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Biomythography as Genre, Tradition and Movement
in the U.S. (1978 – 1998)*

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**“We Cannot Live Without Our Lives”:
Biomythography as Genre, Tradition and Movement
in the U.S. (1978 – 1998) ¹**

Rosamund Marie Lewis

Abstract

In this thesis I focus on seven key biomythographical working class, lesbian writers from the late twentieth century (Gloria Anzaldúa, Dorothy Allison, Leslie Feinberg, Frankie Hucklenbroich, Audre Lorde, Joan Nestle and Pat Parker). I build and put forward a case that what Audre Lorde termed ‘Biomythography’ in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) is in fact the naming and continuation of a Black, minoritised, working-class, lesbian feminist-led literary genre, tradition, and movement. In their struggle for voice and representation, the authors working in this vein unapologetically expounded, mythologised, and contradicted the auto/biographical in their work in order to create sites of resistance as well as socio-political literary spaces, reclaiming and re-envisioning a plurality of existences and experiences. My thesis poses and investigates the development of biomythography, in particular within the era 1978-1998, examining its themes, variations, aesthetics, and impact on our literary and theoretical understanding.

¹ This title is taken from “Need: A Chorale of Black Women’s Voices” (1982) by Audre Lorde in which she names and mourns the lives of 12 Black women who were murdered in Boston in 1979. Lorde references Barbara Deming’s 1974 book of the same title demonstrating a feminist dialogue between authors, and the transhistorical dimensions of her biomythographical work.

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(1978 – 1998)**

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2023

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Statement of Copyright

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As always, this is for my Romona
& in loving memory of Audrey Gabriel Lewis for whom books were like water.

We who love this way are poetry and history, action and theory, flesh and spirit.

(Joan Nestle)

INTRODUCTION: A THEORY IN FLESH²

The woman who embraces lesbianism as an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny must also identify with the world-wide struggle of all women to end male-supremacist tyranny at all levels.

(Clarke in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.129)

1978, in biomythographical terms, was the year when the lesbian feminist literary world erupted. It was the year that two key poetry collections, Pat Parker's *Movement in Black* and Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*, were published. Both represented a significant change in each author's style, subject matter, content, and form.³ Their work was emblematic of a simultaneous historical shift in the cultural and literary production of a generation of U.S. lesbian feminist writers, cultural activists, and archivists. Parker and Lorde formed part of a literary movement that I refer to as biomythography, a movement led by Black, minoritised, feminist, and working-class lesbians that spanned two decades (1978-1998).⁴

² This title is taken from the subtitle of the second section of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 edited collection, *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, p.21. The full title is "Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh". It references the interconnections between the personal and political struggles of minoritised women of colour whose theory and activism materialised beyond the page.

³ Biomythography as a term was developed by Audre Lorde who used this term to describe the genre of her 1982 text, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, in which she combines a fictional, mythologised, and politicised narrativisation of her memoirs with biographical prose. For the purpose of this thesis, I refer to U.S. biomythographical texts by Black, minoritised, and working-class lesbians, who used auto/biography in their creation of personal or community-centric mythologies that purposely deconstruct individualistic and liberalist rationalities and universal truths in favour of collectivist resistance and a female focused intersubjectivity.

⁴ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp in a 1993 edition of *Signs* offer their own definition of lesbian feminism, "By lesbian feminism, we mean a variety of beliefs and practices based

In this thesis I will focus on the work of seven biomythographical writers – Dorothy Allison, Gloria Anzaldúa, Leslie Feinberg, Frankie Hucklenbroich, Audre Lorde, Joan Nestle and Pat Parker, writers that were born within several decades of one another, in the 1930s-1940s, and lived and worked for most of their lives in the U.S.⁵ While the individual names of the authors I study may be familiar to some contemporary readers, as a collective or movement of biomythographers they remain an invisible grouping, the connections between their work still largely unexplored. Twenty years, in literary terms, is a limited space of time for a movement to emerge, especially when injections of momentum associated with subcultural creativity can be short-lived and easily run out of energy. The dates I choose to work within –1978-1998 – demarcate not only an important period for generative collectivity but also a movement that connected the pre- and post-digital age.

The biomythographical works I feature in my thesis range in textual style and form: from poetry (Pat Parker’s *Movement in Black*⁶ and Audre Lorde’s *Between Our Selves*⁷) to essays (Joan Nestle’s *A Restricted Country*⁸), performance-based narratives (Dorothy Allison’s *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*⁹), epistolary texts (Leslie

on the core assumption that a connection exists between an erotic and/or emotional commitment to women and political resistance to patriarchal domination.” (Taylor and Rupp, 1993, p. 93)

⁵ Several writers such as Lorde, Nestle and Anzaldúa also lived for periods of their lives outside of the U.S., and Parker and Allison grew up in Southern regions of the U.S. that either featured in or were especially significant to their work and writing.

⁶ Parker, P. (1999). *Movement in Black*. New York: Firebrand.

⁷ Lorde, A. (1997). *Between Our Selves*. New York: W.W. Norton.

⁸ Nestle, J. (1996). *A Restricted Country*. London: Pandora Press.

⁹ Allison, D. (1996). *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. New York: Plume, Penguin Putnam.

Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*¹⁰), bildungsroman-like episodic short stories (Frankie Hucklenbroich's *A Crystal Diary*¹¹) and multi-authored biomythographical collections or assemblages (*This Bridge Called My Back*¹² and *The Persistent Desire*¹³) edited by and featuring some of the aforementioned authors, as well as works that defy any categorisation at all (Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*¹⁴).

By developing a literary framework in which to contextualise their biographical work I hope to demonstrate the interconnectivity of a small group of phenomenally diverse lesbian feminist writers who formed part of a wider social, political, and cultural feminist revolution in the late twentieth century U.S. For the purposes of this thesis, I turn toward a comparative study of the seven named biomythographical authors, but I also at times refer to other biomythographical authors such as Cherríe Moraga with whom Anzaldúa collaborated on *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.¹⁵ Critically, these writers described themselves in no uncertain terms as being lesbian, which made their approach definitive but also led to their public muting. Each writer refers to their formative years in the late 1950s to early 1970s as a time when lesbian sexuality and lifestyles were socially if not legally condemned and their political activism or involvement in liberation movements made them vulnerable to state or gender-based violence,

¹⁰ Feinberg, L. (1993). *Stone Butch Blues*. New York: Firebrand Books.

¹¹ Hucklenbroich, F. (1997). *A Crystal Diary*. New York: Firebrand Books.

¹² Moraga, C. and Anzaldúa, G. eds. (1983). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.

¹³ Nestle, J. ed. (1992). *The Persistent Desire*. Boston: Alyson Publications.

¹⁴ Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

¹⁵ This text is also often referred to by its shorthand title: *This Bridge Called My Back*.

homelessness, poverty, and the fear of being alienated from family or loved ones.

In effect, I aim to use these biomythographical texts to go back in time to address the literary and critical exclusion of a lesbian literary movement. This involves developing an intellectual and political framework sturdy enough to hold my thesis and the work of the writers whom I seek to ‘archive’. Writing *through* this archive of biomythographical texts, I am studying lesbian writers whose work, in a broader picture, has either been abandoned or reinterpreted to fit a new set of political feminisms. The primary objective of this thesis is not to analyse present day interpretations of these lesbian feminist texts (even where these exist) but to attempt to understand these texts within their own set of historical and social paradigms. I do so deliberately with the aim of enabling a committed (re)engagement with this work – while remaining alert to the possibility that my own scholarship may romanticise a former time, place, and collective movement of authors because of my deep connection with their work.

I approach this thesis with an urgent critical intention for biomythography to be understood as a genre and a tradition that meters the creative processes of complex individual authors, who together can be viewed as an extraordinary (and much neglected) movement. As a feminist literary tradition that instigated cultural and social change through the representation of often absent subjectivities and experimental narrative forms, I argue that biomythography was and continues to be highly influential. By the term *biomythography* I refer to a definition I outlined in my Masters by Research which focused on the pivotal biomythographical work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), as the mythologisation of the auto/biographical in

literature to create sites of resistance and socio-political literary spaces, in which to reclaim and re-envision a plurality of existences and experiences.¹⁶

I am grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to write this thesis. I owe many of my formative years and the will to survive them to these women, these authors, these biomythographers whom I regard as being amongst the best storytellers, theorists, poets, essayists, and rabble rousers of the twentieth century.

PART 1: BIOMYTHOGRAPHICAL BEGINNINGS

How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course.

(Anzaldúa in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.165)

Biomythography is a distinct mode of writing that navigates multiple spheres and genres without occupying any solid territory or centring any one political focus; it is both polyvocal and multi-directional. It is a politicised mode, one that I would observe exemplifies narratives of resistance in defence of worlds that the authors fear will be destroyed or erased if not inscribed on the page.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde is one of the key writers and interpreters of the biomythographical genre and tradition, as well as being the first to coin this term. More recently, Lorde has become a Black lesbian feminist icon and is regarded to be part of the late twentieth century literary canon. However, the significance of the other writers I examine, and indeed their collective oeuvre of work, remain largely unacknowledged. This concerning oversight, alongside my earlier MA dissertation focus on Lorde's interpretation of biomythography in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, has helped to shape the structure of this thesis and my decision to leave my (brief) examination of Lorde's biomythographical poetic work and influence until the final chapter. This enables me to analyse Lorde's poetry in a collective rather than individualist literary context.

The biomythographical reader defies correlative time, often journeying through an author's real, mythical, or imagined world simultaneously. These worlds are grounded in the historical context of mostly urban subcultural realms, such as lesbian bars, dystopian queer housing projects, working-class barbershops, and intergenerational communes. Here multiple identities can be explored in their imaginary biomythographical domains, even when the subjects are trapped in pockets of social exclusion.¹⁷

A feature of biomythography is its ability to redefine genre in its 'not belonging' and, often, its occupation of an alterior or adjacent temporal space distinct from other parallel literary subcultural movements.¹⁸ This is why I claim that biomythography is a genre of not only *material* resistance but *literary* resistance in its deliberate attempts to declassify literary norms. I maintain that if biomythography had not been a collective movement with a corresponding publishing infrastructure that practically and economically supported the authors, it is likely that their full-length works would have remained unpublished or incompletely published.¹⁹ Much of the writing would have remained hidden from view in the archives or shared only in short, abstract form in feminist literary journals.²⁰

¹⁷ Arguably these life experiences remain those of the majority under advanced capitalism and in a social world connected by hyper digitalisation.

¹⁸ While biomythography could 'parallel' a movement such as the Beat generation of largely male poets and authors it could also refer to contemporaneous feminist literary traditions and movements in their heteronormative assumptions.

¹⁹ There remains a vast amount of biomythographical work by these authors that has not yet been published. I hope that a re-consideration of biomythography as a genre, tradition and movement may inch towards the possibility of future retrospective publications of the full body of their published and unpublished work.

²⁰ Unfortunately, I do not have space in this thesis to discuss the many feminist journals that featured biomythography in the period I have chosen (1978-1998). I hope that this thesis will support further studies into the integral role that

In my thesis I do not claim to, nor am I able to, include all biomythographical texts written in the time frame to which I refer (1978-1998). I have instead selected what I believe to be key biomythographical works that demonstrate the range and breadth of the genre. I say this with an awareness that I am not a self-elected expert, but instead hold a number of positionalities and viewpoints that relate to both the personal and political drivers for this study. Each text bringing to the fore the often publicly invisibilised material realities and intense interior worlds of the author. My seven main texts vary in form, from poetry and essays to novels. Often these texts are dialogic, referring to one another or to an author's body of work. They consistently deploy mythological aspects, either creating futuristic mythologies as a place of existence or consolidating lost ancestral mythologies. Spatially and temporally shifting, these narratives feature subjects whose stories have never been told; conceptually they lean towards the utopian and dystopian in their experimental and theoretical framing. What distinguishes the seven texts that make up my corpus is that 1) they are dialogic and inter-textual, 2) each brings to the fore the material realities and intense interior worlds of the author, 3) each is mythological in scope, 4) each is spatially and temporally ambiguous, and 5) each holds historical literary importance either in reach, subject matter, or execution.²¹

biomythography played in feminist journals and women's periodical culture – and that more recent U.S. and UK projects such as Northumbria University's *Liberating Histories: Women's Movement Magazines, Media Activism and Periodical Pedagogies* can benefit from this work. Available at: <https://liberatinghistories.org/>.

²¹Myth, within a context of narrative and storytelling often becomes an amorphous concept. John Gentile's observation that "Myth resists stable boundaries" seem apt for the purpose of this study, as does his definition, "A closer consideration of the definitions of myth, including many of those presented above, reveals myth's close and vexed relationships with *truth, falsehood, belief, identity; the nature of being, and the sacred.*" (Gentile, 2011, P.88). Roland Barthes, in his 1957 text *Mythologies*

Among the abundance of women biomythographers from this period, I could have also called upon Chrystos, Michelle Cliff, Judy Grahn, Sally Morgan, Paule Marshall, Mab Segrest, and Cheryl Clarke, to name just a few. Faced with a limitation of space and time, I have chosen the texts that I feel speak to the range and the key tenets of the movement, work that has often been abstracted from the collective whole and/or a biomythographical oeuvre. As I shall go on to describe, some also tell a story about the active marginalisation and exile of many Second Wave lesbian writers and, critically, the ways in which some authors – more recently – have been made to fit into a literary or academic framework that impoverishes their nuanced political sensibility and creative approach.

Breaking the Silence

Now that we've begun to break the silence and begun to break through the diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together.

(Cade Bambara in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.vi)

It could be asserted that biomythography was written into a cultural and literary void of absent voices, lives, and experiences. As an

famously decried myth as being a “type of speech chosen by history” (Barthes, 1972, p.108) and more importantly in purview of this thesis, that “myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by discourse.” (Barthes, 1972, p.107). I believe that biomythography takes Barthes to task on these statements to a certain extent, particularly the work of Joan Nestle, as I discuss in Chapter 2 of my thesis.

unrecognised late-twentieth-century literary genre, tradition, and movement, biomythography still occupies a complex position in the annals of literary history, from which authors have been abstracted and individualised. Their work has been divorced from a movement that held, nurtured, and as quoted above, connected their effort to “break bread together” as they broke through literary barriers. In her introduction to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, Toni Cade Bambara speaks of the ways that this collection of work by twenty women of colour takes an intersectional approach to writing that is rooted in lived experience. She affirms that the text:

...documents particular rites of passage. Coming of age and coming to terms with community – race, group, class, gender, self – its expectations, supports and lessons. (Cade Bambara in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.vii)

As I shall discuss in my opening chapter, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s painful labour of love and commitment to art, writing and community activism was spurred on by the urgency of their mission. They experienced a number of challenges in putting together such disparate texts by women who did not inhabit structures that would support them to write:

Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places the beginning woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women’s feminist world. (Moraga and Anzaldúa, in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.165)

Following Toni Cade Bambara's observations in the introduction to *This Bridge Called My Back*, I am moved to counter the de-contextualisation, erasure and silencing that has operated around many Second Wave feminist texts, and to focus on biomythography as one of the many strands of this entangled and 'in dialogue' work. I use the metaphor of the bridge to describe the role my thesis may play in better connecting the collective aspect of biomythography to the individualistic take on the history of literature and authorship that sometimes prevails.

The authors that I focus on here, like the subjects of their narratives, are complex and nuanced, their work existing within a specific set of socio-cultural circumstances, each reacting to these in their own way. Although they have identities that intertwine and can be the basis for their overlapping or shared experiences, the patterns to be found in their work are also indicative of a simultaneity of ideas and expression – not a simulacrum – and to feature only one biomythographical text would be to lose the thread between them all.

Consequently, this thesis focuses on the writers that represented and – crucially – created space for one another knowingly and unknowingly. As I shall go on to explain, many of the authors' lives may have been interconnected but their focus and support of one another centred on the development of their work, through a myriad of

personal, social, and financial struggles.²² They often had to collectively address these “diabolically erected barriers” that Cade Bambara refers to, which have structurally inhibited Black, minoritised, and marginalised lesbian authors from being fully recognised for the ingenuity and import of their work together. Another critical aspect of the inter-relationship of biomythography is the inter-textual, referential, and as mentioned dialogic nature of their work, a project that involved developing often personal collective structures in which to exist and work. Biomythography as a movement also existed within and spoke to the context of the women’s liberation movement (WLM), civil rights movement and wider transnational liberation movements that included LGBT rights.^{23 24} Biomythographical authors were often writing through their own struggles whilst also working for social change within broader political movements.

²² Enszer, J. ed. (2018). *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989*. New York: Sapphic Classic, A Midsummer Night Press. This collection of letters demonstrates one of the closest relationships among the authors I discuss, which was based on mutual literary respect and guidance. The predominant view of women artists and writers’ relationships can be seen to be gendered whereas in reality these relationships were forged around their creative work and political affinities, not just their personal friendships and intimate relationships. This understanding also informs my assertion that biomythography was an unrecognised movement.

²³ I use the term ‘LGBT’ throughout my thesis but recognise that the term itself was not introduced into public discourse until the very late 1990s. The term most widely used in the timeframe of the biomythographical movement would have been ‘Lesbian and Gay’ or ‘Gay Liberation Movement’. As many of the writers I consider often referred to sexual identities outside of more ‘traditional’ gay and lesbian definitions of sexuality and make use of and reference to non-gender conforming identities (for example Leslie Feinberg identified as being both lesbian and in their terms ‘transgender’), I feel that LGBT is a more useful and apt term to use.

²⁴ As I shall discuss in Chapter Two, the Pat Parker archive (Schlesinger Library, Harvard University) includes pamphlets and leaflets that evidence her involvement in the ‘Third World’ liberation struggle – as it was then termed – and the connectivity of the WLM to international liberation struggles.

Despite some of the individual authors I refer to being considered in academic articles, theses and essays, there has so far been no wide-scale scholarly investigation into the relationality between the texts I feature nor their place in the genre, tradition, and movement I refer to as biomythography.²⁵ Although the term biomythography is mentioned in a number of articles in relation to Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* – and, as I go on to discuss, is briefly featured in relation to life writing scholarship which often lists biomythography as a 'type' of auto/biography – it remains an unexplored literary area and mode.²⁶ It is also referenced in some broader studies of Audre Lorde and in a few articles from the 1990s that are unrelated to Lorde or the authors I discuss in this investigation.²⁷ Apart from scholarship on the 'Women in Print' movement, and individual studies of the texts I refer to – particularly those by Anzaldúa – there has been no co-ordinated study of my selected writers, either in relation to biomythography or intertextuality. This omission seems particularly surprising when we consider, as I shall go on to detail, that the texts I explore reference, influence, and cite one another.

²⁵ As defined by Audre Lorde in her 1982 text *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. See Lewis, R. M. (2016). *Biomythographical Tradition and Resistant Subjectivities in Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* [<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11737/>]. MA by Research, Durham University.

²⁶ Namely that of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001). 'Biomythography' is also featured in other auto/biography studies (such as Linda Anderson and Stephen Butterfield's texts on auto/biography), but it is often amalgamated into other auto/biographical genres or traditions.

²⁷ A couple of examples of studies that cite biomythography but do not reference the authors I discuss together are: Holland, S. P. (2008). When Characters Lack Character: A Biomythography. *PMLA*, 123 (5), pp. 1494–1502. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501949> and Mutnick, D. (1998). Rethinking the Personal Narrative: Life-Writing and Composition Pedagogy. In C. Farris and C. M. Anson, eds., *Under Construction*, pp. 79–92. University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt46nrqf.9>. This suggests that the word biomythography was in the broader literary zeitgeist and cultural lexicon following the work of Lorde in the 1990s.

The feminist scholarship that does feature these authors together is usually in response to published collections of work such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992), both of which I will discuss in my opening chapter.²⁸ Most of this scholarship is from the 1990s and is featured in literary journals and reviews. Other than on Audre Lorde, there is surprisingly little comparative or in-depth scholarship around the authors I consider. It is my view that contemporary scholarship featuring these authors outside of a biomythographical context or through a present-day political lens, risks obscuring its grounding (in movement and tradition) and layered multiplicity (in genre as well as subject position terms).

The 25-year neglect of these biomythographical texts and, particularly critical neglect of their inter-relational development and nature, begs a number of questions: Why have these texts fallen out of critical view for nearly three decades? Despite their popularity at the time of publication, why have so many of them been forgotten in terms of a wide readership today? And why have some authors' texts been picked up in contemporary literary and theoretical frameworks and other texts discarded?²⁹

²⁸ Some examples of the feminist journals that the authors edited or were featured in include the still active *Sinister Wisdom* (established in 1976) and *Lesbian Voices* (1974) as well as *Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians* (1977-1983) and *Conditions* (1976-1990). It should be noted that *Conditions* also featured Dorothy Allison, Barbara Smith, and Cheryl Clarke amongst other biomythographers as editors in time period of this thesis.

²⁹ In my analysis I have found this to be particularly true of work that has been used to qualify queer and Black feminist activism such as that of Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa.

As I shall suggest, the reasons for these omissions are complex and disappointing as they suggest a default to tropes and stereotypes often associated with *lesbian* and *women's literature*.³⁰ They also involve a dismissal of literature by women of a biographical or self-referential nature as being inferior to male biographical work, which is often presumed to be historically more relevant and accurate in its truth telling. Such a pattern points to a present day bent that negatively critiques texts thought to be associated with 'Second Wave' feminism.³¹ This bias has had a particularly damning impact on marginalised writers whose work had already either been ignored or extracted from this same Second Wave feminist context without acknowledgement.³² The current critical embarrassment in some quarters about feminist literature written in the late twentieth century is arguably entrenched in neo-liberal ideologies, where misogyny sometimes hides in plain sight. It is also pertinent that Post-structuralist notions of identity and language struggle to fully accommodate the striking arc and range of biomythographical literature (an issue I will return to later). This context, or literary critical void, has led to an appropriation, abstraction, and de-

³⁰ I specifically use the term *lesbian* as all the authors I refer to consistently use that term of reference. I use the term *queer* in a wider social or theoretical context – recognising that the term has a very different contemporary social currency and meaning. It is important to retain an understanding of the historical use of words for contextual reasons where recent language around sexuality and identity has changed so much. I also note that later in her life Anzaldúa referred to herself as being queer, reclaiming the term to define aspects of her identity, including her sexuality.

