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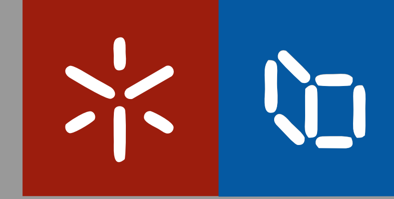

Universidade do Minho
Escola de Artes, Letras e Ciências Humanas

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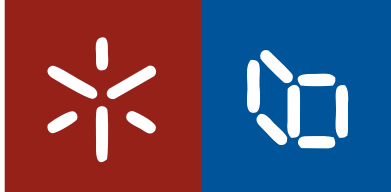

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On Sap and Blood: Family Trees, Literary Legacies and Systems of Kinship in Contemporary Representations of Queer Families

Tese de Doutoramento
em Modernidades Comparadas: Literaturas, Artes e Culturas

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação da
Professora Doutora Ana Gabriela Vilela Pereira de Macedo

abril de 2022

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration.

I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Code of Ethical Conduct of the University of Minho.

ON SAP AND BLOOD: FAMILY TREES, LITERARY LEGACIES AND SYSTEMS OF KINSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF QUEER FAMILIES

ABSTRACT

Through a comparative reading of several literary works, while also evoking other art forms, namely photography, this thesis will address matters of queer kinship, inheritance and legacy in contemporary representations of families in the context of the United States of America, namely in two novels *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides (1960-) and *The Great Believers* (2018) by Rebecca Makkai (1978-), a play, *The Inheritance* (2018) by Matthew Lopez (1977-) and a memoir, *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson (1973-). This comparative reading is established through a dialogue between a set of metaphors that permeate the case studies (ghosts, family trees) while also exploring how the discourses about queer bodies and families have been reshaped and challenged over the last twenty years. Looking at families, in the context of queer theories and kinship studies, is perceived as a way of analysing how heteronormative norms shape both the home and the social, as well as how queer individuals have been producing both alternative but also assimilationist kinship structures that guarantee structures for safety and care. Ultimately, this thesis intends to open up a discussion about how queer families have been represented in literature and other art forms, how these representations reinforce or challenge notions of nuclear families and how these are shaped by social and gender norms, and how one generation of artists can contribute, not only to the representation of their times but also to a transgenerational legacy of cultural references.

KEYWORDS: families, genealogy, literature, memory, queer temporalities.

SOBRE SEIVA E SANGUE: ÁRVORES GENEALÓGICAS, LEGADOS LITERÁRIOS E SISTEMAS DE PARENTESCO EM REPRESENTAÇÕES CONTEMPORÂNEAS DE FAMÍLIAS *QUEER*

RESUMO

Através de uma leitura comparatista de várias obras literárias contemporâneas, evocando também outras formas de arte, particularmente a fotografia, esta tese abordará questões de parentesco e afinidades *queer*, herança e legado em representações contemporâneas de famílias no contexto dos Estados Unidos da América, nomeadamente em dois romances, *Middlesex* (2002) de Jeffrey Eugenides (1960) e *The Great Believers* (2018) de Rebecca Makkai (1978-), uma peça, *The Inheritance* (2018) de Matthew Lopez (1977-) e uma *memoir*, *The Argonauts* (2015) de Maggie Nelson (1973-). Esta leitura comparatista é estabelecida através de um diálogo entre um conjunto de metáforas que permeiam os estudos de caso (fantasmas, árvores genealógicas), explorando ao mesmo tempo como os discursos sobre corpos e famílias *queer* foram remodelados e desafiados ao longo dos últimos vinte anos. Olhar para as famílias, através de teorias *queer* e *affect studies*, é entendido como uma forma de analisar como as normas heteronormativas moldam tanto o doméstico como o social, assim como as formas como pessoas *queer* têm vindo a produzir estruturas de parentesco, alternativas e assimiladoras, que garantem proteção e cuidado. Em última análise, esta tese pretende abrir uma discussão sobre como as famílias *queer* têm sido representadas na literatura e outras formas de arte, como estas representações reforçam ou desafiam noções de famílias nucleares e como estas são moldadas por normas sociais e de género, e ainda o modo como uma geração de artistas pode contribuir, não só para a representação dos seus próprios tempos mas também para um legado transgeracional de referências culturais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: famílias, genealogia, literatura, memória, temporalidades *queer*.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. Sowing

No family is safe when I sashay.
Perfume Genius, "Queen"

In the 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye looks into the camera and asks "Can you believe it? Fae's *a sapphic sister* [emphasis added]. A bull-dagger. A lesbian" as if a black lesbian starring in silent films in the early 1920s was a mythical creature. And yet, she was. Dunye's ground-breaking film, although fictional, was filmed as a documentary and is perhaps one of the earliest and still most relevant analysis of intersectional queer history. Dunye, aware that as a black lesbian her path as a filmmaker will be hard to walk, decides to look into the past and try to find other black lesbians who have also been in film. Dunye comes across Fae, who was often credited in the films she starred in as "The Watermelon Woman", a derogative term used to refer to black people. The only role she ever played was the one of the servant of a white family, one of the few roles in film that were given to black women and a stereotype that still prevails in representation. Dunye's affinity towards Fae becomes even stronger when she learns that the actress was a lesbian, another "sapphic sister", an evocation to both the foremother of lesbianism, Sappho, and to this woman that Dunye perceives as a sister, given their common sexual identity. It is exactly this look that writers and artists directed at the past in order to find out forgotten and erased memories that this thesis intends to analyse, as well as this affinity with the past, in the shape of a branch of a family tree. Dunye, just like the case studies in this thesis, provides an affectionate analysis of the past, creating another page of a queer family album that has, more often than not, been devoid of non-white figures. Through film and photography, as the latter is also prominent in *The Watermelon Woman* in the shape of an archive, and as a way of proving Fae's existence, and therefore, the existence of queer black individuals in history, Dunye creates a black queer history where one does not exist: in the closing title card, it can be read "[s]ometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman does not exist" (Dunye, 1996). This 'Watermelon Woman' may be fictional, but certainly other black and lesbian women have existed and it is precisely that work of archaeology, of looking back into the past in search of non-normative narratives and individuals, that this thesis will work with.

The main aim of this thesis is to work as a contribution to a much broader and ever-expanding discussion on how queer texts (and bodies) are being produced and perceived, taking a small sample of

these same texts as examples of feelings towards gender, family-making, marriage and reproduction. This thesis can be seen as the starting point of what is expected to be a longer and much more complex line of research, of which this thesis is a part of as an exercise in comparison with the overall theme of queer family-making, while considering the fast and ever-growing body of research and creative production that can be defined as queer.

This thesis intends to weave together several contemporary artworks produced in The United States from the end of the millennium up to now, from literary to visual texts, through the common thread of family structures, queer kinship and genealogy, while also looking at non-normative bodies as challenges posed to heteronormative[1] structures of power, as well as homonormative[2]. This thesis will also look at how queer artworks have been shaping and changing queer representation, how issues related to gender equality and law-making have been dealt with by writers and artists and, ultimately, what challenges have been overcome and what are the obstacles still posed to today's queer community when it comes to achieving an equal presence in both fiction and life, as well as the responsibility of artists and writers towards the representation of their time, and the responsibility of one generation of queer individuals to the next.

This thesis intends to draw clear and creative connections between the several works that, albeit distant in time and concerning distinct sexual categories and types of representation, may be perceived as landmarks in a line of queer representation over the past twenty years. These objects have been chosen due to their similarities in themes or concerns, but it is also intended to show how they are distinct from each other, given that they were written in different times of The United States' history, by different individuals, with different ways of thinking and addressing gender, as well as due to the changes that queer lives, representation and theory have gone through since 2002.

As its title openly suggests, this thesis will analyse matters of kinship in families, how they both reconfigure and reinforce ideas of nuclear families and literary legacies, and how artists and writers from

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[1] "Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define heteronormativity as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent - that is, organised as a sexuality – but also privileged" (Sullivan, 2003: p. 132).

[2] "Homonormativity, a term coined by Lisa Duggan, refers to queer citizens' uncritical acquiescence in state-sanctioned political formations that foreground domesticity and consumption while nurturing depoliticized and hegemonic hierarchies of race, class, gender, and ability" (Huebenthal, 2017; p. 3). According to Manalansan "[h]omonormativty is a chameleon-like ideology that purports to push for progressive causes such as rights to gay marriage and other "activisms", but at the same time it creates a depoliticizing effect on queer communities as it rhetorically remaps and recodes freedom and liberation and liberation in terms of privacy, domesticity, and consumption. In other others, homonormativity anesthetizes queer communities into passively accepting alternative forms of inequality in return for domestic privacy and the freedom to consume" (2007; p. 43) Homonormativity, also quoting Duggan, can ultimately be defined as "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Chinn, 2012: p. 125).

a past generation dialogue with the next generation. Moreover, the image of the family tree will work as a strong metaphor for matters of legacy, genealogy, and inheritance, both in the shape of inescapable and conditioning norms but also as a productive dialogue with the past. 'Sap' is proposed as an alternative to blood, as another fluid that nurtures a family tree, a metaphor for acts of care rather than the blood that links a family. 'Blood' is perceived as the fluid that nurtures a heteronormative and heterosexual structure based on the model of the nuclear family, and the patriarchal values that inform them, conditioning non-normative sexualities, while 'sap' refers to structures of kinship as defined by Judith Butler, particularly regarding the stages of life that the author addresses:

> If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental *forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death* [emphasis added] (to name a few). Kinship is neither a fully autonomous sphere, proclaimed to be distinct from community and friendship – or the regulations of the state – through some definitional fiat, nor is it "over" or "dead" just because, as David Schneider has consequentially argued, it has lost the capacity to be formalized and tracked in the conventional ways that ethnologists in the past have attempted to do. (Butler, 2004, p. 103)

The case studies that are here analysed have distinct but complementary approaches to family. In Chapter 1, it will be argued that family structures reinforce gender expectations while looking at the trouble they face when an LGBTQI+ child is born, and how the child, in this case an intersex individual, challenges a two-sex system of marriage, reproduction and family-making. In Chapter 2, it will be analysed how chosen families work as protective alliances against hate and the constant threat of danger, providing care for those that were expelled from home by their parents due to an HIV diagnosis during the 1980s. Chapter 3 will address the change in queer rights, with the new possibilities of queer family-making that are opened up by adoption and same-sex marriage and how the queer community deals with matters of inheritance and legacy, as well as assimilation. Finally, Chapter 4 will analyse how queer family-making can still be an act of radical resistance and/or the giving into homonormativity, and how pregnancy also comes into play when addressing queerness.

This introduction, besides stating the main goals of this thesis, also entails a part that provides the theoretical framework that establishes the concepts and approaches that are used while reading the case studies. This section will define the concept 'queer', while also introducing queer temporalities, a strain of thought that, along with affect theory, has been a rather productive hermeneutics to analyse queer objects.

Chapter 1 analyses Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, a novel published in 2002, in a comparative reading with Daniela Nicolò e Silvia Calderoni's performance *MDLSX* (2015), which could be read as a somewhat loose adaptation of Eugenides' book, one that updates and brings new meanings to the type of representation offered by the book. Matters of genealogy, genetic inheritance, and the enforcement of normative gender categories through family structures will be analysed in order to understand the manifold ways how the intersex body is either constricted by them or clashes against what parents may expect from their children. Through the literary style of the family saga, in *Middlesex*, and the image of the family album in *MDLSX*, one will look at intersexuality against these family backdrops, both as a reinforcement of heteronormative structures that mark non-binary identities as deviant, as it happens in *Middlesex* – "in the reproduction of heterosexuality ... it is assumed that all arrangements will follow from the arrangement of the couple: man/woman" (Ahmed, 2014: p. 147) – or non-binary identities as plastic, fluid and disruptive of inherited structures of belonging, as addressed in *MDLSX*. The metaphor of the journey of the body and the journey upon the map is present in both the book and the performance and it will also be highlighted in order to establish parallels and dialoguing lines with the other case studies.

The second chapter concerns Rebecca Makkai's *The Great Believers* (2018), a novel that looks back at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, while also linking it with a more recent past, by addressing the terrorist attacks of the Bataclan, accompanied by a brief look at the work of the photographer Nan Goldin (1953-), particularly the photographs taken from the 1970s up to the 1990s, in which Goldin documented the disappearance of many elements of her family of friends due to HIV/AIDS. Matters of queer family-making, as well as blood families and their rejection of gay men are present in the text, as it provides a complex look at how, in times of grief, these family structures are borrowed from those without family support to find affection, financial security and someone to take care of those in need in the time of death. The link with Goldin is established due to the ubiquitous presence of photography throughout the book, as the image of the family album becomes a way of evoking those who are long gone and an act of resistance against oblivion, collective amnesia, and overwhelming nostalgia. The image of the ghost, present in the shape of photographs and the virus, will also be used as a linking device to establish a connection with the following chapter.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of Matthew Lopez's epic play *The Inheritance* (2018), a text that looks at a group of gay men at the time of the election of President Trump, as they deal with the right to get married and to adopt children, while also being aware of matters of homonormativity, the assimilation and commodification of gay culture, and the legacy that gay men inherit from each other – and the legacy they leave behind. HIV/AIDS is also present in the play, side by side with matters of legacy (a legacy of

fear, of remembrance, of the virus itself as it passes from one body to another), as well as family-making, from friends who take care of the ill, from gay men getting married to each other, to the inability to strive as a gay man within a heteronormative family and social structure. Once again, the image of the ghost is present, in the shape of a literary inheritance and the acknowledgment of those who were writing about being gay in the past, albeit with shame and secrecy, as the figure of the modernist writer, E.M. Forster materializes to confront the men with their past, the possibility of a gay canon and to be himself confronted with his inability to live openly as a gay man. The inclusion of two AIDS narratives in this thesis seems particularly relevant given the shift that the virus provoked in gay communities regarding matters of family and kinship[3], as well as the way how the virus and its presence still haunt contemporary ideas of gay culture and sexuality.

The last chapter of the thesis will analyse Maggie Nelson's memoir *The Argonauts* (2015). Nelson's book looks at queer family-making and Nelson's own experience of having a child with her transgender husband. Pregnancy and same-sex marriage, and how easy it is to lose hard-won rights, are also brought into question while reflecting on same-sex partnerships and parenting, as well as on the achievements and setbacks of gender equality law-making. Again, queer commodification and assimilation, as well as matters of family-making, and particularly mothering and motherhood, are also questioned, showing, hopefully, the distance between the first work analysed, *Middlesex*, and this last one, as well as the way how every case establishes a dialogue with the other, either through dissonance or alignment. This final Chapter, more than engaging with queer matters, also provides a view of how motherhood is represented and dependent on normative readings of gender expectations, while also reflecting on how women are always perceived as caretakers – and failed mothers when they do not fully commit to the act of mothering.

Spanning from two novels, a memoir, a play, and even photography, written and produced in different times and with very distinct political environments, marked by distinct feelings towards gender and queerness, and dealing with the complexity of transgender and intersex bodies, as well as the lives of gay men during the AIDS years and after, this thesis is a constellation of artworks that, in their own way, look at how families work as structures of caring and kinship or how they reject and fail queer individuals.

[3] "In conversations about the changes in their midst, gay men and lesbians in the Bay Area sometimes linked the lesbian baby boom to AIDS by juxtaposing the two as moments in a continuous cycle of life's passing and regeneration. New lives replaced lives lost, implicitly reasserting "community" as a unit which, like the disease itself, spanned divisions of gender, race, age, and class. Children (whether biological, foster, or adopted) brought generational depth to this community, along with the promise of a future in what some saw as genocidal times" (Weston, 1991: p.180)

Moreover, the comparative aspect of this thesis intends to make clearer the invisible links between these texts, while also suggesting new ways of reading them in dialogue with each other as part of a broader context of queer production. Through a lens that looks at the implications of memory and queer temporalities[4], this thesis intends to provide a new look at case studies that have already been discussed through another theoretical apparatus, with different conclusions. As Hirsch writes, "[m]emory signals an affective link to the past – a sense, precisely, of a material "living connection" – and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony" (Hirsch, 2012: p. 33); it is exactly this affective intersection between the past and the present, mainly in literature and photography, that this thesis will work with.

Hopefully, the links between the texts, both visual and written, are clearer than muddled, and the conclusions that are intended to be achieved, if any are indeed achieved, may they be 'queerer' than solid. Even if this thesis follows a purely academic structure, with its well-defined chapters, a list of references that punctuate the text here, and there and an analysis of texts recognised as worthy of academic research, due to their accolades, reviews and financial success, in its writing there was an attempt to proliferate the intersections between texts and theories rather than narrowing them down, to expand the concept of queerness instead of delimiting it, by using it as a tool for analysis rather than purely as an identity category or a label in which to place each author and book, an attempt 'to plant trees rather than cutting them down', to borrow from Paul B. Preciado's metaphor of the limitations of academic discourse – and the need to queer them with a "manifesto [that] could be understood as a counterclinic of queer and trans sexualities" (2018: p. 4), in order

> to avoid the enclosure of academic discourse while still using some of its critical tools to understand what had been excluded from it. Academic discourse and its grammar not only are like a forest that doesn't allow us to distinguish between individual trees but also go a step further, forcing the researcher to cut the trees down in order to understand the forest. As the logic of the dildo proclaims, instead of cutting down trees, lives, desires, and sexualities, this book[5] is a call to care and proliferate, to connect and multiply (Preciado; 2018: p. 4)

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[4] In the article "Like Daughter, Like Grandson", Moskowitz quotes both Marianne Hirsch and Ann Chetkovitch and the natural articulation between trauma, memory and queer studies, "to generations, time, temporality and the important ways of rethinking these that queer theory has brought us" (Hirsh in Moskowitz, 2021: p. 1), as well as trauma and queer studies as "they seek ways to build not just sexuality but emotional and personal life into models of political life and its transformation" (Chetcovich in Moskowitz, 2021: p. 1).

[5] Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*.

There are many trees in this thesis and in the works analysed in it: many family trees, with more or less branches, all in different moments of blooming, trees that are food for silk worms (*Middlesex*), trees that men dying of AIDS grow in paper cups in the windowsill of the hospital where they draw their final breath (*The Great Believers*), a tree that is presumed to be magic and the cure for AIDS (*The Inheritance*), a Killing Tree in Cambodja that frightens a mother-to-be, and a boat named Argo, whose parts keep being replaced, the tree reshaped – queered? – into the body of a boat (*The Argonauts*). Hopefully, by the end of the reading of this thesis, the contours of some type of forest can be glimpsed. If "[i]n bonsai you often plant the tree off-center in the pot to make space for the divine" (Nelson, 2016: p. 81), in a thesis one must also give space for the case studies to dialogue, for the writer to find a space in which not to exhaust their future work, but still, undivine and certainly not spiritual, this thesis does intend to also make space for something somewhat innovative, while giving in to "[t]he queer impulse to forge communities between the living and the dead" (Love, 2007: p. 31).

1.2. Queer Roots

To attempt a definition of 'queerness' seems to go exactly against its desire to disrupt[6]; and yet, not to define it would be to betray the need for more queer discourses in academia and elsewhere, aware that these definitions often overlap but also distance themselves from each other[7]. If it started as an insult to define LGBTQI+ individuals, 'queer' has been reclaimed in manifold ways, from new political stands, to new geographies and even new temporalities. There has been, however, also a stepping back from LGBTQI+ individuals and a denial of being identified as queer, something perhaps more visible in the rejection of the label by transgender individuals. In this thesis, 'queer' is understood as a manner of making and addressing gender, as a way of describing anyone that does not comply with any normative discourses concerning gender roles and identities, sexual orientations, and gendered bodies, as an umbrella term that may give in to the pressure of trying to be too broad, too inclusive, too over-arching but always ambiguous[8].

[6] "[A]ttempting to define what queer is … would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do" (Sullivan, 2003: p. 43).

[7] "[Q]ueer theorists are a diverse lot exhibiting important disagreements and divergences" (Seidman 1995: 125)" (Sullivan, 2003: p. 43).

[8] "Two distinct (and seemingly contradictory) ways of thinking about the "queer" in queer studies have emerged in productive tension over the past few decades. In one use of the word, queer works as an umbrella term for a range of sexual and gender identities that are not "straight," or at least not normative. In a second sense, queer functions more as a verb than a noun, signaling a critical stance – productively corrosive at times – that is skeptical of existing identity categories and more interested in understanding the production of normativity and its queer companion, nonnormativity, than in delineating any particular population" (Somerville, 2020: p. 2).

Moreover, if "queer theory has been defined not only as anti-heteronormative, but as anti-normative" (Ahmed, 2014; p. 149), then it provides a productive framework in which to analyse matters of family-making, inheritance and kinship, parenthood and patriarchal family structures, all informed by myths of normalcy. For Sarah Ahmed, in the face of compulsive heterosexuality, "the failure to orient oneself 'towards' the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world, an affect that is readable as the failure to reproduce, and as a threat to the social ordering of life itself" (2014: p. 145). Every sexual orientation, heterosexual or other, is informed by these "narratives of ideal heterosexuality in one's orientation to others" (Ahmed, 2014; p. 146), narratives that mark and dictate every orientation that is not normative as deviant. This is also sustained by Butler, who address how marriage and kinship are thought of as equivalents, "that marriage is and ought to remain a heterosexual institution and bond but also that kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship , unless it assumes a recognizable family form" (2004; p. 102), and therefore implying that certain types of queer people will become legitimised through marriage, while others will be, again, left out of this new normative structure. In this thesis, kinship is perceived as a way of family-making, one that is not sustained by patriarchal and heterosexual structures, but by a horizontal matrix of caring and acts of mothering that takes into account "the relationship between marriage and "the reproduction of patriarchal relations" (Boellstorff, 2007:p. 227), and therefore questions how fitting marriage is as a social mechanism of legal recognition, how women engage with it only as mothers or wives, and what alternatives there may be to these structures through a queer and feminist analysis of the nuclear family. Given that "[b]odies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force" (Ahmed, 2014: p. 145), these heteronormative narratives of family-making also shape these bodies, restraining them to normative models of making gender and sexuality, establishing the family, through an emphasis on generation, as the foundation upon which culture is reproduced, therefore placing non-heterosexual families as potentially endangering this 'progress':

> The reproduction of life – in the form of the future generation – becomes bound up with the reproduction of culture, through the stabilisation of specific arrangements for living ('the family'). The family is idealisable through the narrative of threat and insecurity; the family is presented as vulnerable, and as needing to be defended against others who violate the conditions of its reproduction. … heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind of 'birthing', a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognisable as forms of civilisation. It is this narrative of coupling as a condition for the reproduction of life, culture and value that explains the slide in racist narratives between the fear of strangers and immigrants (xenophobia), the fear of queers (homophobia) and the fear of miscegenation (as well as other illegitimate couplings). (Ahmed, 2014: pp. 144-145)

In the 1990s, when it was first used as a reclaimed term, 'queer' was meant to disrupt, to work as a contestation to the hegemonic effects of heteronormativity[9], as a word "that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects" with

> a commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality. (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005; p. 1)

As defined in *Tendencies*, in which Eve K. Sedgwick establishes the 1992 New York City pride march "as the moment of Queer" (1995: p. vii), something supported by David M. Halperin when the author writes "in 1990 came the "queer" moment, with its militant vindication of deviant sex and gender styles" (2003; p. 53), the term is perceived in a manner that shall also be used to think of gender in this thesis, one that, according to Sedgwick, was even used by other authors as a way of encompassing race and ethnicity as:

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us (Sedgwick, 1995: p. 7).

Queer may emerge as an intersectional promise to disrupt the hegemony of any identity category. Faced with the mainstream of gay and lesbian identity, queerness must then redefine and resignify itself so that it can encompass the complexity of identity categories and the spaces in which they overlap, becoming an area of studies and theories that is aware of the world in which it is being put into practice, "a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor with a fixed referent" (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005; p. 1). Cathy J. Cohen also addressed the need for queer politics to leave myopic views of gender and sexuality, and a duality of heterosexuality and queerness, in detriment

[9] "Judith Butler, and Monique Wittig argue (in slightly different ways) that heterosexuality is a complex matrix of discourses, institutions, and so on, that has become normalised in our culture, thus making particular relationships, lifestyles, and identities, seem natural, ahistorical, and universal. In short, heterosexuality, as it is currently understood and experienced, is a (historically and culturally specific) truth-effect of systems of power/knowledge. Given this, its dominant position and current configuration are contestable and open to change" (Sullivan, 2003: p. 39).

for an intersectional view of queerness in relation to heterosexuality[10], one in which "individuals who consistently activate only one characteristic of their identity, or a single perspective of consciousness" also understand "the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances" (1997: p. 440), something also supported by Nikki Sullivan, as the author explains how the gay and lesbian movements of the 1970s were often criticized by individuals of colour given the white focus of the movements, as well as the way how sexuality was perceived as the first and most prominent source or privilege or oppression.

It is this renewed way of 'queering' that is demanded and needed when considering "the late-twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies" (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005; p. 1). Therefore, queer studies are, now, more than a hermeneutics to read gendered bodies; they can also challenge the ways how categories of sexual difference are used to either privilege or oppress individuals and collective groups of people, aware of the oppressing forces that shape everyday life. As new challenges arise (from liberalism to terrorism, to climate change[11], to name a few), so do queer studies adapt (or they intend to adapt) to all of them, becoming, at the same time, an umbrella term for every struggle, while becoming dangerously close to being devoid of actual force, with "so many portentous – weighty yet vaporous – significations" (Halperin, 2003: p. 339).

For Susan Stryker, queer theory, in the early 1990s, had "a potential for attacking the antitranssexual moralism so unthinkingly embedded in most progressive analyses of gender and sexuality without resorting to a reactionary, homophobic, and misogynistic counteroffensive" (Stryker, 2004; p. 213). As Annamarie Jagose writes, looking back at how queer theory was perceived in its early stages, queer was seen

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[10] "Cathy Cohen challenged the tendency to understand "queer" in opposition to "straight." This binary, she argued, overlooked the fact that not all heterosexualities historically have been afforded the privilege of normative status. Cohen urged her readers to consider how race has functioned to mark some heterosexualities as suspect, even criminal, pointing to the examples of the US history of legal prohibitions against interracial heterosexuality, and the stigmatization of unmarried women of color who receive public assistance to support their children. Cohen cautioned readers not to rely on sexual identity or practice alone for understanding how power is distributed. Instead, drawing on intersectional analysis from women of color feminisms, she argued for the importance of distinguishing heterosexuality from *heteronormativity*, which she understood to be as much a racialized concept as a sexual or gendered one." (Somerville, 2020: p. 5).

[11] "Such emergencies include the triumph of neoliberalism and the collapse of the welfare state; the Bush administration's infinite "war on terrorism" and the acute militarization of state violence; the escalation of U.S. empire building and the clash of religious fundamentalisms, nationalisms, and patriotisms; the devolution of civil society and the erosion of civil rights; the pathologizing of immigrant communities as "terrorist" and racialized populations as "criminal"; the shifting forms of citizenship and migration in a putatively "postidentity" and "postracial" age; the politics of intimacy and the liberal recoding of freedom as secularization, domesticity, and marriage; and the return to "moral values" and "family values" as a prophylactic against political debate, economic redistribution, and cultural dissent." (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005: p. 2).

> not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing, but as a resistance to the norm. These descriptions are typical of the many definitional sketches of queer that proliferated in the early to mid-1990s where identity is recognized as an artifact of the normalizing force of modern power, and queerness is therefore characterizable not in terms of any positive substance but in oppositional relation to normativity. (Jagose, 2015: pp. 31-2).

When Stryker realised "that transsexuals were considered abject creatures in most feminist and gay or lesbian contexts" (Stryker, 2004: p. 213), she wrote "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage", an attempt at opening up a space for the re-configuration of transgender bodies, a creation of "new territories, both analytic and material, for a critically refigured transsexual practice" (Stryker, 2004: p. 213). Ten years later, in 2004, Stryker revisited her foundational text, a work that was to shape "an early formulation of transgender theory" that Stryker meant "to help define "queer" as a family to which transsexuals belonged" (Stryker, 2004: p. 213), only to conclude that the energy of the queer movement of the 1990s had been lost. While in the 1990s, there was a certain utopian feeling regarding the future of the community, Stryker seems rather disappointed about the failure of queer theory to fully operate changes:

> The queer vision that animated my life, and the lives of so many others in the brief historical moment of the early 1990s, held out the dazzling prospect of a compensatory, utopian reconfiguration of community. It seemed an anti-oedipal, ecstatic leap into a postmodern space of possibility in which the foundational containers of desire could be ruptured to release a raw erotic power that could be harnessed to a radical social agenda. That vision still takes my breath away. A decade later, with another Bush in the White House and another war in the Persian Gulf, it is painfully apparent that the queer revolution of the early 1990s yielded, at best, only fragile and tenuous forms of liberal progress in certain sectors and did not radically transform society – and as in the broader world, so too in the academy. (Stryker, 2004: p. 213)

For Heather Love, 'queer' is, due to its origin as a slur, less respectful than 'gay' or 'lesbian', a word that attempts "to counter the stigma by incorporating it" (Love, 2007: p. 2). If "[t]he history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants" (Love, 2007: p. 1), it seems appropriate to lean on the term 'queer' and how is seems to encompass the full injury made upon queer individuals:

> [w]hen queer was adopted in the late 1980s it was chosen because it evoked a long history of insult and abuse – you could hear the hurt in it. Queer theorists drew on the energies of confrontational, stigma-

inflicted activism of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation who had first taken up this "forcibly bittersweet" term" (Love, 2007: p. 2).

Therefore, 'queer' can be thought of as an operative term that brings together the traumatic past, present challenges, and future possibilities of thinking and doing gender. For Sedgwick, "[q]ueer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant* ... keenly, it is relational, and strange" (Sedgwick in Nelson, 2016: p. 35). "As stated by Love, the backward turn is neither a form of nostalgia nor a fetishization of queer melancholia; it questions the existing queer movement that only has a vision of the future and lacks a politics of the past" (Liu, 2020: p.10) and the case studies that are to be analysed establish a very strong link with the past as a way of addressing present struggles. Moreover, 'queer' can also be perceived as "a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledge and identities (Sullivan, 2003: p. 43-44).

Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed write that "[t]he history of AIDS in the United States and the history of queer theory in the academy overlap almost exactly" (2012: p. 145), while claiming that, if earlier queer theory seemed to want to cut ties with the past, a second wave of theorists attempted at working the earlier trauma by turning back into the past "by temporal disorientation and "queer time" towards negative feelings, "such as rage, shame, and loss" that, for the authors, "are signs of a post-traumatic response to the first wave's own traumatized forgetting" (2012: p. 146). This 'queer time', as theorised by Jack Halberstam, arises in alternative to 'straight time' and 'reproductive time'[12], timelines "shaped by linked discourses of heteronormativity, capitalism, modernity, and apocalypse, and that naming this temporality and speculating on possible alternatives might productively inform discussions of same-sex marriage" (Boellstorff, 2007: p. 228). It is with these "post-traumatic responses" that this thesis engages directly, through 'feeling backward', queer temporalities, the haunting of the past in dialogue with the present and the future, and reparative readings, in both the theoretical framework and the selected case studies. As Love writes,

[12] "Any analysis of heteronormative temporalities must therefore incorporate not only straight time, but also reproductive time. Reproductive time is a cyclical imagined future of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (Halberstam, 2005), most closely associated with womanhood (Freeman, 2010: 5). For women, marriage marks the temporal transition from Childhood into the sexualized and reproductive role of wife within the private sphere; from the wedding onwards, pro-natal sex, childbearing, and childrearing are not only sanctioned but expected of the wife. Entry into marriage thus marks the self as embodying a desire for futurity through the biological and social reproduction of the Child. The best interests of the Child, then, is not simply a fantasy of a desirable social order, but a fantasy of the Child growing up to enact that social order. The fantasy is not addressed universally to children in the present, but to the Child conceived as a future white, cisgendered, middle-class, and abled heterosexual self" (Stewart, C. 2019: p. 5).

> [t]he emphasis on damage in queer studies exists in a state of tension with a related and contrary tendency – the need to resist damage and to affirm queer existence. This tension is evident in discussions of the "progress" of gays and lesbians across the twentieth century. Although many queer critics take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphalist view of history, we are in practice deeply committed to the notion of progress; despite our reservations, we just cannot stop dreaming of a better life for queer people. Such utopian desires are at the heart of the collective project of queer studies and integral to the history of gay and lesbian identity. Still, the critical compulsion to fix – at least imaginatively – the problems of queer life has made it difficult to fully engage with such difficulties. Critics find themselves in an odd position: we are not sure if we should explore the link between homosexuality and loss, or set about proving that it does not exist. (Love, 2007: p. 3)

Queer theories and affect theories have also been walking hand in hand and more recent theoretical work on queerness has been informed by affect theory, away from psychoanalytical approaches to detriment of "frameworks that allow for looser, more descriptive accounts of psychic and corporeal experience" (Love in Chinn, 2012: p. 126). As Wen Liu writes, both "share equally ambitious goals in the initialization of the project of paradigmatic transformation beyond the linguistic or the cultural turn, shifting and troubling the boundaries, definitions, and approaches to identity, body, and matter" (2020: p. 1). To Love, the interaction between affect and queer theories allows for an understanding of oppression at a small scale, at how non-normative lives are daily affected by acts of homophobia and racism, by looking at "the ways that everyday experience is structured by inequality" (Love in Chinn, 2012: p. 126). Liu addresses what was termed as 'queer turn' as theorized by Jagose and Donald Hall and how it

> inspires antifoundational knowledge production that persistently challenges institutionally established identities such as "women" or "homosexual" and the biologically deterministic notions of the body as well as engages with various publics—mass media, science, medicine, religion, public policy, and so on—to trouble the fetishized normality and create alternative possibilities of politics and belonging. (Liu, 2020: p. 2)

Queer affect, in the shape of the three strains that Liu identifies (queer negativity, queer temporality and queer as machinic body), is then a response to the "limited theoretical and political possibility of what Sedgwick terms paranoid criticism in the initial formation of queer theory", proposing a conceptualization of "erotic life beyond the either/or thinking of normality and antinormality, relationality and antisociality, the public and the intimate, shame and pride, oppression and liberation", allowing queerness to move beyond academia and into other realms, "to effect and provoke changes across established institutions and social life" (Liu, 2020: p. 2). As Ahmed writes:

> [d]o queer moments happen when this failure to reproduce norms as forms of life is embraced or affirmed as a political and ethical alternative? Such affirmation would not be about the conversion of shame into pride, but the enjoyment of the negativity of shame, an enjoyment of that which has been designated shameful by normative culture (Ahmed, 2014: p. 146).

This intersection between affect and queer theories intends to look at how "the noncognitive forces of the body and feelings matter and shape the social and political life of marginalized subjects across time and space" (Liu, 2020: p. 4) and this thesis is heavily informed by the two strains that Liu identifies as 'feeling down' and 'feeling backward', an articulation between

> *feeling down* as a method to look at how affect circulates around and forms attachment to the queer body and deepens queer theory's understanding of the cultural process, 2) *feeling backward* as an epistemological reflection that expands the capacity of queer theory on a temporary scale (Liu, 2020: p. 4).

By embracing feelings of shame (*Middlesex*, *The Inheritance*), ambivalence (*The Argonauts*), and regret (*The Great Believers*) towards one's own body and others, these works establish a trans-temporal dialogue, with a strong attachment to the past but always hinting at a queer future, a queer utopia. These two strains of queer affect theory are used as a hermeneutics to analyse the case studies that were selected to be a part of this thesis, while also recurring to concepts borrowed from theorisations of queer time, to attest "that queers survive through the ability to invent or seize pleasurable relations between bodies … across time" (Freeman, 2005: p. 58) against the heteronormativity of time itself.

As Richard T. Rodriguez points out, the concern of queer studies with kinship was already felt in the work of gay and lesbian scholars, the foundation for queer studies as they are now. For Gayle Rubin, in a clear separation between family and kinship, often considered to be the same, "a kinship system is not a list of biological relatives. It is a system of categories and statuses that often contradict actual genetic relationship" (Rubin in Rodríguez, 2020: p. 215). For Rodríguez, who states that "family diversity" is often equated with "marriage diversity", there is a need for these "kinship practices that exceed genetic relationships and state-sanctioned bonds … when accounting for the communal networks that exist beyond biological ties" (2020: p. 215). These "'chosen" kinships are not always independent or devoid of genetic relations" (Rodríguez, 2020: p. 215) and they do not necessarily and directly oppose to genealogical kinship, but they do pose a challenge to procreation as the origin of every kinship, leading it away from biological and heteronormative models of reproduction and Oedipal familial ties. Moreover, it

is exactly by not fitting within the family that queer family-making becomes more potentially disruptive, as "it is in 'not fitting' the model of the nuclear family that queer families can work to transform what it is that families can do. The 'non-fitting' or discomfort opens up possibilities, an opening up which can be difficult and exciting." (Ahmed, 2014: p. 154). Not only is queer family-making a way of challenging ideals of the family structure, but it also denounces how family is "an impossible fantasy", one that obliterates the many configurations of families, queer or otherwise:

> Reflecting on the work that is done in queer families, as well as what queer families do, allow us to disrupt the idealisation of the family form. This argument seems to suggest that queer families may be just like other families in their shared failure to inhabit an ideal. But of course such an argument would neutralise the differences between queer and non-queer families, as well as the differences between queer families. Families may not 'be' the ideal, which is itself an impossible fantasy, but they have a different relation of proximity to that ideal. For some families the ideal takes the shape of their form (as being heterosexual, white, middle-class, and so on). The 'failure' to inhabit an ideal may or may not be visible to others, and this visibility has effects on the contours of everyday existence. (Ahmed, 2014: p. 154)

Ever since it was defined as such, queer theory has also been preoccupied with "how the state deploys sexuality as a mechanism of normalization and control" as "the legalization of hate crime legislature, nondiscrimination policy, and the later legislation of same-sex marriage showed a problematic direction toward "progress" (Liu, 2020: p. 4). Lately, researches have turned to the more negative feelings of queer experience in detriment of what is perceived as "progress", often equated with the assimilationist project of certain strains of LGBTQI+ activism, in an attempt at recognizing the rich and complex past of queer experience expressed in art and literature, as well as in life, heavily marked not only by progress, pride or affirmation, but also by secrecy and exclusion, in order to develop a "deeper sense of the multiple pasts that are in our present" (Love in Chinn, 2012: p. 129). As Sarah E. Chinn writes, this new body of critique

> challenges the narrative of relentless political and psychological progress for LGBT people ... acknowledge and value the much more complex experiences of setbacks, backlash, self-criticism, and sadness that are laminated in with the more public affects of pride, triumph, and success. (2012: p. 125)

Liu states that certain feelings such "pride, safety, and happiness are in fact a result of the mainstream LGBTQ movement's troubling alliance with neoliberal capitalism" (2020: p. 4), something sustained by

Freeman who developed the concept of 'erotohistoriography' as a way of resisting "the chronopolitics of development" (2005: p. 59), in light of the aforementioned "troubling alliance":

> In a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals. ... This timeline tends to serve a nation's economic interests, too. In the United States, for instance, states now license, register, or certify birth (and thus citizenship, eventually encrypted in a Social Security id for taxpaying purposes), marriage or domestic partnership (which privatizes caretaking and regulates the distribution of privatized property), and death (which terminates the identities linked to state benefits, redistributing these benefits through familial channels), along with sundry privileges like driving (to jobs and commercial venues) and serving in the military (thus incurring state expenditures that often serve corporate interests). (Freeman, 2010: 4)

The articulation between affect and queer theory, in line with the "feminist analytical method that "the personal is political"" (Liu, 2020: p. 4), can disarticulate these discourses of triumph, progress and individual freedom and read them as direct consequences of neoliberal impulses that strip queerness away from its collective and social concern into a shift to the private. This is rather clear in *The Inheritance*, a text about what it means to be a gay man in 2018 and the implications of the commodification of gay culture.

This thesis also engages with matters of trauma and memory, particularly looking at how they intersect with modes of inheritance and generation within the family, as well as collective history. Castiglia and Reed point out how AIDS has not been perceived as a cultural trauma, as wars or other events in history have, that

> [a]mong the historical disasters addressed by trauma theory (the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, 9/11), AIDS has rarely been taken up as one of the most significant cultural traumas of the late twentieth century, and the cultural aftershocks of reinvigorated assaults on gay lifeways has attracted even less attention as a site of trauma worth of study. (2012: p. 10)

Sullivan writes that 'queer' can be perhaps more fully apprehended when thought of as a verb, an action taken upon an object, and what the author proposes to do (and perhaps what every queer historian, academic, and critic intends to do) "is to queer – to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up – heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them" (2003: p. vi).

“Why do people feel the need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize something that can barely be said yet to exist?” (343), wrote Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant in 1995, about five years after the term ‘queer theory’ itself had been coined. Although it could hardly be argued that ‘queer theory’ – or ‘queer theories’ – do exist, it can be taken from Warner and Berlant’s claim that, over the last thirty years, ‘queer theory’ has been time and time again pinpointed, defined, renewed and misinterpreted, its shifting nature oscillating between assimilated and radical, canonical but also still relevant. Warner and Berlant also imply that a normative impulse led lesbian and gay organisations to identify with ‘queer’, a first step towards an assimilation process “whose highest aspirations are marriage, military patriotism, and protected domesticity” regardless of the fact that, even though that may result in visibility “in the official public sphere” queerness is presented as “a pathology or an evil, let alone a good” (1995: p. 345), a type of representation that, though far from the contemporary queer commentary present in mainstream media, is still somewhat spectral and even, at times, repeated. This introduction of queerness into the mainstream and national discourse was propelled, to Warner and Berlant, by AIDS[13] activism and the vast spectrum of questions that it raised[14]. Warner and Berlant were also already pointing out, as Sedgwick did, at the intersectional aspect of queerness, something that might indicate that queerness is an awareness of the world and its many struggles, obstacles and threats to all of those who do not fall into the heteronormative structure of privilege, a set of “perspectives and archives to challenge the comforts of privilege and unself-consciousness” (1995: p. 347)

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[13] Weston writes on how lesbians looked for sperm donours in gay men, and how AIDS brought a change upon that, for fear of contagion and the impact this had in what had previously been an alliance between lesbians and gays to create families: “[a]s they encountered the lack of government support for AIDS research, programs, and drug trials, many newly politicized gay men learned firsthand the meaning of the feminist slogan, “the personal is political.” They began to build bridges, however imperfectly constructed, to the feminist sector of the lesbian population. Although some lesbians criticized the racism and sexism within community based AIDS organizations, renewed concern for the situation of gay men seemed to prevail. Even lesbians not directly involved in AIDS organizing work mentioned making gay male friends when previously they had had few or none. The onset of AIDS had a dramatic effect on the donor pool available to lesbians for alternative insemination. Before AIDS surfaced, the preferred means of facilitating lesbian motherhood had been to ask gay men to contribute sperm. The general feeling among lesbians was – and continues to be – that gay men represent that category of males most likely to recognize the lover of the biological mother as a fullfledged parent, and to abide by any parenting and custody agreements reached in advance of a child's birth. For many, economics was also a factor in locating a donor, since informal arrangements are far less expensive than paying the high fees charged by sperm banks. But in light of the devastating losses AIDS has inflicted upon gay men in the Bay Area, and the risks for child and mother-to-be of contracting the HIV virus through insemination, by the mid-198os most lesbians and gay men had become hesitant to pursue this strategy” (Weston, 1991: pp. 176-177).

[14] “AIDS activism forced the issue of translating queerness into the national scene. AIDS made those of us who confronted it realize the deadly stakes of discourse; it made us realize the public and private unvoiceability of so much that mattered, about anger, mourning, and desire; it made us realize that different frames of reference-science, news, religion, ordinary homophobia-compete and that their disjunction is lethal. AIDS also taught us not to assume a social environment of community and of support for legitimate politics. Far from preexisting as sources of activism and critical commentary, communities of support had to be created by a public labor. AIDS also showed that rhetorics of expertise limit the circulation of knowledge, ultimately authorizing the technocratic administration of peoples' lives. Finally, in a way that directly affects critics of polite letters, AIDS taught us the need to be disconcertingly explicit about such things as money and sexual practices, for as long as euphemism and indirection produce harm and privilege” (Berlant and Warner, 1995: p. 345).

For Elizabeth Freeman, queer theory must look at "actually existing social possibilities", echoing another of Sedgwick's concepts, 'reparative criticism', a look at the past that is performed, given that the knowledge of the future is out of hand, through a retrospective look and a crosstemporal and multidirectional gathering of references of "cultural debris" (2010: p. xiii) which is then brought together as a whole, that, although made from what already exists, does not resemble anything that existed before as such. Moreover, neither a nostalgic recollection of the revolutions of the past, nor the complete oblivion of the past in detriment of an utopian view of the future will, according to Freeman, work as a way of understanding what is to come for queer people; "mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions" (2010: p. xvi) seems to be the way how Freeman conceives queerness.

The case studies of this thesis shift between these three stages of queer time: an attachment to the past (*Middlesex*), an attempt at mediating past and present, with its ghosts and spectral presences, with an eye in the future (*The Great Believers, The Inheritance*) and the concern about the futurity of queerness (*The Argonauts*). It seems productive to read these temporal intersections through 'queer temporality' and how it "rethinks the ways in which time is felt through the nonnormative body and desire – how past suffering continues to haunt the present and how the future only exists through the repression of queer pleasure" (Liu, 2020: p. 12). To Butler, 'queer' is open, looking at both the historical past as well as the future:

> [i]f the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. (Butler, 1993: p. 19)

Queer theory must then adapt to any and all challenges that may arise. For José Esteban Muñoz (2009), this can be achieved by perceiving queerness through its "not-yet" nature, advancing a future in which queer individuals may strive, an utopian view of queerness. Moreover, Butler also claims that this need to encompass any challenges will reshape the movement, a reshaping that "can never be fully anticipated" (Butler, 1993: 20). Butler also address the limitations that 'queer' may have, for "[a]s expansive as the term ... is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions" from the use of the term by younger generations intending to distance themselves from "more institutionalized and reformist politics" (Butler, 1993: p. 20), to how it was a 'white' movement that failed to encompass or to dialogue with non-white communities, to an illusion of unity among men and women.

Elusive and hard to pin down, radical but turned mainstream, used as a umbrella term for LGBTQI+ individuals who self-identify with it, or rejected by LGBTQI+ individuals who perceive 'queer' as a term that fails to encompass, due to its capacity to encompass everything and everyone, the nature and idiosyncrasies of their bodies and experiences, 'queer' seems to do exactly what it was first though to do: to escape definitions related to heteronormative ideas of gender and sex. Although 'queer theory' is fully established as a discipline and a hermeneutic to read texts and cultural objects as productive, stable and therefore limited as any other, to *be* queer, or to *do* queer, or *to queer* a text, seems to still have a leftover of radical resistance, and in this thesis, in is used as a hermeneutic to challenge any concept of gender as being stable, fixed and attributed at the time of birth, from intersex bodies and even to pregnancy, while challenging the heteronormative. Lately 'queer studies' have even been reshaped into debates about the state of queer academics themselves, and the material conditions in which queer theorists and students work and live, as well as the hierarchical structures that rule academia[15]. Halperin writes, looking at the way how academia has turned queer theory into a discipline rather than a theory, a set of outcomes that students must meet rather than a hermeneutics to be used:

> [i]f queer theory is going to have the sort of future worth cherishing, we will have to find ways of renewing its radical potential–and by that I mean not devising some new and more avant-garde theoretical formulation of it but, quite concretely, reinventing its capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought. (Halperin, 2003: p. 343)

Ultimately, the way how 'queer' will be perceived in this thesis is close to Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz's definition:

> in this intense time of war and death, and of U.S. unilateralism and corporate domination, queer studies now more than ever needs to refocus its critical attentions on public debates about the meaning of democracy and freedom, citizenship and immigration, family and community, and the alien and the human in all their national and their global manifestations. (2005: p. 2)

It is this articulation that gender studies offer between gender and class, as well as ethnicity and race, and many other identity categories, in order to challenge these same structures of power and biopolitics that will be used as a hermeneutics in this thesis, as "an engaged mode of critical inquiry" (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz: 2005: 3). The case studies that have been selected deal mainly with sexuality and

[15] Brim, Matt. (2020) *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University.* Durham & London, Duke University Press.

gender but always in articulation with other identity categories, under the overall theme of family structures and queer kinship, as theorized by Kath Weston in the pivotal *Families We Choose*, an analysis of the emergence of debates on non-heterosexual families in the 1990s, in which family is perceived "not so much as an institution, but as a contested concept, implicated in the relations of power that permeate societies" (Weston, 1991: p. 3), while also analysing those same relations of power and the social structures and institutions that enforce them.

Aware of the limitations of a truly queer *queerness*, i.e., of encompassing the experience of every single LGBTQI+ identifying individual and its many manifestations, while also attempting at becoming a body of theories through which other areas of study can be put into practice, perhaps the most productive way of seeing queerness in this particular thesis is as a way of reclaiming the word, taking it out of the context of the insult and into one of many other words that are used to define non-normative gendered bodies. 'Queer' is then here perceived as a hermeneutics for the study of the variety and intersection of oppressive forces that design social structures, the family structure being the one that is here analysed in detail. Perhaps 'queer 'could exactly be defined by what it is not instead of all that it intends to be.

Or perhaps, instead of a hermeneutics of queer, what we need is an erotics of queer.

Chapter 1. All in the Family: Mapping the Intersex Body in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*

> They wished for ancestors like them: uncles who'd shaved their legs and squeezed their bellies into corsages and dresses at night, aunts with shingled hair and black lipstick, strolling through the streets in suits. None of these stories had ever found its way into the annals of family history, but they must have existed, so what was wrong with inventing them?[16]
>
> Sasha Marianna Salzmann, *Beside Myself*.

1.1. *Middlesex*

Perhaps *Middlesex* could be described as the quintessential intersex novel[17] – or at least that is what Cal, its main character and narrator intends it to be, making of him the most famous intersex of all time, after Herculine Barbin. Written by Jeffrey Eugenides, published in 2002 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the book is narrated by Calliope Stephanides, a young woman born within a Greek-American family and who will soon find out that she[18] is intersex, leading her to start living as a stealth[19] man as he refuses to accept the fact that he is intersex. Throughout the rather long narrative, which encompasses three generations of the Stephanides family, one is told, by Cal, how his grandparents left Greece during the war with Turkey in the beginning of the 20th century and settled, as many others, in the United States, where they raised their own family, balancing the need to preserve their Greek origins while also being assimilated into the American culture. Cal narrates the story of his family as a man in his forties, in Berlin, where he lives, with a retrospective look that imposes upon the narrative of his family and himself a 'straight timeline' in which marriages and giving birth to children are perceived as the main milestones of life, something that may be explained by a need to represent matters of heritage and inheritance as part of the immigrant experience, while also using that to explain Cal's condition. Being intersex is seen in *Middlesex* as the direct cause of the fact that Cal's grandparents were brother and sister, and this consanguinity is used to explain Cal's inheritance of what is taken to be as a defected gene, a mutation that has survived through three generations; inheritance is here deeply linked to matters

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[16] *Beside Myself* has been compared to *Middlesex*, for its narrative of a gender transition across borders: as the main character travels in a quest to find their body, their body transitions between gender spheres.

[17] Other works that deal with the intersex experience is the novel *Annabel*, by Kathleen Winter, along with Foucault's writings on Herculine Barbin and even Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* that, although not intersex, poses a transition that echoes *Middlesex*'s main character.

[18] Since the process of Cal's transitioning from girl to boy seems seamless and binary, the pronouns used in the text will also mirror those binary choices: "she/her" when referring to Callie/Calliope as a young girl, "he/his" when referring to Cal as a teenage boy and adult man.

[19] Hsu refers to Cal as a "stealth man" claiming that it is "the term used by transgender and intersexed communities to describe individuals who do not publicly disclose the fact of their gender transition" (2011: p. 87).

of blood, legacy and predestination. By looking back at his genealogy, in a retrospective look at the history of the United States and some crucial events which mark that same history, Cal tries to make sense of his condition as intersex, while also coming to terms with matters of familial links and legacies, gender expectations that are brought upon him by his family, and acculturation, in a story "held together not just be the thread of Cal's genealogy ... but also of his genetics: the mutation ... is in some sense the hero of this story, ... as it survives atrocity, displacement and war" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 377).

While relying "on the familiar model of the US immigration narrative to introduce an international readership to the decidedly unfamiliar voice of a narrator who is a "hermaphrodite" (Hsu, 2011: 87), Jeffery Eugenides juxtaposes the migrant experience with the one of the intersex individual, bringing together genetics and heritage in what is a problematic, often misleading and incomplete reading of both the immigrant experience and the intersex body. Many studies have focused on *Middlesex* as a ground-breaking work of cultural hybridity, an hybridity that was intended to be fully translated by the intersex voice that narrates the book. However, this chapter will solely focus on *Middlesex* as a reinforcement of the heteronormative discourse when dealing with the intersex experience. Moreover, the emphasis given to genetics and genealogy in *Middlesex* will be questioned and challenged while looking at the Stephanides family, their gender expectations and the gender roles that are mirrored in Callie, as well how heritage is deeply linked with the idea of nuclear families and blood relationships, here depicted as a single thread between past, present and future in the shape of shame embodied in Cal's body, through the transgenerational inheritance of trauma and guilt. Moreover, the retrospective look that Cal uses to look back at his genealogy is informed by an idea of time as straight, in a logic of sequence, in which a generation follows another, in the same sense that Cal was first a woman and then a man, but never intersex. This Chapter thus analyses *Middlesex* in relation to family structures, straight time and gender expectations, while also providing an introduction to intersex theory as well as a comparative reading between *Middlesex* and *MDLSX*, (2015) a performance based on the novel. Moreover, through an analysis of the television series *Transparent* (2014-2019) and *Fun Home* (2006), *Middlesex* will also be seen as a narrative of transgenerational trauma, as well a failed attempt at writing an intersex history.

Right at the beginning of the book, the reader is presented with the double birth of Cal, first as woman, then as man, but in neither as an intersex:

> I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day of January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of l974. . . My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license...records my first name simply as Cal. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 3)

Cal is a sequence of first female, then male, implying continuity instead of duplicity, a clear contradiction of the *middle sex* promised by the title in favour of an either/or logic: "Callie is an evolutionary dead-end that Cal has passed through" (Lee, 2010: p. 39). This sequential logic also implies the existence of a single original sexual identity, of a heteronormative timeline, that is somewhat disrupted by intersex bodies which must be corrected and restored to an original form, an origin that precedes the intersex body informed. Cal's "intersexed identity is experienced within a temporal and teleological structure, that is, as having a female 'before' and a male 'after' ... endorsing a binary gender view as well as a binary narrative structure" (Antosa, 2012: p. 70).

Later, Cal will mention a third birth, at the age of forty-one – "and so before it's too late I want to get it down for good: this rollercoaster ride of a single gene through time" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 4) – which seems to be the birth of *Middlesex* itself, implying that the narrative is deeply connected with Cal's reinvention, hinting at the performative power of gender, as well as Iain Morland's (2005) argument that the intersex body is produced by the narrative that the surgically modified bodies have been inscribed with, a narrative of sexual difference. According to Olivia Banner, this third birth is the evocation of "another traditional American genre: the historical saga of the immigrant family" (2010: p. 851) and it crystalizes the novel's intention to present biological determinism as intertwined with Cal's experience, as "autobiography becomes a true "genealogy": the gene's story becomes a foundational locus for identity" (Banner, 2010: p. 851). Although these births could be perceived as disruptive of a time continuum that implies a single birth, Cal is born as one thing and then another, reinforcing what has been referred to as *Middlesex*'s heteronormative timeline.

Middlesex has been praised by critics and medical practitioners as having introduced intersex lives to a mainstream audience. Alice Dreger even implies that *Middlesex* has directly contributed to the revision of treatment by medicine of intersex individuals by giving a face to intersexuality beyond the time of their treatment (Banner, 2010). Other activists have, however, criticised *Middlesex* as being inauthentic, given the fact that Eugenides is not intersex, stating that "the novelist has claimed a space that should be reserved for authentic voices" (Banner, 2010: p. 861). It is no wonder that *Middlesex* appears at "the end of the 20th century" a time that

> marked a change in intersex representations: autobiographical accounts of intersex lives, conveyed from the perspective of intersex individuals, have appeared in considerable numbers and produced a new discursive space that has challenged the monolithic medical discourse on intersex (Amato, 2016: p. 55).

Eugenides' authority to write a book on an intersex individual has been questioned[20], especially due to the fact that sexually marginalized voices are scarcely featured in mainstream media and visual arts, a tendency which seems to be in decline, due to the efforts of queer and feminist movements towards equal rights and representation and "academic and activist work of and about genderqueer, transgender and other gender-nonconforming individuals and groups [that] has provided a 'queer space'" for debate (Amato, 2010: p. 56). Ambiguity permeates *Middlesex*, not only when it comes to what can be seen as a failed attempt at a critique at the medical treatment of intersex individuals, ultimately enforced by the overpowering authorial male heteronormative, but also when it comes to the critical reception of the book, often applauded, due to what Banner refers to as a need for "a representative text that destigmatizes ambiguous sex", other times criticized, for this representation is penned by "a heteromasculine-identified narrator and the fact that it was authored by a heterosexual man" (Banner, 2010: p. 862). Moreover,

> [o]n the one hand, Middlesex gains the intersexed increased exposure, and its narrative is empathetic to their plight; on the other hand, *Middlesex* presents the intersexed through a mode of fiction (as opposed to the category of autobiography, whose relationship to experiential truth goes unproblematized), raising the question of and provoking anxiety about who holds the claims to subjectivity and agency. Does such authenticity matter, though, if the novel promotes acceptance of intersex? (Banner, 2010: pp. 861-862)

The metaphor of the 'divided' sexual body of Cal works to convey matters of belonging when addressing the duality felt by the Stephanides family, as they try to protect their Greek origins while also being acculturated by the American culture in which this family has lived in for three generations:

> the family roughly enacts the three-phase progressive assimilation that sociologist George A. Kourvetaris describes in such families: the first immigrant generation identifies with a Greek nationality; the second identifies with the Greek Orthodox religion and American nationality; and the third, most assimilated generation identifies with Greek-immigration status as a class. (Lee, 2010: p. 33)

Their lives are all intertwined and "the title of the novel punningly links the history of the Stephanides family with the ambiguous sex of the protagonist[21]" (Antosa, 2012: p. 63), providing heritage and blood

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[20] See Hsu (2011) and Banner (2010).

[21] Banner (2010) addresses Eugenides' decision to give voice to a family saga through the body of an intersex person as being a choice informed by a conception of sex as binary, as well as the use of the image of a single gene through time as a reductive view of what an intersex life consists of. In interviews, the author of *Middlesex* has referred to Cal as 'hermaphrodite', a word that the intersex community has rejected due to its connotations with fetishism. According to Eugenides, the word refers to the mythical literary creature that Cal is, reducing Cal to a literary motif, something sustained by his claim of using Cal's single mutated gene as a means to portrait a single family over the years. Banner also critiques Eugenides' approach to sexuality as binary when

legacies an overpowering and inescapable force. Later, Cal will embark on his own journey, leaving home when faced with the fact that he his intersex, and being unable to face his parents. On the road, which he starts to travel as a girl, his body changes, adopting characteristics that are socially perceived as male:

> After Ohio came Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska. I rode in station wagons, sport cars, rented vans. Single women never picked me up, only men, or men with women. A pair of Dutch tourists stopped for me, complaining about the frigidity of American beer, and sometimes I got rides from couples who were fighting and tired of each other. In every case, people took me for the teenage boy I was every minute more conclusively becoming. Sophie Sassoon wasn't around to wax my mustache, so it began to fill in, a smudge above my upper lip. My voice continued to deepen. Every jolt in the road dropped my Adam's apple another notch in my neck." (Eugenides, 2000: pp. 448-449)

He experiences homelessness and, arriving in San Francisco, will take part in a peep show, in which his body is presented to an audience as a curiosity, enhancing the way in which the intersex body is here portrayed as a sexual fetish. When his father dies, Cal returns home, only to leave to travel expansively, since he claims to never be able to be at home or stay for a long time in the same place, eventually settling in Berlin, a city which reminds him of himself due to its once divided map, that he sees as home, as he struggles for a unification (which for him means fully erasing his intersex identity and living in a body that is unambiguously male):

> I've never wanted to stay in one place. After I started living as a male, my mother and I moved away from Michigan and I've been moving ever since. In another year or two I'll leave Berlin, to be posted somewhere else. I'll be sad to go. This once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einheit* . Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin." (Eugenides, 2002: p. 106)

Middlesex can be read as several genres, from a coming-of-age in the first person, a family saga to an historical novel: even though this analysis aims at a reading of the sexual bodies of *Middlesex*, and the role that genealogy and heritage take in shaping them, these sub genres will work together as forces for the determination of Cal's identity, particularly in a novel which often recurs to biology and genealogy as forces of determinism through the enforcement of a heteronormative structure to a body that defies it. As Samuel Cohen writes, *Middlesex* is highly influenced and hostage of its own genre and its demands:

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addressing the author's choice as one that would allow him to have a male and female view of the world through Cal's eyes, revealing not only that Cal's experience as intersex is only valid as a narrator or someone else's story; he is also only perceived as his male and female parts, not as an intersex individual.

> This novel displays a particular historical imagination, as all historical novels do; it depends on a set of notions about the relationship between past, present and future, about cause and effect, and about the possibilities and problems that attempts to understand and represent the past entail. (2007: p. 371)

Although *Middlesex* might be perceived as a ground-breaking work of fiction, for its intersex narrator and for addressing matters related to the intersex body, as well as a portrait of The United States "from its immigrant roots to the present" (S. Cohen, 2007: 371), one must be aware of the duality that permeates the novel, as well as its heteronormative structure, one that shows "how a supposedly transgressive narrative can remain within the confines of a normative discourse" (Antosa, 2012: p. 65):

> *Middlesex* thus develops and problematizes a number of issues that intersect at different levels: biology and culture, nature and nurture, ethnic dislocations and ambiguous body formation, determinism and free will, the old world of the Greek homeland and the new American culture of the twentieth century. It is a novel about geographical migrations, narrative shifts, sexual transitions and self-redefinitions (2012: p. 64).

Moreover, and even though *Middlesex* is indeed a work of fiction, one must be aware of the political implications of addressing matters of gender, sex, ethnicity and even class in fiction. Therefore, an introduction on the intersex body, drawn from crucial texts on intersexuality, is much needed, particularly due to misconceptions and misunderstandings that might exist about this sexual category which has only recently found its way upon the LGBTQI+ acronym. As Preciado writes:

> We live in a world where violent gender diagnosis is a legalized practice in every modern hospital, forcing gender assignment according to the binary; a world where in spite of the technical separation of heterosexuality and reproduction that the pill enables, heterosexuality is still declared the normal and natural form of sexual reproduction; a world where hormones, prostheses, and surgeries enable an embodied experience of gender transition but where normalization of gender is the political requirement for any gen- der reassignment process; a world where experiments with three-dimensional printing of skin and organs are already taking place but always within the framework of hegemonic gender and racial norms. And yet we – the intersexed, the crip, the gender-queer, the nonwhite, the trans – exist, speak, and act. (2018: pp. 5-6)

1.2. A Genealogy of the Intersex Body

> Candy says 'I've come to hate my body

And all that it requires in this world'
Candy says 'I'd like to know completely
What others so discretely talk about'.
The Velvet Underground, "Candy Says"

Greek myths, besides the myth of an original, binary sexual order, permeate *Middlesex*. Perhaps in an attempt to bring Cal closer to, again, his and his family's roots, "a simple result of his effort to be self-consciously Greek" (Lee, 2010: p. 34), Eugenides draws inspiration from Greek mythology and punctuates the narrative with these myths that, along with the use of the word hermaphrodite, point to a genealogy of the intersex body as mythical, belonging to fiction. Cal rarely refers to himself as intersex though he often uses the word hermaphrodite – perhaps as "a simple result of his effort to be self-consciously Greek" (Lee, 2010: p. 34) – again reclaiming an existence back to the mythological Greek figure, establishing himself more as a myth rather than an intersex individual with a particular subjectivity; "protesters point out that foregrounding this mythic genealogy means perpetuating a form of recognition that has been identified as oppressive by intersexed people and as scientifically inaccurate by a majority of medical professionals" (Hsu, 2011: p. 95). As Merton Lee points out:

> Whereas "hermaphrodite" is still freighted with connotations of the unnatural, "intersexuality," as a neologism, attempts to naturalize various sexes, which themselves are naturally occurring. In this light, Cal's choice of "hermaphrodite" implies the conservative view that only the categories of male and female are natural genders. (33)

The work of authors such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, Suzanne Kessler and Alice Dreger has been crucial to disrupt the image of the intersex body as mythological, while also implying that intersex bodies have always existed, creating a legacy for these individuals, a legacy that has been based upon a dual system of sexes, dedicated to maintaining that binary system through the discipline of the bodies, ensuring that a heterosexual matrix is also generated. According to Fausto-Sterling, narratives of progress must be abandoned when referring to the intersex body, as what was perceived as progress – the 'fixing' of the body in order to have a single sex – often resulted in repression of that same body:

> From the viewpoint of medical practitioners, progress in the handling of intersexuality involves maintaining the normal. Accordingly, there *ought* to be only two boxes: male and female. The knowledge developed by the medical disciplines empowers doctors to maintain a mythology of the normal by changing the intersexual body to fit, as nearly as possible, into one or the other cubbyhole. One person's medical progress, however, can be another's discipline and control. (Fausto-Sterling, 2002: p. 8)

While conceiving Milton, Cal's father, Desdemona, Cal's grandmother thinks of the Minotaur, half human, half beast, after having seen a play about the monster. Later, Desdemona will think back about this night and recall the image of the mythological creature as the reason why Cal is intersex, with a body also divided as human and something else. As Cal narrates the moment of his father's conception, in another impossible omnipresent look at his family's life – reminding the reader of Tristan Shandy – Cal reflects on the fate of his own sexual identity and how it has been passed on from the moment in which the Minotaur has set foot on stage up to the present. "Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too." (Eugenides, 2002: p. 4), says Cal, as if his powers for storytelling are also a matter of lineage, placing himself next to Homer and the great Greek authors, establishing a literary legacy.