³¹ Taylor and Rupp consider such critiques as being veiled as an attack on 'lesbian feminism', "The critique of cultural feminism sometimes is a disguised – and within the women's movement – more acceptable attack on lesbian feminism." (Taylor and Rupp, 1993, p.93).

³² I believe that Gloria Anzaldúa has particularly suffered from this abstraction in her wholesale absorption into a strand of Queer Theory from the late 1990s onward. Her text *Borderlands/La Frontera* continues to be considered within this framework yet concomitantly removed from Second Wave feminism. I discuss this further in Chapter Six of my thesis.

contextualisation of biomythographical work, something which I hope to begin to remedy here.

PART 2: RESISTANCE – ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

I complete this thesis 25 years after biomythography as a genre, tradition, and movement, in my delineation, ended. When I commenced this project in 2016, the proposal – to write a comparative thesis that would address the ongoing erasure of historically marginalised voices in literature – appeared to be a simpler venture. At the outset, I thought it would involve bringing to light neglected work within a specific socio-political and cultural context. I have thus approached this thesis, as it has evolved, with the stated intention of finding ways to represent the unrepresented in literature, aiming to bring to the fore of scholarship a generation of writers whom I now believe developed not only a genre and tradition – but the *very language* of a social movement. I want to ensure that their vast contribution to literature and their influence is fully incorporated into a wider understanding of literary studies and literary theory. My hope is that it will form a bridge between marginalised literary work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – further connecting the pre- and post-digital age.

In my 2016 MA by Research, I put forward the case that Audre Lorde’s self-titled biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) was representative of a literary tradition for “new or emerging subjectivities of resistance” (Lewis, 2016, p.1) that also encapsulated

and embraced Black, lesbian, working-class textual difference.³³ This PhD thesis aims to further develop that earlier argument in relation to a range of biomythographical authors, whilst also critically analysing their prose, essays and poetry. In my first foray into defining biomythography purely through the lens of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, I focused on a consideration of biomythography as a tradition, a lesbian feminist mode. Lorde's writing was rooted in her experience as a racialised Black woman, a survivor of colonisation, racism and patriarchy, and a daughter of her maternal Caribbean ancestors. That study brought into focus the need for literary strategies of resistance and a narrative approach that could exist outside of patrilineal canonical realms. I consider this thesis to be a sequential development of my research based masters and scholarship, which raised many of the queries that spurred on this investigation, but also the discovery of the 'silences' with which Lorde was so concerned, something to be returned to throughout my thesis.

I have discovered, since commencing this study, that biomythography needs to be examined through various and often imperfectly fitting lenses as it rejects the restraints and comfort of any one theoretical perspective, just as it reflects the inadequacy of existing genres to describe or contain it. Throughout the thesis I refer to a wide range of perspectives to support my work, including Black and Radical feminisms, lesbian and Queer Theory, autobiographical theory as well as other broader philosophies, liberation theories and literary critical approaches. None of them entirely fit (and, as I argue, many were

³³ Lewis, R. M. (2016). *Biomythographical Tradition and Resistant Subjectivities in Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. (MA by Research, Durham University). <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11737/>.

influenced by biomythography) but each holds a relevance to the development of biomythography or the author's own theoretical aims.

The Politics of Feminist Publication

The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release.

(hooks, 1999, p.84)

Late twentieth-century lesbian writers in the U.S., who were excluded from mainstream publishing options, looked to autonomous self-financed alternatives to "tell one's story". They often sought creative ways to develop and publish their work, their efforts in doing so embodying that "gesture of longing" invoked by the writer bell hooks and representing the multiplicity of their lives. They followed a Euro-American twentieth-century tradition of lesbian women having a level of autonomy in their cultural production. This was particularly the case in relation to earlier experimental and modernist literature, as lesbian women had played an important but often unrecognised role in the publishing history of male and female experimental literature.³⁴ Late twentieth-century advances in publishing technologies and accessibility, from distribution to sales, enabled working-class and marginalised lesbian women to (collectively) take up central and

³⁴ Women have also played a pivotal role in the publication of banned, marginalised male authors and their experimental texts, with feminist scholars working hard to ensure that these women are acknowledged for the structural and creative work involved in this. They have also brought recognition to the influence that women's literature has had on the development of the canon and modern literature.

ownership roles in all areas of publishing. In effect, they took the means of production into their own hands.

In *The Women in Print Movement: The History and the Implications* (2008) Trysh Travis aptly describes the role of print culture in Second Wave feminism and the Women in Print (WIP) movement as “a woman-centered network of readers and writers, editors, printers, publishers, distributors, and retailers through which ideas, objects and practices flowed in a dynamic loop.” (Travis, 2008, p.276) Focusing on the “means of print production in the larger intellectual history of feminism” (Travis, 2008, p.277), Travis considers the production of print matter to be a key component and revolutionary tool of Second Wave feminism – particularly separatist lesbian feminism, which was seen as the only way of advancing the personal, social, and political rights of women outside of a patriarchal order. The key tools of feminist movements – the sharing of information and theory – derived from this increase in feminist publications. Feminist literature – including journals, pamphlets, and information leaflets of the time – was not designed to be passively consumed but to enable women to be economically as well as socially and culturally independent of men and their systemic control, in terms of economic, religious, institutional, political, and social dominance. With improved access to the means of production, and the motivation to be freely and autonomously communicating, informal and formal ‘underground’ networks of distribution developed. Women were sharing texts by word of mouth, in consciousness-raising sessions, in collective women-only spaces, at feminist bookstores, and so on. International print distribution followed, along with an increased or at least dedicated readership of

women, and corresponding increase in the scope and opportunities for lesbian writers and lesbian-produced literature.³⁵

More so in the late twentieth century, compared to any previous era, the history of feminist print culture emerges as being intimately connected to political and social change. Travis refers to this as a “dialectical relationship between skills and politics” (Travis, 2008, p.280), wherein women were able to become actively politicised and economically independent, illustrating aspects of Marxist feminism in action. Women’s role in print culture has been well documented by feminist scholarship, particularly in the area of modernist print culture and the avant-garde.³⁶ Comparisons can be made between the WIP movement of the late-twentieth century and the modernist print movement; as experimental yet independent cultural blueprints both integrated practical modes of production (albeit in different ways) to synthesise and develop a distinct aesthetic. In doing so, both created a space for and nurtured a range of experimental writing forms and authors. This enabled the collective or group involved to reinterpret and better represent their socio-political conditions and creative visions throughout the process itself, strengthening the impact of the finished article. The politics of radical lesbian feminism can also be seen as an ongoing subtext throughout the WIP movement.

The revolutionary nature of biomythography captured the raw unfettered energy of a generation of women who had been excluded

³⁵ This is a growing area of scholarship – for more recent discussions outside of the U.S. see: Boucher, L. (2019), Discomforting politics: 1970s activism and the spectre of sex in public. In M. Arrow & A. Woollacott, eds., *Everyday Revolutions: Remaking Gender, Sexuality and Culture in 1970s Australia*, pp. 183–198. ANU Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvq4c17c.13>.

³⁶ Benstock, S. (1986). *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

from mainstream cultures, they also had little choice but to take matters into their own hands if their work was to be published or distributed. In the absence of historical representation, biomythography as a lesbian-driven and focused movement could not avoid becoming a consciously political lens through which to write a lesbian narrative, or as Joan Nestle cites, a “dialectic of oppression and resistance” (Nestle in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.17) The role of collectivism in feminist journals, anthologies, and performances (musical, dramatic, poetic), in the development of the lesbian feminist movement, culture, and later lesbian publics of the 1990s, cannot be underestimated in fostering the work of women who would become published authors, or the capability of the movement to archive their narratives.³⁷

Late twentieth-century feminist literary criticism’s historical reading of the modernist era, in particular, has focused attention on the role that women (and women’s literature of the time) had in shaping literary production, experimentalism, and the literary form.³⁸ Both the beginning and end of the twentieth century are eras connected by the deployment of a lesbian business model of publishing: that is, as cited, women owning the means of literary production. This model was advanced in the late 1960s and 1970s by developments in

³⁷ As Ann Cacoullos summarises: “For the so-called radical feminists, theorizing also occurred in the active, loosely organized consciousness-raising groups of the 60s and 70s where women’s varied voices were heard and women’s experiences became a source of knowledge.” Cacoullos, A. R. (2001). American Feminist Theory. *American Studies International*, 39(1), pp. 72–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41279790>. Catherine Harnois has also explored the segue way of Second into Third Wave movement building activities: Harnois, C. (2008). Re-presenting Feminisms: Past, Present, and Future. *NWSA Journal*, 20 (1), pp.120–145. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40071255>.

³⁸ Feminist literary theorists and historians have given a rich and detailed overview of the influence of women writers and the connectivity between countries particularly the U.S., France, and the UK. This was further advantaged by the growth of established feminist presses such as Virago who set about publishing ‘lost’ unpublished feminist classics, as they continue to do so now.

communication technologies and the increased affordability of printing press facilities. The Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City has a vast collection of feminist and lesbian print journals that give an insight into the networks and readership that existed at this time. By the late twentieth-century feminist publishing, and women involved in print based production, was no longer principally the domain of academic upper-class women. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, by capturing information about distribution networks, evidence the inter-relational collectivism that brought the late twentieth-century WIP movement into being.³⁹ Women were no longer relying on other parts of the publishing industry or ‘chain’ to co-ordinate, distribute or even sell this work.

In the U.S. context, two key differences should be noted that distinguish the late 1960-1980s print culture revolution from women’s previous involvement in print culture:⁴⁰

1. Black and minoritised lesbians, although often unacknowledged, were at the fore of the most radical and conceptual elements of the late-twentieth century women in print movement – in terms of production, distribution, and their

³⁹ This is evidenced by the annual journal distribution catalogues as well as room of journals stored at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), which from the 1980s alone run into the thousands. The journals themselves also give an insight into the inter-relationality of these networks and publications as writers, editors, photographers, illustrators are connected in different journals, but in similar editorial formations. The LHA website gives an insight in the breadth and range of material the archive holds, much of which has now been digitised: <https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>.

⁴⁰ These points are materially and theoretically evidenced in several ways; through the amassing and increased visibility of lesbian cultural and social archives, like those of the LHA and Schlesinger Library (further explored when I focus on Pat Parker in Chapter 3) and the historical re-working of the WIP movement through a lesbian lens, as cited in my reference to the work of Jaime Harker and Trysh Travis.

involvement in the networks of feminist bookshops, journals, publishers, and readership.^{41 42}

2. Working-class lesbians were involved in all aspects of the WIP movement. It could be argued that late-twentieth century feminist print culture (if we consider all facets including distribution and production) was a working class led movement, and this went on to greatly affect its content as well as its existent or potential readership.

As indicated, the late-1960s saw the development of a distinct feminist print culture. This was further strengthened, driven, and financed in the 1970s by a network of active lesbian feminists – entrepreneurs, distributors and women working in mainstream publishing or academia.⁴³ Jaime Harker’s scholarship and focus on Second Wave feminist women in print cultures, particularly in the Southern States of the U.S., has provided a critical historical narrative to accompany that of the existing lesbian archives. Harker’s work is part of an emerging strand of scholarship around late-twentieth century print culture, detailing the powerful part that technological

⁴¹ The term Black and minoritised is inclusive of those who may be termed, in a U.S. context ‘people of colour’. Although I often use the term ‘Black and minoritised’, I do use the term ‘women of colour’ where relevant and respectful to do so, particularly in relation to my analysis of Moraga and Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. The term ‘Black and minoritised’ is widely used to include an understanding of political blackness (which is relevant to the historical context of this thesis) as well as people of African and Caribbean heritage, the term ‘minoritised’ acknowledges often intersectional racial identities and the active racialisation of the Global Majority in a U.S and European context, which is again relevant to this study.

⁴² In analysing the output of Black feminist writer, academic and activist bell hooks—notably the collectivist and relational dimensions of her work— Mako Fitts observed Black feminist leaders’ unrecognised contribution to the feminist movement and their awareness that “Cultivating an oppositional consciousness requires the practice of an oppositional politics of space, or transgressing dominant, hegemonic social locations.” (Fitts, 2011, p.118).

⁴³ Harker, J., & Farr, C. K. eds., (2016). *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

and rights-based advances had to play in enabling marginalised women to produce their literature and work, and the role that lesbian women, who often considered themselves to be radical separatist and non-gender conforming, had in furthering these advances.

This is not to be naïve about the fact that many of the writers and women in print readership at this time were college or university-educated and were involved one way or another in the professional middle classes. But it should be noted that many of the women integrally involved in biomythography and the pragmatic margins of the movement (distribution, promotion, sales) were working-class women, and that biomythography promoted the work of Black, minoritised and working-class women in conscious ways. At this time, feminist publishers such as the Women's Press Collective and Diana Press functioned as both publishers and distributors. This is evidenced in Harker and Farr's 2016 edited collection *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*, in which they bring together a collection of essays and historical texts that outline and evidence elements of the WIP revolution of the late-twentieth century. One of the essays by Julie R. Enzer, who remains actively involved in contemporary feminist print culture, discusses a 1974 feminist distribution company called WinD (Women in Distribution) that was set up in 1974 for these purposes.⁴⁴

Robin Morgan has noted that the writing of this era was an inherent part of feminist activism and that it was an organised form of

⁴⁴ Julie R. Enzer is currently the editor of the quarterly lesbian journal *Sinister Wisdom*; she is also a scholar and poet. She has edited *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (2016) published by Sinister Wisdom and A Midsummer Nights Press and contributes an introductory essay to Joan Nestle's most recent collection of work *A Sturdy Yes of A People* (2022) also published by Sinister Wisdom.

political dissent (Morgan in Harker and Farr, 2016). I would take that a little further to articulate a particular drive of biomythography to shape and influence the movement – and for writing, literature, and journals to be so effectively integrated in the movement as to be a theme or subtext throughout the work. It is for this reason that I continually connect and bring in historical elements of the publishing process throughout this thesis, often in relation to the individual texts under consideration. It is one way to incorporate into this discussion the many challenges that biomythographical writers experienced, as well as to evidence the ways that biomythographical work developed collectively to overcome these challenges. Throughout the thesis, I also register an ongoing referential relationship in the development of biomythographical work – not just the interconnected personal relationships, which I shall go on to sketch, but also via the form, content, and experimental style of the work itself.

The complexity of the independent publishing world in the 1970s for women who were already economically challenged cannot be overstated, neither can the financial constraints that were imposed by a broader patriarchal publishing industry. Feminist journals of the time such as *Sinister Wisdom*, *Conditions* and *Off Our Backs* (and, later, what many lesbian women considered to be its evil publishing twin, *On Our Backs*) all make reference to the projects being run, in the main, by dedicated women’s free labour – as most of the women involved were working secondary jobs to pay their bills.⁴⁵ They testify

⁴⁵ *On Our Backs* (1984-2006) was often considered to be the evil twin of the feminist publishing world by many Radical Feminists as it was a magazine for lesbian women dedicated to lesbian women’s erotica and erotic culture. The *On Our Backs* magazine archives and back catalogue was recently bought, and is now housed, by Brown University in the U.S. As of 2022 the online catalogue can be found here: <https://library.brown.edu/collatoz/info.php?id=148>.

to the challenging nature of the practical editing and technical processes involved, as producing professional magazine-quality journals on a low budget tended to involve limited access to technical equipment. Many of the feminist journals of this time folded just as feminist publishing became more corporatised in the late 1990s. This was often due to concomitant issues – with cashflow, personal differences, political and practical challenges all playing a part. The above considerations greatly shaped the later twentieth century feminist print revolution but also influenced its corporate takeover, which I will come back to later in my thesis.

Off the Page: A Contextual History

In 1978, President Carter's government extended the deadline for states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have seen sex-based rights included in the U.S. Constitution. The hope was that the outlier states and their representatives, who had over half a century earlier refused to sign the amendment, would come on board.⁴⁶ The proposal for equal rights was introduced in 1923, three years after the Nineteenth amendment enabled only white women to vote. (Black women would not be afforded this right until the Civil Rights Movement instigated a chain of events leading to the Voting Act of 1965). Equal rights for all citizens regardless of sex has still not materialised, despite the hundred thousand men and women who marched on Washington in July 1978 and more recently pressure from the #MeTooMovement, for example, that tried to reinvigorate the

⁴⁶ The Equal Rights Amendment proposed to inscribe sex-based equality rights into the U.S. constitution: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article." Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Equal-Rights-Amendment>.

cause.⁴⁷ Forty-five years on, instead of the overdue Equal Rights Amendment being ratified, women in the U.S. have suffered the once-unimaginable repeal of a woman's right to access abortion – established in law for half a century – after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs Wade* (1973) in June 2022. Although gender related issues have become better recognised (but no less subjugated) at this historical juncture, the repealing of women's sex-based rights seems significantly out of step.

When I commenced this research, Audre Lorde was still considered to be a marginal literary figure. While her status has since been escalating into that of a revered literary Black feminist heroine, there have been many significant changes in the socio-cultural and political lives of those living in the U.S. The election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president in 2016 represented an electoral swing from a Black, arguably progressive, President immersed in the history of the Civil Rights movement to a right-wing, arguably white supremacist populist whose rhetoric echoed other international right-wing authoritarian movements. In addition to this political shift, the decades of what Fredric Jameson termed 'late capitalism' in the U.S. (and Marxist scholars might now call globalised hyper-capitalism),

⁴⁷ Founded by Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo Movement gained wider public recognition in 2017 with high profile sexual abuse scandals (such as the prosecution of Harvey Weinstein) being given an international platform which resulted in a shift in social and criminal justice responses to the sexual abuse and harassment of women and girls. The movement's use of social media campaigns and celebrity endorsement attracted millions of followers worldwide and ignited a social movement which has had a long-lasting impact on attitudes, behaviour and an awareness of sexual violence, abuse, and harassment. Although there has been much criticism of the movement from an intersectional or essentialist standpoint, its positive impact in increasing the public's awareness of, and changing the sexist narrative around, violence against women and girls cannot be denied. Its legacy and continued work to "interrupt sexual violence wherever it happens" and support survivors continues: <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

have undoubtedly fuelled the climate-related emergencies that are only just – when effects are becoming irreversible – being fully acknowledged.⁴⁸

The duration of my project also spans the displacement of people who are politically scapegoated as the cause of imposed misfortune; wars across the world breaching the post-1945 rules-based order; a global pandemic; the accompanying cost-of-living crises impacting everyone but the super-rich; political polarisation exacerbating a social disconnect; the digitised loneliness of hyper-connectivity. Set out alongside all of this, the rupture in how we interpret words that resonate with a pre-digital age may not register as being so significant – and yet words underpin the currency of our human interactions. Naming is an action. When an action seeks to erase another’s embodied humanity, the naming of our response is often political.

The eruption of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the wake of George Floyd’s racist murder in 2020 by white police officers ricocheted around the globe. The naming of that mass civil response – under the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign – was an integral part of the resistance to the erasure it represented. While the BLM response echoed the 1992 Los Angeles riots in response to Rodney King’s brutal beating in 1991, it additionally amplified the issues at stake. These contentions run alongside theoretical developments in Post-structuralism and Queer Theory as well as changes in literary

⁴⁸ This concept is outlined in Frederic Jameson’s 1991 text, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

priorities that biomythography could be considered to have both observed and predicted.⁴⁹

Biomythographical literature in the late-twentieth century was informed by the same “series of contradictions” (Temperley and Bigsby, eds., 2006, p.4) as those reflected in U.S. history at the time. The authors I discuss in this thesis were each born into a U.S. marred by the Great Depression and the country’s participation in two world wars, both of which impacted on the U.S.’s approaches to economic engagement overseas. For some Black biomythographers, their ancestral experiences of enslavement were only a generation away while they continued to live through unrelenting racism, segregation, lynching, violence, and the privation of Black women’s rights. This generation of biomythographers lived through the imperialist rhetoric of Vietnam and televised images of mass genocide, the Cold War, McCarthyite propaganda and the 1950s cultural backlash against women’s increased freedoms following the Second World War. Many of the writers’ works discussed in this thesis also came to prominence or publication against a backdrop of the AIDS epidemic, the traumatic impact of which on lesbian communities and artists has only recently been more fully explored. It is no wonder that biomythographical texts often articulate a high level of emotional intensity that centres psychological and psycho-social examinations of shame, alienation, paranoia, trauma, and fear. Those exploring biomythography should be mindful of the interdependent experiences a generation of

⁴⁹ An article that maps the theoretical challenges of ever-changing global politics for queer communities is offered by Suzanne Danuta Walters, “The growth of queer theory and queer politics must be placed in a social and political context. The most important pieces of this are, of course, the AIDS crisis, the rise of postmodern/post-structural theory, the politics of academia, the sex debates, and recent critiques of feminism.” (Walters, 1996, p.837).

biomythographical writers may have shared in living through such seismic social and cultural shifts and the impact these may have had on both their writing and the reception of their work.

Each of the biomythographical authors I feature in this thesis took their first steps in an era when the roles of women in public and private social spheres were rapidly changing.⁵⁰ Living through the tail end of the Second World War in the 1940s, they grew up in a psychological and material space that previous generations had not been afforded, with more access to public social spheres, employment, financial autonomy, and physical safety. They witnessed older women in their orbit taking up increased work-related responsibilities and leadership roles, deploying skills that had been previously assigned to men and living in family units where men were not as present or as influential. When the Second World War ended, a generation of future biomythographers had already tasted some of these fleeting freedoms which were similar to those experienced by the adult women in their households. These experiences also impacted on women's relationships with one another – not only were there more opportunities for women to come together and forge complex relationships without the scrutiny of the male gaze but women were also able to work collectively without male disruption. These post-war and industrial societal shifts can be seen to be present in, and to affect the tone and subject matter of, biomythography which unapologetically focuses on female experiences and themes of female subjectivity.