It seems then that there was no other possible future for Cal but to inherit the "motifs, scenarios, even fates" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 109) of his family. Moreover, this inheritance is also perceived as genealogical, biological, even mythological and therefore, inescapable:

> A momentous night, this, for all involved (including me). I want to record the positions (Lefty dorsal, Lina couchant) and the circumstances (night's amnesty) and the direct cause (a play about a hybrid monster). Parents are supposed to pass down physical traits to their children, *but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates* [emphasis added]. Wouldn't I also sneak up on a girl pretending to be asleep? And wouldn't there also be a play involved, and somebody dying onstage? *Leaving these genealogical questions aside, I return to the biological facts* [emphasis added]." (Eugenides, 2002: p. 109)

More than the inheritance of fate, Cal seems to also inherit shame, the shame felt by Desdemona and Lefty and the fact that they are siblings, a shame made visible when the doctor tells them that birth defects may arise by consanguinity. "A word on my shame. I don't condone it. I'm trying my best to get over it" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 106), writes Cal, although the narrative does not seem to move away from shame, as it settles it as a family heirloom. Cal grows up feeling ashamed of his body, as perceived in the comparison with the Minotaur, unable to have sexual relationships with women or to show them his body:

> When I meet someone I like and who seems to like me, I retreat. There are lots of nights out in Berlin when … I forget my physical predicament and allow myself to hope. The tailored suit comes off. The Thomas Pink shirt, too. My dates can't fail to be impressed by my physical condition. (Under the armor of my double-breasted suits is another of gym-built muscle.) But the final protection, my roomy, my discreet boxer shorts, these I do not remove. Ever. Instead I leave, making excuses. I leave and never call them again. *Just like a guy* [emphasis added]. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 107).

Cal is exiled and isolated, a feeling that he expresses when explaining that he is not political and therefore does not participate in intersex movements, a statement that seems to expose Cal's loneliness more than his refusal to be politically engaged, unable to speak about his own sexual identity:

> But we hermaphrodites are people like everybody else. And I happen not to be a political person. I don't like groups. Though I'm a member of the Intersex Society of North America, I have never taken part in its demonstrations. I live my own life and nurse my own wounds. It's not the best way to live. But it's the way I am. … I'm closeted at work, revealing myself only to a few friends. … Only a few people here in Berlin know my secret. I tell more people than I used to, but I'm not at all consistent. Some nights I tell people I've just met. In other cases I keep silent forever. (Eugenides, 2002: pp. 106-107)

Cal refers to himself as an hermaphrodite but when addressing the fact that he is not political or that he does not get involved in intersex activism, he uses the term 'intersex', perhaps aware that intersex is indeed a political category, one that implies political agency and engagement, as well as a self-identification and self-reflective action, and not a mere diagnosis. By engaging with activism, meeting other intersex individuals, disclosing his intersexuality or not living as a man, Cal would be turning into "one of them": "Is it really my apolitical temperament that makes me keep my distance from the intersexual rights movement? Couldn't it also be fear? Of standing up. Of becoming one of *them*" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 319).

Cal appears as a lonely and tragic figure, without a network of support in the shape of friends or a family of his own, as queer figures are often represented. Cal, due to his intersexuality, is prevented from forming meaningful relationships, having in constant movement, unable to make a home for himself, for he never seems to fit the world around him. This is also sustained by how Eugenides designs *Middlesex* through the insertion of a straight timeline that goes from Greece to The United States, from the first Stephanides down to Cal:

> After decades of neglect, I find myself thinking about departed great-aunts and -uncles, long-lost grandfathers, unknown fifth cousins, or, in the case of an inbred family like mine, all those things in one. And so before it's too late I want to get it down for good: this roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time. Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own midwestern womb. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 4)

Cal knows the history of his family but he seems completely unaware of the history of intersex people, knowing that they have always existed but uninterested in engaging with that part of his life as

> only glimpses of his life as an adult are offered, many of them unhappy memories. The faltering in Cal's story beyond the age of fourteen associates his later life with invisibility and difficulty ... suggesting that ... its intersexual aspect is unspeakable. Indeed, Cal makes clear ... the urge to tell the story of his family and their legacy, not his own. (Graham, 2009: p. 9)

At school, Cal studies Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and even plays Tiresias, in a rather obvious and expected nod at the *Antigone*'s gender bender figure, who was first male, then female. Side by side with these mythical evocations is the reminder that

> [i]ntersexuality is old news. The word *hermaphrodite* comes from a Greek term that combined the names Hermes [...] and Aphrodite [...] There are at least two Greek myths about the origins of the first hermaphrodite. In one, Aphrodite and Hermes produce a child so thoroughly endowed with the attributes of each parent that, unable to decide its sex for sure, they name it Hermaphroditos. In the other, their child is an astonishingly beautiful male with whom a water nymph falls in love. Overcome by desire, she so deeply intertwines her body with his that they become joined as one. (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 32)

More importantly, the fact that this apparently impossible creature exists may also work "as the embodiment of a human past that predated dualistic sexual division" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p.32), with Plato writing on three original sexes, male female and hermaphrodite, and they are present, not just on Greek mythology, but also on religious texts – "the Talmud and the Tosefta list extensive regulations for people of mixed sex, regulating modes of inheritance and of social conduct" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 33) – as well as in ancient Rome, having been both persecuted (in Romulus's time) and later eligible for marriage (in Pliny's time). It is however relevant to think that, although featured in literature and the arts at large and for a centuries as a metaphor, symbol or pure myth, intersex is yet to be legally recognized as a sexual category in many countries.

Fausto-Sterling writes expansively on the medieval perception of a sexual continuum, one which did not reduce sexual experience to two sexes, and that derived from classical theories on sex fluidity such as Aristotle's take on the hermaphrodite as some sort of unfulfilled twinning and Galen's understanding of the hermaphrodite as an intermediate sex (a *middle sex*). However, even though these attempts at scientifically defining the intersex body did not necessarily translate into direct social acceptance and "[d]espite widespread uncertainty about their proper social roles, disapproval of

hermaphrodites remained relatively mild" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 34). Later on, during Renaissance,

> physicians' stories competed both with medicine and with those elaborated by the Church, the legal profession, and politicians. To further complicate matters, different European nations had different ideas about the origins, dangers, civil rights, and duties of hermaphrodites (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 34).

Sex categories have been a constant matter of discussion and questioning and an intrinsic part of human experience, and there are numerous accounts of men living as women, women living as men, women enlisting as soldiers, men cross-dressing as women and intersex individuals who lived accordingly to their chosen gender expression and even individuals who would assume the other sex category in order to marry their loved ones, in order not to be punished, or even killed, for having an homosexual relationship. Fausto-Sterling accounts for three examples of sexual dissidence (two women who assumed male identities in order to marry other women and a male soldier who gave birth to a baby girl) in order to show how the different outcomes of said dissidence (the first women was sentenced to death, having been released under the promise to wear women's clothes, the second one was convicted of vagrancy and the intersex soldier was granted a divorced from his wife, since giving birth was not appropriate for a husband) in order to illustrate not only the manifold expressions of sexual fluidity but also the leeway of punishment given to these individuals accordingly to each country's legal and religious systems. However, besides an apparent ambiguity in the treatment of those who did not obey to sexual duality, it cannot be ignored that there was always a sharp border between male and female spheres, and much was taken away from women due to the patriarchal structure that has regulated women's experience ever since, regarding marriage, property, the right to vote or even to regulate their own bodies. For the intersex, even though enjoying a certain type of freedom from this castrating sexualized social structure, there was still the need to identify with one or the other sexual category and therefore enjoy the privileges of his manhood or the hardship of being a woman.

It is with the rise of biology as a discipline in the 19th century that the abnormal sexuality, be it anatomical or related to sexual orientation, was first perceived as needing to be corrected. Saint-Hilaire, a biologist, defined that, if nature is one single entity, both normal and *abnormal* births were natural; moreover, he also established that hermaphrodites and other *anomalies* were results of "abnormal embryonic development. To understand their genesis, he argued, one must understand normal development. Studying abnormal variations could in turn illuminate normal processes" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 36). Saint-Hilaire's study, although it "offered a natural explanation for the birth of people with extraordinary bodies" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 36) it also defined them as derivations of the norm, and

therefore, a mistake that needed to be corrected.

As women voiced their concerns about slavery and their right to education and voting, many were concerned about the presence of women in circles exclusively male and a need to keep women in their places arose, under the authoritarian discourse of biology:

> Scientists and medical men insisted that the bodies of males and females, of whites and people of color, Jews and Gentiles, and middle-class and laboring men differed deeply. In an era that argued politically for individual rights on the basis of human equality, scientists defined some bodies as better and more deserving of rights than others. (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 39)

If women's struggles seem unrelated to the condition, and the invention, of the 'hermaphrodite', they are not; to regulate women, and their rights, is often to regulate sex itself and every other sexual category and "[s]uch social struggles had profound implications for the scientific categorization of intersexuality. More than ever, politics necessitated two and only two sexes" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 40). But if until now,' hermaphrodites' had to live under a chosen gender expression, under an either/or logic, in the 1930s there was a new way of approaching the intersexed body: the correction of those same bodies. Doctors found it necessary to, at birth, erase the ambiguous traits and make of the mixed body one that was fully male or female. William Blair Bell, a physician, claimed that each case of hermaphroditism was to be treated accordingly to his/her own intrinsic characteristics and that each individual were to display more or less complex bodies which, upon thorough examination of both the anatomy and behaviour of each person, as well as how this individual's personal experience as male or female in "social situations, using sophisticated understandings of the body more as a guide to the range of physical possibilities than as a necessary indicator of sex" (Fausto-Sterling, 42).

Even though this approach can be seen as practitioners' wish to allow intersex individuals to adapt to a society which was profoundly patriarchal and in which gender roles were fully defined, "behind the wish lay unexamined assumptions: first, that there should be only two sexes; second, that only heterosexuality was normal; and third, that particular gender roles defined the psychologically healthy man and woman" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 44). What lies at core of these decisions is not exactly the intersex body itself, but a much broader discussion on "the origins of sexual difference, especially gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 45); the intersex body takes that sense of origin and questions it, by being in itself origin and deviation, as well as ambiguity. It is the fear of breaking centuries of well cemented sexual borders that makes of an intersex birth a "state of emergency" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 45), and the prospect of the birth of a body that does not comply

to the way in which we think our familial, social and political structures demands for a quick and effective erasure of that sexual ambiguity so that the original sexual order must be carried out.

To correct the intersex body is to correct gender itself, to reinforce a sexual binary and to insert every single ambiguous body in the heteronormative structure in which "intersex medicine aims to make unfamiliar genitals instantly familiar, recognizable, not worthy of a second glance" (Morland, 2005: p. 336). This became the approach of medical practitioners during the 1960s, an era when the fantasy of "the post–World War II ideal of the suburban family structured around strictly divided gender roles" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 46) was also crystalizing (curiously, Cal Stephanides is born in 1960). The intersex body must be recognized by non-intersex individuals, and read as sexually different, regardless of the fact that intersex people are devoid of the chance to read or write their own bodies. Cal reflects on the fact that gender is also determined by the place and time in which it is produced when addressing the gender identity theory that Dr Luce, a specialist in sexual disorders and the person who 'diagnoses' Cal, followed in order to arrive to the conclusion that Cal is a girl, since she was raised as such:

> It's no surprise that Dr Luce's theory of gender identity was popular in the early seventies. Back then, as my first barber put it, everybody wanted to go unisex. The consensus was that personality was primarily determined by environment, each child a blank slate to be written on. My own medical story was only a reflection of what was happening psychologically to everyone in those years. ... for a little while during the seventies it seemed that sexual difference might pass away. But then another thing happened. It was called evolutionary biology" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 478)

The attempt to normalize theses bodies is also an attempt to normalize sex itself, by crystalizing the normality of the unambiguously male and female bodies, closing possibilities for non-confirming sexual categories to exist and keeping the borders that define the male and female spheres. As Cal explains in *Middlesex*, when addressing his doctor consultations:

> I had miscalculated with Luce. I thought that after talking to me he would decide that I was normal and leave me alone. But I was beginning to understand something about normality. *Normality wasn't normal*. [emphasis added] It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. But people – and especially doctors – had doubts about normality. They weren't sure normality was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost (Eugenides, 2000: p. 446)

When faced with such threatening bodies, the heteronormative instinct is to make them *normal* again, by defining it as a deviation from an original form of sex, a detour that must be rapidly corrected in order to

proceed on the right path of sex difference and binary gender expression. As Dreger writes:

> we tend to assume that the normal (in this case the "normal" sexual anatomy) existed before we encountered the abnormal, but it is really only when we are faced with something that we think is "abnormal" that we find ourselves struggling to articulate what "normal" is (2003: p. 6).

Cheryl Chase (1956-), the founder of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), has been vocal about her experience as an intersex child and the harmful effects that the surgery, as well as the deceiving treatment of intersex patients, can produce in the adult intersex; "the declared goal" of the ISNA was the "systemic change to end shame, secrecy, and unwanted genital surgeries for people born with an anatomy that someone decided is not standard for male or female" (Amato, 2016: p. 56). Chase's body displayed, at birth, internal and external genital, as well as ovo-testes. However, due to what was medically perceived as an oversized clitoris and since Chase had been raised as a boy for eighteen months, her parents were advised to perform a clitorectomy, erase every trace of Chase's male identity and raise her as a girl. After several more surgeries, and the lack of either psychological counselling or even the disclosure of what type of surgery and treatment she had been subjected to, Chase searched for access to her own medical records, when she finally found out that she was intersex, as well as the set of surgeries that she had been submitted.

Besides the struggle to accept the imposed surgery, Chase has also been vocal about the lack of a healthy sexual life, as well as the lack of help or answers provided by specialists and doctors. In order to prevent the damage that early genital surgery may bring, Chase supports allowing children to live socially as male or female and then, when entitled to, self-determine their own sex and gender presentation, without being conditioned by surgery. This stand, along with other associations of intersex people, researchers and even medical practitioners has been changing medical practice in the United States (Fausto-Sterling). Even though these procedures have changed and there are many forms of performing surgery on the intersex body, and although medical malpractice and negligence can be found in many areas of medicine and not exclusively when dealing with intersex bodies, there are several cases like the one of Chase, and the fact that the treatment of intersex bodies has many approaches according to the standards and medical trends at the time, this also accounts for a variety of intersex experiences that must be recorded and heard. Regardless of the multiple types of accounts, there is a common ground when it comes to intersex experience: lack of support, shame associated with the late discovery of early surgery, secrecy and even unpleasant and unfulfilled sexual pleasure. Perhaps this is also not exclusive of intersex experience but also a symptom of the overall lack of knowledge when it comes to sexuality,

and, more particularly, with the lack of sensitivity towards clitoral function and the female body. Furthermore, surgery often brings more doubt than certainty, and the fact that these bodies are now inscribed as sexually intelligible for others does not necessarily translate as a form of identification for intersex individuals:

> These genitalia may commemorate a sexual difference that was, or should have been, in their place, but they do so precisely as a memorialized loss, not a communicated presence. Intersexed writers (e.g. Chase, 1998b, p. 214; Holmes, 1998, p. 225) have chronicled the anguish of trying to choose between an identity based on surgical results and an identity based on the anatomy that surgery removed. It is intractably difficult to know which identity is properly authentic, or moreover whether this so-called choice is a reasonable one. Whereas for some non-intersexed people intersexuality is a sexual fantasy, for some post-surgical intersexed people sexuality itself becomes a fantasy (Morland, 2005: p. 344).

Fausto-Sterling transcribes the words of Dewhurst and Gordon, two doctors whose book *The Intersexual Disorders* expresses the deepest fear of sexual ambiguity and an omen of the misfortunes of a new-born baby, whose photograph is featured on the book for close inspection of his/her *abnormal* genitalia. The focus on the body of an intersex new-born seems to always be the parents and not the child itself. In Dewhurst and Gordon's words, there is not a reference to the fact that these individuals hardly have any type of health problems that arise from being intersex and that any complications will arise from sexist, heteronormative societies unprepared to let go of solid gender roles and expectations:

> [o]ne can only attempt to imagine the anguish of the parents. That a new-born should have a deformity . . . [affecting] so fundamental an issue as the very sex of the child . . . is a tragic event which immediately conjures up visions of a hopeless psychological misfit doomed to live always as a sexual freak in loneliness and frustration. (Dewhurst and Gordon in Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 48)

Morgan Holmes also reinforces the way in which intersex children bring around and challenge the parents' expectations regarding their child's sex, as they come across intersexuality

> in the context of diagnosis: the pointing out of a flaw, an error, perhaps—it is implied—arriving through some heritable genetic 'defect' not expressed in the parents, but present nonetheless. Parents and families of intersexed children confront a world informed by the premise of defect, not of neutral variation. Even the conciliatory 'DSD[22]' nomenclature speaks to problems and defects: disorders that can be managed,

[22] Hsu writes that "intersex is being invalidated as the medical term for individuals born with mixed genital attributes in favor of a classification as a "Disorder of Sex Development (DSD)" (2011: p. 87), further claiming that the intersex cause, besides the separation from other sexual minorities and gender categories,

> fixed, and brought into line with the expected rather than the unexpected. Much like Mcruer's (2006: 203–4) image of disabled bodies made disposable by the neoliberal goals of such global bodies as the United Nations, the future of intersex itself is haunted by the probability that if we do not maintain a critical framework, intersex will not simply be under erasure but will be done away with altogether. (Holmes, 2009: p. 6).

To look at intersex bodies as derivations of *normal* ones is to take away their humane status, privileging the approach that the medical discourse, one that is in itself defined by beliefs on "male and female sexuality, gender roles, and the (im)proper place of homosexuality in normal development" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 48) and the expectations of families, friends and also strangers that must change when regarding non-normative bodies. Given that, "despite the general consensus that intersexual children must be corrected immediately" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 48), it was the medical practitioner that ultimately decided whether to perform or not the *correction*, and if "[d]eciding whether to call a child a boy or a girl, then, employs social definitions of the essential components of gender" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 58), a shift in the paradigms in which gender and sex are defined in medical discourses is also much needed, hoping for a change in "our scientific narratives to conform to our cultural transformations" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 73).

Since corrective surgery is "a kind of writing" with the aim of ensuring that "the genitalia be readable, like a book" (Morland, 2005: p. 336), this same change in the treatment of intersex bodies by not changing them in order to turn them into "good facsimiles of culturally intelligible bodies" (Fausto-Sterling, 76) may also signify a change upon cisgender bodies themselves, opening up possibilities for embodying other types of gender presentation, sexual orientation and even body types. If the intersex body has been perceived as the deviation to the norm, and therefore, a way of reinforcing that same norm as 'natural', then to erase gendered borders for intersex bodies and embrace their ambiguity could mean that those same gendered borders could be opened up to accept the existence of cisgender bodies, outside of the binary, beyond biology. The expectations on the anatomy of intersex individuals are, if not

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may be abandoned in favour of a medical condition, which seems to be a step back when looking at, for instance, the long and hard fight to remove homosexuality from WHO's list of diseases. Activists of the intersex movement, however, claim that such categorization may result in better health care while others claim that "there is, indeed, some critical utility, vigour and power left in the deployment of the term 'intersex'" and "that it is too soon to accept the language of disorder wholesale and that, in fact, a critical value remains in the use, deployment, recognition and interrogation of 'intersex'" (Holmes, 2009: p. 1). The same argument for this identification with a diagnosis rather than a sexual category is also sustained by Reis: "[t]he new medical term "DSD" (disorders of sex development), takes some of the attention away from matters of sexuality, gender, and monstrosity, particularly because of the availability of the acronym, but I and others think that it unnecessarily medicalizes a situation that might not need medical care. The vast majority of intersex conditions are not life threatening. Not everything has to be "fixed," especially when the fix is based on social concerns rather than medical necessity" (2009: p. xv).

the same of cisgender bodies, at least grounded on the same systems of gender; women and men are brought up under scrutiny, encouragement, peer pressure and assumptions about sexual performance, as well as the size, shape and functionality of body parts. Looking at unchanged intersex bodies might as well be seen as looking at mirrored images of *normal bodies*, for they opened up possibilities of having a body in a patriarchal and heteronormative society, as well as a necessary challenging to the way how these bodies are designed by familial, medical, social and political discourses, given that, "[w]hen we look at hermaphrodites, we are forced to realize how variable even "normal" sexual traits are" (Dreger, 2003: p. 5).

Stephanie Hsu puts forward a strong argument on the effect that *Middlesex* may have in the "increasing normalization of intersex in the world of the text's reception" (2011: p. 88). Hsu's thesis brings together what is claimed to be an often overlooked link between the "genealogy for intersex genitalia" and "the sexing of racialized or ethnic bodies" (2011: p. 87). Although the focus of this chapter is placed on *Middlesex*'s sexual politics and not on the novel's view of national identity, Hsu's arguments are pertinent when it comes to analysing *Middlesex*'s treatment of the intersex experience, particularly what she claims to be the erasure of the intersex identity in detriment of a diagnosis that brings with it techniques for the normalization of the intersex body, something that clearly figures in Eugenides' narrative:

> [b]y normalization, I refer to the management of intersex through technologies of biometric standardization, including corrective surgeries, the DSD diagnosis, and the functional disappearance of intersex in the form of stealth culture. If the decline in the significance of intersex identity is related to finding a "cure" or otherwise eradicating intersexed people, however, intersex normalization is also a sign of the heightened regulation of gender norms and sexed embodiment. (Hsu, 2011: p. 88)

1.3. Transgenerational Trauma

> "My mother says there are no homosexuals in my family."
> "Maybe there aren't, but there might be a lesbian."
> Malinda Lo, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

As previously mentioned, Berlin is portrayed as perhaps the only space where Cal feels at home. Perhaps the link with the German city is fortuitous and solely established given the fact that its topography may work as a productive metaphor for a 'divided' body, but the link between space and queerness cannot be overlooked. As Silvia Amato writes: "[h]istorically, places and spaces played a significant role

in the social and cultural perception of intersex and functioned as the sites where the knowledge production of intersex was institutionalized" (2016: p. 187), and the spaces in which sexuality is practised (or censored) in *Middlesex* are a crucial part to understand how the intersex body is read, misread and contested, from the clinic where Cal is subjected to Foucault's "instruments of disciplinary power", to the pool in which Cal performs his peep show, to the openness of the road, to the city of San Francisco, the American capital for queer freedom and resistance, where Cal finally comes across a group of people that somewhat resemble him. Berlin is also featured in the television series *Transparent*, which is here evoked to establish a dialogue that can be productive to read *Middlesex* and its take on transgenerational trauma.

Created in 1919, and located in Berlin, Magnus Hirschfeld and Arthur Kronfeld's Institute of Sex Research (Institut für Sexualwissenschaft) was invaded by Nazi troops on May 6 1933, for whom the work of the sexologists, devotedly dedicated to the study of homosexuality and the protection of queer people was an offence to the ideals of family and nationalism perpetrated by Nazism. With the closing of the Institute, and the destruction of its library and a vast body of literature on same sex desire and non-normative bodies, Hirschfield's work was put on hold, a rupture in a pioneering and innovative approach to queer lives and their humane treatment. Moreover, the Institute was a safe haven for people who had been criminalized and prosecuted due to 'deviant' sexual orientations and identities (the Institute offered some of the first sex-reassignment surgeries and it was Hirschfeld who first used the word "transsexualism"), working as an early type of shelter that provided treatment and counselling and for LGBTQI+ individuals, one which allied personal histories and caring with scientific research. At the time of the second World War, Berlin enjoyed a significantly liberty when it comes to sexuality, proving that queer lives are not a modern invention while also attesting that the rights of sexual minorities are always at risk in times of conflict and crisis.

The Institute of Sex Research was featured on the second season of *Transparent*. Created by Joey Solloway, the show was based on the author's experience with the coming out of their father as a transgender woman, who started transitioning late in life. The show revolves around the character of Maura Pfefferman, the *trans*parent of the title, who finally comes out as a transgender woman at 60, after gathering up the courage it takes to share the news with her former wife, her three adult children, each of them facing their own plural sexual identities, and overall strangers who are now faced with the female body of Maura. The series has been highly acclaimed by its casting of transgender actresses (although it was also heavily criticised by the fact that the main transgender character is played by a cisgender man), as well as the exploration of several sexual categories and forms of gender presentation, while also

approaching the Holocaust, polygamy, white and male privilege, non-white and working-class transgender lives, queer feminism, transphobia, sexual assault, ageism, gay marriage[23], the intersection between Jewishness and queerness[24], and even the Israel-Palestine conflict. Family secrets are uncovered, the family's structure is rearranged and questioned as Maura comes to terms with her own gender and her place as 'Moppa' ('mother' and 'pappa' in one word) within a family that is rather dysfunctional. The viewers learn about Maura's wife's past trauma as a sexual abuse survivor and they see Maura meeting her father, who abandoned her as a child to move to Israel, who tells Maura that one member of her family, who was also transgender, had died during the Holocaust. One of the most tender moments of the series is witnessed when Maura comes out as transgender to her own mother. The viewer also gets a glimpse of Maura's life as a married man while also trying to explore her gender presentation, while Maura's youngest daughter, Ali, tries to make amends with the family's past as she wonders about the many ways in which it can affect the present, through transgenerational trauma. Josh, Maura's middle child, finds out that he has a son, although he is unaware of how to be a father, finding comfort and guidance in his stepfather, while Sarah, Maura's oldest daughter also deals with her bisexuality and how it is (or is not) compatible with a heterosexual marriage. As Maura comes out, the families secrets also come out as "the affective cost of silence and unacknowledged trauma is thematised through the ways in which past events still permeate the present" (Horvat, 2019: p. 2), while also disrupting normative timelines as it is up to "Sarah, Josh, and Ali ... adults ... who now have to renegotiate their parent-child relationship with their father" (Hess, 2017: p. 8).

Transparent "both historicizes transgender identity and exposes the hidden transgender histories of the Pfefferman family, thus raising questions of memory and temporality" (Horvat, 2019: p. 2), something also sustained by Linda Hess, who claims that Maura's coming out establishes a new beginning for the family as it:

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[23] Maura's daughter Sarah, who is married to a man with children, starts a relationship with a woman, Tammy, who she is supposed to get married, but she does not. Afterwards, Sarah gets back with her husband, with whom she also explores an open relationship. For Hess, Sarah and Tammy's wedding ceremony is a particularly elucidative moment of how *Transparent* defies family boundaries: "[o]ne scene that humorously marks the permeability of family boundaries in the show occurs at the very beginning of Season 2, when family pictures are taken at Sarah's lesbian wedding. Various members of the wedding party keep interrupting the photographer in order to add more people into the picture, including two ex-wives of Tammy, Sarah's new spouse. While the wedding planner pleads, "Only family," an exasperated Ali finally asks, "Anybody else want in?" (2017, p. 8). Moreover, through Sarah's "almost wedding", another point of marriage is made – it is only a ritual. When Sarah is told by the Rabbi that without the licence, the marriage is not official yet, "Ali asks, dejectedly, "What is a wedding, then?" to which the Rabbi replies, "It's a ritual, a pageant. It's like a very expensive play." Sarah chimes in, relieved, "It's a play. And we're just in costume" ... The scene exposes social and cultural conventions (like marriage) as collective and performative constructions. ... At the same time, the focus on Sarah's sweaty skin, as well as the use of successive close-ups and an unsteady camera perspective (largely Sarah's perspective on the scene) during the wedding ceremony, produces a stifling atmosphere that conveys Sarah's fear of being confined by marriage, whether heterosexual or lesbian." (Hess, 2017: 10).

[24] For an analysis on the prosecution of queer people during the Holocaust see Jensen (2002).

> interrupts ideas of "progression" and "continuity," which characterize hegemonic concepts of family and temporality (Halberstam 70, 74). In Season 1, Josh, who finds it particularly difficult to accept or understand his father's transition, asks his sisters in frustration, "So what does this mean? Everything Dad has said and done before this moment is a sham? Like he was acting the whole time?" Ali's answer – "No. It just means we all have to start over" ("The Wilderness") – underlines the significant impact that Maura's transition has on her family, but it also interrupts the ideal of linear continuity proposed by the cultural blueprint of the heteronormative timeline. (Hess, 2017: p. 8).

The Institute appears in the form of lyrical and complex flashbacks that are juxtaposed, and sometimes are even intertwined, with the narrative that takes place in Los Angeles in 2015, creating multiple timelines that defy linear time and a heteronormative logic, as well as a link between contemporary queer politics and earlier queer communities (Dempsey, 2018). Like *Middlesex*, *Transparent* is a family saga, one that explores the tight bounds of a dysfunctional but affectionate family as "the travel of unvoiced trauma from generation to generation of Pfefferman women plays a central role, and the series emphasizes the role of haunting in our perception of the present" (Horvat, 2019: p. 2). Anamarija Horvat sustains her analysis of *Transparent* through Carla Freccero's 'queer haunting', a concept that will also be highly productive to analyse both *The Great Believers* and *The Inheritance*, that dialogue directly with the preoccupations explored in *Transparent* and these "legacies of affect" (Stratton in Horvat, 2019). As defined by Avery Gordon:

> Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us. (Gordon, 2008: p. xvi)

This ghost, who has a real presence and demands attention, appears in the life of Ali, Maura's daughter, who is also questioning her gender, in the shape of her great-aunt, Gittel, a transgender woman who used to visit Hirschfield's centre and who was killed at a concentration camp. The acknowledgment that Gittel was a woman will allow Maura and Ali to both engage with other ways of expressing her gender, while also recovering a story that was obliterated from both the family story and history books. As Gordon

writes, “what’s been concealed is very much alive and present” (Gordon, 2008: p. xvi), and both *Transparent* and *Middlesex* are massively haunted by the past and the hidden family secrets.

Throughout the series, there are several flashbacks that provide glimpses of Maura as she attempted at exploring her female identity, while also preserving the figure of the male patriarch at home and at work as a respected professor, whose decisions when it comes to hiring women are often more than sexist. This retrospective look is an important part of the show, especially when reading it side by side with *Middlesex*: while Maura’s flashbacks often show the struggle of having to obey to social norms and gender expectations that are created by her family while living as a man, as well as the brief moments in which she gets to leave home and express her femininity, in *Middlesex* that same retrospective look that is performed by Cal over his childhood memories as a girl works solely with the purpose of establishing a non-existent continuum between his sexuality, biological determinacy and sexual identity. If *Transparent* and *Middlesex* approach sexuality from different standpoints (the first, in a *queerer* interpretation, the latter, through a more binary one), there’s an aspect in this particular season of the series that brings both together: the idea of a transgenerational trauma, and how families inherit the pain of previous generations, but also the existence of queer individuals throughout history as “transfeminine history emerges as precisely this kind of multidirectional, multifaceted relationship between past, present, and future” (Morse, 2016).

Halberstam (2007) refers to Sedgwick’s analysis of paranoid reasoning as anticipatory and deeply linked with inevitability, establishing a structure of inheritance based on repetition, a structure in which what happened to a previous generation will also happen to the next and then the next, while queer models of transgenerational relations are not informed by this same paranoid reading. Since “the bourgeois family matrix, with its emphasis on lineage, inheritance, and generation, does tend to cast temporal flux in terms of either seamless continuity or total rupture” (2007: p. 318), Cal is destined to be the result of his past generation’s mistakes. But Eugenides puts the reader’s concern at rest regarding the possibility that a strange creature such as Cal may ever be born again, for the reader is told that Cal cannot have children, therefore bringing an end to the Stephanides’s generational mutation, breaking a cycle of possible gender multiplicity in detriment for a narrative in which every loose end is tied. *Transparent* seems to, although also engaged with matters of inheritance and lineage, offer not only a reparative link towards the past but also toward the future, for Maura’s children are also queer and challenging their own concepts of sexuality and gender identification, while also questioning what a family is as “personal bonds exceed the expressive possibilities of institutions like marriage or divorce, but also dissolves the heterosexual matrix of biological sex, gender, and sexual desire” (Hess, 2017: p.6), going

against the biological impulse that informs *Middlesex* and how "[c]hronobiopolitics harnesses not only sequence but also cycle, the dialectical companion to sequence, for the idea of time as cyclical stabilizes its forward movement, promising renewal rather than rupture. (2010: 5)

Horvat argues that even the credits of *Transparent*, its visiting card, propose a queer lineage, by juxtaposing scenes from "a montage of grainy old family videos" (Horvat, 2019: p. 1) with scenes from the documentary *The Queen* (1968), which provides a look at the drag queen pageants:

> The recordings blend seamlessly one into the other—it is only after one learns where some of them are from that the presumed discrepancy becomes notable. At the end of the sequence, a date appears ... the year in which the show's transgender main character (Jeffrey Tambor) first started addressing herself as Maura instead of Mort (Stephen Vider 2014). As Stephen Vider points out, when "taken together," these "clips could" easily "be the introduction to a gender studies course: What does it mean for the bar mitzvah boy to 'become a man,' and the drag queen to 'become a woman'? (Horvat, 2019: p. 1)

Moreover, Horvat also states that "while the opening credits do point towards the constructed nature of gender and subjectivity, their focus on how the past has been documented and (mis)remembered also highlights the temporal aspects of this construction" (Horvat, 2019: pp. 1-2). The credits then imply that the TV show will deal with queer temporalities, as well as matters of heritage and genealogy as "[b]y putting together recordings of the heteronormative family and of gender nonconformity, they comment on how these seemingly separate temporalities exist not only at the same time, but within the same person" (Horvat, 2019: p. 2)

If in *Middlesex* the gene that creates a mutation in Cal was brought upon him by the consanguinity of his grandparents, and is revealed as the punishment for a family secret, in *Transparent* the viewer – and Maura – are confronted with the revelation that Maura's aunt, Gittel was also a transgender woman as a way of both humanizing Gittel, and her tragic death at the hands of Nazi troops, as well as creating a familiar lineage of queer subjects. Although the identity of Gittel as a transgender woman was hidden away from her family, due to the rejection of her femininity by her father and the fear of her mother that she would be attacked, Maura's transition will contribute to the revelation of this secret, in a restorative turn of attempting to build a queer familiar genealogy which will prevent forgetfulness and will hopefully open up the possibility for future generations to tackle their sexualities. Although Jewish suffering is always at the heart of Holocaust memory, the intersection between ethnicity and gender, and the fact that LGBTQI+ individuals were also sent to concentration camps and were victims of prosecution was often ignored. According to Horvat, "[s]uch deliberate forgetting [Gittel's erasure from the family's history]

mirrors the experiences of the real queer victims of the Holocaust, whose persecution under the Nazi regime did not become a part of even LGBTQ activist memory until the late 1960s" (Horvat, 2019: 7) while it is also used as a way of discouraging Maura's transition, implying that the fate of a past generation of queer individuals will be the same as the one of future generations': "when knowledge of the past is passed on in the family, it is wielded as a weapon against Maura's transgenderism. In a particularly distressing flashback in the show's third season, her grandfather threatens Maura's with Gittel's fate after discovering her wearing her mother's clothes" (Horvat, 2019: 7).

The discovery of Gittel's identity is made by Ali, the youngest daughter of Maura who, after learning that Maura is transgender, embarks in a journey of sexual exploration, engaging in lesbian relationships and adopting a non-binary gender presentation, in a look at her history, the history of her family and the history of Jewish refugees, something which seems to enable her to, at the same time, project herself into the future as a different individual. *Transparent* not only contradicts stereotypical transgender representation but it also creates a transgenerational dialogue within the same family, a family that is also, in its way queer: according to Horvat, the television show does not represent "a lone queer individual in an otherwise heterosexual family, but rather ... several generations of LGBTQ-identified women within the same familial unit" (Horvat, 2019: 2), a very different family photograph to the one provided by *Middlesex*, where Cal appears as a lonely being, unable to raise his one family or find a community of other intersex individuals.

The past comes into the present not only through highly inventive montage and intercuts that juxtapose images of the past and the present, but also in the shape of a pearl ring, through which "progress and legacy are also visually depicted" (Hess, 2017: p. 13) that the Pfeffermans smuggled during the Holocaust into the United States and that Ali wears around her neck, which also seems to trigger a remembrance of the past for Maura's mother, Rose, who mistakes Ali for her sister Gittel. Hess provides a relevant analysis of this piece of family heirloom, as being passed down not as a symbol of heterosexual love but as the connection between two women who are, in different times, exploring their gender identity, again engaging with but also challenging notions of family inheritance:

> But, even such presumably normative processes as inheritance (as a sign of generational progress) are imbued with a twist in *Transparent*. Gittel gives the ring as a present to young Rose, and her mother saves it by hiding all jewellery in chocolate bars during their passage to America. A generation later, Maura wanted to propose with this ring to Shelly, and she refused it, not wanting to wear the ring of someone who died in a concentration camp. Josh tries to propose to two different girlfriends with the ring, but is refused both times. Finally, Ali finds the ring and begins wearing it on a necklace. Interestingly the ring

> never comes to serve as an engagement ring to a heterosexual couple, but is worn in the end by Ali, who has recently begun to explore her queerness and who can thus also be read as Gittel's heiress. Hence, the ring comes to symbolize non-heterosexual inheritance and legacy as well as a connection between different Pfefferman generations. (Hess, 2017: 13-14).

The scene of Maura presenting herself to her ageing and seemingly amnesic mother is particularly evocative of a restorative dialogue with the past, as Maura's comes to terms with her own mother (Figure 1), while her mother also seems to evoke her own sister and the affection she has for both transgender women. Recovering the moment of Maura's birth in the final episode of the season, in an inverted timeline, and after knowing that Maura is a woman makes the image of the doctor holding the new-born baby and claiming that it is a boy particularly strong, a statement how the body is defined by medicine but how gender can also be written upon the body by other discourses: the moment is the one "that Judith Butler has identified as the "initiatory performative" sentence that kicks off the process through which gender is continually produced" (Hess, 2017: p. 12). As Amy Villarejo writes "that is claimed to infuse Maura's rebirth as a woman at age 70. Just as Maura's mother Rose gives birth to a boy, so do television and this fantasy of history give birth to Maura, whose future is as transcendent as the sea before her eyes. (201: p. 20). Throughout the series, Ali and Gittel share the same spaces even though they are separated by time (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Still frame from *Transparent* showing three generations of the Pfefferman women.

Figure 2: Still frame from *Transparent showing* Ali and Gittle.

This collage of characters from different timelines is one of the devices used by Solloway to explore the presence of the past in the present and the intersection of multiple timelines as well as the double casting of actors and actresses, and reinforcing the close bounds between them, as well as a hidden genealogy, of either blood or queerness, as Nicole Erin Morse points out. By placing the body of Gittel inside the Institute, the TV show aims at reinforcing a queer history, by retelling the story of Hirschfield as a pioneering figure within gay and transgender rights, as well as creating a genealogy for the Pfeffermans, juxtaposing the personal story of this family against the historical context of Nazi Germany, the persecution of Jewish people, which would eventually lead the Pfeffermans to the United States (the parallels with *Middlesex* are many, including the link between ethnicity and gender) but also of queer people.

When Maura and her daughters visit an only-women festival, they come across the resistance that has been defined as trans-exclusionary feminism, as the women in the festival claim that Maura is trespassing, bringing up her former male identity. In another transtemporal juxtaposition, that Morse analyses, in which both timelines are intertwined, the past and the present become one: by a fire, Maura is insulted by the other women, in a space that was expected to be inclusive for *all* women, while Hirschfeld's centre is invaded by Nazi troops, who burn down the centre, which was also meant to be a safe space for queer individuals, implying that "the intrusion of fascism and the destruction of Hirschfeld's work also emphasize that progress is indeed neither linear nor to be taken for granted" (Hess, 2017: p. 11), a disruption on the narrative of progress that marks queer history, that will also be subject of analysis later in this thesis, when analysing *The Inheritance*. This intersection between "the individuality of trauma, even in those cases in which it is communally memorialized" (Hess, 2017: p. 12) can also be found in

AIDS narratives, as it will be addressed when analysing *The Great Believers*, as personal story and collective history are placed side by side: in *Transparent,* the hyper memory of the Holocaust appears vis-à-vis the forgotten history of transgender individuals that is now being unearthed. If "[o]ne of the principal social units in which such memories are passed on is the family", which, given the fact that most queer individuals are set outside their own families, "Rachel Gelfand is correct in pointing out how "queer scholarship troubles the frame of biological belonging that permeates key memory concepts such as generation, diaspora, and postmemory" (Horvat, 2019: p. 4). However, it seems productive to recover Hirsch's postmemory[25] in the sense that, in *Transparent*, queerness is also deeply connected with the Holocaust and trauma does stay in the family.

Again, the past is brought into the present in order to illustrate how queer individuals, regardless of the space or time they inhabit, face discrimination and are excluded from the spaces that are meant to provide security to them. "Just as the records from Hirschfield's Institute were destroyed, setting back global knowledge of transgender history and medical research, Gittel also disappears from her family's history" (Morse, 2016), leaving a gap in the family's narrative that will only be revealed two seasons later, when Maura finds her father after decades, who tells her and Ali who Gittel was.

"All my life, my whole life, I've been dressing up like a man"[26], says Maura: the retrospective look goes in the opposite direction than the one of *Middlesex*. Ultimately, *Transparent,* and the case studies that are part of this thesis's corpus perform

> a negotiation of generationality and legacy [that] not only takes these concepts beyond their heterosexual parameters, but also emphasizes that (queer) resistance to social norms is of course not without history either, pointing to forms of tradition and inheritance that are not anchored in the family. While the series thus does not discard or disavow concepts such as family or generation, it interrogates them and challenges their normative boundaries. (Hess, 2017: p. 10).

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[25] This concept will be also used to analyse AIDS narratives as dialogues of memory and postmemories, for, even if AIDS may not have been addressed within the context of the family due to shame, or as a way of shutting out queer relatives, it does seem productive to understand that the work that the gay community does in remembering past generation can perhaps be also understood as a postmemory, in the sense that it is inherited. Horvat seems to sustain this, when referring to the work of Rachel Gelfand, who "correctly raises the question of how queer families pass on postmemory to their children, and how this at once upholds and subverts notions of memory transferred along biological lines" (2019: p. 4).

[26] "When Sarah, somewhat bewildered by this surprise, asks, "Are you saying that you're going to start dressing up as a lady all the time?" Maura answers, "No, honey. All my life, my whole life, I've been dressing up like a man. This is me" ("The Letting Go"). While first of all providing an educational moment by questioning definitions of "dressing up" and "authentic identity," Maura's statement also emphasizes that she has endured many decades of closeted suffering while living as a heterosexual family father. Here, *Transparent*'s narrative contests not only imaginaries of the linear life course but also a binary understanding of queer temporality vs. a heteronormative life course." (Hess, 2017: p. 5).

This take on family trauma as queer history can also be found in Alison Bechdel's graphic novels[27], particularly *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, an autobiographical account of how Bechdel, a lesbian, came to terms with her own father's possible suicide, whose sexual orientation as gay only surfaced after his death, as "Bechdel explores the story of her father's death out of a desire to understand her own history and the genesis of her gender and sexual identity" (Cvetkovich, 2008: p. 113) in a transgenerational dialogue that, in life, was not completely successful (Figure 3).

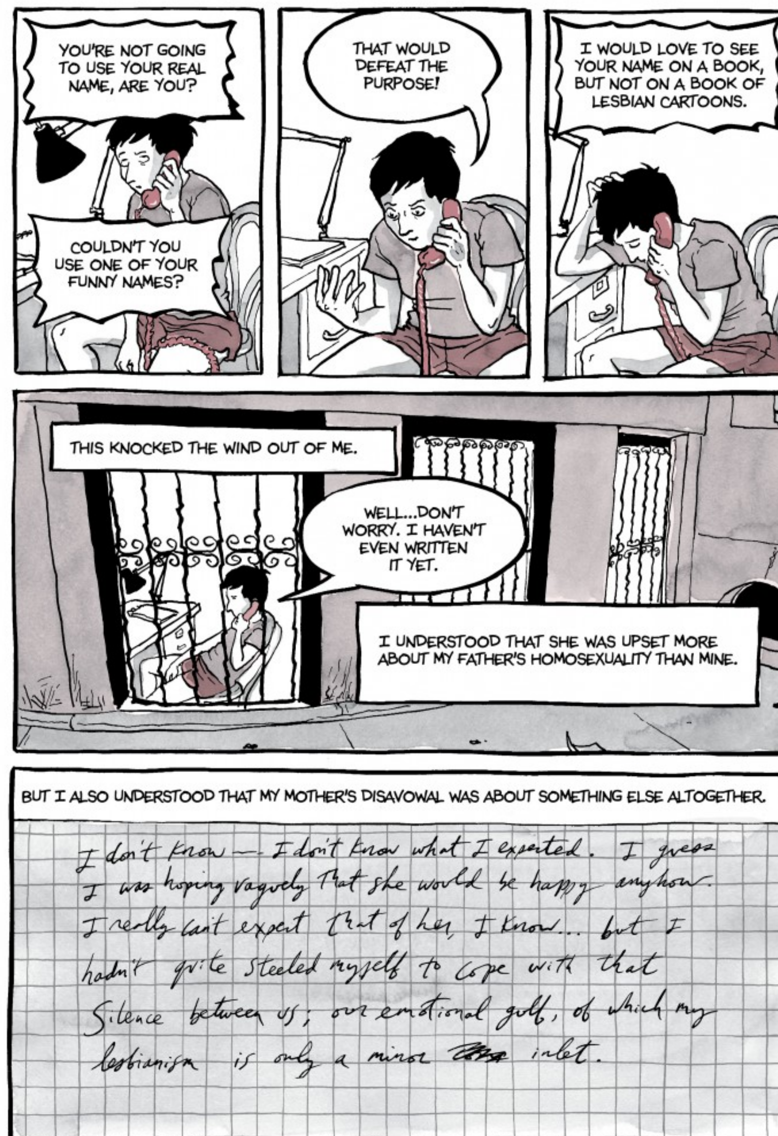

Figure 3: A page from Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

[27] Although extremely relevant, Bechdel's work is evoked as part of this thesis only briefly and it is used to provide a visual equivalent to some arguments and readings that are made, in a dialogue with other authors. Having already been the subject of much research, it is particularly relevant to point out the article by Olga Michael on queer trauma in Bechdel's work, as well as how the graphic novel has been used as a form of trauma writing, being Bechdel's, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, some of the most well-known graphic novels to address transgenerational trauma.

Bechdel is "an intergenerational witness who explores the ongoing impact of traumatic histories on successive generations and into the present" (Cvetkovich, 2008: 113) through "texts ... haunted by questions about the effects of growing up in the vicinity of powerful combinations of violence and secrecy" (Cvetkovich, 2008: 113), something also found in *Transparent*, as Maura's transgender relative and the violence to which she was exposed was also made a family secret. Not only was Bechdel's father gay but she also finds out his extremely problematic attraction to young men, which further complicates his daughter's ambivalent feelings towards him. In a similar tone to that of *Transparent*, Bechdel attempts a reparative reading (and retelling) of her father's life – and death – one marked by detachment, emotional distance and secrecy. Bechdel returned to the same theme in *Are You My Mother*, an account of the author's relationship with her mother as the latter comes to terms with her husband's sexual life. Cvetkovich refers to a particular moment in Bechdel's narrative that juxtaposes the family's narrative and the father's attraction to men as conflicting and parallel but also somewhat coexisting: Bechdel comes across a nude photograph of the family's male babysitter taken by her father, which she reproduces as a part of a strip of negatives that also feature photos of Bechdel and her siblings,

> [a]ccentuating its [the photograph of the babysitter] capacity to disrupt the family history ... But the proximity of these ostensibly disparate images (both enabled by the technology of the home camera) offers evidence of her father's capacity to inhabit different worlds simultaneously and shows how the putatively innocent family vacation is closely shadowed by sexual desires that it excludes or renders invisible. (Cvetkovich, 2008: p. 116).

Even though the negative imposes a temporal sequence – a square after a square after another square – Bechdel's father seems to inhabit two different timelines at the same time: the one in which he is a father and the one in which he has sexual encounters with men. It is the expected sequence of time that makes, for Bechdel, the discovery of the body of her father's lover as an intruder upon her family history, an external element that should not be written upon the negative and the narrative of the family vacations. The negative is therefore a timeline composed of multiple narratives that are, at the same time, conflicting and coexisting, in which family history and the homosexuality of the patriarch exclude each other: the family history as the photograph, the father's sexual life as its negative. Moreover, " [i]n asking about the relation between two generations of queerness, her own and that of her father, Bechdel also raises larger questions about histories of sexuality and their relation to national histories (Cvetkovich, 2008, p, 123), exposing how different her father's and her own experience as gay people is also conditioned by the times they lived in.

1.4. Family Matters: Gender Roles at Home

Middlesex's take on transgenerational trauma begins in Greece, with Cal's grandparents: Desdemona and Lefty, Callie's grandparents, left Greece in order to escape the war with Turkey: together as siblings, sharing a room without rigid gender segregation, the journey changed them, and they decided to, due to the lack of other Greek prospective lovers, to get married, lying not only about their familial link but also about their ethnicity. Jennifer Vliet (2011) arges that it is the death of their parents, the lack of moral guidance, the need to assume adult gender roles, and the responsibility felt by Desdemona to find a wife to her younger brother that makes Lefty and Desdemona engage in an incestuous relationship.

What also passed from generation to generation of this particular family was the shame felt by women when it comes to being a sexual being, to Desdemona from her mother and, even though "Eugenides describes Desdemona's body as built to enjoy sex and to arouse desire in men ... by nature and upbringing, she is instead extremely chaste and ashamed of sexual desire" (Vliet, 2011: p. 131). *Middlesex* addresses the sexual oppression not only of the intersex body but also the female body when describing the chastity and purity that was expected of Desdemona as well as the lack of "femininity" of Callie's young body, described as too male, too hairy, too ambiguous. The representation of the female body oscillates between shame and lack; even when perceived and visible as a young girl, Callie is not feminine enough, with the references to her typical Greek hairy upper lip echoing stereotypical views of Mediterranean beauty ("like the Sun Belt or the Bible Belt, there exists, on this multifarious earth of ours, a Hair Belt. It begins in Southern Spain ... before lightning gradually in India" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 308), that contrast with the all American girl that Callie should be, something sustained by the fact that she feels neither female enough nor American enough when compared to the Charm Bracelets, a group of girls who embrace the prototype of American beauty, one that is defined by the fact that they are upper class and *true* American – "well-bred, small nosed, trust-funded ... descended from hardworking, thrifty industrialists ... the same last name of American car makers (Eugenides, 2002: p. 296). When compared to Callie and her "ethnic" friends, heirs of an inherited privilege that allowed them not to work in school, proving that "there is no evidence against genetic determinism more persuasive than the children of the rich" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 297). To embody America is to also embody femininity, an unambiguous sexual identity, one that fits within the idealization of a national and sexual discourses of belonging:

> my friends and I had always felt completely American. But now the Bracelets' upturned noses suggested that there was another America to which we could never gain admittance. All of a sudden America wasn't about hamburgers and hot rods anymore. It was about the *Mayflower* and Plymouth Rock. It was about

> something that had happened for two minutes four hundred years ago, instead of everything that had happened since (Eugenides, 2002: p. 299).

Moreover, to embody the body of a passable girl, feminine and visible as such, would be for Callie to achieve the American Dream, built upon the solid core of the family and therefore, binary sexual spheres that imply marriage and reproduction:

> Callie hates her face, which is too masculine for traditional womanly beauty, her height and her flat chest, and she feels, based on American cultural standards for femininity, that she has too much facial hair, even though excessive facial hair is common among her Greek female relatives and accepted in their family and community (Vliet, 2011: p. 133)

Cal is the embodiment of Desdemona's shame, for being intersex does not allow him to be feminine as it is expected of her, having been raised strictly as a woman, treated by the rest of the family as such. Moreover, not only is Callie intersex, something that the family's blood is to blame, but also Greek, another inheritance, which, within the beauty standards of the American Dream, also prevents Callie from fitting in.

A child will be raised according to the gender expectations of their parents, something which poses particular challenges when raising intersex children; as many parents, Tessie treats young Callie according to the female stereotypes: "starved for a daughter, Tessie went a little overboard with me. Pink skirts, lace ruffles, Yuledite bows in my hair" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 224), overcompensating Callie's gender presentation in order to erase any type of possible ambiguity, something particularly ironic given the natural ambiguity that young children possess. When Callie runs away after finding out that she is intersex, Tessie attempts at taking a retrospective look at her daughter's life, one that, like the one that Cal does over the course of the novel, establishes gender as a continuous line of logical events:

> Tessie gazed out across the dark bedroom ... and saw before her all the items I had ever worn or possessed. They all seemed to be heaped at the foot of her bed – the beribboned socks, the dolls, the hair clips, the full set of Madeline books, the party dresses, the red Mary Janes, the jumpers, the Easy-Bake Oven, the hula hoop. These objects were the trail that led back to me. How could such a trail lead to a boy? (Eugenides, 2002: p. 466).

As Vliet writes, when addressing Cal's upbringing:

> [w]hile Callie is never genetically or biologically a woman, he is raised strictly in the female gender role

> until the age of fourteen. This allows Callie to operate in a very unique position in the family; Callie shows very clearly how the perceived gender of a child completely changes how he or she is treated by the other members of the family. Even before their child's birth, his parents were dreaming of how they would raise a young daughter. (2002: p. 132-133)

The excitement of seeing the baby's sex on sonograms as proof of his or her future gender, the preparation of gender reveal parties, the buying of toys and clothes whether blue or pink accordingly to the child's sex: it is through ritual that gender is performed:

> the apparently descriptive expressions "it's a girl" and "it's a boy," spoken at the moment of birth (or even at the moment the fetus is visualized via ultrasound), are in fact performative invocations, closer to the contractual expressions spoken in social rituals, such as the "I do" of marriage, than to descriptive statements such as "this body has two legs, two arms, and a tail." These gender performatives are bits of language historically charged with the power to invest a body with masculinity or femininity as well as with the power to castigate intersex and morphologically dissident bodies that threaten the coherence of the sex/gender system by subjecting these bodies to necrosexual cosmetic surgeries (clitoris reduction, penis enlargement, silicone breast implants, hormonal refeminization of the face, etc.) (Preciado, 2018: p. 27)

As previously mentioned, corrective surgery was performed on intersex children in order to prevent psychological unbalance, especially if the genitals of the child would not match the gender with which the child was raised. However, Fausto-Sterling claims that more than the child's, it is the parents' mental stability and overall convictions and beliefs that are at stake when faced with the birth of an intersex child. It is the gender-neutral rearing that confuses them, after having been expecting a baby that is either/or, not both sexes, and even when it comes to the medical practitioners, the intersex status of the baby is not presented as such but rather as a matter of having existed a need to, after giving birth, to 'finish' what was not finished in the uterus, reinforcing the need for a stable sexual identity for a child who is about to learn how to perform gender expectations, while "[i]t asserts genital surgery's capacity to persuade parents, school friends, babysitters—and, in adult life, lovers—that a patient has a single, visibly authentic sex" (Morland, 2005: p. 345). Moreover, as Holmes writes, parents came across intersexuality

> "in the context of diagnosis: the pointing out of a flaw, an error, perhaps – it is implied – arriving through some heritable genetic 'defect' not expressed in the parents, but present nonetheless. Parents and families of intersexed children confront a world informed by the premise of defect, not of neutral variation" (Holmes, 2009: p. 6).

The reshaping of the body was perceived by medical practitioners as the way to ensure that the intersex body becomes readable as a gendered body, with cultural genitals that can be perceived, by their family and others, that the child is indeed male or female. As Dr Luce claims in *Middlesex*, after being submitted to hormonal treatment and cosmetic surgery, Callie will "look exactly like the girl she feels herself to be. In fact, she will be that girl. Her outside and inside will conform. She will look like a normal girl. Nobody will be able to tell a thing" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 428). This approach to the intersex body also reveals a belief in an original sex, one that the body possessed but that was somehow left unfinished, that can still be recovered "provided that they were raised with parental conviction regarding their child's gender" (Morland, 2009: p. 337).

Kessler also addresses the anxiety lived by parents and medical practitioners when intersex children are born and the need to find the correct diagnosis, along with the correct wording, to prevent scaring the parents: the first time the gender of the child is pronounced, it is immediately taken as the true sex of the child by their parents. Preciado mentions the ultrasound, "a technology celebrated for being descriptive, though in reality it is entirely prescriptive", and the fact that "as once sex has already been assigned, any change in designation requires that the body literally be trimmed, crafted" (2018: p.106). Therefore, the role of medical practitioners which acknowledge gender plurality is highly pertinent in the handling of these children. Since parents will raise a child accordingly to its sex and the gender expectations that sexes bring with them, hence the urgency to often correct the visibly ambiguous bodies.

"Gender and children are malleable; psychology and medicine are the tools used to transform them" (2002: p.15), writes Kessler and the several medical practitioners[28] that she has interviewed for *Lessons from the Intersex* claim that a decision over the child's body must be made earlier and decisively, leaving no margin for doubt when it comes to the child's sex, in order for the parents to play their role as carers according to that same sex and its corresponding gender role. The same practitioners reinforce the need to reassure parents that their child has a normal, *corrected* genitalia in order to prevent negative reactions to the child. As Eugenides writes in *Middlesex*, clearly influenced by the reading of Dreger's work:

> [t]he chief imperative in cases like mine was to show no doubt as to the gender of the child in question. You did not tell the parents of a newborn, "Your baby is a hermaphrodite." Instead, you said, "Your daughter was born with a clitoris that is a little larger than a normal girl's. We'll need to do surgery to make it the right size." Luce felt that parents weren't able to cope with an ambiguous gender assignment. You had to tell me if they had a boy or a girl. (2002: p. 413)

[28] Dreger (2002) draws attention to the fact that, throughout history, doctors who took care of intersex patients were exclusively men, which could also influence the choices taken upon being faced with an intersex body.

Concerned parents will turn to medicine to cure any ailment that the child may have, including what they perceive as an unfinished sexual identity. In *Middlesex*, Cal states that "as for my parents, I held them blameless. They were only trying to save me from humiliation, lovelessness, even death" (2002: p. 446) against the blame that he places on Dr Luce, a doctor to whom Cal's body "refuted nature in just the way his theory predicted" (Eugenides, 2002: p.408). Callie is raised as the girl that she is perceived to be and Tesse and Milton's expectations, before and after Cal is born, are reinforced in her upbringing. Only when young Callie fails to correspond to the American beauty standard for girls, translated by what is perceived as a masculine face, and the natural changes of the cisgender female body, translated by the lack of her menstruation, does her female status is questioned:

> Callie's conviction throughout her youth and puberty that she is a girl, despite obvious physical evidence to the contrary, supports the social construction of gender – how gender identity is learned in the family and society, and not simply acquired by the possession of the correct genitalia. (Vliet, 2011: pp. 133-134)

It is not what her body tells her that bothers young Callie; it is the inability to correspond to society's and her parents' expectations that make her doubt her ability to be – and perform – as female, regardless of the fact that she was not a girl to begin with, reinforcing the theory that gender is a language acquired and learnt by repetition which can be learnt by anyone regarding of their sex. Moreover, what Cal defines as masculine traits (a hairy, masculine face, attraction towards women, certain acts) are no more than preconceived and stereotypical notions of femininity that are reductive for every person who identifies as female, by implying that there is only a way of being a woman. *Middlesex* is strongly infused by patriarchal gender expectations and these are clearly put into practise within the family. For Tess, Cal may be a man in the public domain but he is still, in relation to her, her daughter, as caring for a mother is perceived as the task of a daughter, not a son's:

> Even now, though I live as a man, I remain in essential ways Tessie's daughter. I'm still the one who remembers to call her every Sunday. I'm the one she recounts her growing list of ailments to. Like any good daughter, I'll be the one to nurse her in her old age. (Eugenides 2002: pp. 520-521).

Vliet also writes that researchers have found that "parental expectations about a child's gender may influence their construction of gender as much as the child's natural inclination does; little girls get treated differently than little boys" (2011: p. 133). When Dr Luce is writing a report on Cal as he starts puberty but without the changes that would be expected for a girl, Cal gives in again to the gender role that he

has been assigned by the expectations for her family, although Luce is unware that Cal "was making up most of what I [Cal] wrote, pretending to be the all-American daughter my parents wanted me to be" (Eugenides, 2002: p.418). Even though he comes to the realization that he is not the girl his parents have raised, Cal still hides it from them, performing his female identity under a female name one last time, while writing them a farewell note before going on the road: "I am not a girl. I'm a boy. That's what I found out today. ... Despite its [the note] content, I signed this declaration to my parents: "Callie." It was the last time I was ever their daughter" (Eugenides, 2002: pp. 438-439). More than not being a girl anymore, Cal is no longer a daughter, reinforcing the argument that home dictates gender, that to stay at home would mean for Callie to keep being Callie. Moreover, Dr Luce's report also looks at Cal's parents to justify Cal's upbringing: while the mother is someone who "avoided bodily matters ... never spoke openly about sex" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 284) and "accedes to the subservient wifely role typical of women of her generation, Cal's father "only came to the clinic twice, citing business obligations ... a self-made man and former naval officer" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 436). These well-defined gender roles lead Dr Luce to believe that Cal will also be able to operate as a girl if only her body is changed to resemble the one of a girl. Eugenides compares learning gender to learning languages:

> gender identity is established very early on in life, about the age of two. Gender was like a native tongue; it didn't exist before birth but was imprinted in the brain during childhood, never disappearing. Children learn to speak Male or Female the way they learn to speak English or French. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 411)

This comparison between learning languages and learning gender is in *Middlesex* obligatorily linked with the learning of English by Desdemona and Lefty, Cal's grandparents, and the learning of maleness by Cal. The subject of learning and *performing* gender, as coined by Butler, has also been addressed by Preciado in *Counter-Sexual Manifesto*, who compares languages and sexualities due to their performative, plural and repetitive aspects:

> [s]exualities are like languages: they are complex systems of communication and reproduction of life. As languages, sexualities are historical constructs with common genealogies and biocultural inscriptions. Like languages, sexualities can be learned. Multiple languages can be spoken. As is often the case within monolingualism, one sexuality is imposed on us in childhood, and it takes on the character of a naturalized desire. We are trained into sexual monolingualism. ... We entered that sexuality through the medical and legal acts of gender assignment; through education and punishment; through reading and writing; through image consumption, mimicry, and repetition; through pain and pleasure. And yet we could have entered into any other sexuality under a different regime of knowledge, power, and desire. Still, we can learn any

> other sexual language with a greater or lesser sense of alienation and strangeness, of joy and appropriation. It is possible to learn and invent other sexualities, other regimes of desire and pleasure production. … Countersexuality is an attempt to become foreign to your own sexuality and to lose yourself in sexual translation. (2018: p. 8)

According to Rachel Carroll (2012), the moment when the medical discourse of Dr Luce is confronted with the personal narrative of Cal is crucially defining of what has been described as *Middlesex*'s heteronormative narrative and the reinforcing of the existence of a single, stable sex category determined by biology which can be pinpointed by science, something sustained by Fausto-Sterling:

> scientists create truths about sexuality; how our bodies incorporate and confirm these truths; and how these truths, sculpted by the social milieu in which biologists practice their trade, in turn refashion our cultural environment (2000: p. 6).

Dr Luce stands as an authoritative entity in sexual studies, as the founder of the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic and the writer of a column on *Playboy* that replies to reader's inquiries about sex, while Cal feels compelled, due to family expectations and Dr Luce's confrontations, to correspond to the gender conformity that is expected of him, as a girl, creating a narrative that is defined by sexual expectation, medical binary constructions of sex and the normalization of Cal's body through a diagnosis. As Carroll writes, "both authors falsify reality in order to preserve a culturally constructed 'truth' of sex" (2012: p. 193) and the narrative that Cal creates to convince Dr Luce that she is a girl, and the findings that Dr Luce draws from Cal's narrative end up influencing each other (Antosa, 2012) perhaps because there are only two choices available for Cal to accept: if he isn't he girl, like the one Dr Luce will create through surgery, then he must be a boy:

> That summer – while the president's lies were also getting more elaborate – I started faking my period. With Nixonian cunning, Calliope unwrapped and flushed away a flotilla of unused tampons. I feigned symptoms from headache to fatigue. I did cramps the way Meryl Streep did accents. … my deception worked. It calmed my mother's anxieties and somehow even my own. … I wasn't at the mercy of nature anymore. (Eugenides, 2002: pp. 361-362)

Callie fakes her periods not only for herself but also, and mainly, for her mother's sake, who wants, like any other parent, for her daughter to be healthy and experience the normal changes that teenage girls experience. At the time she was born, Callie narrates how she could sense "all around … from the

beginning, the weight of female suffering" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 215), a legacy of "biblical" pain that women experience throughout their lives as a consequence of owning a female body, from puberty to motherhood. As it happens throughout the narrative, every event in the Stephanides family is framed by a crucial moment in Greek and American history and while Nixon's political discourse becomes more fallacious, the female performance also becomes more believable for Callie, paradoxically through lying. The fakery of her sexual body raises the question of how "the social recognition of an intersexed body is connected with its visibility" (Antosa, 2012: p. 72), in the sense that the intersex body is only visible when it does not comply with male or female gender presentation. When she is born, Callie is "mistaken" for a girl by the almost blind doctor who, by not recognizing the difference in the intersex body of Calliope, defines her as a girl: "as long as it is hidden from view, the intersex body is deprived of its subversive potential (Antosa, 2012: p. 71). It is this subversive potential that Cal gives up on when choosing to adopt a male gender presentation and erase any type of sexual ambiguity from his body. As Antosa writes, there is "a general inability to read Callie's body" as intersex since "the social normative gaze invests Callie's body and condemns it to the invisibility and secrecy" (2012: p. 71). Callie passes for a girl due to her upbringing as one and for being read as 'female' by her doctor, her family and even herself. It is when Cal reaches puberty, and her body starts to 'look male', that Cal becomes visible as different, undermining "her desire to code her gender identity as female and to fit into the binary, heterosexual system of identification" (Antosa, 2012: p. 72). When Cal decides to run away from his family, and therefore, run away from the role as daughter, and assume his male identity, he is often surprise by the fact that no one seems to notice him or to look at him as different: his male body, with its short hair, male clothes and a posture that Cal thinks of as male is not sexually visible for others for corresponding exactly of what is socially expected of a man. And yet, even though he tries to escape, "running away didn't make me feel any less of a monster. I saw ahead of me only humiliation and rejection, and I wept for my life" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 449); Cal seems to be unable to overcome shame, alluding to the fact that the intersex body, due to its inability to correspond to a dual system of sex, will always be perceived as shameful.

After having an accident and being taken to the hospital, Callie's body becomes readable as different, to the medical eye that, upon the theatrical revelation of her genitals, reacts in awe, in a scene crafted to resemble the moment of the reveal of something monstrous:

> The doctor bent closer, mumbling to himself. The intern, rather unprofessionally, raised one hand to her throat and then pretended to fix her collar. Checkov was right. If there's a gun on the wall, it's got to go off. ... but in the emergency room things were different. There was no smoke, no gunpowder smell,

> absolutely no sound at all. Only the way the doctor and nurse reacted made it clear that my body had lived up to the narrative requirements. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 396)

Through the hiding of these 'different characteristics' and through the narrative that Callie makes up at Dr Luce's office, she attempts at presenting her own body as normative as the one of any other cisgender girl, passing as girl, and later, as man, even hiding from Dr Luce that she has been in a same-sex relationship, in order not to raise any questions about both her sexual identity and orientation. As Morland writes, what lies at the core of the surgeries that redesign intersex genitals is the intention to make these bodies readable and intelligible to a binary structure of bodily signification, "a narrative, whether presumed to originate in patient or clinician, which produces what it narrates" (2005, p. 338). As Cal narrates his experiences as a young girl through the retrospective look that orders his life according to the heteronormative authorial gaze, his male body is produced, in an account that is often marked by a shift from "I" and "Callie", a device that makes Callie in the past othered to present day Cal.

Gender is only read when set against the backdrop of the normative gaze and sexual normative discourses, in a twofold action of both normalizing the 'normal' bodies while differentiating the ones that do not fall within the spectrum of the ideal sexed body. This act of falsifying her experience through narrative is linked to the writing of *Middlesex* itself, in the way in which Cal narrates her story through the voice of a "gene-body-text" (Banner, 2010: p. 13), as well as the story of her family, through the retrospective look that reshapes his experiences as a girl, conferring them with the patina of abnormality and almost rejecting them as true, as if Callie was not Cal. From the future, Cal looks at Callie and narrates her story with the estrangement and distance reserved for a stranger, hiding away any clues that might authenticate her female identity, giving meaning and sequence to a story that is not, at all, sequential or coherent.

Even if Cal rejects Dr Luce's findings, perhaps because he is aware of the fact that he lied in order to convince the doctor of his 'authentic female self', he ends up giving in to Dr Luce's binary approach, even if paradoxically by rejecting it: "this treatment provokes Cal to accept Luce's binary model of sex/gender: he rejects two viable queer identities – lesbian and intersex – in favour of a yearning for unequivocal heterosexual maleness" (Graham, 2009: p. 14). While Cal says 'no' to the surgery and the mutilation of his body, he does however "undergoes a process of heteronormative change" (Antosa, 2012: p. 71) and even if he rejects medical discourses by rejecting the surgery, "Callie remains imbedded in such discourses, since she decides to construct her new gender identity starting from Dr Luce's definitions of masculinity" (Antosa, 2012: p. 75).

Carroll (2012) draws attention to an interesting detail of Cal's discovery of his condition as

intersex; although having been *diagnosed* as a girl, according to Dr Luce's medical report Cal's body has undescended testes and a hypospadic penis, determining that Cal's body is not fully male, neither fully female and only his upbringing as a girl could explain the need for him to identify as one, given that his body isn't the one of a girl as medicine and society define it. Besides the presence of these male organs, Cal also finds out that Dr Luce's surgery would most likely devoid him of sexual pleasure, in what Carroll and advocates of intersex rights have described as IGM (Infant Genital Mutilation), sometimes even equating it with FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), due to the fact that these surgeries often take away the possibility for intersex individuals to live a healthy sex life and, given that these surgeries are performed without the consequent of the children that undergo them, define the parents and doctors as the legal authority the determines the characteristics of someone else's body. Dr Luce writes, in line with medical practitioners of the time in which this particular part of *Middlesex* takes place, that "sexual pleasure is only one factor in a happy life" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 437) in detriment of being able to pass and act socially as woman. Moreover, the criteria used to define which sex the undetermined body must be is highly biased and susceptible of criticism, one purely based on the body's ability to reproduce:

> doctors faced with uncertainty about a child's sex use different criteria. They focus primarily on reproductive abilities (in the case of a potential girl) or penis size (in the case of a prospective boy). If a child is born with two X chromosomes, oviducts, ovaries, and a uterus on the inside, but a penis and scrotum on the outside, for instance, is the child a boy or a girl? Most doctors declare the child a girl, despite the penis, because of her potential to give birth, and intervene using surgery and hormones to carry out the decision. (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 5).

Many are the reports on the violence, flaws and even the lack of sexual arousal that these surgeries originate in intersex bodies and "medical literature is rife with evidence of the negative effects of such surgery" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 85). Moreover, there's "strong evidence that early genital surgery doesn't work: it causes extensive scarring, requires multiple surgeries, and often obliterates the possibility of orgasm ... the only criteria for success are cosmetic, rather than later sexual function" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 80) and many adults that have been subjected to this type of treatment as children have been open about the psychological damages of having their bodies exposed to doctors and to a constant invasive scrutiny of their sexual organs. Morland writes on the fact that intersex surgery is mainly cosmetic and not exactly functional, that "[p]erhaps their post-surgical anatomy 'resembles' only a 'resemblance' of sexual difference" (2005: p. 343), a "nostalgic genitalia" (Morland, 2005: p. 339). In the sense that these new genitals are often designed to *look* male or female and not to *work* as male or female, again

implying that it is the ability for these bodies to be read by others that turns them into signifiers. Moreover, even if Cal's genitals had been fashioned to look like what is commonly accepted as ideal female genitalia, the lack of breasts, period or public hair provokes heavy anxiety in teenage Callie, a fear that arises with the failure of recognizing that a plurality of bodily configurations exist. "Hierarchies exist everywhere, but especially in locker rooms" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 295), claims Cal – "the locker room, that site of prepubescent anxiety about impending gender developments" (Butler, 2004: p. 63). As both intersex but also as a teenager who has been raised as a girl, and therefore ready to embody and perform every detail of femininity and womanhood, Callie is fearful that her body will be read by all the other girls as different. While Cal is used to hide his body – in the dark with Julie, his girlfriend in Berlin, under the covers of sleep with Obscure Object of Desire, the girl with whom Callie has her first sexual experiences – in the locker room she would be exposed, her body a dissonant discourse against the other girls' bodies, inscribed by all American notions of beauty and femininity.

When Dr Luce claims that Callie will lose the ability to experience sexual pleasure but she will be able to pass as a girl, he is also implying that the modification of Callie's body will not exactly mean that she will experience her body as woman but she will socially function as one, and her bodily experience will be defined by her enactment of femininity through her gender presentation, the redesign of her genitalia and her performance of female gender roles such as getting married to a man. If the intersex body is modified based on idealistic images of genitals, can the post-surgery intersex body be perceived as not intersex anymore? Morland implies that these bodies work as simulations, that through these mechanics of transformation only "damages genitals" are produced:

> Once one focuses on the formal property of repeatability required by surgery as an act that never stops acting, one also confronts the intersexuality of atypical genitals as a sexual difference that never definitively stops resisting the surgical project—irrespective of who is authorizing the genital modification, whether patient or clinician. Surgery never stops being a euphemism for violence, a figure of the failure of violence to make literal its claims. (2005: p. 344)

Paradoxically, a surgery which intends to correct abnormal sexual organs is the same surgery that strips them away from their functionality; by being concerned with the way sexual organs *look*, instead of the way they *work*, corrective surgery is another product of social anxieties regarding the aesthetics of the body, and their ability to fit in, rather than the healthy and pleasurable sexual lives of intersex people; as Preciado writes "[t]he different body is not eradicated but physically transformed in order to be included within the heterosexual visual regime" (2018, p. 114).

According to Dr Luce, "[t]he ability to marry and pass as a normal woman in society are also important goals" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 437), a statement which embodies many of the matters here discussed: the heterosexual behaviour that is expected of Callie, even though she feels attracted to women, the anxiety that, by correcting the intersex body homosexuality is also avoided. Heterosexuality and marriage are here presented as the ultimate and only goal for Cal, as marriage acquires a status of legitimizing Cal's female identity, and again, the focus on genealogy and family as it permeates the entirety of the narrative. This link between Callie's sexual orientation towards women and her male identity is so entrenched in Cal (instead of being a lesbian intersex who presents as girl, she *must* be a straight man) that he claims, at the age of forty-one, that he cannot get married as he cannot have children, unable to break the narrative that is enforced by straight time and reproductive futurity, one that perceives marriage and having children as the only way of conceiving the future. "Like most hermaphrodites but by no means all, I can't have children. That's one of the reasons why I've never married." (Eugenides, 2000: p. 106): for Cal, both actions are intertwined and are co-dependant, which is not surprising for a person whose life has been highly defined and informed by such strict family and gender roles based on heteronormative ideas of heritage and inheritance.

As Antosa points out, the tendency during the 1950s of correcting intersex bodies is deeply linked to the fear of homosexual desire itself, "a hermeneutic challenge to the hegemonic discourses of sexual difference of the social normative order" (Antosa, 2012: p. 70). By providing intersex individuals with "an unambiguous gender identity" (Antosa, 2012: p. 70) through corrective surgery, normative sexual desire can also be developed and these bodies pose such a threat to heterosexual systems of sexual difference that "it is precisely because its disruptive potential has been grasped only too well by those who diagnose it that intersex has been made to disappear so thoroughly through material and medical discursive practices" (Holmes, 2009: p. 7). This is sustained by Fausto-Sterling, when addressing the right to marry, for instance, and the fact that, before same-sex marriage, the legal system also required a binary sexual identification:

> As usual, the debates over intersexuality and inextricable from those over homosexuality; we cannot consider the challenges one poses to our gender system without considering the parallel challenge posed by the other. In considering the potential marriage of an intersexual, the legal and medical rules often focus on the question of homosexual marriage (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p. 112).

Therefore, by correcting the body of intersex individuals and offering them only two possible sexual categories, medical practitioners were also correcting possible deviant sexual desires, enhancing the

imaginary link between sexual identity, sexual orientation and even sexual acts: this "medical management of intersexed bodies can be seen as a model of heteronormative imperative. Intersex bodies have genetic, hormonal, and anatomical configurations that cannot be adequately apprehended by hegemonic discourses of sexual difference" (Antosa, 2012: p. 70) and to correct that difference is to enforce a compulsive heteronormative system. As Dreger writes, the erasure of intersexuality over the correction of the intersex body stems from "the desire to keep people straight. That phrase – keeping people straight – should be taken figuratively, but literally as well" (2003: p. 8) and the writer even points out that it is the existence of two stable sexual categories that allows to define heterosexuality and homosexuality as such, the former as the original one and the latter as deviation. Dreger provocatively asks if one can still talk of homo or heterosexuality when the body is not fully male or female.

To assume the role of a woman within the heterosexual system would be a way to consolidate Cal as a functioning woman, and the mimicry of heterosexual living would erase his intersex ambiguity. It is also interesting to note that even as a man Cal does not have a fulfilling sexual life due to the shame of revealing his body to his prospective girlfriends and even other men, for his body is always marked as different. One could then conclude that neither Callie after the surgery, or Cal performing as male would actually find sexual and bodily experiences that are successful and fulfilling. If Tiresias was turned blind from having enjoyed sexual pleasure as both man and woman, it is clear that Cal could hardly be compared to Tiresias in this particular aspect. Although Middlesex may delve into gender performativity and body ambiguity, it fails to fully address the complexity of bodily experience and the corporality of intersex experience, particularly because *Middlesex* is ultimately a book about growing up as the grandchild of immigrants in a changing America and not about the intersex experience. At best, the novel revolves around the intersex experience only to use the mythical world of hermaphrodites and metaphorical binary oppositions to expiate the guilt and shame of one family. Cal is more of a symbol than an effective character; its omnipresent narrational voice closer to the prophetic, all knowing Tiresias than an actual intersex individual who experiences both pain and pleasure, shame and pride.

According to Carroll, when Cal flees from Dr Luce's and his family's expectations in order to keep living through his intact body, he escapes "the medical establishment and its management of intersexed bodies" (2012: p. 195) but it is that same medical report, written after the extensive scrutiny of his body by someone who is virtually a stranger, that Cal's male identity is defined and even though

> *Middlesex* does criticize modern medicine's response to intersexuality through Cal's treatment ... the novel nevertheless remains complicit with its epistemologies. ... while the novel critiques the brutal treatment of intersex subjects by the medical profession, its implicit confirmation of a binary sex/gender model

> effectively validates that treatment. (Graham, 2009: p. 14)

Cal's identity isn't defined by his own experience of the world but by what the medical report finally brings to light as being parts of his body there were previously unknown to himself, re-establishing the retrospective logic that Carroll writes on:

> [i]t is Luce's case notes and their record of genitals palpated and examined which forms the origin of Cal's newly sexed identity, rather than his own corporeal experience. Moreover, it is this medical history which inaugurates the retrospective logic which dominates the text we read. The adult Cal lays claim to an unequivocal maleness decreed by his hormonal constitution; in the earlier stages of the narrative, and in anticipation of events yet to unfold, he asserts, ''To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology, I've got a male brain. But I was raised a girl'' (19). Retelling his life for his imagined avid reader, *Cal rewrites his past desires as anticipating the male heterosexual destinations with which he later identifies* [emphasis added]. (Carroll, 2012: p. 195)

This retrospective logic has been questioned by theorists such as Judith Butler, who writes that this same logic established dangerous claims for the idea of original sexes and the perfect harmony between anatomy and hormones, in "support to the idea that gender has to be borne out in singular and normative ways at the level of anatomy" (Butler, 2004: p. 63). Biology isn't the sole reason for a certain sex or gender, neither is hormone counting the solution for gender determination because "[a] body's sex is simply too complex. There is no either/or. Rather, there are shades of difference" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: p.3). The idea of male and female brains must also be contradicted for, as Fausto-Sterling claim based on studies on both the shape and size of the corpus callosum of men and women and the use of testosterone and/or estrogen on older women in order to prevent the advances of menopause, indicate that there is a lot more to sex than hormones, implying that, more than sex, hormones are linked to aging and growing.

Callie then concludes that she must be a man because she felt attracted to girls in school and her "desires are placed firmly within a heterosexual matrix" (Carroll, 2012: p. 195), and even when Cal is living as a man, who claims to have always liked girls, even when he was one, again firmly assuring that he is male in a problematic and illogic direct link between gender identity and sexual orientation, a statement only made possible by Cal, in Berlin, at forty years old, looking backwards and placing his 'confusing' life within a straight timeline. By discovering that he's *biologically* male, it makes sense for Cal that he is attracted to girls, suggesting such a direct relationship between sexual identity and sexual orientation (as by extent, heterosexuality and reproduction) that makes it seem even almost impossible

to have. Even though Cal explains that lesbianism was common in the 70s, in an apparent acceptance of her attraction towards other girls and her own identity as one, in other moments of the novel Cal will present contradictory feelings towards this, particularly when he assumes a male identity which is thought of having been always inside his body, another instance of *Middlesex*'s ambiguous, contradictory nature: "Why should I have thought I was anything other than a girl? Because I was *attracted* to a girl? That was happening all the time. It was happening more than ever in 1974. It was becoming a national pastime" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 388).

Curiously, while "first-person intersex narratives constitute legitimate alternative or counter-narratives to hegemonic medical narratives and to other dominant narratives about sexed embodiment and gender, and thus challenge the notion of one 'truth' regarding intersex" (Amato, 2016: p. 56), *Middlesex*, with its heteronormative male voice, straight time and retrospective look, does exactly the opposite: it consolidates rather than questions gender determination, and even though it does criticise those same hegemonic medical narratives, it does imply that there is an original, true sex in intersex individuals. This is sustained when Cal claims, when picking up berries from the mulberry (family) tree, that he was unaware of how the tree was connected to his family, how, after knowing that he is intersex, "now things are different. Now all the mute objects of my life seem to tell my story, to stretch back in time, if I look closely enough." (Eugenides, 2002: 396).

Intersex narratives have only recently turned autobiographical; even though the image of the intersex (or historically, hermaphrodite) is often featured in medical literature as a curious medical case, these narrative were often written by medical practitioners, being intersex subjectivity often invisible and erased. Even if "this genre of life-writing has become the site of highly charged claims for self-determination, authorship and agency" (Carroll, 2012: p. 112) and that is what Cal does in *Middlesex* by deciding his own gender, the fact that *Middlesex* is a family saga, an immigrant novel and a coming-of-age – all "fictions of origin" (Carroll, 2012: 112) – it does this self-determination informed by the heteronormative system in which it is inserted. Moreover, the fact that Cal goes on the road after discovering that he is intersex can also be read as the need to obey to the timeline and constrains of another great American genre: the road narrative, and the fact that, in these tales, there must be a fixed destination that the main character must reach: in Cal's case, it is the male body. The fact that *Middlesex* is a coming-of-age narrative may also imply that, with adulthood, so does an heteronormative way of living and being must be accepted, as "Childhood is imagined as an irrational and dependent queer time in which one lacks a fixed political identity and is instead in the process of 'growing up'" (C. Stewart, 2019: p. 5).

Cal begins his journey on the road by getting a haircut and dressing in men's clothing – a funereal suit that works as some sort of prophetic suit, the same one in which Cal will eventually fly back home to attend his father's funeral – that feels "warm, comforting, alien" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 444), each time feeling more secure about his male identity because he is visibly perceived as male by the people that he meets on the road. This is not just an expression of sexual stereotypes but it also shows how Cal's upbringing confined him to a dual-sex view of the world, one in which "[t]he swearing, the straight razors, the shaving brushes, all these were my welcome to the masculine world" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 442). This running away from home is implied as working as the shift of Cal into adulthood, as well as a break away from the family constrains, as expressed in the episode when Tessie, Cal's mother, explains that she cannot feel the umbilical connection that she felt towards Cal:

> Then one day, three months after I was gone, the signals coming over my mother's spiritual umbilical cord stopped. Tessie was lying in bed when the faint purring or tingling in her navel ceased. She sat up. She put her hand to her belly.
> "I can't feel her anymore!" Tessie cried.
> "What?"
> "The cord's cut! Somebody cut the cord!" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 493).

On the road, without the parents' surveillance, Cal feels free to do what his parents would not have allowed me to do, "ordering two and sometimes three deserts" (Eugenides, 449) – and perhaps being a boy – but this lack of family surveillance and control will again find its way into Cal's life in the shape of Myron and Sylvia Bresnick, a couple that picks Cal up on Route 80, on their RV, a "ship of the prairie" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 450) – the comparison to the Giulia[29], the boat in which Cal's grandparents crossed

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[29] Although the aim of this Chapter is the portrayal of the intersex body of Cal, and how *Middlesex* uses it to enforce heteronormativity and a straight timeline in which to place marriage and child rearing as the only possible outcomes, while also attempting at inserting the intersex body upon it, it is relevant, due to the fact that the boat will work as a metaphor in other parts of the thesis, to briefly analyse the description of the boat in which Cal's grandparents crossed the Atlantic to escape from war and how, aboard this space for transformation, they pretend to be Turkish instead of Greek and lovers instead of brother and sister: "[e]ach time Lefty encountered Desdemona on deck, he pretended he'd only recently met her.... Traveling made it easier. Sailing across the ocean among half a thousand perfect strangers conveyed an anonymity in which my grandparents could recreate themselves. The driving spirit on the *Giulia* was *self-transformation* [emphasis added]. ... Gray ocean stretched in all directions. Europe and Asia Minor were dead behind them. Ahead lay America and new horizons" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 66-68). This is echoed when Cal runs away from home, as travelling is again evoked as a time of transformation: "[m]y grandparents had fled their home because of a war. Now, some fifty-two years later, I was feeling myself. I felt that I was saving myself just as definitively. I was fleeing without much money on my pocket and under the alias of my new gender. A ship didn't carry me across the ocean; instead, a series of new cars conveyed me across a continent. I was becoming a new person, too, just like Lefty and Desdemona, and I didn't know what would happen to me in this new world to which I'd come". (Eugenides, 2002: p. 443) Although the process of acculturation of Lefty and Desdemona is problematically equated with the changing of their relationship from siblings to husband and wife, what Eugenides writes about the process of travelling, for both Cal and his grandparents, as a process of change, will be addressed later when analysing *The Argonauts.*

the Atlantic, is inevitable – with its door that opens "like the door of a *house* [emphasis]" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 450). The couple appears like a mirage of domestic bliss right after Cal's statement on how he does not identify with other runaways, teenagers "from broken homes, had been physically abused and now abused others. I wasn't anything like them. I had brought my family's upward mobility out onto the road. I joined no packs but went my way alone" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 450). Cal's self-imposed exile has already been addressed as a result of a permanent sense of sexual displacement, of self-loathing and shame, of a trauma that Cal seems to carry way into his adult life. This "exile that is both self- and socially-imposed" can also be read as Cal's lack impossibility of belonging, ethnically or sexually as "Cal is consistently alone ... belonging to no sexual or gender, national or ethnic community, liminal in every aspect" (Graham, 2009: p. 17). Cal claims that he "tried to forget my [Cal's] body by keeping it in motion ... never long enough to form a solid attachment to anyone" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 320), again emphasizing the loneliness and lack of connection that queer people are claimed to have, an inability to forge long lasting relationships (Weston, 1991), with the nuclear family working as the only place of identification for Cal, who rejects any other kinship structure that is not based on blood.

And even though he fails to identify with other social groups, he does feel happy to be home after his father's death while also finding comfort at the Bresnick's mobile home with "framed photographs of their children on the wall ... beds, the shower, the living area" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 450). It is inside this mobile home that "something clicks inside my [Cal's] head and suddenly I feel like I'm getting the hang of it. Myron and Sylvia are treating me like a son. Under this *collective delusion* [emphasis added] I become that, for a little while at least. *I become male-identified* [emphasis added]" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 450). 'Collective delusion' seems to embody exactly what the performance of gender entails: repetitive behaviours and acts that ensure a two-sex system, one that is defined by but also defines kinship relationships themselves, such as the ones within a heteronormative family, or, as Butler writes in the seminal *Gender Trouble*:

> Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. ... [A]cts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (Butler, 1999: p. 73).

Cal, again, needs a family structure to frame his identity as male, as someone's son; this may stem from

being underage but also from the fact that, when unsure of his sexual identity, the family structure will provide him with a gender role that will allow his to think of himself as male, through the collective delusion that is performed through the adoption of certain gender roles, presentation and expectations.

As Samuel Cohen (2007) writes on Derrida's "future anterior", Cal's past only becomes real after he can perceive who he is in the future; from that point of danger that the future presents, of uncertainty and the unexpected, Cal's past is then recreated keeping in mind an effect of continuity and logic. This future is always determined by the past, establishing then that Cal's life has no other possible outcome than to follow the fatalism that his family has been devoted to. According to S. Cohen, Cal's moments of self-determination depend on the future anterior: both moments (when he assumes a male identity and when he reaches the end of the narrative of his youth) "belong to the future anterior because they are constructions of history – Cal's own history – that claim to describe a present but really construct a past built upon a wish for the future" (2007: p. 382). Moreover, Cal's decision to reject his feminine identity, and therefore reshape his past as a girl and recreate it, stems from the same retrospective logic and the future anterior, as "she decides to reject her rearing and selectively interpret her ambiguous physiognomy ... in the moment that she declares herself male, she begins the process of constructing a history of her life that leads up to the present she imagines for herself" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 382). Putting her life in perspective, Cal will look at herself with the distorted mirror of the present and the knowledge that she now has about herself: "[w]e see the future anterior in Cal's response to her mother's question "Don't you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?": "This is the way I was" (S. Cohen, 2009: p. 382). Cal erases the fact that he never had any doubts about his upbringing except when his body didn't develop as expected, putting into a male oriented perspective his female experience, also reinforcing a certain idea of a true sex, one that was always there but had been hidden and confounded by intersexuality, one that he has found again. As Hsu writes "intersex phenomena have largely symbolic value in talk about liberation from sexual and gender norms, but this is exactly the type of symbolism that Cal – who is, by novel's end, certain of his manhood – categorically rejects" (2011: p. 92).

There is a gap in Cal's own narrative between the time when he goes back home after having run away, as a teenager, and when he moves to Berlin, which presents an odd choice in a novel that encompasses the story of three generations. Moreover, Cal implies that moving to Berlin has brought him closer to his Greek family's history, due to the fact that he lives among Turkish immigrants. He claims that "[d]espite family history, I feel drawn to Turkey. I'd like to work in the embassy in Istanbul. I've put in a request to be transferred there. It would bring me full circle" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 440): again Cal finds closure, the full circle instead of an alternative timeline, a need for closure that will also dictate the

ending of the novel itself. Cal seems to know more about his own family than about himself, for he seems uncapable of narrating his own story from his late teens up to his adulthood and according to Cohen, this narrational gap

> provides a clue … to the specific nature of this novel's historical imagination … it established that the novel is set safely in the past and so really is an historical novel … it highlights what for many postmodern historical novels has become a staple: the recognition that present concerns impinge on reconstructions of the past (2007: p. 378).

"Cal needs to tell the story of his past in order to function in the present" (S. Cohen, 2009: p. 378) and this retrospective logic will influence his choice to assume a male identity, as well as the aesthetic choices that Eugenides makes towards the end of the novel, in what can be perceived as historical fiction, in which details are hidden away or presented in order to create a solid and believable identity and history for Cal, a "history … motivated by particular concerns" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 379). Furthermore,

> The retrospective narrative strategies employed by Eugenides in *Middlesex* make it impossible for the reader to access Cal's experience as a teenage girl other than through the adult male Cal's self-consciously knowing hindsight; Cal's female adolescence is mediated by the adult Cal's conviction in his genetically sexed identity as male. (Carroll, 2012: p. 196)

"[N]arratives of adolescence can become narratives of historical, and perhaps especially national, development" (Carroll, 2012: p. 196), and in *Middlesex*, Cal's identity is definitely shaped by the history of the United States, showing "a family buffeted by historical change" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 378) but also by the constant presence of the Greek influence that he inherits from his parents, especially in the intersection between national, cultural and sexual identity, as the journey of Cal from young girl to adult man is equated with the immigrant experience of his grandparents, as well as the one that he himself takes part in, by moving regularly, presenting "genetics as a narrative of familial ties to ethnic and national culture" (Banner, 2010: p. 852).

Perhaps this linear link between sex and sexuality, and the biological determinism that brings together family and cultural matters and Cal's sexual identity, are the effects of the genre of the family sage itself, as well as the structure of the *bildungsroman*, in which every aspect of the novel must be inserted in a logical path that will respect the continuum of inheritance that lies at the core of a family, side by side with the constant growth and development of our main character, always moving forward and looking back from vantage standpoint to make sense of his past, from confused, troubled and sexually

ambiguous teenager, into full blown straight, male adult. However, the expectations that are created for what is described as the *great intersex novel* could be more transgressive and ground-breaking, ones that truly challenge not only the form of the novel itself, but the ones of a *genre* itself, ultimately questioning the heteronormative norm that has so often dominated literature and art. If *Middlesex* opens up several possibilities for Cal, ultimately the narrative is "complicit with a heteronormative matrix within which queer contingencies of identity are contained" (Carroll, 2012: p. 201). For as much as *Middlesex* might explore the crossing of gender and national borders, through the act of travelling within and outside the body, there is a binary matrix that underlies ideas of family and nationality that prevent those same crossings to be fully transgressive and even successful. The many births of Cal, and many journeys, seem to have taken him to the ultimate place marked by family heritage: going back home and filling his father's shoes, as the patriarch of the house.

Cal returns home when his father dies. With Milton, the image of Cal as a woman also dies but somehow it remains crystalized in the memory of the now dead father, who never actually met Cal as a man, his son – "[w]ith respect to my father I will always remain a girl" (Eugenides, 2000: p. 512), or, as Vliet writes "the essence of his family unit essentially remained intact" (2011: p. 135). "Close relatives always store a younger version of you in their memories, superimposing it on the aging, changing body that visits them once a month, once every six months" (Salzmann, 2019: p. 178); however, it does seem pertinent to question this overpowering role of the family man when it comes to define Cal's own identity, as if the secrecy of Cal's new life as man, and his status as an intersex, needs to be hidden from the patriarch, to whom this the fact that Cal is a man is a secret, another one in a family which holds many. Again, Cal is invisible as intersex, in the sense that Milton did not see him while transitioning from Callie to Cal, who describes Milton's death as a sort of relief for Milton for he "got out" right before several tragedies, both American and personal, being the worst perhaps seeing Cal as a man, again reinforcing the shame that Cal's family may feel toward him:

> Milton got out before many of the things I will not include in this story, because they are the common tragedies of American life, and as such do not fit into this singular and uncommon record. He got out before the Cold War ended, before missile shields and global warming and September 11 and a second president with only one vowel in his name. Most important, Milton got out without ever seeing me again. That would not have been easy. I like to think that my father's love for me was strong enough that he could have accepted me" (2000: p. 512)

Following a family Greek tradition, Cal must stand in the doorway, as the oldest child of the family, in

order for his father's ghost to be unable to return home; in this ritual, Cal is therefore recognized, at the same time, a man and as the patriarch of the house, his face a palimpsest of his family's Greek heritage and his American upbringing:

> And so it was I who, upholding an old Greek custom no one remembered anymore, stayed behind on Middlesex, blocking the door, so that Milton's spirit wouldn't reenter the house. It was always a man who did this, and now I qualified. ... The mulberry tree had no leaves. The wind swept over the crusted snow into my Byzantine face, which was the face of my grandfather and of the American girl I had once been. I stood in the door for an hour, maybe two. I lost track after a while, happy to be home, weeping for my father, and thinking about what was next. (Eugenides, 2000: p. 529)

And yet, even though Milton's father did not enter the house, Cal is still haunted by his past, particularly by Callie, who appears as a ghostly reminder that the intersex body, regardless of being constricted, is able to encompass several timelines at the same time as "Cal presents himself as "possessed" by the girl he was raised to be ... "like a childhood speech impediment" (41) a simile suggesting ... a disability or a flaw" (Graham, 2009: p. 10):

> I'm not androgynous in the least. ... In other words, I operate in society as a man ... I've lived more than half my life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally. When Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her nails. It's a little like being possessed. Callie rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe. She sticks her little hands into the baggy sleeves of my arms. She inserts her chimp's feet through the trousers of my legs. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 41–42)

Calliope haunts Cal's body, which seems to echo Holmes' statement that

> the terrain of intersex studies is also haunted and haunting. In the context of the clinic where parents confront the unexpected, there is a gender haunting that conjures up all the performative efforts required to shore up the traditional sex/ gender divide, and which repeatedly collapses inward when we feel ourselves to have 'failed' at what was supposed to come naturally. For those of us who have rejected assertions regarding the naturalness of sex, and its effect as gender, such collapsing may become a welcome part of the performance, or even a logical impossibility in the face of a more fluid conceptualization of sex/gender. That is, when all things are possible and welcome, the idea of a collapse ceases to make sense. (Holmes, 2009: 6).

1.5. Continuity and Contingency

There is an anxiety regarding ambiguity and the lack of closure in *Middlesex*: its ending, in which every loose end is neatly tied, has been critically contested as the desire of post 9/11 literature to stay away from what is contingent and unexpected, and to recover a narrative of triumphalism and closure (S. Cohen, 2007), a narrative that seems to fit exactly in what Halberstam defines as straight time, both regarding the individual body (from female to male) and the nation (a long line of triumphs rather than a series of steps forwards and backwards). Moreover, the omnipresent metaphor of the link, symbolised by threads, can be read as the dominance of genealogy and predeterminism in *Middlesex* (Graham, 2009), as if Cal's life has been the spinning of a single thread over time, one that defines exactly how his life must take shape. Between these two concepts, continuity and closure, this part of the chapter aims at looking at the images of threads and the images of doors in Middlesex within the context of post 9/11 literature and the genres of the family saga, a coming of age (perhaps even a coming out) tale and even historical fiction.

S. Cohen (2007) writes on *Middlesex* as being a result of its own time: while looking at past, present and a possible future, the novel hints at the historical imagination of its own time. This retrospective look into the past as a direct influence on the present, and even on the future, for Cal presents a tragic past in order to imagine and reshape his future into a brighter horizon, entails a necessary notion of continuity, something sustained by the novel's concerns with historical fiction. Moreover, the discourses around September 11 "were full of signs of heteronormativity", as "[t]he rhetoric of the loss of "fathers and mothers", "sons and daughters", and "brothers and sisters" attempts to trace the smooth alignment between the nation-state and the nuclear family, the symbolics of blood relations and nationalist domesticity" (Eng in Ahmed, 2014: p. 157).

This desire to impose a sense of continuity through historical veracity and family genealogy also "imposes a false closure on its narrative of the main character's gender crisis" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 372). Cal's 600-pages-long saga of gender-bending and failure in connecting with other people comes to an abrupt end in which he seems suddenly happy as a man who has finally found a matching partner in a Japanese girl who also seems to have a body that is, to Cal's binary way of perceiving bodies, only barely feminine. This enforced ending seems to be a rushed aesthetic choice but, more than style, it "depends in part on how contingency existence feels and how public discourse and constructions of history deal with that feeling" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 327), a reflection of the moment when it was written:

> the way it imposes a false closure on its narrative of the main character's gender crisis. This closure represents something other than a poor aesthetic choice. Rather, its falseness – the unearned, unwarranted character of the novel's ending – is unintended, and so it represents a failure that is especially indicative of the unconscious effect of its historical imagination. The way Middlesex ends is in part due to, and thus can tell us something about, the way history felt in America in 2002. (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 372)

Although Samuel Cohen refers directly to terrorism and its volatile nature, and the inability to trace it or predict it, one could also argue that the intersex category (and every other category that is gender non-conforming) in itself also entails some degree of contingency, disruption, uncertainty. Like any type of ambiguity, sexual or national, an enforced closure seems to be the pacifying end that these narratives need. Even though Cal's narrative "challenge(s) already constructed narratives" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 372), there is only as much leeway to rewrite the historical background in which *Middlesex* takes place, "for historical literature … whose focus is explicitly on the past and always implicitly, as a result, on the way that history "ends" – on the way the past leads to the precarious present and, ultimately, the future (S. Cohen, 2007: pp. 372-373). While *Middlesex* presents a linear timeline in which things succeed each other neatly (first female, then male), aimed by the structure of the family saga (a generation follows another generation), the other case studies that were chosen to be a part of this thesis have different ways of engaging both with time (straight time/queer time) as well as the past, the latter being perceived not only as a site of shame (although it is there) but also of a collective enactment of memory that is passed on to the next generation of queer individuals, in the same way that a family inheritance (as well as their trauma) is passed down from parents to children. Cal does not erase the past, as he tells it with the utmost detail, but in the process of retelling this past, he actively intervenes upon it, marking it by the present knowledge that, whatever he was doing at a particular time, he was doing it with the knowledge that he was a man. Moreover, while Cal's shame seems to have followed him into the present and the future, and still haunts him, texts like *The Inheritance*, as will be seen in Chapter 3, take that shame from the past and turn it into something else; while in *Middlesex* the past has an overpowering force, and Cal narrates it with the distance of an authorial voice, works like *The Great Believers* and *The Inheritance* actively engage with the past, dialoguing with it, taking lessons from it.

Eugenides also needs some type of a symbolic ending for Cal, one that fits comfortably on the binary logic of sexual spheres and that sustains Cal's argument that there is nothing ambiguous about his body or identity: Cal as a man on the doorway of the home in which he grew up, the same Cal that a few pages before was writing about the desire to move freely across national borders and performing as a mermaid in a freak show. According to Lee, this ending

> enact[s] the neutering of the queer that Halberstam says is so comforting to a conservative ideology. It is true that throughout the novel, the underlying ambiguities always threaten to irrupt through the conciliatory surface, but the fact that these undercurrents are invisible, and by definition below the surface, serves to preserve the inoffensive hierarchy of a queer coming of age in which the teleological destination, and what is most desired, is normalcy. (2010: p. 45)

This seems to be the "way of telling American history older than the nation itself" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 374) while describing narratives of triumphalism and their retrospective look over history in order to consolidate national images and identities, from the early European settlers, to the Reagan years (which will be analysed in Chapter 2, while looking at depictions of AIDS), and up to 9/11, a time to "introduce a new enemy to the West's superior way of life in the amorphous and shape-shifting form of Terror" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 374) as well as "a different kind of terror – the terror caused by the recognition of contingency" that "informs a view of the course of human events as not chartable along the upward line of humankind's inexorable progress toward liberal democracy but rather as heavily featuring randomness and vulnerability" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 374). This reading and interpretation of history demands a solid structure defined by continuity and sequence, by binary oppositions of what must be defeated and the one that defeats; *Middlesex* is, after all, part historical novel and the same sequence that links the Ottoman war to the Race Riots, is perhaps the same logic that Eugenides feels obliged to follow from baby Calliope to adult Cal. As Lee writes, Cal narrates his grandparents struggle to arrive in The United States having already informed the narrator that his sole birth is the proof that his grandparents were successful, and the same can be applied to his former female self, long gone. This retrospective look ensures that "all manner of heterogeneous, unruly past events, can be tamed and assimilated such that the smooth, uncontested surface of the present, or the null ethnicity of white America, contains the only relevance" (Lee, 2010: p. 40).

Even though Cal's story could be perhaps contemplated as a counternarrative, as many novels have by looking at "events and facts that are concerned with loss and wrongdoing" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 375) through historical trauma, *Middlesex* seems to want to fall over the triumphalist discourse that marks most literature. While aware that intersex lives must also be allowed to enjoy triumphalist discourses, one must also be aware to the way in which endings may be enforced or simulated in literary narratives, if these endings are true to the struggles of these characters or aesthetic choices to please a solid and continuous narrative structure. Cal's trauma is vividly present in *Middlesex*: the invasive study of Dr Luce, acknowledging and immediately ignoring his intersexuality, the escape from home, the degrading

experience as part of the freak show only sustained with drugs and alcohol, the constant fear of being exposed as intersex, the inability to sustain relationships. All these traumatic experiences are closed up neatly by Eugenides by providing him with a final closure – "imposes healing closure on what beings as a more open-ended story" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 376) – that promises a time of future happiness, one that seems to arise from the closing of these wounds rather than the problematization of these traumatic events resulting in a "traumatic narrative too quick to heal the wounds it uncovers ... through the magic or eliding and forgetting" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 376). While this closing of the wound can be purely an aesthetic choice and authorial decision, for Cohen it encompasses a broader sense of national narratives that marked American discourses after 9/11 and provided:

> a model of narrative closure difficult to resist. A history whose tragic losses and dark secrets can be uncovered and healed is not as opposed as it might seem to a history in which those things stay hidden, a history that's all about victory and righteousness, a history where everything turns out all right for America in the end. The events of 9/11, which some have found a fit for a narrative of America as innocent victim (and then righteous avenger), have been for others a model of an open wound that needs healing-or closing. (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 376)

Eugenides "resolves his hero's conflict too quickly and too neatly" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 377). The decision to live as a man seems rushed, unproblematic, even betraying of the intersex category that seems to work only as a temporary stage that can be fixed if not by surgery, at least by the performance of gender: "this section of the novel is rushed and haphazardly plotted, and the ideas that animate the story earlier are lost" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 377) and a whole novel on gender troubles and uncertainty becomes solved through a quick decision of switching genders. *Middlesex* contradicts its own premises when taking the turn towards an ending that is very much determined in presenting that, after all, and after so many traumatic turns, any of them actually matter for Cal was able to define himself as something, even if this moment of self-realization is informed by misconception and denial. S. Cohen writes on the "simplistic" ending of the narrative sustained by Eugenides' own words:

> After I returned from San Francisco and started living as a male, my family found out that, contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important. My change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood (Eugenides in S. Cohen, 2007: p. 383).

Several earlier arguments of *Middlesex* are debunked in a single paragraph: a family like the Stephanides, with its solid gender roles, sexual secrets and untold stories becomes, all of a sudden, open to gender

possibilities and their variations and gender doesn't matter anymore to them, while also going against the grain of popular opinion. Vliet hints that "Callie's transition to Cal is in some ways harder on his family than it is on him" (2011: p. 134) but it seems that this concern is directly linked to the fact that Cal runs away, and the uncertainty regarding his whereabouts and less with the fact that he his intersex. Moreover, the Stephanides do not show any concern about Callie as a girl and then her return as a man; it is the in-between stage of Cal as an intersex person that is unspoken, kept secret, ultimately shamed. His return to the family is made as a man, also implying that while his identity is unclear, so is his role within the household; when he returns, he can assume the role of "the man of the house", left empty by his father. Vliet implies that Milton's death disrupts the family equilibrium, a balance that seems to be regained by Cal's return and that, had Milton been confronted with Cal as a boy, "there would have been an entirely different sort of emotions upheaval within the family unit" (2011: p. 135).

"In the end, the middle of its title, which it had so promisingly staked out as its territory early on, is abandoned" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 384) while the past is healed and presented as "a closed book" (p. 384) that Cal reinvents in order to reimagine a present and perhaps a future free from trauma and hurt. It is, however, debatable if the rushed closure of the wound, which is equated with the anxiety to provide a happy end to Cal does more harm than good. As S. Cohen points out, the past is "domesticated" and even though the choice to deal with the past and then put it away may seem productive, for it allows Cal to, apparently "escape its power to determine the future … with the reforgetting of the traumatic event, its potential us lost" (p. 384).

When Cal stands on the doorway, not wanting to talk with the ghost of his father, he is expectant of what will come next: given that he is narrating his story through a retrospective look, "this optimism relies on the teller's already knowing what is next (as we do, from the frame story)" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 387). This romanticizing of the past is possible due to Cal's knowledge of the present; the trauma of the past in therefore reframed and retold taking into account the outcome in the present. Cal is happy for the future on the day of his father's funeral, a detail which can probably be read as a result of the over dominating power of the optimism of closure and an hyper-romanization of the past, one that tends to overlook trauma and repression in detriment of the happiness found in the present, a past which is "constructed optimistically" (S. Cohen, 2007: p. 387). Cal no longer fears the future for he is sure of who he is; there is no fear of the unexpected because the past is solved and closed, Cal is unambiguously male and the mutant gene seems to have found a dead-end since Cal cannot have children. He is indeed, "the last stop", as the title of the last chapter of the book indicates. Cal is therefore happy and expectant of the future for he is sure that the is the last intersex person in his family, therefore bringing this deviant

line of sexual identity to a stop. The fact that Cal cannot have children works for Eugenides as an effective literary device: the closed end. Adoption is not considered, neither is IVF, as it happens in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*: with this ending, Eugenides guarantees that the Stephanides will not have any more intersex children, relying solely on Cal's brother to carry on with the family's legacy.

Graham points out the link between the Minotaur and the image of the thread, in the sense that Theseus is helped by his sister Ariadne who gives him a ball of thread in order to kill the monster and leave the labyrinth. It is the thread that brings death to the Minotaur and it works as a recurrent image to define the fate of Cal as the direct result of his ancestors' actions, as a link that is spun throughout almost one century of history over two continents, surviving war and riots: "[t]he motif of the thread runs through the novel, emphasising that Cal is a product of his ancestors' transgressions and reiterating his connection to the Minotaur" (2009: p. 8).

Besides the mythological Minotaur, Desdemona is also linked with the image of threading, in the shape of the silk that she grows in Greece, in Mount Olympus and later in The United States, in a factory; when moving across the Atlantic, Desdemona takes the silk worms with her, a clear metaphor for the desire to establish a link between what's left behind and her new home, taking her "across boundaries of place and race, representing both the narrative itself and the flawed genetic thread that links her to her grandchild Cal" (Graham, 2009: p. 8). Another image pointed out by Graham is the one of the boat in which Desdemona and Lefty leave, referring to an old tradition[30]: "[a]s it leaves the dock, balls of thread connecting those on board to those left behind onshore unravel, filing the air with lines which symbolize the ties of ethnic origin that are stretched and broken by the process of migration" (Graham, 2009: p. 8). As suggested by Graham, the mulberry tree is another image connected with the network of threads: silk worms feed on the leaves that grow in Greece and also in the Stephanides's home in Middlesex, the name of the road where they live, bringing the two distinct and distant places together as the food that feeds those that produce the silk threads. However, by the end of the novel, as Cal stands in the doorway preventing his father's ghost from returning, the tree is bare, implying that Desdemona's silk worms won't be able to eat and therefore, perish, symbolising the death of the links that connected the Stephanides to Greece. Graham points out that this means that the narrative has come to an end, something sustained

[30] "It was the custom in those days for passengers leaving for America to bring balls of yarn on deck. Relatives on the pier held the loose ends. As the *Giulia* blew its horn and moved away from the dock, a few hundred strings of yarn stretched across the water. People shouted farewells, waved furiously, held up babies for last looks they wouldn't remember. Propellers churned; handkerchiefs fluttered, and, up on deck, the balls of yarn began to spin. Red, yellow, blue, green, they untangled toward the pier, slowly at first, one revolution every ten seconds, then faster and faster as the boat picked up speed. Passengers held the yarn as long as possible, maintaining the connection to the faces disappearing onshore. But finally, one by one, the balls ran out. The strings of yarn flew free, rising on the breeze."(Eugenides, 2002: p. 64).

by another image of Greek mythology: Ariadne, whose thread is also linked to the unravelling of stories. One is also reminded of Penelope, weaving the epic story of Ulysses over a tapestry or even Louise Bourgeois spiders named after her mother. Weaving and the images of threading are interlinked not only with the shaping of narratives but also to womanhood and the domestic: the lack of leaves in the tree where Cal goes back to symbolises the end of his own narrative, as well as, perhaps a closure that also symbolises a break from the world of women and weaving, an argument that seems to find echo in Cohen's arguments on the rushed ending of *Middlesex*. The tying of all the loose ends and the lack of leaves on a tree, which could also be read as a family tree, now striped bear by the death of Cal's father, crystalizes what has been previously written on the need for closure for *Middlesex* and for Cal: nothing can be ambiguous, not even the end of the novel. Without leaves with which to feed the silk worms, there are no more narrative threads to spin.

1.6. *MDLSX*: Queering Middlesex

MDLSX is a solo performance by Silvia Calderoni, directed by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò that premiered in 2015. Like *Middlesex*, *MDLSX* is anchored in several texts, besides *Middlesex* itself and *Orlando*, as well as critical works by Donna Haraway, Judith Butler and Paul B. Preciado's on gender and queer studies. The result is a *pastiche* of pop songs that a teenager Calderoni must have grown up with, juxtaposed with autobiographic videos of a young Calderoni with her family, creating an ambiguous personal account through the ventriloquism of other works, where it is difficult to understand where fiction ends and reality begins, what words are Calderoni's and what words were borrowed from the many texts that inform the performance, what experiences are Cal's and which ones are Calderoni's, juxtaposing severa timelines that intertwined, bringing together past and present, self and other.

While recurring to domestic videos – the chapter in which Callie is born, and Dr Philosobian declares her female, is appropriately entitled "Home Movies" – Calderoni impersonates the role of a VJ/DI, as she chooses songs, recites texts, points a camera to herself, undresses and redresses as another. While addressing the prejudice and confusion that Calderoni's ambiguous body has provoked over the years, *MDLSX* also delves into the freedom that comes from accepting that same ambiguity, addressing gender with a playful tone: "the happiness that attends disaster", says Calderoni. *MDLSX* oscillates between moments of comedy – often the effect of the use of fake beards and prosthetic breasts that echo drag performances and ridicule of gender stereotypes – and tender moments of empathy towards Calderoni when she appropriates Cal's words in *Middlesex*, like the moment when Callie looks

for the meaning of ‘hermaphrodite’ on the dictionary (in *Fun Home*, Bechdel does the same, looking for the meaning of ‘lesbian’, as seen in Figure 4). The dictionary, in which the words ‘hypospadias’, ‘eunuch’ and ‘hermaphrodite’ follow each other, with MONSTER being suggested as a synonym for all of them, is yet another text that constitutes the myriad of authorial texts that compose the novel, both present directly and the ones to which Eugenides has recurred as part of his research. Something similar happens in *MDLSX*, in the sense that it is also composed of several texts: songs, literary works, critical works, domestic videos, and the body of the performer. This also happens in another case studies selected for this thesis, as intertextuality, as it will be analysed, composes a network of references and voices with whom the authors dialogue, creating a genealogy of queer heritage.

I'D BEEN HAVING QUALMS SINCE I WAS THIRTEEN...

...WHEN I FIRST LEARNED THE WORD DUE TO ITS ALARMING PROMINENCE IN MY DICTIONARY.

lesbian

¹les·bi·an \'lez-bē-ən\ *adj, often cap* **1** : of or relati
2 [fr. the reputed homosexual band associated wit
Lesbos] : of or relating to homosexuality between fe
²lesbian *n, often cap* : a female homosexual
les·bi·an·ism \-ə-,niz-əm\ *n* ; female homosexuality
lese maj·es·ty *or* **lèse ma·jes·té** \'lēz-'maj-ə-stē\
majesté fr. L *laesa majestas*, lit., injured majesty] **1**
committed against a sovereign power **b** : an offense

BUT NOW ANOTHER BOOK--A BOOK ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAD COMPLETELY CAST ASIDE THEIR OWN QUALMS--ELABORATED ON THAT DEFINITION.

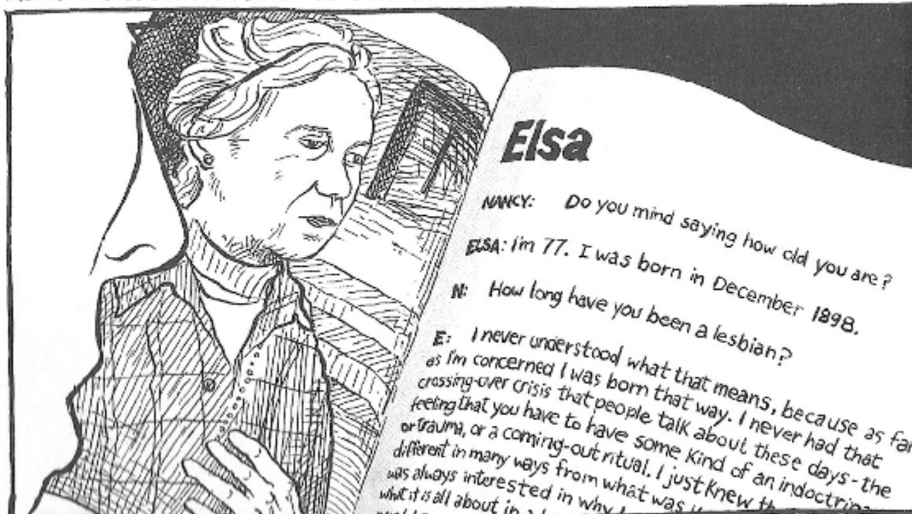

Figure 4: A page from Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.

If Callie is aware that Dr Luce's report is part of the fictional account that she gave him, and therefore, false itself, the dictionary poses another level of textual and cultural veracity:

> the synonym was official, authoritative: it was the verdict that the culture gave on a person like her. Monster. That was what she was. That was what Dr Luce and his colleagues had been saying. ... it explained her mother crying in the next room. It explained the false cheer in Milton's voice. ... it explained the photographs, too. What did people do when they came upon Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster? (Eugenides, 2002: p. 431)

Banner (2010) points out the fact that *Middlesex* is informed by other texts and from reading the novel it is clear that Eugenides recurred to medical texts as well as personal accounts on intersexuality: this list of references can be found in the first page of the novel, therefore informing the reader that this novel has been written taking into account the way in which medicine has treated intersex people over time and the text, with its treatment of Cal by Dr Luce is clearly denouncing the abuse of intersex bodies by medicine. "We are therefore constantly made aware that the redefining of intersex occurs through texts, through the construction of narratives" (2010: p. 854), writes Banner, in the same sense that Cal is also, through the writing of his body, a genetic narrative that has been carried out for years, narrating Greek, American and intersex stories and histories; Calliope is, after all, the muse of epic poetry. It is when he meets Zora, another intersex person, that Cal finally comes across other intersex narratives besides the medical one and the reductive dictionary entries, coming across a counter-narrative that places Cal within an historical context of existence. When they meet, Zora is writing a book on intersex lives called *The Sacred Hermaphrodite*, "a strange (a hybrid itself) mixing genetics, cellular biology, and Hindu mysticism" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 490), a book that Cal claims to have looked for all his life but which he has never seen published, perhaps addressing the erasure and hiding of intersex narratives, something that seems to be expressed by the fragility of the manuscript itself, prone to be destructed, as it was "typed on the thinnest onionskin paper ... therefore perishable" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 491), much like the intersex body itself. Through Zora, Cal comes across narratives that are not medical, narratives that present Cal a variety and multiplicity of genders and intersex voices that create a genealogy of the intersex body, one that reaches back into the past while also expanding over borders:

> I read everything Zora gave me, trying to educate myself. I learned what varieties we hermaphrodites came in. ... I was more interested in historical than medical material. ... Many cultures on earth operated not with two genders but with three. And the third was always special, exalted, endowed with mystical gifts. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 495)

For Cal, these texts informed him with an intersex history similar to the resources that Eugenides recurred to while writing the novel, that also evokes the way how Calderoni mixes personal account with other texts for her solo performance. Writing the intersex body through not only the medical narrative but also through historical and personal accounts, through a queer and intersectional approach results in a broader understanding on what the intersex body means, does and challenges: "[i]n Zora's rice-paper house, with misty light coming in at the windows, I was like a blank canvas waiting to be filled with what she told me" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 489), says Cal, as his body becomes inscribed not only Dr Luce's discourse but also with Zora's enlightening alternative narratives.

Regardless of this knowledge that is passed down from Zora, "a gender mother", to Cal, he eventually seems to forget everything that he has learnt, in detriment of adopting an authorial male heteronormative voice. However, in *MDLSX* Calderoni narrates her own story while also narrating Cal's story now informed by other texts that were particularly groundbreaking for an understanding of intersexuality and gender that is rather different from Eugenides' take on intersexuality, one that, even though it is a mirror of the medical treatment of intersex individuals, it lacks subjectivity and the plural debate that has been carried out over the last thirty years, a debate of "'queer interventions to further discussion on an ontological phenomenon that can never be reduced to a pure, embodied state, nor to a simple cultural rendering in which 'intersex' is whatever we want it to be" (Holmes, 2009: p. 2).

One of the main aspects in which performance and novel intersect is the use of the family lineage: in *MDLSX ,* this appears in the shape of a family album of videos, like the ones that Dr Luce asks Cal's parents to watch in order to see if Cal's sexuality as a child was already ambiguous. These videos becom a device for storytelling, as well as a way of addressing the anxiety that families of intersex individuals experience. This particular aspect of family albums and heritage is the main focus of this chapter and to compare Eugenides' and Calderoni's text through this aspect is to bring them closer in their differences and understand how the novel permeates the performance but how it is turned into another type of text, with a different tone and intention.

The performance starts with a home video of a very young Calderoni singing karaoke about a young boy who liked The Rolling Stones "just like me"; the young Calderoni appears in a circle over which, slowly, Calderoni's own face, who is now on stage, appears, in an intersection of multiple timelines aided by technology. Throughout the show, Calderoni carries a camera that is pointed at her face and body, in a writing of the body in the first person, similar to the process that Cal does in *Middlesex*, again intersectining family and personal histories. The many songs that are part of *MDLSX* play a crucial role

in the narrative of the show and it is important to acknowledge the relevance of music in this particular show as well as the tradition often associated with drag of lip-synching.

The close ups of Calderoni's face echo the moment that Cal narrates the way how his father's eye appeared in the camera that was used to record their family videos when he checked for film, an overseeing patriarchal eye that intercuts the domestic scenes of the Stephanides; this eye, as Cal writes, is what Cal can most clearly see, haunting and hovering above his early years, again implying that his childhood and upbringing as a girl was always surveilled by the gender expectations of the family's patriarchal structure:

> The only way to check the amount of film left in the camera was by reading the counter inside the lens. In the middle of Christmas scenes or birthday parties there always came a moment when Milton's eye would fill the screen. So that now, as I quickly try to sketch my early years, what comes back most clearly is just that: the brown orb of my father's sleepy, bearish eye. A postmodern touch in our domestic cinema, pointing up artifice, calling attention to mechanics. (And bequeathing me my aesthetic.) Milton's eye regarded us. It blinked. An eye as big as the Christ Pantocrator's at church, it was better than any mosaic. It was a living eye, the cornea a little bloodshot, the eyelashes luxuriant, the skin underneath coffee-stained and pouchy. This eye would stare us down for as long as ten seconds. Finally the camera would pull away, still recording. We'd see the ceiling, the lighting fixture, the floor, and then us again: the Stephanides. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 225).

However, in *MDLSX*, Calderoni flips the gender of the novel's passage, saying that it was her mother's eye that would fill the screen, while pointing the camera at her own eye, which now also fills the screen (and stage), in an interesting take on female authorship and gaze, drawing the public's attention to the mechanics of storytelling, "a postmodern touch" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 225). Lee (2010) points out that there is a cinematic aspect to *Middlesex*, one that makes the novel openly aware of its own narrative devices, that often reminds the audience of how the novel's narrator can, at will, change the course of the narrative, and how the narratives mechanically spun, a device that is even cinematographic, as seen when Cal describes his own birth, again making use of the language of home filmmaking: "I'm going to rewind the film, so that my pink blanket flies off, my crib scoots across the floor as my umbilical cord reattaches, and I cry out as I'm sucked back between my mother's legs" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 20).

The textuality of *MDLSX* is always being put forward by the insertion of the texts that Calderoni recites to a microphone over the background of the stage next to the image that is being recorded and broadcast from the camera that the performer holds, in a house of mirrors of multiple perspectives of the same body. *MDLSX* is highly self-reflective but while *Middlesex*'s similar process is infused with

transgenerational shame, Calderoni examines every inch of her face in the camera right after mentioning the fear of mirrors brought by middle age or by a girl who has always been taken for a boy, an echo of Cal's statement that the changes brought upon the body of an intersex person are similar to the ones brought by age. "Beauty is always a bit monstrous", says Calderoni, echoing Cal's girlfiend, Julie, but seeming to want to establish a clear cut with the self-loathing and shameful tone of *Middlesex*.. What Calderoni proposes, similarly to what Eugenides does in *Middlesex*, is a physical description of oneself from childhood to today, encompassing, in the novel, the time before Cal's own birth.

"At birth it was established I am F. without involving me in any way", says Calderoni, addressing the need by medical practitioners to define gender at birth, and therefore erasure doubts regarding their children's sex to parents, followed by "[h]ere I am, family cinematography", in a clear link between parenthood and gender expectation, as a home video of Calderoni appears on the corner of the stage. A naked Calderoni takes the stage, her body ambiguously thin, her mimicry of hiding away a penis between her legs a convincing fantasy that there are indeed male genitals to be hidden. The audience is confronted with her naked body in full display and the shame of *Middlesex* of the naked body and sexuality is set aside for a double view of Calderoni's body as an ambiguous Venus, arms stretched out to the sides, legs bent. Again, the music used in this "monster-performance", just like the intertext in *Middlesex*, overlaps with the main narrative and provides it with a second layer of meaning: *One Hit* by the band The Knife plays, a song on misogyny and domestic abuse which serves here as a comment on the intersection between gender, homemaking, gender expectations for both men and women, maternity and femininity:

> So where's the femininity
> The one with skirts and high heels
> A shiny sink and homemade meals
> The one and only way
> If you enter you'll stay
> Sons and daughters you will breed
> As long as you breastfeed
> Yeah, being a man is a bliss
> One hit, one kiss (Andersson & Dreijer, 2006)

If the audience is familiar with Eugenides' text, it will hear the echoes of the book, as Cal's experiences are narrated by Calderoni; for those who are not aware of the text, perhaps the performance will sound as the autobiography of the performer. At times, credits are due, others not; this ambiguity of voices, creating a polyphonic text, seems to be deliberate. After a puberty in which neither breasts nor a period

appear (for Cal or Calderoni, who share the first three letters of their names?), Calderoni states that the bra that she would use was merely of theoretical use, “like the higher physics”, again referring to the mimicry of gender performativity, already addressed not only as part of adolescence in itself but also of social gender expectations. “Hierarchies! They exist everywhere but especially in locker rooms”, says Calderoni quoting from *Middlesex*, as videos of herself as a teenager are projected on stage, addressing then the differences between the girls that would display the “normal” characteristics of a developed feminine body, a “different species” when perceived against “the skinny, hairless, disgustingly domesticated” body of Cal(deroni). Then, the performer dances and energetically shakes her abnormally large breasts made of clothes. As a video of a young Calderoni, is projected, on stage the performer, who is wearing wigs (Figure 5) that resemble exaggerated pubic and arm pit hair (two signs of puberty) reads aloud from Preciado’s *Counter-Sexual Manifesto* the contract that is to be signed by those who intend to reject gender norms and gendered social behavior, renouncing one’s

> biopolitical position as a man or a woman, of any privilege (whether social, economic, or regarding hereditary rights) and of any commitment (whether social, economic, or reproductive) resulting from my sexual condition within the framework of the naturalized heterosexual system (Preciado: 2018: p. 40).

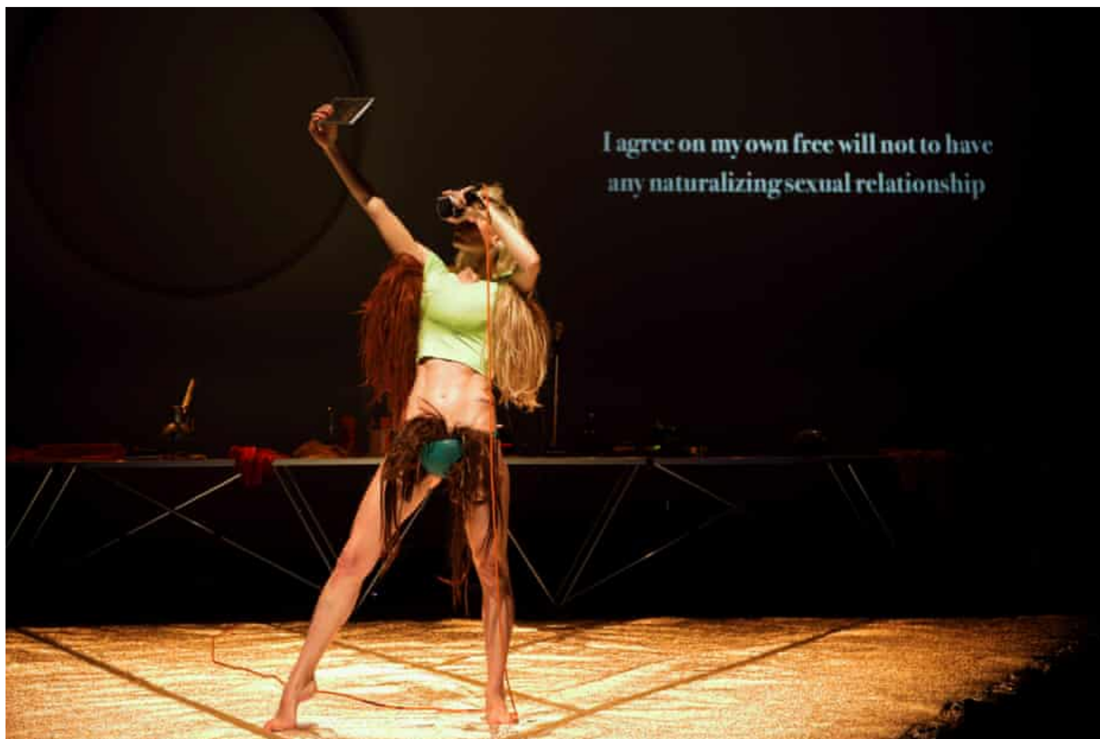

Figure 5: Calderoni in *MDLSX*

Here *MDLSX* moves away from the gender ambiguity that it borrows from *Middlesex* to analyse broader aspects of gender as part of an heteronormative patriarchal political structure. Moreover, the rejection of this naturalized heterosexual system is also the rejection of "all legal kinship (both parental and marital) that has been assigned [to me] within the heterosexual regime, as well as all privileges and obligations derived from them" (Preciado: 2018: p. 40), a clear cut from the foundational text of the performance, *Middlesex*, which is anchored and deeply rooted in notions of heritage, family and reproduction (as heterosexual structures). Preciado's text alludes at one of the central debates of queer theory, as well as this thesis: to analyse the implications of this legal kinship established by rituals, such as marriage and giving birth to children, and understand how and when to mimic them, appropriate them or dismantle them, by taking "the right to use my reproductive cells only in the framework of a consensual contra-sexual contract" (Preciado, 2018: p. 40).

As images of flowers blooming are projected on stage, a nod to the variety of genital configurations as well as sexual desire[31], Calderoni stages one the of the most melancholic moments of the performance: reflecting on an "impossible us", the performer questions "not what is our common essence, but what holds us together. When we say us, us women, us gay, us lesbians, us trans, us workers, what are we actually saying?". This universalizing aspect, which seems to be what Eugenides intended when claiming that Cal's story is as much as a tale of teenage transformation as well as an intersex story, achieves in *MDLSX* an intersectional aspect which is missing in *Middlesex* when it comes to a queer perspective, although it does intersect gender, nationality and ethnicity. "I am neither a woman, nor a man, I am not black, but I would never call myself white. I am not a dog, I am not a plant, or maybe I am all these us at the same time", claims Calderoni, again playing with the identity plasticity that marks *MDLSX*.

[31] "For that spring, while the crocuses bloomed, while the headmistress checked on the daffodil bulbs in the flower beds, Calliope, too, felt something budding. An obscure object all her own, which in addition to the need for privacy was responsible for bringing her down to the basement bathroom. A kind of crocus itself, just before flowering. A pink stem pushing up through dark new moss. But a strange kind of flower indeed, because it seemed to go through a number of seasons in a single day. It had its dormant winter when it slept underground. Five minutes later, it stirred in a private springtime. Sitting in class with a book in my lap, or riding home in car pool, I'd feel a thaw between my legs, the soil growing moist, a rich, peaty aroma rising, and then—while I pretended to memorize Latin verbs—the sudden, squirming life in the warm earth beneath my skirt. To the touch, the crocus sometimes felt soft and slippery, like the flesh of a worm. At other times it was as hard as a root. How did Calliope feel about her crocus? This is at once the easiest and the hardest thing to explain. On the one hand she liked it. If she pressed the corner of a textbook against it, the sensation was pleasurable. This wasn't new. It had always felt nice to apply pressure there. The crocus was part of her body, after all. There was no reason to ask questions. (Eugenides, 2002: pp. 329-330)

After a monologue on Buñuel's *Obscure Object of Desire*, a comparison between the burden that the man in the film carries around and the burden that Cal seems to carry around[32], an interview between Paul B. Preciado and Alejandro Jodorowsky on what queer theory encompasses plays in the background. These moments, in which other texts intersect the passages that were selected from *Middlesex* inform these same excerpts with new ideas and concepts that seem to lack from Eugenides' text, while also serving a pedagogical purpose of providing the public with a theoretical framework in which to place the performance. In the interview, Preciado defines queer theory as "teoria bolleras, maricas, trans, mestiza[33]", clearly indicating a plural, intersectional view of this particular theoretical lens that, according to Preciado, has been appropriated by micro groups in the United States in 1980s as a space of political fight against the politics of integration of gay and lesbian individuals within the heterosexual society. When placed within the text of the performance, and side by side with the excerpts from *Middlesex*, this particular view of queerness as resistance to assimilation enforces a different reading of *Middlesex*, one that criticizes exactly what has been discussed in this chapter as the heteronormative transformation of Cal, from female to stealth male. *MDLSX* is a self-criticizing text, one that reshapes *Middlesex*, readjusting it to the time not of its production but of the staging of the performance, while also criticizing Cal's need to assimilate, to pass for man. Preciado states that before having defined himself as "lesbian", the ones around him, in a very catholic Burgos, had already felt the need to define him, often through insults. When asked how he defined himself at the time of the interview, Preciado claimed to be "transgender". Just like Cal, the need for Preciado to identify himself stemmed from the imposition from the outside of a certain sexual category. Unlike Cal, Preciado's sexual identification changes from a non-normative identification to another, without the assimilation of heterosexuality and gender conformation that Cal endures.