⁵⁰ The dates of birth of the biomythographical writers I feature in my thesis are as follows: Dorothy Allison (1949), Gloria Anzaldúa (1942), Leslie Feinberg (1949), Frankie Hucklenbroich (1939), Audre Lorde (1934), Joan Nestle (1940) and Pat Parker (1944).

PART 3: ARTICULATING THE BIOMYTHOGRAPHICAL

Rooted in Desire

Before the 70s my life was almost totally defined by sexuality because it was sexuality that created the community of women in which I found life. But that sexuality was inclusive of the oppression of the state, it was inclusive of the danger of a woman expressing desire, it was inclusive of rejecting every basic traditional option for a woman.

(Nestle in Douglas, 1993, p.2)

Desire plays a central role in biomythography, both as a theme and an intimate driver of the work. Women's right to bodily autonomy, their sexuality and reproductive rights had shadowed the politics of the 1960s, but the lesbian sexual revolution, also known in the late 1990s as the (Lesbian) Sex Wars, contextually redefined these rights for many women. Women's increased control over their own reproductive rights and sexuality heralded a new era of ostensible liberation for women as a subjugated and oppressed political class. Legislation, socialisation, religion, the family – were all centred around a woman's biology and perceived gender, which was often ideologically positioned.

⁵¹ But the lived experience and subjugation of sexuality was very different for lesbians in the late twentieth century. The punishment and violence that lesbians experienced was extreme and executed at a dehumanising level due to the interplay of what were considered to be their societal subversions – such as non-traditional gender roles, same-

⁵¹ For an historical overview see Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. London: Penguin Modern Classics.

sex desire, and the increased economic independence of women and lesbians.⁵² The reality of day-to-day survival was a very different experience for butch and femme lesbians from their lesbian feminist sisters (often referred to as political or separatist lesbians), with class or economic privilege underlying many of these divergent experiences. Women's sexuality had been defined by and represented by men's overt and repressed desires that were simultaneously legislatively inscribed and socially embedded.⁵³

The emergence of a lesbian feminist middle class that dominated the politics of lesbianism and the parameters of women's sexuality is scrutinised in many ways throughout biomythography and, as I describe in my analysis of working-class textual modalities, particularly so in the narratives of butch-identified lesbian writers such as Frankie Hucklenbroich. Biomythography has a unique ability to write between the lines of multiple feminisms and the complex battle of conscience that surrounded so many of these political positionings and histories. As we will discover in my analysis of *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, identity was routinely used to mask the vulnerabilities to which many femme and butch women were

⁵² Alix Genter's engaging 2016 ethnography of butch-femme customs and politics in *Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Fashion and Queer Legibility in New York City, 1945–1969*. *Feminist Studies*, 42(3), pp.604–631. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0604>, spells out the role that clothing and attire had on lesbian subcultural life. "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Fashion and Queer Legibility in New York City, 1945–1969", is focused on the aesthetics of lesbian fashion which often had dangerous consequences: "Lesbianism was not explicitly illegal, but police interpreted certain laws broadly enough to intimidate and arrest women caught in engaging in sexual activity or transgressing gender norms." (Genter, 2016, p.616). Genter, A. (2016).

⁵³ Kathy Rudy unpacks this further and suggests that these issues paved the theoretical way for a such a transition: Rudy, K. (2001). Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory. *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), pp. 191–222. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178457>.

subject, owing to the high level of social control and the accompanying threat of violence surrounding them in public places.

Teresa de Lauretis in *Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation* considers the ways in which sexual difference and lesbian sexuality opens up “a critical space – a conceptual, representational, and erotic space – in which women could address themselves to women.” (de Lauretis, 1988, p.155) de Lauretis considered this to be something that could only be achieved if women were able to concurrently recognise women as both *subject* and *object*. The act of bringing biographical elements of their lives into literature, according to de Lauretis, was critical in giving space to the subjective as a principal location of desire. Through this lens we can observe desire to be a recurring matter in biomythography, as an avenue that is able to connect with, explore and represent lesbian narratives outside of the male or, more specifically, non-lesbian gaze.

In speaking of Nicole Brossard’s descriptor of a specific type of lesbian biography, de Lauretis notes the wide range of modalities, idioms and forms that this writing may take and the lines of myth, reality, and theory it blurs:

...fiction/theory: a formally experimental, critical and lyrical, autobiographical and theoretically conscious, practice of writing-in-the-feminine that crosses genre boundaries (poetry and prose, verbal and visual modes, narrative and cultural criticism), and instates new correlations between signs and meanings, inciting other discursive mediations between the symbolic and the real, language and flesh. (de Lauretis, 1988, p.165)

Here de Lauretis speaks to a relationship between the physical body (desire) and the symbolic meanings (identity) that come together in the “real, language and flesh”. Her formulation can be used to encapsulate the transitional phase of the biomythographical movement where there is cultural, historical, and linguistic variation (which she views as existing between anglophone and francophone writers, but I believe that it could also apply equally to writers of many different identities). De Lauretis conclusively determines that, as a lesbian, what she terms ‘fiction/theory’ in her articles, is able to mediate borders of identity in its representation of specific lesbian practices. In effect, de Lauretis is outlining the ways that this fiction/theory or, here, biomythography can *only* ever sit within an intersectional framework even where it may be split between the social programme and personal expression of desire and identity.^{54 55}

De Lauretis helpfully locates late twentieth century lesbian identity and desire within a framework of political and social struggle, suggesting that New Left movements sit alongside a theory of subjectivity that is internalised, unconscious and – I would concur – rooted in desire.

⁵⁴ By referring to an ‘intersectional framework’ I speak not only to Kimberle Crenshaw’s definition of the term intersectionality in her pivotal essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color” published in the *Stanford Law Review* in 1991 (following on from her revolutionary 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”) but also her “exploration” of “the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of colour” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242):

Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241-1299. <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/files/2020/02/1229039.pdf>.

⁵⁵ In the context of my thesis, intersectionality should be viewed as an emerging political framework that originated in the Black feminist movement, and very firmly included class. Biomythographical work could also be seen to be the literary vehicle through which intersectionality was both imagined and enacted, even before the term was included in public discourse.

The discourses, demands and counter-demands that inform lesbian identity and representation in the 1980s are more diverse and socially heterogeneous than those of the first half of the century. They include, most notably, the political concepts of oppression and agency developed in the struggles of social movements such as the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, and third world feminism as well as an awareness of the importance of developing a theory of subjectivity that takes into account the working of unconscious processes in the construction of female subjectivity. (de Lauretis, 1988, p.177)

I consider this struggle for identity and place to be threefold in a biomythographical context. First, the struggle to develop a new language inclusive of representational narratives that reflect multiple identities. Second, the struggle to locate desire (personal and collective) within written narratives and texts – coming together as a genre that avoids fragmentation. Third, the struggle for this to invoke or inspire political change – taking into consideration progression towards societal change and an archival legacy. Alongside this there is the struggle for embodied subjectivity, for the placing of butch/femme or lesbian desire and sexuality that is both material and symbolic. It is biomythography's ability to interweave these components that makes it so unique. As de Lauretis outlines so fittingly, when considering the place of lesbian desire and sexuality, "the discourse, demands and counter-demands that inform lesbian representation are still unwittingly caught in the paradox of socio-sexual (in)difference." (de Lauretis, 1988, p.177). Biomythography speaks to this paradox but also the internal struggle for the lesbian subject to be both a part of and released from the different spheres of socio-sexual political lesbianism.

As I shall go on to explain, this juxtaposition between desire and sexuality has so often been societally defined by gender stereotypes and enforced gender roles. Late twentieth century theory offered a re-imagining of gender that became more established in academia under the umbrella of Gender Studies and later Queer Theory in the 1990s.⁵⁶ By referring to an example of a popular academic text from this era I hope to best articulate many of the ways that biomythography both coalesced with and departed from institutional and academic representations of gender, sex, and sexuality. I will also demonstrate the wider context in which these changes were driven by debates amongst feminist, queer, and LGBT academics.

Scrutinising Gendered Frameworks

The Polity Reader in Gender Studies, from 1994, is one of many social sciences and humanities books to be revisited through a now-

⁵⁶ Biomythography consistently deconstructs the gender binary in its representation and descriptions of lesbian women. This was done through the subversion of gender roles, which was not merely an act of self-expression but also but an act of survival for many self-defined butch, femme, kiki, and ‘passing’ women. A news article about a recent documentary entitled *LA Pride At 50* gives a fascinating insight into many of the challenges (and the violence) that lesbian women experienced 50 years ago in the U.S. One part of the documentary, and an accompanying review and article about the documentary and anniversary, refers to a ‘Frankie Hucklenbroich’ (as the story is told by Lillian Faderman the feminist author and activist, this is likely a reference to the biomythographical author I feature in my thesis). In Lillian Faderman’s recollection of police brutality against LGBT people she cites that ‘Frankie’ was arrested when dressed in femme clothes (Lilian had suggested she dress in femme attire to get a job) however the police officers were convinced that she was a cross dressing man. Retrieved from: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-10-09/l-a-pride-at-50-in-the-beginning-it-was-about-visibility-were-here-were-queer-get-used-to-it>.

classic 1990s feminist lens.^{57 58} The book is highly influenced by the confluence of, and what would become an ongoing struggle between, material feminist and Post-structuralist feminist theory. It introduces twenty-four essays (excerpts from already published work) by renowned feminist academics such as Sylvia Walby, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva and Rosi Braidotti. Although this collection is published by a UK-based publishing house, it includes as many texts by French and U.S. scholars as it does those from the UK. The collection uses the term ‘gender’ to denote studies of the oppression of women and examination of masculinities in the construction of social power.⁵⁹ Written at a time when U.S. and European universities had an array of Gender Studies or Women’s Studies departments and programmes, informed by the Second Wave feminist movement and feminist activists, the *Polity Reader* includes subject matter that dominated feminist debate and some of its subsequent divisions.⁶⁰

Throughout the *Polity Reader* there is a default parsing of the term ‘gender’ in that it is orientated around feminism or studies in feminism. In this, the collection predates an incoming tidal change of theory that would greatly impact how society subsequently came to

⁵⁷ This ‘classic lens’ being the retrospectively awkward transition from Second Wave feminism to a U.S. influenced take on French Post-structuralism that went on to greatly influence the growth of Queer Theory in early twenty first century academia.

⁵⁸ For other examples of these types of collections that were popular across the late twentieth century also see; Elaine Showalter (1978) *A Literature of Their Own: Ellen Moers (1978) Literary Women*; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) *The Mad Woman in the Attic*; and collections such as Elaine Showalter, ed. (1986) *The New Feminist Criticism*.

⁵⁹ My use of binary terms such as ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘male’, ‘female’, etc. throughout this dissertation does not seek to erase a recognition of the fluidity of gender as expressed in a contemporary context but reflects the historical conflation of gender and sex, with gender often being used interchangeably within these two definitions at that time.

⁶⁰ Such as a Marxist analysis of domestic labour, an analysis of violence against women and girls, masculinised identities, gendered technologies, reproductive rights, female sexuality, and pornography.

interpret certain terms such as *gender* and *identity* three decades on. The collection also highlights continued absences and a marked presence during this time – the absence of both Black feminist and lesbian feminist analysis and the (over) representation of French Post-structural feminisms. The age of Second Wave feminism, which seemed to include any texts or cultural work produced by women in the 1970s and 1980s, was coming to an end. In the Introduction to the *Polity Reader* by an anonymous (and perhaps gender neutral) editor, it is stated:

We see today in the academy a third transition occurring, away from ‘women’s studies’ and towards ‘gender studies’. It is the feminist movement which has made gender so central to theoretical thinking and research; yet plainly gender studies means focusing upon men as well as women, masculinity as well as femininity.

(Anon ed., 1994, p.4)

This suggested positional transition – a theoretical and material sidestep away from women and a feminist movement that focused on achieving the liberation of women (and thus the liberation of society) – is one that has the potential to conceptually hamper my intention in this thesis. If the reader can no longer understand or foreground the concept of women as an oppressed class – and analyse those of this class who are marginalised and erased within a certain set of historical, social, and cultural circumstances – the meaning of this thesis is obscured. That the attention on women must be moved to a focus on gender (destabilising sex as a class), I suggest, speaks to a tendency toward forced completion – an eradication of the need for a

‘certain’ type of studies.⁶¹ ⁶² This is not to negate the considerable advances that Gender Studies (and Queer Theory) have made in movement building, but to bring attention to a distinct historical shift and tension in feminist thinking.⁶³

What the *Polity Reader* and a plethora of gender related theoretical work at the time demonstrated was the all-encompassing influence of Judith Butler, French Post-structuralist theory and the resurgence of Michel Foucault’s work in the further development of Queer Theory, which has shaped literary and critical theory in the early twenty-first century. By the end of the twentieth century, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) had blown apart Second Wave feminist theory and Radical Feminism was becoming an increasingly antiquated feminist position. Gender Studies morphed into a heavily Foucault-influenced reading of identity, language, and power, while material concerns – socio-economic and political issues and the need for social transformation – that had featured in Second Wave feminism

⁶¹ It would be so much easier for me to skirt around this notion – it would be easier academically to accept current directions in scholarly travel – but I believe this would do a disservice to the texts I explore and to scholarship more broadly.

⁶² This is one of the reasons I am writing this thesis – the replacement approach in academic, scholarship and wider cultural spheres tends to presume that all avenues worth exploring have been explored and yet we know this is not the case. Aside from cultural dead ends, there are many absent voices.

⁶³ The biomythographical authors I examine in my thesis were often resisting repressive regimes and socio-political dictates, but they were also fighting for sexual and gender freedoms in opposition to many liberal feminists of the time. As I complete the final draft of this thesis numerous Republican states in the U.S. are participating and enacting so called ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bans, reasserting normative gender binaries and patriarchal ‘family values’ that repress women’s rights, are banning LGBT+ adjacent books in schools and critiquing the inclusion of critical race theory in university curriculums under a broader guise of First Amendment ‘free speech’ rights. These rights-based violations are interlinked with an excoriating denial of racism and attacks on the advances that the anti-racist movement has made in addressing racial and social inequalities.

were supplanted by the increased focus on psycho-social identities and language.⁶⁴

This discussion points to a central dilemma in my thesis, as the era I write from in 2023 differs markedly from how life was generally experienced in 2016 when I commenced this work. At the current time, when the term ‘woman’ is so manipulated by the Conservative Right and in other contexts continues to be expanded exponentially away from sex-based rights to be ‘more inclusive’, it may arguably appear to have reached a crisis of destabilisation as an identity.⁶⁵ If this is the case, how then do I write about texts that have historically been referred to as ‘women’s literature’? How do I contextualise and write about lesbians, women who were excluded and minoritised while inhabiting identities at the time that were seen to be ‘biologically’ stable (while often being simultaneously gender expansive or non-conforming)? How can I culturally and socially understand a generation of Second Wave feminist lesbians through a contemporary theoretical framework that no longer recognises the same sex-based symbols, signifiers, and social constructs? The very substance of the words I write, concepts I draw on, lived realities of lesbians in 1978-1998 that I refer to, are ghosted by the experience of living through the current socio-historical passage of time. The subjectivity of somatic experience seems to be as perennial as Penelope’s woven work in the *Odyssey* – as assiduously being unravelled as it is created.

⁶⁴ Like many scholars I also connect with and cite Foucault’s work and am persuaded by many of his theoretical positions, but I also have a similar respect and admiration for many Second Wave feminist writers and theorists.

⁶⁵ Heather Love also articulates this in relation to sexual identity in her 2007 text *Feeling Backward: Loss and The Politics of Queer History* to which I refer in this thesis.

Destabilisation often presumes that there is an anchored position of power to move away from, a formal, self-perpetuating structure that has lost credibility. In my thesis I choose to write from a position that recognises biomythography as a (stable or at least anchored) literary movement in its coming together of many fluctuating and disparate parts. I view these parts holistically, first and foremost, rather than primarily through the individual authors, texts, and subtexts. I define collective movement throughout this thesis as the coming together of individuals to create active social and political relationships (collectively) that are expressed by, but not confined to, temporalities of existence (in movement). This collective movement could take the form of a rhetorical response or reply – including modes of resistance or survival – to a set of social, cultural, and political contexts.

A Simultaneous Multiplicity of Spaces

Doreen Massey's pivotal 1994 text *Space, Place, and Gender* points to a simultaneity of "social relations" that motivate collective action and thinking. We can apply Massey's theoretical work when considering ways to reclaim and reinsert collective "cross cutting, intersecting" histories that have been de-contextualised or discarded:

The view, then, is of space-time as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as inherently dynamic simultaneity ...Such a way of conceptualizing the spatial, moreover, inherently implies the existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or

existing in relations of paradox or antagonism (Massey, 1994, p.3)

This thesis does at times struggle awkwardly with what Massey terms the “paradox and antagonism” that has been found in and directed at many of these biomythographical texts. The era and political paradigm in which biomythographical works emerged has been judged harshly by the standards of contemporary progressive politics. I would note that tolerating “relations of paradox and antagonism” in a certain era of Second Wave feminism (and all who sailed with her) could speak to present day gender identity debates as much as to the continued lived material realities of the women, lesbians, and people these texts were written by and for. While the social and public attitude toward Second Wave feminisms may have changed, issues they tackled so effectively, such as the ferocity of violence against women and the erasure of their literature and subject positions has not.

Temporality, in theoretical terms, is something I revisit throughout this thesis through the queered lens of Jack Halberstam as well as briefly through the Radical Feminist lens of Massey and her contemporaries. Despite its many imperfections, the concept of temporality remains productive as a focus and framework for any analysis of late twentieth century lesbian texts. It is my belief that a simultaneity of theoretical approaches can and must be adopted to examine work written and published in a different socio-political, cultural, and historical context from ‘now’. Returning to my bridge analogy – periodisation alongside temporality seems to be one logical way for the marginalised academic or theorist to collectivise and bring together lived narratives retrieved after decades of erasure or as

Massey cites in the passage I have quoted, the “lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces” (Massey, 1994, p.3).

When elaborating on the framework for this thesis, my aim is to consider the socio-political contexts of these selected late-twentieth century texts – not occluding the lived material experiences and realities of actively minoritised and marginalised authors and their readers – and what these texts meant to the biomythographical movement involved in producing them. Beyond that, my broader intention is to enable a fuller understanding of how work by marginalised and underrepresented authors can develop and be sustained. I hope to do this in a way that reignites literary and social engagement with this biomythographical work as well as other abandoned or abstracted Second Wave feminist texts. I aim to do this in a way that gives the texts and their authors the space to be contradictory, oppositional, frustrating and at times even ‘unsafe’. My intention is to fully broach these unexplored spaces of literary and cultural experimentation – even where their authenticity is at odds with the idiom of contemporary truth-telling.

It would be inappropriate and limiting to frame the work of these biomythographers through just one single theoretical lens or contemporary position. There are though, three obvious late-twentieth-century theoretical directions to highlight in relation to the authors I study: feminisms (particularly Radical, Black, and lesbian feminism/s); intersectionality; and Queer Theory. Still, in this thesis I take an expansive approach to framing my enquiry, drawing on several theorists and writers who were contemporaries of these authors in the late twentieth century, particularly feminist theorists who focused on lesbian ethics and lesbian literary theory such as Bonnie Zimmerman.

I also delve into feminist literary theory, critical race theory, life writing theory and narrative theory along the way.

Finding a Female (Lesbian) Tradition

I take the above subheading from the 1986 collection of essays on women's literature, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, introduced and edited by Mary Eagleton. This is just one example of an avalanche of feminist literary theory books (a genre in itself) from the 1980s and early 1990s, a decade in which women's literature, particularly nineteenth century literary heroines, received long overdue attention. Within a broadly liberal feminist bent, like many similar texts of this era, it at least includes (less tokenistically than other similar texts) Black, lesbian, and working-class authors. I choose Mary Eagleton's work over a range of other collections because, like the *Polity Gender Studies Reader*, it exemplifies the complex straddling of political and transnational discussions that were taking place in late-twentieth century literature between the U.S. and Europe.⁶⁶

In *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, Eagleton organises excerpts from key literary texts by women (Virginia Woolf, Toril Moi, Hélène Cixous, and Barbara Smith among others) around five appealingly simple themes that become muddied when we consider truth, language, and interpretation through different heuristic lenses.⁶⁷ Throughout the book, Eagleton defaults to the concept of there

⁶⁶ Despite transnational feminist considerations, there is a neo-classicist approach to feminist/literary theory of this era that prioritises European and U.S.-centric theoretical frameworks to the exclusion of all others.

⁶⁷ *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* is divided into five sections based on the text's core themes and section titles: "Finding a Female Tradition", "Women and Literary Production", "Gender and Genre", "Towards Definitions of Feminist Writing" and "Do Women Write Differently?". Each section features an opening introduction written by

being a gendered way of writing through a set of identities – that is, there being a clear way to define women’s writing. Eagleton’s work omits a range of analyses, often missing from feminist literary criticism of this era, namely in relation to power, subjectivity, and the material frameworks or structures in which the work was created. These are the very analyses that would point to the collectivist aspects underlying many transformational cultural movements. This retrospective vantage point informs my interpretation of biomythography, as I steer clear of the *individualist* or *exceptionalist* literary tropes that late-twentieth century feminism can fall into.

I would observe that the components of ‘women’s literature’ follow a lineage or tradition, as Eagleton *et al* suggest. But I believe that biomythography’s ability to depict the increased structural autonomy of women who had been historically, socially, and culturally excluded – is far more noteworthy. Literature written by and for women in the late-twentieth century was not new, but a lesbian women-led infrastructure that supported the publication of Black, lesbian, working-class feminists *for* a readership of Black, lesbian, working-class feminists absolutely was. It is no surprise that this emerged alongside, and in conjunction with, an increase in feminist activism, leadership, and structured collectivism in areas of healthcare, childcare, women’s domestic violence shelters/refuges and small autonomous business networks.