The moment that follows recovers the moment in which Cal is confronted by his father's disclosure of his intersexuality and the reading of the file written by Dr Luce that has served as a way for the Stephanides to confirm their son's sexual identity: on stage, Calderoni wheels around a suitcase – Buñuel's burden? – while a video of herself as a teenager is projected. The reading of the doctor's file, with its complicated medical terms and the conclusion that Cal must endure a "feminizing surgery along

[32] Cal explains that what interested him the most in Buñuel's film "was the surrealist touch ... In many scenes Fernando Rey is shown holding a heavy sack over his shoulder. The reason for this sack is never mentioned. (Or if it is, I missed that, too.) He just goes around lugging this sack, into restaurants and through city parks. That was exactly how I felt, following my own Obscure Object. As though I were carrying around a mysterious, unexplained burden or weight. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 325). As Cal explains, he watched the film long after meeting Obscure Object, naming her after the event, an "anachronism" as he claims, again reinforcing the fact that the narrative is written backwards.

[33] Roughly translated as "dyke, fag, trans, mixed"

with corresponding hormonal treatment" contrasts with the video of a playful young Calderoni dancing and using her body to project shadows over a wall. The heavily charged moment of the discovery of "monster" on the dictionary follows, as well as Cal's escape from home and his female identity. Calderoni wears a suit and carries the suitcase over her head, while reciting excerpts from the novel that describe Cal's life on the road, trying to mimic a man, while Talking Heads' *Road to Nowhere* plays and a video of a younger Calderoni, hair cut off, is projected (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Calderoni in MDLSX

The song, along with the images of the road intertwined with images of Calderoni wearing boxer shorts and short hair, and the text that describes the transformations that Cal's body endures, reinforce the idea that to *do* gender is to travel, a process of transformation of both map and body, a recurrent metaphor in queer literature. "It was in those motel rooms that I learnt about my new body" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 452), recites Calderoni from *Middlesex*: it is in these fleeting, temporary spaces that Cal's body develops, once away from home, from gender norms and expectations imposed by his family and his doctors. Calderoni then recites:

> We are the black and faggot Jacobins, the red dykes, the green evicted, we are the undocumented trans, labs animals and animals in slaughterhouses, the virtual sex works, the landless, the migrants, the autistic, the ADD, those suffering from a thyroxine excess, a serotonin dysfunction, we are the handicapped, the old living in precarious conditions. We are the failed reproducers of the earth, those bodies that cannot be valued in an economy of knowledge. We are the rabid diaspora. (Nicolò, D & Caldeironi, S.: 2020)

Again, the input of intersectional queer theory against the backdrop of *Middlesex* results in a plural text that is informed by a queerness that is aware, besides the multiplicity of gender identifications, of colour, class, age, disability and even green politics, a "rabid diaspora" or people that, not belonging in any category of an heteronormative structure, find solace in the nomadic, the outside, the non-belonging, besides also finding a kinship amongst them, as unreproductive bodies: "Bodies are recognized as human only as they are potential producers of ovules or spermatozoids to be located within a Fordist-family chain of production and reproduction" (2018, p. 12), writes Preciado.

This moment of political engagement gives place to oneiric space of the Octopussy's Garden, where Cal performed in a peep show, as images of water are projected and Calderoni struggles to fit inside a mermaid's tail; this is the same water that kills Milton, Cal's father and allows Desdemona and Lefty to cross the Atlantic and change their identity, a space of transformation, deeply linked with mythological creatures such as sirens and nymphs. Calderoni looks directly at the audience, transformed in a mermaid, while images of herself with short hair and wearing tennis shoes and sweatpants swirling underwater are projected, in the first clear moment of a gender duality in which the performer appears in two different spaces, at the same time, with distinct gender presentations: it is also the first time in the performance that the word "intersex" in enunciated. A video of a younger Calderoni, head shaved, dancing with her father is then projected, over the appropriately titled *Imitation of Life* by R.E.M.: the video ends with the two embracing.

Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want by The Smiths plays, the song that, earlier on the performance, Calderoni, as a teenager, had requested her parents to play on her funeral; as in *Middlesex*, a death takes place at the end of the narrative, although Calderoni reacts the moment of death through the use of a song. Although in *MDLSX* the death is metaphorical (perhaps of gender itself), in *Middlesex* it is the death of the father (both physically and philosophically) that allows Cal to fully take the role of man of the house. If Cal is born twice, perhaps he can also die twice, as suggested by *MDLSX*, in which to return home is to kill off Callie in order for Cal to become the man that he feels that he has always been.

Perhaps the biggest difference between *Middlesex* and *MDLSX* stems from their narrators: while Callie perceives, first, her attraction to girls as unnatural and her masculine traits of her body as unwanted, and then, as Cal, a need to suppress every feminine traces and pass exclusively as male, a behavior that must be practiced side by side with heterosexuality, in *MDLSX*, the ambiguous narrator of the one-(wo)man-show never gives in to either fully female or male presentation: while Cal binds his chest and wears what he defines as an overcompensation of masculinity through suits and cigars, always hiding

his naked body in shame from being mistaken for something else other than a man by a lover, in *MDLSX* the body of the performer appears unapologetically naked, in full display, right before being covered by wigs that mimic beards and public hair or augmented by the insertion of gym clothes in a bra as fake breasts. In *MDLSX* there is no shame of the naked and ambiguous body, nor is the display of femininity or masculinity taken seriously: via techniques that mimic drag, Calderoni parodies gender presentation that ironizes Cal's own anxiety of always looking like what he presumes to be a man. About fifteen years separate the novel from the play: what lacked in *Middlesex* when it comes to the celebration of ambiguity and acceptance of intersexuality is present in *MDLSX*. Perhaps the gap between both texts is explained by the recent developments in queer theory and gender studies, as well as in the treatment of intersexuality and the change towards its consideration as a sexual category.

Whereas in *Middlesex* intersexuality is monstrous, rejected and perceived as illness, in *MDLSX* ambiguity is monstrously celebrated, reclaimed and open to possibility. The juxtaposition of texts, from the heteronormative *Middlesex* to ground-breaking queer texts, informed by new views on gender, makes of *MDLSX* a unique and highly insightful view of not only of gender ambiguity but also gender plurality, a seamless collage of voices embodied by Calderoni in an account which is as biographical as othered, but that recreates *Middlesex* as if the novel was reanalysed and recreated through the lens of queer theory and the enunciation by a narrator which is not a male. Moreover, *MDLSX* also addresses how productive a transmedia work can be, particularly one that is already informed by a multiplicity of written texts that is then layered upon video, music and performance, showing that to compare is to establish dialogues between texts and theories, often resulting in a plural hypertext, one that opens up instead of closing in, that challenges rather than enforcing, that provides questions rather than neat endings that betray their own characters. Like the performance itself, gender is playful, changeable, a multi-layered text written over a body.

1.7. A Road to Somewhere

The ambiguity of *Middlesex* can and must be celebrated; however, it is crucial to understand the limitations of that same fluidity, as well as the binary, heteronormative structure that encompasses the many crossings of Cal and his family and "the anxiety about sexual ambiguity" (Graham, 2) that the novel expresses, as well as what seems to be a fear of taking a strong stand against the medical treatment of intersex individuals but also to pose a challenge to binary sexuality. Both heavily praised as a hymn to hybridity and criticised for its need for closure, continuity and stability,

> *Middlesex* may be read as a valuable attempt to make visible a lived experience that is rarely represented ... through its descriptions of Cal's negative self-perceptions and experiences, [the novel] acknowledges the ways in which intersex people have been represented and understood in the past – as dysfunctional monsters – and seeks to counter that depiction (Graham, 2009: p. 17).

It is certain that it can be argued that Cal does have the right to self-determine his own gender presentation and sexual identity and the free will to live as he desires; on the other hand, the choice of a single gender identity over fluidity seems to be more of a choice based on external pressure, mainly from a doctor for whom intersexuality is to be eradicated and a family that deeply reinforces gender roles, rather than on an informed view of the many possibilities provided by a plurality of sexual identities, something that is sustained by his own view of himself as a myth as well as a freak show attraction, placing himself on the realm of the oneiric. Perhaps Cal could be read as a mirror image of a society's own lack of acceptance and Cal is a product of his time, an embodiment of the general perception of "other" bodies, in a book that "offers its readers the same opportunity to view the "Other" from a safe distance and find reassurance" (Graham, 2009: p. 16). However, by giving in to a need for dramatic effect (the shock of seeing the intersex body) as well as the recurrent use of myth and allegory, as well as the portrait of Cal as unhappy in exile, alone in the world with a lack of positive models or other intersex narratives and individuals makes of *Middlesex* more of a fable in which ambiguity is a stage which can be cured if one is willing to take the road to somewhere, instead of nowhere. The retrospective look that has been analysed in this chapter works as a way to reinforce what the Stephanides have been imposing on their family relatives for generations: well defined gender roles, with no leeway for sexual ambiguity, which is in *Middlesex* equated with assimilationist desires expressed by Cal of being the "all American daughter" that his parents desired, questioning then if national identities are also meant to be as crystalized as a binary sexual system.

Intersex bodies challenge what was thought of as unquestionable: that bodies are female or male, that these bodies must interact accordingly to what is expected of social femininity and masculinity, that ambiguity must be fixed in order to prevent the collapse of a binary heterosexual system sustained by idealistic notions of gender configuration and presentation, that marriage or relationships must necessarily produce children, that queer people are unable of having networks of support. As Holmes writes, these bodies work critically "as a tool for interrogating heteronormative and bionormative presuppositions about proper embodiment" (2009: p. 7). Owning a gendered body is to accept what is expected by families, friends and lovers: to have an intersex body is to question those same expectations

for "'intersex' is not one but many sites of contested being, temporally sutured to biomedical, political and social imperatives in play in each moment" (Holmes, 2009: p. 2).

While the family in *Middlesex* was marked by well-established gender roles to which Cal's intersex body had adapt itself, the following chapter will address a new configuration of familial liaisons and queer kinship, in particular during the AIDS years, and how in this particular time, family structures were questioned and rearranged, through the creation of alternative ways of ensuring care and security for those afflicted by HIV/AIDS.

Perhaps a new genealogy of intersex texts is needed, one that is plural, that represent intersex people not as exiled but as part of a community and capable of establishing healthy structures of kinship, leaving shame behind. As Zora tells Cal when he asks her why she would want to disclose her intersex status to anyone, since she could easily pass for a cisgender woman: "[b]ecause we're what's next" (Eugenides, 2002: p. 490) pointing out to a future that *Middlesex* does not allow Cal to dream about.

Chapter 2. Photographic Arc(HIV)es, Memory and Family Ties in *The Great Believers*

William S. Burroughs said cut
into the present and the future leaks out
When I cut into the past
what leaks out is you.
Mark Bibbins, *13th Balloon*

2.1. Looking Back: *1985*

At the height of the AIDS crisis, a young man named Adrian goes back to his parent's home in conservative Texas to celebrate Christmas and tell his parents that he is gay and to disclose an HIV positive diagnosis; his return home is, essentially, a farewell. He leaves without being able to tell his parents either of his two secrets[34]. But before leaving he records a tape for his younger brother Andrew, a boy who listens to Madonna[35] and has quit sports in order to take part of the drama club in school, and to whom his older brother, without ever mentioning his sexual orientation or the presumption that his younger brother is also gay, states that there the young boy should not be afraid of his desires or deny who he is. The young man, who walks around with a death sentence over his head, leaves town before the young boy listens to the tape on his Walkman, a voice which the viewer can assume to come from beyond the grave, surpassing death. The tape becomes a queer temporality, one that can be played in loop, that connects both men to each other, but also to the inheritance of a gay culture. If the dialogue with his parents proves to be impossible, there is a dialogue that is somewhat possible with his brother, due to the sharing of a mutual culture reference: the music tape.

1985 is a "stylish and heartbreaking" (Hans, 2018) independent film directed by Yen Tan in which the narrative relies as much on moments of honest exposure – when Adrian shows his friend his chest marked by Kaposi lesions – and somewhat clichéd and not so subtle suggestions – Andrew, the younger brother, has every trait that is expected of young gay men, who are stereotypically taken to be

[34] As Weston writes "[a]side from AIDS, no other topic encountered during my fieldwork generated an emotional response comparable to coming out to blood (or adoptive) relatives. When discussion turned to the subject of straight family, it was not unusual for interviews to be interrupted by tears, rage, or a lengthy silence. "Are you out to your parents?" and "Are you out to your family?" were questions that almost inevitably arose in the process of getting to know another lesbian or gay person" (Weston, 1991, 43).

[35] Besides being thought of as a gay icon, Madonna has been the target of controversy regarding "Vogue", as the song is a reference to the drag culture of New York that was immortalized in the film "Paris is Burning". (1990) The singer is either celebrated for having given a platform to an underground subculture or condemned for having appropriated it and turned it mainstream. The film also provides a complex insight into matters of family, as well as intersections of race, class and gender. It has been analysed many times, with Judith Butler and bell hooks writing crucial insights about it.

effeminate and prone to like pop music and performing. There are also moments that attest for the crushing unspeakably of being both gay and HIV-AIDS positive in the 80s, as when Adrian's father, a war veteran, realizes his oldest son's sexual orientation but is unable to talk about it.

In the four-star review of the film in *The Guardian*, it is written that "[s]et against the backdrop of Reagan's America, the Aids epidemic looms large over the film, though it is never mentioned by name" (Hans, 2018). The delicate, at times melodramatic film is particularly touching during its final moments, when Andrew, without realizing that this was the last time that he saw his older brother alive, listens to the tape that his brother recorded for him, in a loop of acceptance and encouragement that will, hopefully outlast the plague and infuse the next generation of gay men with self-acceptance instead of shame.

Adrian's family's gender roles are well defined: the young man does not feel *at home* when at home: his father is silent, masculine, a war veteran that drives a truck with a Reagan sticker, and yet loving towards his son even if unable to communicate with him, and his mother is nurturing, a homemaker and yet hides from her husband the fact that she votes for the Democrats. Adrian's homosexuality seems incompatible with such a family picture, whose tensions arise from a need of acceptance and understanding and the incapability of the coexistence between a conservative milieu, a deep devotion to religion (Adrian's parents give him a Bible, his last Christmas present ever) and homosexuality.

1985 is shot in black and white, which seems to intend to crystalize Adrian's story, and AIDS, in the time when the virus took away many gay man. The film could easily fit within the aesthetic and atmosphere of New Queer Cinema that often dealt with AIDS and HIV related issues in a similar honest fashion: "[t]he lighting, clothes, and production design all further the sense that we're seeing a missing artifact from that era" (Seitz, 2018). "A missing artifact" seems to be a rather fitting description of most queer narratives that have been created over the last years which often look back at this particular time in an attempt to recuperate personal narratives of both disappearance and resistance.

In the figure of Andrew, and the cassette that Adrian records for his brother, one finds a possible future for a new generation of homosexual men, a possible existence for a group of people whose lives were prematurely brought to an end during the AIDS crisis. Adrian records the tape against forgetfulness, thinking of the future, a last moment of resistance from a dying man, a love letter from brother to brother, from a gay man to another.

The Great Believers

Written by Rebecca Makkai (1978-), the highly praised and awarded *The Great Believers* is one of the first narratives to document the AIDS crisis from its early stages. Interestingly, the book was published in 2018, the same year that the film *1985* was released, and its narrative starts in 1985 as well, a coincidence that does not stop there: both address matters the AIDS years and the articulation between family and AIDS, disclosure and shame, the core themes of this Chapter. *The Great Believers* is

> among the first novels to chronicle the AIDS epidemic from its initial outbreak to the present — among the first, that is, to convey the terrors and tragedies of the epidemic's early years as well as its course and its repercussions over the decades. Makkai puts the epidemic (which, of course, has not yet ended) into historical perspective without distancing it or blunting its horrors. (Cunningham, 2018)

As Monica B. Pearl writes about the early texts to address the AIDS years around the beginning of the 1990s, these texts were already working in retrospect, often looking back at the AIDS years and going even further back, to Stonewall, for instance, indicating a "transition" in theme, in which loss is a part of narrative but not their only feature:

> there should now be historical novels of gay life implies some sort of closure, or at least transition in narrative and experience a transition to what is still uncertain, though certainly to a life that incorporates, but no longer dwells on, the losses incurred by AIDS. *There is a gay history now* [emphasis added], the appearance of gay epics such as these imply, an era that closes with the advent of the AIDS epidemic. (2013: p. 5)

Perhaps one could imply that *The Great Believers* also does something similar to AIDS narratives, by adding a future to them, juxtaposed to the AIDS years, with characters that mediate these times, adding to that same gay history. The text goes back and forth between 1985 and 2015, queering time, between the early AIDS years and the terrorist attacks at the Bataclan. Makkai's narrative weaves through the lives of young Yale Tishman, a young curator, and his group of disappearing friends in 1980s in Chicago and Fiona, the younger sister of Nico, a man who died of AIDS. Fiona, who took care of the men who fell ill and worked as a mother figure for them, finds herself in the other timeline that is part of the book's narrative, in 2015, in Paris, looking for her own daughter of whom she has become estranged. In the meantime, she attends the opening of the exhibition at the Pompidou of Richard Campo, a photographer who has survived the AIDS epidemic while documenting it and how was close to Fiona and her group of friends, documenting them. This trip to Paris forces Fiona to confront her past, her loss, her inability to move on due to the trauma of having lose her family of friends, besides coming to terms with motherhood.

As Makkai writes, regarding the photographs that Richard took of the men who were rapidly disappearing, and the ability that photography has of preserving time: "[a]nd what had started as a strange quirk had become, in the past few months something essential. Yale would hear the camera click and think, "He got *that*, at least." Meaning: Whatever happens – in three years, in twenty – that moment will remain." (2018: p. 9). Photography takes centre stage in Makkai's novel, as well as in this analysis of the narrative, in a comparative reading with Nan Goldin's work, as a look at how the memory of traumatizing events is passed on from a generation to the next, whether mediated by personal and collective memories, through the making of a photographic archive, one that is also collective (museum) as well as personal (family album), bringing past and present together, disrupting timelines. Richard's photographs can be perceived as family photography, in the sense that they portray dynamics that resemble the one of a family, and also how "[f]amily photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully ours. Nor are our pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. (Jo Spence and Patricia Holland in Hirsch, 1997: pp. 13-14). Photography survives time and fills in absences while working as individual and collective souvenirs that resist amnesia, while also playing a close relationship with death, "the eidos of that Photograph" (Barthes, 2000: p. 15):

> ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens, photographs were superior to any painting as a memento of the vanished past and the dear departed (Sontag, Pain, 2003: 21).

The boys that Richard immortalized with his camera may be gone, but their images are part of a queer archive, one that is exhibited decades after, far away from the place where they died, disrupting time and space.

When she first meets Richard in Paris, Fiona is immediately reminded of the AIDS years and although this was a particularly hard time for her, it is implied that at least through that time she felt needed and loved by the men who would soon find their end, unlike her own daughter who seems to have been escaping from her ever since she was a child, resisting Fiona's will to mother her. The 1980s were

> a time when she'd been optimistic and unencumbered. Granted, she associated him [Richard] with the next years, too, the ones with Nico gone, with Nico's friends, who'd become her only friends, dying one by

> one and two by two and, if you looked away for a second, in great horrible clumps. But still, still, it was a time she missed, a place she'd fly back to in a heartbeat (Makkai, 2018: p. 39).

Richard pulls out a photo album "lugged all the way to Paris and into the new century" (Makkai, 2018: p. 40), with photographs of Fiona and Richard's gone friends. Again, photography is used as a device for remembrance, a both "a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (Sontag, 2008: p. 16), as Nico, Fiona's brother, is nostalgically summoned from the past, "looking past the camera and laughing. Some joke, crystalized forever" (Makkai, 2018: p. 41). As Sarah Ruddy writes regarding Nan Goldin's photographs, "[t]he photographs mourn the loss of specific moments and the people that fill them; at the same time, they refuse that loss by capturing an image of those moments at the instant of their constant disappearance (2009: p. 351).

There's a date stamp on the photo, one that immediately indicates that it was the beginning of the 1980s, and many men were still unaware of AIDS: Nico would only get sick three years later. Next to Nico there is a man with a Kaposi sarcoma scar over his eyebrow. Fiona "tried to wipe the spot away, in case it was on the cellophane, but it didn't move" (Makkai, 2018: p. 41), a gesture that attests not only the presence of Nico in Fiona's memory and Richard's photographs but also the spectral presence of AIDS, looming over, also crystalized in time. The spot works as an omen for what was to come, an indicator that, although those who bore these scars may not have known it, death was imminent: "[s]he [Fiona] stared at all those sick men who didn't know they were sick, the spot that was still, that summer, only a rash" (2018: p. 41). The marks on the body become, like the photographs, imprints of a certain time, a certain illness, a nostalgia *avant la lettre* that is evoked only when the past that was at the time perceived as stable is uncovered in the present as lost for "[n]ostalgia's primary meaning has to do with the irreversibility of time: something in the past is no longer accessible" (Huyssen, 2006: p. 7), although this past may still be accessible through photographs. As Susan Sontag writes "but when we are nostalgic, we take pictures. It is a nostalgic time right now, and photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art" (2008: p. 15), and although at the time neither subject nor object knew that the people in the photographs would be disappearing soon, the fact that they did makes these photographs (and any photograph) objects of nostalgia. And if "[t]he dictionary defines nostalgia as "homesickness" or a "longing for something far away or long ago" (Huyssen, 2006: p. 7), then Fiona is indeed an melancholia object: missing what was, for her, a home.

2.2. Strange Souvenirs

2.2.1. Looking Back I: Jürgen Baldiga

German photographer Jürgen Baldiga (1959-1993) documented, in the vein of David Wojnarowicz or Derek Jarman, the decaying of his body by AIDS through candid photographs in which Baldiga goes from healthy hustler to dangerously thin and bedridden. One of his pieces resembles a paperweight; looking closely, it is composed of a Kaposi sarcoma scar encrusted in resin, "stored in a reliquary as if it were the bone of a saint" (Maguire, 2020), a souvenir of a distant and tragic time which has the ability to resist forgetfulness, in the same way that Baldiga, Goldin, Jarman and many others attempted at resisting anonymity by portraying faces and bodies taken by AIDS. These images of grief, pain and loss work as souvenirs, artifacts of memory intended to prevent amnesia and to shake away the fear, ignorance and panic that arose during the AIDS years. With the death of a whole generation of young gay men, it is these souvenirs (Baldiga's paperweight, Goldin's photographs and AIDS narratives such as Makkai's) that work as reports of that time, a "second-hand experience" for future generations created through narrative:

> The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin. It represents not the lived experience of its maker but the 'second-hand' experience of its possessor/owner." (Stewart: 2007: p. 135)

Carla Freccero also looks at the figure of the ghost, a productive metaphor to analyse both *The Great Believers* and *The Inheritance*, which echoes Stewart's take on the souvenir, particularly on the fact that a legacy is only inherited in an articulation between past and present, what survives to the past (perhaps memory):

> We inherit not "what really happened" to the dead but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present, how they claim us, and how they haunt, plague, and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future ... each project – feminist, multicultural, and queer – also allows itself to be haunted in the context of an articulation of political aspirations in the present. (Brown in Freccero, 2007: p. 200)

Baldiga's Kaposi 'souvenir' and the Kaposi scar that does not move from the photograph taken by Richard defy time. Moreover, they are the embodiment of an illness that was marked by an inescapable feeling of death and erasure. Perhaps it is useful to recall Marianne Hirsch's concept of "testimonial object", not only for Baldiga's paperweight but also to photographs or even personal belongings that are passed down to friends and family:

> [s]uch "testimonial objects" carry memory traces from the past, to be sure, but they also embody the very process of its transmission. They testify to the historical contexts and the daily qualities of the past moments in which they were produced and, also, to the ways in which material objects carry memory traces from one generation to the next. (Hirsch, 2012: p. 178).

In the 2019 documentary *Rettet Das Feuer*, which provides glimpses of Baldiga's artwork, diaries and friends' testimonies, this image of the photograph as the souvenir becomes stronger in the shape of Baldiga's final photographs, taken by his friend and photographer Aron Neubert, who Baldiga asked to document his demise, with one monthly photo that should culminate in his cremation. Aron, who documented both in film and in his own memory Baldiga's final moments, shows his many photographs, archived in the Schwules Museum Berlin, to the camera (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Still frame from the documentary *Rettet Das Feuer*.

However, he refuses to show the final photograph of the series, taken a few moments after Baldiga's death, visibly still shaken by the loss of his friend and muse. This refusal may arise from the inability to

see, once again, Baldiga's dead body, or to repeat Baldiga's death, through the display of his final moments. The missing part of the series that the viewer is prevented from witnessing does not however translate in the lack of ability to understand what is missing from the narrative, especially when taking into consideration the archive as conceived by Jacques Derrida as ghostly (1995), for Baldiga is neither present not fully absent:

> Derrida remarks that "a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive." Further, in a passage that makes the notion of the archive constitutively spectral and links that spectrality to the "being" of a ghost, he writes: "the structure of the archive is spectral. It is spectral a priori: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh,' neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met" (Freccero, 2007: p. 199).

Baldiga at the hospital, Baldiga eating ice cream in bed with an IV drip in his arm, Baldiga holding his boyfriend in bed: these are shots that document a subjectivity behind AIDS erasure of the self against that final shot of Baldiga's dead body. These personal shots become the possible archive for a historical memory that is not official neither remembered as communal. It is this same type of humanity and subjectivity that *The Great Believers* and Richard's photographs intend to preserve; in a plague marked by faceless numbers, these shots of ill men still living work as tokens of resistance, of individuality, of existence, and even against government's neglect, budget cuts and an overall lack of empathy for those who were ill. Certain of his imminent death, Baldiga muses on his history, provide a complex insight on how photography creates memory, as well as queer ancestors and family: "I take a photograph, I photograph a person. I photograph the world. I exist. When I imagine the stream of my ancestors standing behind me, I see my adoptive parents, my biological parents, and I see my queer ancestors." (Viefhues, 2019).

2.2.2. Looking Back II: Nan Goldin

When she started to photograph her close friends, Nan Goldin (1953-), now a Commander des Arts et des Lettres (2006), could not expect that ordinary snapshots taken with a disposable camera of dark clubs, drag queens and explicit sexual encounters could be classified as high art and exhibited in art galleries such as MoMa and Guggenheim, Pompidou and the Louvre, images named by Henry M. Sayre as "the space[s] in which the avant-garde must operate" (1994: p. 64). Born within a Jewish family in Washington, Goldin lived under the shadow of the family trauma brought by her sister's suicide, and after

having left home as a young teenager, she was introduced to photography her friend and fellow photographer David Armstrong, having her first exhibition in 1973, a personal account of the LGBTQI+ community in Boston. "Even these teenage snapshots evince Goldin's commitment to creating a community by making images of it" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 348) by making "queerness visible and beautiful" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 350). On gender expectations, Goldin claims that:

> [a]s children, we're programmed into the limitations of gender distinction: little boys to be fighters, little girls to be pretty and nice. But as we grow older, there's a self-awareness that sees gender as a decision, as something malleable. You can play with the traditional options - dressing up, cruising in cars, the tough posturing - or play against the roles, by displaying your tenderness of toughness to contradict stereotypes. When I was fifteen, the perfect world seemed a place of total androgyny, where you wouldn't know a person's gender until you were in bed with him or her. (...) Rather than accept gender distinction, the point is to redefine it. Along with playing out the clichés, there is the decision to live out the alternatives, even to change one's sex, which to me is the ultimate act of autonomy. (Goldin, 2001: p. 7)

After graduating in Fine Arts, Goldin moved to New York, the city in which she would find the subjects that would permeate the surface of her photographs, "queer and, specifically, transgendered friends who had by then become her family" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 348) "subjects considered to be disreputable, taboo, marginal" (Sontag, 2008: 13), to whom Goldin refers to as her "tribe" (2001), resulting in "[a] collection of images of her friends in drag shows ... called "The Other Side" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 348), its title a reference of an alternative reality, with a different timeline and spaces:

> [A]s much as it looks backward into the past, it also looks forward, into the space of its own becoming. Always, at the instant a photograph is shot, the necessity for the shot's development. And it's deployment. For as the shot is contextualized, takes its place among other shots, it voices itself, discovers its tone, its tenor, its resonance, like a word extending out itself into the field of the sentence (Sayre, 1994: p. 71).

If one perceives a photograph as a snapshot of reality, what is written between one and the other can only be a fictionalized account of what has happened in the past. Every time Goldin's photographs are publicly displayed, the public is invited to create their own account of Goldin's memories, inserting themselves in between each fragment, in a repetitive action of over-writing them: "fiction subverts the myth of presence, of authorial context, of origin (...) fiction allows us to see that repetition is a matter of reframing, that in the repetition difference is displayed in both directions, just as 'identity' is created" (Stewart, 2007: 21). Even though the photographs portray real people who have lived and died, their absence can be overcome by that repetitive process of exhibiting them, as the identities of the work of

art, as well as the one of its viewer are created, almost in a fictionalized biographical account. Refering to a particular photograph by Goldin, “Ryan in the Tub” (Figure 8), Ruddy writes that Goldin’s photographs never allow the viewer to have “the relief of an easy separation between artist and subject, between personal and political, between audience and text” (Ruddy, 2009: p. 348).

Figure 8: Nan Goldin, “Ryan in the Tub”, 1976.

“Ryan in the Tub”, although the name on the title is often given to men, is an image of both absence and presence, a ghostly echo of the past: the ethereal body asleep in a bathtub, its borders left diffused by the water demands a second look when it comes to the definition of this body as female or male - or both. Ruddy writes extensively on its composition, as well as on the inability for the viewer to identify its subject’s gender or the limits of their body. Ryan is lying in a bathtub, half submerged, eyes closed and hands clasped over her chest, as if dead, the limits of the tub resembling the ones of a coffin (Ruddy, 2009). The photographer also played with light and shadow, as the body is brought forward by its milky and pale

flesh that disappears into the water, its edges melting into the substance that surrounds it. “Ryan in Tub” seems to envelop the themes that are to be explored while looking at Goldin’s photographs: a genderless body, between life and death, between the presence of the latter in the photograph itself for, as Ruddy writes, this photograph is already Ryan’s “half-death”, or Sontag’s understanding of a photograph as a token of absence:

> We can barely tell if Ryan is female or male, nor can we decipher what comprises her surroundings other than the chipped enamel bathtub. We cannot know who Ryan is or what she does, and yet it is of fundamental importance that Goldin captures her as a semi corpse, disappearing into the dim reaches of the water and her exhaustion dissolves into and infuses the air of the frame. It is tempting to say that Ryan is sick because she appears pale, thin, discolored, and half-conscious. She may be. (Ruddy, 2009: p. 347)

Ryan is already dead, through their representation with the look of a dead body (the posture, the colour of the skin, the framing of the body within a confined space made of a concrete structure) and the crystallization provided by the act of suspending them in time and inscribing them in a certain place (Provincetown, 1976) by recurring to the crystalizing that is made possible by photography. As many other subjects that Goldin has photographed, one is almost drawn to assume that Ryan no longer physically exists; and yet, they are here, permeating the photograph’s frame, “her very un-life suffuses every corner of the image” (Ruddy, 2009: p. 347). Moreover, one could identify Ryan’s decaying body as a testimonial object, “[e]xtending into the future, the photograph, which tells us nothing about the individual Pat Ryan, is instead a vessel for the sadness, exhaustion, and gradual disappearance of an entire world” (Ruddy, 2009: p. 348), the collective absence of an entire group of people and a certain time embodied by the body of Ryan.

Ryan works then as a synecdoche for every other subject that Goldin has photographed, in the sense that the photographs that she has taken of those who died of AIDS, extend into the future, while attesting for the loss of the past, a device for the persistence of memory used “to trace people's histories before I [Goldin] lose them” (Ruddy, 2009: p. 348). Ruddy defines Goldin’s work as an “affective documentary” (2009: p. 349): a record of things that, although having happened to Goldin personally, are also happening to a particular world, her photographs “her prosthetic memory, literally a defense against death and symbolically a resistance to the loss of memory” (Mirzoeff, 1999: p. 82).

On the particular subject of “people living with AIDS or HIV” who “lacked in relation to history”, Ruddy writes that Goldin’s photographs open new possibilities for the subjects that are represented, for “[S]o afraid were Americans of AIDS that those with the disease were, and frequently are still, only

represented as passive participants in space; effectively, they are always already dead" (2009: p. 372). Goldin's photographs also contributed to a humanization of bodies affected by AIDS at the time of death, particularly through the series of Gilles and Gotscho (Figures 9 and 10): "Gilles passes from a healthy, confident man to an emaciated victim of AIDS" (1999: p. 87), writes Mirzoeff, who also claims that although dying, Gilles "retains his personality even in hospital, that most depersonalizing of locations. Death can no longer be denied or displaced to the photograph" (Mirzoeff, 1999: p. 87), neither do these fragile bodies are hidden from the public. "AIDS changed everything" (Goldin in Mirzoeff, 1999: p. 88) writes Goldin in the afterword to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, beside also claiming that photography is unable to preserve memory as effectively as she had expected, given that the people that she had photographed had mostly been taken away by AIDS. Presuming that, if she took a photograph, she could never lose those people, Goldin eventually realizes that it is exactly by having taken the photograph that the loss is so acute, so vivid.

Figure 9: Nan Goldin, "Gilles and Gotscho at Home", 1992.

Figure 10: Nan Goldin, "Gotscho Kissing Gilles", 1993.

The passage of time becomes then the motion through which Goldin's work takes place, as the spaces in between each of the images that she juxtaposes become as important for the understanding of the narrative that Goldin intends to weave as the images that are shown. What is there is almost as important as what it is not, and each time these photograph are publicly displayed, time and space are disrupted by being re-enacted, for

> [A]s much as it looks backward into the past, it also looks forward, into the space of its own becoming. Always, at the instant a photograph is shot, the necessity for the shot's development. And it's deployment. For as the shot is contextualized, takes its place among other shots, it voices itself, discovers its tone, its tenor, its resonance, like a word extending out itself into the field of the sentence (Sayre, 1994: p. 71).

Goldin's language of affection "speaks the crumbling of borders between subject, artist, and audience, each crossing and intimacy for forming the interstices of incorporation" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 352). One could perhaps hint at notions of private and public spheres and spaces when it comes to Goldin's work; when exposed, those rooms, often attached to the notions of domesticity and closeness become somewhat public, as the viewer is invited to occupy and read them by being invited to fill in the gaps between one image and the next with a narrative which will link the fragments presented before them; between the photograph of Gilles and Gotscho at home and the photograph of them at home, the viewer can only presume that there lies a long story of pain and the decay of the body. To understand a photograph (here understood as a memory-object) as a visual, accurate, truthful transcription of a remembrance would be a naïve assumption that the process of 'creating' a photograph is not artificial and mechanic. Cameras, "clocks for seeing" (Barthes, 2000: p. 15), expand time and mediate past and present, while mediating the relationship between artist and subject, as the former decides what will and what will not be found within its frame, clipping what they consider to be superfluous and unnecessary for the desired result. Hence, a photograph is already a polished memory, an adulterated remembrance; the photographer chooses what she wants to remember (and by its direct counterpart, to forget).

It is through the intersection between her own story and the story of the world that Goldin writes "a specific history", in which Goldin takes the debris of society, one that is meant "to be hidden or forgotten" and represents the "waste products of late-capitalist America ... those whose histories 'eluded legibility' or were 'daily and inevitably other' to traditional historical representation" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 358), making a (queer) 'counter memory', "a competing narrative of the past composed of memories that exceed official public history" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 360). "This is the history of a re-created family" (Ruddy, 2009: p. 360), as well as the work of "family photographer of a generation that redefined family"

(Ruddy, 2009: p. 350). For Goldin, her subjects are her family, a group of individuals that, see kinship as defined not by blood, but a need to find individuals that share, more than blood or heirlooms, a communal sense of morality, provided by a disbelief in the future and a past marked by grief and loss:

> In my family of friends, there is a desire for the intimacy of blood family, but also a desire for something more open-ended. Roles aren't so defined. There are long-term relationships ... We are bond not by blood or place, but by a similar morality, the need to live fully and for the moment, a disbelief in the future, a similar respect for honesty, a need to push limits, and a common history. We live life without consideration, but with consideration. There is among us an ability to listen and to empathize that surpasses the normal definition of friendship. (Goldin in Mirzoeff, 1999: pp. 82-83).

2.3. A Family Album

As previously mentioned, photography plays a crucial and central role in *The Great Believers*. Richard's show, entitled *Strata*, consists of rewriting old photographs from the 1980s, of Fiona and her group of friends, and juxtaposing them to more recent photos, in a clear intention of imagining a possible future over a tragic past, emphasising that "photographic images ... now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present." (Sontag, 2008: p. 4)[36]. A tryptic of Julian, a friend of Fiona who was thought of as dead from AIDS, only to appear in 2015 at Richard's house – a hint to a spectral, ghostly and always present fear of AIDS that comes back from the past but also an image of resistance and survival – gains a fourth image of himself in the twenty first century, next to the ones taken during the 1980s: "the first photo when everything was great, ... the second when Julian was freaking out because he knew he was sick ... the third when he weighted like a hundred pounds (Makkai, 2018: p. 165).

[36] In 2010, Goldin spent months in the Louvre in Paris after the museum was closed to the public in order to photograph the artworks that one has access at the museum, creating a meta-artwork, a photograph of a photograph - or a painting, or a sculpture. Afterwards, with the help of a personal assistant who went through boxes of photographs taken over the years, Goldin juxtaposed the photographs she had taken at the Louvre with ones that she had previously taken of her friends, surprisingly achieving uncanny similarities between her artworks and the ones exhibited at the Louvre regarding themes, aesthetical and formal aspects of composition. Adequately named *Scopophilia* - the love or pleasure of looking, gazing and watching, often linked to a sexual connotation - the resulting exhibition was shown to the public in several cities, such as her own New York, at Matthew Marks and in Rome, at Gagosian Gallery, questioning altering the plasticity of the Louvre's walls, displacing the museum from Paris and bringing it through the photographs to other cities. Not only is the work disruptive of the authoritarian space of the art gallery and the museum, a space "in which time never ceases to pile up and perch on its own summit" (Foucault, 182), Scopophilia also brings together other spaces like the ones in which the works were produced and/or consumed. Jack, in Paris (2010), photographed by Goldin is juxtaposed to a portrait by Bronzino (1503-1572), bridging the gap between Renaissance Italy and contemporary France, in a disruption of the time-space continuum by establishing a cross temporal dialogue.

While describing the show to a journalist, Richard finds himself at a loss for words, even decades after losing his friends, and especially because he understands what these images would mean to Fiona, given that she is also a carrier of the same memory of Chicago in the 1980s in the same way that he has recorded that time in film. Again, Richard claims to having edited the photographs with "a contemporary eye" establishing a dialogue with the dead. The photographs have do what Richard cannot: narrate a time that is too hard for the spoken word to narrate:

> "They're optimistic, I believe. They're full of life. I've edited them with a contemporary eye, but the subject is twenty-five, thirty years ago. The –" He faltered … He said, "you should interview Fiona while she's here. You can interview me anytime. But her brother and those boys, they're –" and he stopped, blinked rapidly, waved a hand in front of his face. He went into the kitchen, called from behind the counter, ""Who'd like apple tart?" (Makkai, 2018: p. 114).

With the revelation that there is footage of her brother and her friends, "Fiona felt her pulse in her cheeks" (Makkai, 2018: p. 114), and even though she was in Chicago, witnessing the events that Richard had recorded first hand, the footage becomes a souvenir, a way of experiencing, again, the same event, through the eyes of someone else, in a nostalgic recollection of the past:

> The photograph … is a logical extension of the pressed flower, the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance supplied by means of narrative. The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expenses of other senses (its glossy surface reflecting us back and refusing penetration), makes the eruption of that narrative, the telling of its story, all the more poignant. For the narration of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia (Stewart 2007: p. 138).

As Makkai writes, Fiona "had come here to find Claire, but a recovered minute with Nico, with Nico and Terrence, with – That was something. Wasn't that a rescue too, of some kind?" (Makkai: 2018: p. 114). Again, Fiona seems to dwell into the past with the same urgency with which she faces the present, even though she claims, to perhaps convince herself that "[s]he wasn't meant to go in there and dwell on to the past. She was here for Claire, not Nico" (Makkai: 2018: p. 186). Fiona seems entrapped as Benjamin's angel of history: unable to move forward, but forced to by the force of the wind, yet still transfixed by the past, paralysed by melancholia[37].

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[37] "Wendy Brown warns against the potential dangers of such an orientation in her essay "Resisting Left Melancholy." Brown discusses the pos sibilities for sustaining hope after the "death of Marxism." In a reading of Benjamin's article "Left Melancholy," Brown attempts to make a dis tinction between productive

With the prospect of "rescuing" the boys, even if virtually and through images, Fiona's trip to rescue her own daughter becomes something else, a recovery of the past: although Claire herself has escaped her, the photographs of the boys somewhat belong to her, for "[t]o photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (Sontag, 2008: p. 4). The images of the boys become as present as the body of Claire, which, for being alive and able to move and hide, seems even more unreachable than the images of Nico and the boys. Rescuing the fire, rescuing the boys; AIDS narratives always look at what was lost in an attempt at bringing it back, even if briefly, to life, and to give a present to those who were deprived of the future. The perseverance of the past does seem to contaminate the present, through the trauma that Fiona carries from the past, as well as genetics and familiar traits: Fiona's granddaughter looks exactly like Nico, when he was her age: "[t]his child: If you cut her hair, if you dressed her in the boy clothes of the 1960s, she was Nico" (Makkai, 2018: p. 202).

It is through Richard's photographs that this group of friends is evoked, years after their disappearance, in a collective act of remembrance, a family album in which "a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze" (Barthes in Hirsch, 1992: p. 6). For gay men during the AIDS years, funerals were a time in which family dynamics were especially questioned, due to the absence of the blood family in this time of need. On the other hand, according to Pearl, "the repetition of burials for the gay community during the time of AIDS had the effect of cementing the community as a common community" (2013: p. 8). Nico's parents had expelled him from home and Fiona worked as a "his accomplice, his thief, his occasional mother" (Makkai, 2018: p. 202), providing for her brother, something which goes from bringing him food, when their parents cut Nico off at 15, when Fiona was 11, to being the one who holds power of attorney over Terrence, Nico's partner, his belongings and his body: "[w]hen Nico introduced Fiona, he always said, "[t]his is the lady that raised me"." (Makkai, 2018: p. 4). This is supported by Weston, who describes this phenomena has having happened:

> Contesting definitions of family can become all too evident in conflicts over a course of medical treatment or hospital visitation rights. Some people had drawn up powers of attorney authorizing persons they

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and paralyzing forms of political melancholia. Left melancholy is a form of nostalgia for an expired past-a way of clinging to a broken and outdated dream of class revolution. To this form of melancholy she opposes a productive clinging to historical loss, which is what she sees in the allegory of the angel of history. Brown asks a series of questions about how to imagine the future after the breakdown of historical master narratives. She considers our feelings about the future when we no longer believe in the inevitability of historical progress and when our dreams for a global revolution have died. What do dreams of freedom look like after the ideal of freedom has been smashed? Brown diagnoses a pervasive despair on the Left, a melancholic attachment to earlier forms of politics that has proved disastrous for responding to contemporary political conditions." (Love, 2007: p. 149)

> considered gay family to take charge of their affairs in the event of incapacitation or death, but these documents sometimes do not hold up under legal challenge by blood relations. When a gay man or lesbian dies, disputes over whether families we choose constitute "real" or legitimate kin can affect wills, distribution of possessions (including property held in common with lovers, friends, or housemates), listings of survivors in obituaries, and disposition of the body. (Weston, 1991: 186)

As Sarah Schulman[38] writes on familial homophobia, gay oppression calls for intervention, for a third party to intervene and stop the process of violence or discrimination and to hold the perpetrator of such acts accountable. This is what Fiona does within and outside her own family, by cutting ties with her parents as well as making sure that her family of friends is well taken care of:

> What makes gay people so ideal as the scapegoat in a family is that they are there alone. Sometimes no one else inside the family is like them or identifies with them. They become a projection screen, the dumping ground for everyone else's inadequacies and resentments. In addition, no one else is watching. No one from the outside will intervene because of the perception that family matters are private and untouchable. The family structure and its untouchability predominates. Then, because gay people do not have the full support of their families, they in turn become an ideal social scapegoat. For, in society, just as in the family, no one will intervene. Society will not intervene in the family, and the family will not intervene in society. It's a dialogic relationship of oppression. (2009: p. 20)

With the lack of a supportive family, it is not just affection that is erased from the lives of these men; financial stability, job security, medical care and the right to be with a loved one in the time of death are all at risk without law making that protects same-sex couples. As Fiona explains, without knowing that Julian has actually managed to survive, without job security or the safety net of a family, it was extremely hard for ill gay men to overcome the virus, find medical support and material safety. Julian's example is also used as the inevitability of death when falling ill of HIV/AIDS during of the AIDS years:

> He was an actor with no family and no health insurance, and he could have gotten some decent support if he'd stayed in Chicago, if he'd stuck around till the drugs came out, but instead he took off and died alone and I don't even know where. (Makkai, 2018: p. 166)

[38] Fink provides a relevant analysis of Schulman's AIDS novel *Rat Bohemia* "which represents HIV as the result of not viral pathology but parental cruelty. Schulman's queer characters exhibit a variety of emotional and physical symptoms in response to homophobia and gender correction from their parents" (2020: p. 77), something that Schulman as engaged both in her fictional and non-fictional work.

Fiona, or Feef the Thief, as Nico's friends call her, would take Nico and his friends food, objects and money that she would take away from her family house, even if they did not need them, as a symbolic way of caring for a family member to whom one provides both care and material security. While in Paris, Fiona looks back at that time, when AIDS was still named GRID[39] and young men started dying unexpectedly, at the way in which her mother left her bag unattended so that Fiona could take some money for Nico, pretending that she did not know that Fiona was visiting her brother, but never taking an active effort to protect or care for her son, perhaps moved by the shame of Nico's sexual identity and the inability to deal with it, not realising that to cut her son away from the family would have serious consequences to both Nico and her:

> After Nico died, their mother spent years drinking. Fiona knew she was crushed, but she couldn't forgive her. They had done this to Nico, her mother and father. Her mother had stood there, crying, arms crossed, the night their father kicked Nico out, but she hadn't done a thing to stop him. She hadn't even given him any money. (Makkai, 2018: p. 151)

While acknowledging the importance of a stable and caring family in the upbringing of gay individuals, Fiona also wonders if Claire herself, who, according to her child psychology, thinks that Fiona's affair has stemmed from Fiona's desire to be "looking for another family, a better family" (Makkai, 2018: p. 346), could have benefited from having a solid family structure, if "Claire would have been better if she'd had grandparents, a safety net, extended family" (Makkai, 2018: p. 151), since Fiona herself gradually stopped seeing her parents and prevented Claire from doing it too. This guilt will follow Fiona throughout her life, only seeming to ease when she finally meets her granddaughter and makes some sort of reconnection with her daughter; years of hardening for feeling anger towards her parents, and the grief of losing her brothers (both by blood and by affinity) seems to have made Fiona unable to connect to others.

After seeing Nico's parents preventing Nico's friends and partner from attending his funeral, Terrence, Nico's partner, decides to give Fiona power of attorney over his body and belongings; jokingly kneeling down as if proposing to a bride, Fiona, barely legal, takes the responsibility of taking care of Terrence:

> It made sense. Nico's parents had botched his medical care horribly – moved him to a hospital that didn't even want him there – and then they'd claimed the funeral too. Terrence's family, Yale understood, wasn't

[39] Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, the first name of AIDS, which emphasised the fact that the virus was 'a gay disease'.

> one he'd want making his medical decisions. Terrence hadn't seen his mother in years, hadn't been back to his childhood home in Morgan Park, on the South Side, since he graduated high school. Still it seemed a lot to put on Fiona. She was just a kid. (Makkai, 2018: p. 75)

While at the hospital, it is Nico's parents that are allowed the most amount of time with Nico, not Terrence or Fiona, who refuses to share a room with her parents: "Yale and Charlie and Julian and Teddy and Asher and a rotation of Nico's other friends filled in the gaps" (Makkai, 2018: p. 126). It is Fiona that the nurse informs of Nico's moment of death, not Terrence, Nico's partner, and when Fiona asks the nurse to take Terrence with her into Nico's room, the request is denied. Terrence voluntarily steps away so that Nico's parents can stay with his body, carrying a devastated Fiona away in his arms, causing "someone, concerned that a black man was carrying a sobbing white woman around the parking lot, called the police, and an officer showed up and trail them slowly" (Makkai, 2018: p. 127). On the link between AIDS and family, Weston writes

> [t]he number of PWA[40]s without homes, family, or resources has grown year by year. When people told relatives and friends they had AIDS, kin ties were reevaluated, constituted, or alienated in the act, defined by who (if anyone) stepped forward to offer love, care, and financial assistance for the protracted and expensive battles with opportunistic infections that accompany this disease. (1991: p. 186)

To Ahmed, "[t]he debate about whether queer relationships should be recognised by law acquires a crucial significance at times of loss. Queer histories tell us of inescapable injustices, for example, when gay or lesbian mourners are not recognised as mourners in hospitals, by families, in law courts." (Ahmed, 2014: p. 155) . Weston was also questioning this need to ensure that partners who were not legally recognized as such could be by their loved one's side back in 1991:

> Who will be authorized to make life-and-death decisions when lovers and other members of gay families are hospitalized or otherwise incapacitated? Will court rulings continue to force some parents to choose between living with their children and living with a lesbian or gay partner? Should a biological grandfather who has never spoken to his grandchild because he disapproved of his daughter's lesbianism retain more legal rights vis-a-vis that child than a nonbiological coparent who has raised the child for ten years? Will the phrase "related by blood or marriage" be allowed to stand as a justification for refusing lovers public accommodations; denying them visiting rights at nursing homes, prisons, and hospitals; disqualifying gay families for family discounts; or withholding the right to pass on a rent-controlled apartment after death?

[40] People With AIDS

> How will conflicting conceptions of kinship play themselves out during disputes over death or inheritance, which are so often complicated by strained relationships with blood or adoptive family? (1991, : p. 5)

Not all parents in *The Great Believers* are absent or reject their children: Charlie's mother, Teresa, treats Yale as her own son, caring for him and standing in for Yale's biological mother, who left Yale when he was three to pursue a career in acting. It is Charlie's mother who takes Yale for an HIV test, when Charlie contracts the virus. This particular moment in the narrative, roughly halfway through it, marks a shift, and a downfall, in the action and course of the novel: Charlie, the owner of a newspaper in which he advocates for safe sex, AIDS activism and medical care, is now HIV positive, meaning that Yale may have also contracted the virus, and what seemed like a promising future for both – the collection at Northwestern for Yale, where he is a curator, the house they were going to buy – is now obliterated by the diagnosis, in a cascading effect: "[t]hose were the dominoes that had fallen: Julian, and then Charlie. And maybe Yale" (Makkai, 1918: p. 175).

If children were often expelled from home by hateful parents, some are estranged from them due to an inability to communicate and to verbalise a sexuality that was, at the time, not only perceived as non-normative but one whose status as different was also further intensified by AIDS. Yale's father does not seem to reject his son and yet they fail to address Yale's sexuality or to establish a bond. Yale's father is speechless when talking with Charlie, like the family in the film *1985*, a symptom of the unspeakability of being gay (as well as having AIDS):

> Yale's father always phoned within the first few days of the month – regularly enough that Yale assumed it was something he scheduled, an item on his to-do list, like checking the batteries in the smoke detectors. It wasn't an insult; it was just the way his father's accountant brain worked. But if Charlie picked up, Leon Tishman wouldn't leave a message, would just stammer that he must have misdialled. Five years ago, when Yale was so newly in love with Charlie that he couldn't help shouting it from the rooftops, he'd tried telling his father he was in a relationship. His father said something like "*Bop bop bop bop bop*," a sound effect to cover Yale's voice, to stop his talking" (Makkai, 2018: p. 82).

And even though Fiona is estranged from her own daughter, who seems to have been distant from her mother from an early age, she flies to Paris as soon as she finds out that she may be in danger after joining a cult. While Fiona has worked as a mother to all the men who died of AIDS, she is unable to reach her daughter, who seems to be running away from her in the same way that Fiona herself had ran away from her own family, as her husband points out, a "genetic" tendency to run away:

"Why do you suppose she ran away?" ...
He laughed and said, "Maybe it's genetic. I mean, why did you and your brother run away?"
"I *left* home," she said, "when I was eighteen. And Nico was kicked out, and you don't ever get to mention him again." (Makkai, 2018: p. 62)

Fiona is unable connect with Claire due to what seems to be a hardening of motherly feelings over so many losses during the AIDS years and the trauma that Fiona carries. It is as if Fiona can only love and care for those in need, like Nico and Yale, while Claire, who seems to be able to rule her own life, is somewhat alien to Fiona's concept of motherhood and nurturing:

> [s]he wanted her daughter to learn something the hard way, and from someone other than her. For once, she wanted Claire to crawl home hurt, not run *away* from Fiona claiming she'd been gravely wounded. At least, this was what Fiona had worked out since then with her therapist. But maybe it was more complicated. Something about being done with unwinnable battles. After the bloodbath of her twenties, after everyone she loved had died or left her. After her love itself became poison. (Makkai, 2018: p. 66)

There is an underlying sense of heritage and genetic predisposition in Makkai's novel, side by side with the images of chosen families and the care of those who are not related by blood: the estrangement that Fiona feels from her daughter is parallel to the one that Nico's father had felt towards his own son, although, while Fiona cares about Claire, and tries to connect with her and rescue her from a potentially dangerous relationship, Nico's father had expelled him from the family:

> Fiona prided herself on never tearing up over onions. A Marcus family ability ... Maybe the only thing the entire family had in common. Nora always claimed there were two distinct genetic strains in the family – the artistic one and the analytic one ... Fiona's father, who had probably wanted to hand down his orthodontic practice one day, had absolutely no idea what to do with Nico, even before his sexuality came into play. (Makkai, 2018: p. 109)

Even though Nico's father had attempted at introducing his son to ball games, Nico had turned to drawing instead, with Nora, Nico and Fiona's aunt stepping in as a sort of mentor, who sends him art supplies and critiques his work, when Nico's father fails to communicate with his own son. And when Claire started to show a preference for sketching, Fiona, analytical, the owner of a resale shop that benefits AIDS housing, and with "no artistic skill" (Makkai, 2018: p. 110), also fails to understand her daughter's needs, and with Nico and Nora gone, the young girl had no role model to turn to: "Fiona did her best, buying her charcoal pencils and gummy erasers, taking her to museums. But she couldn't give her what Nico had

gotten from Nora. If Richard had stayed in Chicago, maybe he'd have filled that role" (Makkai, 2018: p. 110).

2.4. Funeral Rites

It is through loss, grief and trauma that the gay community finds the need and desire to fight against discourses of hate, the paranoia and fear of contagion that marked the AIDS years, as well as a latent homophobia that was still very much alive in the 80s and would not meet its end but its epitome soon, with Matthew Sheppard's brutal death in 1998 and then with the Pulse shooting in 2016. As Asher explains, when Teddy, one of Fiona's friends, is attacked in public, this attack is a direct intersection between homophobia and the panic brought around by the fear of contagion during the AIDS years. A time in which gay men mostly needed support, was also the time in which homophobic feelings were exacerbated. After being assaulted by strangers, who broke his nose against the sidewalk, Teddy was seen by the police, who excuse the perpetrators of this homophobic attack: "I went to help him deal with the cops. You know how they are. Even if someone's caught, they'll say it was gay panic, say you put your hand down their pants, whatever". (Makkai, 2018: p. 84).

It is not fortuitous that *The Great Believers* starts with Nico's funeral; and yet, the group of young men are not attending the funeral but some sort of party that they have organized at Richard's house. The funeral, which "must only be relatives up at the church, the parents' friends, the priest" (Makkai, 2018: p. 1) is meant to be attended only by family and it is clear that Nico's friends are unwelcome at the church. The space of the church and the space of Richard's house, where the memorial for Nico is hold are incompatible as if written upon different timelines. It is suggested that the church will be empty in comparison to Richard's house, a suggestion that entails that although Nico's dead body may be somewhere else, surrounded by his family, the true holders of his memories are at Richard's, celebrating Nico's life: "this isn't a funeral, it's a *party* ... There's death out there, but we're gonna have a fabulous time in here" (Makkai, 5), says Julian, as the memorial becomes a party against death, a celebration against amnesia. According to Nico's wishes, his death should not be a time of sadness and it is what his friends aim at with the memorial held away from the funeral, and after "everything had scabbed over" there was "this imperative to be, somehow, okay" (Makkai, 2018: p. 4). Although sad for having lost a friend, there is also a desire to celebrate and heal; in the face of so much loss, there is no other solution for these men but to try to, as a community, remember the ones who are gone.

This desire to keep on living, while also being afraid of the virus and wanting to prevent more people from getting infected is often evoked by Yale and his friends, although with conflicting ideas. While Yale thinks that gay bars should be closed while the virus is still around, Julian explains that he has heard more about condom usage at Club Baths than at any other place. Yale explains that this will to stop living the same way that these men had been living until then does not come from "shame or regression or anything else" (Makkai, 2018: p. 104), comparing the gay bar with a restaurant with an outbreak of salmonella, although there seems to be a sliver of self-loathing and shame in Yale's comment, with Julian replying that "when they cure this thing, there won't be any place left to go" (Makkai: 2018: p. 104). The fear of no-future creeps in, and the men do agree in one point: "[c]an you imagine the party? When they cure it?" (Makkai: 2018: p. 104). The fact that many advances have been made when it comes to reducing the effects of the virus and slowing down its consequences upon the body, but no effective cure has been discovered until now, makes the comment of the young men even more tragic; the action takes place in the very early stages of the AIDS crisis, a time in which to stop living as one had until then was perhaps the only chance to survive and not getting infected, illustrating the lack of information about the virus and the fear that pervaded gay and straight communities. And yet, it is revealed that Julian is in love with Yale, a detail which reminds the reader that, although paralysed by anxiety and pain, these men still loved each other and found ways to connect through the grief of losing friends and fear of contagion. As it is elicited by Cecily Pearce, Yale's co-worker and the mother of Kurt Pearce, the father of Fiona's granddaughter, although taking a stereotypical view of gay living, the AIDS years marked a shift within the gay community, particularly in the ways in which gay men behaved and perceived themselves. If the Stonewall riots marked, for some, a shift away from shame and hiding, the AIDS years brought back those same feelings, as well as fear and grief; fun was meant for the past, not for the 1980s and it could not co-exist with funerals, hospitals and death, Cecily claims that "gay men used to have more fun than anyone. You used to make me jealous. And now you're all serious and staying home because of this stupid *disease*" (Makkai, 2018: p. 56). This is also addressed by Castiglia and Reed, who write on how gay subculture radically changed after the 1970s:

> The death of the 1970s, the move from a cultural self- representation that valorized sexual adventure, expansion, and optimism to one that stressed harrowing guilt, isolation, and despair was neither a natural nor a historical inevitability but, as we argue throughout, the result of changes in representation that have had debilitating social and political consequences for sexual culture today. (2012: p. 33)

As Douglas Crimp points out, there is a general conservative understanding that the AIDS crisis brought a new era upon gay men, an era that forced them to completely change their social behaviour, leaving behind what was thought to be, as argued before when analysing *Middlesex*, an inability to forge relationships and structures of care and support. Taking the example of Andrew Sullivan's moralist claims about AIDS, and on how before AIDS gay men were lacking self-respect and any type of responsibility towards themselves or others, Crimp explains how the virus came to signify a break for gay men from seeking self-destruction to adopting heteronormative ways of being, as if gay experience did not in itself sustain and depend on interpersonal relationships, relying only on themselves, often embodying homophobia themselves:

> Prior to AIDS, gay men were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked the responsibility that comes with normal adulthood – I settling down with a mate, raising children, being an upstanding member of society. ... Then came AIDS. AIDS made gay men grow up. They had to find meaning in life beyond the pleasure of the moment. They had to face the fact that fucking has consequences. They had to deal with real life, which means growing old and dying. So they became responsible. And then everyone else accepted gay men. It turns out that the only reason gay men were shunned was that they were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked responsibility. Thank God for AIDS. AIDS saved gay men. ... it is deeply insulting to read of ourselves as having been closeted, accepted second-class citizenship, cared little for ourselves or one another, had no idea we could form strong relationships, thrown our lives away. (1989: p. 4-5)

Weston writes that "the nineteenth-century link between homosexuality and morbidity that seems to have found a twentieth-century counterpart in judgments that blame persons with AIDS for their own affliction" also implying that "[l]esbian and gay parenting counters representations of homosexuality as sterile and narcissistic by courting life, establishing new family ties where critics expect to find only tragedy, isolation, and death" (1991: 184), establishing family-making as an alternative to death. Castiglia and Reed, also address the way how the AIDS years were thought to be the direct result of recklessness, rather than the time for the strengthening of a community in struggle, a contribution for amnesia and the reconfiguration of the queer past into a single normative history of reclaiming legitimacy through heterogeneity: "[t]he sexual past was relentlessly reconfigured as a site of infectious irresponsibility rather than valued for generating and maintaining the systems of cultural communication and care that proved the best—often the only—response to disease, backlash, and death" (2012: p. 3). As Love also points out, when interpreting modernist texts that look at queer lives,

> [p]erverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past. … The association of homosexuality with loss, melancholia, and failure runs deep; psychoanalytic accounts of arrested development and representations of the AIDS crisis as a gay death wish represent only a couple of notable variations on this theme. Given that such links are deployed against gays and lesbians so regularly, we have an obligation to counter them, which is not altogether easy. (2007: p. 6)

The Great Believers does contribute to counter these accounts of gay men as lonely and immature, by showing them as part of a larger network that supports and grieves each other, particularly when facing familial homophobia. The gap between Nico's family and his group of friends gets embodied in the shape of an estranged grandfather who flew in from Havana to attend the funeral, which delayed the burial for three whole weeks, while Nico's lover, who is not welcome at the funeral: "his grandfather, the one who no one had seen in twenty years … this ancient Cuban man was crucial to the funeral planning, while Nico's lover of three years wasn't even welcome at the church tonight" (Makkai, 2018: p. 2).

It is blood and not affection that defines who has the right to attend Nico's funeral. Fiona works however as a disruptive element, by being Nico's sister but attending, not the funeral, but the farewell party, for the boys are a reminder not only of her brother's early demise but also of her responsibility towards them as a caretaker and friend, her "two hundred big brothers" (Makkai, 2018: p. 8) of whom Fiona takes care and who take care of her. Even though Fiona is rather young, she's "an absolute veteran" (Makkai, 2018: p. 77) when it comes to AIDS and her life has been marked and changed by the virus as much as the lives of these men have: her birthdays are now synonymous of moments that were critical for her brother and their friends and for her twenty-first birthday: "Yale imagined she hadn't celebrated at all, in the throes of the wretched summer. Her twentieth had been a dance party at Nico's with strobe lights. This one she'd probably spent in a waiting room" (Makkai, 2018: p. 74).

There is a mixture of sadness and the desire to enjoy Nico's party and even though Yale is conflicted about how to feel, "this was infinitely better than that strange and dishonest vigil last night" (Makkai, 2018: p. 5), the one that Nico's family had prepared and attended for the son that they had cut off, the same family that does not allow Nico's friends, the ones who had taken care of him, to attend:

> The parents had carefully invited Nico's lover to the vigil, saying it was "an appropriate time for friends to pay respect". Meaning, don't come today to the actual mass. Meaning, don't really even show up for the vigil, but aren't we generous? But Terrence had gone last night, and so had eight friends. Mostly to surround Terrence, and to support Fiona, who, turned out, had convinced her parents to issue the invitation. (Makkai, 2018: p. 6)

Even at the moment of Nico's death, grievance only works as a communal time for either friends or family, not for both, who are separated in time and place, although mourning the same person. One of Nico's friends, Asher Glass, claims that "his body would revolt at setting foot in a Catholic church. ("I'd start yelling about rubbers. Swear to God.")" (Makkai, 2018: p. 6) and the image immediately evokes "Stop the Church", a demonstration organized by ACT UP members on December 10th against Cardinal John O'Connor at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. The group, later joined by WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization), invaded the church as a protest against the Cardinal's stance on homosexuality, AIDS, abortion and the teaching of safe sex in schools; the group was arrested both inside and outside the church and the act was heavily criticized by the public, the media and even some elements of the gay community.

At the funeral, Nico's family can only tell stories of Nico when he was a child, "as if he'd died in adolescence" (Makkai, 2018: p. 6) because that is the image of Nico that they have preserved. With the cutting off of Nico's friends from the funeral, not only are his friends and partner prevented from participating in Nico's farewell; they were also prevented from owning his things and, for Terrence, Nico's ashes and property. Without an official document such as a marriage certificate, and the refusal by others of accepting and recognizing an homosexual relationship as valid, partners are often evicted from the home they shared with the deceased and prevented from keeping shared property. Not only is Nico's death a fragile moment for Terrence when it comes to his feelings towards the dead man; he is also left in a fragile position when it comes to his material comfort, especially after having given up on his career to take care of Nico, when no one else would:

> Fiona wanted to trick her parents, to exchange Nico's ashes with fireplace ones and give the real ones to Terrence. It was hard to tell if she was serious. But Terrence wasn't getting any ashes, and he wasn't getting anything else either, besides Nico's cat, which he'd taken when Nico first went into the hospital. The family had made it clear that when they began dismantling Nico's apartment tomorrow, Terrence would be excluded. ... Terrence had been an eighth-grade math teacher until this summer, when Nico needed him around the clock and Terrence learnt he was infected himself. And how would Terrence get through the fall, the winter, with no Nico, no job? (Makkai, 2018: p. 7)

There is a strong link between ritual, family and the performance of heteronormativity: while the men are prevented from going to the funeral, in other communal moments queer people must play the role of model daughters and sons within their family. Makkai provides the example of Thanksgiving, a moment of anxiety for the gay men going back home. The city is the space for sexual experimentation, and the distance from the family home provides the necessary courage to assume same-sex desires; going back

home means to accept the gender roles and expectations defined by a family and the household. As expected, by being cut from their families, it is Fiona and Yale's family of friends that gets together to celebrate the holiday and not their blood family:

> Guys with families flew home for Thanksgiving to play straight for nieces and nephews, to assure their grandparents they were dating, no one special, a few nice girls. To assure their fathers, who had cornered them in various garages and hallways, that no, they weren't going to catch this new disease. … Yale wound up cooking Cornish game hens for himself and Charlie, plus Asher Glass and Terrence and Fiona. Teddy and Julian would drop by for dessert. (Makkai, 2018: p. 68)

At Nico's farewell party, Richard shares a slideshow composed of images of Nico and their friends; the first photograph, of Nico and Terrence, is shown over the song "America" by Simon and Garfunkel, Nico's favourite song, an act that "creates the scene of mourning shared by those who are left to look at the picture" (Hirsch, 1992: p. 6). The choice of the song is not arbitrary and it reflects Nico's feelings towards Reagan's election and the lack of government support to AIDS related health care (Reagan's first speech addressing AIDS was given six years after the first cases were reported), in an America that these men don't recognize as their homeland:

> Nico's favorite song, one he saw as a defiant anthem, not just a ditty about a road trip. The night Reagan won re-election last year, Nico, furious, played it on the jukebox at Little Jim's again and again until the whole bar was drunkenly singing about being lost and counting cars and looking for America (Makkai, 2018: p. 9)

Reagan's face became the synonym of government neglect over AIDS related issues, as well as discriminatory law making and overall lack of care. This is also addressed by Makkai, in the shape of a series that Richard created titled *Defiling Reagan*. Considered to be the direct result of homosexual desire and misbehaviour, along with the neglect of governments to address and direct funding for proper medical research, AIDS was then conceived as an individual responsibility instead of a matrix of oppressive forces and hierarchies that dictated and confined an already oppressed community to a higher level of exclusion, placing the blame on individual rather than the collective, an emphasis that intended to isolate these individuals rather than finding a collective treatment:

> The fact that President Reagan and then-Vice President Bush emphasized antibody testing over medical research reflected this fantasy: The aim was not to treat or cure, but to identify, isolate, and ultimately

> eradicate the moral dangers of AIDS. As a result, those who had historically already been marginal in American society—gay men and lesbians, sex workers, and intravenous drug users—were further marginalized by the advent of AIDS because they symbolized a threat of physical as well as moral contagion. (Huebenthal, 2017: p. 4)

Yale also reflects on the lack of attention provided to anonymous people dying of AIDS vis-à-vis the much mediated and discussed death of celebrities; Rock Hudson's death contributed for a change in AIDS related deaths visibility, making it finally palpable:

> Charlie had been right; he'd said what they needed was one big celebrity death. And *poof*, there went Rock Hudson, without the courage to leave the closet even on his deathbed, and finally, four years into the crisis, there was a glimmer of something out there. Not enough, though, Charlie had once sworn that if Reagan ever deigned to give a speech about AIDS, he'd donate five dollars to the Republicans. ("And in the memo line", Charlie said, "I'm gonna write *I licked the envelope with my big gay tongue*."). (Makkai, 2018: p. 58)

And yet, this type of visibility and public presence will not result directly in understanding or aid; "Yale, because the street was completely empty, swung Charlie around to kiss him" (Makkai, 2018: p. 122), away from the eye of hate and prejudice, and the fact that a public AIDS death had happened did not prevent hate speech or an awareness of what it meant to live with AIDS or as a gay man, enlarging yet again the gap between straight and gay worlds, and the fact that visibility that was brought by the AIDS years does not translate into acceptance:

> But at least now Yale was overhearing the word on the El. He'd heard two teenagers joking about it in a hotel lobby where he went to pick up a donor. ("How do you turn a fruit into a vegetable?") He'd heard a woman ask another woman is she should keep going to her gay hairdresser. Ridiculous, but better than feeling like you lived in some alternate universe where no one could hear you calling for help. Now it was like people could hear you and just didn't care. But wasn't that progress? (Makkai, 2018: p. 58)

The slideshow that Richard has created for Nico's memorial – "Nico laughing ... Nico up close, teeth shinning" (Makkai, 2018: p. 10) – contrasts heavily with Yale's final image of Nico at the hospital "unconscious with foam ... oozing suddenly from his mouth and nostrils" (Makkai, 2018: p. 10); one is reminded of Goldin's sequence of Gotscho and Gilles. Makkai also tackles the fear of contagion felt by the nurses who took care of Nico, who, after Terrence injures himself by bumping his leg on a cleaning cart "were more concerned about whether or not Terrence had shed blood that about what was happening

to Nico" (Makkai, 2018: p. 10) or the nurse who reads a menu aloud to Nico from the door, fearing having to share the same hospital room as him. The same fear of contagion can be seen when Nico's father uses rubber gloves to clear out his own son's apartment. Perhaps more than in any other time, the 1980s marked a polarization between gay and straight worlds, with a few allies from the latter, like Fiona, aiding the endangered group of gay men who were being taken away by the virus. As Castiglia and Reed write:

> De-generational unremembering was at the heart of the culture of the sex panics—the systematic assault on sexualities that diverge from the interests of the privatized and heteronormative reproductive family—that reached a fever pitch in the United States in the final years of the twentieth century. (2012: p. 40)

At a fundraising, Yale notices that the event is being attended by "the regular crowd mostly", something "comforting but always a bit disappointing. It would be nice, one day ... to see an alderman, a straight doctor or two" (Makkai, 2018: p. 101). But in a tragic way, and through the virus, these two worlds are brought together, as men who live their sexuality openly and those who hide find themselves ill and, as Charlie claims, both deserve attention and care:

> Charlie was saying: "The reason we don't know *all* the names, the hundred and thirty-two who've died in Chicago, is, listen, half were married, closeted blokes from the suburbs. They picked it up at, you know, the bathrooms at the train station. Commuter gays. They convinced their doctor in Winnetka to tell the wife it's cancer. Okay, we don't know them, and me personally, I'm fine with that. They're hypocrites, yeah? They vote against their own bloody interest. But they're still dying. Suffering is suffering. And they're still spreading it." (Makkai, 2018: p. 107)

Yale cannot bear to see the slideshow at Nico's memorial and heads upstairs to try a breathing technique for calming himself while making mental lists of sick friends. After a while, he climbs back downstairs only to find an empty house: Yale thinks that "the world had ended, that some apocalypse had swept through and forgotten only him" (Makkai, 2018: p. 13), a somewhat prophetic feeling for his life was indeed being swept through their own personal apocalypse. The empty house seems to symbolise the imminent departure of every man who is close to Yale, as well as his own death which will occur soon.

Yale wanders around town, visits the places he usually goes to but there are no familiar faces around. This would be Yale's life during and after AIDS: a city that is anonymous, with everyone who he has ever met gone. While wandering, Yale comes across a house that is for sale, a house that Yale dreams of buying with Charlie; again, the image of a house as a home appears as a way of protection and

validation, as well as genealogy, as it will be discussed while analysing *The Inheritance*. To buy the house would mean to buy a future, as well as protection from eviction. "To own a piece of the city" would be to inscribe them upon the city's map, making them part of it and not only of its margins, to testify for their ability to own property and to, most importantly, inscribe a future over the death of a close friend, to think of a home with Charlie, and to create a family with him, was to resist to the loneliness felt by these men in a time when they were witnessing the loss of so many close friends and lovers. Even after dying, the house would still be there: the envisioning of a future with a home becomes more tragic when looking at the young men early demise:

> To own a piece of the city, to have something that was theirs, that no one could kick them out of on any pretext – that would be something. It might start a trend! If Charlie did it, other guys who could afford to would follow.. … Yale could memorize the real estate agent's number … And then this wouldn't just be the night they didn't go to Nico's funeral, the night Yale felt so horrifically alone; it would be the night he found their house. (Makkai, 2018: p. 21)

When Charlie gets to the apartment they share, Yale finds out that the men have gone to Nico's house to take away all his belongings, which would be given to his blood family, who intends to take them away from Terrence, in a clear reference to a family heirloom that is passed on from generation to generation but only to those related by blood, as well as a refusal to let a neglecting family to keep what was by right of those who were close to Nico while he was alive, a souvenir of a loved one whose absence is minimized through their objects that seem to work as familial testimonial objects:

> Yale wished he had been there. Not to wind up with some keepsake necessarily but just to touch everything, to think about Nico, to learn things about him he'd never known. If you learn new details about someone who was gone, then he wasn't vanishing. He was getting bigger, realer (Makkai, 2018: p. 26).

Later, Yale will break down and cry expansively at a fundraising; at this particular moment, Yale is utterly overwhelmed by loss, wondering "[w]asn't this why he'd gone upstairs the night of the memorial in the first place? To keep from crying?" (Makkai, 2018: p. 105). At times, the title of the book seems completely ironic: through so much grief and loss, the characters of *The Great Believers* often find themselves overwhelmed and the prospect of being alone and ill becomes a reality and a realisation for all: when asked if he is feeling sad for having missed the raid of Nico's apartment, he explains that he is upset not because of that but "because I'm thirty-one and all my friends are fucking dying" (Makkai, 2018: p. 106).

Makkai lengthily details not only the massive amount of lives that were lost during this time but also the rejection by their families that these men felt when it comes to both their homosexuality and HIV status, how they would be expelled from home and die alone in hospitals, if it wasn't for their friends. "There is nothing on earth that could kill us more efficiently than parental indifference" (2020: p. 78) quotes Fink from Schulman's *Rat Bohemia*, referring to the lack of care that people with HIV/AIDS suffered from their immediate family, having to rely on friends or the strangers from associations and charity groups to ensure that same caretaking, while also implying that it is not AIDS that kills but the lack of care, family support and appropriate medicine.

Moreover, Schulman also addresses the "historically entrenched medical narratives that position homosexuality as an inevitable cause of physical decline" (Fink, 2020: p. 78); if "cultural narratives of HIV are informed by epidemiologists, doctors, and scientists" (Fink, 2020: p. 78) so are, as previously stated in this thesis, intersex narratives, as Cal's body and the bodies of the men in Makkai's novel can be read side by side as 'unproductive' bodies within a structure based on heteronormative capitalist reproduction sustained by the figure of the nuclear family[41], as the disabled body (both as HIV positive or intersex, perceived in *Middlesex* as disabled in the sense that it is barren and monstrous) of the children fails the expectations of the parents. Marty Fink writes on HIV narratives as showing "the family (support systems) and not the sick body (disabled individuals) as requiring intervention" (2020: p. 79). Nico's parents rejected their son and only when Nico is dying do they bring their son closer – to a hospital away from his home, away from the people who were close to him while alive. As Nikola Stepic writes

> [i]n the face of sickness and death, especially when AIDS literalized that progression so compactly as it did in the 1980s and 1990s, family and its tropes are bound to not only resurface, but take center stage in the form of caregivers, lovers, friends and even antagonists. (Stepic, 2017: p. 3).

Throughout the book, many men disappear; it is the burden of the ones who survive to take care of those who are dying and stay by their side on their deathbed, standing in for an absent mother or father. *The Great Believers* explores family dynamics and the failure of them; when sons and daughters do not fit in within the heteronormative household, it is the work of a family made of friends to look out for them. But according to Weston, this particular time also marked the resurgence of other dynamics within blood and chosen families, after what is referred to as a lesbian baby boom:

[41] "In contesting these medical narratives through HIV fiction, these archives reposition family trouble as caused by homophobia and cissexism (and not homosexuality and trans-ness). HIV archives likewise identify how ableism (and not disability) is the problem in need of a cure." (Fink, 2010: p. 76)

> Situated historically in a period of discourse on lesbian and gay kinship, AIDS has served as an impetus to establish and expand gay families. In certain cases blood relations joined with gay friends and relatives to assist the chronically ill or dying. Sometimes a family of friends was transformed into a group of caregivers with ties to one another as well as the person with AIDS. Community organizations began to offer counseling to persons with AIDS "and their loved ones," while progressive hospitals and hospices modified residence and visitation policies to embrace "family as the client defines family." Implicit in a phrase like "loved ones" is an open-ended notion of kinship that respects the principles of choice and self-determination in defining kin, with love spanning the ideologically contrasting domains of biological family and families we create. (Weston, 1991: p. 183).

The urgency of preserving queer memory[42] while also looking at it critically is a moving force in every case study chosen for this thesis – one might add, in every queer text, literary or visual, ever created, especially because "[a]lthough the gay community has often been seen in terms of an ethnicity, gay men do not have equivalent structures of kinship, family, or memory" (Pearl, 2013: p. 7), and without such structures, the need to create a legacy and archives that are not only material but also composed of written and oral histories, affection and structures of caring is crucial. Moreover, as Freccero writes on narratives of colonization that could also be extended to AIDS narratives:

> [t]hus for these writers engaged in an ethical relation to a traumatic past event, the trace that is also a calling, a demand, a messianic wish or hope, takes the troubled form of a ghost – neither altogether processes of recollection are present nor quite absent – conjured by the moment of writing. (2007: p. 199-200)

For a community plagued by illness and death, with a prospect of no future, artistic creation, autobiographical narratives and testimonies of resistance become particularly relevant in order to create that same "queer time" that Halberstam writes about, a queer time that signifies a queer history often but not exclusively lived side by side with straight history:

[42] "we urge a return of/ to memory as a means to resolve queer theory's persistent melancholy, to reanimate its connections with the social and rhetorical innovations of previous generations of gay and lesbian thinkers (or with a current generation that still identifies with that past), and to integrate those generations' materialist critiques into the abstracted domain of academic theory. A more direct reckoning with the past and with our desires for pastness might, we hope, produce more nuanced and self-critical forms of engagement with the present and our traumatized desires for transformed social and sexual opportunities, for queer world-making. Queers are not lacking; queers are productively abundant. Queers do not experience only shame, guilt, or grief; we also experience exuberance, defiance, pride, pleasure, giddiness, enthusiastic innocence, outrageous optimism, loyalty, and love. We are, in short, as wonderfully and complexly queer as were those in our social and rhetorical pasts." (Castiglia & Reed, 2012: p. 148)

> [q]ueer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic. ... the constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and ... squeezes new possibilities of the time at hand. (Halberstam, 2005: p. 2)

It is not a coincidence that Yale's project at the museum involves collecting paintings, while also discovering the personal life of Fiona and Nico's aunt, Nora, a former model for Modigliani, who, as many women throughout art history was stripped off of her voice and served only as model for a great male genius, having even aided a male painter to finish his paintings without taking credit for it. Neither is the placement of Fiona as the bystander of the terror of the Bataclan attacks fortuitous; *The Great Believers* works with and through history, in both personal and collective perspectives, to address matters of loss, death and recovery. If the AIDS crisis marked the 1980s, terrorist attacks and the constant threat of violence, as argued before when addressing *Middlesex*, marked the experience of post 9/11 imaginary. These artworks can be perceived as responses to the damaging effects of these events, while attempting at working against the erasure of the memory of those who disappeared.

When at Richard Campo's house, Fiona finds what she mistakes to be a photo album. Then, after dropping the file, and the past comes flying around her, she realises that the photo album is an archive of prayer cards and funeral bulletins of men who died of AIDS related complications, an archive of loss of "so many of them, so impossibly many" (Makkai, 2018: p. 184). Even decades after, Fiona is constantly reminded of the AIDS years and "the PTSD she'd carried with her from the 80s" (Makkai, 2018: p. 168). Whenever someone went to her AIDS benefit store, people would mention the AIDS years as a faded memory, a distant relative who would have had the virus, ask Fiona is she had seen "Philadelphia":

> And how could she answer? They meant well, all of them. How could she explain that this city was a graveyard? That they were walking every day through streets where there had been a holocaust, a mass murder of neglect and antipathy, that when they stepped through a pocket of cold air, didn't they understand it was a ghost, it was a boy the world had spat out? (Makkai, 2018: p. 184)

As Castiglia and Reed write, taking into account Huyssen's argument that only a certain part of memory is turned into an official discourse of history, achieving national consensus, the narratives that followed the AIDS years, often aimed at a mainstream audience unfamiliar with AIDS individuals, worked more

towards amnesia than remembrance, by providing a sanitised, acceptable version of history, one that does not challenge nor rewrites official discourses:

> Paradoxically, then, official memories—in the form of films, education, museum exhibitions, holidays, news reporting, and political speeches—constitute a potent form of forgetting even as they purport to traffic in memory. The assault on gay memory following AIDS took precisely this form, offering "cleaned-up" versions of the past as substitutes for more challenging memories of social struggle. (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 2)

Schulman remembers someone, an "apparition", who used to attend the ACT UP demonstrations with a sign that would be updated every month, to show for how long he had been living with AIDS, making himself his own queer timeline; eventually the man disappears from the archival footage, having possibly died like many others, a conclusion that Schulman reaches easily due to the ending that people with AIDS had, although she only notices that he is in the footage when he is not there anymore. Interestingly, although Schulman claims that Fotopoulos would stand alone, in a photograph (Figure 11) he can be seen next to a woman who carries a sign that reads "Loving a Son Living With AIDS:

> I had almost forgotten Mark Fotopoulos, until he kept popping up in archival footage. This was the guy who used to stand alone at every demonstration with a sign saying "Living With AIDS 2 Years and I Months, no thanks to you Mr. Reagan." Every month he would update the numbers. Three Months, Four Months, Three Years. He's in each demonstration somewhere, in a corner, in a backdrop, standing to the side holding his sign. Then at some point he is no longer there. Only when I start looking for him in the footage do I realize that he has become an apparition. He stops appearing long before I recognize his absence, and only when I understand this fact does it become clear to me that he must have died. (2012: p. 55)

Figure 11: ACT UP member and Broadway performer Mark Fotopoulos and his mother demonstrate on Broadway, March 24, 1988.

The ghost of AIDS float over Fiona and those who managed to survive: some even materialize themselves like Julian, who shows up after everyone presumed him to be dead, or Asher, who Fiona sees – where else? – in a documentary about three decades of AIDS, "as healthy as anyone, was so muscular you couldn't believe he had the same virus she'd seen carved men into skeletons" (Makkai, 2018: p.184). "Here, in her hand, a stack of ghosts" (Makkai, 2018: p. 184): for Fiona, these ghosts are reminders of her guilt and inability to having saved these men, as well as pain, loss and mourning, perfectly encompassed in the shape of photographs, frames that "state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people" (Sontag in Hirsch, 1997: p. 19). They also disrupt linear time, bringing the past back in the shape of a "real memory, which these picture trigger ... an invocation of color, smell, sound and physical presence, the density and flavor of life" (Goldin, 2001: p. 6), with an urgency to remember, for "haunting,

ghostly apparition, reminds us that the past and the present are neither discrete nor sequential. The borderline between then and now wavers, wobbles, and does not hold still" (Freccero, 2007: p. 196).

In one of his final self-portraits (Figure 12), Robert Mapplethorpe also appears as a ghost: his head floats upon a body that seems not to exist anymore "already "swallowed up" by the negative pan" (Phelan, 1993: p. 40). In the forefront, the skull predicts the eminent death. In a single frame presence and absence coexist and timelines juxtapose. Mapplethorpe's features are already blurred but his hand and hand are well defined, holding centre stage of the composition, death clearer than the body: "[t]he image of the 'self', Mapplethorpe suggests, can only be glimpsed in its disappearance" (Phelan, 1993: p. 40).

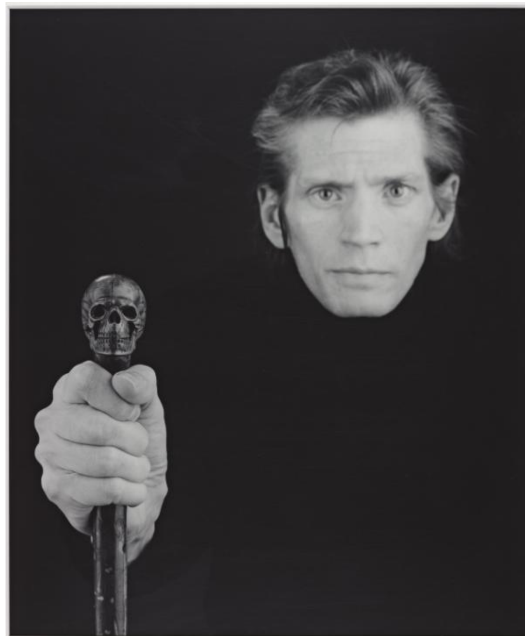

Figure 12: Robert Mapplethorpe, "Self Portrait", 1988.

The way how Hirsch conceived postmemory seems to be a productive way to think about the AIDS years, their dimension and their social and cultural implications upon the next generations of queer individuals, for "incomplete mourning, a holding on to the past that keeps the dead with us, can be a resource" (Cvetkovich, 2003: p. 208). Regardless of the fact that the Holocaust is marked by discourses, dimensions and political and social matrixes that are particular and complex that distinguish it from the AIDS crisis, to read these events in light of Hirsch's postmemory can perhaps elucidate how a generation of gay men have inherited and consumed images, representations and social and political implications from the AIDS years – and how to live with and from those spectres. The link between AIDS and the

Holocaust, as presented by Larry Kramer[43] and informed by Hannah Arendt's texts, was heavily criticized by Sontag and others[44], for its reduction of the Holocaust to a metaphor (while AIDS has also been reduced to metaphors, such as plague). However, this use of postmemory does not intend to reduce the impact and dimension of either tragedy: it does intend to attempt at perceiving how trauma lives through generations, something that seems to have been hinted at in *Transparent*, with the intersection between transgender and Jewish histories) as well as how collective acts and campaigns of hate and fear mongering can lead to the direct or indirect erasure of communities. However, it is not the Holocaust but the way in which it is conceived as a cultural memory, as well as postmemory that one intends to look at and, borrowing from Hirsch's concept, understand how AIDS (and other queer) memories are also apprehended and articulated by the following generations. Hirsch thinks of postmemory as "that of a child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth" (1992: p. 8); instead of circumscribing the concept to familial structures, it is here expanded in order to encompass communities plagued by the same traumatic event (AIDS years) or families that have a genealogy marked by non-conforming gender and sexual identifications (as analysed in *Transparent*).

Postmemory is not placed after, neither beyond, memory but "is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by personal connection" (Hirsch, 1992: p. 8): Fiona, Julian and Richard in *The Great Believers*, Gittel, Maura and Ali in *Transparent*, Cal in *Middlesex* are deeply connected to the root of their traumas by both generational distance and personal connection, although they are not all directly involved in the traumatic event. While Fiona seems to have passed her trauma into her biological child, estranging her, Maura and Ali have inherited Gittel's trauma but made it a moving force for change, while Cal is the embodiment of his family's secrets and shameful sexualities. Hirsch recurs to the work of Jan Assmann (communicative/cultural memory[45]) to explain how "less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone" (Hirsch, 2012: p. 33)

Moreover, "post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing as equally constructed, equally mediated by the process of narration and imagination" (Hirsch, 1992: p. 8-9) and this is exactly what Richard Campo's exhibition, as well as these artworks, do: reframe the past and narrate it through

---

[43] Larry Kramer's analysis of AIDS as Holocaust can be found in the 1989 book *Reports from the Holocaust: the making of an AIDS activism.*

[44] David Caron (2005) analyses in detail the adoption (and the criticism) of the AIDS/Holocaust metaphor in "AIDS/Holocaust: Metaphor and French Universalism".

[45] "Communicative memory is "biographical" and "factual," and is located within a generation of contemporaries who witness an event as adults and who can pass on their bodily and affective connection to that event to their descendants" (Hirsch, 2012: p. 32) while ""Political" and "cultural" memory, in contrast, is not inter- but transgenerational; it is no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems" (Hirsch, 2012: p. 33).

text and photograph, the latter being "the medium connecting memory and post-memory" (Hirsch, 1992: p. 9), bringing back Yale and the dead to Fiona but also to Claire, who attends the exhibition without having met her uncle or his friends, through a medium that, for Sontag, "passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened" (Sontag, 2008: p. 5).

Julian, presumed dead and who appears in Paris in 2015, works as a link between past and present, defying what was expected of a man with HIV in the 1980s[46]. Before he leaves Chicago, not wanting his friends to see his body going through the changes brought by HIV/AIDS, Julian stays at Yale's, leaving behind some dental floss. Every night, Yale would tear some and use it, using his own in the morning, as "a way of making Julian's last longer" and to make Julian's memory last longer too, "but it was also a way of reflecting back on his day" (Makkai, 2018: p. 295). When Yale unravels the last strip of dental floss, it is as if Julian has vanished forever and "[o]ne night, he pulled Julian's dental floss and the last of the string came out, just long enough to use. He tried not to take it as a bad sign, but it felt like one" (Makkai, 2018: p. 341). A single string of memory links Julian, Yale and others, an ephemeral testimonial object. In *Middlesex*, when Desdemona and Lefty leave for The United States, their boat is covered in threads that are linked to the shore and the families of those who stay behind; when these threads are severed, so is the link to the past, and this begin the process of forgetfulness, of erasing the past and familial links, these "threads in the fabric of collective grief[47]" (Ahmed, 2014: p. 157).

And yet, Julian is not fully gone: when Fiona is in Paris, Julian, "a zombie" (Makkai, 2018; p. 356), appears, leaving her, who thought him to be dead, in a state of shock, as the past comes back to her, again, but now in the shape of a body, realising that, with Julian, so does a memory of a particular time comes to live, a memory of "events she's believed herself, for years, to be the sole custodian of – when all along, those parties, those conversations, those jokes, had stayed alive in him as well." (Makkai, 2018: p. 358). Again, the metaphor of the ghost is used to describe what seems to be survivor's guilt and the inability to imagine a future for HIV+ individuals after the 80s. Julian is indeed a ghost, trapped and suspended between a timeline that is chrononormative (ending with an expected premature death), but also queer, in the sense that he escapes what was expected to happen. As Julian says: "For a long time, I wondered if I was a ghost. A literal ghost. I thought I must have died and this was some kind of purgatory or heaven. ... but then I thought: If this is heaven, where are all my friends?" (Makkai, 2018;

[46] "Attending to how the queer activist archive has informed the formation of queer subjectivity, Cvetkovich's (2003) work on AIDS activism illustrates the generative potential of remembering and acting out trauma, where traumatic memories of loss and death have created a sense of collective life that troubles the privatizing and medicalizing of everyday catastrophes felt by queer communities" (Liu, 2020: p. 10).

[47] It is also relevant to briefly mention the AIDS Quilt Project, a public archive of people of died of AIDS were are publicly mourned by the family and friends, in what is the collective interweaving of a patchwork quilt, stitched with and by memories.

p. 359). And yet, Julian did defy death and expectation, surviving with the help of medicine, getting married to another man, living what he describes to be a second life (again, a second birth). The fact that Julian is married does not seem to be casually mentioned, with Fiona noticing his wedding band on his finger, but a hint at how HIV+ individuals can, when they have access to medicine and a future, live healthily and have access to a future, albeit one that is here thought of through heteronormative futurity based on establishing a family and ensuring a genealogy. This makes Fiona reflect about the way how her life has been defined by trauma and loss, how she presumed that there was no future for her generation but how Julian somewhat contradicts that:

> [h]ow utterly strange that Julian could have a second life, a whole entire life, when Fiona had been living for the past thirty years in a deafening echo. She'd been tending the graveyard alone, oblivious to the fact that the world had moved on, that one of the graves has been empty this whole time. (Makkai, 2018: p. 360)

Julian is alive in 2005 and Fiona is no longer the sole survivor of her chosen family; their collective memory is still somewhat preserved in Julian and Fiona, as well as on the photographs of Richard, who now adds to his triptych of Julian's earlier bodily decay, a 4th photograph of Julian, alive and healthy, again in a dialogue between past and present. When Yale fears that he is infected with HIV, he wonders what will be of Fiona after every single one of her friends are gone:

> "You'll make a great mom," Yale said.
> "Ha! Sure. Maybe that's my next move." There was something horribly bitter in her voice. He shouldn't have brought up family. Nico's death hadn't made her any closer to her parents, and now even Terrence was gone. … A husband and a baby – those were the only ways Fiona would every really have a family again. … There was something so *alone* in her. (Makkai, 2018: p. 269)

Having stopped any communication with her family, and with her chosen family rapidly disappearing, Fiona will be left alone soon. Here, to have a family, whether of friends or blood, is equated, as it happens with Julian's husband, with security, company, a sense of heritage, that seems to invest *The Great Believers* with both a concern with the importance of chosen families but also of blood families, perhaps due to the fact that it intends to denounce the familial homophobia that marked the AIDS years. For both Julian and Fiona, the AIDS years did not cut short their lives or reduced their possibilities. Even if Halberstam writes that "[a]nd yet queer time, even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis, is not about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of

family, inheritance and child rearing [emphasis added" (2005 p: 2), in *The Great Believers* this triad is not equated with annihilation but possibility, as it is not imposed or compulsory but a mechanism to assure that Julian and Fiona will be both caretakers and taken care of when needed, while correcting and rearranging the damaging family ties that they had in the past. Queer time could be unscripted of these convention but perhaps it can also be scripted by them, as perceived in *The Great Believers*, *The Inheritance* and mostly *The Argonauts*, a look at how family-making can also be queer, through a look at pregnancy and transitioning.

2.5. Family Heirlooms

Fiona and Nico's aunt appears in the narrative as the owner of an art collection that she intends to pass on to Yale for the permanent collection of the Brigg Gallery, where Yale works. As the only member of the family who had not cut Nico off from her life, who provided financially for him and who "had known all along" (Makkai, 2018: p. 71) that Nico was gay, she identifies up to a certain level with Nico and his friends, in the way that she perceives both the young gay men and her own group of displaced artists as outsiders in Paris:

> I used to go visit Nico, you know. I saw that neighbourhood, and those boys, and I can't tell you how much it reminded me – all my friends in Paris, we were foreigners. Flotsam and jetsam ... I'm not calling Nico's neighbourhood Paris, don't get me wrong, but all those boys landing there from every direction, it was the same! ... Everyone born in some godforsaken shtetl, and then there they were in heaven. (Makkai, 2018: p. 53)

While seeing the many art works that Nora possesses, Yale does not believe that they are authenticate and worthy of his time and money, although Nora is portrayed in the artworks and has memories of Paris and all the artists that she claims to have met. One of these artists, Ranko Novak, is particularly obscure due to the fact that he burnt his own work and that there are no records of his life, besides winning an award and, while in Paris, Fiona tries to track down his past, again bringing together her quest for her daughter while always trying to rescue the past and to provide closure to Nora's narrative. Through Nora's need to authenticate her own past, Makkai offers a strong comment on photography and veracity against painting and other artforms: while Nora's paintings need validation and to be authenticated by the museum, Campo's photographs of the AIDS epidemic work as proof, as evidence of a certain time which, like Nora's Modernist Paris, is gone. Moreover, as Ranko Novak had destroyed his own work, it becomes

nearly impossible to attest for his past, while Richard's photographs work as an archive of Chicago in the 80s. While Chicago was marked by AIDS in the 80s for Fiona and her group of friends, "in her mind, Paris was always 1920. It was always Aunt Nora's Paris, all tragic love and tubercular artists" (Makkai, 2018: p. 60); even in illness there is a link between the two eras, with Nora explaining that Modigliani did not die of drinking but of tuberculosis, having used the drink to cover up the disease to which there was stigma and shame associated. The parallel that Makkai intends to draw is clear: both illnesses were marked by stigma and were taking away people prematurely.

Besides the impact and importance of chosen families during the AIDS years, Makkai also looks at biological families, in the shape of Fiona's quest for her daughter as well as the dispute between Nora and her son regarding their estate and the artworks that Yale intends to appraise and take into the gallery. Side by side, Makkai places the material security that young and ill gay men find in each other and the estate and inheritance that Nora's offspring claim to be their birth right, in the figure of Frank, Nora's son, married and father of two children, a comment on what each family will inherit: grief and pain, but also comfort in the time of death for the former, financial security for the latter, an heirloom which Frank presumes to be his and his children's as a birth right, a sense of inheritance that is based on affect and another that is enforced by the imperative of heteronormative reproduction.

Quickly Yale understands that not only is Frank threatened by the presence of Yale at his house due to the fact that he are taking his heirloom away. Yale's sexual orientation is also brought up, perhaps as a threat to Frank's solid and heteronormative notion of what a family should be, who live in a house with "the kind of kitchen every grandmother ought to have" (Makkai, 2018: p. 146). As Yale talks with Nora about the collection, Frank and Phoebe, Frank's wife, yell at their children in the background, a reminder that Nora's family is well structured by regular standards of family-making. When Yale heads to the bathroom, Frank prevents him from doing so:

> Frank said, "Stop right there."
>
> Yale said, "I understand you're upset. Family is always –"
>
> "My kids use that bathroom (...) I know who you are," Frank said. "I know where you're *from*. You are not unzipping your trousers in my house" (...)
>
> "I'm healthy, if that's what – I'm not sick." But his voice cracked on the last word, which didn't help.
>
> Frank looked revolted, as if the words themselves were contaminated. He said, "There are *children* in this house."
>
> "And you're one of them", Yale didn't say" (Makkai, 2018: pp. 146-147)

Not only does Frank ensure Yale that the house he is in is *his* property, although it does belong to his mother, and not him, but he also mentions his children, placing the structure of heteronormative family-making, with children being used as symbols of stability, normalcy and establishment, as well as continuity, against homosexuality, the well-known slogan that homosexual desire and same-sex relationships jeopardize the well-being of children and the institution of marriage, besides being unable to produce children[48]. As Weston writes, to set queer from straight families would be to imply that queer individuals do not have relationships of their own and they are incompatible with their own families as soon as they disclose a status as gay, a "menace" to the family unit that does not stand outside of it but inside, as part of a family that was both imposed on them but also that they themselves have constituted. Save the children and save the family were always arguments to support the fight against equality, giving voice to a type of prejudice that "depends upon a view of the family grounded in heterosexual relations, combined with the conviction that gay men and lesbians are incapable of procreation, parenting, and establishing kinship ties" (Weston, 1991: p. 25). Jan Huebenthal sustains this by claiming that

> in the heterosexual imaginary, AIDS produced tremendous uncertainty about bodily and sexual integrity, as well as about the moral health of the "family" (203). By definition, cultural narratives about "family" excluded the disease-ridden and immoral "homosexuals" from sexual legitimacy. (Huebenthal, 2019: p. 10)

In the June 1983 edition of *Moral Majority Report*, an image of a nuclear family was used in order to further discriminate gay HIV+ men, as a source of destruction of the American family: "Homosexual Diseases Threaten American Families" (Figure 13) was the slogan, accompanied by a photograph of a heterosexual family of four wearing surgical masks, in order to prevent them from getting infected with a disease that is not airborne contagious, further accentuating the panic and fear felt by family members, medical practitioners and even the police (in a 1987 protest of ACT UP, one of the most famous slogans of the AIDS campaign was created "Your gloves don't match your shoes! You'll see it on the news!", when police officers put on gloves to remove the protestors) that both AIDS and homosexuality were

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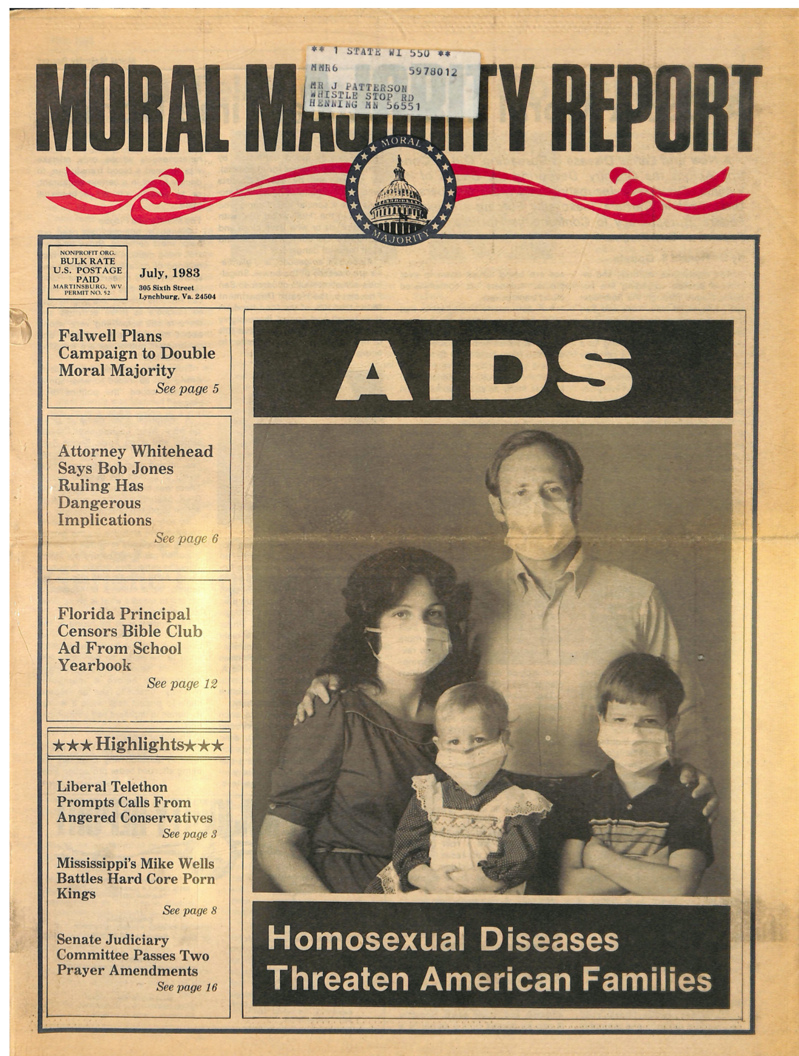
[48] "In the best interests of the Child, marriage structures heterosexual practices through distinct spaces. The man takes up their purportedly 'natural' position of authority in politics, work, and as head of the family. The public sphere, the space outside the home associated with politics and work, thus becomes the 'natural' place of men. The woman takes up the subservient responsibilities of domestic labour and reproduction, and her queer affective and relational nature is limited through her 'natural' placement in the private sphere, inside the home (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Boyd, 1997). Again, here, the public/ private dichotomy is not fixed by social reality but is constituted through practice (Massey, 1994); it appears as pre-political and timeless due to its repetition over time. Muñoz (2009) does not directly address the relation between adulthood and Childhood, despite acknowledging the importance of Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism." (C. Stewart, 2021: p. 4).

contagious. Later, new findings about the disease would contribute to a new attitude by medical practitioners and carers, trying "to keep a sense of visceral disgust at bay, a disgust that was already a vital part of homophobia and that made slogans like "homosexual diseases" possible" (Murray, 2020). The slogan does not mention AIDS, but "homosexual diseases", a plurality of conditions, one of them perhaps being gay, that would find their way into the American home, threaten it and possibly destroy their physical bodies as well as their morality.



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MORAL MAJORITY REPORT

MORAL MAJORITY

NONPROFIT ORG.
BULK RATE
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July, 1983
305 Sixth Street
Lynchburg, Va. 24504

Falwell Plans Campaign to Double Moral Majority
See page 5

Attorney Whitehead Says Bob Jones Ruling Has Dangerous Implications
See page 6

Florida Principal Censors Bible Club Ad From School Yearbook
See page 12

★★★Highlights★★★

Liberal Telethon Prompts Calls From Angered Conservatives
See page 3

Mississippi's Mike Wells Battles Hard Core Porn Kings
See page 8

Senate Judiciary Committee Passes Two Prayer Amendments
See page 16

AIDS

Homosexual Diseases
Threaten American Families

Figure 13: Moral Majority Report: "Homosexual Diseases Threaten American Families".

By passing the artworks onto a gallery through Yale, Nora is choosing what to do with her heritage and who deserves to hold onto her memory and her heirloom, again challenging the natural and common decision of giving an heirloom to blood relatives. Yale and the gallery become, like Fiona and Richard Campo's photographs, "miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (Sontag, 2008: p. 4), the holders of the personal and collective memories of both Paris in the beginning of the 20th century, and

Chicago in the 80s, a memory as fragile as Nora's collection, precariously collected in shoeboxes secured by rubber bands, inside manila envelopes that are falling apart, prone to water and time damage but kept in a safety deposit at the bank. When Nora's sees her collection again, next to Yale, who is seeing the collection for the first time and realising that it is indeed everything that Nora had promised it would be, she exclaims that "it is like being pried open" (Makkai, 2018: p. 151), a reaction much similar to the one that Fiona has when seeing Campo's images of her long gone friends, a recollection of something presumed lost but rescued. Nora's words and personal memories, in the same way that Nico's memory is rescued by Fiona, are also used to authenticate the pieces, to provide them with an origin and history that, without her witnessing their making, would certainly be harder to authenticate. Retelling these narratives, and reinserting them within and beyond their contexts of production, validates the past, authenticate it and turn it into something that is tangible. "Domeone should be taking it all down ... you're going to need these stories. ... And I'm going to want to sort things too. I can see now they're out of order." (Makkai, 2018: p. 157), says Nora, wanting to take control over her own past, retell it, give it an order and a meaning.

Even if the artworks and photographs are remembrance of a past long gone, for Fiona there is a tension between art and testimony, being voyeur and agent: when asked about a photograph of herself curled up in a hospital bed next to an ill man, she explains: "[y]ou're asking about private things," she said. "It's art, but I was *there*. Those were my friends" (Makkai, 2018: p. 164) echoing what Goldin writes about *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,* of being both agent and object of her own photographs, of not being a voyeur of the disappearance of her group of friends for she was also a part of that same group, suffering along them and not outside, but also enjoying moments of community and sharing (Figure 14):

> People in the pictures say my camera is as much a part of being with me as any other aspect if knowing me. It's as if my hand were a camera. If it were possible, I'd want no mechanism between me and the moment of photographing. The camera is much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex. The instant of photographing, instead of creating distance, is a moment of clarity and emotional connection for me. There is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party. But I'm not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history. (Goldin, 2001: p. 6)

Figure 14: Nan Goldin, "Picnic on the Esplanade", 1973.

2.6. In Loop

The end of *The Great Believers*, regardless of its many deaths and damaged familiar ties, has a celebratory note, one that may hint at the repairing that Fiona desperately wants to do with her daughter and granddaughter, as well as the past. Fiona attends Richard's exhibition, accompanied by Claire, with whom Fiona has a heated exchange of words in which she is accused by Claire of having a childhood overshadowed by the death of Yale, who died the day after Claire was born. Claire, who has not experience the AIDS years, embodies exactly what Hirsch claims to be postmemory, as her entire life was inscribed by the trauma of the losses of the AIDS years, her birth and Yale's death happening one day after the other marking Claire has an heir of this trauma. Claire experiences the AIDS years directly, through her mother, and indirectly through the series of Richard's photographs, just like the audience of the exhibition will become acquainted with a past they may not be familiar with, through the family album of Richard and Fiona.

At the exhibit, Fiona sees a video of Charlie and Yale that shows the men watching the demolition of a well-known gay bar: after the demolition, the men rub the glitter that they find on the club's ruins on their t-shirts and take it home with them. The ruin of the bar can be seen as both a place of destruction

but also of renewal, for the film is played in a loop and as soon as it is destroyed, it starts again, the building still intact. Perhaps Richard's photographs can also be seen as ruins, as defined by Cadava, as places death and survival side by side – just like the photographs of Julian from the 80s that are not juxtaposed to one taken in 2015 . But although Cadava mentions that the ruin implies silence and the inability to narrate the past, the photograph distances itself from it, by narrating the past through nostalgic recollection:

> There can be no image that is not about destruction and survival, and this is especially the case in the image of ruin. We might even say that the image of ruin tells us what is true of every image: that it bears witness to the enigmatic relation between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation mourning and memory. It also tells us, if it can tell us anything at all, that what dies, is lost, and mourned within the image - even as it survives, lives on, and struggles to exist - is the image itself. This is why the image of ruin ... often speaks of the death, if not the impossibility of the image. It announces the inability of the image to tell a story ... this silence in the face of loss and catastrophe. (Cadava, 2001: p. 36).

The video ends and starts again, in a continuum that prevents the men from fully disappearing, in a ritual act of remembering: the loop is not a mere repetition – it creates intensity and reinforces a presence, as well as the absence of these men. Makkai's words, regardless of the subject theme of the book and its many deaths, hint at a future, if not for these men directly, for others like them: "[t]hen the whole film looped again. There they all stood, the Bistro whole. Boys with hands in pockets, waiting for everything to begin." (Makkai, 2018: p. 418). Every time the film is played, the Bistro is destroyed and rebuilt, just like Fiona's memory is also trigger by these flashes, as she shifts between Claire and her need of a mother, in the present, and the inability to bring back the dead, except through recollection. *The Great Believers*, by juxtaposing two different timelines, and for its emphasis on family and inheritance, ambiguously addresses time as both crystalized, in photograph, but also full of possibilities, with the video in loop. In one of the photos of the show, Fiona sees herself along with her dead friends; as she recollects that particular moment she addresses the fact that Claire was not even conceived yet and therefore, unable to be traumatized by Fiona's past, while expressing the desire to contradict time and participate in the photograph as more than a mere viewer:

> There she was herself, an arm around Terrence. In a restaurant, it looked like. She never remembered being that pretty, that happy. Claire was just an egg in an ovary, one more thing Fiona hadn't ruined yet. At the left of the shot was Yale, mouth open, talking to someone out of frame. ... she wanted to climb into

> the photo, to say, "Stop where you are." Wasn't that what the camera had done, at least? It had frozen them forever. (Makkai, 2018: p. 415)

"What a burden. To be Horatio. To be the one with the memory" (Makkai, 2018: p.415), says Julian about *Hamlet*, although it is clear the Makkai is referring to Fiona, to Julian, to Richard's show, to an entire generation of individuals who lost friends, family and loved ones to AIDS, who, like Horatio, are also visited by ghosts. Fiona's heart is described as a "palimpsest ... the way things could be written over but never erased" (Makkai, 2018: p. 416), echoing the title of Richard's show, *Strata*, in which past and present are also juxtaposed, overlapped, overwritten but still unchanged. According to Love, "[t]he effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start. To reconstruct the past, we build on ruins; to bring it to life, we chase after the fugitive dead" (2007: p. 21). Fiona chases after the dead through her attempt at surviving trauma, by looking at the Bistro ruins and Richard's photographs but the past is never quite reconfigured, except for ghosts, like Julian, who have a second chance at life. Richard's exhibition itself is an archive of feeling, a walk into the past through static images that only open up windows into the past to be scrutinized with a magnifying glass, with a one way interaction from viewer to subject, only to be left alone again. Besides the photographs, the ruins of the bar also evoke another space and time; as Huyssen writes, "[t]he architectural ruin is an example of the indissoluble combination of spatial and temporal desires that trigger nostalgia. In the body of the ruin the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia" (2006, p. 7).

The image of the loop becomes particularly strong as a force of intensity and remembrance when taking the example of William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* (2002-2003): when transferring old tapes into a digital format, the tapes started to disintegrate, leading Basinski to play them until they were destroyed, becoming a ruin. Finished on September 11, 2001, Basinski then played them as he saw the Twin Towers collapse, making one of the most powerful artworks about this event in The United States history by coincidence. These loops are, at the same time, a testimony of amnesia and remembrance: as they disintegrate, they also come to being. The sound that is heard, is, at the same time, the one of creation and destruction. Mark Bibbins encapsulated Basinski's artwork in a poem that also denotes how these loops were created almost by accident, how Basinski's creation of the artwork predated the event, in an inversion of the sequence of cause-effect:

> William Basinski made the truest piece of art
> in response to 9/11
> before it happened

> and mostly by accident He had been
> digitizing old tape loops
> and as they played
> the magnetized coating
> on the surface of the tapes began
> to flake off
> to disintegrate He kept recording
> until there was no sound left
> and replayed the digital files on his Brooklyn roof
> as the sun went down behind
> the appalling cloud of smoke (Bibbins, 2020: pp. 37-38)

The loop implies ending but also an idea of re-starting: perhaps instead of thinking of a loop as a cycle, it would be more productive to think of it as a ruin – one created over the ruins of the Twin Towers – as what is intended is not repetition but recreation, not cyclical inheritance but a continuum. When men start dying of AIDS, and when he is faced with the possibility of being infected, Yale wonders what will happen to the next generation of gay men:

> I keep thinking that maybe they'll start over, you know? The next generation of baby gays, when we're all gone. But maybe they won't, because they'll be starting from scratch. And they'll know what happened to us, and Pat Robertson will convince them it was our fault. (Makkai, 2018: p. 268)

The next generation did not start over; gay experience is still deeply marked by AIDS and its presence, both as ghost and a reality. It is exactly this questioning of what one generation of gay men leaves as legacy to another, as well as how to dialogue with the past, that Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* addressed, as analysed in the following Chapter.

Chapter 3. Ghosts, Queer Heritage and Community in *The Inheritance*

Prior: My name is Prior Walter.
Prior 1: I know that.
Prior: Explain.
Prior 1: You're alive. I'm not. We have the same name. What do you want me to explain?
Prior: A ghost?
Prior 1: An ancestor.
Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

3.1. *The Inheritance*

E. M. Forster comes back from the dead to haunt a group of young gay men.

The premise of Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* (2018) closely based on Forster's *Howard's End* and written in dialogue with the English author as a forefather of homoerotic love, is easy to follow, and its dialogues are dense with sex, identity politics, intersectionality, violence against gay men, the commodification of gay culture, the AIDS years, the AIDS ghost, a new virus called neo-liberalism, and what is the responsibility of one generation of older gay men towards a younger one, facing the same old problems as well as new threats to their well-being. The play appears in a moment that seems to be particularly marked by a desire to remember the AIDS years, through "a strong impulse to historicize and memorialize the lives and deaths of those affected by HIV/AIDS through a large body of filmic work" (Hann, 2020: p. 101), a desire that seems to arise from a fear of amnesia due to the shifting nature of the virus from death sentence to chronic illness, resulting in what Hann describes as "AIDS nostalgia", a sanitized version of the AIDS years and its victims offered as a commodity to a mainstream audience that emphasizes the dichotomy between past and present, without reflecting on the effects of the virus today. "With emerging queer generations now experiencing HIV/AIDS as something primarily chronic and manageable rather than a killer virus, a complex debate has arisen within academic and artistic realms. That is, does a queer heritage exist – particularly amongst gay men – and if so what forms does it take?" (2010, p. 101), asks Louisa Hann, and Lopez also wants to engage in that debate.

The actual inheritance of the play is a house that was used during the AIDS years as a shelter for hundreds of rejected, dying men, itself haunted with their ghosts, that is now being passed on from Walter, an older man who has survived the AIDS years, to Eric, the play's central character. Margaret, a friend of Walter, works as a mirror image of Fiona, as she helped Walter taking care of the sick men,

again providing a structure of care that is not based on blood. These ghosts urge Eric to take on the role of caretaker, to act upon his community and assume a responsibility not to the past but to the future:

> [t]he ghost is ... pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding. This something to be done is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost but never had. (Gordon in Frecerro, 2007: p. 196)

In the vein of *Angels in America* (1991), with which it engages directly, particularly in how ghosts and apparitions are used to overlap temporalities, *The Boys in the Band* (1968) and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), to which *The Inheritance* has been compared to exhaustion, Lopez's play looks at the lives of several gay men, both younger and older, as they come to terms with their own privilege, either provided by race or class, while reflecting on the legacy of the AIDS years, its activism and survivors, as well as the legacy of shame that the gay community has inherited. The characters work more as tokens rather than well rounded beings: there's the gay couple who is adopting a child, an older, rich Republican for whom gay rights must be overshadowed by economic politics, a reckless and self-destructive young man who hustles for a living (and becomes HIV+), an arrogant writer who cannot face his past and a young man who would like to dedicate his life to helping others. In *The Inheritance* the ghosts appear, both materialized and metaphorically, to force a younger generation of gay men to face their past while also vowing to make a difference, aware that HIV/AIDS is also not only a part of the past, for "[e]very gay person walking around who lived in New York or San Francisco in the 1980s and early 1990s is a survivor of devastation and carries with them the faces, fading names, and corpses of the otherwise forgotten dead" (Schulman, 2012: p. 45).

Successful in the UK, where it was first staged by Stephen Daldry in 2018, the play was not as well received across the Atlantic, where it was written. This Chapter aims at understanding to what extend does *The Inheritance* really portray, analyse and question white privilege, the intersections between race, class and homosexuality, right wing politics, neoliberalism and their implications in queer lives, random acts of violence towards queer people, as well as how can a community learn from the past and re-adapt itself to new challenges through the haunting of those who preceded them, remaking family and kinship structures.

3.2. (In)Visible Ghosts

And the past with its fierce undertow won't ever let us go/ Won't ever let you go.

Nick Cave, "Ghosteen"

As previously mentioned, *The Inheritance* proposes a cross temporal dialogue between three generations of gay men: a group of younger men who seem unaware of what the 1980s meant for gay men, E. M. Forster, the symbol of repression and the shame of disclosing a non-normative sexuality, and Walter and Eric, an older couple who lived through the AIDS years, who give the younger men a "first-hand gay history" (Lopez, 2018: p. 70), a history whose "dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence", especially concerning the AIDS years (Love, 2007: p. 1). It is the presence of ghosts, both Forster, who appears as another character of the play, and the dead men from the 1980s, that seems to work as catalyst for the need to act upon the present. Through a retrospective look, similar to the one used in *Middlesex*, also informed by a desire to repair the past, the inheritance moves in a difference direction than the one that Eugenides' narrative followed. Although Halberstam refers to time of inheritance as a heteronormative matrix of passing down history and knowledge of the past, the concept seems to be productive when analysing *The Inheritance*, as it also established a link between generations, not linked by blood, while linking this particular 'family' of friends to a particular time of the past within the nation, while also connecting it to the future:

> the time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability. (Halberstam, 2005: p. 5)

While Halberstam claims that queer time is outside "temporal frames of bourgeois and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (2005: p. 6), it still seems relevant to think of a queer time, or a queer temporality as a lens to analyse *The Inheritance*, as the contact with the past is also established through dialogue, in a present that looks back and dialogues with the past instead of perceiving it as a stable inheritance, as it happened in *Middlesex*. This seems to be sustained by Hann, when address the utopian aspect played by *The Inheritance*. It is then suggested that both these 'straight' and 'queer' temporal frames can coexist, as few straight families are also informed by purely temporal frames as described by Halberstam, given illness and premature deaths, poverty and the lack of a family heirloom, infertility, and even HIV infections. 'Inheritance' is produced here outside the domains mentioned by Halberstam but

also possibly encompassing them, or at least *queering* them, by claiming that this inheritance can be familial but also communal, not ruled by a patriarchal structure neither by blood.

Besides the phantoms aforementioned, Rennie McDougall, in a negative review of the play, points out that Lopez's play is also "haunted by outdated gay archetypes" being "celebrated as a mainstream gay milestone while stirring resentment and frustration in queer circles" (2000), perhaps because "given the scene of destruction at our backs, queers feel compelled to keep moving on toward a brighter future" (Love, 2007: p. 162), celebrating a narrative of progress that is also inscribed in a time that is, as argued before when looking at *Middlesex*, triumphalist.

Even if Matthew Lopez intended to write "an examination of class, economic inequality, and poverty within the gay community" (Lopez, 2020) what *The Inheritance* does is to raise those same questions just to let them die down right after, in several pivotal moments of the play that work as breaks in the somewhat larger matrix of love relationships, the passing down and search for homes and estate, moments of death and despair, and dinner parties. As pointed out by McDougall, these men are

> The leads are all white, while men of color stand around the edges of the stage yelling finger-snapping woke-isms: "Let's talk about trans rights," "Let's finally ratify the motherfuckin' ERA," "Let's talk about the resurgence of HIV amongst gay men of color," they cheer, then talk about precisely none of these issues for the remainder of the six-plus-hour play. (2020)

The Inheritance does tackle these issues but it does it with the brevity of social media activism: click, share, move over. "These are the things that will require just as much of our blood, sweat and tears as marriage equality" (Lopez, 2018: p. 91): and yet, none of these men is an activist of any sort, nor do they actively take a part to change anything, even in the face of Trump's election, with Clinton shining as a beacon of hope that fades fast. These discussions about race, class and gay rights appear briefly as a topic of conversation during a dinner party but never become one of the major issues of the play. "Being gay was like being a member of a secret club" (Lopez, 2018: p. 85) but it "doesn't feel remarkable anymore" (Lopez: 2018: p. 86), say Eric and Jason 2, only to be contradicted by Jasper, who explain that "the point of all that work at visibility was to not feel stigmatized. To not have our sexual identities be our primary identities" (Lopez, 2018: p. 86). Much has been written on the visibility, assimilation and homonormativity:

> Yet, unfortunately, the processes of assimilation and cultural visibility are not solely beneficent. History has shown us – with horrifying detail – the ways in which forms of bigotry sustain themselves and even grow in the face of assimilation. ... As with any minority group, the moment of public visibility marks the

> beginning of a complex process. The emergence into public view can aid in the process of liberation; surely liberation cannot be won from the space of the crowded closet. Yet the glare of commercial culture can often produce a new kind of invisibility, itself supported by a relentless march toward assimilation. If the enemy was once perceived as invisibility itself, then how is an enemy defined in an era of increased visibility? Is the penetrating gaze of the popular a sign of public acceptance or, rather, the construction of the homosexual as commodity fetish, as sideshow freak? (Walters, 2016 p. 132-3)

This is also addressed by Love, who distinguishes the different levels of visibility, and how ""advances" such as gay marriage and the increasing media visibility of well-heeled gays and lesbians threaten to obscure the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence" (2007: p. 10). To enter the mainstream is to take a step away from "all those who cannot make it – the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the gender deviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected" (Love, 2007: p. 10), exacerbating, "[g]iven the new opportunities available to *some* gays and lesbians, the temptation to forget ... the outrages and humiliations of gay and lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalization" (Love, 2007: p. 10). *The Inheritance* does a safe act of remembrance: gay cisgender attractive men, with a central mother figure played by a woman, along with two older and a couple of non-white actors in order to embrace a broader, but not that broad, spectre of representation, remember the AIDS years through the dismissive figure of the ghost, in a second-hand experience of that suffering, invisibility and neglect.

But *The Inheritance* also features, besides the parties and social gatherings, some more intimate moments of depictions of sex on stage (although these are between couples, with Leo and Toby becoming infected with HIV off stage). When reading Richard Scott's poem [even if you fuck me all vanilla in], perhaps, even though the relationship that the gay men in the play have with each other are based on the structure of marriage, aiming at a reproductive futurity, the sexual acts that perform, given that they are, still *unproductive*, can be perceived as radical and transgressive, distinguishing act from identity, pleasure from relationship:

> even if you fuck me all vanilla in
> out slow responsible vaguely tender
> it's still not regular intercourse
>
> even if we're missionary the hairless
> backs of my knees against your shoulders
> it's still an act of protest even if I'm

> moaning at a respectful volume
> even if you are wearing an extra-strong
> condom even if I make you cum
>
> on my thigh not inside even if I
> fall in love as you pull out flop over
> it's all still a middle finger up flaming
>
> rag stuffed into napalm revolution fuck-
> ing anarchy we are still dangerous faggots (Scott, 2018: p. 53)

This tension between acceptance and resistance, commodification and visibility is, in the play, extrapolated by Trump's election, an event that works as a turning point, but one that seems to work only directly to one character as a possible threat to his own safety, as, at the end of the day, all these other men are actually safe from harm mainly due to the security that is given to them by having a home, a job and being white. If *The Inheritance* could be criticized for something, it would be for failing deliver what Lopez intended; and yet, if individuals are shaped by the type of representations that are seen in the media, it seems likely that these men also remind us of the

> [c]ontemporary definitions of LGBT [that] are put forth by the capitalist consumerist culture to sell LGBT consumption, relying on marketing versions of uncomplicated sex, gender, and sexuality binaries. ... The sad truth is that we become what we consume; we are what we eat. These reductive images push us to embody not who we are, but what the marketers want us to become. (Siebler, 2016: p. 4)

Even when Eric faces eviction of his rent controlled apartment, he inherits a house from Walter[49], and soon moves in with Henry, Walter's former partner, to his luxurious condo, for a sexless marriage that nevertheless provides him a much needed material security. Alberto Carbajal states that, in both E. M.

[49] The actor who plays Walter also plays Forster (Carbajal), a repetition of the technique used by Solloway in *Transparent* to, once again, bring together different temporalities. Hann reinforces the proximity between Forster and Walter, and how they are both represented as spectral: "[s]uch a casting decision means that Walter – a character who ostensibly operates within the same diegetic space as Eric and his friends – possesses an uncannily similar appearance to that of Morgan who, although appearing on the same stage as other actors, operates in a different diegetic layer. Indeed, he exclusively inhabits an 'outer', possibly even empyrean domain also populated by (potentially spectral) versions of the play's central characters, allowing him to help author their lives, as well as to conduct reflective discussions about how their experiences fit in to the gamut of queer history. In this way, although they never meet, Walter is inextricably tied to the spectrality of Morgan and the way in which he transcends normative spatio-temporal boundaries: a descendant of sorts. As Toby notes at the very beginning of *The Inheritance*, 'Walter has this sort of, I don't know, this ghost-like spirit about him. Like a sheer curtain in front of an open window' and, as one of the young narrators remarks about Walter's disposition just before his death, 'What had once been a distant, inscrutable aspect was now positively spectral" (2020: p. 109).

Forster's *Howards End* and *The Inheritance*, the passing down of estate is not based of familiar liaisons but on a sense of community and social responsibility, although in *The Inheritance* both co-exist:

> There is a quiet sort of radicalism to this testament, though. The inheritance of Mrs Wilcox's *Howards End* and of Walter's upstate New York house parts with bloodlines, opting instead for a form of communion across generations prizing tolerance and social responsibility, underpinned, as I will argue now, by a Hegelian understanding of property. (Carbajal, 2021, p. 4).

None of these men truly face hardship for long, something that can be perceived, at times, as an attempt at giving gay narratives a different ending, like when Leo, a young, white uneducated hustler who gets infected with HIV (an archetype taken straight from the 1970s) is helped and supported by Eric, who goes to university and eventually becomes a writer, against all odds and unlike many of the men who would have been infected the virus four decades before. Side by side with Leo, when it comes to the comment that the play intends to make on HIV/AIDS in 2019, there's Tristan, an HIV+ black gay doctor, who, after hearing the news of Trump's election, decides to move to Canada.

As Huebenthal writes, what is perceived as progress for the gay community (access to marriage and the military) has compromised the safety of less privileged individuals, and the treatment of HIV and access to health is more of an intersection of hierarchies and forces of oppression rather than just another step towards equality:

> access to the private spheres of marriage, child-rearing, and inheritance has come at the expense of the health of vulnerable populations and breathed new life into historical spectres of homophobia and AIDS stigma. Moving into a "post-AIDS" age of chronicity, treatment, and future, HIV/AIDS has come to function as a fault line of normative queer subjectivity. Systemic critique has, by and large, given way to imperatives of personal responsibility that gloss over the vast structural exclusions that restrict access to HIV care and treatment. (2017: p. 2)

Tristan features briefly in the play, while Leo gradually gains more and more relevance during it and even if these two men work as a way to comment on how HIV has become less of a death sentence and more of a chronic disease controlled with the medication, its effect is not lasting. As McDougall points out:

> Lopez's answer to the question of privilege is Leo, a white sex worker and a caricature — slumped, stinking, and stripped of all agency until a lonely playwright takes pity on him. If Lopez was concerned with economic inequality and HIV's still-disproportionate impact on lower-income Americans, why not show the reality that Black and brown queer men and trans people are at the highest risk? (2020)

Leo is brought into the play as a double of Adam[50], an actor who, by having been brought up in a privileged environment, becomes Toby's idea of an alter-ego, and even as what could have happened to Toby "if Eric hadn't rescued him all those years before" (Lopez, 2018: p. 191). What Lopez intended to do with these characters seems to be a take on privilege and a comment on how class and access to education dictates one's pathway, as well as how "[r]estricted access to health care does not only make HIV survival conditional on material privilege, it actually undermines the very notion of "LGBT equality"" (Huebenthal, 2017: p. 6). Adam, whose adoptive mother went to university with Barack Obama, is an actor looking for a first break in theatre, something that he will find by taking the main role in Toby's play, which is an adaptation of the book that Toby claims to be autobiographical. Adam recounts the moment when, during a trip to Prague, he finds himself engaging in unprotected sex with several men, becoming HIV+. Being privileged and having access to medicine, he takes PEP, erasing the traces of the virus from his body, his virus load undetectable. This status as undetectable, and therefore unable to contaminate others, is equated with privilege by Huebental as such:

> "[u]ndetectable" is more than a descriptive feature of successful HIV treatment: It connotes privilege and fitness for citizenship. Indeed, "undetectable" promises a post-AIDS world inhabited by gay men who, having suffered though the horrors of AIDS, have returned to their healthy, authentic selves – and are now "armed with just the right amount of [behavioral] modification" needed to manage HIV. (2017: p. 2)

For Leo, who is homeless and a sex worker, who has a past of abuse, trauma and was expelled from home before turning 18, the outcome is rather different, finding himself ill and completely alone, without someone to take care of him; the language that Lopez uses is the same of heritage and genealogy, echoing Cal's "bitter inheritance" in *Middlesex*:

> He attempted a mental list of all the men he'd had sex with in the last six months, either for money, for shelter, for drugs. ... Leo thought of the chain of infection that had been passed down along the *years, decades and generations, his particular lineage moving from person to person, until it was eventually passed to him. A bitter inheritance*. [emphasis added]. And yet, despite this chain of humanity, Leo never felt so alone in all his life. (Lopez, 2018: p. 252).

While Adam is making a career for himself, Leo is homeless and his health is decaying, the heir of a "bitter inheritance" that has linked gay men for forty years now, both physically and as a symbol. As

[50] Again, this doubling is also achieved by casting the same actor for both roles (Carbajal, 2021).

Huebenthal writes, the shift after the first AIDS years and its activism marked a change from the collective to the individual. As rights related to a domestic sphere, such as marriage and the ability to constitute a family, became the main focus of LGBTQI+ activism, HIV/AIDS became less visible as a collective and structural matter but an individual affliction. When Leo finds himself alone, he is indeed alone – a loneliness particularly felt due to his economic precariousness and lack of familial ties – and he is expected to singularly take care of himself:

> [a]s mainstream LGBT rights-based political movements paved the way to the domestic sphere – where queer people may now practice "sodomy" with impunity, get married, and raise children – HIV care became closely tied to knowledge of the self, and ultimately care of the self. The activist histories of AIDS – with the memories of suffering, grief, anger and trauma they evoked—gave way to modes of civic belonging that began locating HIV infection not as a structural or public health concern, but as a *personal* problem. In the meantime, HIV/AIDS transitioned from the "gay plague" to a manageable chronic illness – I but only if the HIV-positive individual enjoyed access to financial and political capital as well as to quality health care. (Huebenthal, 2017: 5)

Eric will take Leo in, leaving Henry furious, especially due to the fact that Henry had paid Leo to sexually engage with him but detaches himself from any responsibility to take care of Leo. In a repetition of what Walter had made for other HIV positive men, Eric intends to take Leo in and take care of him at Henry's place, although Henry does not allow Eric to do so. Here, Lopez addresses the responsibility, direct and indirect, of a community towards each other, shifting between witness and agent:

> When Toby left him, Eric had grabbed the nearest lifeboat and pulled himself to safety, leaving everyone else behind. And on that day in Toby's apartment, it was Eric who had fobbed Leo off with a few dollars and some kind words. *Eric had chosen his own comfort over the needs of this frightened young man. And in realizing that, Eric understood that he was no mere witness to Leo's suffering. He was one of its authors* [emphasis added] ... Sitting on a bench in his expensive clothes, holding the keys to his thirty-million-dollar home, Eric Glass asked himself the simple questions: 'What good am I? To what use has my life been put?' (Lopez, 2018: p. 275).