In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” written in 1980, Adrienne Rich defines the ways that, like men, women too had

Mary Eagleton followed by a selection of essays by majoritively female literary critics and theorists.

commonalities of experiences, as did lesbians, but that "... lesbian existence has been lived...without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning." (Rich, 1994, p.52).^{68 69} The convergence and overlapping of these experiences, which thematically connect with biomythographical work, informs the conceptual brokering of biomythography as a tradition. Likewise Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and The Politics of Queer History* (2007) examines the absence of an authentic continuity in the mainstreaming of gay liberation from a historical perspective. In looking 'back' Love reclaims the importance of gay liberation, activism and particularly culture in the formation of a contemporary re-visioning of gay history, which includes the violence, exclusion, shame, and threats that have surrounded gay identities. She identifies a challenge I grapple with throughout the thesis in the opening of her text, that "For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it" (Love, 2007, p.1)

This is where the lesbian archive plays a fundamental role in the biomythographical imagination, for one could wonder – without the archive would there be any record of these late-twentieth century lesbian lives, traditions, and subcultures? As Rich explains:

The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the reality of lesbian existence must be taken very

⁶⁸ This is taken from Adrienne Rich's 1994 collection *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (Virago Press).

⁶⁹ Elaine Showalter has also commented that women writers, when developing their literary traditions, have often "constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society" (Showalter in Eagleton, 1986, p.11). It should be noted that in adopting an intersectional societal framework, lesbian, Black, disabled, minoritised and working-class women have created their own subcultures within this literary subculture – a set of adaptive traditions to represent their historical frames of reference and life experiences.

seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women. (Rich, 1994, p.52)

Biomythography is so heavily connected with the archive, which is inscribed within the language and genre itself, that I would even venture to say that biomythography could be seen as an agile literary archive. In capturing marginalised subjectivities, biomythographical works encompass literary subjectivities rarely found in other genres.

Biomythography As a Literary Movement

Bonnie Zimmerman, one of the few well-known lesbian literary theorists and critics of the late twentieth century, asserts that lesbian criticism is always rooted in the politics of the time. It often acts as an antithesis to social consensus and prevalent political ideologies. In the present-day context and division over sex-based rights in a post-gender age, Zimmerman's observations fly searingly close to the contemporary sun. In her 1981 essay "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism" she considers the ways in which lesbian critics have historically had to develop a lesbian canon and a lesbian critical perspective. With these tools, lesbian critics were able to quantify and validate the presence of difference in lesbian literary texts and the inclusion of lived experiences not represented elsewhere. This speaks to a central question in my thesis, how do literary theorists explain the significance of a movement that has never been written into existence?

The biomythographical texts I discuss, at the time they were published (even posthumously in the case of Parker and Lorde), were generally well received by a lesbian readership, with some authors

such as Dorothy Allison selling hundreds of thousands of copies of their texts.⁷⁰ Yet a few decades later many of these books – with the exception of Lorde’s work which has undergone a renaissance over the past decade, are not considered worthy of republication. As an example of this phenomenon, in Chapter Four I explore Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* which, despite its continued inter-generational popularity, has not been republished for complex reasons. Joan Nestle is another instructive case. Her recent collection, *A Sturdy Yes of A People* contains some of her best known work originally published by mainstream publishing houses (including the UK’s Pandora Press). Yet it has only reached the light of a twenty-first century day through the Sinister Wisdom publishing imprint, which is linked to a feminist journal that Nestle herself has been directly involved in throughout her lifetime.⁷¹

PART 4: READING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

We begin by speaking directly to the deaths and disappointments. Here we begin to fill in the spaces of silence between us. For it is between these seemingly irreconcilable lines – the class lines, the politically correct lines, the daily lines

⁷⁰ Referring to Dorothy Allison as the “Rosanne Barr” of literature in December 1995, the New York Times Magazine highlights the popularity and demand for Allison’s texts at the time and reports on the large publishing advance (\$100,000) she had received for her last published novel, *Cavedweller*, following the success of *Trash* and after selling the film rights to *Bastard Out of Carolina* (\$25,000). Despite these advances and being arguably the best paid biomythographer in the 1990s, she was still financially unstable as “recognition didn’t help her finances” and following her \$100,000 advance, due to accrued debts from years of having a limited income as a writer, “the state of California closed Allison’s bank account for failure to pay quarterly taxes.” <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/17/magazine/the-roseanne-of-literature.html>.

⁷¹ Joan Nestle has been editing and writing for the monthly and then quarterly publications of the *Sinister Wisdom* journal for almost 50 years.

we run down to each other to keep difference and desire at a distance – that the truth of our connection lies.

(Moraga and Anzaldúa, in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.106)

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), set out a thorough and innovative theoretical framework for ‘life writing’.⁷² Their framework enables the scholar or reader of autobiography in its disparate textual forms to re-evaluate what Smith and Watson determine to have historically been a patriarchal or gendered approach toward the creation and reception of autobiography. That lens tended to divide life writing and narratives into two categories – the objective historical (male) text of value and the subjective personal (female) text of domestication. It also largely centred nineteenth and early twentieth century texts and enshrined the demarcation of public and private, or embodied external and internal, spheres of materiality and consciousness. Smith and Watson’s expansive reading and interpretation of autobiography and other “life narratives” that “shuffle between the fictive and autobiographical” (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.8) delves into specific autobiographical elements and methods, including genre definitions. They therefore redirect understanding away from life writing as an art of accurate recollection towards it being one of creative subjectivity.⁷³

⁷² *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* was originally published in 2001 by Minnesota Press, I refer to the expanded second edition (2010) throughout my thesis – again published by Minnesota Press.

⁷³ Here Smith and Watson are arguing for the validity of creative subjectivity as part of a feminist reconsideration of auto/biography.

Smith and Watson posit a loose methodological framework – six areas for consideration that, they believe, inform all autobiographical or life writing texts and narratives: memory, experience, identity, embodiment, space, and agency.⁷⁴ They chart the history of life writing as well as the philosophical and textual overlaps between types of life writing. Building on the work of Philippe Lejeune, they re-imagine the genre in its fuller sense beyond its speculations on “history, politics, religion, science, and culture ... and vocabulary for self-study”. (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 2).⁷⁵

In her influential 2001 book *Autobiography* Linda Anderson offers a further explanation as to the historical and political origins of the auto/biographical text and the implications of this context on what Smith and Watson refer to as a “vocabulary of self-study”:

The argument that texts can have political or historical effect revives the question of referentiality or truth, without necessarily returning us to the same place. Indeed the notion of multiple locations, both as contexts of reading and positionings for the subject, becomes one of the ways autobiography has offered itself as a site for new theoretical and critical insights. (Anderson, 2011, p.15)⁷⁶

⁷⁴ I will come back to Smith and Watson’s six components as they relate to the biomythographical authors I discuss.

⁷⁵ Smith and Watson’s work is particularly influenced by Philip Lejeune’s concept of the “autobiographical pact” and the ways that auto/biography can be and should be distinguished from the novel.

⁷⁶ In her work (which predates Anderson’s study) Laura Mulvey also considers “multiple locations” referring to them as ways to avoid binary patterns/thinking: “The literal representation of transition as movement through from one space to another, has a very different mythic connotation from that of the binary pattern” (Mulvey, 1987, p.15). Mulvey, L. (1987). Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience. *History Workshop*, 23, pp.3–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288745>.

Anderson's consideration of "multiple locations" as sites for "new theoretical and critical insights" speaks to my analysis of Smith and Watson's recourse to and use of multiple discourses (which I too adopt in my thesis). As quoted by Smith and Watson in *Reading Autobiography*, Julie Rak additionally views autobiography as a potential literary tool for the marginalised. She thus references "the aspects of power inherent in acts of autobiographical inscription" by recognising that "those whose identities, experiences, and histories remain marginal, invalidated, invisible and partial negotiate and alter normative or traditional frames of identity in their difference. (Rak in Smith and Watson, 2010, p.3)

Smith and Watson examine life writing beyond the mode's style and content. They unpack a range of life writing sub-genres demanding that they be considered and critiqued in a broader literary context. Their work brings in a range of discourses including intersectionality, Marxism, lesbian/Black and other feminisms. In this endeavour they challenge the twentieth century enlightenment discourse of the authoritative writer or text and its associated scramble to legitimise an autobiographer's place in the literary canon.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, they only make passing reference to biomythography in relation to Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and I would contest their too narrow description of it as the author's means of "affiliating with a mythic community of other lesbian women" (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.263). Despite this, I value their work as a theoretical foundation for

⁷⁷ In her 2001 text *Autobiography* Linda Anderson has detailed the ways in which an autobiographical text's place in the literary canon is usually based on the text's historical import or the placing of the author as an active observer or agent in that history.

my biomythographical framework and for exploring components of biomythographical work in future chapters.

In my thesis I build on Smith and Watson's critical assertion that biography and life writing (and indeed biomythography) bear scrutiny from intersubjective truth, mode, and discourse viewpoints. There is a "shift" in power in autobiography that is recognised by Smith and Watson to be related to the author's authority and the text's legitimacy, but this shift should also be read in biomythography as a deliberate way to reclaim an authorial power and textual legitimacy that has been denied. Smith and Watson observe the "intersubjective" "dialogic exchange" between the writer and reader, which fully applies to the concept of biomythography, as a genre born of collectivism – co-dependent on the thematic correspondences and forms of relation between texts. This is a *mode* that can also be found in historical narratives of the enslaved and formerly enslaved, of women and of the working class.

If we approach such self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader rather than as a story to be proved or falsified, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. (Smith and Watson, 2010, pp.16-17)

This "dialogic exchange" can also be seen to be a potential nexus of power created by a network of texts or readings that inform a genre or body of work. Even where texts or writers have been subjugated their collective inter-textual dialogical exchanges can still form a powerful body of work. When considering the role of power within the

biomythographical text, biomythography moves beyond individual or self-speculative autobiographical power into a collectivist power that can engender social transformation.

Defining Biomythography

My framework for analysing the seven key authors I have chosen and their connected literary production, is composed of three strands: genre, tradition, and movement – encompassing what I consider to be the most significant components of biomythography. I link this to the lack of recognition that biomythography has received despite its overtly interrelated subject matter, linguistic correspondences, and dialogic intertextuality. As I have referenced Second Wave feminist literary criticism focused on excavating subjugated women's literature. It often asked what women's literature was and should be, identifying and validating women's subject matter, style, and approach. I move on from these inquiries in posing the following framework:

Biomythography as a literary genre: This refers to the forms and styles, themes, communicative modes, and subjectivities that are both contained within and shared between biomythographical texts. This strand of my framework locates each author's work as indicative of, and part of, a biomythographical literary genre linked with contexts of material production.

Biomythography as a literary tradition: This speaks to the collective import of each writer's biomythographical work in a historical and cultural context when it is analysed comparatively along with other biomythographical authors' texts or work. A broader temporal literary

frame of reference places the author's work within a distinct and sustained biomythographical literary tradition.

Biomythography as a literary movement: This strand of my framework positions biomythography as an interconnected socio-political literary movement, made up of interventions that were often co-produced. It references the materiality of biomythography as part of a network of feminist journals, publishers, and affiliated political networks. This term also helps bring to the fore the critical role that I believe biomythography played in the development of the late-twentieth century lesbian archive, firmly securing each author within a biomythographical literary movement.

Additionally, within this framework I identify nine distinct elements, or what Smith and Watson would refer to as *components*, that underpin my case for biomythography as a genre:

1. The self-conscious female-identified protagonist and narrator (who regularly interjects; in poetry the speaker), urgently telling a story about the subjective 'I' within a biographical context that tends to mythologise their life story.
2. A Russian doll-like, non-chronological narrative framework that often appears to be told in real time (in varying ways), that does not tell the *whole story* but suggests a plethora of possible endings or outcomes that reach beyond the textual page.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Fittingly the Russian doll also known as the 'Matryoshka doll' symbolically represents generations of matriarchal figures, who contain female or child figures or 'souls' within their nested encasing, serving as a reproductive metaphor for inter-generational legacy making.

3. Investment in an implicit intersectionality (including matriarchal and intergenerational concerns), acknowledging the marginalised position of the narrator, but also her agency even as the institutional structures around her operate to minoritise and marginalise.
4. The presence of the biomythographical author (herself) who takes ownership of the story or the delivery of the story and whom we see deciding what will be told or withheld (moving us beyond the standard categories of memoir or autobiography).
5. A concern with gender-based violence and violence against women. This informs the material and social choices that the protagonists can make, but never controls the direction of the story.⁷⁹ Male violence and the patriarchal abuse of power is often linked to the subjugation of reproductive rights and sexual freedoms and is interwoven with other forms of oppression such as racism, homophobia, or poverty, and is often given a structural or political context.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Here I can refer to specific examples such as young Audre's sexual assault aged nine or her abortion in her early twenties in Audre Lorde's *Zami*, to Allison's rape at 11 (repeated in her stories and essays), Jess's sexual assault by police in *Stone Butch Blues* and the domestic and sexual violence Joan Nestle's mother experienced among many other incidents that are documented in the biomythographical canon. The threat of male violence if not explicit and present, resonates throughout every biomythographical narrative featured in my thesis, directing the subtext of the story. It does not control the narrators, as in the usual 'victim escapes tragedy' trajectory where violence is seen to be a one off, but instead shows male violence and control as a systematic, ever-present threat and lived reality.

⁸⁰ In Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1996), for example, this context is class oppression – where young men are pitted against each other, their frustration constantly rises to the surface, and we see public displays of violence that evades being covered up by class privilege and guises. In Allison's stories, communities are aware of the violence women face in their homes, indeed they are warned about it, but rarely are they able to prevent it.

6. A rejection of internal/external dichotomies throughout the text by means of a relaxed interlacing of material, spiritual and subjective dimensions. This is also demonstrated using itinerant or experimental ways to tell and represent a story whether that be physically through performance or oral storytelling, gestural descriptors, the use of visual media in texts (photographs, pictures, drawings) as well as vernacular and typographical markers such as grammar, capitalisation, and the layout or formation of words in the text.
7. An overt questioning and subverting of ways in which memories, stories, internalised understandings of the self, community representations and identities are constructed and retained. Biomythography represents a multitude of voices or narratorial 'versions' of that story. Often there is a refreshing plurality and contradictory tone throughout a biomythographical text that blurs and delineates concepts (or ideologies) of truth, authenticity, and history itself.
8. An emphasis on the primacy of experience, including an emphasis on experiences that are considered 'shameful' or prohibited, in truthful storytelling. A centring on the marginalised narrator's survival (surviving to tell the story) and resistance (to being prevented from telling the story), including via the text itself as a physical manifestation of *storytelling as resistance*.⁸¹

⁸¹ The use of the word 'truth' does not necessarily refer to biographical accuracy but to the 'truth' that the storyteller wants to reveal about her own or the subject's experiences in the narrative.

9. A form of intertextuality and intersubjectivity within a collectivist context, which distinguishes it from other forms of life writing. Biomythography emerges from such a literary framework and offers an encoding of dialogic relations, leading to my claims for a genre, tradition, and movement.⁸²

Throughout the chapters of my thesis, I will turn to each of the above, seeking to demonstrate the ways in which these elements connect the texts and their authors to a collectivist biomythographical movement.

PART 5: A RADICAL VERNACULAR

Reconceiving self-referential narratives not as sites of truth of a life but as creative self-engagements allowed the elevation of autobiography to the status of a literary genre.

(Smith and Watson, 2010, p.203)

Following my exploration of Smith and Watson's analysis of auto/biography and modes of life writing, and the development of my own literary framework, I am attempting to "elevate" biomythography beyond the often-dismissive tropes associated with Second Wave feminist literature. As Smith and Watson critically articulate, autobiography – and I would add biomythography – are sites of "creative self-engagement" that are collectively held and driven. I elaborate further on this in the following chapters of my thesis.

⁸² Additionally, several recurring themes in biomythography are often associated with the memoir genre.

In Chapter One I consider the collectivist context in which early iterations of biomythography were often published, by studying two key feminist anthologies: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), and *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* edited by Joan Nestle (1992). Both texts articulate a particular stage in the development of biomythographical writing and its publishing history, with anthologies and feminist journals often serving as an intermediary step in the author's publishing journey. Such collections provided a welcome environment for experimental, radical, and explicitly lesbian writing, each biomythographer being given a supportive space and infrastructure in which to further develop their work. These anthologies illustrate the many stylistic, thematic, and linguistic mechanisms of biomythography, enabling us to study intertextual dialogues inclusive of both 'minor' and major biomythographers. Asking the question as to whether these texts could be archives in themselves, I examine the role of documentation and memory in the biomythographical text and consider whose lives will be remembered when a generation of writers are no longer in print.

Reflecting on biomythography's inherent role in the lesbian archive of the late twentieth century, Chapter Two examines Joan Nestle's intimate collection of essays, *A Restricted Country* (1987). Rooted in her responsibilities as a custodian of working-class and outsider lesbian lives, in *A Restricted Country* Nestle writes against the taboos that surround female sexuality, to document those whose desire and love is never seen outside of a lesbian archive. As a lesbian Jewish historian and writer, Nestle has a firm understanding of the necessity for the oppressed to have their own histories made public, for their stories to be told, as we see in something like the Lesbian

Herstory Archive holdings.⁸³ In this chapter I examine the role that butch-femme relationships had in redefining lesbian identities in biomythography (something I also delineate in Chapter Four), where expressions of lesbian desire actively resist heteronormativity. I look at the often-cyclical nature of biomythography as a restorative space of belonging and consider the role that memory and disclosure play in the personal boundaries established (or not) between private lives and public archives.

In Chapter Three I move onto the work of Pat Parker, exploring the role of simultaneity in Parker's highly personal and politicised poetry. Following on from Chapter Two, I discuss the importance of the material archive and what it reveals to us about people whose lives have largely been excised from literature. I examine Pat Parker's work and life through an exploration of her archive based at the Schlesinger Library in Massachusetts. The library houses a collection of Parker's personal memorabilia and political artefacts and pointedly demonstrates the importance of understanding biomythography as a collective movement. As a result, I spend a considerable time examining the ways that her personal life informed her political activism in a collectivist context. I also focus on a close reading of her poetry collection, *Movement in Black* (1978), to sharpen my analysis of both Parker's 'radical vernacular'. The language of her work shaped as

⁸³ The Lesbian Herstory Archives were founded in the 1970s by Joan Nestle and her lesbian community contemporaries, Deborah Edel, Sahli Cavallo, Pamela Oline, and Julia Penelope (whose theoretical work I feature in this thesis). The collections and archives were first housed in Nestle's New York apartment and then they were moved to a brownstone house in Brooklyn, which was purchased through donations from the lesbian community. The building and archives are now a recognised historical landmark – this pioneering approach to becoming a self-funded archive has ensured its independence for fifty years. LHA's social significance is only just being fully recognised. At the core of the LHA is its comprehensive library of lesbian literature and journals from the mid- to late-twentieth century.

much by her struggle to survive physically and economically as a Black working-class lesbian as it was by the connectivity she forged with other biomythographers such as Audre Lorde.

Building on the reclamation of butch-femme desire in Nestle's work, in Chapter Four I look to the complex lesbian identities that both Leslie Feinberg and Frankie Hucklenbroich detail but represent in very different ways in their own writing. Again, I examine the role that class and sexuality play in defining gendered identities through a detailed exploration of lesbian masculinities in Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Hucklenbroich's *A Crystal Diary* (1997). In this chapter, the role of the biomythographer as authoritative interlocutor is fundamentally questioned by the playfulness of Hucklenbroich's episodic often challenging outsider adventures and Feinberg's oppositional revelations of state and male violence that threaten and sequester the voices of the violated as well as voice of the literary outsider.

In Chapter Five I discuss an author who very much benefitted from her biomythographical predecessors and the legacy of this collective work and movement. Dorothy Allison's books had accrued a mass readership in the mid to late-1990s yet the success of her novels and short stories, particularly *Trash*, marks a figurative end to the biographical timeframe I have set out.⁸⁴ Focusing on her lesser-known work *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995) which still pivots around many of the stories in one of her best-known books *Trash* (1988), I explore the ways in which Allison uses stylistic aspects of

⁸⁴ 1998 also marks an end to the period that Jaime Harker describes as being the 'Women in Print era'.

memoir, modes of performance art and photographs in her biomythographical text as a way of negotiating painful family memories. In her public revelations of family privacies, she is in fact able to inscribe the emotional distance and safety she needs to survive whilst honouring the women in her family.

In my examination of Gloria Anzaldúa's work in Chapter Six, I turn my focus to the colonising powers of ethno-nationalism and its inherent subjugation of female bodies, indigenous peoples, their land, culture and language. In a very different way to Dorothy Allison, Anzaldúa's use of biomythographical language and genre to tell the untold truths of survivors of intergenerational violence (domestic, sexual, racial, and state-led) is carried forward in this penultimate chapter that examines her text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Gloria Anzaldúa's deeply poetic and lyrical evocations of her ancestral heritage, sees Anzaldúa rewriting her own mythologies, and hybridising her lived experiences with the mythologies of her ancestors. Anzaldúa's biomythographical work also exposes the brutality of colonialism and the violence of imperialist ethno-nationalism in a way that remains ever timely and relevant. In her work, Anzaldúa demonstrates the power of biomythographical narrative to hold open a cultural and political space that resists the violence of patriarchal storylines and the destruction of indigenous matrilineal histories. This fusion of the personal, political, and mythical brings us full circle, back into the formative realms of biomythography as tradition and lineage, as a space of reconnection.

In a final short chapter before I conclude my thesis, I return to the work of Audre Lorde where my initial exploration of biomythography began in 2014. I do this to reflect more fully on the

term and its meaning, as well as the genre's use of language. I examine two of Lorde's earlier poetry collections: I consider *The Black Unicorn* very briefly, written in 1978, which is the year I consider to be the beginning of the biomythographical movement, and *Between Ourselves* (1976). The latter, textually as well as in its publication history, exemplifies the connection between biomythography's emergence as a genre and the development of a collectivist movement and pre-emptive infrastructure to support it. In this analysis I return to some of my original theoretical work on biomythography and, while Lorde is the progenitor of biomythography and defined the term, I wish to demonstrate the relationality of her biomythographical poetry with the authors I feature throughout my thesis.