In a brief encounter with Eric, Tristan anticipates how hard it will be for a black, gay, HIV+ man to live in The United States during the Trump years, whose status and job security as a doctor seems not to be important in his homeland but will be his visiting card in Canada:

> **Tristan** This whole year has been… well … Eric, this country is destroying itself. And I can't stick around to watch it happen.
> **Eric** But Tristan, you're an American.
> **Tristan** No, Eric. I'm a gay, HIV-positive black man who lives in America. There is no place for me in this country anymore. I don't think there ever was. The last eight years were like a fantasy. But this year has shown us who we really are. And it's ugly. Much uglier than I ever thought. …
> **Eric** Do you know how cynical that sounds? What about the people in this country who don't have that option? …
> **Tristan** Eric, you married a billionaire that you don't love. You're floating in a gold-plated lifeboat. The rest of us are not as safe as you.
> **Eric** But this country needs people like you, Tristan.
> **Tristan** This country doesn't deserve people like me. I don't owe this country a goddamned thing. America isn't worth saving anymore. But I am. (Lopez, 2018: p. 249)

As Schulman argues, AIDS is not perceived as part of American culture, while also making the point that AIDS literature is also American literature; Comparing 9/11 and how the event is remembered, and the lack of remembrance or public memorials for AIDS victims, Schulman echoes Butler's claim that some lives are more grievable than others:

> all along it has puzzled me that the AIDS experience is not recognized as an American experience, while for me it is the American experience. How can something be equally *the* and equally *not*? Because it belongs to people still considered, even postmortem, to be second-rate and special interest. It has not been integrated into the American identity of which it is a product. … no true, accurate, complex, deeply felt and accountable engagement with the AIDS crisis has become integrated into the American self-perception. It puts those of us who do know what happened in the awkward position of trying to remember what we used to know in a world that officially knows none of it. (Schulman, 2012: pp. 69-70)

With the rise of discourses fuelled by heteronormative ideals of family-making side by side with racist and xenophobic feelings, to be something that is not white, male and straight is to possibly be in danger. Henry Wilcox, Eric's husband, before coming out, was "star of the track and field". He was also "[f]irst in his class and president of the student body association. As American as an Aaron Copland symphony. He married Patricia Fitzgerald while still in college. Two sons arrived soon after" (Lopez, 2018: p. 61): as American as the Charm Bracelets that, in *Middlesex*, embody the beauty standards that Callie desperate wanted to achieve. And as Margaret, a woman who helped Walter take care of gay men during the AIDS years, and who will now help and guide Eric, points out, the AIDS years were a time in which

homosexuality became as visible as rejected, with governmental neglect working as a way to silence gay voices while amplifying hateful ones:

> Thirty years ago, before you were born, we turned a blind eye to the deaths of tens of thousands of our fellow countrymen. In our disgust, we looked away, we made ourselves deaf to the cries of so many of our sons. Why were so many men allowed to die this way? I think it's because these men's illness required that Americans think about the means by which they contracted it. It required that we looked at gay men and accept their nature, accept their affection and their desire for another as equal to our own. Most Americans couldn't do that. (Lopez, 2018: pp. 295-296)

"The AIDS crisis forced America to start the process of acknowledging that gay people exist" (Schulman, 2009: p. 14), although that act of acknowledgment was often made by directly silencing gay people and/or overwriting their stories with dominant narratives, turning gay history into an alternative story that runs not intertwined but parallel to American history:

> What separates unremembering from such national amnesia, however, is the direct assault on particular memories and on the cultural act of remembering. Such attacks sought not to cohere an imagined national community but to undo the historical basis for communities that once seemed to offer radically new forms of social and sexual engagement. Gay culture has been prey to a particularly intense version of unremembering since the onset in the early 1980s of the AIDS epidemic. We are not saying what AIDS itself did in gay culture, although the very real costs of the syndrome in both human and financial terms has been staggering. Rather, the AIDS crisis became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialize our losses. (Castiglia & Reed, 2012: pp. 2-3)

In a time when Stonewall Inn, a landmark for queer resistance, "has become .... a Chinese Restaurant" (Lopez, 2018: p. 62), and "certain identifiable, broadly applicable cultural markers that are specific to the gay community" (Lopez, 2018: p. 87) are becoming appropriated and diluted for the acceptance of a broader, mainstream audience, whose knowledge of the AIDS years and gay struggle is often mediated through a couple of commodified and safe narratives that aim at acceptance. Instead, it seems productive to "insist on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury. Resisting the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead". (Love, 2007: p. 30)

Perhaps *The Inheritance* aims at equating that unbalanced and fragile tension: being visible without being appropriated, being accepted without giving up radical resistance, a tension which is addressed by Siebler, as resulting in "feelings of isolation, stereotypes regarding sex/sexuality/gender that reinforce patriarchal, misogynistic systems of power, and strong connections between queer identity and capitalist consumption with the goal of assimilating to a heterosexual "norm." (2016: p. 3) Tristan's fourteen year old niece is shouting "yas queen" without being aware that "that phrase has been toppling out of the painted lips of drag queens[51] since before you were born. They have taken a phrase that started in the drag world and built a brand off it" (Lopez, 2018: p. 87)". "Our culture is being co-opted", adds Eric, while Jasper wonders if one can "demand visibility and then cry foul when your culture starts getting disseminated into the culture at large" to which Eric replies "that's only true if that kind of cultural visibility also comes with the kind of societal participation that matters" (Lopez, 2018: p. 87), "What does it mean now to be a gay man?" (Lopez, 2018: p. 86), asks Eric, and the play does intend to answer it, although it often overlooks the multiple ways in which both homosexuality and even masculinity are conceived and performed, in detriment of a mainstream representation of what being gay today means.

3.3. Toby's Phantoms

It is perhaps through Toby that the inability to face the past is more visible, as well as the performance of privilege. Although presented as his autobiography, Toby's novel, that tells the story of Elan, which is then turned into a play, is only the projection of what Toby would like to be: a "snobby gay rich kid" (Lopez, 2018: p. 40). His character is exactly that, a fictional version of himself, used to convince others that he is as privileged as he projects himself to be:

> **Toby** Rich kid, seventeen, raised on the Upper West Side, sexy as fuck, sarcastic, rude, yet undeniable compelling. He's basically me.
> **Morgan** Or. Elan is everything Toby has ever wanted to be. He is who Toby has convinced himself – and the world – that he's become. (Lopez, 2018: p. 38)

[51] This commodification of drag culture through mainstream media has been analysed by Feldman and Hakim: "One result of this is a dampening of drag's subversive potential – a constraining of its politics of critique. Less a project of subverting gender norms, or anti-capitalist politics, today's commercialised drag signals, results in and endorses 'a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in . . . consumption' (Duggan 2003, p. 179), where drag has become a vehicle for enterprise as opposed to a means through which dominant power structures might be mocked, queried or dismantled." (2020: pp. 2-3)

When he comes across Adam, Toby realises that the actor is indeed what Toby had wanted himself to be, an access to privilege that is then re-enacted when Adam stars in Toby's play as the main character that Toby has created as his own alter-ego. This failure to manage to perform and pass for something that he is not is particularly visible in Toby's umbrella, an object that denounces the fact that Toby has been narrating his life differently than it actually was, in an attempt to preserve himself from the damaging act of recollecting his extremely hurtful past, marked by poverty, homophobia and family tragedy:

> **Morgan** Toby left, forgetting his umbrella. Adam picked it up and saw its condition. It had all gone along the seams and been re-patched. In truth, it was an appalling umbrella. But from a distance it was dazzling. Like its owner, it did not bear close scrutiny. (Lopez, 2018: p. 45).

When Eric and Toby end their relationship, Eric accuses Toby of lying about his past, of not facing who he is or his unprivileged background, implying that he "spent the last decade of your [Toby's] life constructing this elaborate narrative that has nothing to do with the truth" (Lopez, 2018: p. 104). Toby also refuses to take his parents' belongings with him from the house he shares with Toby, which end up being boxed and sent to Walter's house, where Toby will later go to unpack his past, leading him to his death. Toby, who accuses Forster of not having been brave enough to assume his homosexuality, of being unable to live up to his own motto – 'only connect' – finds himself also unable to connect with his friends or have a healthy relationship with Eric, taking in Leo, endangering him, while attempting to buy his attention. On Christmas, a ritual traditionally marked by a sense of community and family, Toby finds himself with "an overwhelming spasm of loneliness that, on this night, the wine could not alleviate" (Lopez, 2018: p. 131). "There's a deep desire to see a lot of the old bad feelings we associate with being gay or lesbian disappear, but I think they are still very much with us" (Love in Chinn, 2012: p. 127), and if Forster is portrayed as lonely and unable to connect to others, so is Toby, again implying that trauma and grief can also be inherited and are certainly passed down from generation to generation, as "progress" is not a straight timeline marked only by triumphs. This tendency to move away from narratives of shame arises

> [d]ue to the urgency of the LGBTQ rights movement to construct an affirmative gay genealogy … The increasingly attainable future of gay and lesbian normalization for some places a time stamp on queer suffering as something that only belongs to the past, where marginalized subject – the nonwhite, the perverse, the irrational, and the gender transgressive – encounter extraneous obstacles to progress and advancement. (Liu, 2020: p. 10)

This performance of privilege is also enacted by Leo, who, finding himself wearing expensive clothes and in Toby's home, safe now that "housing is no longer a concern" (Lopez, 2018: p. 220), and in the same way that drag balls challenged white privilege and the privilege of upper class through mimicry, so does Leo, with the books and clothes and the suit that Toby has bought him, finally finding the security of a home. This re-enactment is reinforced by the fact that the men are getting ready to attend a play, and the line "They arrive at the theatre" seems to work as a way to consolidate the performativity of privilege, the re-enactment of codes that are socially visible and perceived as a source of privilege:

> **Leo** – standing in Toby's apartment, wearing a new designer suit, Leo takes a breath and pretends for one, two, three seconds, that he belongs here, in this apartment, in this man's life. For the briefest moment, Leo allows himself to believe that he is home.
> **Toby** They arrive at the theatre. (Lopez, 2018: p. 221)

After attending Henry and Eric's marriage, when he is confronted by Eric and his past, Toby goes to Alabama; this going back into the past seems to be an attempt for Toby to reconcile with it, through the writing of a second play in which he will address his childhood. In going back, the audience finally discovers that Toby is the product of a family hit by tragedy, starting with his father's suicide, something that will condition the family's economic status, followed by his mother's depression and inability to either take care or communicate with Toby, making Toby think that "he had lost the wrong parent" (Lopez, 2018: p. 279) for suicide. His mother, who had been born in Alabama, moved to New York in order to become an actress and model – the parallel with Yale's mother from the *Great Believers* is visible – meeting Toby's father and therefore becoming "ensconced in wealth, access and privilege" (Lopez, 2018: p. 279), something that comes to an end with the his death, forcing mother and son to go back to Alabama:

> **Toby** And then Toby Darling, the golden boy, raised in privilege, trained in the violin and in ballet, educated at the finest prep schools in Manhattan ... was deposited in an Alabama public school, where he was anything but a golden boy.
> Ostracized for his sensitivity -
> **Young Man 2** – for his scandalous interest in learning.
> **Young Man 3** Even the teachers mistrusted him.
> **Young Man 8** No one knew what to do with this sensitive –
> **Young Man 5** – effeminate –
> **Young Man 4** – sing-songy –

Young Man 6 – twinkle-toed –

Young Man 3 – wide-eyed –

Toby – I broken-hearted child.

Young Man 2 It wasn't long before Toby's new schoolmates smelled the blood in the water.

Young Man 3 He was eight

Toby Eight, when he was first called a faggot. (Lopez, 2018: p. 280)

Through Toby, Lopez also address another type of oppression, one that comes from rurality[52] and poverty and how they both also dictate the experience of homosexual individuals, and the consequences of bullying and violence against LGBTQI+:

> **Toby** He did not even know its meaning the first time it was hurled against him. He only knew it was not a good thing to be called. He could tell by the way it was flung of the snarling lips of the boy who first uttered it. The hatred in his eyes directed solely at Toby, the only one of his kind at school. The only faggot. ... Toby explored the word in his mind. ... It became his only possession in life. As Kevin Olson spits sunflower husks at his face on the bus. Toby sitting there petrified and helpless. Afraid to acknowledge what is happening to him. Afraid he'll cry if he does. The children around him laughing at the spectacle[53]. (Lopez, 2018: p. 281)

Moreover, the lack of a supportive family, along with the daily abuse at school, was damaging for Toby's mental and physical health. As Schulman writes:

[52] Rurality (and the diaspora to the city) and LGBTQI+ rights have been an increasingly prominent matter of analysis in queer studies, from Annie Proulx short stories about masculinities to theoretical work such as *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson and Brian J. Gilley, in which it is argued that rural areas of the United States have been standing against LGBTQI+ related rights, blaming gender plurality as the reason for the many challenges faced by people living in rural areas of the country: "[i]ndeed, over the past several decades especially, rural Americans have arguably done more than their fair share to block various efforts to advance the civil rights, and even the basic human rights, of LGBT people in the United States. What is more, they have often claimed to take these actions in defense of rural America and the way of life it supposedly represents, as if to suggest that same-sex desire and gender nonconformity are themselves responsible somehow for the myriad problems that many nonmetropolitan communities have been dealing with since the farm crisis of the Reagan Era—problems that include job loss, persistent outmigration, eroding tax bases, school consolidation, crumbling infrastructure, and, most recently, a surge in methamphetamine use among rural young people that is so extreme that meth addiction has almost certainly eclipsed crack cocaine addiction as the United States' most significant drug problem." (2016: p. 5)

[53] Schulman writes on how gay people suffer of a double type of oppression at home and outside it: "[t]his multiply reinforced exclusion is powerful and devastating to gay people because it defies the typical private/public dichotomy on which society's safety net depends. Usually the family is a refuge from the cruelties of the culture. Or, if the family is a source of cruelty, the larger society is a refuge from the family. But when the family and the larger society enact the identical structures of exclusion and diminishment, the individual has no place of escape. Especially when the institutions of representation also don't allow the experience and subsequent feelings to be expressed." (2009; p. 21)

> Because of the twisted nature of dominant behavior, gay people are being punished within the family structure even though we have not done anything wrong. This punishment has dramatic consequences on both our social experiences, and our most trusting, loving sexual relationships. (2009: p. 13)

There is also a hint at how religion also worked as an overpowering force in the rejection of homosexuality, and how every space, given the homophobia that was deeply felt by Toby, was possibility dangerous and a threat to Toby's mental and physical security:

> **Toby** And returning home to a mother, once beautiful, now ugly from alcohol; to a grandmother, whose faith was no match for the despair that has filled her house; and to a poverty so crushing, he would sometimes go to school for days unwashed. ... Daily these assaults occurred and daily he was counselled to pray. For his tormentors, for himself. Pray for those who called him a faggot.... Every walk through town felt dangerous, every school day possessed the potential for violence. (Lopez, 2018: p. 281-282).

Toby's self-loath, which stems from internalized homophobia and shame, seems to also be also hereditary, as he also considers suicide, like his father, and his way of doing it is the same that Walter had, decades before him, in a similar rural environment, consider. Not only is family trauma perceived as transgenerational; the abuse and constant hate that LGBTQI+ individuals face will also translate into trauma that is, regardless of time, also passed down and inherited[54]:

> Toby would steal his mother's sleeping pills, hoarding them, planning his suicide. He would stare at them nightly, holding them in his hands, telling himself they were the pathway out of his pain, that they were more powerful than prayer.
> **Young Man 2** Like father, like son. (Lopez, 2018: p. 282).

Toby finds himself in the space in which he felt more deeply rejected, neglected and abused, forced to face his traumatic upbringing, something that he will do by writing a play that is rejected by his agent, dismissed as being a failed work of art. By addressing the difficult upbringing of Toby, and his refusal to

[54] Sarah Schulman mentions how an artist who had survived the AIDS years committed suicide two decades after having seen his partner dying of AIDS, in a way that resembled the death of his partner: "remember him telling me about Tom's last moments. Robert held his hand, looked into Tom's eyes and said, "I love you, I love you," until Tom was dead. Robert had bad a pretty privileged life before AIDS. He'd grown up in Teaneck, gone to Princeton. He was good looking, well trained, and smart. The death of his lover and his eviction from his own home was not the way is life was supposed to have gone." (p. 2012: p. 56-7). "In a state of very high anxiety about a head injury he had suffered the previous spring, Robert impulsively decided to commit suicide in July 2009. His boyfriend, Fabio, reported that he was "with Robert through his final moments of life." When I read that, I couldn't help but remembering the image of Robert holding Tom's hand, twenty-three years before. He had recreated his AIDS trauma, the unnecessary death of the young beloved, holding the hand of his grieving partner, saying goodbye. Only now Robert was on the other side. The consequences of AIDS on one person's life are very complicated, but as time passes, they prove irrepressible" (Schulman, 2012: p. 58).

acknowledge it, Lopez seems to try to address the writing of *The Inheritance* itself, as it also intends to be a narrative about trauma and pain in as much as it does want to open space for other types of discourses that are marked by progress and both collective and personal achievements. Huyssen seems to address this when writing that "nostalgia counteracts, even undermines linear notions of progress" (2006: p. 7), as looking backwards will always reveal hardship and challenge linear narratives of order, of triumph, or sequence, as the one that *Middlesex* provides. Moreover, the erasure of Toby's past may be equated with the erasure of a gay past and the inability to acknowledge the losses and trauma of previous generations, both personally and collectively, will dictate the future of that same community and this dialogue across time is often addressed by the play. As Love writes, "[p]aying attention to what was difficult in the past may tell us how far we have come, but that is not all it will tell us; it also makes visible the damage that we live with in the present" (2007: p. 29).

In another poem by Richard Scott, the poet wonders if this concept of 'progress' can be simply equated with new challenges that keep being posed to gay men, from illness, to unaccepting parents, to bullying, to shame:

> people say shit like *it gets better*
> but what they mean is *there'll always be haters*
> only you'll be older
>
> you are twenty-seven when your father says
>
> *gay people die of terrible diseases*
>
> you are twenty-eight when a poet says
>
> *makes for uncomfortable reading*
>
> you are thirty-one when your father says
>
> *don't tell anyone you're my son*
>
> you are thirty-seven when a poet you love writes
>
> *that's so gay*
>
> the world has given you a silk rose

> dyed all the colours of sunset a polystyrene
> peach love I mean shame (Scott, 2018: p. 62)

Toby must decide, in the same way that the gay community must face the AIDS years and Forster's inability to assume his sexuality as part of its history, to accept his upbringing as traumatic and write a new narrative over it, or to deny it, and therefore, denying the suffering, trauma and pain that often marks gay experience, addressing what Love writes on the need to often celebrate the past and to redress it as a time of progress: "Heal or burn. Those are the only two options before him. ... can he accept his life for what it is ... or will he reject his history, his story, and ultimately himself? (Lopez, 2018: 283). Toby does burn: the lesson of *The Inheritance* seems clear. Toby dies in a car crash, involved in flames, unable to accept his past, similarly to Henry, who realises that he closed himself to others, by neglected his whole community when he decided to deny help to the men dying of AIDS. Family and the collective past will dictate and inform the present and future, particularly when traumatic. To Hann, Toby's death symbolizes his "lack of connection to a queer cross-generational community; a product, perhaps, of his burning desire to be recognized as a great playwright within a heteronormative mainstream" (2020: p. 115). Toby's premature and tragic death seems to work as a reminder of the dangers of forgetting and ignoring the past, both individual and collective, as well as turning the back into the past. If Toby perishes for having failed to face the past, the same also happens when AIDS narratives from the past are replaced by narratives of progress, as if AIDS was only an illness of the past. Instead, Castiglia and Reed argue for a cross-generational dialogue, one like the one in *The Inheritance*, in which an older generation, in the shape of Walter, and a physical archive, in the shape of the house that Eric inherits, find mutual and intergenerational spaces for dialogue:

> [t]he death of friends and the loss of generational transmission of cultural literacy, pleasures, and ideals threatened by those deaths and by phobic responses to them has moved us not only to remember but also to address the causes and consequences of not doing so. (2012: p. 25)

Not only is HIV/AIDS inherited in the sense that it is spread by blood. It can also be passed, through fear and contagion, from one generation to the next of gay men, as Lopez intends to show. Illness travels through the blood, as well as family traumas, as seen in "In the House of My Father" (1996-7), Donald Rodney (1961-1998) holds a fragile home on his hand, made of his own skin, put together with pins (Figure 15). The house, that is a piece in itself entitled "My Mother. My Father. My Sister. My Brother" (1996-7), narrates Rodney's battle against "sickle cell anaemia, an inherited disease that affects people

of African, Caribbean, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Asian ancestry" Both the photograph and the fragile house "address Rodney's sense of family and identity, as a British-born artist whose parents had emigrated from Jamaica, as well as themes relating to mortality and his own illness" (Barson, 2002). The comparison could even be extended further, in the sense that, in *Middlesex*, blood is used to explain Cal's intersexuality, as if intersexuality were another illness passed down from parents to children. Rodney's work also implies an relevant analysis of ethnicity, as, although British, his condition reminds him of his ancestry.

Figure 15: Donald Rodney, "In the House of My Father", 1996-7.

Toby's death could be read as a reductive take on the overpowering force of the past, and its haunting force, as if neither Toby nor the gay community can escape their legacy of trauma, disease, and tragic endings and "[f]or groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it" (Love, 2007: p. 1). The retrospective look that was analysed when reading *Middlesex*, is also present in *The Inheritance*, albeit presenting more possible outcomes, except for Toby,

who seems unable to break away from his family trauma. When Toby finally unpacks his family's belongings, coming across photographs of them, the past comes back with the same haunting force that one finds in Fiona's browsing of Richard's photo albums and exhibition:

> **Toby** Envelopes stuffed with family photos, his early writing, movie tickets. Trinkets. (He picks up a photo.) His mother, once so young and beautiful. (Then another photo.) His father, forever young, robust and handsome. ... Toby then finds a photo of himself seven years old, two months before his father died. He standing in his pajamas, his eyes staring directly at the camera. ... Toby stares at the photo, searching for himself in his seven-year-old face. He cannot find it. It is if Toby were looking at a stranger. The loved boy in the photo bears no resemblance to the lost man who is holding it. This beautiful boy could never have done all the damage that Toby has done. This innocent child could never have hurt all the people that Toby has. And that moment, Toby knows that he can never heal, that was only built to destroy. (Lopez, 2018: p. 307)

While Fiona attempts to connect with her daughter motivated by the ghosts of the past, Toby fails to accept what he has done to others, as well as to himself, and what has been done to him. Toby's photo as a teenager is presented as the one of a stranger, in a retrospective look blurred by time as well as Toby's mental health and self-deprecation, a result of his upbringing. Both Adam and Leo seem to work, again, as the alternative Toby, as Toby in a different timeline, with a different outcome, in different contexts. Toby's ashes are buried next to the other men at Eric and Walter's house, as the funeral becomes again a rite of closure, togetherness, one that is particularly informed by a shared sense of the communal.

3.4. A History Lesson

> AIDS showed up an inheritance for a confusion.
>
> Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk*

For a play that is, at times, extremely upsetting and moving regarding the AIDS crisis, as when Walter tells Eric that if he had lived during the AIDS years, all his friends would be dead, *The Inheritance* is also deeply nostalgic for a past which the audience is often told that was indeed tragic. When Eric claims that he "can *understand* what it was. But I [Eric] cannot possibly *feel* what it was", Walter enumerates the names of Eric's friends and poses possible outcomes for them, had they been through the AIDS years ("Jasper is also dead. ... Tomorrow is Eddie's funeral") (Lopez, 2018: p. 66-7). When

Margaret asks Leo if he knows about the plague, he replies "only a little" (Lopez, 2018: p. 295), implying that the memory of AIDS is not a part of the lives of gay men today, as if the virus had stayed in the past. McDougall writes, "I refuse to believe that any gay man living in New York today has never imagined the epidemic this way before" (2020). This amnesia is addressed by Castiglia and Reed, who write on the urge to forget the AIDS years as working both into the past as well as the present, creating a *de-generation*, a gap rather than a dialogue in what should be a cross-generational process of memory making, something that Lopez's seems to want to contradict:

> The sweeping calls to unremember targeted the generation hardest hit by the onset of AIDS, cutting that generation off from younger gays and lesbians who might continue the visionary work undertaken in the late 1960s and 1970s. We call this temporal isolation *de-generation*. It is a process destructive of both a generation of social revolutionaries and the transgenerational bonds that make the transmission of revolutionary projects and cultures across and against time possible. De-generational unremembering is not simply an assault on the past or an attempt at prophylactic protection of the future, then; it is, above all, an aggressive assault on possibilities for the queer present. (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 9)

If *The Great Believers* was marked by an excess of memory, *The Inheritance* seems, at times, to suffer from a certain amnesia, one that, as the ghosts that embody those same memories, is present, albeit spectral, blurry, hard to grasp. This lack of knowledge of the past, and the constant look into it as a time of radicality, resistance and pre-assimilation of the younger men seems to clash with the recollection of what the past was really like to Walter and Henry:

> Rumours fly about incarcerations of gay men as a precaution.
> Politicians begin to openly discuss mass quarantines.
> There is talk of outlawing homosexuality, rumors of deportations.
> Anti-gay violence is on the rise.
> The American public becomes galvanized by the epidemic: not against the illness but against the people who have it.
> Businesses cancel health insurance policies for employees with AIDS.
> States pass legislation requiring home sellers to divulge if a person with AIDS has ever lived there. (Lopez, 2018: p. 67-8)

Such a report on the manifold acts of hate and discrimination against gay men is incompatible with the young men's recollection about a joyful past of a somewhat secretive state of being visible but not yet commodified, with a strong sense of community[55]:

> **Eric** You know what I miss? I miss the feeling that being gay was like being a member of a secret club.
> **Jason 2** You mean being in the closet?
> **Eric** No, I mean that liminal state when we were out but also, I don't know, still kinda mysterious and opaque to society. ... I'm describing a community. Everything was a little secretive, you know?
> **Tristan** But not in a shameful way – ...
> **Eric** Yes! It was a secret culture with a secret language and shared, secret experiences. (Lopez, 2018: pp. 86-87)

The balance between this nostalgic recollection and the acceptance of the troubles of the past seems to be addressed when reflecting on the visibility and achievements of the gay community when it comes to public recognition and representation, while also looking back at the radicality of being queer. In a time when marriage equality and media representation have been reclaimed, is being gay still radical? As Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz write:

> If mainstream media attention to queer lives and issues has helped to establish the social and legal foundation for the emergence of gay marriage, family, and domesticity, what are the social costs of this new visibility? And how does the demand for marriage and legal rights affect, run counter to, or in fact converge with conservative promotion of traditional marriage? (2005: p. 2)

The men keep asking how can a community strive if safe spaces like gay bars are being closed, where will both sixty and twenty year olds find other gay men, when "Sean Penn won an Oscar for playing Harvey Milk but American students are still taught nothing about queer history" (2018: p. 88). The destruction of queer spaces, like the Bistro in *The Great Believers*, encompasses a process of both homogenization of cities (Schulman) and an erasure of a link between queer individuals (Castiglia and Reed[56]), affecting a

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[55] Castiglia and Reed on the 1970s and referring to the depiction of gay culture in books such as *Dancer From the Dance* by Andrew Holleran: "It was not just promiscuous sex this culture was inventing; it was promiscuous representation. It was the nature of the things the culture valued – drugs, dance, music, cruising – to be constantly in flux, a dynamism that emphasized the apparent permanence of the network through which the details moved. Producing a rich culture in a world that considered them sick and immoral, the men in the novel could not count on archives and history books, but they could count on the communication networks generated through individual memory and, more important, through collectively circulated memory narratives." (2012: pp. 31-32)

[56] "[T]he assault on gay memory and the resulting modification of sexual consciousness was a necessary precursor to the "urban renewal" projects of the mid-to late 1990s in cities like New York, which in the name of health and touristry (touristry *as* health) closed bars, bathhouses, porn theaters, and other

collective community whose spaces for meeting become virtual: "the sacrifice of spaces and rituals of memory to the lure of amnesia has weakened gay communities, both our connections to one another and our ability to imagine, collectively and creatively, alternative social presents and futures for ourselves" (Castiglia and Reed: 2012: p. 1). Eric concludes that "if being gay only describes who we love and who we fuck but not also how we encounter the world, then gay culture and gay community would start to disappear. And we still need that community. Because this country is still filled with people who hate us with vengeful, murderous fanaticism" (Lopez, 2018: p. 88) which seems to Jason far-fetched, since "progress has happened" (Lopez, p. 89), while Tristan reminds them of the mass shooting at Pulse. This attempt at erasing negative feelings towards the queer past, focusing solely on an optimist narrative of the present rather than "continuities between the bad gay past and the present ... show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress" (Love, 2007: p. 27).

By looking at queer narratives as a disruption of straight time as proposed by Halberstam, it is possible to acknowledge the Pulse shooting as more than a step backwards in a line of seemingly linear events that mark a progression of queer rights and achievements, as if these are not, more than often, easily taken away from queer people[57]. To understand queer narratives, the concept of progress, one that is deeply rooted in a sense of sequence, must be challenged, if not abandoned, for it provides queer history with a sense of failure or retrogression every time one step into a fictional idea of progress is not taken. In Castiglia and Reed's work, the act of forgetting the past and its troubles, by distancing ourselves from them, is referred to as "unremembering" and it is perceived as a continuous process of erasure of the links with the past, as well as "a perpetual self-monitoring for inclinations to pastness" (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 10). If the events of the past are forgotten, then a narrative of progress arises, one that dangerously portrays only the acts towards the inclusion of queer individuals within a normative social structure of assimilation, as "we are urged never to cast our eyes back, never to turn from a dubious vision of normativity-as-progress glimmering beyond a perpetually receding horizon" (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 10). Moreover, if queer individuals were not victims of hate, exclusion and rejection in the past, then how can progress be made, given that there is not a starting point exists from where to improve the treatment of queer individuals?

On the night of June 12th 2016, in Orlando, Florida, a man walked inside the Pulse bar, a local place for queer people, and killed 49 people in what was "the deadliest attack on LGBT persons in US

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spaces where public sex took place. Acts of memory generate and justify a different sexual consciousness, which in turn shapes divergent theories of the relationships sexual subjects—and here we are talking especially about urban gay men—have to one another and to ideas about social protest and cultural organization" (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 40).

history" (Edelman, E. A., 2008: p. 32). The attack triggers old fears within the community, reminding that homophobia and racial hatred are still threats posed to queer individuals. During the coverage of the shooting at Pulse several forces were at play that determined the way the victims were portrayed: many declared that the shooting had been yet another Islamic terrorist attack, ignoring the homophobic and racist aspect of the attack. On the other hand, some declared the shooting to be an act of hate but only directed at queer people, neglecting the pertinent aspect that most of those who were killed were non-white as well. The space of Pulse worked as a queer heterotopia for people who were queer, gay, lesbian, Latin, black, trans, poor - or several of these at the same time. And even though the men in *The Inheritance* seem worried about the people who were killed in Pulse, they also seem, albeit only up to a certain level, aware that some people are more prone to danger than them.

The Pulse shooting can happen, while also, somewhere else, same-sex marriage is legally recognized, for queer time is marked by multidimensionality and crossroads, in which things do not replace each other (a victory does not atone for all the damage done to queer people in the past) but co-exist in a long line of a troubled but also celebratory events. As E. A. Edelman argues, the Pulse shooting, offers a relevant insight on how "the "forgetting" of the Pulse nightclub murders reflects a core structural flaw of the LGBT paradigm: these are bodies that never mattered" (2018: p. 32), as well as the lack of a stronger and broader sense of community towards "young, poor or working class, queer, Latinx, and black, and/or gender nonconforming" (2018: p. 32) individuals within the LGBTQI+ groups. "The opposite of shame is not pride" (Scott, 2018 p. 63) and Love also seems to sustain that the contemporary discourse on pride also excludes the reality of several queer individuals with "socially or politically liminal sexualities and genders that may fall outside hegemonic or normative demands" (E. A. Edelman, 2018: p. 33) who are not encompassed by the structure of state legitimation that is provided by marriage or homonormativity:

> As many critics have argued, the politics of gay pride will only get us so far. Such an approach does not address the marginal situation of queers who experience the stigma of poverty, racism, AIDS, gender dysphoria, disability, immigration, and sexism. Nor does such an approach come to terms adequately with sexual shame-with the way that the closet continues to operate powerfully in contemporary society and media. Finally, the assertion of pride does not deal with the psychic complexity of shame, which lingers on well into the post-Stonewall era. (2012: p. 147)

3.5. Rebuilding a Ruin

Perhaps it is through the house that Walter gives Eric so that he can not only help Leo but also other HIV+ men who may need it, that *The Inheritance* seems to more clearly fail its main purpose, establishing a clean cut with the past, or at least the work that was done by Walter and the one that Eric does. This house, "that had once been a place where young men went to die maybe could be now a place where they went to thrive" (2018: p. 276), again implying the shifting nature of AIDS. And yet, as argued by McDougall:

> The play closes by telling us that Eric grows up to be "a teacher, a mentor, and eventually a wise old man." He leaves the house to his children and grandchildren. "They maintain [the house] to this day as a cherished family heirloom." So instead of using the property for anything like protecting homeless LGBTQ youth or providing medical services to queer people — or for any of the other political urgencies that the play seemed to pat itself on the back for mentioning — Eric neglects the house's legacy and makes it his private property, passed down through generations of grandchildren enjoying wealth and privilege. Perfect. (2020)

Carbajal also implies that Lopez's play falls short in providing a solution for ravaging gentrification, which seems to be here equated with the AIDS crisis as the new problem that gay men in New York face:

> [t]he bequest can also be interpreted as a critical response to the gentrification of New York City in the wake of the AIDS crisis interrogated by Sarah Schulman (2012), whereby people living with AIDS were pushed out, yet the play's antidote has its limitations, since Lopez still fills Walter's house with a remarkably homogenous white gay community. (2021: p. 7)

As it happens throughout the play, individual needs surpass the needs of a community: Eric has inherited a house which worked as a last stop for homeless gay men without a caretaker and turned it into his family home. Eric, worried about the dying off of a community, about his responsibility towards the next generation of gay men, about learning from history, who visits the Stonewall Inn looking for inspiration from a generation of people who, fighting neglect, hate and grief, helped each other, eventually turns the communal space of Henry's home into private estate. Eric's decision and desire to have a family seems to clash directly with his ultimate goal of turning Walter's home into a shelter for underprivileged HIV+ individuals, providing a final and extremely enlightening comment on family-making, heteronormativity and physical vulnerability, presenting family structures as incompatible with community making, as if, if he had wanted to, Eric couldn't have his family as well as the shelter for less privileged men. The 'inheritance' does seem to be one that will be passed on from father to children, not from one gay men

to another, as memory, shelter, legacy and material security; the need for a stable family seems to be, for Eric, more important than the stability of his community.

The need for a stable and safe home is a common feature to underprivileged individuals or those who were disposed of their safety and whose precariousness often equates fragility. It is relevant to think of gentrification and the way in which cities becomes homogenized, pushing away individuals whose race, gender, sexual orientation and class are socially conceived as underprivileged, erasing difference in detriment of cohesion and homogeneity, erasing a rich subculture marked by cultural, sexual, linguistic, and variety, through immigrants, gender non-conforming and non-white individuals. As Schulman writes, looking at the close and complex link between AIDS and gentrification:

> It is clear to me, although it's rarely stated, that the high rate of deaths from AIDS was one of a number of determining factors in the rapid gentrification of key neighborhoods of Manhattan. From the first years of the epidemic through to the epicenter of the AIDS crisis, people I knew were literally dying daily, weekly, regularly. Sometimes they left their apartments and went back to their hometowns to die because there was no medical support structure and their families would take them. Many, however, were abandoned by their families. Sometimes they were too sick to live alone or to pay their rent and left their apartments to die on friends' couches or in hospital corridors. Many died in their apartments. ... Particularly gruesome was that surviving partners or roommates were not allowed to inherit leases that had been in the dead person's name. (2012: p. 37)

It seems to be possible to establish a parallel between what Schulman writes about an early gentrified New York in the 1980s and what Lopez writes about Eric's apartment, which Eric occupied after his grandmother's death. This apartment, which has worked for Eric and Toby as a home, also worked for his grandmother as a way to become American, to reclaim, at the same time, a safety and nationality of which she had been deprived:

> **Young Man** 1: Eric's grandfather, Nathan, was a veteran of the 10th Armored Division, which helped liberate Dachau. His grandmother, Miriam, a refugee from Germany.
> **Morgan**: In the fall of 1947, the signed the lease on a rent-controlled apartment on West End Avenue. This was back when middle-class families could afford such places.
> **Eric**: This apartment became the first place Eric's grandmother felt safe in the world. She raised her family here ... Voted in every election ... She watched John Kennedy's death, Richard Nixon's resignation, and Barack Obama's election from the living room ... It was in this apartment that Miriam Glass became an American. (Lopez: 2018: p. 29)

This apartment, that Eric is now being evicted from, although he moves right away with Henry and never experiences the lack of a safe home, works for him as a family heirloom, one that is rented and not owned, and one that is immediately taken away from him when he loses the family's claim over it. Nonetheless, the anxiety that Eric feels for losing what he describes not as his home, but his grandparents', quickly fades and when Eric himself inherits Walter's house. There is an attachment to his family home that Eric oversees (or directly transposes) to the house left to him by Walter and if "[i]n order to understand who Eric Glass if, one first has to understand the significance of his family's apartment on the Upper West Side" (Lopez, 2018: p. 28), then in order to understand Eric's choice of turning Walter's home into private estate may also be explained by the desire and longing for a family that is expressed throughout the play, culminating in Eric's marriage to Henry, a man to whom Eric seems to work only as a surrogate to Walter.

Similarly to Fiona in *The Great Believers*, Eric feels a strong desire to be loved, needed and helpful – when asked what love means to him, Eric replies "Taking care of Toby, I guess. Because no one ever has" (2018: p. 52), with Toby working as his main source of both attention and frustration. While for Eric, Toby "was everything he'd ever wanted in a relationship", for Toby "it was a home that was safe and stable and loving" (2018: p. 29), something that, as the audience will find out, had been missing from Toby's life and that eventually informs his process of self-destruction and premature death.

When Walter visits Eric's apartment for the first time, Eric claims that he perceives himself and Toby as Eric and Walter, who have been together for thirty-six years. Eric and Toby are meant to get married (although they do not) and there is a direct link between the house that Eric is about to lose and family-making, as Eric clearly suggests that, not only does he look to Henry and Walter as an example of the possibilities of same-sex relationships, he also aspires to have that with Toby, who eventually ends the relationship. It is relevant to analyse the scene when Eric asks Toby to get married: "I've got cum inside my ass and we just got engaged" (Lopez, 2018: p. 37) is a line that encapsulates several dynamics of representation for gay men: the possibility of having safe sex without condoms, one that is here equated with monogamy and even with marriage, as well as the refusal that "receptive anal sex in particular hinted at a latent desire to self-destruct" (Huebenthal, 2018: p. 11), as Bersani implies in "Is the Rectum a Grave?", written on the fear of contagion during the AIDS years, as well as the implications of AIDS and gay sex as a challenge posed to normative sexuality[58]. Fink, while analysing the novel *Fledgling*, by Octavia

[58] "Those power relations become differentially coded—vaginal intercourse as normal, other sexual practices as deviant—and anal sex comes to signify as a very particular power relation. In and of itself, anal sex is not uniquely revelatory of power, as Bersani hastens to add, but rather makes visible the "shifting experience[s] that every human being has of his or her body's capacity, to control and to manipulate the world beyond the self" (216). In other words, anal sex brings to the fore a relationship between sex and power that unmasks sex as a precarious oscillation between mastery and subordination. Normative

Butler, evokes Tim Dean's work on barebacking[59] as a subculture in which Dean "reframes HIV transmission as opportunity for kinship" (Fink, 2020: p. 26), claiming that the AIDS years offered a time for new structures of kinship outside the matrix of the couple, structures that relied on the "overnight conversion of strangers into relatives" (Dean in Fink, 2020: p. 26), as unprotected anal sex arises "as a nontraditional mode of family building that reconceives intimacy as a collective membership process rather than something that transpires between a couple alone" (Fink, 2012: p. 26).

Eric explains to Walter, as he guides him through the apartment, that the apartment holds his families memories (a physical Horatio) and Eric also intends to keep adding his own memories with Toby to this place, in an overlap of histories:

> **Eric** My father took his first steps right over there. My mother was sitting in that very chair you're in when my father proposed to her. I don't think I've spent a Thanksgiving or a Passover anywhere else.
> **Walter** I envy you that. ... the connection to your family's history through your family's home. To live in the same place your father was raised – that's pretty remarkable, Eric. It must inform so much of your life. (Lopez, 2018: p. 59)

Family rituals such as festivities and personal stories, intertwined with collective history, work as milestones for the creation of one's one personal history: Eric's attachment to the house is an attachment to his family, something that Walter claims to envy, as the older man's life was mostly spent away from his own family, in shame and rejected for being gay. In as much as Eric's family informs his life, so does the absence of Walter's inform his; another young gay man escaping rurality, expecting to find in the big city others like him: "young people came to New York to "make it," to come out, to be artists, to make money, to have more sophisticated experiences, to have sex, to escape religion, and to be independent of their families" (20112: p. 29), writes Schulman.

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gender presumptions figure centrally in discourses of normative sexuality, and anal sex calls these presumptions into question. As Patton suggests, "desires centering on the anus cannot infallibly be stabilized to produce 'heterosexuality' and anal sex becomes a key site of (hetero)sexual danger of sexual reference" (118). To paraphrase Patton in Butlerian terminology, anal sex diffuses the "heterosexual matrix" meant to ensure and enforce the internal coherence of gender and sexuality, and since the rectum cannot reliably signify male vis-à-vis female anatomy, it poses the risk and dangers of diffusion (cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6)" (Huebenthal, 2017: p. 11).

[59] "[B]arebacking reformulates heteronormative notions of family in a way that shifts the queer subject from somewhere outside or on the fringes of the reproductive family unit to an integral part of its structure. The sheer extent to which this conception of family lies outside the heteronorm, with an impetus on building love and kinship between men rather than procreation and productivity, renders it a utopic practice" (Hann, 2020: 119).

While Henry got married to a woman, with whom he had two children before moving to New York with them, where he met Walter, Walter's path was rather different that Henry's, although very similar to Toby, decades younger than him:

> Like so many before me, I arrived in New York a refugee from a home that had grown hostile to presence. I was aware from an early age that I made people uncomfortable. I was moony and effeminate. But small towns have a peculiar habit of tolerating their feathery, delicate boys – provided that they are born to wealthy and (needless to say) white families. Once I grew older, my parents sent me to ministers, to psychiatrists, to fitness instructors even. Every walk through town felt dangerous, every school day possessed the potential for violence. I would steal my mother's pills, hoarding them, planning my suicide. (Lopez, 2012: p. 61)

Walter addresses, though briefly, the same intersection between race, class and sexual orientation that Lopez intended to question and complexify in *The Inheritance*: to be gay, working class and black in America is not the same as being gay, upper class and white, as most of the men featured in the play. Regardless of that privilege, it would be a mistake to just erase the complexity of intersections of race, class and sexual orientation and how they work together to either benefit or oppress someone. Walter, who decides not to end his life but to seek his dignity, realising that he "didn't want to change and what I hated was not my nature, but rather my circumstances" (Lopez, 2018: p. 62), moves to New York, inspired by the Stonewall riots, arriving in 1981, the year of the first reported HIV/AIDS case. As Walter explains, his relationship with Henry was not as planned as it was forced upon them by the fear of contagion and it is at this moment that they buy and move into the house that Eric will then inherit:

> I was never meant to be Henry's life partner. I was the person he was dancing with when the music stopped. By that point, whispers of disease had graduated to rumors. Rumors became stories. And stories became fact. ... For five years, Henry and I clung to one other for safety, for comfort, as the city burned around us. By the summer of 1987, we had had enough of funerals and hospital visits and the sight of once-vital men laid to waste. We looked for a house as far from civilization as we could find. We finally stumbled across a rambling old farmhouse on an aimless country road, three hours north of here, built in the late eighteenth century. It's set off from the road so you have the illusion of being alone in the world. And in front of the house, my favorite thing on the property: an enormous cherry tree that has been there since the time George Washington was out terrorizing them. (Lopez, 2018: p. 63)

For Hann, Walter "aligns his own experiences with oppressed gay men of the past, present, and future, establishing connections of kinship generated by shared forms of suffering" (2020: p. 110) by evoking

the image of the burning Sodom and Gomorrah (and the scene of the burning of Hirschfield's research centre also comes to mind), New York in the 1980s as well as a tree from the time of George Washington:

> Walter's words demonstrate a historical consciousness that is deeply political and connected to a desire for queer utopian thinking. He resists the temptation to close off the homophobia of 1980s America to a fixed, historical era, as such a move may seem to paper over subsequent examples of governmental or societal homophobia ... Walter refuses to settle for the apparent progress that has been made in the name of queer liberation, instead striving for what Muñoz describes as 'a collective political becoming' that encourages generations of queer folk to step 'out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter' (Hann, 2020, pp. 110-111).

The tree, a symbol of inheritance, genealogy and continuum, becomes here a symbol for physical healing, a natural element, that, unlike the men, has survived through time and AIDS, a family tree that links all the men that have set foot in the house: "the tree is here and not here; real and imaginary; extant in the past, present, and future" (Hann, 2020: p. 113). In *Middlesex*, this symbol was also used as a synonym for heritage, as Cal explains that mulberry trees, the trees that feed his grandmother's silk worms, were brought to Greece from China and how Cal's family also took them to The United States, smuggling them in the same way that Cal's 'intersex gene' was smuggled through generations, establishing a long line – a silk thread – between past and present:

> My family might never have become silk farmers if it hadn't been for the Emperor Justinian, who, according to Procopius, persuaded two missionaries to risk it. In a.d. 550, the missionaries snuck silkworm eggs out of China in the swallowed condom of the time: a hollow staff. They also brought the seeds of the mulberry tree. As a result, Byzantium became a center for sericulture. Mulberry trees flourished on Turkish hillsides. Silkworms ate the leaves. Fourteen hundred years later, the descendants of those first stolen eggs filled my grandmother's silkworm box on the *Giulia*. I'm the descendant of a smuggling operation, too. (Eugenides, 2002: p. 71)

In *The Inheritance*, although the tree failed to save the men who came to the house as a last stop before death, it did convey to the house an element of safety, something quite needed in what was an extremely dark and difficult time for gay men, who would, if not perish, live to see all their loved ones dying:

> ... deep in the trunk of the tree are a set of pig's teeth that were put there I don't know how many generations ago. The superstition among the colonials was that if you bite the bark of the tree, it will cure all your ailments.

> **Eric** Does it?
>
> **Walter** No. Of course it doesn't. Pure superstition. And yet, there in the country, on rolling pastureland, with flowers and breezes and cherry trees with pig's teeth stuck in the bark, there was no death, there was no illness, there was no loss or danger. Henry bought it the next day and we lived there for a year without ever leaving the area. We cooked, we gardened, we read underneath the cherry tree. And we avoided all news from our friends, from the outside world. (Lopez, 2018: p. 64)

When Eric finally visits the house, he is taken aback by the fertility of the garden, the grandiosity of the tree, the simplicity of a house which has, for Eric and Walter, a long and moving history. Again, the house encapsulates past and present, the legacy of one generation to another, as well as a past lost to AIDS, a history that was obliterated by the death of many and a shared culture that could have had a different impact on Eric's generation. As Love writes, "as long as homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget" (Love, 2007: p. 29). Eric is welcomed into the house by the ghost of Peter, the first man to visit and die in the house, someone who Walter had come across when visiting New York for the first time in a year:

> Eric thought of Walter, and the story of his friend Peter who came here to die, of all the young men who came here to find peace in their final days. He thought of all the men who died in those years and what they might have become, what the world would look like today had they been allowed to end their story on their own terms. Eric wondered what his life would be like if he had not been robbed of a generation of mentors, of poets, of friends and, perhaps even lovers. Eric breathed and filled his lungs with the past. It stretched before him now, limitless – the past and the present, mingling together inside this house, inside him. (Lopez, 2018: p. 154)

Knowing that his friend is ill and does not have a place to stay, Walter takes him to the house, taking care of him, "cleaned him when he fouled himself ... held him as he wept in grief ... comforted him as he screamed in pain" (Lopez: 2018: p. 65). Again, Lopez addresses the discrimination, fragility, precariousness and the lack of support from families that many gay men experienced after contracting HIV:

> Peter had 'the look', the tell tale sign that someone was infected. His handsome face was sunken and sallow, his muscles had melted away. He was also, I discovered, essentially homeless. His landlord evicted him. He'd been estranged from his family for years. He had nowhere to go. We took the next train upstate and phoned for a cab. The driver took one look at Peter and fled. (Lopez, 2018: pp. 64-65)

The house, that is intended to be a shelter from grief and loss to both men is then transformed, to Henry's disapproval, in a place for them to be taken care of during their final moments and when Henry discovers Peter dying at their home, "flew into a rage, accusing me [Walter] of betrayal, of bringing the plague into our home. I had never seen such fear on a man's face" (Lopez, 2018: p. 65), leaving Walter alone for several months. For Henry, it is inconceivable to imagine a gay man dying of AIDS in "the room where your [Henry's] kids sleep" (Lopez, 2018: p. 237), for he thinks he is "responsible to you [Walter], to my boys, to myself and no one else" (Lopez, 2018: p. 237), while for Walter is not only family but a community that matters. For Carbajal,

> Walter and Henry's escape to the country reveals a homonormativity the play cannot altogether dispel ... While Lopez's play verbally critiques the avoidance of social responsibility, its theatrical manifestation insidiously embraces social sequestration, since it perpetuates an escape of the material urban realities of the AIDS crisis taking place offstage. (Carbajal, 2021, p. 7).

A family home that sheltered Henry and Walter from death and loss became a communal home for dying, and if for Henry this is incompatible with his relationship and family-making with Walter, for the Walter its seems to be the right thing to do for others who are in need of a home at that particular time:

> I spent the first few weeks of my exile wondering if I was wrong to show such kindness to a friend. But, oh Eric, to see Peter's ravaged face, and to look into those frightened eyes, I believe that if I had left Peter on that sidewalk, returning to my place of peace without him, I would have ruined that house for myself far more than I ever could have ruined it for Henry. I eventually came to see that leaving the city and our friends behind was as unforgivable an act of cowardice as I have ever performed. The answer, I realized, was not to shut the world out but rather to fling the doors open and to invite it in. And so, while Henry's furious silence roared at me from across the Atlantic, I brought others in their last days up to the house. I replayed that scene over and over with friends, acquaintances and eventually strangers. One by one they came to my house, and one by one they died there. After several months, Henry had his lawyers draw up the paperwork to name me the sole owner of the house. (Lopez, 2018: p. 65)

As Carbajal writes:

> Walter realizes that individual survival is not enough, that he can only become fully realized as a person in a "community of others." In the face of both social and familial disowning, the HIV+ men and their HIV- hosts forge a queer community in Walter's house, and, in turn, Walter's "will to will" his estate to his socially aware friend Eric, due to his imminent homelessness, becomes a token of intergenerational queer friendship. (2021, p. 7).

Aware that his relationship with Henry cannot exist inside that house, Walter decides to dedicate himself to taking care of others, opening up the house's doors to those who need its security; later, Eric will also do it while taking care of Leo, although he turns it into his family home right after that. Even though this shift may be a result of presuming and implying that people do not die of AIDS anymore (although they do, especially when prevented from having access to medication, which is what would have happened to Leo had Eric not provided him shelter and access to healthcare), the house could have been used to shelter the increasing numbers of young LGBTQI+ individuals made homeless or in extreme poverty by the lack of familial support and rejection, one of the major factors to contribute for youth LGBTQI+ homelessness, job insecurity or discrimination[60]. The house is then again closed to the outside world, in the sense that even though the play does acknowledge that black, working class gay men are more prone to get infected, none of them is actually featured on the play, shutting the door to that debate; it is as if family-making, for both Eric and Henry are incompatible with taking care of their community. While visiting the house with Eric, several ghosts appear and Henry recollects the moment he found Peter dying at the house. In a tone similar to the one of *The Great Believers*, Henry starts to regret having put distance between himself and Walter, as well as not having faced the men dying of AIDS, due to fear of contagion, enhancing the trauma that was left by HIV/AIDS, particularly among those who have survived it. As it happens between Fiona and her daughter, Henry and Eric also see their relationship affected by the virus, in the sense that it has, in both Henry and Fiona, created an inability to connect:

> Henry, if you keep running from this –
> **Young Man 4** - from what happened at that house, from what is happening to our friends, to our community
> **Young Man 4 and Eric** - you will never know peace.

[60] Many studies have been published about the high percentage of LGBTQI+ individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as the abuse suffered at shelters, mainly by transgender individuals forced to live with individuals of the same sex assigned at birth, as well as the higher probability of finding themselves in a situation of homelessness and poverty, something that is entirely missing from the play, regardless of its concern with estate and heritage. In a report from 2020, by UCLA's School of Law, it was stated that: "[s]tudies find that between 20% and 45% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, at least 2 to 4 times more than the estimated percentage of all youth who identify as LGBTQ (e.g., Baams et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2015). Among young adults aged 18-25, LGBT people have a 2.2 times greater risk of homelessness than non-LGBT people (Morton, Samuels, et al., 2018). Family rejection of LGBTQ youth is a major factor contributing to their high levels of homelessness (e.g., Choi et al., 2015; Ecker, 2016), and that rejection diminishes not only the possibility of reunification but also family ties for LGBT people into adulthood and elder years. LGBT youth and adults face challenges in accessing homeless shelters and services, such as harassment and violence, staff who are not equipped to appropriately serve LGBT people, and sex-segregated facilities in which transgender people are housed according to their sex assigned at birth (which leads many transgender people to go unsheltered instead). LGBT people face widespread harassment and discrimination by housing providers, who, for example, studies have shown are less likely to respond to rental inquiries from same-sex couples (Friedman et al., 2013) and are more likely to quote male same-sex couples higher rents (Levy et al., 2017) than comparable different-sex couples." (Romero, Goldberg, Vasquez, 2020: p. 3-4)

> **Henry** That is my decision.
>
> **Young Man 3** You decided that no house, no community, no nation would ever be strong enough to save you. ...
>
> **Young Man 3** You had to turn off the part of you that fears. The part that reaches with desire. Eric The part that loves.
>
> **Henry** I couldn't touch another man without thinking about death. ... Men were dying all around me. Men I knew. Men I loved. My friends. My peers. ... I can't change the past but I will not stare at it. I choose to close the door on it and leave it where it is. That is my right as someone who was there, as someone who survived. It is my right as someone who cannot close his eyes without seeing the faces of those he lost. (Lopez, 2018: pp. 238-239)

When Walter dies, he leaves the house to Eric, although this is hidden from him by Henry and his sons, who presume that Walter may have not been sane when he decided to do so, presuming, as Nora's son in *The Great Believers*, that blood is the sole reason to pass down an inheritance. Henry, who despises the house, eventually passes it onto Eric, when Eric tells Henry that he cannot be married to him anymore. While for Henry and his sons, the house is a piece of estate which is a family heirloom, "to Walter it had been more than a house; it had been a spiritual possession, for which he sought a spiritual heir" (Lopez, 2018: p. 110). The second time Eric walks inside the house, after having sent all his belongings, as well as his grandmother's, to be stored there, Eric feels at home after seeing that Margaret has taken all his objects and displayed them, the objects that used to be at the apartment that Eric while living with Toby, and it is clear that, by seeing all his belongings for the first time in two years, Eric feels more at home at Walter's house than at Henry's:

> **Margaret** You fit perfectly here as the books on the shelf. ...
>
> **Eric** Oh, no. I'm not going to be living here. I'm just here for a time. Just while Leo gets back to health.
>
> **Margaret** You can think that if you want. But this is your home, Eric. You may not know it's yours, but it is. (Lopez, 2018: p. 298)

By the end of the play, Henry visits the house again, in 2022, for Eric's 40th birthday. He reads from Leo's novel *The Inheritance*, a name that, as it happens in *Middlesex*, draws attention to the mechanics of the writing itself, in which he has been called Henry Wilcox, like the character in *Howard's End*. It seems that Henry finally finds a way to reconciliate with the past, the house, Walter and his friends, the dead and the alive. The ghost of Walter appears again, urging Henry, who apologises for having wasted time, to do what the men who died of AIDS could not do: "[y]ou live" (Lopez, 2018: 318).

> The late afternoon light diffused in the brilliant autumn leaves of the grand old cherry tree. How could Walter have known, how could he have seen how things would inevitably be? Henry looked all around him. For the first time he truly saw the beauty of it. Not the property itself, although the property was beautiful. No, what Henry saw was the beauty of his life. A life blessed by this house and Walter and Eric and all his friends both living and long dead … Finally in that moment, Henry saw it all. The past, the present and the future all at once, all in concert, all around him. (Lopez, 2018: p. 317)

Perhaps it is in this ending that the utopian potential of the play comes into being, as part, present and future intersect. As Pearl writes, the fact that "there is a pre-existing link, not only between gay men and death, but between gay men and loss, disappointment, and grief" (2013: p. 11), a link that pre-exists AIDS given the tragic nature of gay narratives due to violence, parental rejection, early death of lovers and friends and general homophobia. The fact that Lopez closes the play with the words "you live" points at a different direction, not only to gay narratives but also to gay men's experience, one that encompasses not grief but joy, not death but survival. As the poet Danez Smith writes on his experience as a black man living with HIV:

> it's not a death sentence anymore
> it's not a death anymore
> it's more
> it's a sentence
> a sentence (Smith, 2017: p. 45)

Over the years, the house will find many purposes "as a shelter, a refuge, a place of healing; a reminder of the pain, the fragility and the promise of life" (Lopez, 2018: p. 313). It is where Eric, his "life filled with love, with friendship, with family" (Lopez, 2018: p. 311) marries his second husband, where Eric dies, aged ninety-seven, reading by the fireplace, it is where he is buried, along with his husband and the AIDS victims who had been buried there. It is Eric's family, composed of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren that inherit the house, "which they maintain to this day as a cherished family home" (Lopez, 2018: p. 312). It is where Leo spends Christmas and Thanksgiving with Eric and his family, and it is there that Leo dies, in the same bed where Peter and many others died, while Eric holds his hand, his body upon the imprint of the bodies of many others, reminding one of Richard Campo's *Strata*, a palimpsest of inscriptions. *The Inheritance*, although it also dwells in community making and horizontal passing down of estate and legacy, ultimately gives in to reproductive futurity and "cannot imagine future queerness beyond a homonormative imitation of heterosexuality" (Carbajal, 2021, p. 14). Lopez makes sure that

Eric has left his frustrating relationship with Henry behind and found solace in reproduction and offspring: "its choice of chronological markings is homonormative rather than queer: crucially, Eric finds happiness in monogamy and in child-rearing, that is, as Halberstam (2005) reminds us, in the markers of time and the acquired social status of heterosexuality" (Carbajal, 2021, p. 15). This is also sustained by Hann:

> While I have identified flashes of utopianism throughout the play that problematize reproductive futurity and reject the notion that generations of gay men are somehow beholden to their forebears in a similar way to heteronormative generationalism, the kinship structures between *The Inheritance*'s central characters betray a politics that fails to challenge heteronormative familial or sexual boundaries. A majority of the protagonists monogamously couple up with men of similar ages to them, devoting parts of their lives to raising children in a way that emulates the heterosexual majoritarian culture. Leo, meanwhile, who spends much of the play as a sex worker and eventually contracts HIV, finds that 'while his body was quick to heal, his spirit moved slowly towards recovery', a recovery that ultimately leads to him finding his monogamous life partner … his past as sex worker is portrayed as pathologizing and deviant, the description of 'spiritual' recovery implicitly casting moral judgement over his failure to engage in normative, monogamous relationships that are not explicitly transactionary. The notions of kinship and generationalism espoused by the play, while subverting the heteronorm that familial bonds and structures of care are necessarily produced via generative relationships, remain in thrall to certain tenets of majoritarian sexuality that are explicitly repudiated by participants in bareback culture. (Hann, 2020: pp. 120-121).

The house is at the same time a place for living and dying – a ruin? – and it provided shelter for Eric's family, and its many generations, as well as for Leo, a part of Eric's chosen family. At different times, the house offers different possibilities and this promise of life, which seemed to have been reduced by AIDS in the 1980s, becomes now conceivable, for Leo, via medicine and the treatment of HIV related complications, and for Eric, by leaving offspring and a legacy of his own. The house seems to also encapsulate the needs to gay men according to the politics of its time: a shelter for those dying during the AIDS years, a private home for gay men who are now allowed to get married and have children. Lopez decided to encapsulate around sixty years of time in a single page, when describing the life and death of both Eric and Leo, something that seems to hint at the possibility of a future to the gay community, a future in which gay men are able to get married, access healthcare, defy death, loneliness and tragic ends. This ending seems the embodiment of what Dolan defines as utopian performatives, in the sense that it points at an utopian futurity, in the same sense that Muñoz defined it, one that is fleeting, in progress, that "calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like" (2009: p. 5):

> [u]topian performatives persuade us that beyond this "now" of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later (2009: p. 7).

Hann, echoing Dolan and Muñoz, emphasis the future instead of the present – "the future is queerness's domain (Muñoz, 2009: 1) – also reads *The Inheritance* within the context of utopian performances, arguing that, due to "its immediacy, insecure temporality, and proximity to its audience" (Hann, 2020: p. 103), performance has the ability to provide an alternative to the narratives of AIDS nostalgia. By portraying a utopian and imagined space of possibility, "*The Inheritance* is interested in exploring: striving (with varying degrees of success) towards an affective politics that seeks solutions to oppression through cross-generational alliance and temporal subversion" (Hann, 2020: 103-104), giving a home in which ghosts and bodies made of flesh share the haunted rooms of queer history.

3.6. Literary Legacies

But the house is not the only (im)material legacy in *The Inheritance*; there is an emphasis given to cultural and artistic creation as a part of connecting to the past, while also addressing, as *The Inheritance* also intends, the reality of a given group of people. As in *The Great Believers*, with Nora's legacy going into Yale's hands, E. M. Forster also works as a linking device between past and present, to build "an imagined community of the marginal and the excluded" (Love, 2007: p. 37), by bringing the past into the present, showing "this queering of time as a necessary part of Eric's inheritance as a gay man, insofar as he must reconcile himself with, and embrace, the generation of gay men lost to AIDS" (Carbajal, 2021, 8), in line with what Freeman writes on Derrida's hauntology as

> an ethics of responsibility toward the other across time – toward the dead or toward that which was impossible in a given historical moment, each understood as calls for a different future to which we cannot but answer with imperfect and incomplete reparations. ... time can produce new social relations and even new forms of justice that counter the chrononormative and chronobiopolitical. (Freeman, 2010: pp. 9-10)

Both *The Inheritance* and *The Great Believers*, albeit through different models, seem aware that "although memory can help us create better presents, it cannot be expected to eliminate the sorrows and losses of the past, which must remain part of our memories. Memory is neither clean nor comforting, but is messy business (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 25). Fiona struggles with regret for having not been around for her best friend's death, as she was givng birth, but tries to be a better mother and grandmother while the

shame felt by E. M. Forster is here perceived as a part of gay history, as well as the men that Margaret nursed into death. Julian appears to force Fiona to come to terms with the past, by putting it away and focusing on her legacy (composed of her daughter and her granddaughter) while Forster appears as a way of telling the men that there was indeed a time when gay men were forbidden to express their desire, while Walter and Henry exist to convince the men that the AIDS years were, indeed, a tragic and traumatic time for gay men. While Fiona is overload with memory, a trauma that is still in her given that she was a direct witness of the AIDS years, as well as Margaret, who is still haunted by the faces of the dead, the younger men from *The Inheritance* are experiencing trauma second-hand, haunted by it, but aware that the reality of gay men has changed greatly, even if they are HIV positive although they still have their own challenges, such as gentrification, the loss of gay culture and even acts of violence such as the Pulse shooting. The two texts do share some preoccupations: the inheritance of grief, the importance of remembering the past, the legacy left by art and literature, the need to care for those in need.

When Toby first meets Adam at a bookstore, the latter has bought Cavafy's poems, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name*, and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*, books that the audience will immediately recognise as part of gay canon. Besides the presence of Forster in the play, as ghost and actual character, these books also work as references for the establishment of a transgenerational legacy. Right at the beginning of the play, the men discuss what to write with E. M. Forster (named Morgan in the play):

> **Young Man 1** He has a story to tell - it is banging around inside him, aching to come out. But how does he begin? He opens his favorite novel, hoping to find inspiration in its first familiar sentence. And in reading those words, he finds himself once again in the gentle, reassuring presence of their author. ...
> **Morgan** What is your story about?
> **Young Man 1** Me. My friends. The men I've loved. And those I've lost.
> **Morgan** Goodness me. Friendship, love, loss. Sounds like you're off to a very good start. (Lopez, 2018: p. 7-8)

This looking back into the past in order to write new narratives that both respond to but also challenge the narratives of others finds its direct expression in the play in the first line of Forster's *Howard's End*: "one may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (Lopez, 2018: p. 8). This sentence, which will then be re-appropriated by Leo when he writes his own book, "[o]ne may as well begin with Toby's voicemails to his boyfriend", a clear intertext with Forster's book as well as with the play itself, as the audience realises that Leo's book is actually the narrative of the group of young men, and another volume to add to the long legacy of AIDS narratives. As Pearl writes,

> literature has for a long time been a formative cultural influence on gay identity. Insofar as "the arts have ... served as an arena in which homosexuals can address and redress the inequities of their social status" the gay community's reliance on literature and other forms of cultural representation stems directly from gay men's experience of oppression. (2013: p. 6)

As Fink writes on his work on care and HIV narratives, and how disability narratives should also include HIV narratives, and therefore, also contradict "assimilationist and capitalist politics" (Fink, 2020: p. 2), while also taking into account how caretaking is underpaid and often performed by queer people of colour[61] Fink intends, after realising that most young people do not have access to HIV/AIDS early narratives, to establish a link with the older generation, something that seems to also be at the heart of Lopez's text:

> to create an opportunity for a generation that lost lovers, friends, and family to AIDS to pass down their experiences to those like myself who are continually looking to this older generation to make sense of our own bodies and our relationships to sexuality, to gender, and to HIV. This book's central argument is that *literary and archival narratives of HIV caregiving offer a model of disability kinship that supports ongoing sexual and gender self-determination into the present* [emphasis added] (Fink, 2020: p. 2)

For Leo and these men, even though Forster's time was marked by different challenges then theirs, human relationships are somewhat similar and it is that affection that allows them to communicate through a literary legacy, marking, according to Love, a shift in queer studies towards the politics of feeling, on the relations with queer figures of the past and how and why we care for them, a look at "the identifications, the desires, the longings, and the love that structure the encounter with the queer past" (2007: p. 31):

> **Morgan** Tell me: what is it about the novel that speaks to you? What do you find in its pages?
> **Young Man 2** Guidance?
> **Young Man 8** Compassion.
> **Young Man 4** Wisdom.

[61] "Drawing overt links between disability and HIV resists assimilationist and capitalist politics by leveraging "productively unruly bodies" (McRuer, "Critical" Investments" 236) toward confronting ableist normalcy, increasing access to public space, and building antiracist coalitions (McRuer, "Critical Investments" 236, 230, 226; Linton 162–63; Sandahl 50; Stockdill 62; Far- row, "When My Brother Fell"). By regarding HIV as a disability, the caregiving activism to meet access needs, to counter stigma, and to connect individual body problems to larger struggles for antiracism, access to health care, and decolonization links ongoing histories of HIV activism to broader transnational movements (Bell et al. 439; Hobson, *Lavender* 3; Hobson, "Thinking" 205). Early HIV archives can be connected to ongoing queer and trans disability movements to support the self-determination of those who fail to conform to body norms" (Fink, 2020: p. 2-3).

Young Man 5 I love its humanity.

Young Man 7 Its honesty.

Young Man 1 It comforts me.

Young Man 10 Not me. I mean, it's a great book, don't get me wrong. And the movie's good. But, I mean, the world is so different now. I can't identify with it at all.

Young Man 9 It's been a hundred years.

Young Man 7 The world has changed so much.

Young Man 3 Our lives are nothing like the people in your book.

Morgan How can that be true? Hearts still love, don't they? And break. Hope, fear, jealousy, desire. Your lives may be different. But the feelings are the same[62]. The difference is merely setting, context, costumes. But those are just details. (Lopez, 2018: p. 9)

Later in the play, the men will once again analise Forster's heritage, but in a different light. When Forster pushes Toby to be honest about his past, Toby implies that Forster was not honest either, something contested by the other men, who claim that they are able to tell their stories now because of writers like Forster. "He locked himself in the closet all his life", says Toby, to which Forster replies "you now have the chance to be honest, which is something I was never given" (Lopez, 2018: p. 146). Toby accusing the English writer of having been coward for having lived until 1970, having seen Stonewall and not having come out, and regardless of having written *Maurice* in 1912, he "hid it from the world for fifty-six years" (Lopez, 2018: p. 146):

> Just imagine what would have happened if you had published a gay novel lifetime! You might have toppled mountains. You might have even saved lives. But you didn't do that. (*To the Lads*) Morgan had his chance to be honest and he fucking squandered it. He left others to do the heavy lifting and then he slipped it in at the end. (*To Morgan*.) And because of that, you're fucking irrelevant. You're just books on a shelf gathering dust. ... You have nothing to teach us because you can't possibly understand what it's like to live in freedom, to demand choices for yourself. ... Toby's gonna fuck who he wants and live how he likes because that is his right as a gay man in the world you did nothing to help build. (Lopez, 2018: pp. 146-147)

If the importance of figures such as Forster is acknowledged, it is also clear that this retrospective look is informed by the 'achievements' of the gay community, with Toby demanding of Forster to proudly assume his homosexuality in a time when most individuals would not, over imposing a narrative of progress that

[62] "Noticeable differences, he [Forster] believes, are primarily superficial and transient, while the experiences and affective relations shared between gay men are anything but" (Hann, 2020: 114).

surpasses the reality of being queer in the 19th century. Hann claims that Toby's understanding of the past is marked by an heterosexual reproductive futurity, one that looks into the past in a one-way path towards knowledge and enlightening, in the same way that children learn from parents:

> Toby's definition of queer community, kinship, and ultimately, liberation, therefore, is bound up with a linear pedagogical practice in which younger queer generations inherit wisdom from their older counterparts, leaving Morgan, as a historically closeted gay man, to embody the figure of an estranged, neglectful parent. (Hann, 2020: p. 114).

Love points out how the need to "construct a positive genealogy of gay identity" often results in an uncertainty of where and how to place figures like Radcliffe Hall, Willa Cather and, one could add, Forster, figures "who haunt the historical record" (2007: p. 32), due to their reluctance in identifying as queer. This denial and refusal to acknowledge a difficult past or their admittance "in order to redeem them" (Love, 2007: p. 32) is often made, as it happens with Forster in Lopez's play, to "make good on their suffering, transforming their shame into pride after the fact ... a way of counteracting the shame of having a dark past" (Love, 2007: p. 32) The feelings of shame and self-hatred before Stonewall are also still present in our time, "as indications of material and structural continuities between these two eras" and "we cannot do justice to the difficulties of queer experience unless we develop a politics of the past" (Love, 2007: p. 21). Forster is a remembrance of the shameful past when men would not assume their homosexuality, but he is treated as a forefather, a figure that sets out a continuum from modernity to the present, of hidden figures within a queer history that is written retrospectively, through "recollections of exercises of freedom pioneered by previous gay generations to create a collective connection with the past that enables us as we transform the present" (Castiglia and Reed, 2012: p. 10).

Moreover, the play also glosses over the need for queer role models, for community making through texts and narratives and as Forster explains, each generation will find its voice and a way of narrative victory and struggle:

> The past must be faced. It must be learned from. But it cannot be revised. I had my time. Now it is yours. ... Oh, my lads, how I do love you. You have allowed me to see... what I could not live. What a gift! I think your lives are beautiful. And I know at what cost they have come. Tell your story bravely. It is a story worth telling. Take care of yourselves. Take care of each other. (Lopez, 2018: p. 148)

After failing to make a profit[63] in The United States as it had in England[64], Lopez wrote a piece in The New York Times about what he intended, and what he did not want to address in *The Inheritance*: the piece reads as a defence of the play and Lopez explains the backlash he suffered from many critics about the lack of representation of the play. Lopez, a Puerto Rican writer, makes a powerful claim for the lack of representation of queer Latinx and people of colour when claiming how the adaptation of Forster's *Howard's End* had a profound impact on him, perhaps as a first example of queerness on screen:

> My journey to writing it began when I was 15 years old, watching the Merchant Ivory film adaptation of *Howards End*. Somehow a gay Puerto Rican kid from the Florida panhandle was able to see some part of his experience reflected back in the story of the Schlegel sisters. He could identify with scenes of Londoners making sense of life at the turn of the last century, and even find a version of his *abuela* in the character of Ruth Wilcox. (2020)

Lopez expresses, both inside at outside the play, the ability that literature has of establishing dialogues between different contexts, realities, times, geographies and even cultural backgrounds. In a conversation with Leo, Forster will address the writing of *Maurice*, as well what was perceived as a homosexual relationship in the end of the nineteenth century, and how, regardless of the general lack of rights, representation or even a name for same-sex relationships, some people still found a way to be together. When it comes to gay experience, activities such as cruising were the way that gay men had to meet, secretly and in spaces dedicated only to their meetings, outside of the time and space of heterosexuality; it's in these spaces, with the lack of references or role models, that gay culture was created:

> So many of us were never given a healthy example of what it means to be homosexual. Which means, of course, no one ever taught us how to be ourselves, how to love, how to accept love. We couldn't find it in our cultures and so we had to find it in each other. Clandestinely, fearfully. And sometimes joyfully. Our educations occurred in parks, in public toilets, on these very dunes of Fire Island. Or Hampstead Heath, busier than Oxford Street on some summer nights. It was all dangerous and forbidden and furtive and wonderful. And along the way we hurt each other. Sometimes we caused each other great pain. (Lopez, 2018: p. 240)

[63] There is a point to be made regarding the cost of the play (approximately 9 million dollars) and how a play that is expected to make a comment about poverty and economic inequality is aimed at an audience that can afford not one but two Broadway priced tickets, for the play was divided in two parts. Its failure at the box office may also be a result of not just poor ticket turn out but also of having been early closed due to the pandemic.

[64] "The gushing accolades earned by *The Inheritance* in its initial runs at the Young Vic and London's West End demonstrate that a sanitized and gender-conforming two-part play focused on contemporary white middle-class gay men can be highly popular" (Carbajal, 2021, pp. 15-16).

When asked if he recognized the name, Edward Carpenter, to which Leo replies "no", Forster explains that "that is regrettable if unsurprising", since LGBTQI+ individuals, even though they existed, were often obliterated from history, as seen when analysing Transparent. Then, in another moment of "second-hand gay history", Forster tells the story of Carpenter:

> Victorian-era poet, philosopher, and one time Anglican priest. He lived in the English countryside with his husband George Merrill. Of course, they didn't use that word to describe their relationship but theirs was a true marriage. I visited them in 1912 and you cannot know what it was like at that time to encounter two men living together openly, happily, as a couple. By this time, was thirty-three and, while I knew that I was homosexual, I had still never touched another man with desire. (Lopez, 2018: p. 241)

In the same way that Forster works for the young men as a role model and inspiration, so did Carpenter and Merill to him, being this influence physically when "Merrill reached over and touched me [Forster]", something that for the English writer, who was yet to physically engage with another men "unleashed a creative spring in me [Forster] unlike any I'd ever felt" (Lopez, 2018: p. 242). Hence, *Maurice* was created, in Forster's attempt to encapsulate what he perceived as a marriage between two men – even if he did not have an appropriate word to it – and without being himself able to articulate his own desire, aiming at starting a new type of narrative, one that was not tragic, a contribution for a queer canon of texts that intends to attest for the presence of queer people throughout history:

> I wanted to capture what I saw, to write a simple love story about two ordinary affectionate men. I wanted it to be as revolutionary as Carpenter and Merrill's relationship. And it was imperative that it have a happy ending. The newspapers were filled with too many stories that ended with a young lad dangling from a noose or carted off to prison for his nature. I was determined to change that narrative, at least in fiction. Writing *Maurice* was the most terrifying, and the most exhilarating thing I had ever done. Hiding it from the world was the most shameful. My greatest regret is that I never lived to understand the impact that it had on people's lives. If I had even an inkling that you needed to read it as badly as I needed to write it, I might have been braver. But you have shown me that my book was then, as you are now, a link in this chain of gay men teaching one another, loving one another, hurting one another, understanding one another. This inheritance of history, of community, and of self. (Lopez, 2018: p. 242)

3.7. Fantasy Mothers

> "Te necesito, mamá! No sé cómo he podido vivir todos estos años sin ti."
> "No me digas eso, Raimunda, que me pongo a llorar. Y los fantasmas no lloran."
> Raimunda and Irene, *Volver*

Once again, we are faced with a group of men that, not having a blood family around, are expected to take care of each other, while creating new family structures. As it happens with *The Great Believers*, a woman plays a central key in the narrative when it comes to providing for the men, giving in to the stereotype of women, and mothers in particular, as caretakers. Margaret, as it happened with Fiona, stands as a central figure as a type of mother that takes care of her many diseased children, as she accompanied them in their final moments, while the men stand as doubles of her own son who, though gone, is reflected on many other gay men. As with Toby's mother, Margaret also neglected and rejected her son. Again, rurality and religion come into play and influence how these women perceived their sons' sexuality: Margaret was a teenage mother, having Michael when she was 17 – "Michael and I were both children when he was born" (Lopez, 2018: p. 299) – and she was unprepared but willing to love him, as she, for "the first time in ... life I understood that I was needed. It was the first time in my life I truly felt love" (Lopez, 2018: p. 299). Michael, "effeminate as a child" (Lopez, 2018: p. 299), was insulted by others, while his mother also used "less compassionate words ... cloaked ... in faith" (Lopez, 2018: p. 299). Margaret buys Michael weights, so that he can become more masculine, overcompensating like Cal in *Middlesex*, to no avail: Michael, as many others before him (Henry, Eric, Walter) leaves to New York. The night before leaving, Margaret urges him to find a girl and start a family, to which Michael replies by coming out. At this particular moment of rejection, another type of death is enacted, one that Pearl and Levidow claim to be part of gay experience as well, and one that proceeded AIDS:

> The appearance of AIDS among gay men, then, was not the first time that homosexuality in men has been associated with loss, mourning, or death. One writer comments, for example, that "[p]arents' fears that their children might become gay have symbolized various death fears," and not only "that of biological death from AIDS," but also "death of innocence, death of heterosexual identity, death of parental adult authority, death of the natural order even a feeling that a child turned gay might just as well be dead". There is a legacy of these associations that pre-exist AIDS and also seem to anticipate AIDS, a condition and a historical moment in which these associations are made corporeal by actual illness and death, by calls for mourning that now have ill and dead bodies connected with the underlying grief. (Pearl, 2013: p. 8)

There's also in Margaret a sense of both guilt and atonement, for her own inability to fully comprehend her son, translated in the motherly care directed at other lonely ill gay men:

> What the hell did I know? ... In truth, I was the one who was afraid. Afraid of losing him. Afraid he'd be harmed. Afraid for his soul. I told him he could not be my son and be like that. I told him he would die of disease or violence. I told him he would spent eternity in hell. [...] The damage had been done. I was no longer his mother, his protector, his one safe person in the world. If I had known that night that he would only live another seven years, I would have held him in his arms and told him I loved him. (Lopez, 2018: p. 300)

Instead of connecting with her son, Margaret exchanges brief phone calls with him, never asking him about his life, refusing to acknowledge his sexuality. It is when Walter calls her, to explain that Michael is at the house, dying, that Margaret comes to see her son, whom she fails to recognize due to the many changes brought upon his body by AIDS. After Michael's death, Margaret decides to return to the house, and along with Walter, create a makeshift hospice to take care of the young men, to provide them security, dignity and also comfort in the time of death, and especially a sense of a familial environment, in a dual act of affection, one towards the men and from the men to Margaret, who tries to expiate her guilt:

> More men came. Men like Michael, who had nowhere else to go. Over and over scenes like that played out in this house, as Walter and I did what we could to comfort these men. I held their hands as I held Michael's, as if they were my own child. I asked them about their pasts, their dreams that had been thwarted, their lives that had been interrupted and their futures that had been taken from them. Questions I should have spent seven years asking my son. (Lopez, 2018: p. 302)

There is a list of the men's names in the attic of the house, a private record of the plague and a reminder of the need to document a past so fragile as the one of the gay community, something present in projects such as Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman's *The Act Up Oral History Project,* an online archive of interviews with the members of the ACT UP. Through naming and direct or indirect testimony, these individual memories create a larger patchwork of a narrative about HIV/AIDS that has often been erased and misremembered. To Fink, these "HIV narratives thus further expose the ways in which capitalism and neoliberalism, racism and colonialism, and anti-queer and anti-trans violence create barriers to giving and receiving mutual care" (Fink, 2020: p. 8). Margaret has started to forget the names of these men but not their faces, for "[t]hose faces have stayed with me [Margaret] all these years, like ghosts. ... A haunting, if you will. A necessary haunting" (Lopez, 2019: p. 303), bringing the past into the present:

> [t]he past is in the present in the form of a haunting. This is what, among other things, we imagined for queer history, since it involves openness to the possibility of being haunted, even inhabited, by ghosts. What is transmitted in the co-habitation of ghostly past and present is related to survival, to "living well,"

> and to the "pleasures of mortal creatures," survivals and pleasures that have little to do with normative under- standings of biological reproduction. (2007: p. 194)

This haunting seems to work as an intersection of mourning and melancholia, to use Pearl's working concepts, for if mourning "is the working through of an identifiable loss until that lost object has been relinquished and eventually replaced" (2013, p. 14), one could perceive Margaret's replacement of her son with the other men as such. Melancholia, as "a pathological inability to work through a loss, to the point where the loss, though initially concrete, can be later unidentifiable, or thought to be standing in for an earlier, repressed, loss" (Pearl, 14) seems to be found in the way that the names of the men are slowly being erased from Margaret's memory, although always present through haunting, always in place of her lost son. The mourning of her son has seemed to shift into a melancholic recollection of faces upon faces of the replacements of her son, as she gives in to "a willingness to live with ghosts and to remember the most painful, the most impossible stories" (Love, 2007: p. 43). Again, a photo album is brought out, when Margaret shows Leo photographs of Michael as a child, of mother and son smiling together in photographs, with "a love he [Leo] had never known as a child" (Lopez, 2018: p. 303), causing Margaret to cry in Leo's arms when he tells her so. Once more, it is at a time of loss that these chosen families come together, disrupting a family vertical structure in favour of a collective effort to preserve both dignity and memory at the time of death and after. While in *The Great Believers* Nico's parents wanted to keep his son around during his last days, away from his friends and in a hospital, probably alone, in a final act of keeping an appearance of family bliss, Margaret is truly regretful of having rejected her son, and vows to protect other gay men that had also been rejected by their own family. As Walter says, to address the ambivalent feelings of parents to gay men towards them, and the act of taking care of them, "Javier went home to die in his mother's house. Jonathan's family won't take him back" (Lopez, 2018: p. 67). When "institutions including biological family and the medical system" (Fink, 2020: p. 8) failed people living (and dying) with AIDS by not providing them with structures of care giving, it was up to friends and activists to take care of the ill, a symptom of the "neo-liberal replacement of the state by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)" (Hobson in Fink, 2020: p. 8). Taking as an example narratives of AIDS such as Schulam's, Fink claims that "[t]hrough these HIV narratives, disability is reframed not as an individual or pathological problem but as powerful in generating chosen family when biological kin fail to care" (2020: p. 78), and perhaps Makkai's text could also fall into this category.

In *The Great Believers*, Fiona's urgent desire to reconnect with her daughter arises exactly from the same feeling that Margaret feels: guilt. When Yale was dying, Fiona was going into labor, leaving Yale alone. Moreover, Yale's mother, who was mostly absent from his life, not due to Yale's homosexuality but

because being a mother was incompatible with being an actress, appeared at the hospital to visit Yale four days before he died. While growing up, Yale would look for his mother in films and TV shows, only to find mother figures who enacted the same family structure that he longed to have; his mother is a mother for him and for every other American, a fantasy mother:

> He hated it … on a gut level, the humiliation of being afforded only the same two-second shots of his mother that the entire rest of the country was given. Hated that he needed to watch, that he couldn't look away in indifference. Hated that he'd missed seeing her just now, hated that they'd all seen her without him, hated they were pitying him, hated that he hated it all so much.
> When Yale was seven his father had taken him to see *Breakfast at Tiffany's* – and Yale, knowing his mother was an actress, and that actresses disguised themselves for their roles, became convinced that his mother was the one playing Holly Golightly. He wanted her to be the one singing "Moon River", which seemed like just the sort of song his mother might sing to him if she were still around. He soon outgrew the fantasy, but for years, when he had trouble sleeping, he'd imagine Audrey Hepburn singing to him. (Makkai, 2018: p. 73)

Fiona, holding power of attorney, forbids Yale's mother from seeing him. Even though Yale's father did visit him "a couple of times but he kind of just stood around and it was so awkward" (Makkai, 2018: p. 389), Fiona feels entitled, due to her legal and also emotional bound to Yale, to send his mother away, particularly because Yale had told Fiona that he did not want to see his mother. She does realise that not wanting his mother at the hospital was also a way for her to be his sole caretaker, his only companion, without understanding that later her daughter will also turn away from her:

> I wasn't a mother yet, not really. I – all I could think was it might upset him to see her. But I was being possessive too, I know that know. He was *mine*, and here this woman came, and I didn't think about what she was going through. Or what it had taken for her to walk in there. … I imagined her messing up the treatment, trying to take charge the way my parents had with Nico. And I hated my own mother so much. (Makkai, 2018: p. 389)

Yale dies in the company of a nurse, without his family or friends around, something that, for Fiona, becomes a personal trauma and will damage her relationship with her own daughter: "I think I'm being punished for it now. I shut my own mother out and I sent Yale's mother away, and it all boomeranged me and hit me in the face" (Makkai, 2018: p. 391), in an understanding of history as cyclical, that does not break away from ideas of heritage. "How do you make up for it? What's a thing you could do that would make you feel better?" (Makkai, 2018: p. 391), asks Cecily, Nicolette's other grandmother and it

is exactly this urgency to correct the past that *The Inheritance* also intends to do. Fiona intends to move to Paris to stay closer to what is left of her blood family, "to make up for maybe being a depressed, shitty mother by being a decent grandmother" (Makkai, 2018: p. 400) while Eric inherits Walter's house, although its purpose is completely changed. It is clear that the trauma that Fiona has experienced from the many losses during the AIDS years still live in her, also influencing her relationship with her own family: "[t]rauma causes an incomplete eradication: the traumatic experience hovers, not forgotten but not remembered, on the edge of consciousness" (Castiglia and Reed, 2018: p. 10), just like another ghost. It is, however, relevant and pertinent to think of how these narratives both challenge the role of caretaker and parenthood, with the Jasons adopting a child and Eric caring for Leo, but also reinforce the argument that taking care, as it happened with Cal in *Middlesex*, who was, although he was living as a man, care for his mother as her daughter, is the role of female figures. Mothering and motherhood will be addressed in the following Chapter when analysing *The Argonauts* and queer pregnancy.

Mary Jean Chan, in a poem entitled "Conversation with Fantasy Mother", wonders about how easy it would have been to come out not to her own mother, who expects her daughter to be feminine and to marry to a man, but to her fantasy mother, one that fully accepts her daughter's sexual orientation, while providing care, something that is expected of any mother. Interestingly, as in *Middlesex*, Chan implies that the moment of coming out is also a second birth, one when she finally realizes that her (fantasy) mother loves her. This is also a moment when she is finally comfortable with her own body, her sexuality, finally feeling acceptance from others and therefore towards herself, in a strong comment on how queer individuals feel when accepted by their family:

> Dear fantasy mother, thank you
> for taking my coming out as calmly
> as a pond accepts a stone
> flung into its depths.
>
> You sieved my tears, added
> an egg, then baked a beautiful cake.
> You said: *Let us celebrate, for today*
> *You are reborn as my beloved.*.
>
> The candles gleamed and the icing
> was almost true – impossibly white –
> coated with the sweetness of
> sprinkles. We sat together

> at the table and ate. Afterwards,
> I returned to my room and touched
> all the forbidden parts of myself, felt
> a kindness I has not known in years. (Chan, 2019: p. 19)

3.8. A Haunting

> The happy phantom has no right to bitch.
> Tori Amos, "Happy Phantom"

The pages of a family album are often separated by translucent sheets of paper, shields that protect these memories while also blurring their contours, their characters becoming ghostly negatives of themselves, reclaimed by the past. These ghosts and haunting figures function in both *The Great Believers* and *The Inheritance* as reminders of the need to take action, to carry, from one generation to the next, of both blood and chosen families, a legacy of community, dialogue and protection since, as Eric asks "[i]f we can't have a conversation with our past, then what will be our future?" (Lopez, 2018: p. 92).

Moreover, both texts work with and through trauma, both expiating it and enduring it, as the AIDS years work as a haunting that follows both Fiona into her adult life, contaminating her own family life with guilt, the inability to be the mother she would like to have been, and a desperate need to make amends with the past as well as with her friends and family. The same happens with the men in *The Inheritance*, who struggle to find a balance between assimilation, family-making, and acknowledging a traumatic past while trying to design a more inclusive and equal present and future. As Love writes, "it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting. The dead can bury the dead all day long and still not be done" (2007: p. 1), and neither Fiona nor Margaret feel fully separated from the dead.

In *The Great Believers*, Yale's roommate at the hospital was "a guy who had ten Dixie cups lined up on the windowsill, each with an acorn planted inside. He was trying to sprout them before he died so he could give oak trees to ten of his friends" (Makkai, 2018: p. 404). Like the tree with the pig's teeth that casts a shadow over Eric and Walter's house, perhaps these oak trees have managed to survive and grow, as a memento for the lost ones, as a family tree for those who keep nurturing it. It is also of trees that the Argonaut was carved of. It is at family trees, child rearing and bodies in transition that the following and final chapter will look at, while analysing Maggie Nelson's memoir, *The Argonauts*.

Chapter 4. "In Drag as a Memoirist"[65]: Bodies in Transit and Family-making in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

4.1 *Gendernauts*

In Monika Treut's 1999 documentary *Gendernauts*, the German filmmaker travels to San Francisco, "the queer Meca" as described by many in the film, to meet several individuals who are, at the end of the millennium, opening up new possibilities of identification and when it comes to gender. In this "an affectionate, uncritical home video" (Steel, 1999), the audience is introduced to Annie Sprinkle, sexologist and sex work activist, Sandy Stone and Susan Striker, both transgender women and academics, Texas Tomboy, a transgender man and video artist, Max Wolf Valerio, a transgender man and writer, Jordy Jones, a transgender man who is a visual artist and the organizer of "Club Confidential", a space for drag kings and queens to perform and for the performance of any type of gender, Stanford, a model who seems to neither identify as man or women, Hida Viloria, an intersex person who appears in the film in what is clearly still an early phase of intersex representation, and Tornado, a cisgender bisexual woman who claims to work as a mother to Texas.

It is Sandy Stone who first refers to the word "gendernauts" in the documentary, as those who "never give up searching, they never give up adventuring, or questioning" (Jenner, 2021), while defining the many shifts that the bodies that are featured in the documentary have experienced when it comes to their sexual and gender identifications. With the fitting subtitle *A Journey Through Shifting Identities*, the documentary looks at many ways of expressing gender, at the process of taking testosterone, at the early days of internet and computer-made visual art, at an embryonic stage of providing appropriate healthcare to transgender individuals at the Tom Waddell Clinic and even a brief yet relevant look at intersexuality. Described as "a fascinating and candid portrait of 'a family of friends'" (Steel, 1999), *Gendernauts* is an early and pertinent artifact of transgender history, a glimpse into community and family-making, as well as how each individual finds their own way to change and adapt their bodies, not according to how others want them to be, but how they want to perceive themselves. As Stafford claims "'[g]ender confusion is a small price to pay for social progress" (Steel, 1999) and it is exactly what these individuals want to do: to confuse and disturb gender peace but, mainly, to live as they want to, unrestrained by gender. The metaphor of the Argonaut is too evident and productive not to use it in comparison to, and to provide a starting point, to an analysis of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, the final text to be analysed in this thesis.

[65] (Nelson, 2016: p. 142)

4.2. *The Argonauts*

Is it a wall
or a pit
or a poked wound
that grows between lovers?
I've been reading too much poetry
perhaps it's much simpler
just shake up two skin jars
of water and chemicals
bump them hard together
and watch their chains
of strange molecules
change and groan.
Dorothy Porter, "Water and Chemicals"

Described as an autobiographic memoir (Carson, 2021), autofiction (Bakiyeva, 2020, Pignagnoli, 2018), a lyric essay (Dicinoski, 2017), critical autobiography (Summa-Knoop, 2017) and autotheory[66], while it "both (at the same time) blends and refuses genre" (Pearl, 2018: p. 199), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) has been the subject of much academic criticism and critical acclaim due to its gender and *genre* bending and its questioning of same-sex marriage and family-making, motherhood and the representation of transgender bodies. *The Argonauts* questions instead of providing answers, given that "assertion is not her [Nelson's] mode, unraveling is" (Sehgal, 2015) while addressing "the interstices of sex, mothering, and language in the age of North American neoliberalism" (Kervick, 2019: p. 1). As in drag as a memoirist, as Nelson defines herself, also alludes to this performative aspect of writing the body, according to Lauren Fournier, for whom *The Argonauts* is not pure memoir but something closer to performative writing, as it does with memory what queer studies does with memory: it dialogues with it.

[66] Many have written on the genre of *The Argonauts*, and its shifting, hard to pin down nature, as well as the fact that the text is part of a new way to write about "motherhood", defined as "mumoir", a cross between "mum" and "memoir". Husain (2020) writes vastly about *The Argonauts* as a part of a new canon of narratives of motherhood, on how these narratives differ from previous ones, and how motherhood dialogues with new feminisms and neo-liberal attitudes. Although concerned with motherhood, this chapter will look more closely at how family-making, and not exactly motherhood is represented. Fournier analyses how autotheory has been used as a feminist and queer tool for writing: "[i]t is a term that describes a self-conscious way of engaging with theory – as a discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice – alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment, something very much in the Zeitgeist of cultural production today – especially in feminist, queer, and BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and people of color – spaces that live on the edges of art and academia." (2021: p. 8)

> Memory is associated with the genre of memoir, while performative writing approaches memory with a reflexive sense of instability and play. In performative writing, the writer's memory of their lived experience is one material among others, like the theory and artworks and literary texts they reference. (2021, 18)

Again, the trees. *The Argonauts* opens with a striking paragraph that evokes several of the narrative's main themes: the body as a space for inscription, non-reproductive sexual pleasure, intertextuality with other authors, the utterance of words as they find new meanings, giving the contexts in which they are uttered:

> October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you come* tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had *Molloy* by your bedside and a stack of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? What's your pleasure? you asked, then stuck around for an answer. (Nelson, 2016: p. 1)

The juxtaposition between the dildo and Molloy seems not fortuitous but clearly influenced by Preciado and their concept of the prosthetic as a text, a metaphor that seems rather productive for this analysis of Nelson's memoir. Taking the example of Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, that Sade kept intact during his time in prison inside a dildo, Preciado writes on how the object can operate like a book:

> The lesson we learn from the survival of Sade's most challenging text is not only that hollow dildos can be useful pens for hiding secrets or that any dildo can eventually contain a book but also that a book can operate like a dildo by becoming a technique for fabricating sexuality. Like a dildo, a book is a sexual body's assisted cultural technology of modification.
> In this sense, this book, too, is a dildo. A dildo-book and a book about dildos that aims to modify the subject who might use it. (Preciado, 2018: p. 2)

"To open a glans 'like a book' is to make it signify", writes Morland (2005), regarding the intersex body, and under the order of the dildo as text, which "is to sex and to the straight systems of representation of genitals what the cyborg is to the nature/culture divide ... located at the very edge of the racist male-dominant capitalist tradition" (2018: p. 9), contersexual practices arise, being anal pleasure and the use of dildos, for Preciado, two of them, sexual practices that open "possibilities of a radical shift from the dominant sex/gender system" (29) and therefore also disturbing the order of reproductability.

"Even as the text is completed, it maintains its state of vulnerability and 'chance' formlessness" (Jenkins, 2018: p. 205), doing "something so obvious and so rare – and so very welcome: it combines high theory and the everyday" (Pearl, 2018: p. 199). Defined as "a stellar example of memoir's departure from standard narrative conventions" (Summa-Knoop, 2017: p. 7), the text, which combines snapshots drawn from Nelson's own life with quotes from other theorists, to whom she refers to as her 'gendered mothers of her heart', follows Nelson and Harry Dodge, a visual artist and her partner, while the former tries and succeeds in getting pregnant and Dodge undergoes the bodily changes of a gender transition, offering a precious insight on transformation, but never offering fully closed conclusions or answers as "Nelson insists on fully inhabiting in-between-ness, in tarrying with the liminal" (Salamon, 2016: p. 304).

If *Middlesex* was marked by a chronological logic of sequence – first one thing and then the other – *The Argonauts* disrupts that time, queering it, making it shoot in several directions. Nelson tells her story against chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010): the narrative shifts from past and present, as evocations of their son as a child appear juxtaposed with images of his conception and quotes from thinkers who are not contemporary, coming straight from the past and into the text, in a clear disruption of time that Eli Dunn describes as a device for the challenge of transgender and queer narratives of binary oppositions:

> Nelson's refusal of chronological structuring throughout the text helps to resist the 'before' and 'after' trope that structures many queer and trans memoirs. Rather than allowing the creation of Nelson's queer, theoretical, biological, and chosen family to be presented in a temporality that emphasizes the 'after' as a period of stasis, the ultimate outcome of change, *The Argonauts* juxtaposes scenes from vastly different perspectives and experiences along the narrative's timeline, blocking any one moment from having a privileged viewpoint on the preceding or following life events. (2016: p. 14-5)

This going against the clock is, according to Page McBee, also found in transgender narratives, being *The Argonauts* also a narrative of the transgender body of Harry Dodge, as it shifts and changes:

> Trans time isn't linear. Beyond the shared experience of birth and death, many of us live in loops that double back on themselves: A second birth, a second death, two puberties, a collapsing of space-time that becomes, eventually, a kind of integration. "You don't have to start at the beginning and go in order to achieve 'truth,'" the trans historian Susan Stryker told me in a recent conversation about how she approaches writing trans histories. Trans people, she said, cut off from our history and traumatized both collectively and personally, live in a space without the constrictions and narrative benefits of neat arcs of time. Our time is circular, organic, associative. Sometimes we return to the beginning and find that not much has changed. (McBee, 2021)

According the Hilton Als, *The Argonauts* is "one of the rare moments in modern literature where the pregnant woman does not stand alone, wondering what will become of her or her child; Papa's going through some fairly significant shit, too" (2016) and the book "refuses form in a way that parallels how Maggie's and Harry's bodies and identities refuse taxonomy" (Pearl, 2018: p. 201). Domestic scenes are intertwined with the words of Anne Carson, Sontag, Preciado, and others, whose names appear on the margins of each page as a kind of paratext that is polyphonic and multivoiced (Bakiyeva, 2020) a voice that challenges heteronormative narratives about the transgender and the pregnant body (such as only two genders exist, mothers cannot be thinkers, that pregnancy is not a violent experience, that identities exclude each other rather than intersect) in a patchwork of "memoir, literary analysis, humor, and reporting with vivid instances of both the familiar and the strange" (Als, 2016). "The Argonauts is a project about queer family-making twice over: literally, as it tells the story of Nelson, Harry, and their children, and literarily, in its composition" (Donegan, 2015) as

> [t]his foregrounding of its intertextuality (and its fragmentariness) models a vulnerability of borders/boundaries, an interpenetration of words and ideas, and a refusal of the assumed sovereignty of selfhood and authorship that becomes its strength (through conversation, communion) (Mitchell, 2018: p. 197).

Such an evocation of other voices could imply that Nelson's self-reflexive act of writing, one that is already heavily informed by theory in which "[h]er numerous personal anecdotes are either interrupted by other theorists' citations or haunted by their words ... the depiction of real life does not stand outside, or in opposition to discourse, but rather is always informed by it" (Husain, 2010: p. 51). But this multivocal strategy does not intend to resist criticism or any type of exterior questioning but the opposite: by conjuring a series of voices and different takes on gender, motherhood, language and writing, she opens up the possibilities for bodies and texts to be written and thought of. As Pearl writes,

> [t]he marginal mentions in *The Argonaut*s do seem very much like conversations: this is whom I am in dialogue with in thinking on this point or that idea; this is who has inspired this perception, this is whom I must ventriloquize to make my thoughts clear (2018: p. 200).

On this familial link that Nelson draws with other women theorists, Fournier argues that it designs yet another aspect of queer motherhood:

> The description of "mothers" – maternal figures with offspring – as "many-gendered" continues Nelson's queering of motherhood, decoupling the mother as a parental figure from its etymological/ontological associations with cis women. By foregrounding these figures as being "of my heart," Nelson makes affective the citational practice that structures her reading and writing. (2021, 162)

This constellation of references, that is to Nelson "another scene of family-making" (Nelson in Pearl, 2018: p. 201), "a kind of heritage" (Husain, 2010: p. 56) "towards the familial and relational" (Jenkins, 2018: p. 192), also inscribes Nelson within a legacy and tradition of (women) writers who write about the body and identity, as she is 'cruising for intellectual mothers' (Nelson, 2016), and "[t]here is thus a literary genealogy for Nelson's inscription of queer kinship, and particularly of queer reproductivity, one with important alliances to labour and class politics" (Mayer, 2018: p. 190). At the same time, this genealogy must also be perceived in the sense that Nelson chooses certain texts instead of others and this selection itself is a way of reinforcing a certain normative legacy of queer thought and motherhood:

> the almost complete absence – in fact, persistent erasure – of people of colour in The Argonauts, either as lived beings or through Nelson's citational practice of queer kinship. The lack of acknowledgement that there is a Black queer and trans feminist (literary) genealogy for the kind of mothering and/as writing that Nelson undertakes is startling given her parenthetical acknowledgement of the queer feminist parent-writers who precede her, and whose work precedes hers. (Mayer, 2018: 190)

Moreover, Fournier also addresses the fact that *The Argonauts* has been hailed as having opened up the space for autotheory without acknowledging the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, another strong argument for the making of a white genealogy of queer and feminist authors that sets aside non-white voices:

> In his blog post "The Argonauts is a Direct Descendant of Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera and No One is Talking About It," Daniel Peña laments the tendency for white writers to be credited with the coining of "new genres" that BIPOC writers and artists contributed to developing. While Nelson's work is often described as charting the path for the emerging term "autotheory"—perhaps because her book was one of the first to have the word "autotheory" explicitly printed on it—Peña makes the case that The Argonauts is heavily indebted to Anzaldúa's Borderlands, something that he argues continues to go unacknowledged in most current conversations around Nelson's work. (2018, p. 35).

Ultimately, to interpret *The Argonauts* is already a failed task that one sets off to do, since "Nelson asks readers and critics to resist – the temptation to fit her narrative neatly into an eros or a hermeneutics of motherhood, pleasure, or desire" (Kervick, 2019: p. 3). And yet, this chapter aims, perhaps courageously

and erroneously in equal measures, to analyse the many responses to *The Argonauts*, while also contributing with new insights into the text, aiming at further questioning it, giving space to ambiguity and error, in a similar way as to how Nelson allows herself "to make arguments, and also to dismantle them, with beautifully articulated perversity" (Salamon, 2016: p. 306).

4.3. I Now Pronounce You Heteronormative

The Argonauts appears at a time when mothers must obey to "a neoliberal and patriarchal order ... to actively participate in public markets through work outside of the home while at the same time requires them to fully participate in and fulfil motherwork in the private sphere" (2019: p. 2). This seems to reinforce, due to the focus on individualism and privatization of "[t]he 'neo-traditional family configuration' as the basis for mothering in a neoliberal order [that] results in the reproduction of the patriarchal institution of motherhood instead of providing women with opportunities to practice empowered mothering and care" (Kervick, 2019: p. 2). As Halberstam writes, referring to Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, "support for the nuclear and conjugal family through marital support programs and a revival of covenant marriage" (2007: p. 316) has been enforced "by anchoring the conventional family to financial security in the absence of a welfare state" (2007: p. 316), i.e. by expecting social responsibility and economic stability from private households instead of the public body of the government, as "the sole remaining resource is the cooperative, mutually supportive household or kinship network" (Duggan and Kim in Halbertsam, 2007: p. 316), when facing shrinking social security for underprivileged individuals. Therefore, "Duggan and Kim propose, gay and lesbian activists should not be pushing toward marriage but arguing along with other progressives for the recognition of household diversity" (Halberstam, 316), for other ways of officially recognizing family structures that are not based in hierarchy or monogamy but horizontal and constellational. "The question in regard to marriage should not be the binary "should people do it or not?" but "in what ways can our acts from within a system of power do more than sustain or not sustain that system?" (Boellstorff , 2007: p. 234). Even though queer family-making, as a horizontal support systems and communities, has always existed as a place of resistance, these kinship systems have both been celebrated and criticized, due to the way in which they mimic traditional ways of enforcing power, namely the nuclear family:

> Alternative kinship, indeed, has long been a *cause célèbre* among gay and lesbian groups and queer scholars and while some anthropologists like Kath Weston, Gayle Rubin, and Esther Newton have applauded the effort and creativity that goes into making new kinship bonds in queer communities, other

> scholars, mostly psycho- analytic theorists like Judith Butler and David Eng, have examined the family as a disciplinary matrix and have linked its particular forms of social control to colonialism and globalization. Why, many of these scholars have asked, does the nuclear family continue to dominate kinship relations when in reality people are enmeshed in multiple and complex systems of relation? (Halberstam, 2007: p. 316)

In "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage", Duggan claims that September 11 made her and her partner want to officially register their relationship, after 17 years without having felt the need to. "I imagined her hurt and me unable to find her or unable to convince a city worker or hospital employee that she was my next of kin still, though no longer my lover" (2008: p. 155), writes Duggan, expressing the panic of not being able to find or get in touch with her partner, of being stripped away from that bond that they had not yet made recognizable "with any state agency" (2008: p. 155). What Duggan writes is interestingly similar and evoked by Makkai and Lopez in their own texts about the AIDS years and the act of taking care of lover and friends who were not legally bond to each other, of the fear of a conservative parent to take away a loved one, breaking up a family:

> I worried that her Helms voting mother in North Carolina might be able to take her away. When she finally came through my door late that evening, covered in grey dust and totally exhausted, we both grasped the significance of that term "next of kin" as we never had before. If anything happened to her, the importance of being recognized as the one most responsible, the one most concerned, arose in my mind then as an absolute emotional and practical imperative. (Duggan, 2008: p. 155)

When Duggan and her partner arrive at the city hall, they realise that there are many other people who want to register, that most are heterosexual, that, like the AIDS crisis in the 80s, September 11 also marked a shift in the feelings of both queer and non-queer towards creating bonds of kinship that are legally recognize, and to guarantee the safety that comes from them: although "[t]hey didn't want to be married, or they were not romantic couples" "their experiences since September 11 had convinced them that they wanted the basic legal recognitions that domestic partnership registration would provide (Duggan, 2008: p. 156). According to Duggan, several structures of family-making, straight or other, do not fall in the category of marriage as the heteronormative structure that has been claimed as the norm:

> This experience of mine resonates with many others – of caretakers and friends or ex-lovers with HIV/AIDS, of long time roommates with intertwined lives and joint property, of lesbian and gay parents bound to each other and to children in complex nonnuclear ways, of lovers who do not want the state contract with all its assumptions that is civil marriage. There are legions of people – straight and gay, bisexual or

> transgendered, and others – whose lives are intertwined in ways that do not fit with one-size-fits-all marriage. Yet the needs and desires we all have – emotional and material – are as real and compelling, as fundamental and as significant, as the needs that lead many romantic couples to want to marry. (2008: p. 156)

To Halberstam, more than "new models of family ... the recognition of friendship ties as kinship" (2007: p. 317) or even the recognition of "the difference that gay and lesbian parents make to the very meaning of family" (2007: p. 316), queer reading of kinship systems must forget the family, "in order to allow for the possibility of other modes of relating, belonging, caring" (2007: p. 316). As Lee Edelman writes, not only is the past that haunts the present of queer individuals through ideas of heteronormative family-making, but even the future, given that this emphasis on the future of queerness is often sustained by an emphasis on the protection of the Child, one that is based on reproductive futurity, that

> remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention. Even proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a "fight for our children-for our daughters and our sons," and thus as a fight for the future. What, in that case, would it signify not to be "fighting for the children"? (Edelman, 2004: p. 3)

Hetero and homonormativity are, as in *The Inheritance*, a concern for Nelson. While looking at language and its failure, motherhood and mothering, gender transitions, birth and the complexity of (queer) family-making, the hard resistance to homonormativity and the reproduction of structures of patriarchal kinship, it could be argued that

> [i]f *The Argonauts* can be said to have a primary concern, this is it: how to resist a conception of queerness that shoehorns complex lives into a neat dichotomy of normative versus not, and how to resist the unhelpful demonization of motherhood, domesticity, and the other supposedly reactionary forms that love can take. (Donegan, 2015)

More than a memoir about having a body that transforms itself every day, *The Argonauts* is a look at marriage and family-making – and how queerness can be found in, or erased from, them. Throughout the narrative, Nelson often exposes the social, political and cultural implications of getting married and having children, embracing the ambiguity that she feels towards both, while also attempting at preserving the queer radicality that comes with being in a queer relationship, having a transgender partner and writing about queer art. "Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable) or reinforce it (unforgivable)",

writes Nelson as herself and Dodge hurry to get married before same-sex marriage is voted to be banned in California, addressing the fact that getting married can be perceived as either the ultimate homonormative decision while also disrupting heteronormative marriage, by reclaiming the access to the same economic, social, and legal status that marriage provides, an access that is, nevertheless, deemed to be recognized as valid by the state[67]. Queer theory has been highly critically of same-sex marriage for the ways in which it is perceived as the mimicking of heterosexual structures or the legitimization of some ways of making kinship over others[68]. But Ahmed provides a disruptive view of this duality between normalcy and queerness, by writing that

> Queer lives do not suspend the attachments that are crucial to the reproduction of heteronormativity, and this does not diminish 'queerness', but intensifies the work that it can do. Queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce. To turn this around, queer lives shape what gets reproduced: in the very failure to reproduce the norms through how they inhabit them, queer lives produce different effects. ... The reworking is not inevitable, as it is dependent or contingent on other social factors (especially class) and it does not necessarily involve conscious political acts. ... the closer that queer subjects get to the spaces defined by heteronormativity the more potential there is for a reworking of the heteronormative ... When does this potential for 'queering' get translated into a transformation of the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality? (2014: p. 152)

The decision to get married places Nelson and Dodge "as an affront to those opposed to gay marriage on the grounds that it perverts traditional marriage, and also those anti-assimilationists who see in marriage a hijacking of a radical queer politics" (Salamon, 2016: p. 304). In her analysis of queer family-making, Nelson does not posit queer family-making against gay or lesbian homonormative couples, opening up possibilities for other types of family-making beyond plain assimilation or rejection and revolution. This is also sustained by Weston, who writes that "most discussions of gay families have

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[67] "To be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there" (2004, p. 105), writes Butler, implying how queer people entering this way of legitimation may also be giving away their own terms of legitimation, resulting in "the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate queer lives" (Butler, 2004, p. 106). This is also sustained by Ahmed, who writes that "[a]ssimilation involves a desire to approximate an ideal that one has already failed; an identification with one's designation as a failed subject. The choice of assimilation – queer skin, straight masks – is clearly about supporting the violence of heteronormative distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate lives" (2014: p. 150).

[68] "Queer theoretical arguments against same-sex marriage typically found that stance in two linked sets of legitimate concerns. One is that same-sex marriage takes heteronormative marriage as a model (indeed, an ideal) for sexual and affective relations. Another is that same-sex marriage concedes the state may properly authorize these forms of sexual and affective relations, thereby colluding in the collapse of the welfare state with the substitution of marriage as a specifically civil institution. Same-sex marriage is thus seen to participate in an inevitable logic of exclusion with two key negative consequences: first, the creation of a class of denigrated sexual and affective relations (e.g., the single, the promiscuous, those who sell or pay for sex, the polyamorous); and second, the associated assumption that same-sex marriage inevitably authorizes the monogamous, cohabiting couple with children, the nuclear family that, in this view, is preferred by the logic of contemporary capitalism. (Boellstorff, 2007: pp. 233-234).

evaluated the political significance of laying claim to kinship as either inherently assimilationist or inherently progressive, without respect to social or historical context" (1991: p. 474). As perceived in *The Argonauts*, "[e]ven within the homonormative relations of same-sex marriage, there exists a potential to produce a future in which the homonormative public/private dichotomy is queered[69]" (C. Stewart, 2019: 9) while "the seemingly homonormative gay or lesbian family is never completely assimilated into a cisheteropartriachal system, neither is the non-normative queer immune to the same assimilating forces" (Dunn, 2016: p. 10). Butler also asks:

> Does the turn to marriage make it thus more difficult to argue in favor of the viability of alternative kinship arrangements, or for the well-being of the "child" in any number of social forms? Moreover, what happens to the radical project to articulate and support the proliferation of sexual practices outside of marriage and the obligations of kinship? Does the turn to the state signal the end of a radical sexual culture? Does such a prospect become eclipsed as we become increasingly preoccupied with landing the state's desire? (2004: p. 105)

Homemaking takes up a central part of *The Argonauts*: before her pregnancy, Nelson and Dodge were already a family, with Nelson "driving around the city looking at apartment after apartment, trying to find one big enough for us and your son, whom I hadn't yet met" (2016; p. 11), and the memoir is punctuated with many moments of domestic bliss, at a home that consists of Nelson, Dodge, Dodge's son from a previous relationship, for whom Nelson was a "near stranger who was quickly becoming family" (Nelson, 2016: p. 14-15) and Iggy, the baby that Nelson gives birth to during the course of *The Argonauts*, "a Native American name, meaning "he who wanders"" (Nelson, 168)[70], a fitting name for the son of two

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[69] "The legalization of same-sex marriage therefore creates new and public discursive opportunities for LGBTIQ people to deliberately queer the public/private dichotomy. Patriarchal gender roles divided through a public/private dichotomy may be publicly rejected by LGBTIQ people who get married. Same-sex weddings in particular constitute a highly public moment in which LGBTIQ people may have a platform to actively reject homonormative images of their relationship (see Kimport, 2014: 148). Being married too, can enable and empower such queer practices. Some married same-sex couples reject the official term 'wife' due to perceived connotations of private sphere subordination, instead adopting the term 'girlfriend' or 'partner' (Badgett, 2009). Every time such a label-change is enacted, the spatial differences between the roles of wife and girlfriend/partner are publicly transvaluated. (Stewart, C. 2019: 9).

[70] Nelson briefly address "the spectacle of two white Americans choosing a Native American name" (Nelson, 2016: p. 168), while also explaining shortly after that the lactation consultant that helps her nurse Iggy for the first time was a member of the Pima tribe, who explains to Nelson and Dodge that her mother had insisted that her son, named Eagle Feather, learnt how to say his own name in "tribal language". After wondering why she was talking so much about her own family, Nelson implies that she had felt "an intuition that something about identity was loose and hot in our house, as, perhaps, it was in hers" (Nelson, 2016: p. 168). The lactation consultant leaves, saying that if ever Nelson and Dodge found trouble in having given a Native American name to their son, they could reply that "a full member tribe, from Tucson and Watts, gave you her blessing" (Nelson, 2016: p. 169). To Mayer, this moment of *The Argonauts* represents a problematic moment of appropriation by Nelson, without wanting or doing to effort of fully engage with non-white voices: "[q]ueerness is not a ticket to political solidarity or radical alterity at the start of *The Argonauts* and yet, at the moment of birth, a kind of sentimental white liberal feminism seeps in, a determination to be placed in a Black and indigenous genealogy – without having done (or cited) any of the work" (2018: p. 190)

gender travelers. Similarly to the men in *The Inheritance*, Nelson also explains how living in New York City was almost unbearable, although enjoyable for her, describing the precarious conditions of her jobs as a bartender and waitress at several restaurants as well as how inhospitable her rented apartment near the F train was, punctuated with mouse droppings, with an empty fridge, a makeshift bed composed of milk crates and a futon, and "a floor through which I could hear *Standclearoftheclosingdoors*" (Nelson, 2016: p. 14) where Nelson spent very little time. This way of living is, for Nelson, different than the one that she has with Dodge and their children, a living that demands a certain level of responsibility and care, unlike the way of living of a single woman, in a rented apartment, "which involved never lifting a finger to better my [Nelson's] surroundings" (Nelson, 2016: p. 14). While single life can be enjoyable, making a family and motherhood, Nelson implies, demand responsibility. While using Winnicott's concept of "good enough" mothering, Nelson looks back at a particular episode of Iggy's childhood, when being a mother becomes the acknowledgment of taking care of a fully dependent being: the recollection is narrated through a cinematographic lens – "I want to pause here, maybe forever" (Nelson, 2016: p. 25) – as Iggy initiates what Winnicott defines as "an intellectual recognition of the fact that at first we were (psychologically) absolutely dependent" (Nelson, 2016: p. 25), and Nelson explains how she must reach to Iggy's hand to prevent him from taking an object into his mouth, and how the reader is also alive at the moment of reading because someone also took care of them and removed inappropriate objects from their mouths.

Winnicott is also in dialogue with Alison Bechdel in her work (Figure 16), appearing as a ghostly authority on motherhood in a similar way that Forster appears in *The Inheritance*, while also sidelining with Nelson when it comes to creating a constellation of references, from Adrianne Rich to Virginia Woolf, as both works attempt at making amends with the author's mothers. Although Nelson seems comfortable with the idea of being a "good enough mother", Bechdel works through, with the help of psychoanalysts, the pain of having lost her father and having grown up with an emotionally unavailable mother, without knowing how to come out as a lesbian knowing that her mother was unhappy in her marriage with a gay man.

Figure 16: A page from Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

Is Fiona from *The Great Believers* a good enough mother for travelling to Paris to look for her daughter? Was Margaret a good enough mother as she expelled her son from home? Is Cal's mother good enough by accepting her intersex daughter only as a son? When looking at families, motherhood must also be questioned, and the many ways in which mothers act and related to their queer children. While addressing crucial matters of queer family-making, *The Great Believers* and *The Inheritance*, seem highly complacent with a matrix of motherhood that reserves for women the place of caring and nurturing, often in the detriment of their own wellbeing, a nurturing that seems to always stem from anxiety, guilt and a sense of not being "good enough", one that highlights the need to be "needed", as Margaret and Fiona claim. What these texts seem to suggest is that, after failing to have been good enough, these mothers show regret and shame at what was done, while they attempt to get close to their own children by nursing ghosts (Margaret) or looking for children who do not want to speak to their mothers (Fiona). And yet, as argued before, are not feeling of shame and guilt also a valid part of personal and collective histories? The pressure to be a good enough mother also worries Nelson, similar to the pressure to be a fitting stepparent, another type of familial kinships that *The Argonauts* explores. "As soon as we moved in together, we were faced with the urgent task of setting a home for your son that would feel abundant and containing – good enough – rather than broken or falling" (2016: p. 25), writes Nelson, aware of the expectations of Dodge's son, as well as the cultural and social demands and stereotypes associated with stepparents, "structurally vulnerable to being hated or resented" (Nelson, 2016: p. 26). Although aware of this, Nelson explains that her own relationship with her stepfather was marked by that same hate and resentment, as well as a sort of exasperation towards her mother, who loathed her own body and who would remark about how she was never thin enough. Not only does Nelson look at the family that she is creating with Dodge but she also devotes some part of *The Argonauts* to the difficult relationship she had with her mother, the absence that the early death of her father has left, and how she can perfectly conjure her father's image, perhaps due to his death, but she is unable to image her mother's body as *being* mother, who insists on, upon Iggy's birth, to use the example of the Killing Tree in Cambodja, where infants were killed, to "install in me [Nelson] an outer parameter of horror of what could happen a baby human on this planet" (Nelson, 2016: p. 151), in line with Sedgwick's paranoid criticism, that predicts the damage before it actually takes place and Edelman's point about the emphasis on the protection of Child, regardless of the trauma that it may induce on the parents.

As Tyler Carson points out, *The Argonauts* is more than about mothering; it is also a text about repairing feelings towards one's mother (something that seems to be at the heart of Bechdel's *Are You My Mother*, as seen in Figure), in a double directional affective look at the ancestor and the offspring:

what arrives, in the true spirit of Sedgwick's (2003) reparative reading practice, as a pleasant surprise—that in the process of writing The Argonauts Nelson (2015) remembers that her mother was "good enough" … So, while The Argonauts is indelibly marked as a text about what Winnicott (2005/1971) might do for us now, it might also be read—in spite of Nelson's (2015) staunch disavowal—as the Kleinian urge to make reparation with the (m)Other. (2021: p. 48)

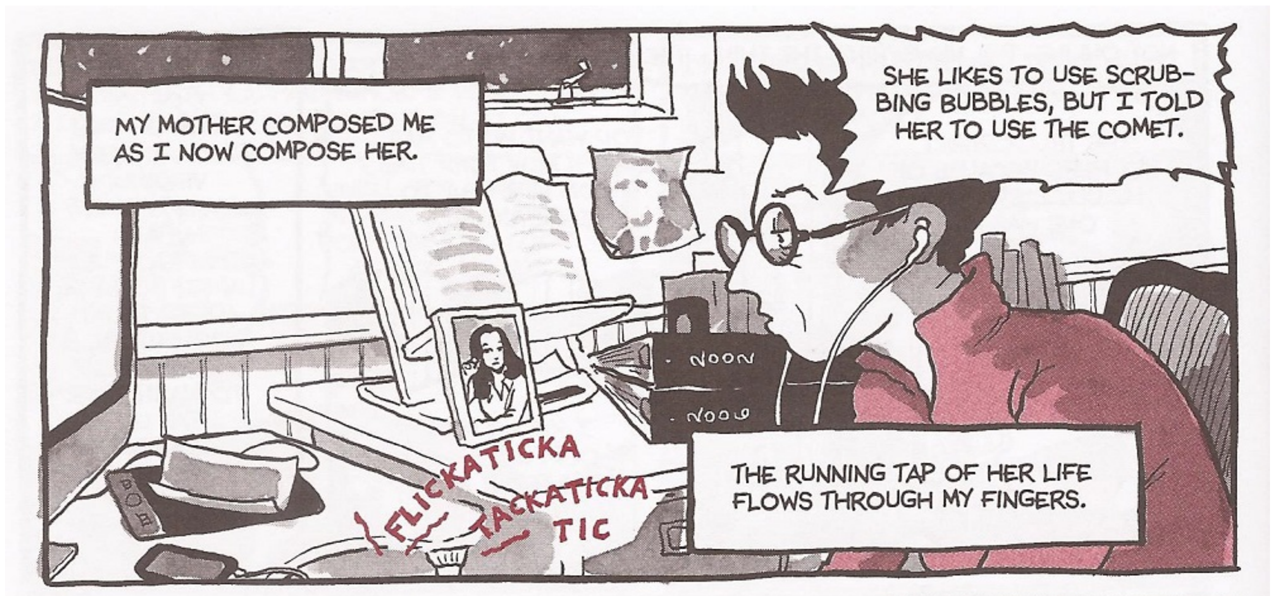

Figure 17: A page from Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

Again, ghosts appear: in the shape of a ghost drawn by Dodge who states "[w]ithout this sheet, I would be invisible" (Nelson, 2016: p. 86), a paradox of (in)visbility, or in the image of *Hamlet*. In a diary written as a teenager, Nelson vows to stand with her sister and the ghost of their father to demand revenge against the stepfather, a counterfeit paternal image. So Mayer also addresses an absence in *The Argonauts*: Medea, who also travelled inside the Argo, "a ghost in its machine for making sodomitical mothering"; as "the only Argonaut to bear a child", although she kills it, Medea can also be "radically recontextualized – as a limit case" (Mayer, 2018: p. 188) "of the gaps and lacks in our account of parenting and kin-making, that which Nelson herself explores" (Mayer, 2018: p. 189). Mayer claims that the erasure of Medea's figure from *The Argonauts* represents the erasure of people of colour from the memoir,

either as lived beings or through Nelson's citational practice of queer kinship. The lack of acknowledgement that there is a Black queer and trans feminist (literary) genealogy for the kind of mothering and/as writing that Nelson undertakes is startling given her parenthetical acknowledgement of the queer feminist parent-

> writers who precede her, and whose work precedes hers, particularly in the anthologies of the Kitchen Table Collective. (Mayer, 2018: p. 190)

Dodge's mother also comes into the narrative, after having being diagnosed with cancer. As it happened in the AIDS narratives that were analysed in this thesis, it is at time of illness and death that caretaking comes into play, that family members, either by choice or by blood, become (re)connected. More than a text about motherhood and mothering, *The Argonauts* disrupts a vertical hierarchy of caring and replaces it with an horizontal, equal structure of caring and affection, as it "ties together a number of care narratives, including Nelson's meditations on Dodge's process of gender transitioning, caring for her stepson as well as her biological son, and her own partnership with Dodge" (Kervick, 2019: p. 1). Nelson and Dodge give their own bed to Dodge's mother, but eventually the situation becomes unbearable for the recently composed family. While Dodge wants "to give her [the mother] the care she'd once given to you [Dodge] but could see it was breaking our new household" (Nelson, 2016: p. 157), Nelson decides that she cannot live with a dying mother-in-law, "sick and broke and terrified, utterly unwilling or unable to discuss her condition or her options" (Nelson, 2016: p. 157. Dodge's mother finally decides that she would like to leave Los Angeles and go back home to Detroit, her physical home, not the metaphorical home composed by family members such as one's offspring. Instead of staying at a Medicaid facility "all her assets liquidated, a TV blaring from behind a neighbor's canvas curtain, nurses whispering about accepting Christ as your personal savior" (Nelson, 2016: p. 157), a remark that reminds us of the decision to take patients dying of AIDS to hospital near the home of their parents, away from everything and everyone known to them, as seen in *The Great Believers*, Dodge's mother wants to be at home, near all her personal objects, ending up being taking in by Dodge's brother, who moves her to an hospice when her condition gets worse, Dodge flying there, "desperate to get there in time, so that she wouldn't die alone" (Nelson, 2016: p. 158). Nelson disrupts time again, by juxtaposing her account of the long process of giving birth to Iggy with Dodge's first-hand account of his last moments with his mother, a direct opposition to life coming into being and life being extinguished, the opposition of "the labour of birth and the cessation of labour that is the death of Harry's mother" (Mitchell, 2018: p. 195), of how Dodge helps both their partner and their mother in giving birth as well as letting the latter know that she can die peacefully. The link is made clear by Nelson, who claims:

> [i]f all goes well, the baby will make it out alive, and so will you. Nonetheless, you will have touched death along the way. You will have realized that death will do you too, without fail and without mercy. It will do you even if you don't believe it will do you, and it will do you in its own way. There's never been a human

> that it didn't. *I guess I'm just waiting to die*, your mother said, bemused and incredulous, the last time we saw her, her skin so thin in her borrowed bed (2016: p. 167).

"And then, just like that, I was folding your son's laundry" (Nelson, 2016: p. 12) – at the same time that Nelson and Dodge are attempting at living together and making a home in Los Angeles, and Nelson assumes the role of caretaker and mother, 'yellow YES ON PROP 8[71] signs were sprouting up everywhere' (Nelson, 2016). Paradoxically, the signs that intend to ban families like Nelson's appeal to the protection of children[72], something that is exactly what Nelson and Dodge also want to protect by creating a home to Nelson's stepson, recalling that "[l]earning to live with the effects and affects of heterosexism and homophobia may be crucial to what makes queer families different from non-queer families" (Ahmed, 2014: p. 154):

> The sign depicted four stick figures raising their hands to the sky, in a paroxysm of joy – the joy, I suppose, of heteronormativity, here indicated by the fact that one of the stick figures sported a triangle skirt. … PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN! the stick figures cheered. (Nelson, 2016: p. 13)

The sign for Proposition 8 reminds Nelson of Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (Figure 18) in which Opie's back shows an engraved scene that still drips blood that resembles the Proposition 8 yellow sign: "a house and two stick-figure women holding hands (two triangle skirts!) carved into it, along with a sun, a cloud, and two birds" (Nelson, 13), a lesbian alternative to Propositon 8 sign.

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[71] On November 4, 2008, Proposition 8 was passed in California, with 52% of the votes, ending with the legal recognition of same-sex marriages. After several lawsuits that took the state to court, this new section was finally removed from the state's constitution in 2013.

[72] Although perceived as a fundamental text in queer theory, Lee Edelman's *No Future* is not read side by side with *The Argonauts* in this thesis, due to the fact that the link has already been established by most reviews, articles and thesis on Nelson's book. Moreover, the argument that Edelman puts forward and its radicality are addressed and also somewhat refuted by Nelson herself. Edelman's rejection of a reproductive futurity that forces upon queer people the overpowering figure of the Child in exchange of being legally recognized through marriage and child bearing seems to hit a theoretical conundrum when looking at Nelson's text, as well as the long history of (queer and non-queer) people giving birth to (queer) people and the many ways in which family-making can be made, from gay and lesbian couples to single mothers. Even though there is indeed a somewhat heteronormative concern with "the Child", one that is well rooted in a capitalist and neoliberal mode of (re)production, Nelson's claim at the end of *The Argonauts* "don't produce and don't reproduce" seems to be more directed at a need to rethink the structures of queer kinship, and not allowing them to reproduce the oppressive matrix of heteronormative and patriarchal kinships, rather than referring to the actual act of reproducing. As Carson writes, "In foregrounding the queerness of pregnancy as well as the violence inherent in the act of giving birth, I read Nelson (2015) as pushing back against the masculinist logic of the anti-social thesis" (2012: p. 42). This anti-social thesis is perceived as "what it means to be queer in the social world" (Carson, 2012: p. 40), a being in the world that is linked to "an anti-reproductive stance" (Carson, 2021: p. 41) in which "queer's assumed impotence fundamentally challenges the reproductive imperative of heterosexuality" (Carson, 41).

Figure 18: Catherine Opie, "Self-Portrait/Cutting", 1993.

Through this parallel, Nelson addresses the ambiguity that she feels towards structures of family-making and how they reiterate bonds of kinship that already exist. Opie created the family portrait (embodied in her own body) after separating from her partner and "longing at the time to start a family", creating an image of lesbian domestic bliss that "that radiates all the painful contradictions inherent in that wish" (Nelson, 2016: p. 13). Nelson asks "[w]ho wants a version of the Prop 8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?" to which Dodge replies, with a shrug "[m]aybe Cathy does" (2016: p. 13). For Nelson, the existing structure of marriage and family-making fails to encompass the radicality and idiosyncrasies of queer love (the concept of marriage that is being banned is defined by the exact same concept of marriage that is intended to be protected with its prohibition). When Nelson evokes the photographs by Catherine Opie, the visual text finds its way into the written one, giving *The Argonauts* yet another level of significance, one that looks not only at words but also images, to written and visual narratives of family-making. In an interview that Opie gave to Nelson, she claims, "I don't want to be a singular identity. I don't want to be just the leather dyke artist" (2017; p. 109). In *The Argonauts*, Opie's work is evoked many times, and in one of them, in an interview, Opie claims that her work, which shifted from fetish practices and portraits of drag kings to "blissful domestic scenes" (Nelson, 2016: p. 92), becomes shocking exactly as she does that juxtaposition of motherhood and domesticity and sexual practices. As Opie claims, not keeping both

realms separate and "becoming homogenized and part of the mainstream domesticity is transgressive for somebody like me" (Nelson, 2016: p. 92-3).

Moreover, even the definition of 'women' as those stick figures wearing triangles (i.e., women whose gender presentation corresponds exactly to what is socially expected of them, a definition that will leave many other women outside of it) also fails to include women that are gender fluid. And yet, in order to get married until Proposition 8 gets banned, Nelson and Dodge must fall into the category of same-sex marriage (i.e., as two women) so that their marriage can be officiated. Nelson questions the concept of same-sex marriage itself, as, for herself and other queer individuals, their desire is not "same-sex": "whatever sameness I've noted in my relationships with women it is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy" (Nelson, 2016: p. 31), writes Nelson when she is questioned by a stranger in what ways her relationship with Harry is different from the one that Nelson had with other women, while also claiming that "straight women" always fall for Dodge, leading Nelson to wonder if Harry is a woman, if Nelson is indeed straight, and if past relationships, with other people with their own features and genders, could ever be compared to the one that Nelson and Dodge had, implying that there are many ways of connecting and creating structures of kinship.