I conclude my thesis by reviewing my own initial claims that biomythography is a distinct genre, tradition and movement in literature that has not been, until this thesis, recognised as such. I then turn to the wider legacy of biomythography and consider its notable impact on millennial and contemporary literature and the significant part it continues to play in helping to develop and create radical autonomous literary spaces.

CHAPTER 1: THE ROOTS OF OUR RADICALISM

Before venturing into an analysis of the biomythographical authors and individual texts I will be studying in this thesis, I explore two key anthologies in the development of biomythography – *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa and *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader* edited by Joan Nestle (1992).^{85 86 87} I have brought together *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* in this chapter, two seemingly very different texts, to exemplify what I consider to be one of

⁸⁵ I will refer to these texts as *Bridge/This Bridge Called My Back* and *Persistent/Persistent Desire* respectively, rather than their full titles throughout this chapter.

⁸⁶ There are several significant ground-breaking Black feminist anthologies from the same period as my chosen anthologies, that are now rightfully held to critical acclaim, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (published one year after *This Bridge Called My Back*) and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) also edited by Barbara Smith. Both texts were greatly influenced by *Bridge*. It should also be noted that *Home Girls* is a Black lesbian feminist anthology. While I have a great appreciation for these books (both literarily and in terms of their historical importance as books written by and for Black women) I would not, however, consider these texts to be biomythographical in concept, development, modality, or style and have therefore not spent time examining them in my thesis. It is of note that *Bridge* and *Home Girls* were both published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which was founded and co-run principally by Barbara Smith, her sister Beverley Smith and Demita Frazier, who were also part of the Combahee River Collective. The label was supported and highly influenced by Audre Lorde.

⁸⁷ Hortense Spillers in her review of *Home Girls* summarises the text as a politically driven *collection* of work that doesn't sit together as a cohesive project: "This anthology is not conventional: conversation, the review, journal/ diary entries, pieces of historical scholarship, and short formal experimentations that straddle the line between fictional and autobiographical genres are orchestrated here into a vital democracy of written forms that alternately capture the interest and lose it." (Spillers, 1984, p.178): Spillers, H. (1984). "Turning the Century": Notes on Women and Difference. Review of *Black Women Writers at Work: Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, by C. Tate and B. Smith. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3(1/2), pp.178–185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/463834>.

Comparative reviews from the time are similar in their critique: Munro, C. L. (1984). Review of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, by B. Smith. *Black American Literature Forum*, 18(4), pp.175–177. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904298>.

the most important components in my biomythographical framework, that of its intertextual, intersubjective (often inter-referential) and dialogic nature. These texts bookend a decade of productive engagement with, and development of, biomythography in confluent but different ways. By looking at the ethos of two very different anthologies, I will illustrate what underpins their biomythographical connectivity.

PART 1: Refugees of A World on Fire ⁸⁸

We are slowly moving past the resistance within, leaving behind the defeated images. We have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we – white black straight queer female male – are connected and interdependent. We are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea.
(Anzaldúa in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, no pagination)

In 1983 Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, self-defined lesbian and queer feminist Chicana/Latina women of colour, reissued their co-edited book, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (first published in 1981), to which they had contributed much material.⁸⁹ This collection of essays, diary excerpts, journal pieces, poetry and short stories centralised the experiences of

⁸⁸ Moraga, C. (1983). Refugees of a World on Fire. In: C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa. eds, (1983). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 2nd ed, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, no pagination. *Refugees of a World on Fire* is the title of the foreword to the second edition.

⁸⁹ As above *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd Edition, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa and reissued in 1983 by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

diverse ‘women of colour’, preferring this term to the use of the word ‘Black’ when acknowledging ethnic and intercultural identities.⁹⁰ It is one of the most distinct collections to come out of the early 1980s Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM).⁹¹ By the time the second edition of *Bridge* was published, 54,000 copies of the book had been sold, mainly in the U.S. After a troubled relationship with Persephone Press, the editors – along with other women featured in the collection, Barbara Smith, and Audre Lorde – released the book themselves. They called their women of colour-led and self-determined publishing house Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.⁹² The book has now been through four substantial pressings (including a 2015 edition by the SUNY Press) and has sold over 100,000 copies, becoming ever more relevant and a pivotal stimulus in feminist and Queer Theory. In an interview with Cherríe Moraga for her 2015 thesis “This Bridge That Never Dissipates: Recreations of *This Bridge Called My Back* 1981 - 2015”, Paulina Jones-Torregrosa interviews Cherríe Moraga about the

⁹⁰ By ‘diverse’ I refer to a number of factors that engender different positionalities within the text and that also define the authors as being, in their own words, ‘Third World’ or racialised women. Such factors include identity, self-described nationality, skin colour, language and culture.

⁹¹ I use the broader term Women’s Liberation Movement rather than feminist movement here to honour the sentiments of some of the women featured in *Bridge* who refer to their mothers and female ancestors as being both influential and instrumental in their own women-focused activism but who may not have named this as ‘feminism’.

⁹² Page ten of the second edition of the outer leaves of the collection dedicates a page to explaining the second pressing and change of publisher. Persephone Press was a white owned feminist women’s publisher that went out of business in 1983 and, despite the relatively high sales of the book, *Bridge* was left to go out of print. Both *Bridge* and Audre Lorde’s *Zami* could be seen to have been exploited and neglected by Persephone Press who also published numerous notable biomythographical authors such as Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Norma Alarcón. The differences were not just about financial exploitation and literary control but also represented an ever-widening split in the WLM in the U.S., replicated in feminist journals such as *Heresies*, which led to Black/women of colour forming self-determined publishing spaces and collectives.

development of this ground-breaking work. Here she documents the editor's vision of its potential future influence:

Thirty-five years after the initial publication of *This Bridge*, I asked her [Moraga] about the ways in which the new edition is significant. She says, "It tells me that people are still grappling with some of the same issues and dynamics that we were grappling with back then. It reaffirms, for me, that words and stories can and do have power over time and over generations." (Jones-Torregrosa, 2015, p.112)

What remains so radical about *Bridge* and continues to differentiate it from other collections is its deliberate inclusion of Asian, Latinx/Latina and Chicana voices, self-described 'brown,' 'yellow' and mixed heritage women, often first-generation migrants to the U.S., whose experiences are an inherent part of the creation of the collection.

Black feminist epistemologies underlie much of the fabric of *Bridge* and the approach of its editors. In establishing biomythography to be informed by a Black feminist tradition, it is important to outline the ways that the political informs the literary, cultural, and intellectual. Patricia Hill Collins has referred to the role of Black feminism in literature as that of changing the "consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions" (Hill Collins, 1990, p.221).⁹³ In order to address racism, racialisation, misogyny *as well as* class and state oppression amongst other concerns, Barbara Christian's understanding of literary

⁹³ In relation to this concept there are also two other Barbara Christian texts of critical importance to consider: *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1992) and *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976 (Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies)* (1985).

“transformation” is underpinned by a politicised material approach and “the ways in which our theorizing, out of necessity, is based on our multiplicity of experiences.” (Christian, 1987, p.60).⁹⁴ In effect, *Bridge* as a collection of biomythographical work that has both material and theoretical foundations responds to Christian’s “passionate” concern that “the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction and cooptation” (Christian, 1987, p.62).

Described by Cherríe Moraga as having been developed between 1976 and 1981, the first and second edition of *Bridge* bears all the hallmarks of Audre Lorde’s biomythographical blueprint *Zami*.⁹⁵ Indeed, the collection opens in a typically elusive way, contradicting even its genesis as the dates given for its conception switch between 1979 and 1976.⁹⁶ ⁹⁷ Two unannounced additional editors’ forewords in the second 1983 edition, in which Moraga and Anzaldúa each add an additional foreword, precedes Toni Cade Bambara’s engaging foreword to the first edition. Acting as biomythographical prologues these are, more than anything else, a prediction of the changing socio-political context of the times and the increasing cynicism of a Black feminist

⁹⁴ This Black feminist tradition can also be seen to be upheld by Pat Parker who I examine in Chapter 2, as her Black feminist biomythographical poetry is anchored in and extols the same “intense literary activism” to which Christian refers.

⁹⁵ I have explored this in my MA by Research focused on Audre Lorde. Lewis, R. M. (2016). *Biomythographical Tradition and Resistant Subjectivities in Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* [<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11737/>]. MA by Research, Durham University.

⁹⁶ Discrepancies in dates, times and historical facts are a tenet or some would say by-product of biomythography as a genre that refuses to be tied to the *real* and the *factual* in order to be able to tell the *truth* via a mythicised narrative form.

⁹⁷ In the first edition preface, Moraga discusses a three-year phase of development from 1976-1979, during which she and Anzaldúa had discussed their project. She then goes on to contradict this narrative by quoting a letter addressed to the organisers of a 1979 conference who had predictably excluded women of colour as the starting point for the book’s creation. Within a similar scope of contradiction and with biomythographical flair, Anzaldúa also talks about dreaming of the book for just two years in the book’s preface.

movement that had grown tired of battling with and deconstructing white liberal feminism. This led Moraga to have a revisionist view of the original text and its conception; after enduring a struggle for women of colour to have a voice in the broader feminist movement, her cynicism about an interracial women's movement being possible or successful is evident:

I think that were *Bridge* to have been conceived of in 1983, as opposed to 1979, it would speak much more directly now to the relations between women and men of color, both gay and heterosexual. In 1979, in response to a number of earlier writings by women of color which in the name of feminism focused almost exclusively on the relations between sexes, *Bridge* intended to make a clean break from that phenomenon. Instead, we created a book which concentrated on relations between women. (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, no pagination)

Here we find reference to the editors' original choice of a focus on women of colour and their "relations" and how the project might have differed in concept if it had been conceived at the time of the second edition due to what could be seen to be more regressive shifts in the feminist movement. There is a deliberate transference from an emphasis on the importance of relations between women and female experience to a potential inclusion of men of colour and unsaid exclusion of white women. This "clean break" from a feminism that focused "exclusively on relations between the sexes" and neglected other factors constitutive of identity denoted the frustration of women of colour within the liberal feminist movement.

Many Black feminist activists considered the liberal feminist movement to be abjectly racist and lacking in support or recognition for marginalised communities and argued against a separatist model of lesbian feminism.⁹⁸ Although not named as such until the 1990s, the inability to deconstruct ‘intersectional’ oppression within the WLM and wider society underpins Moraga’s revised stance. However, this kind of hypothesising in the additional foreword was also a controversial political message as many Black and minoritised lesbians, and working-class women continued to fight for women-only spaces. Indeed, the success of the feminist literary scene and publishing houses at this time was arguably due to a separatist approach.⁹⁹

Although largely lesbian-authored, the foreword contributions – particularly from Moraga, who has the greatest overall literary stamp on the text, contributing four chapter openings plus six of her own essays/poems – reclaim a connective non-separatist platform.¹⁰⁰ The forewords emphasise transnational efforts to build solidarity stating that oppression is multifaceted, especially for people who have been colonised. This open position also creates a space to critique separatist feminism, calling on readers to reflect on wider oppressions that

⁹⁸ Kimberly Springer further elaborates on this in *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (2005), her socio-historical analysis of late-twentieth century Black feminist radical collectivist activism in the U.S. She details the struggles, racism, and exclusion many Black feminists experienced in the wider WLM.

⁹⁹ This viewpoint could be seen to have isolated Moraga from her peers, something which is alluded to in Jones-Torregrosa’s 2015 thesis on *Bridge*.

¹⁰⁰ Each chapter in *Bridge* has an explanatory introductory section written by the editors, which seeks to define the chapter ahead. As the format of the collection is experimental, these introductions serve to bring together the disparate works therein. It could be noted that the organisational rationale is not always secure, as some essays could interchangeably be slotted into other chapters.

overlap and to lay the foundations for an intersectional approach to movement building, albeit a contentious one.^{101 102}

Akin to the multiple forewords, para-texts, and visual inserts within the formatting of *Bridge* (these include hand-drawn chapter openings and creatively interwoven headings inspired by the essays), the text reflects a biomythographical take on its cross-genre content. It shares with other biomythographical texts recurrent techniques and concerns such as a focus on creating and enabling literary and political spaces; narratives of personal transformation; an experimental approach to language, including stream of consciousness and syntactical disruption; and intertextual referencing (both internal and external to the text). *Bridge* as a collection most notably contributes to and expands the pantheon of radical literary feminist texts to which I refer in this thesis. These are texts that in transformational ways bring

¹⁰¹ I say contentious due to the ‘reintroduction’ and inclusion of men of colour into a theoretical movement and text that both Moraga and Anzaldúa cite as being by and for women (this further explains Anzaldúa’s influence on Queer Theory and the further deconstruction of gender to come). The second edition forewords, especially from Moraga, display weariness with mainstream feminism and the lack of progression in the WLM to include or at least construct coalitions *with* women of colour. This leads us back to an ongoing debate that continues today about men’s contribution or placing in any feminist movement, while also highlighting, as I have pointed out before, transnational movement building.

¹⁰² Although the word ‘intersectional’ is not used once throughout *Bridge*, the anthology was undoubtedly influenced by considerations of how multiple oppressions (and/or privileges in some cases) affect experiences, understanding (in terms of subjectivity) and the power of individuals to be autonomous. *Bridge* continued to be highly influential in ongoing theoretical developments in feminism. Autonomy and its post-anarchist definition is also of relevance in the framing of this thesis.

Black/women of colour and working-class lesbian voices to the fore of the feminist movement.^{103 104}

The embodied aspect of this imperative is elaborated in Moraga's editorial note in the first edition of *Bridge* as she emphasises the materiality of the text. Here she juxtaposes the impact of oppression with the equally urgent need to work through the physical and emotional experiences of visceral pain she associates with intellectual subjugation.

The materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women's lives; the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched. (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xviii)

It is this exploration of 'real,' affective and experiential literary modalities and their political intent that I believe must inform any analysis of *Bridge*. A critical understanding of this work should be grounded in a materialism that takes account of the authors' experiences of race, class, gender, and sexuality in context. Indeed, the title of the book itself, *This Bridge Called My Back*, demonstrates how

¹⁰³ As sales of the book and its lasting influence demonstrate, there was and continues to be an audience for the marginalised majority, and this includes an audience beyond lesbian feminists alone. There are also white contemporary authors whose subject matter remains focused on working-class and lesbian experience, including Michelle Tea's *Black Wave* (2015) and *Against Memoir* (2018), whose popularity continue to evidence this fact.

¹⁰⁴ This was also true of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith.

the oppression of women and people of colour is not only multivalent but is often physically and intellectually determined. As Moraga states, the “knife” of betrayal remains close to the “the nausea we feel in our bellies”.

The Vision

In order to gain a broader understanding of *Bridge*, an analysis of its structure as well as its genre is crucial. The fusion of biography, historical narrative, and visual elements in *Bridge*, which includes drawings and symbols, creates a sense of plurality, a holistic vision that undermines the notion of a closed master text or narrative. Fredric Jameson alludes to this literary resistance as leading to the “disappearance of genres as such, along with their conventions and the distinct reading rules they project.” (Jameson, 1991, p.370).¹⁰⁵ ¹⁰⁶ As Moraga emphasises, *Bridge* “is about the physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision.” (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983 p.xix). In further examining those “most private aspects of ourselves”, *Bridge* supports Stephen Butterfield’s observation that (Black) autobiography unravels notions of the western ‘private’ self of biography. He goes on to elaborate that private space is often made public for a collective cultural cause or a willed political consensus where “the self belongs to

¹⁰⁵ As mentioned, the text contains a series of black ink and wash drawings that open each chapter to evoke a different sensory understanding of each chapter’s content.

¹⁰⁶ I would also agree with Fredric Jameson’s assertion that genre is political, as outlined in his theoretical texts *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and *The Political Unconscious* (2002).

the people, and the people find a voice in the self.” (Butterfield, 1974, p.3).¹⁰⁷ As *Bridge* demonstrates, biomythography as a genre often obscures the purely biographical and *representative* in favour of subjective self-expression to structure new literary modes.

Bridge is divided into six parts (that vary in length), which structure a textual journey focalising on radicalism, self-awakening and collective solidarity. The collection’s opening section, “Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of our Radicalism” seems to be less well defined than the following chapters, and contains just eleven pages of essays and poetry on a variety of topics. Nellie Wong’s poem “When I Was Growing Up” best reflects Moraga’s title for this section:

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when I was growing up, I felt
dirty. I thought that god
made white people clean
and no matter how much I bathed,
I could not change, I could not shed
My skin in the gray water
(Wong in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.8)

¹⁰⁷ This quote is taken from *The Field of Cultural Production* by Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Trans. R. Nice. This integrates with Pierre Bourdieu’s idea that cultural production “is contained within the field of power”, particularly “the literary and artistic field” of production which is associated with the “dominant class” (Bourdieu, 1993, p.37). On p. 38, Bourdieu positions the literary and “artistic field” as a square within a “field of power” which is also a rectangle held within the final rectangle of class relations. (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.37-38). This use of the figurative to symbolically illustrate his point echoes the frequent deployment of drawings, symbols, and textual configurations in many biomythographical texts.

¹⁰⁸ Moraga and Anzaldúa divided the editorial duties of the book with Moraga overseeing the first four chapters and Anzaldúa the last two. Each chapter has an introduction by the principal editor of that chapter, which encompasses its vision and purpose.

Written as an informal but emotionally laden slice of memoir, this poem reiterates recurrent biomythographical themes and encapsulates some of the experiences of marginalised women and girls. One strand is childhood shame and the subject's recognition of the inequality and surrounding hegemonies that impose this shame. Another strand is a questioning of the speaker's spirituality or surrounding spiritual norms. A third strand is the speaker's poetic trajectory of transformation or change through a simultaneously contemporary and dystopian vision of racial and gender disparity.

Part two, "Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh", moves *Bridge* more formally towards examining the reasons why women of colour in the U.S. often have no choice but to become politically active. This chapter raises many issues around the call to, or necessity of engaging with, struggle. It invokes the issues of activating an awareness of political and social inequality and participating in theoretical and real-world movements for change. For Moraga – who again acts as editor of the essays in the chapter – this theory resonates with Toni Cade Bambara's idea of cultural work or creativity as social theory and activism. It arises from lived experience and is considered a survival tactic born of "necessity":

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete where we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politics born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.23)

As Moraga clearly outlines, contradiction is an inherent part of the writers' work in the collection, alongside the representation of their experiences as lesbians and women of colour. The volume presents numerous viewpoints, which often raise uncomfortable questions within the collection itself but also form an integral part of biomythography as a pluralistic genre. Much biomythographical work could be seen to be about the processing of, and improvisation around, such contradictions.

The stark differences between rural and urban narratives in this chapter are a poignant reminder of the differences between first-generation migrants, the “women of color” that Moraga and Anzaldúa refer to, and second- or third-generation African American women in their visions of home. For Anzaldúa, this entails the experiences of growing up in rural and financial hardship as part of a struggling farming community and in proximity to a violent ethno-nationalism that was often mirrored by the behaviours of the patriarchs in her family. This contrasts greatly with Audre Lorde's idealistic portrayal of Caribbean fishing communities in *Zami*, where matriarch-led independent communities co-exist in harmony with their surroundings and island men. This plentiful utopian memory is a common feature in Black feminist literature and memoir.¹⁰⁹ Typically, such a vision is then spurned to support a movement toward justice with a focus on a promised land or homeland that is safe, welcoming, and abundant.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Examples of this can be seen in the (popular) feminist fiction of Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison, who often experimented with ideas about home and belonging, race and gender, in novels such as *The Color Purple* (1982), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Paradise* (1997).

¹¹⁰ This is a concept with African-centric and nationalist inferences to a desire to the return to a motherland or originary homeland.

The clash between lived experience and the projected utopian narrative remains an unreconciled tension within biomythography. As a point of struggle within the genre itself, a mythical shared *reality* projecting hope for the future exerts a strong pull in a different direction from a retrospective, even introspective, memoir that adheres to biographical structures in an acutely individualistic society. The chasm between reality and hope is often irreconcilable in *Bridge*. The deeply embedded cultural and social experiences of women from diverse backgrounds can somewhat clash when attempting to work collectively across lines of intercultural difference.

Cherríe Moraga's essay "La Guera" (which is Mexican-Spanish slang for 'white girl') recounts these broader contradictions within an understanding and consideration of intersectionality, race and privilege. She portrays a non-romanticised vision of feminist solidarity as a means of self-protection:

What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. If my sister's being beaten because she's Black, it's pretty much the same principle. (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.29).

Here, in accordance with the chapter's title, Moraga highlights difference (a recognition that the darker a woman's skin or more visible her sexuality, the more vulnerable she becomes to racism and homophobia) and sameness. She dismantles a purely theoretical position, stating that lived experience and understanding from outside of an academic framework are a necessary resource for revolution and art. Moraga goes on to express the reason why these differences born of

hierarchies prove to be so difficult to overcome within movement and collective action, “We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of the oppressor into our hearts and turned them against ourselves and one another” (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.32).¹¹¹ This is Moraga’s admonishment and caution against what Lorde terms the *hierarchy of oppression* and what has become a common internal issue of horizontal oppression in the WLM.¹¹²

Chapters Three and Four, “And When You Leave Take Your Pictures with You: Racism in the Women’s Movement” and “Between the Lines: On Culture, Class and Homophobia”, elaborate on themes of class, race, and sexuality connecting and rooting *Bridge* (and other featured biomythographical work) to a distinct socio-historical framework that I will return to throughout my thesis. What I wish to highlight here is the way in which *Bridge* reveals the challenges of dealing with racism and homophobia at an intercultural level or within the broader women’s and Black liberation movement. As Moraga identifies:

In this country lesbianism is poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.29)

¹¹¹ Moraga states this in the revised second edition of *Bridge* (1983).