However, Dodge's claim that this type of family life may be what Opie wants brings up the question that same-sex marriage can also be fitting for other queer people, and they may want the exact same structure that is given to heterosexual couples, along with its rights. Only when confronted with the possibility of seeing same-sex marriage banned from California do Nelson and Dodge realise that they may lose the legal rights provided by it and rush to get married and the idea of losing custody of Dodge's son and having "a homophobic or transphobic judge deciding his fate, our family's fate, turned our day tornado green" (Nelson, 2016: p. 38) It is the vulnerability of queer rights, and the way how they quickly become prone to be erased that makes queer response more urgent, pertinent and necessary, as passivity will contribute to that same erasure:

> [w]e hadn't planned on getting married per se. But when we woke up on the morning of November 3, 2008, and listened to the radio's day-before-the-election polling … it suddenly seems as though Prop 8 was going to pass. We were surprised at our shock, as it revealed a passive, naive trust that the arc of the moral universe, however long, tends towards justice. But really justice has no coordinates, no teleology (Nelson, 2016: p. 28).

Nelson's stance regarding marriage seems ambivalent, as she questions her own sense of queer radicality, of what it means to be queer in a time when queer rights are as safe as endangered. When invited to speak at Biola University, an evangelical Christian school, Nelson wonders if she should go, given that the school banishes students who are homosexual. When reading more about the stance that the school has on marriage, Nelson finds out that the school disapproves of any sexual intercourse outside of "biblical marriage", while homosexuality is only accepted when "in its proper context: marriage"– "what kind of queer is this? (Nelson, 2016: p. 35), asks Nelson, commenting on the homonormative manner in which homosexuality is often thought of as a private manner, recognized only when inserted within the validation provided by the structure of marriage. This has also been questioned by Ahmed and Butler, who write on how same-sex marriage may be used as a way to legitimize some queer individuals over others, by inserting them in an heteronormative structure:

> There remains a risk that 'queer families' could be posited as an ideal within the queer community. If queer families were idealised within the queer community, then fleeting queer encounters, or more casual forms of friend- ship and alliance, could become seen as failures, or less significant forms of attachment. Queer politics needs to stay open to different ways of doing queer in order to maintain the possibility that differences are not converted into failure. (Ahmed, 2014: p. 154).

The anxieties of both queer and non-queer seem to meet when it comes to these institutions that are thought to be in danger by queer liberation and according to Nelson, queer individuals must aspire to do more than merely mimicking heteronormative and capitalist structures of power:

> There's something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilization and its institutions (marriage, most notably) is met by the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions, and their frustration with the assimilationist, unthinkingly neo liberal bent of the mainstream GLBTQ+ movement, which has spent fine coin begging entrance into two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military. ... If there's one thing homonormativity reveals, it's the troubling fact that *you can be victimized and in no way be radical; it happens very often among homosexuals as with every other oppressed minority*. This is not a devaluation of queerness. It is a reminder: if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us. (Nelson, 32)

Nelson seems to be in direct dialogue with Ahmed, who writes

> Queer is not, then, about transcendence or freedom from the (hetero)normative. Queer feelings are 'affected' by the repetition of the scripts that they fail to reproduce, and this 'affect' is also a sign of what queer can do, of how it can work by working on the (hetero)normative. The failure to be non-normative is then not the failure of queer to be queer, but a sign of attachments that are the condition of possibility for queer. Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us. (Ahmed, 2014: p. 155)

This fear of assimilation, of becoming *less queer* is also addressed by Moira Donegan, who claims that "*The Argonauts* arrives at a critical moment for queerness", when

> [t]he expansion of marriage rights and rapid cultural shifts toward assimilation and acceptance have rendered homosexuality much safer and less politically radical than it once was. For some queers, this has provoked a desire to preserve queerness's alterity: to evoke its history and mark it as fundamentally and continually separate from the straight culture that surrounds it. It's an understandable impulse, given how quickly the LGBT movement has been embraced—and co-opted—by corporations, politicians, and other fair-weather allies eager to keep up with the times. But this impulse has a downside, too, as it risks becoming attached to its own idea of authenticity, the distinctions it makes between real queerness and queerness's supposed traitors. (Donegan, 2015)

In a crucial point of the narrative, Nelson is confronted by a friend – "*I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life*" (Nelson, 2016: p. 15) – with the ultimate object of domesticity: a mug with a family photo. A gift from her mother, that made Nelson horrified upon receiving it, the mug "depicts my family and me, all dressed up to go the *The Nutcracker* at Christmastime – a ritual that was important to my mother when I was a little girl, and that we have revived with her now that are children in my life" (Nelson, 2016: p. 15). As stated before, certain times of the year are intrinsically linked with family traditions and ritual and as soon as Nelson's life became the life of a mother, this tradition was revitalized and repeated. In the photo Nelson is "pregnant with what will become Iggy" while "Harry and his son are wearing matching dark suits" (Nelson, 2016: p. 15), mimicking the images of traditional mother and father. As Sedgwick writes, already hinting at Freeman's chrononormativity:

> the pairing "families/Christmas" becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of "the" family. The thing hasn't, finally, so much to do with propaganda for Christianity as with propaganda for Christmas itself. They all – religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourses of power and legitimacy – line up with each other so neatly once a year, and the monolith so created is a

> thing one can come to view with unhappy eyes. What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where everything means the same thing? (Tendencies, 1994, P. 5)

Rituals such as Christmas can be perceived, as they are almost interchangeable with 'family', as chrononormative events that do not comply with the alternative timelines of queer individuals who are made uncomfortable at home. In Weston's *Families We Choose*, the people who were interviewed mention how going back home forces queer people to be someone else, another straight friendly version of themselves who pleases every member of the family, projecting themselves into the domestic timeline inscribed by chrononormativity. Margaret F. Gibson writes on the "the lure of "normalcy" that is felt by queer parents, "highlighting relational features (such as monogamy or marriage) or social practices (such as church attendance or "stay-at-home parenting") that make them seem more mainstream", also stating that this homonormativity may not be desired and/or accessible to all, being these often "left out of both political discourse and research literature. Transgender, transsexual, bisexual, and multiply marginalized queer parents, such as those living in poverty or experiencing racism" are often ignored, while "the practices of "queer respectability" or what Lisa Duggan calls "homonormativity" (50), extend beyond parenthood and are widespread in LGBTQ media representation, political strategizing, and even organizational development" (2014: p. 4).

And yet, Nelson wonders what is inherently heteronormative about the mug, "what is the essence of heteronormativity" (Nelson, 2016: p. 15): the fact that her mother made the mug, that they are a part of "a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best" (Nelson, 2016: p. 16), that her mother made the mug as a token of approval and recognition of Nelson and Dodge's family as a valid family, "that she recognizes and accepts my [Nelson's] tribe as family" (Nelson, 2016: p. 16) – 'tribe' being the exact same word that Nan Goldin uses to describe her chosen family of friends – or that Nelson is pregnant (although her pregnancy is the result of *in vitro* fertilization). Moreover,

> is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you miss it? (Nelson, 2016; p. 16)

As Carson writes,

> Nelson (2015) frames the issue of queer family-making as a generational issue: as access to adoption or other reproductive technologies becomes more readily available, albeit for a very limited class of queers, no longer *must* the queer be positioned as inherently oppositional to both the literal and figurative Child (2021; p. 42).

For Ahmed, and perhaps to Nelson,

> [t]o define a family as queer is already to interrupt one ideal image of the family, based on the heterosexual union, procreation and the biological tie. Rather than thinking of queer families as an extension of an ideal (and hence as a form of assimilation that supports the ideal), we can begin to reflect on the exposure of the failure of the ideal as part of the work that queer families are doing. (2014: p. 153).

Weston also implies that the tradition of community making within gay and lesbian groups also demands a deeper analysis of the many ways in which kinship ties are created among them as more than mimicry of nuclear families:

> [b]ecause family is not some static institution, but a cultural category that can represent assimilation or challenge (again, in context), there can be no definitive answer to the debate on assimilationism. Rather than representing a crystallized variation of some mythically mainstream form of kinship, gay families simply present one element in a broader discourse on family whose meanings are continuously elaborated in everyday situations of conflict and risk, from holidays and custody disputes to disclosures of lesbian or gay identity. (Weston, 1991: p. 477)

As previously addressed while reading *The Inheritance* and *The Great Believers*, queer relationships have found new ways of configurating themselves and "the very heart of queer politics ... is a fundamental challenge to the heteronormativity – the privilege, power and normative status invested in heterosexuality – of the dominant society (Cohen, C. J., 1997: p. 445). This is also addressed by Nelson, who recognizes the right for queer people to have families, as well as the right to do so without feeling that they are being stripped away from their 'queerness', for the radical resistance to heteronormativity by reclaiming it and reconfiguring it. Quoting Butler, Nelson wonders "[w]hen or how do *new systems mime older nuclear-family arrangements* and when or how do they *radically recontextualize them in a new way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship*" (Nelson, 2016; p. 16) – and how to tell that such mimicry or disruption is made and, as Nelson asks, who has the authority to say so? By recurring to Winnicott's notion of "feeling real", Nelson claims that there are many ways of both imitating and resisting such systems and that both can be, at certain times, for certain people, adequate, since "feeling real is not reactive to external stimuli,

nor it is an identity. It is a sensation – a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live" (Nelson, 2016: p. 17).

Moreover, Nelson also claims that the opposition between being queer and procreating no longer poses a conflict: one can be queer *and* have a family, recognized as such, with the legal rights provided to non-queer families, while questioning and even destroying the argument that queer relationships are incompatible with reproduction. Nelson goes even further in her statement on the possibility (but not obligation) of making a family when claiming that motherhood is not exclusive to either women nor heterosexual relationships, doing what Husain defines as a broader concept of motherhood that goes over the experience of raising a child, while contradicting heteronormative notions of motherhood, looking at "Adrienne Rich's seminal text *Of Woman Born* in which she distinguishes between *motherhood* as patriarchal institution and *mothering* as the lived practice of conceiving and raising children" (2020: p. 6).[73]

Nelson is a mother but she is *also* an accomplished writer and a recipient of the Guggenheim fellowship in non-fiction in 201. Husain claims that *The Argonauts* is particularly relevant as part of a canon of narratives of motherhood due to the way how Nelson disrupts the concept of motherhood in which mothering is incompatible with writing or good mothering can only mean a total devotion of a mother towards a child, as "Nelson presents a more expansive concept of the identity of a mother, which permits her to be many different selves at the same time and *celebrate* this multiplicity" (Husain, 2020: p. 42). Moreover,

> [w]hile in prior decades gays and lesbians sustained a radical critique of family and marriage, today many members of these groups have largely abandoned such critical positions, demanding access to the nuclear family and its associated rights, recognitions, and privileges from the state. That such queer liberalism

[73] For a more detailed analysis on (queer) motherhood in *The Argonauts*, see Husain (2020), Bakiyeva (2020), Pignagnoli (2018) and Kervick (2019): "Adrienne Rich has (now famously) defined two different meanings of motherhood. One understanding of motherhood refers to the 'potential relationship' between a mother and child, while the other refers to motherhood as a patriarchal institution which requires and ensures that all women remain under male control (1976: 13). .... It is unsurprising then, considering that the institution of American motherhood has been constructed within patriarchy, that there is relatively little critical work that considers the erotic lives of mothers and the physical experience of mothering. Further, according to O'Reilly, academic feminism has historically elided the maternal and 'the disavowal of the maternal in twenty-first-century academic feminism is deliberate and necessary, (...) enacted in order to protect and promote the illusion of the autonomous subject favoured by neoliberalism and celebrated in much of feminist theory (O'Reilly, 2016: 209). While economic, political, and social gains have been made for women as a result of decades of feminist activism and scholarship, the social and political realities of mothers and the motherwork they perform have been largely overlooked by feminism. Yet, to acknowledge the maternal (and the maternal body) 'is to remember that human beings are not self-sufficient, free- floating, and unencumbered subjects (...) who are championed by neoliberalism and celebrated in feminist modernity' (O'Reilly, 2016: 206). Instead, academic feminism must welcome a matricentric feminism that understands the social and historical construction of motherhood and the relationality inherent in its ideology and practice (O'Reilly, 2016: 4)" (Kervick, 2019: p. 4)

> comes at a historical moment of extreme right-wing nationalist politics should give us immediate pause. (Eng, 2005: p. 11)

In an excerpt of the book, Nelson equates giving birth and earning the fellowship as two hard-won achievements. While her mother was proud of her fellowship, having laminated the *New York Times* page in which Nelson was mentioned, she had refused to look at photographs of Iggy's birth (Nelson then realizes that she had also refused to see graphic photographs of births). Nelson explains how she placed the Guggenheim placemat under Iggy's high chair, to catch his food, something that for Nelson feels like "a loose sense of justice" (Nelson, 2016: p. 19), given that Iggy was conceived with the money of the fellowship.

In another moment of the book, Nelson describes A. L. Steiner's 2012 installation *Puppies and Babies*, a "collection of snapshots ... of friends in various states of public and private intimacy with the titular creatures" (Nelson, 2016: p. 88) that reminds her of Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, "another series of photographs that bears witness to the friends, lovers, and exes that make up the photographer's tribe" (Nelson, 2016: p. 123), albeit very distinct in their "moods". Addressing a particular photograph by Steiner in which a woman pumps milk, Nelson claims that these images of an activity that is profoundly intimate for women are often hidden away or made non-existing and to view it can be compared with what the images by Goldin also do, that "often make us feel as though we have glimpsed something radically intimate by evoking danger, suffering, illness, nihilism, or abjection" (Nelson, 2016: p. 124), although in Steiner this exchange of bodily fluid is "about nourishment" (Nelson, 2016: p. 124). For Gibson, and against what Michael Warner defined as heterosexuality's claim over "the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (Warner in Gibson, 2014: p. 2) "queering motherhood becomes a truly expansive project, an endeavor that might profoundly destabilize existing social relations, institutions, and discourses" (2014: p. 2).

Nelson defines Steiner's work as an antidote to the feeling expressed by the mainstream that neither motherhood nor animals provide the basis for "highbrow genres of art" (Nelson, 2016: p. 88), as well as a discourse written against the pressure to reproduce in which "these chosen families and creative reproductive options signify the *cultivation* of ethics of care (for others, animals, and environments) rather than that care being assumed or forced based on a traditional and limited model of the family" (Carson, 2021: p. 43), a family-making against "all kinds of subtle-to-appalling ways to punish women who choose *not* to procreate ... with its joy-swirl of sodomitical parenthood, caretaking of all kinds, and interspecies love" (Nelson, 2016: p. 89). The installation features babies nursing, pregnant women, as well as dogs playing or being fed or even "Alex Auder, pregnant, and in leather dom gear, pretends to give birth to an

inflatable turtle" (2016: p. 89). According to Nelson, "one of the gifts of genderqueer family-making – and animal loving – is the revelation of caretaking as detachable from – and attachable to – any gender, any sentient being" (2016; p. 90). Queer family-making, albeit mimicking certain heteronormative structure do redefine them, by directing affection and kinship towards any being, animal or human: "[i]nstead of hierarchizing affection based on the patriarchal family model ... a horizontalization of care whereby the principles one would normally apply to one's family become universally applicable to all living entities (Lauer, 2018: p. 43) would perhaps be more productive. Nelson also claims that, although not every subject in the photographs is queer, "the installation queers them" (2016: p. 90) by taking part in

> a long history of queer constructing their own families, be they composed of peers or mentors or lover or ex-lovers or children or non-human animals – and that it presents queer family-making as an umbrella category under which baby making might be a subset, rather than the other way around. It reminds us that any bodily experience can be made new and strange, that nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it, that no set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative. (Nelson, 2016: p. 91)

Nelson perfectly encapsulates – while expanding it – what queer family-making entails, of how queer family-making, as any type of family-making, may encompass but is not restricted to child bearing: "[f]amily becomes less about the particular relations between people than the acts of devotion that pass between them" (Seghal, 2015). That all bodies age and transform and that this process of aging and transforming is individual and distinct to each one of them, that "however anticipated these transitions may be, their precise trajectories remain uncertain, surprising, unsettling", as *The Argonauts* "muses on physical vulnerabilities, on the sense of the body as pregnable, penetrable, defenseless, susceptible to death, decay and ageing – but also as something that is transformed by desire" (Mitchell, 2018; p. 195) Its seems relevant to go back to Goldin and her more recent work: named Eden and After (2014), the series collects portraits of children that Goldin has made over the years, the children of Goldin's friends who have died, hinting at a possible emphasis on the figure of the child as continuity. One of the photographs in particular (Figure 19) suggests that the legacy of queer family-making encompasses reproductive but more than that, it also implies a heritage of gender fluidity and the disruption of heteronormativity. Io, who is now a transgender man, is described by Goldin as "was transgender before we used the term, before the majority of people knew anything about gender-fuck" (Goldin, 2016). Io "first lived as a boy from about 6 to 14 with one of his library cards identifying him as "Richie" and told

me he passed as a boy … Here was a 6-year-old kid kicking against all convention, fearless and daring to be who he felt rather than who he was supposed to be” (Goldin, 2016).

Figure 19: Nan Goldin, “Io in camouflage”, 1994.

When looking at other photographs, it is clear that Goldin’s families were not inscribed by a normative understanding of time (Figures 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24). When coming across the photographs of Cookie, the dates provided by the titles imply a narrative that is not inscribed by heteronormative sequence: Cookie holds Max, her son, in 1976, while Richard, possibly Max’s father, oversees his sleep in 1983. Cookie’s marriage with Vittorio dates from 1986, while Cookie is also seen dancing with Sharon, her partner, in 1976. The photographs from Vittorio and Cookie’s funeral date from 1989, as well as the one of Sharon taking care of Cookie. The viewer wonders where is Max, and who may have taken care of the boy after his mother’s death, while also understanding how caretaking played a crucial role in establishing these relationships of kinship, and how Sharon appears both before and after Cookie’s marriage to a man, emphasising the non-normative aspect of these relationship, both in relation to gender as well as sequence and time.

Figure 20: Nan Goldin, “Cookie with Max at My Birthday Party”, 1976.

Figure 21: Nan Goldin, “Cookie and Sharon Dancing in the Back Room”, 1976.

Figure 22: Nan Goldin, “Max and Richard”, 1983.

Image 23: Nan Goldin, “Cookie and Vittorio's Wedding: The Ring”, 1986.

Figure 24: Nan Goldin, “Cookie at Vittorio’s Casket”, 1989.

Figure 25: Nan Goldin, “Sharon with Cookie on the Bed”, 1989.

Figure 26: Nan Goldin, "Cookie in Her Casket", 1989.

4.4. The Argo: Reclaiming the Queer

Looking at Barthes' concept of the Argo, while also borrowing the structure of *A Lover's Discourse*, a body whose "parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo" and his description of how "I love you" is "like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name", (Nelson, 2016: p. 5), given a new meaning every time it is uttered, Nelson refers to the performative aspect of language and how it can be used to define but also redefine categories, to encompass change. "Nelson employs and references the Argo as a metaphor for the ever-evolving self[74]" (Husain, 2020: p. 67-8) highlighting "the resistance to categorisation that *The Argonauts* heralds provides [as] a model of empowered mothering that works to undermine a heteropatriarchal neoliberal order through the process of queer family-making" (Kervick, 2019: p. 2). And yet, regardless of the eternal rebuilding of Argo, perhaps the metaphor can also entail that

[74] Husain (2020) and Jenkins (2018) write on how the Argo metaphor is employed by Nelson when reading the body as well as the structure of the book itself, a narrative that is composed of seemingly disjointed blocks of text that, like the Argo, are malleable and interchangeable but make up a whole boat.

> [t]he book is a paradox not only of content but also of genre. The title, *The Argonauts*, in referring to a structure – a ship – is also referring to a genre. In other words, genre works in precisely this way: it has a rough structure and with it a name. Those things that fit into the rubric of that structure are called by that name; at the same time, what is claimed and named under that structure changes the category. (Pearl, 2018: p. 200).

When trying to become familiar with Harry's pronouns, Nelson describes how she looked for an appropriate way of addressing Harry online, having come across John Waters' remark "[s]he's very handsome" (Nelson, 2016: p. 9), which encompasses the exact ambiguity that Harry's body puts forward: the female pronoun and the masculine adjective. "The key is training your ear not to mind hearing the person's name over and over again … take cover in grammatical cul-de-sacs, relax into an orgy of specificity … tolerate an instance beyond the Two" (Nelson, 2016: p. 8); regardless of this, Nelson still has to deal with "shame and befuddlement" (Nelson, 2016: p. 8) of those who mistake Harry's pronouns, by making wrong assumptions regarding gender, "but who can't be corrected because the words are not good enough" (Nelson, 2016: p. 8). This inability of words to adjust to transgender experience is explained by Nelson as being linked to intimacy, as the ones who have access to "the you so close the third person never need apply" (Nelson, 2016: p. 9) will naturally have a different type of vocabulary to describe the transgender body; unlike Nelson, for whom Harry's body, life, and pronouns are familiar, for those outside their home, new words are needed. Taking the example of Harry's film *By Hook or By Crook*, that Dodge directed with Silas Howard, who also directed some episodes of *Transparent*, Nelson explains how the same body can be described as both female and male pronouns, on how the use of such pronouns is less about correctness and more about opening up words to a realm of the possible meanings, made anew when uttered, also different depending on who is speaking them – "words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure" (Nelson, 2016: p. 9) – on how categories of gender are defined by inner and outer forces, the latter often enforcing gender expectations that may not be a match to the gender expectations of those within the realm of transgender experience:

> you and your cowriter … decided that the butch characters would call each other "he" and "him", but in the outer world of grocery stores and authority figures, people would call them "she" and "her". The point wasn't that if the outer world were schooled appropriately re: the characters preferred pronouns, everything would be right as rain. Because if the outer world called the characters "he," it would be a different kind of he. … The answer isn't just to introduce new words (*boi, cisgendered, andro-fag*) and then set out to reify them (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts (Nelson, 2016: p. 9).

This 'multitude of possible uses' is also visible in the way how not only 'queer' has been reclaimed as a space of possibility instead of solely shame, as well as in the plurality of pronouns and identity categories that have been redefined to better match the reality of living in a gendered body. Nelson hints at how queer bodies are also, in their own way, Argos, also aligning, as it was previously done in this same thesis, with Sedgwick's understanding of 'queer' as fragmented and plastic:

> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wanted to make way for *queer* to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation. … She wanted the term to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of place-holder – a nominative, like the Argo, willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip. This is what reclaimed terms do – they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive. (Nelson 2016: p. 35-6)

"Any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity, also has a finger in psychosis" (2016: p. 17), writes Nelson. The journey that Harry's body follows is one that defies categorization. In line with what Preciado writes in *Testojunkie*, an account of self-hacking one's body in order to change it without the need of a medical diagnosis and neither accepting "the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it" (Preciado in Nelson, 2016: p. 66). Harry's transition is not a journey from one point to another but in a state of being somewhere in between. Without denying the experience of other trans individuals, Harry opens up *transness* to encompass new ways of having a body that is not male nor female, but in a state of becoming, of fluidity[75] and nomadism as Harry puts it. "Life histories are histories of becoming, and categories can sometimes act to freeze that process of becoming" (Butler, 2004: p. 80) - in the same way that narratives of progress mutilate the intersex body and crystalise gay rights – "a becoming in which one never becomes" (Nelson, 2016: p. 67), going hand in hand with Nelson's words and Harry's statement that to be transgender may not mean arriving somewhere, disrupting again the logic that often informs transgender narratives of being a

[75] "Others have criticised queer theory for its idealisation of movement (Epps 2001: 412; Fortier 2003). As Epps puts it: 'Queer theory tends to place great stock in movement, especially when it is movement against, beyond, or away from rules and regulations, norms and conventions, borders and limits . . . it makes fluidity a fetish' (Epps 2001: 413). The idealisation of movement, or transformation of movement into a fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as *not free in the same way*. Bodies that can move with more ease may also more easily shape and be shaped by the sign 'queer'. It is for this reason that Biddy Martin suggests that we need to 'stop defining queerness as mobile and fluid in relation to what then gets construed as stagnant and ensnaring' (Martin 1996: 46). Indeed, the idealisation of movement depends upon a prior model of what counts as a queer life, which may exclude others, those who have attachments that are not readable as queer, or indeed those who may lack the (cultural as well as economic) capital to support the 'risk' of maintaining anti- normativity as a permanent orientation" (Ahmed, 2014: p. 152).

journey from one place to another, in a straight timeline, like the one that informs *Middlesex*. Sometimes, things stay troubled so

> [h]ow to explain – "trans" may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly developing mainstream narrative it evokes ("born in the wrong body", necessitating an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless for some - but partially, or even profoundly, useful for others? That for some, "transitioning" may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others - like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T - it doesn't? I'm not on my way anywhere, Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy? (Maggie, 2016: p. 65)

Nelson is unafraid of exposing failure, change, ambivalence. When Dodge's mother is diagnosed with cancer, and the prospect of losing his son in a custody battle becomes more likely, Dodge also starts to contemplate his transition. The making of an exterior home, of a comfortable place to live with his son and partner, clashes with his feelings of homelessness when it comes to his own body, which feels more and more inhospitable every day. Nelson also addresses the tension between Dodge's decision to undergo surgery and testosterone treatment, how she feared that his new identity would change their relationship, as Dodge would start identifying as someone and something else, as well as the fear that the testosterone would endanger Dodge's life. However this tension fades away when Nelson realizes how unconformable Dodge is in his own body. Given that "[n]ormativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it" (Ahmed, 2016: p. 147), Dodge's body is clearly unable to live as *normal*, smashed by binds that allow him to pass as male, uncomfortable in the home closer to him – his body:

> Your inability to live in your skin was reaching its peak, your neck and back pulsing with pain all day, all night, from your torso (and hence your lungs) having been constricted for almost thirty years. Your tried to stay wrapped even while sleeping but by morning the floor was always littered with doctored sports bras, strips of dirt fabric – "smashers," you called them. I just want you to feel free, I said in anger disguised as compassion, compassion disguised as anger. Don't you get it? you yelled back. I will never feel as free as you do, I will never feel as at home in the world, I will never feel as at home in my own skin. ... We knew something, maybe everything, was about to give. We hoped it wouldn't be us." (Nelson, 38-9)

Ahmed's take on comfort seems relevant to read Dodge's body against other bodies; taking the example of a chair, Ahmed writes on how comfort can induce conformity, and how non-normative bodies, as well as queer relationships such as marriage, that are "uncomfortable" when brushing against other bodies or families, not only question the norm, by not, literally, fitting, but also change its form:

> Say you are sinking into a comfortable chair. Note I already have transferred the affect to an object ('it is comfortable'). But comfort is about the fit between body and object: my comfortable chair may be awkward for you, with your differently-shaped body. Comfort is about an encounter between more than one body, which is the promise of a 'sinking' feeling. It is, after all, pain or discomfort that return one's attention to the surfaces of the body as body ... To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can't see the 'stitches' between bodies. (2014: p. 148)

Perhaps an interesting parallel can be drawn between the object that Harry refers to as smasher, that compresses his chest, known as 'binders, and 'time binds', as theorized by Freeman, and how the trans body either disrupts chornonormative sequences of time but is also constrained – "smashed" – by these binds in order to conform to the expected look of masculinity, while also thinking of the 'ties that bind' people together under a common belief of heteronormativity:

> By ''time binds'', I mean something beyond the obvious point that people find themselves with less time than they need. Instead, I mean that naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere exis- tence into a form of mastery in a process I'll refer to as chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity. (Freeman, 2010: p. 3)

The fear of the changes that can be brought around by the hormone replacement therapy is addressed by Nelson as another moment of ambivalent feelings – and an awareness of them, instead of shaming them: when reading a piece written by the mother of one of her students about how she dealt with the fact that he was transgender, Nelson becomes enraged due to the inability that the mother expresses of loving "the man my [hers] daughter has become" (Nelson, 2016: p. 62). Nelson reads parts of the article to Dodge, furious when the mother explains that "[a] transgender child brings a parent face to face with death" (Nelson, 2016: p. 62) – an echo of McBee's take on trans time and the duplicity of life events such as birth and death – and how she fails to recognize the man that is now her son:

> I couldn't tell what made me more upset – the terms with which the woman was talking about her child, of the fact that she had chosen to publish them in a major newspaper. I told you I was sick of stories in the mainstream media told by comfortably cisgendered folks – presumably "us" – expressing grief over the transitions of others, presumably "them" (Nelson, 2016: p. 62).

Dodge forces Nelson to realise that she had also expressed similar feelings towards his own transition, of how Nelson had expressed, although in different words, the dangers brought by testosterone when it comes to heart disease and high cholesterol. Nelson recollects the exact moment when she felt reluctant about Dodge's transition, going through an informative leaflet, while she was, at the same time, trying to get pregnant. The parallel seems to establish that both bring pregnant and undergoing transition are equally valid forms of changing the body through the rearrangement of hormones, a rearrangement that will bring around many changes, resulting in either the gender presentation of a body or the birth of a new one (the metaphor could be expanded to also perceive the new gendered body as a second birth, echoing McBee's article and even Cal's second birth in an emergency room, albeit with different contours). The parallel, which defines the skeleton of *The Argonauts*, becomes more evident when looking at the preparation of the Dodge's and Nelson's body to their transitions, one as a "butch on T", the other as a mother:

> By the time I was scouring the pamphlet, we'd been trying to get pregnant, without success, for over a year. I stayed busy trying to puff my uterine lining by downing gobs of foul-smelling beige capsules ... from an acupuncturist ... you had begun to lay the groundworks to have top surgery and start injecting T, which causes the uterus to shrivel (Nelson, 2016: p. 63).

While one uterus becomes more fertile, the other becomes smaller. Nelson explains how the changes in Dodge's body worry her, of how she selflessly wants Dodge to keep his body as it is, of how she would like Dodge to be pleased with the fact that he can already, due to his beard "*pass 90 percent of the time without T*" as a man (Nelson, 2016: p. 63). Nelson eventually accepts Dodge's transition, realising that in such matters it is the person who is going through the transition – and their "peace" (Nelson, 2016: p. 64) – that must be taken into account, that "[w]e can feel uncomfortable in the categories we inhabit, even categories that are shaped by their refusal of public comfort" (Ahmed, 2014: p. 151).

Nelson will also express how, upon finding that her child would be a boy during an ultrasound, she had to "mourn something" (Nelson, 2016: p. 108), as if the fact that the baby was a boy completely erased any type of female identification for him, while also implying that even within a queer household, gender expectations are very much alive: "the fantasy of a feminist daughter, the fantasy of a mini-me. Someone whose hair I could braid, someone who might serve as a femme ally" (Nelson, 2016: p. 108). Dodge then reminds Nelson of the obvious: he had also been born female. For Nelson, the fact that her female body can produce a male body only works as a way of bridging the gap between male and female bodies, as the male body is *another* body but, according to Nelson, a female body would also have its

own subjectivity and be a different body than her own. As argued by Husain, and referring to Grosz's critique of the Cartesian mind over body motto, *The Argonauts* offers a glimpse at the bodily and embodied experience of a pregnant and a transgender body, "as a site of knowledge production that is just as valuable as the mind" (Husain, 2020: p. 54). Nelson would offer a definition of this as something close to the erotics of the pregnant body, rather than the hermeneutics of the pregnant body.

After Dodge's mother dies, Nelson goes through her papers, coming across Dodge's adoption papers, bringing up yet another way of making families. "You were Wendy Malone but for minutes" (Nelson, 2016: p. 169), but as soon as Dodge is adopted, another name is given to him. The implication made by Nelson is simple: Dodge has been shifting identities since he were born, the naming process changing as he changed families and genders. From Wendy, a child up for adoption, to Rebecca for twenty years as her mother and father's daughter, to Becky, to Butch in college (although ironically Dodge was unaware of its meaning and only used the name because it was a nickname that had been given to him by his father), to Harriet Dodge, when Dodge moves to San Francisco, a name that was made official after having a child, when "you [Dodge] inched toward the state and made the change official" (Nelson, 2016: p. 170), and finally Harry. When the *New York Times* writes an article on Dodge's artwork, they demand that Dodge chooses a title, Mr. or Ms.; Dodge chooses Ms., claiming that he would "take one for the team" (Nelson, 2016: p. 170), positioning themselves with a legacy of women artists striving to see their work recognized like Nora in *The Great Believers*. However, while the process of choosing one's name and title may seem easy, Dodge was reminded that this change is also defined and depends on the state and legal affairs, when Dodge's ex-partner refuses to accept that Dodge appears as their son's mother in adoption forms, although Dodge could not legally appear as a father either.

When Dodge's mother is dying, she claims to be happy to have her daughter by her side, leaving the nurses confused and looking for a woman when Dodge is standing right in front of them. In appointments with Iggy, the nurse would say how pleased she was seeing a father helping with the baby (one can also address, albeit briefly, how surprising it seems to be to see a father, even if this father is a "butch on T", taking the role of caretaker). In a restaurant, the waiter still addressed everyone in Nelson's family as 'ladies'. Depending on each context, Dodge's body is read and perceived as male or female, as father or daughter: gender is then also dependent on family relations and the relation of gendered bodies towards each person, mother, partner or son; Pearl states that "[t]his is the puzzle presented in the book: the paradox of how we might understand or recognize queerness when it looks conventional" (2018: p. 200). Dodge eventually finds his birth mother, a former sex worker and a lesbian, who only realizes who Dodge's father might be, a violent men named Jerry, when seeing Dodge, given the facial resemblance

that Dodge has to their brother, who has been in and out of prison and battling addiction, with whom Dodge's mother has no contact. Dodge recognizes his writing style in his brother's writing, as well as his tendency towards addiction, having being sober from alcohol from the age of twenty-three. And yet, although his family's background is far from stable, Dodge claims that, even though "it can be hard not to know much about one's parents" (Nelson, 2016; p.173), it can also be quite liberating. For Dodge, their "lifelong interest in fluidity and nomadism" (Nelson, 2016: p. 173) stems from having been adopted, something that he perceives as being positive, given that he do not share the risk of becoming like his parents, "a fear you saw ruling the psyche of many of your friends" (Nelson, 2016; p. 173). "You [Dodge] felt you came from the whole world" (2016; p. 173), claims Nelson, explaining how Dodge's sense of belonging derives not from a nuclear family but from the detachment from blood ties, although Dodge does express the grief that he feels when his adoptive mother dies, and the will to find more about his birth mother is "clouded by the memory of your mother" (Nelson, 2016; p. 173).

While the writing of the memoir progresses, so do the bodily changes, due to hormones, synthetic and naturally produced; their bodies "grew stranger, to ourselves, to each other", as Nelson becomes nauseated while Dodge's sexual libido increases, as Nelson's breasts become sore while Dodge exposes his newly flattened chest in public spaces:

> 2011, the summer of our changing bodies. Me, four months pregnant, you six months on T. We pitched out, in our inscrutable hormonal soup, for Fort Lauderdale ... so you could have top surgery by a good surgeon and recover ... I had started showing, which was delightful. Maybe there would be a baby. (Nelson, 2016: p. 99-100)

After these changes comes the time when these gendered bodies are open to public scrutiny in the open space of a restaurant, visible only because their respond to what is expected of them, as male and female. "Visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre" (2016; p. 107), writes Nelson on Dodge's newfound ability of walking around passing as male, cloaked by the privileged level of visibility provided by unambiguous masculine traits, something that can also be said of the visible pregnancy of Nelson, and how she was given help and support in public transportation by strangers, never bridging "the gap between the meanings ascribed to, and inscribed onto, the visible body, and our bodies as we live them from the inside out" (Salamon, 2016: p. 304):

> You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant. Our waiter cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours. On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more "male", mine, more and more "female". But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside we were two human

> animals[76]. undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we are aging. (Nelson, 2016: p. 103)

As Butler writes on marriage and its universalizing power to legitimate and make a relationship visible:

> marriage compels, at least logically, universal recognition: everyone must let you into the door of the hospital; everyone must honor your claim to grief; everyone will assume your natural rights to a child; everyone will regard your relationship as elevated into eternity. In this way, the desire for universal recognition is a desire to become universal, to become interchangeable in one's universality, to vacate the lonely particularity of the nonratified relation, and, perhaps above all, to gain both place and sanctification in that imagined relation to the state. Place and sanctification: these are surely powerful fantasies, and they take on particular phantasmatic form when we consider the bid for gay marriage. (2004: p. 111)

And yet, the fact that Harry and Nelson were once a lesbian couple, and are now being perceived as a straight couple, also provides a very relevant questioning of how deeply rooted symbolic readings of gendered bodies are, particularly in relation to each other, and how easily demystified they can be. Even if they are now perceived as a heteronormative couple, Nelson wonders if being pregnant can also be radical and subversive, especially when making a family with Harry, a transgender man, if

> [i]s there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with — and radical alienation from — one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? ... What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? (Nelson, 2016: p. 16)

For Fournier, the queering of the pregnant body also destabilizes the queer theory canon composed of male voices, through a feminist and queer approach:

> Along with this queering of the pregnant body comes a queering of the antisocial turn as it exists in queer theory via Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman. Nelson's writing brings a feminist approach to the language and frameworks of a gay-male-authored canon of queer theory and its politics of refusal that emerges from both the new precarity politics of the left (*The Argonauts*) and masculine avant-garde traditions of extremism and violence in performance (*The Art of Cruelty*). We can read Nelson's writings as deconstructing dominant discourses in purportedly experimental and progressive spaces through a queer

[76] "Two human animals"; again, Nelson evokes a certain link with animals, a closer kinship towards other forms beyond the human. For a queer and ecocritical reading of Nelson's book, see Lauer (2018).

> feminist perspective. Yet the view that there is something quintessentially more queer haunts the text … because of her status as a cisgender queer pregnant woman who rejects both homophobic heteronormativity and antisocial calls for queer negativity. (2021: p. 164)

And as Bakieyva writes:

> Nelson's claim that pregnancy is queer illustrates that she refuses one definition of subjectivity. Since a pregnant mother contains another subject, mothers have multiple subjectivities. This is important because Nelson also aims at providing the reader her 'self' formed from different experiences and subjectivities, a self that is multiple and speaks in multiple discourses (2020: p. 37).

One of Nelson's main arguments is exactly these multiple subjectivities of a mother, challenging the narrative that motherhood "obliterates" any other type of subjectivity, that to be a mother she would have to put on hold her writing. *The Argonauts* can then be read as

> Nelson's attempt, as a mother and a partner, to 'narrate [her] own life' as a method of resisting cultural taboos about motherhood and mothering, sex, pleasure, and desire and to transgress the boundaries of the heteropatriarchal institution of motherhood. (Kerwick, 2019: p. 5)

Giving the example of her own mother, who always asked Nelson to change channels to see a man instead of a woman reading the weather forecast as the latter would be more accurate, Nelson provides an interesting view on how women are perceived as "suspect", of how condescending patriarchal discourses think of bodies that are capable of giving birth as unable to do anything else, on how even "most oft-cited, well-respected, bestselling books about the caretaking of babies … have been and are mostly still be men" (Nelson, 2016: p. 54), exposing "her own need for academic writing on motherhood other than the phallocentric gravitas of Freud and Lacan" (Husain, 2020: p. 51). This multiple subjectivity of women is also found in the juxtaposition between motherhood and sexuality, addressed by Nelson when analyzing Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* in context with the other artworks that compose the series, such as *Pervert*, which features the word carved on Opie's chest, and other series by Opie, such as "the heterogenous lesbian households of Opie's *Domestic* series (1995-98) – in which Harry appears baby-faced – as well as with Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004), take a decade after *Self Portrait/Pervert*" (Nelson, 2016: p. 80). In this portrait, (Figure 27) the metaphor of the Argo becomes clear: Opie's body has renewed itself, its flesh has healed – "her *Pervert* scar still visible, albeit ghosted, across her chest" (Nelson, 2016: p. 80) – from the cutting as well as the giving of birth to her son, who nurses over her

scarred chest, a palimpsest of scarring and subjectivities encapsulated in the same photograph, as "[t]he ghosted scar offers a rebus of sodomitical maternity: the pervert need not die or even go into hiding per se, but nor its adult sexuality foisted upon the child, made its burden" (Nelson, 2016: p. 80). Donegan wonders:

> What does one hope to achieve, she [Nelson] wonders, when one performs gestures like the one Opie did when she carved pervert into her chest? What are we signaling, and to whom, when we mark ourselves as different—as queer, as deviant, as angry or oppositional? Above all, how do we think our way out of the easy sense of contradiction that Opie's revisited image presents, between the pervert-self and the nursing-self? (2020)

Figure 27: Catherine Opie, "Self-Portrait/Nursing", 2004.

Textual ghosts, again, make their brief appearance and haunting to demand something, to explain how one can be, at the same time, many versions of spectral identities that overlap in the body, how mothering and queerness are compatible and moreover, capable of co-existing in the same body, in the same

household, that non-reproductive sex and its pleasure can also be practiced by women who happen to be someone's mothers[77], working against a model of mothering that is patriarchal by replacing it with "a woman's experience of empowered mothering through her repeated insistence that eroticism is embedded in the practice of mothering" (Kervick, 2019: p. 3). As Lauer claims, when analysing the first page of *The Argonauts*, in which Nelson writes on the first sexual encounter with Harry, an encounter that right away states the queerness of their relationship, by reclaiming, as Nelson will do in other parts of the book, the pleasure of anal sex and non-reproductive sexual acts[78]:

> Queer pleasure begs you to "fuck me in the ass" because it is the protagonist's desire, and it isn't scared to admit love before it's felt in "an incantation" to summon what's desired. Queer pleasure speaks of bachelor pads with unused shower stalls where stores of dildos are kept. Queer pleasure can do all of these things without disintegrating under the pressure because it is not invested in the same ideas of futurity, family, and normalcy in which some other sexual pleasures abide. Equally, queer pleasure can be vulgar as well as inspiring, carnal as well as theoretical, bodily as well as spiritual. (2018; p. 49).

Queer pleasure as perceived by Ahmed seems to echo Nelson's, as well as Preciado's definition of countersexual practices, as practices uninscribed by reproductive imperatives that fall outside the heteronormative:

> The 'orientation' of the pleasure economy is bound up with heterosexuality: women and men 'should' experience a surplus of plea- sure, but only when exploring each other's bodies under the phallic sign of difference (pleasure as the enjoyment of sexual difference). Whilst sexual pleasure within the West may now be separated from the task or duty of reproduction, it remains tied in some way to the fantasy of being reproductive: one can enjoy sex with a body that it is imagined one could be reproductive with. Queer pleasures might be legitimate here, as long as 'the queer' is only a passing moment in the story of heterosexual coupling ('queer as an enjoyable distraction'). The promise of this pleasure resides in its convertibility to reproduction and the accumulation of value. (2014: p. 163)

4.5. Docking the Argo

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[77] See Kervick's on the acts of pleasure and their presence side by side with mothering in Nelson's book as a case of "empowered mothering" that subverts "heteropatriarchal neoliberal order" (2019: p. 3).

[78] Nelson writes expansively on acts of sex that are, because they are non-reproductive, inherently queer, pleasure-based: "I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphorics, of my anus. I am interested in ass- fucking. I am interested in the fact that the clitoris, disguised as a discrete button, sweeps over the entire area like a manta ray, impossible to tell where its eight thousand nerves begin and end". (Nelson, 2016: p. 85)

“Kissing the stomach/ kissing your scarred skin boat”, writes Michael Ondaatje in a fragment that Nelson sends to Dodge in an attempt “to behold the names and images of others inked onto your skin without disjunct or distaste” (2016: p. 7). It is this skin boat, this Argo, that one carries around, a body permeable to the occupation of others, to the inscription of social texts and expectations of gender, a body that is open to the gaze of others. *The Argonauts* is a hypertext, not only composed of textual references that create a dialogue between time and multiple voices, but one that also features several bodies that are, in themselves, texts:

> Catherine Opie’s Self-Portrait/Cutting, Harry’s unremovable tattoos, Harry’s physical pain from binding and later surgical scars, Nelson’s own body “queered” by pregnancy – in *The Argonauts* the bodies bear literal wounds as a result of their diverse histories, their surfaces vulnerable to invasion, inscription, to rewriting and reinvention but also to misreading (to pass or not to pass?) (Mitchell, 2018; p. 195).

In *Transparent*, when Maura finds that she is illegible for surgery due to her health issues, she strips her bra and sends it overboard the boat where the entire family is gathered to relearn how to communicate with each other. The link with the boat, and the fact that Maura seems to be sending overboard notions of femininity, is too self-evident of her change and path as a transgender woman not to be mentioned, given the way in which boats provide recurrent moments and metaphors of renewal, from *Middlesex* to *The Argonauts*. “The waters are broken. It feels tremendously good. I am lying in a warm ocean” (2016; p. 164), writes Nelson about the moment of relief that marks the beginning of Iggy’s birth: the open space of the water, works as a surfaces in which “[t]here is no past or future. Using tenses to divide time is like making chalk marks on water” (Frame, 2009: p. 37), a space in which the Argo, as body and language,

> is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea (...) the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (Foucault, 1967: p. 9)

The Argonauts, due to its ambiguity of gender and *genre* opens up many possibilities for writing the self; by refusing categories related to both writing and the writing of the body, Nelson’s book is an incredibly rich contribution for a new way of writing and thinking not only the memoir but also queer and changing bodies and their resistance to being categorized. Moreover, one could argue that *The Argonauts* is the

work of a collaborative effort[79], just like a family is, an autobiography which is written in dialogue, and ultimately a look, not only at Nelson's first person experience, but also at her experience as mother, partner and writer and how she relates to those who permeate her life, from partners and friends, to the intellectuals that one carries around in one's head, dictating our understanding of the surrounding world, transgressing the hierarchy of intellectual authority by using "lateral citation", reproducing the words of "peers, friends, cohort, or colleagues instead of citing only upward" (Fournier, 2021: p. 162) for a feminist and queer relational approach[80]. "You've written about all parts of your life except this, the queer part" (Nelson, 2016: p. 40), says Dodge, to which Nelson replies that she has not written about it *yet*. While delivering a talk at a university, Nelson is confronted by a man who asks her how can she write about sadism, violence and cruelty while being pregnant: "the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*" (2016: p. 113), remarks Nelson, ironically. And Nelson thinks a lot.

Although Dodge's experience is narrated by Nelson, the result is the one of two individuals working together, going "through the first draft page by page ... with him suggesting ways I might facet my representation of him, of us. I try to listen, try to focus on his generosity in letting me write about him at all" (Nelson, 2016: p. 57). In narratives such as Dodge's, narratives of ambiguity and self-awarness, that are written upon a legacy of misrepresentation and mistreatment, of shame and even violence, it is important to negotiate, to give voice and space, to ultimately, listen, or, as Nelson proposes:

> How does one get across the fact that the best way to find how people feel about their gender or their sexuality - or anything else, really, is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours? (...) On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories – predator, twilight, edible – on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the fight, the great soup of being in which we actually live. (2016; p. 66)

An interesting constellation of acts of creation can be drawn over the pages of *The Argonauts*: the mechanical pencil, the testosterone injection, the blood that is drained from Dodge's mastectomy as if ink, and the sperm cannula, even Opie's cutting upon the skin, write, in their own terms, different textual bodies – a memoir, a 'male' body, a newborn. After finally coming to terms with Dodge's transition, by realizing that he has achieved a level of peace only brought down by the regret of not having started the

[79] This is also claimed by Lauer: "Welker goes so far as to insist that "the work is clearly a collaboration: a few sections are by Dodge, many sections are about him, and some are addressed to him" (223), and I certainly agree that The Argonauts reads as flexibly collaborative" (Lauer, 2018: p. 47).

[80] "Part of a feminist and queer feminist citation practice involves destabilizing hierarchies of influence as a movement toward a relational politics." (Fournier, 2021, p. 162).

process earlier, Nelson also becomes an active part of it, by injecting him with testosterone – a metaphorical pen – in a collaborative process, like raising a child or writing a memoir, of writing new discourses and narratives: "[e]ach time I count the four rungs down on the blue ladder tattooed on your lower back, spread out the skin, push in the nearly-two-inch-long needle, and plunge the golden, oily T into deep muscle mass, I feel certain I am delivering a gift" (Nelson, 65).

The metaphor becomes more vivid when Nelson explains how she wrote *The Argonauts*, "hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump: words piled into one machine, milk siphoned out by other" (Nelson, 2016: p. 124), the writing of the book advancing with the nourishment of Iggy's body, with Nelson as the caretaker and creator of both. This is also stated by Mayer, who writes:

> [t]he book is thus a queer object that anticipates its own production as it also details the labour of its own making in parallel with the labour of conception, pregnancy and parenting, and of transitioning or reshaping gender, connecting these to the work of political change, particularly around queer and cultural politics. (2018: p. 189)

The metaphor seems to echo Preciado's account of his writing on testosterone, as the fluid is used as fuel, in a similar vein to other authors:

> I take testosterone like Walter Benjamin took hashish, Freud cocaine, or Michaux mescaline. And that is not an autobiographical excuse but a radicalization (in the chemi- cal sense of the term) of my theoretical writing. My gen- der does not belong to my family or to the state or to the pharmaceutical industry. My gender does not belong to feminism or to the lesbian community or to queer theory. Gender must be torn from the macrodiscourse and diluted with a good dose of micropolitical hedonist psychedelics. (Preciado, 2013: p. 397)

More than the collaboration between partners to raise a child, or someone injecting testosterone on their partner, or a mother feeding a child while writing a book about the child's birth, *The Argonauts* is also a process of academic collaboration, between Nelson and all the other voices that find their way into the text, establishing in themselves a literary legacy as it happened in *The Inheritance*, while at the same time disrupting the canonical and tradition way of "making academia", by setting side by side the voices of well-renowned authors with friends and family members (Lauer, 2018; Hagan, 2017). Moreover, this collaborative process finds echo upon the body as well: in the pleasure that Nelson and Dodge experience, in the countersexual practices of using a prosthetic dildo and anal sex, in the moment of giving birth, when the body opens up and Nelson finally "falls into pieces" when "every point on the body is more

than just a potential plane onto which a dildo can be placed; it is also an orifice-entrance, a vanishing point, a download center, a virtual action–passion axis" (Preciado, 2018; p. 30).

Not only does *The Argonauts* challenge the family structure, it also challenges the moment of conception itself, stripping it away from both romanticised interpretations as well as the *de-embodiment* of the act of conception, i.e., the need not for the bodies of the parents but the fluids and cells that are needed to the act of conception, an act that, although devoid of sexual penetration, is not lacking sexual pleasure. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson describes how she would masturbate in order to achieve an orgasm and therefore increase the chances of having a successful insemination. This description appears side by side with the description of the mechanics of the process of fertilization, as well as the frustration that arises from not becoming pregnant, and how Dodge, although not the biological giver of the sperm, is present in every fertilization session, supporting Nelson, another instance of affect over blood:

> Insemination after insemination, wanting our baby to be. Climbing up on the cold exam table, abiding the sting of the catheter threaded through the opal slit of my cervix, feeling the familiar cramp of rinsed, thawed seminal fluid pooling directly into my uterus. You holding my hand month after month, in devotion, in perseverance. *They're probably shooting egg whites*, I said, tears sprouting. *Shhh,* you whispered. *Shhh*. The first few times we did the procedure, I brought a satchel of good luck charms. Sometimes, after the nurse dimmed the lights and left the room, you would hold me as I made myself come. The point wasn't romance as much as it was to suck the specimen upward (even though we knew it was already about as far up as it could go). (2016; p. 125)

The same can be found in Michelle Tea's narration of getting pregnant, an experience that she accounts for in several or her works: using the sperm of a gay friend, and one of her partner's eggs, Tea describes the act of being inseminated as a domestic affair, unlike the space of the clinic as Nelson does. Tea juxtaposes the moment of insemination with the familiar, also implying a communal aspect that can be found in the moment of conception, as well as pleasure:

> I summoned Quentin and my best friend Rhonda, and we set up our system: Quentin would go into my kitchen and masturbate. … With a children's oral medicine syringe I'd gotten for free at Walgreens (!), Rhonda gathered the semen. I was on my back, on my bed, my hips raised on pillows. "I'm sorry," I said to my friend as I pulled open my labia, and she inserted the syringe into my vag. She gave the plunger a tremendous push, and I was inseminated. We did this for many months – Quentin, Rhonda and I – over time tweaking the process. … I gave myself an orgasm after insemination, while Quentin and Rhonda watched YouTube videos in the kitchen, the volume loud enough to drown out the lawnmower buzz of my Hitachi Magic Wand. … I laid with my legs way up in the air, and then, hearing that sperm are actually

primed to swim up, I laid with them down. Month after month, my pregnancy pee test came back negative. (Tea, 2013)

Tea eventually became pregnant and her pregnancy was documented by the photographer Sophie Spinelle for a series entitled *Modern Conception*. In Figure 28, Tea lies down in an exam table, surrounded by plants, encapsulating "the tension between the way women are taught to conceive (naturally, instinctually) and the way most queer women actually do conceive" (Dow, 2014). In both Nelson and Tea, something is clear: the moment of conception can be either lonely or communal, medically assisted or domestically performed but in all instances, this queering of birth and conception challenge notions of reproduction that are still attached to ideas of a *natural* way of making families and giving birth.

Figure 28: Sophie Spinelle, "Modern Conception", 2014.

The final pages of *The Argonauts* present a family portrait that encompasses the arguments that have been put forward in this thesis: that queer family-making can but does not necessarily mean giving birth, that the structures of affection that queer individuals have created to support and give care to each other are far broader in features that the norm implies and destabilize patriarchal assumptions about gender

roles and motherhood, that the “mythologies” imposed by heteronormative acts and family structures are reductive and unfit to encompass and represent the manifold and multiple ways of making queer families:

> She [Nelson] validates the family she forged and refuses to apologize, because it is sanctified with love, devotion, and care. In fact, watching her stepson play with his new brother, she writes contentedly, “But really there is no such things as reproduction, only acts of production...When all the mythologies have been set aside, we can see that, children or no children . . . we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song”. (Lauer, 2018: p. 70-1)

As Dunn points out, family-making, although it may seem, as implied by Nelson’s friend when holding the heteronormative cup, traditional, “her husband does not identify as either male or female, one of her sons was conceived with a sperm donor, and the other son is biologically Harry’s to whom Nelson is stepmother” (Dunn, 2016; p. 10): care exists and takes shape through kinship and bonds of affection rather than by blood, and without the hierarchy established by patriarchal nuclear families.

If *The Argonauts* resists any type of theoretical anchoring and framing, then the work of an academic is perhaps to read it erotically rather than hermeneutically, or read-fucking, to borrow from Nelson’s wording. As Jackie Stacey puts it: how to be a good enough reader of *The Argonauts*?

4.6. *Genderation*

Twenty years after *Gendernauts*, Treut travels to San Francisco again to re-visit her friends, and see how transgender lives and rights have been affected by the new threats against the freedom that was alive and well in the 90s: the result is called *Genderation* (2021), another nod to generation, “something of a family reunion” (Jenner, 2021), a look at ageing, the transformation of San Francisco from queer heaven to a gentrified and technology-based city that pushes its people away from its centre (perhaps the central concern of *The Inheritance*) and how this particular generation of ‘gendernauts’ is still making and destroying gender conventions. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson writes about how Dodge had felt at home in the “close-knit, DIY queer scene” (Nelson, 2016; p. 78) at the center of San Francisco, unlike the queer scene in Los Angeles, “partitioned by traffic and freeways, oppressively cliquish and bewildering diffuse at the same time, hard to phantom, to *see*” (Nelson, 2016: p. 78). And yet, Treut’s film seems to imply that this invisibility, this lack of a visible queer community has also reached San Francisco.

Annie Sprinkle and her wife Elizabeth Stephens are now ecosexual artists who are still trying to expose gender myths while also raising awareness of the destruction of the planet due to global warming and climate change. This is also somewhat present in Nelson's mind as she mentions how the world is being destroyed by capitalism that, in turn, destroys the planet and even the nourishing milk of mothers is now contaminated with "literal poisons, from paint thinners to dry-cleaning fluid to toilet deodorizers to DDT to flame retardants" (Nelson, 2016: p. 125).

Susan Stryker still lives in San Francisco with her partner, while working as a Professor and writing about gender, thinking of how old age and retirement will change their lives. In one walk around their neighbourhood, the couple expresses their distaste towards the changes brought by gentrification and how every colourful house in San Francisco is now a dull, dark grey, a sign of the change from queer haven to the centre of capitalist corporation power. Max Valerio is still writing and has moved out of San Francisco to back to be closer to his parents, while Stafford, who seemed pleased with being in between genders has not only aged but also became more visibly male, after having received testosterone injections. He has also moved to the desert, far from "Club Confidential", which has, like many other queer spaces, disappeared, where he works at a moving company (most of the time in which Stafford appears on screen, he is inside his car, travelling, an appropriate metaphor for his own personal journey between genders) and he intends to build a self-sustaining community in the inhospitable dry desert so that, when old age comes, these people will take care of each other. Sandy Stone now spends her time to working at a radio station and has managed to finally buy her own home in gentrified San Francisco, as she enters old age. Through Stone, a poignant comment of queer family-making is made: while showing a photograph of several people of different ages, Stone explains how her nuclear family is made of several mothers, Stone's former partners, and fathers, such as a gay couple who was a sperm donor for one of the women, as well as the children of these people.

Images of *Gendernauts* and *Genderation* appear in order to establish a link between past and present but also to show us how much these people have changed, both in their gender appearance and how transgender bodies are also prone to the inevitable passing of time, how much their bodies but also their ideas and ideals have matured, evoking Nelson when she writes that not only are Dodge's and her body' changing: they are also ageing . *Genderation* focuses exactly on that: on how a generation of radical queer thinkers and artists has aged and how the community and the city of San Francisco has also changed, while also dealing with matters of gentrification, economic precariousness, family-making, old age, illness and, as always, but now less important than economic stability, gender.

Although its focus is on the present, the final scenes of the film evoke the earlier film: aboard a boat, Annie Sprinkle, “a many-gendered mother of the heart” (Nelson, 2016; p. 152), who has shared that she has had cancerous tissue removed from her lungs, her partner Beth Stephens and Sandy Stone turn one of Sprinkle’s bucket-list wish into reality: watching whales. This seems to be, although unaware of it, what Maggie Nelson had in mind while writing *The Argonauts* (Figure 29): a couple of ecosexual lesbians and a transgender pioneer holding tight to each other, mimicking the sound of whales – and one is reminded of Nelson’s comment on how queer family-making also entails interspecies love – in an attempt to connect with an animal that is, as humans, “made of star stuff” (Nelson, 2016; p. 151). “Materials never leave this world. They just keep recycling, recombing” (Nelson, 2016; p. 151), writes Nelson, reminding the reader that everything, and every *body*, is an Argo, perpetually in change, in material dependency from each other. The three women keep mimicking the whale, in an undecipherable inhuman call, as three sirens, symbolizing new ways of being a woman, whose call is not meant to destroy men but to build a link with the whale, who appears and shows off for her crowd, on a boat, with bodies that age, change and renew themselves like the Argo, over the fluid sea.

Figure 29: The final scene of Monika Treut’s *Genderation*.

Reaping: Some Conclusions and Further Work

Time is a mother.
Ocean Vuong

Did you know how many ways you can relate to a ghost, kid?
Danez Smith, *Don't Call Us Dead*

"That's enough. You can stop now: the phrase Sedgwick said she longed to hear whenever she was suffering. (Enough hurting, enough showing off, enough achieving, enough talking, enough trying, enough writing, enough living.)" (Nelson, 2016: p. 164). Given that queer literature seems to be experiencing a blooming time, while it points into the future but also engages in a dialogue with the past, it seems counterproductive to bring a thesis on contemporary queer literature to a conclusion. However, queerness encompasses instability, friction and ambiguity, and it seems necessary to bring together the linking threads that connect the many directions that were indicated in this thesis, as well as its dead ends, and to recapture the work that has been done, as well as to point to new directions. "There is much to be learned from wanting something both ways" (Nelson, 2016: p. 34) and the future also "goes both ways" (Morse, 2016), so it seems fitting to both look back at this thesis, its conclusions and ambiguous stances, while also suggesting future work.

Through the analysis of four main cases studies, in articulation with other art forms, it was possible to perceive the many ways in which family-making has been a concern of writers, artists and critics, and how the fear of becoming homonormative lives side by side with an awareness that the norm is also, more often than not, informed by other structures of kinship besides the one of the nuclear family. As shown, metaphors such as the ghost and the tree are recurrent, creating a sense of continuity through the latter, as well as a sense of dislocation that the image of the ghost implies, as the idea that queerness is always haunted (by the past, by the family fantasy enacted by heteronormativity, by shame) seems rather productive to establish a dialogue across time, space and genres. The theoretical framework that was selected to read these works also highlights the way time (and how it is perceived through narratives of progress, genealogy, heritage and inheritance) can also be informed by heteronormative ideas that articulate bodies that are inscribed either inside or outside it.

While non-normative bodies, such as the ones of intersex individuals, disrupt what is presumed to be the stability of heteronormativity, by asking how can the gendered body be thought of, and how these bodies themselves rearticulate desires beyond straight structures, creating anxiety regarding

homosexuality, bodies of gay men who were HIV+ during the 1980s were also perceived as a threat to the family structure. Therefore, it was necessary to read these bodies side by side, as they pose a challenge to the normative and the reproductive. Moreover, these bodies can be read comparatively in regard to how they also disrupt narratives of progress and advance: while the intersex body that was 'corrected' was seen as a work of progress, due to its approximation with a binary system of sex, to think of HIV/AIDS as a problem of the past, and to deny the intersection between gender and class, as well as race, would be to also deny the presence of HIV/AIDS in bodies that are 'less grievable'. And if in looking backwards, and defining queer historiography as well as a literary legacy, pride and progress must be set aside in detriment of an acceptance that these feelings are also an integral part of queer history, then maybe even perhaps *Middlesex* can also be understood as a product of a time when intersex narratives are still so scarce, as one way of doing intersex representation, albeit one that is perhaps marked by a self-loathing that mirrors the way how it is informed by a heterosexual structure, in the same way that E.M. Forster's life and narratives were veiled by shame. And yet, when composing what can be seen as a queer literary legacy, it seems pertinent to always engage with these voices, with the negativity of the past, while also pointing to alternative discourses that can co-exist rather than contradict each other.

If concepts such as heritage, inheritance and legacy have been heavily criticized due to their link with a normative matrix of time, particularly due to its emphasis on reproductive futurity, this thesis intends to open up a space where these same concepts are re-signified through a non-normative lens that perceives kinship, non-patriarchal and horizontal relationships as capable of also carrying a non-hierarchal transmission of cultural and literary legacies. Moreover, this inheritance is not passed *down* (in the sense that the preposition implies hierarchy and a parent-child relationship) but passed down to others who may or may not share a home, who may or may not be related by blood, but are always connected by an identification towards the queer. This legacy is also, as perceived in *The Inheritance* and *The Great Believers*, atemporal, inasmuch that, through ghostly hauntings, the past does not stand still, as a dialogue with the past is established either through photography or literature, as well as personal stories of the past, a dialogue in which the past is somewhat repaired while the present allows itself to be haunted. Therefore, heritage and legacy as imagined here disrupt time, for being multidirectional, as well as heterosexual structures repeated and made legitimate through marriage, and are passed down to friends, stepparents, children born out of sperm donations, and other structures of care.

More than a view on families, and how to queer them, this thesis has also addressed the many ways in which femininity and masculinity are thought of within a household, as a family also implies a patriarchal matrix that oppresses women and reduces them, as previously seen, as mothers who are

socially perceived as "not good enough", because they may be unable to connect to their own children or when refusing to be completely devoted to them. Even though the narratives that were here analysed are often radical in their understanding of parenting and family-making, in both *The Inheritance* and *The Great Believers* women are still perceived as caretakers, the role socially expected to be taken up by women as part of their homes as well as other spaces for care (schools, hospitals, nursing homes). On the other hand, *The Argonauts* provides a complex discussion on what motherhood entails and how caretaking is the task of the whole family, regardless of sex or gender, as women are not solely reduced to the role of the mother or men are reductively portrayed as absent.

Perhaps instead of thinking of these kinship structures as either normative or homonormative, the aim of queer critiques of family-making could leave this somewhat myopic view of binary oppositions and recognize that the norm is not stable either, in the sense that much experience of straight people does not fall within a normative structure, through practices such as "non-monogamous relationships, the rejection of traditional gendered roles and norms including in favour of more egalitarian divisions of labour … adoption processes or use of assisted reproduction technologies, and non-dyadic family structures" (Stewart, C. 2019: pp. 9-10). The queer emphasis on the 'norm' seems to only consolidate it, placing the non-normative only as oppositional, often refusing even to recognize the disruptive potential that children of queer parents may have when seeing "the many ways in which their family violates homonormative futurism on an everyday basis, and the queer futures that this makes possible" (C. Stewart, 2019: p. 11).

With works such as *Detransition, Baby* (2021) (a look at maternity and transitioning), *In the Dream House* (2019) (a look in the shape of a memoir at domestic violence between two women), *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* (2020) (a look at McCullers' sexuality through autofiction) and *Knocking Myself Up: A Memoir of My (In)Fertility* (2022) (an autobiographical account on the hardships of getting pregnant after 40 and via IVF), it is clear that queer and feminist retellings of motherhood, domesticity and family-making are here – and queer – to stay. Future work could also include a stronger intersectional approach to these matters, particularly of race, disability and class, as well as an emphasis on gender and sexual categories that were here neglected, particularly lesbians, often invisible or apparitional. Moreover, the work of authors such as Fink and Schulman has questioned how narratives of HIV/AIDS activism have also set aside the contributions of lesbians and transgender women of colour within the movement, a reminder that even queer history must be constantly rewritten through an intersectional lens that includes both privileged and marginalized voices. Perhaps further work can also

look at other geographies, as well as texts that further problematize these matters, as, when it comes to queerness, there is also a predominance of Western representations.

To think of all the work that has been until now as "good enough", as Winnicott wrote about mothers, is the way to work queerly, particularly when thinking that Muñoz's understanding of queerness, given its utopian power, is yet to be achieved. This thesis is solely intended to be the starting point of an even wider look at works written by queer and feminist authors who keep challenging the ways of narrating domestic stories of intimacy and affection, creating a literary legacy that keeps being expanded by the urgency to narrate these blooming queer times, while always dialoguing with the ghostly voices of the past in order to "imagine a future apart from the reproductive imperative, optimism, and the promise of redemption. A backward future, perhaps" (Love, 2007: p. 147).

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