¹¹² Horizontal oppression is a term often used to describe oppression within coalition or solidarity movements, where codes of privilege and domination are disguised but reinforced in the name of a collective cause or political alliances.

Bridge exemplifies an issue that occurs when trying to break down identity binaries that affect Black and minoritised lesbian women; the use of linguistic symbols of resistance and opposition can sometimes reinforce them. This issue presents multiple linguistic challenges when trying to find ways to achieve change that does not solely rely on utopian visions. In addition, as useful and important as it is, lived experience needs to be contextualised and fully understood in its relational framework and setting if it is to be an effective political tool. Both Chapters Three and Four of *Bridge* demonstrate how easy it is to revert to an oppositional position of *us* versus *them* ('Black versus white' and 'dykes versus straights') and the pain this brings to the women who express these views. These chapters also address the complexities of avoiding this eventuality within the limitations of language. Doris Davenport's astute self-awareness of this phenomenon takes the form of a playful yet cutting satirical essay in "The Pathology of Racism", in which she deals with racism from white women in the feminist movement head on:

We know, for example, that we have at least three distinct areas of aversion to white wimmin, which affect how we perceive and deal with them: aesthetic, cultural, and social/political. Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. (Davenport in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.87)

Here Davenport both satirises and inverts cultural and racial stereotypes associated with women of colour, or the ascribed racialisation of Black women. She scrutinises 'white wimmin' by applying the aesthetic frameworks and systems of desire that are all too often universalised and internalised when the target for derision is women of colour.

Chapters Three and Four of *Bridge* also anatomise the pitfalls in trying to find discrete ‘political solutions’ to everyday aggressions directed toward women of colour that may also be the result of overarching structural inequalities. In “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance”, Cheryl Clarke offers a lucid analysis of homophobia and oppression within the WLM (particularly the Radical Feminist faction) and wider society.¹¹³ She presents a withering analysis of the political dimensions of heteronormativity and what many viewed or hoped to be the saving grace of separatist lesbian feminism:¹¹⁴

I am trying to point out that lesbian-feminism has the potential of reversing and transforming a major component in the system of women’s oppression, viz. predatory heterosexuality. (Clarke in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.134).

Cheryl Clarke’s explicit denouncement of heteronormativity is couched in a lesbian feminist understanding of the all-encompassing regulations of heterosexuality and, in reverse, the taboo of same-sex relationships. While the performance and expression of sexuality is seen as an intimate act, it is regulated and influenced by power structures that are often naturalised – such as state, religion, capitalism, national borders, and the like (I return to this matter in

¹¹³ This is featured in Chapter Four of *Bridge* but also became a flagship essay for the separatist Black lesbian movement, I return to the work of Cheryl Clarke as a reference point for my chosen texts, particularly the work of Pat Parker, throughout my thesis.

¹¹⁴ This in itself jars with the editors’ vision – particularly Moraga’s – of a sense of solidarity among working-class people of colour, no matter their gender or sexuality. This schism arose out of Moraga and other women of colour’s feeling of being failed by the often-separatist lesbian feminist movement.

my chapter on Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*).

As I will go on to discuss, lesbian-feminism as a positionality, often struggled to offer the myriad of solutions needed to address the trauma of violence and oppression experienced by women of colour and self-identified Black, butch, femme and/or working-class lesbians. Chapters Three and Four of *Bridge* remind us that racism and homophobia *had* to remain a central concern on the Black and minoritised lesbian feminist agenda in order for women of colour, lesbian and working-class women to have a voice within the lesbian feminist movement and WLM. In *Bridge*, these bedrock concerns (still recurrent anxieties in theory and activism today) occupy not only the theoretical premise of the collection but can be found in virtually every piece of writing in the collection, especially in the entries belonging to Chapters Three and Four. Likewise, "Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer" and "El Mundo Zurdo (the left-handed world): The Vision" – both edited by Anzaldúa (and concluding the collection) – crucially, elevate *Bridge* to a theoretical touchstone that arguably informed the genesis of Queer Theory and early twenty first century feminist literature. I would suggest that the experimental formatting of chapters, collective approach to editing and the inclusion of diverse styles of writing in *Bridge* have also contributed to its ongoing influence.

Chapters Five and Six of *Bridge* outline the benefits of having a strong cultural and social identity. They present a theme not often discussed in feminist literature, that of the heartache of being excluded from the culture (and family) that defines one. While the 'Western'/European outsider narrative deals with exclusion from

family and community in an individualistic way presenting the exiled loner as survivor and hero – it rarely touches on experiences of living in extended families in Black communities and communities of colour and how these circumstances can both empower and repress the individual. These fundamental differences present literary divisions between the contributors to *Bridge* and a feminist movement that often failed to address and understand intersectional and interculturally informed ways of conceiving the subject. Anzaldúa addresses this matter in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” by quoting Moraga’s poetry:

No, I lack language.

The language to clarify

My resistance to the literate.

Words are a war to me.

They threaten my family.

(Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.166)

Moraga’s poem reiterates the subjective power of words and the failure of literature to fully represent the lived material realities of women of colour and lesbian women. Language can be both powerful and violent, the lack of an external cultural literacy “threaten” the speaker’s family and cause her to re-evaluate her adoption of an external linguistic imperialism and the need to explain or “clarify” her way of life or identity.

Myths and Stereotypes

The definition of U.S. women of colour as ‘Third World’ women throughout *Bridge*, now contested term very much of its historical

time, signals a socio-political understanding that the continuing legacy of colonialism and imperialism impacts on women of colour and their bodies at psychic and physical levels. In discussing gender and coloniality in autobiographical discourse, Linda Anderson concludes that, “The autobiographical subjects are cast adrift from patriarchal origins and must endlessly reinvent themselves, their location and community along with new forms of autobiography.” (Anderson, 2011, p.112). It should be recognised that the very act of identifying difference often supports the voicing of struggle, and this is repeatedly demonstrated in *Bridge*. Within a varied collection of stories from a wide range of women of colour with self-defined cultural differences, the writers are still connected to each other through their collective narratives which often have overlapping themes. At times their entries impact on each other and the shared framing in the volume affects how they are both written and received. In her essay “But I Know You American Woman”, Judit Moschkovich writes that being “an immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes only be understood when experienced.” (Moschkovich in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.83) and that even an attempt at assimilation does not remove the constant threat of being seen as the homogenous, un-American *other*.

As a bilingual/bicultural woman whose native culture is not American, I live in an American system, abide by American rules of conduct, speak English when around English speakers, etc., only to be confronted with utter ignorance or concocted myths and stereotypes about my own culture.

(Moschkovich in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.81)

Here Moschkovich reminds us that there were deeply rooted theoretical and political reasons for the adoption of the term ‘women of color’ rather than ‘Black’ in *Bridge*. The use of this term was a deliberate statement denoting the collective solidarity amongst women from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds whilst acknowledging the distinctive experiences of these often-excluded literary voices.

From a simplistic historical viewpoint, by the late 1970s the feminist movement had seemingly split into two camps: Black and white. Black feminist thought came to be seen to represent African Americans, often second- or third-generation children of migrants or descendants of enslaved people, exposed to particular forms of subjugation and oppression within systems of slavery and domination situated on U.S. soil. Aspects of the racism experienced by African American women were resonant for other women of colour but there were also differences. As Judit Moschkovich has described, the interconnected complications of being a migrant whose culture and language is outside of any U.S. understanding of ways of being mean that first-generation migrant women can experience other forms of discrimination and subjugation, and these remain unrecognised in an over-simplistic analysis of racism. In *Bridge*, as the editors explain, “Each woman considers herself a feminist, but draws her feminism from the *culture* in which she grew. Most of the women appearing in this book are first-generation writers.” (Moraga and Anzaldúa in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983 p.xxiv, emphasis mine) The commonality between many of the writings in *Bridge* is the authors’ experience of “culture” as that which connects them to a heritage of perceived difference, often linked to childhood experiences and memories.

A nuanced understanding of difference and the relativism of cultural alignment continues to be progressed throughout *Bridge* – the inclusion of women from such different social backgrounds and cultural experiences was a radical act which also created a platform from which to contest the label ‘Third World Women’. This is a contentious point that *Bridge* explores, as many of the writers had never lived in countries labelled *developing* or *third world* (terms I prefer not to employ but use in their historical context), yet were often seen and classed as belonging to an homogenous group of the racialised ‘other’. Again, this silenced women’s diverse experiences and caused political friction between different strands of the WLM and the Black feminist movement.

This suggests that narratives that resist dominant hegemonies cannot be fully understood, or their validity recognised when they are interpreted through frameworks that uphold division and oppression. It is difficult for Black, minoritised and working-class lesbian texts to be re-anchored outside of the socio-historical moorings from which they assert a point of view different from that of the dominant so-called master texts of literature and history. As Cheryl Clarke reminds the reader, the positioning of Black, lesbian, working-class women led to forms of resistance not necessarily born of choice but of survival: “For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance.” (Clarke in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.128).

Resistance in itself can be regarded as a form of creative endeavour, generating new artistic platforms or literary spaces of reinvention. Literatures of resistance dispel notions of both a unitary history and a fragmented set of histories within a post-modern prism,

instead fusing and remaking cohesive narratives. Resistance itself does not have to be seen through one social, political or cultural ‘prism’, it can be seen to be an act both devoid of allegiance and born of survival. Although this may appear to be a contradictory statement, Moraga’s poem featured in *Bridge*, “The Welder”, makes the point well:

I am a welder.

Not an alchemist.

I am interested in the blend

Of common elements

To make a common thing.

(Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.219)

Here, Moraga envisages cultural work as a merging or “blend” of everyday raw materials, “common elements” that are handled with practical skills as well as a vision, to make something transformative that may also be unremarkably useful and functional. Just as *Bridge* brings together disparate voices (speaking in tongues) to articulate a collective vision and “To make a Common thing.”, so “The Welder” reminds us that in Frederic Jameson’s words, a literary “symbolic act therefore begins by generating and producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back from it, taking its measure with a view toward its own project of transformation.” (Jameson, 2002, p.67).

Bridge formed part of a pantheon of late-twentieth century literature about identity that grew into distinct fields of cultural production, including biomythography. The authors featured in the collection challenged dominant narratives that deleted the voices, experiences, and struggles of marginalised women attempting to resist

cultural and social erasure collectively. That is, *Bridge* – in its creation and interpretation – was not only intertextually dialogic but was also a way to re-envision “hegemonic forms” (Jameson, 2002, p.72) in literature. At this juncture, a range of Black feminist positionalities and approaches were also being developed from a collectivist standpoint.¹¹⁵ In the early 1980s the Combahee River Collective, whose essay “A Black Feminist Statement” is included in *Bridge*, declared such an intent in their Black Feminist manifesto, *Political Organising in the Seventies and Eighties*: “We believe the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else’s oppression.” (Combahee River Collective, 1986, p.12) Additionally, *Bridge* influenced and was in turn influenced by literature written in a biomythographical tradition that fused radical elements of identity politics with literary futurity.

Produced eleven years after *Bridge*, *Persistent Desire* was also diverse in its collation of authors and perspectives and featured a strong analysis of class. While Moraga mourned the dissolution of a wider scoping collectivist politics in later editions of *Bridge*, Joan Nestle chose to edit a collection of works that explored and played with individual identities and engaged in broader political debates about

¹¹⁵ Here, we can again consider the work of Kimberly Springer and her 2005 text *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980*, that charts the social movement surrounding the Combahee River Collective alongside other Black feminist organisations and organising (including the Third World Women’s Alliance that Pat Parker was associated with) that emerged in the 1960s and had a short lived but intensive impact, the arc of which still politically reaches into contemporary feminist movement building and resistance now. “Similar to the gaps in civil rights movement historiography, women’s movement histories lack in-depth descriptions and analyses of black feminist organizations that contributed to the expansion of the movement’s goals and objectives.” (Springer, 2005, p.3).

lesbian sexuality. This did not, as Moraga had feared, close down communities and affinities but rather expanded them.¹¹⁶ *Persistent Desire* brought to the fore a representation of sexuality and sexual practice that would prove to be divisive yet influential in the lesbian/feminist movement of the 1990s, informing Queer Theory and partially documenting the Lesbian Sex Wars that arguably imploded a movement. In Part Two of this chapter I shall examine how, within these dialogical structures and at the interstices between collective and individual identities, acts of radical liberation were enacted *through* the biomythographical text. I will illustrate this with particular reference to *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader* (1992) – an anthology edited by another key biomythographical author Joan Nestle.

PART 2: A Dialectic of Oppression and Resistance

After twenty years of lesbian-feminism, we can now see what the trade-offs were and have a better insight into the dialectic of oppression and resistance.

(Nestle in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.17)

In making a case for biomythography in the last decades of the late-twentieth century, how can we address the theoretical challenges of a movement that bridges two seemingly oppositional stages of lesbian-feminist cultural production and theory? At the close of a

¹¹⁶ Rosalyn Baxandall's review of the transitions between waves of feminisms over the last century points to a set of historical complexities that place the decade between the *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* anthologies as being that of significant change for the WLM: Baxandall, R. (2001). Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists. *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), pp.225–245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178460>.

century of accelerated social, political, and technological change, how can we capture the voices of a literary movement while today, arguably, a Post-structuralist, post-theory, and post-gender lens predominates?

As suggested, I consider biomythography to be a literary tradition that captures a pivotal moment in lesbian women's literature and movements. The biomythographical writing and literature of this era reflected a social re-ordering and cyclical completion of many rights-based liberation movements' struggles in the late-twentieth century. This historically transitional time exacerbated tensions within the biomythographical body of work I refer to but also supported the inter-textual consolidation of biomythography and its collective restructuring of literary modes to create a space for the new and (re)imagined.

I engage Radical Feminist discourse throughout this thesis, but there are other branches of theory in which biomythography also played a key (unacknowledged) role – particularly Queer Theory as mentioned, which biomythography or at least the work of certain writers, leaned toward as it continued to gain theoretical ground. It should also be acknowledged that the era of the biomythographical movement also spanned a monumental upheaval in academic, scholarly and literary circles – a time when Post-structuralist modalities and latterly Queer Theory was becoming firmly institutionally rooted. While much academic thinking was becoming anchored in the dynamics of language and discourse, the outside world was still being re-shaped by liberation movements that were orientated toward material social change. Historically, biomythography fell between the old guard of the modernist literary canon and the coming

horizons of what would become a 'post-truth' world, within the epoch of a Post-modernist realism that often rejected its materialist claims.

Barbara Christian's examination of the role of Black feminism in literary criticism and theory gives us the tools to challenge the potential dilemma of biomythography's theoretical malaise. Christian believed that Black feminism was able to take on the "old literary elite, the neutral humanists." (Christian in Bell and Klein, eds., 1996, p.311) and ask complex questions about the theoretical underpinnings and expectations associated with literary theory such as, "for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?" (Christian in Bell and Klein, eds., 1996, p.319). Christian analysed the ways that Black/lesbian work can be co-opted by multiple intellectual worlds, concluding that the result of this is a form of displacement that denies this work a place of belonging in any of those worlds. She calls this out as being constructive separation or othering – a form of intersectional oppression.

In her era defining essay "The Race for Theory", Christian goes on to connect the advance of certain strands of elitist theory and literature with "ideologies of dominance" and the eradication of sensuality (and spirituality) from these modalities:

Many of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism since one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanise people by stereotyping them, by denying them their variousness and complexity. Inevitably, monolithism becomes a metasystem in which there is a controlling ideal, especially in relation to pleasure.

(Christian in Bell and Klein, eds., 1996, p.317) ¹¹⁷

Christian excels in her intersectional analysis and contextualisation of critical theory (or the literary theory of critique in relation to marginalised texts and communities). The usefulness of her approach is heightened by her precision around and naming of the “ideologies of dominance” within which biomythography developed and existed. In “The Race for Theory” Christian identifies a theoretical and literary “metasystem” that denies those outside of it their “variousness and complexity” and in doing so controls their “pleasure”. When there is a failure for existing social and political structures to accommodate, make room for or to accept difference, dehumanisation sets in.

In Volume 23 of *Off Our Backs*, a Radical Feminist bi-monthly journal published between 1970 and 2008, Joan Nestle is interviewed about *The Persistent Desire*.¹¹⁸ Here Nestle discusses one of the most significant aspects of the collection:

I’m not really interested in proving that butch women or fem women are feminists. I’m no longer interested in taking up the argument that butch-fem relationships replicate heterosexuality. And I’m no longer interested in arguing

¹¹⁷ Interestingly, this 1996 version of Christian’s essay “The Race for Theory”, further developed from the original 1987 essay for the journal *Cultural Critique*, is markedly different. The quote referenced above is not featured in the original version and gives an insight into the advancement of her theoretical work, as the article benefits from and is bolstered by the political changes that lesbian literature had undergone in the previous decade.

¹¹⁸ *Off Our Backs* ironically became part of the Lesbian Sex Wars of which Nestle was a protagonist, as it was seen to represent the worst in lesbian feminist essentialist sexual politics. Nestle would also go on to write for *On Our Backs*, the content and title of which was intended to deride and be in antithesis to *Off Our Backs*.

whether we have the right to love this way or to identify in this way. (Nestle in Douglas, 1993, p.2)¹¹⁹

In this 1992 interview, Nestle reminds us that lesbian desire and femme-butch desire is not about the replication of power or an equivalency with heterosexuality, but another set of social and intimate experiences. This appears to be an apolitical argument, but it speaks to the heart of what would become the Lesbian Sex Wars, and a re-evaluation of the role that sexuality, gender, and desire would play in political movements. Nestle in her anthology creates a politics of desire that challenges yet safeguards the writers from external legislative, religious and social factors that could erase their collective power and validity. Nestle was ring-fencing a space for working-class biomythography and in doing so enabled new literature and future political change to be developed and to evolve. Within these boundaries, a lesbian biomythographical archive could begin to take shape.

Theoretically *Persistent Desire* can be situated between the radical or lesbian-oriented so called cultural feminisms of the 1980s and the further emergence of Queer Theory in the 1990s, as it encompasses both the material and affective experiences of butch and femme women whose existence does not comfortably sit within either.¹²⁰ Julie Phillips comments in her playful review of *Persistent Desire*, that the collection has “strong loyalties” and “roots” in lesbian

¹¹⁹ In this interview Nestle goes on to discuss how the spelling of *femme* in its shortened version – fem – was used by working-class butch and femme communities from the 1950s onwards.

¹²⁰ Phillips, J. (1992). Style or Substance? [Review of *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, by J. Nestle]. *The Women's Review of Books*, 10 (3), 11–12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4021479>.

feminism while casting an “eye” toward Queer Theory “with its ventures into a truly alternative, truly hot sexual politics.” (Phillips, 1992, p.11).

Returning to the work of Barbara Christian, Phillips’ tongue in cheek analysis potentially further grounds biomythography in the theoretical and linguistic framework in which Christian seeks to locate lesbian literature and “pleasure”; a framework in which there is an “affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense.” (Christian in Bell and Klein, eds., 1996, p.319). By this, Christian is connecting the language of desire and sensuality with lesbian literature, or more specifically Black lesbian literature. Her identities as a Black lesbian and critic/theorist are intertwined with the work of other Black lesbian writers who often exist outside the prevalent narratives of literary invention. Christian emphasises that her identities cannot be divorced from her writing and work asserting that “how I write is done in order to save my life.” (Christian in Bell and Klein, eds., 1996, p.319). This need to include sensuality and pleasure within the language and subject matter of narrative making and literature, describes an important aspect of *Persistent Desire* and as I shall go onto explain, demarcates it as a biomythographical text that is interlaced with subversive takes on butch-femme ‘lesbian erotica’ and desire. ¹²¹

Sites of Tension and Transformation

¹²¹ As Lillian Faderman has commented: “At the height of radical lesbian-feminism, what was seen as an imitation of heterosexuality was officially frowned upon by the most vocal elements of the subculture.” (Faderman, 1992, p.580).

The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader is a collection of work by 71 lesbians who have defined themselves and/or lived as femme/butch women, their sexuality being the impetus of this collection. Featuring a multitude of styles from well-known lesbian novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) to poetry by Jewelle L. Gomez, intimate diary entries to the histories of *passing* women – the collection is incredibly diverse and eclectic, yet still focused on its thematic aims.¹²² It contains testimonies, poetry, erotica, interviews, excerpts from published and unpublished narrative work as well as versions of texts or essays by writers I feature in my thesis – including Leslie Feinberg, Frankie Hucklenbroich, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and Joan Nestle herself.

Persistent Desire is divided into two parts named “The Persistent...” and “Desire”. Part One gives an historical overview, an alternative lesbian history of the shaping and formation of working-class and butch-femme relationships and sexuality, particularly in the 1950s. “Desire” focuses on lesbian sexuality, offering a late-twentieth century template for women’s radical sexuality. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on three pieces of writing included in the collection that best demonstrate the intersection of class, the material reclamation of women’s bodily autonomy, and the new and emerging conceptualisations around the language of women’s sexuality. These entries also give an insight into the changing landscape of lesbian identity, activism and writing within my chosen biomythographical

¹²² Both Faderman and Genter offer us a broader social context here: “Working-class women, in particular, who had identified as butches or femmes and then became genuinely involved in feminism, were often alienated by feminism’s attitude toward roles.” (Faderman, 1992, p. 584). “Indeed lesbian visibility at mid-century was almost entirely dependent on gender transgressions in the form of “mannishness” demarcating butches as the public face of lesbianism” (Genter, 2016, p.604).

period. Taken from “The Persistent...” I discuss “What We’re Rollin’ around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism: A Conversation toward Ending Them” by Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, and “Re-collecting History, Renaming Lives: Femme Stigma and the Feminist Seventies and Eighties” by Lyndall MacCowan. From the “Desire” section I consider “An Academic Affair: The Politics of Butch-Femme Pleasures” by Joan Parkin and Amanda Prosser.

In their co-authored introduction to a documented interview, Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga delve into what they feel to be the crux of the issues faced by lesbian feminism. Taken from a series of conversations between Hollibaugh and Moraga conducted over “many months”, the introduction gives us a clear insight into some of the latent tensions that were emerging in working-class, outsider, minoritised and butch-femme communities that contradicted and delineated separatist lesbian feminisms. They state their frustration that the very thing that has defined their *othered identity* and sexuality is not given the attention or validation needed: “This most privatized aspect of ourselves, our sex lives, has dead-ended into silence within the feminist movement.” (Hollibaugh and Moraga in Nestle, eds., 1992, p.243) As they openly state at the outset of their interview:

In terms of sexual issues, it seems feminism has fallen short of its original intent. The whole notion of “the personal is political” which surfaced in the early part of the movement (and which many of us have used to an extreme) is suddenly and ironically dismissed when we begin to discuss sexuality.
(Hollibaugh and Moraga in Nestle, eds., 1992, p.243)

The exclusion from lesbian feminism that they feel, as part of a femme-butch community, is mitigated in part by their recognition that there is much political work to be done to enable lesbian liberation in a society and culture where “Heterosexuality is both an actual sexual interaction *and* a system.” (Hollibaugh and Moraga in Nestle, eds., 1992, p.243). There is an inclusion of erotica and explicit poetry and narratives in the *Desire* section of the anthology featuring writers such as Patrick Califia who wrote lesbian and queer pornography, and S/M lesbians and dykes whose sexual identities fell very much outside of the realm of the Radical Feminist lesbian politics of that time.¹²³

Both sections of *Persistent Desire* evidence, archive and share a set of invisible lesbian publics through a mostly working-class lens. This does present a strain in the text at times, with some essays moving in a theoretical direction that seems to be at odds with the rhythm of reflective memoirs and exploratory creative work elsewhere. *Persistent Desire* revealed schisms that would later become a tug of war between more radical Second Wave feminisms and an associated New Left ambition for universal lesbian and gay rights; butch-femme women’s sexuality and relationships were not fully represented politically in either of these movements. This led many butch-femme women to become disillusioned with the mainstreaming of lesbian identity and what they considered to be a less contradictory, less challenging, and more socially accepted version of lesbianism. Hollibaugh and Moraga sum this up as: “The failure of feminism to answer all the questions regarding women, in particular women’s

¹²³ See Chapter 5 and my discussion of Dorothy Allison’s work which includes a reflection on her and other lesbian’s role in SAMOIS (the first lesbian feminist S/M organisation set up in the 1970’s) and their depiction of both S/M (sado-masochism) and lesbian sexualities.

sexuality, is the same failure the homosexual movement suffers from around gender.” (Hollibaugh and Moraga in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.244). Hollibaugh goes on to further state what she believes to be the real reason and causality for this when she states in her interview, “*I think the reason butch-femme stuff got hidden within lesbian feminism is because people are profoundly afraid of questions of power in bed.*” (Hollibaugh and Moraga in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.246).

Biomythography addressed familiar Radical Feminist and separatist lesbian themes such as violence against women and girls, sexuality, and women’s rights. At the same time, in representing their authentic selves, many biomythographical authors had no choice but to subvert familiar lesbian themes in order to create new literary spaces for their work. Radical Feminism and lesbianism had long grappled with the issue of violence against women and girls. As a result of their campaigning, lobbying, and awareness-raising, sweeping social and political changes were set in motion to advance the rights, safety and protection of women and girls. Politically, culturally, and socially women and girls in the U.S. and Europe continue to benefit from this groundwork.¹²⁴ However, lesbian, and gay advocates felt that, due to this work, Radical Feminism had stereotyped and essentialised women as *victims*, creating a conceptual purity around women’s sexuality. As a result, they had aligned sexuality with male power and masculinities, which they felt derided butch – and masculinised – lesbian identities.

¹²⁴ The violence against women and girls (VAWG) movement is still very much rooted in the politics and legacy of Radical Feminism, particularly the work of late twentieth century U.S. feminists. For example, the basic model on which all UK domestic and sexual abuse assessments are made is the Duluth Power Wheel created by Ellen Pence in the U.S. in the 1980s and adopted internationally. Although contested in parts, it recognises that VAWG is a result of social, cultural, and patriarchal ideologies as well as interpersonal forms of abuse.

By the 1990s, gender had become a site of feminist-oriented insecurities and divisions. The movement often presented a normative face of lesbianism – one of assimilation that avoided associations with so called sexual deviance.¹²⁵ By the 1990s, biomythographical texts were featuring sexuality, desire and the erotic as recurrent themes that resonated with a growing faction of lesbians, assuming this subject matter to hold an essential place in lesbian creativity and expression. Biomythography centred lesbian and female sexuality as being an important political, cultural, and social issue, which shaped the genre’s style, its scope, and its subject matter. This position (in varying degrees) also continues to greatly influence lesbian literature in the post-biomythographical era and Third and Fourth Wave feminisms.

In Lyndall MacCowan’s “Re-collecting History, Renaming Lives: Femme Stigma and the Feminist Seventies and Eighties”, the last essay in “The Persistent...” section of *Persistent Desire*, MacCowan further develops Hollibaugh and Moraga’s overview of the erasure of lesbian desire and sexuality. MacCowan, a self-described working-class femme, intertextually references Hollibaugh and Moraga’s work and furthers their analytical views. She pushes the boundaries of lesbian thinking about the subcultural lives of working-class femme-butcht women, bringing this into narrative reflections of her own work and her experiences as a women’s studies tutor. She does this by creatively

¹²⁵ Radical Feminists were arguably moving toward legislative, religious, and societal assimilation, which would come to fruition twenty years later with the expansion of various equality legislation across Europe and the U.S. to include LGBT people. Civil partnership and marriage are a good example of the influence of an assimilative legislative shift that the likes of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin pushed for. This assimilative approach also speaks to the feminist contradiction of some pro-censorship positions that are seen to undermine women’s broader human rights.

intersplicing epistolary textual excerpts from letters to Joan Nestle, as her friend and mentor, into her essay, before switching her dialogue back tonally and more formally to Nestle as editor of the anthology. MacCowan's essay, in which she weaves back and forth contemplating the lack of understanding around femme-butch culture, is one of the longest chapters in the anthology. Her letters to Joan mourn that the often negative "lesbian-feminist attitude toward butch-femme is firmly entrenched." (MacCowan in Nestle, ed., 1992, p301).

Yet the assumptions lesbian-feminism made about butch-femme twenty years ago, based on the equation of women's oppression, sex roles, gender, and sexual orientation, have come to hold an unquestioned, unanalyzed hegemony. (MacCowan in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.303)

MacCowan highlights concerns that she feels are not being raised by Radical Feminist and separatist lesbian theory. In her essay, she considers herself to be representing a community made-invisible, an unrecognised collective lesbian subculture. In this discussion MacCowan takes on the role of the knowing insider and social improviser. There is a lack of constraint around the use of an innovative essay style, or the format of the narrative being told – which has a conscious performativity to it. She is writing about her personal experiences, through adapted comedic vignettes that elicit an unstable set of temporalities while telling a chronological tale. Her narratives within the essay are additionally disrupted by another set of personal insights referencing a lesbian feminism that she believes has not been representative of working-class lesbian femmes. The (potentially non-lesbian) reader is given an insight into a world that they are outside of – as observer and participant.

Beneath MacCowan's performative prose is a clear political intent to relay that lesbianism is not just a political position or lifestyle it is also a sexual identity and desire: "To be a lesbian means to be sexual, even though women aren't supposed to be sexual, and to experience that sexualness with other women." (MacCowan in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.312). It was this notion of "sexualness" and the need to make public this consideration that became a pivotal turning point in 1990s lesbianism. As a collective and directive anthology, *Persistent Desire* almost predicts a future tipping point for lesbians, dykes, and queer women. A theoretical line to be crossed by lesbian feminism and queer identities once the more experimental and developmental period of lesbian biomythography had drawn to a close before lesbian subcultures and "sexualness" had been co-opted into more mainstream narratives.

The final essay from *Persistent Desire* that I want to discuss is "An Academic Affair: The Politics of Butch-Femme Pleasures" by Joan Parkin and Amanda Prosser. Writing collaboratively as lesbian lovers, they anticipate the future of femme-butch and lesbian identities, particularly female masculinities:

Without doubt, the discourse of sexuality has become a legitimate, and indeed hip, object of study, and this is precisely where the problems lie... For we as a butch-femme couple whose bodies clearly signify our desires, cannot help recognize, the current topicality of sexuality in the academy as the institutionalization of sexuality, a further example of what Foucault has called "the deployment of sexuality" ... The disembodiment of desire entailed in this institutionalization of

sexuality makes speaking from our desire an arduous task.

(Parkin and Prosser in Nestle, ed., 1992, pp.442-443) ¹²⁶

Part recollection and memoir, part theory and performance, the essay revolves around the pair's experiences as a butch-femme working-class couple in the academy, and the very different experiences they have had individually as femme and butch women. The piece is both quasi-theoretical reflection and biographical rumination, differing greatly from the rest of the anthology in its language (academic and theoretical) and its bold scepticism toward former generations of lesbian feminists. The essay proclaims (quite prophetically) their want of a newer generation of lesbian feminists that can re-interpret gender roles within a butch-femme dynamic firmly entrenched in sexual advocacy. Likewise, they want the academy to open spaces up for a re-analysis of lesbian feminism through what Amanda Prosser in the *Persistent Desire* anthology's biography of featured writers refers to as opportunities to "lesbianize Foucault and Derrida, and the rest of the boys" (Parkin and Prosser in Nestle ed., 1992, p.498).

This quote hints at the friction between separatist Radical Feminist lesbian politics and academia's adoption of Post-structuralism and Queer Theory, which spearheaded so many of the subcultural queer publics we are more familiar with today. In bringing butch-femme to the academy they ask, "How are we, Amanda and Joan, seen by the academy as we strip off layer upon layer of ill-fitting discourse within this space in which desire is expected to be veiled?" (Parkin and

¹²⁶ The irony of this comment being included in an academic analysis of biomythography is not lost to the author of this thesis, neither is the irony of their use of Foucault to ground their point – as his work would become so embedded in Queer Theory and Post-structuralist academic work.

Prosser in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.444). Class lines are blurred here as both authors are involved in work and study within academic institutions while discussing their butch-femme identities and the performance of their sexualities outside of the academy. This essay departs from the other entries in *Persistent Desire*. Whereas the language of other writers in the anthology is accessible and direct, and the previous essays are more experimental in their style, this essay is theoretically encoded with the symbolism and motifs of academic Queer Theory. It therefore reads more like an academic paper, despite the biomythographical elements it features such as style switching, chronological interruptions, mythical memoirs based on lived and imagined experiences, disrupted textual form, and so on.

Tellingly, Parkin and Prosser go on to outline the schism they experience in these different worlds of lived experience and academic scholarship:

As feminists, we expect to feel at home when speaking of subjective desires in a domain that claims to take care of the personal. We do not expect discontinuity between our words and the language of feminism. Yet what we often encounter in feminist sites where we choose to think through our bodies, to speak as lovers, as butch-femme, is the silence of disapproval. (Parkin and Prosser in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.447)

Once again, an uneasy tension arises in their attempt to make visible butch-femme experience in an academically tinged or adjacent space. There is a contradiction in their attempts to bring elements of a private subculture into a public sphere and their want to merge or adapt it to

another set of cultural rules that are structurally oppositional.¹²⁷ In the attempted integration of their identity with the academy due to their personal discomfort with the “discontinuity between our words and the language of feminism” there is a risk that this has the potential to eradicate the diversity of lesbian subjectivity and personhood, and lead to a form of intellectual assimilation. Likewise, the struggle to further embed cultural rights through legislative and societal changes is a fraught one and often comes at a cost to that identity, removing its implicit siting as a form of subcultural resistance.

Biomythography enabled marginalised lesbian voices to have a documented place at the table of twentieth century change and political transformation. Personal desire became both public and political, moving from a private/internal sphere into the public domain. This occurred first interpersonally and then through a wider set of lesbian publics before it became a generational culture shift. When Parkin and Prosser, in the conclusion of their essay, state that their desire is a “critical and political site of resistance” (Parkin and Prosser in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.448), they position themselves as being part of a newer generation of lesbians who would more fully incorporate their own identities within a critical theory of institutional and political queer cultural publics. Wherein Nestle created a place of belonging for intergenerational butch-femme identities through her work as an editor (and archivist), Parkin and Prosser take the security of that belonging into another location, or more specifically the academy. This raises a question for this thesis: who has the right to represent, to

¹²⁷ That is, structurally oppositional in a number of macro and micro ways: corporate/community, professional, upper and middle class/blue collar and working-class, patriarchal foundations/matriarchal foundations, etc.

culturally define and to politically position lesbian publics and subcultures? For Black, minoritised and working-class lesbians whose whole selves had so far been excluded from the academy, these intersections were bound to create tautology as well as transformation.¹²⁸

The Resistance of Desire

Biomythography could not have existed outside of Radical and Second Wave feminisms. As it evolved it started to move beyond the particular restraints of a movement that often shunned certain lesbian sexual practices and identities as being ‘tools of the patriarchy’. It became more and more difficult to bridge an intergenerational gap between Radical Feminists and separatist lesbians and the oncoming wave of ‘sex-radical’ lesbians who were deconstructing gender roles and stereotypes, while excavating the sexual mores of a previous generation of butch-femme lesbians. Although this new generation were the drivers and benefactors of Queer Theory and soon to be Third Wave feminisms, they were still rooted in the foundational Radical Feminist knowledge that:

Male power is maintained and defined through a variety of methods: through institutions within society, through ideology, through coercion or force, through the control of resources and

¹²⁸ In the 1970s-1990s both Joan Nestle and Audre Lorde taught in universities and other biomythographers such as Pat Parker and Dorothy Allison were often asked to give lectures and readings by universities. All spoke of the difficulty of being their whole selves in these spaces that offered a level of financial stability but also required much compromise as they struggled to ensure that lesbian theory, lesbian texts, and lesbian issues were included in the university curriculum.

rewards, through the politics of intimacy, and through personal power. (Rowland and Klein in Bell and Klein, eds., 1996, p.17).

Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed, published in 1996, is a text that signals a decline in the popularity of Second Wave or Radical Feminism amongst late twentieth century feminists. Post-structuralist, Queer Theory, New Left feminisms (liberal, socialist, anarchist), alongside a destabilisation of sex and/or gender as a construct, threw up a number of barriers for Radical Feminism's political charter. The Radical Feminist axis had revolved around two material bases – women's economic subjugation and women's lack of bodily autonomy, including the violence perpetrated against women's bodies as a result of both (often in the domestic sphere). In contrast, the new feminisms were more firmly rooted in *sexual* autonomies and *public* depictions of desire. In the late 1990s, just as advanced capitalism, neoliberalism and corporatisation were taking over the underground and independent publishing networks, so a materialist analysis of women's lives was losing favour to an identitarian political analysis rooted in language that pre-empted the fervent rise of social media two decades later.

While a new generation of lesbians or self-proclaimed 'dykes' and 'queers' did not question the need to address patriarchy and its crushing ideologies (which impacted on both gay men and lesbian women), they had new ways of addressing this power.¹²⁹ One of these strategies was to adopt power through appropriated masculinised

¹²⁹ Both 'dyke' and 'queer' were terms that had been reclaimed by the close of the twentieth century. Although they became popular terms for younger generations of LGBT people, they remained (and remain) a painful slur to many older generations of gay and lesbian people for whom the term was linked to their personal and community experiences of verbal, psychological and physical abuse and violence.

identities, to perform it or ‘drag’ it – another was to re-purpose butch-femme identities by way of the academy.¹³⁰ *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (1998) is an example of this strategy in its re-evaluation of lesbian or ‘dyke’ gender roles, expression and representations following in the wake of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam’s queer theorising on lesbian sexuality and what could also be termed ‘trans masculinities’.¹³¹ The book brings together photography, theory, poetry, narrative and biographical texts to illustrate queer desire and queer lives, maintaining a direct link both with the academy and the avant-garde dyke or lesbian underground that came from urban grassroots activism and the lesbian bar scene of the 1990s.¹³² The text, edited by Sally R. Munt and Cherry Smyth (as photo editor), features artists and writers who were at the fore of re-imagined representations of butch-femme relationships and desire, and whose work from the late 1990s still shapes articulations of trans-masc and trans-femme identities today. Published in 1998, *Butch/Femme* could be seen to signify the beginning of a post-biomythography era; benefitting from and acknowledging biomythographical texts, it significantly departs from the political crux of the era of lesbian writing that forms my focus. Although *Butch/Femme* politically moves

¹³⁰ The term dyke was heavily reclaimed in the 1990s – adopted in a similar way to the term *queer*, as it was formerly a homophobic slur derived from the term *bulldagger* or *bulldyke*. Once reappropriated, it came to take on a post-Radical Feminist conceptualisation of the term lesbian and a departure from lesbian separatism. It was often used in reference to gender fluid, ‘androgynous’, masculine or butch-identified lesbians, merging with the idea of lesbianism as a gender; dyke became an affirmation of a ‘tougher’ masculinised and more culturally inscribed lesbian identity. The term also distanced a new generation from the so-called Radical Feminist separatist ‘lavender’ lesbians of the 1970s and extolled a cultural and social focus on sexuality and gender identity.

¹³¹ Jack Halberstam’s theoretical influence is often forgotten in discussions about Queer Theory, but their contribution brings together lived and quotidian experiences with Post-structuralist theory. I will be looking at Halberstam’s work more fully in Chapter Four.

¹³² This is explored more fully in Chapter Five and my discussion of *On Our Backs* and Phyllis Christopher’s work.

away from biomythography, it was in fact dependent upon this movement which had generated a political space or set of freedoms (creatively and politically) in which such work could flourish. Its timing also sets it apart from biomythography in its cultural and social context – engaged as this work was with new technologies, new audiences, and (due to its historical timing) a certain level of neoliberal consumerism. Its publication date also coincides with what I view to be the close of the biomythographical era.

The acknowledgements in the opening pages of the text reveal its debt to the work of Joan Nestle and the conceptualisation and publication of *Persistent Desire*. In *Butch/Femme*, the editors thank Nestle, whom they felt had “embodied the precious desirability of butch/femme, and has been incalculably valuable in affirming lesbian gender differences.”¹³³ (Munt in Munt and Smyth, eds., 1998, no pagination). The acknowledgments also reference and thank Cheryl Clark, Patrick Califia and again Nestle for the use and referencing of her work *A Restricted Country*. *Butch/Femme* departs from biomythography but remains almost *neo*-biomythographical in its style and dialogical use of intertextual and photographic narratives. The anthology’s publication also marks a potential arrival at the destination that the biomythographical genre and movement had been careering toward. However, it lacks the cohesive energy and interconnectivity of biomythography as a lesbian genre, tradition, and movement in the following ways: firstly in its unquestioningly overt adoption of masculinities or masculine identities, secondarily, the way that femme identities are very much viewed through this lens and

¹³³ *Butch/femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* features work by such late 1990s lesbian, dyke and trans luminaries as Lois Weaver, Jack Halberstam, Shane Phelan, Anne Cvetkovich, and Jewelle L. Gomez, and photographer Del LaGrace Volcano.

thirdly, the text itself falls outside of a direct connection to the tradition of working class femme-butch identities that had emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century.

In *Butch/Femme*, lesbianism is considered by Munt and Smyth to be a *gender* and they step away from essentialist or fixed notions of lesbianism and sex biology. *Butch/Femme* can also be seen to deviate from biomythography's working-class anchoring and appears to have been written from a more institutionally conscious position than previous biomythographical work. As distinct from earlier biomythography, the text platforms the work of lesbians and dykes from the academy and the academy adjacent arts world. Many of the authors and photographers that are featured in the collection also went on to become greatly influential in both spheres. *Butch/Femme* also rejects Second Wave and Radical Feminism, embracing a new era of Post-structuralist sex radicalism. Anne Cvetkovich (writing in *Butch/Femme*) comments that this era of butch-femme identities is theory made 'flesh', echoing an essay title in *Bridge* – and I would observe that this text also marks a literary arrival point for the legacy of biomythography, which had paved the way and created the resources necessary (textual, theoretical, archival) for *Butch/Femme* to exist. The adoption of *Butch/Femme*, as Munt describes it, “is not a neutral subject; it is an institution of the puissant synthesis of lesbian sex, and gender.” (Munt in Munt and Smyth, eds., 1998, p.11). *Butch/Femme* appears to trace the next step toward a queer (potentially post-lesbian) literature, moving away from the awkward turn to academic theory found in “An Academic Affair: The Politics of Butch/Femme Pleasures” by Joan Parkin and Amanda Prosser in *Persistent Desire*.

It is significant that biomythography, in its experimental deployment of language, idiom and style, existed at a time when language and the use of language was becoming highly politicised. Amidst the struggle that biomythography has, as a genre, to find a location or historical literary placing – there remains a specific creative impetus that still drives forward this body of collective work. As a literary genre that was written from the margins, ‘struggle’ and its linguistic representation, is a theme that brings biomythography squarely to the door of Post-structuralism and Queer Theory.

Lesbian Literary Interventions: Presence from Absence

As the editor of *Persistent Desire*, Joan Nestle explained that the collection was about representing a “new voice in identity politics and break[ing] the traditional rhythms of the phrase and image.” (Nestle, 1992, p.18). It offers a way to “break” from the many penalties that lesbian women, particularly femme women, experience and the “past and present attacks on the integrity of our desire” (Nestle, 1992, p.18). In the collection’s “Introduction”, Nestle summarises how lesbians, particularly femmes, have had to pay a penalty because of the way that they look and are perceived “from straight men, from so-called radical feminists, and from some lesbian separatists who, because of their anger at the social construction of femininity, cannot allow us to even exist.” (Nestle, in Nestle, ed.,1992, p.18). Biomythography enabled lesbians to encode and substantiate their individual identities, or to write from their common experiences collectively as a movement to address their historical or framed literary absence.

Likewise for Moraga and Anzaldúa, the legacy of colonialism and racism prompted them to bring a collectivist anthology together from the intersectionalities of literature, a place of further marginalisation: “What began as a reaction to the racism of white feminists soon became a positive affirmation of the commitment of women of color to our *own* feminism.” (Moraga and Anzaldúa in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xxiii). It is also their sexuality – the specificities of their desire, their identity as lesbians (of colour) with little public visibility, that also connects their narratives. It is this context of erasure that brings the tangibility of desire, touch, interaction, the human connectors of intimacy, into focus in *Persistent Desire*. Nestle prescribes desire as a revolutionary act; not the clichéd shock of sexuality exposed in the public sphere, or what were considered to be *deviant* sex acts – but a full representation of sensuality and physical presence.

Moraga and Anzaldúa documented particular rites of passage by women of colour as part of their editorial role in *Bridge* which, although they are not texts that orientated entirely around lesbian identity and desire, they are still constructed around a related “coming to terms with community-race, group, class, gender, self- its expectations, supports and lessons.” (Cade Bambara in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.vii). For minoritised and migrant women of colour, the representation of their identities involved additional structural battles which needed to be addressed collectively, hence the need for an anthological literary intervention. Both Moraga and Anzaldúa have since reflected on the difficulty in bringing together so many different voices, each writer at very different stages of their own literary, writing, or personal journey while also facing racism within lesbian feminist and butch-femme cultures.

Like Moraga, Barbara Christian also spoke to the disconnection of lesbians of colour from men, white lesbians, and their heterosexual sisters.¹³⁴ This intersectional reckoning is often interpreted to be one based on individualised identity – but for Black and minoritised lesbians or women of colour these barriers are encountered structurally. There is a subliminal complexity in the rejection of what Moraga scathingly terms the “lesbian feminist utopia”, asking “Do I dare speak of the boredom setting in among the white sector of the feminist movement?” In answer to her question, she replies “No thank you, sisters.” (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xiii). The metaphorical “Back” of which Moraga and Anzaldúa speak in their anthology title bears the weight and pressures of a disconnected women’s movement, biomythography offering an opportunity to creatively interpret such visceral and divisive evocations. Here Cade Bambara summarises these struggles, to which I will return throughout this thesis:

And coming to grips with its perversions- racism, prejudice, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, and murder. And coming to terms with the incorporation of disease, struggling to overthrow the internal colonial/pro-racist loyalties- color/hue/hair caste within the household, power perversities engaged under the guise of “personal relationships,” accommodation to and

¹³⁴ Ann Cacoulios also refers to this dimension of *Bridge’s* dislocation, “This was not the case for all women and *Bridge* comes out of an ongoing tension between white liberal feminisms and white feminists and women of colour.” (Cacoulios, 2001, p.78). Cacoulios, A. R. (2001). American Feminist Theory. *American Studies International*, 39(1), pp.72–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41279790>.

collaboration with self-ambush and amnesia and murder. (Cade Bambara in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.vii)

Additionally, it is important to set out that there are literary overlaps between *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* that link them intertextually, not only because they include some of the same writers – Audre Lorde and Cheryl Clarke as well as Moraga and Anzaldúa – but also in the approach and spirit of the anthologies’ collation. Their defiant editorial and publishing attitude both replicated and predicted the do-it-yourself ethos of DIY underground punk movements from 1970s New Wave to Post Punk through to 1990s Riot Grrrl. And they drew on a print culture that had been developed through a network of feminist journals and feminist grassroots publishing activism.

Bridge and *Persistent Desire*’s contextual collectivism brought together a range of writers to successfully meld the political social and historical viewpoints of contributors via deft editorial choices. This links both edited collections to my biomythographical framework, most notably my assertion of the genre’s coding of dialogic relations between texts and authors. Both *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* supported and nurtured biomythographical authors by creating a material textual space for these texts to be in dialogue with one another. This is where the biomythographical collection and anthology comes into its own as a place of inter-textual imagination, play and improvisation.

Moraga proclaimed that in her efforts to bring the *Bridge* anthology together she needed to “transfer and go underground”, (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xiii) to reclaim and create a space of belonging to make this happen. In this vein, *Persistent Desire* is also an anthology of intersectional belonging, an

archive propelled by a collective energy where the “discussion of erotic gender identity also extends to the struggle against colonization.” (Nestle in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.17). *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* are synthesised anthologies of resistance that manifest this resistance in very different ways; a defence *against* racism and discrimination in *Bridge*, a defence *of* sexual identity in *Persistent Desire*, which could be seen to consolidate the “physical and psychic struggle...a desire for life”. (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xix).

Both *Bridge and Persistent Desire* bring to our attention complex queries about desire and thematic turns such as resistance, subjectivity, and lesbian ontologies, that are often embedded in the internal and external politicisation of that desire. In each of these anthologies, these biomythographical themes take root outside of patriarchal societal and literary codes, which further enables the emergence of new literary voices alongside established writers. Nestle expresses her happiness at being able to accommodate this within *Persistent Desire*: “I wanted new speech from new speakers. I wanted disclosures and explorations of fragile things like need and discrepancy, stance, and erotic self creation.” (Nestle, in Nestle ed., 1992 p.17).

The writing in *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* is never presented as being novice or amateurish in its ability to capture and document the lives of lesbian women who have both survived and orchestrated a place of existence. Lesbian women without recourse to a breadth of representative literary histories sought out alternative ways to present a living archive and to create a legacy of historical artefacts through biomythographical means. In order to capture a multitude of voices biomythographers deployed non-traditional writing methods that

included elements of improvisation, spontaneity, and the unexpected within their texts. Both anthologies speak to this attempt to bring together intersections of lesbian culture and to provide that ‘space of belonging’ for lesbian writers. Being primarily written for lesbians, this textual belonging sits outside of both heterosexual and patriarchal critique in its expression and containment, ownership, and audience.

Biomythography supported the development of a collaborative body of work and is hallmarked by a refusal to separate the personal and the political. *Bridge* brought together women of colour and was inclusive of lesbian women, while *Persistent Desire* brought together butch-femme women and incorporated lesbian desire. These approaches make for sometimes awkward and intangible literary elements, eclectic styles, and a prioritisation of the experimental and developmental process over the finished project. Such a rationale and methodology can be said to underlie many of the composite feminist journals and anthologies of the time. What unifies both works, alongside their content and style, is their topographical and temporal placings (subjects I will come back to in future chapters), themes, principles, and values. In both works we can see a collective urge for subjective identities to be visible –for them to be held, understood, and reflected in individual or collaborative texts within each anthology.¹³⁵

This leads me to determine that we should consider these collections and anthologies to be lesbian archives in themselves, in

¹³⁵ Mako Fitts has outlined the importance of bell hook’s inclusion of care and love in her Black feminist vision and values – which is very much in line with biomythography’s values and principles of *collective* care rather than individualised ‘self-care’: Fitts, M. (2011). Theorizing Transformative Revolutionary Action: The Contribution of bell hooks to Emancipatory Knowledge Production. *The CLR James Journal*, 17(1), pp.112–132. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26758837>.

their deliberate creation of a body of work to address such literary and historical absence. Nestle cites this absence in her 1990 essay “The Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York” and suggests ways that the archives will address this silencing of voices from history in the future. As she states in the *Feminist Review*:

the strongest reason for creating the archives was to end the silence of patriarchal history about us – women who loved women. Furthermore, we wanted our story to be told by us, shared by us and preserved by us. We were tired of being the medical, legal and religious other. (Nestle, 1990, p.87)

The urgency or need for this approach, to create presence from absence, to relate historical absence to the violence of erasure and the muting of lesbian or queer love is something that Heather Love has also commented on in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*:

Queer history has been an education in absence: the experience of social refusal and of the denigration of homosexual love has taught us the lessons of solitude and heartbreak (Love, 2007, p.52)

Conclusion: A Literary Intersectionality

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the ways that both *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* incorporate key biomythographical modes, as per my identified framework, into their anthologies. There is an ever-functioning implicit *literary intersectionality* coming through both texts, not just in the diversity of approach, writing style and subject matter – but also in the political and social axiom from which each narrative, poem, essay, or prose emerges. This interlinks with

another fundamental component of my biomythographical framework, the simultaneous questioning and subversion of ways in which memories, stories, and internalised understandings of the self and community are constructed and remembered. Both *Bridge* and *Persistent Desire* embed this biomythographically by presenting multiple ‘versions’ of lesbian narratives that re-insert and delineate truth, authenticity, and (unheard) historical identities.

As I have suggested biomythography bridges two eras of feminist thought – that of the Radical Feminism and Post-structuralism/Queer Theory. So much of this work was tied up in resisting negative societal attitudes toward non-heteronormatively constrained sexuality and the subversion of staid moral responses toward identity, in order to represent a strong lesbian feminist stance that was integrated into other socio-political work. Nestle succinctly describes this transitional period and defines the connection that biomythography made between two proximate eras of feminist lesbianism, despite biomythography always being on the margins of both:

The sex wars and the raging debates that followed showed us what we as a movement had left undone, unexplored. We thought we had put gender in its place in the early 1970s by taking a political stance, but we were only postponing the lesbian-specific discussion we needed for a larger cause-changing women’s history. (Nestle in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.19)

As I move into an exploration of key biomythographical authors’ individual texts, including the work of Joan Nestle and Gloria Anzaldúa, I will continue to refer to the themes and biomythographical

archives that I have sketched out so far in the discussion of these anthologies.

CHAPTER 2: JOAN NESTLE

At the Edges of Myth and History

I am of the people who have no mythologies, no goddesses powerful and hidden to call on. I am of the people who have no memories of other lands beneath their feet other than the cement slabs of city streets. I have no secret languages, no deeper words than the words I have learned in this world.

(Joan Nestle, 1987, p.13)

Here, Joan Nestle beautifully evokes narratives as grounded mythologies that speak to a history of women who love and desire one another, of memories inscribed on their bodies, of the words that are lost when language is unable to embody their experiences. She speaks to the legacy of erasure and brings home the urgency of her project to document (through her writing) and archive (by co-founding the Lesbian Herstory Archives) lesbian history over her lifetime. This community and these “people”, as Nestle will go on to tell in *A Restricted Country* (1987), are the subjugated and marginalised – or more specifically the often counter-cultural lesbian outsiders. They are at the edges of myth and history; they are a people that cannot easily be labelled according to gender, sexuality, or class. They are a people whose experiences shape their understanding of the world and, as she insists, can together exercise the power to re-order a new interpretation of the world. Even though they have no secret languages or hidden mythologies, they improvise using whatever they have to hand to survive and resist violence, harm, and erasure.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ It cannot be ignored that Joan Nestle’s literary theoretical moorings overlap with those of two giants of twentieth century philosophy – Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes – both of whom played (and continue to play) pivotal theoretical roles in

In Nestle’s work – her own writing, and the collections she edits – narratives and stories are able to resist societal negation. *A Restricted Country* Nestle presents us with the stories of those excluded from patriarchal history. Nestle’s subjects are the gender variant daughters of industry and exploitation, of creation and subjugation, they are improvisers using the language adopted or stolen from their oppressors, to envision change. Her “people” are the workers and the exploited who may never be afforded a place in the literary tomes of mythology and auto/biography, but to Nestle their stories are just as historically and culturally relevant. As a biomythographer and archivist, Nestle grapples with absence; the words, language, land, memory, and mythologies that do not speak to a subjugated people’s history, their experiences, or their interpretations of the world. In the tradition of a key biomythographical trope, Nestle’s ensures that her subjects are literarily represented as survivors of history not its victims. In Nestle’s imagination, negation becomes a powerful space a means to survive that precipitates the archive. Nestle’s work proclaims

Queer Theory, Structuralism, and contemporary Post-structuralist ideologies. It is therefore worth briefly discussing the interplay between Foucault, Barthes, biomythography and the relevance they bring to an analysis of Nestle’s work. I would argue that both Barthes and Foucault’s work is politically situated amongst the mid-twentieth century rhetoric of a faction of the patriarchal left, a faction that presumes revolution is built on a rejection of what *is* rather than an absence of *what has been*. Where Foucault observes the need for “a whole field of questions, some of which are already familiar, by which this new form of history is trying to develop its own theory” (Foucault, 2000, p.5) biomythography can be seen to bridge such conceptual “discontinuity”, in an effort to (cohesively and collectively) communicate across and through this “threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation” (Foucault, 2000, p.5) to grapple with the *absence* of words, language, land, memory and mythologies. This enables Nestle and her fellow biomythographers to address the “eternalizing” myth (Barthes, 1972, p.150) of patriarchal biographical literary histories of which Linda Anderson, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have written (See the Introduction to this thesis).

that there is no absolute originary, there is no one patriarchal God, there is only the power of language and the narratives we tell.¹³⁷

This chapter will highlight Nestle’s pivotal role in the development and history of biomythography; that is, her ability to nurture successive generations of writers and to hold and house the lives of so many lesbian women at the Lesbian Herstory Archives – which in turn informed her literary vision, her collective praxis, and co-adaptive collaborations. Now in her 80s, Joan Nestle’s publications enable us to retrospectively consider the impact of her writing and the significant influence it has had on the biomythography of which she is both an ambassador and custodian. In this chapter I wish to draw attention to the narrative mode of Nestle’s own work, which included essays, prose, memoir, poetry, historical biographies, and editorial epigraphs along with journalism. I will be focusing on a few of her more memoir-infused works that veer between the historical and the poetic. I also hope to demonstrate the urgency of Nestle’s need to document community histories and that her narratives (personal, community, re-imagined) are part of her ongoing work to archive lesbian herstory and experience. This brings into view my idea that biomythography rejects internal/external literary dichotomies.

¹³⁷ In *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies* (2022), Daniel Marshall and Zeb Tortorici use their concept of the ‘archival turn’ as a rhetorical phrase or gesture throughout their theoretical framework and text in order to bring to view the temporal, the organic and the intangible elements of the queer archive over (historical) time “This emphasis on archival loss in the queer archival turn means that the historical project imagined within its terms has often fixated on the limits of historical knowledge, generating influential insights into historical erasure as well as the problematic reproduction of methodological and political assumptions about historical invisibility.” (Marshall and Tortorici, 2022, p.13).

Nestle's use of storytelling, bearing witness to and recording the lives and loves of lesbian women who would otherwise be cast from history, is rooted in her approach to the archive. Deploying a key feature and component of my biomythographical framework – that is the re-ordering of social and narrative/biographical constructs such as truth, authenticity, and history – Nestle uses biomythography and its modalities to subvert ideological positionings that exclude 'her people' and their herstories. She does this by creating space in her own work and the anthologies she edits for there to be both similar and contradictory representations of lesbian identity.

A Sturdy Yes of A People

On 8th December 2022, Nestle's retrospective collection of work from her own literary archive, *A Sturdy Yes of A People*, was released by Sinister Wisdom's Sapphic Classic publishing imprint. Bringing together a selection of over fifty years' worth of Nestle's work, *A Sturdy Yes of A People* shows the depth and range of Nestle's still groundbreaking output. Alongside her explorations of queer history and the lives of those deemed outsiders in contemporary mainstream LGBT histories, Nestle documents the way in which liberation movements, collective political spaces and marginalised communities have held and nurtured the freedoms of so many queer and lesbian people. This collection of work does not hold back on the valiant struggle of this journey, and how complex and violent it has been and continues to be. But it does so while celebrating the raw sensuality, sexualities and influence of those communities which created unique subcultures of existence.

Akin to other feminist journals of the 1970s and 80s, *Sinister Wisdom* is an inadvertent Joan Nestle side project, as she has been featured regularly in the journal (even gracing its cover in 1978) and has helped to edit, fundraise for, and support the journal over the last five decades. It is a journal in which many of the autobiographical authors I discuss have had iterations of their work featured. It couldn't be more apt that *A Sturdy Yes of A People*, as a textual retrospective of Nestle's collected works, has been published in association with the longest running lesbian feminist journal, through their publishing imprint and Sapphic Classic series, the timeline of which parallels Joan Nestle's literary career.

A lesbian journal that melds theory, literature and art with activism, *Sinister Wisdom* was originally founded in 1976 in California. Set up as a specifically lesbian feminist journal, it also directly supported lesbian biomythographical authors such as Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Cherríe Moraga, and Dorothy Allison. Like many other lesbian feminist journals of the 1970s and 1980s, *Sinister Wisdom* created a space for lesbian writers to experiment with and develop their work. Producing themed journals four times a year since 1976 has resulted in there being an established back catalogue or archive of work (much of it biomythographical) that warrants its own thesis.¹³⁸ *Sinister Wisdom's* celebration and championing of Joan Nestle's work indicates the continued strength of parts of the lesbian literary movement and its fiercely autonomous self-sufficiency.

¹³⁸ The *Sinister Wisdom* back catalogue from 1970s through to the early 2000s has just been digitally archived on their website. Available here: <https://www.sinisterwisdom.org/Archive>.

Writer, historian, genre-creating editor, poet, theorist, archivist – Joan Nestle has defied a singular defining narrative throughout her life. This creatively fluid artistic identity has contributed to her being on the margins of literary recognition in a world that all too often canonises in such singular ways. This literary neglect has also operated at a personal level as she appears to have been excluded in terms of her identity as a self-defined queer femme Jewish lesbian, and in the synonymous literary coupling of sexuality and liberation in her writing.

Joan Nestle could be described as the biomythographical doula (Lillian Faderman has also referred to her as the mother of the Butch-Femme cultural resurgence) giving many writers the space and support for their work, from gestation to birth, in a holistic way. As we discovered in the previous chapter, Nestle's *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader* was a pivotal text to so many lesbian writers and authors who are also identifiably biomythographical in their work, particularly Leslie Feinberg, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga and Dorothy Allison among others. And as I have already documented, the work in *Persistent Desire*, as in Anzaldúa and Moraga's collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, gave the reader and the featured authors an ontological and material space of collective existence.

Archiving Biomythography: *A Restricted Country*

I would like this book to be read as history, these stories and essays to be documents of a flesh and a spirit that lived through and were changed by their times. (Nestle, 1996, p.vii)

In the previous chapter I mentioned Nestle's importance in the development of the Lesbian Herstory Archive (LHA) in Brooklyn, New York. This archive helps to evidence the formation of biomythography as a lesbian literary genre. LHA, a volunteer run archive that focuses on twentieth-century lesbian records (much of which is the result of legacy donations), memorabilia, journals, oral histories, and textual production, was given landmark preservation status by the Landmarks Preservation Committee in 2022.¹³⁹ The fact that LHA had been operative since 1973 is testament to the determined struggle this people's history has had to survive and its self-proclaimed 'radical departure' from conventional museums and archives.¹⁴⁰ It also demonstrates the LHA's powers of endurance and the influence of an institution that is led by and from within the community for whom it serves to preserve the archive, as the LHA building and the archive project itself has never been publicly funded.¹⁴¹

The central role of narrative in the development of any archive is also of scholarly concern to me in this thesis. Without lesbian narratives (and biomythography) there would likely be a more limited cultural recognition or understanding of the lives of working-class, Black, minoritised and marginalised lesbian women in the U.S. and Europe today. In effect without this literary archive of lesbian lives *by* lesbian women, their socio-political, theoretical, and cultural output and contribution would go unrecognised. When we examine and take

¹³⁹ On its website the LHA states that the 'Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities. This ensures future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives.'
<https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>.

¹⁴⁰ See the LHA website for details of their governing Mission and Principles statements: <https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>.

¹⁴¹ This information is available on the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission website: <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/pr2022/lpc-designates-lesbian-herstory-archives-as-landmark.page>.

note of Nestle's work, particularly her seminal collection of essays, prose, and poetry, *A Restricted Country*, we can also reconceive the archive as being made up of ever-changing, intergenerationally connected, living narratives rather than a set of chronologically conceived historical artefacts and events. As explained, I propose that Joan Nestle's five decades of literary, activist and liberation work is creatively driven by this need to archive, for future generations, the historical, social, cultural narratives of people who have "no mythologies". Her underlying impulse is to avert the cultural and historical obliteration of working-class, Black, minoritised and lesbian women's narratives.

Nestle approaches her work and writing with a keen eye on the future and preservation, even though her subjects and subject matter defy such static considerations. What makes her work so distinct is this tension between the material fixity of printed matter as an historical artifact, and the fluidity of identities that were neither documented nor valued at the time in which much of her work was written.¹⁴² It should also be noted that her want to educate, and share human experiences of joy and complexity in an accessible but poetic way, makes her use of language and the content of her work so startlingly prescient and evocative today.

There are three major themes that reoccur throughout *A Restricted Country* that situate Nestle's approach to archiving and writing: personal resistance, political activism, and historical re-interpretation. Woven into these biomythographical themes are

¹⁴² We should remember that the invisible subject matter of today, once printed, can become the material and visible subject matter of tomorrow but that this is never guaranteed, and its audience may come and go.

experiences such as sexual awakening, alternative lesbian feminist domestic lifestyles, collective counter-cultural activities and an examination and critique of family or personal relationships through a queer lens. This collection remains erotically charged throughout in nuanced and overt ways. The continued inclusion of the erotic (surely a form of domestic and social activism) reminds the reader that the body has carnal and sensual memories that can neither be separated from the self or the text. Here Nestle reverts to a key biomythographical concern (as per my framework) in her use of, and indeed subversion of, shame in order to empower a cultural resistance and avoid historical exclusion or erasure.

A Restricted Country also challenges ideas and notions about memory and who owns collective social memories. If a people have been silenced and undocumented how are these memories conveyed? Where do we begin if memories have no linearity or sequence? Nestle is re-writing these lost memories and writing in a dialogic way, through her storytelling she is re-educating the reader to listen to voices that are both internal and external to the text.¹⁴³ This didactic approach unapologetically writes a lesbian text that narrates aspects of the biomythographer's viewpoint using multiple positionalities. In *A Restricted Country* the ever-present biomythographical narrator anchors the text, deliberately inferring and interspersing different genres associated with the history of female narrative making and biographical writing, including epistolary correspondence, snapshots of people's lives, reportage, criticism, theory and historical accounts of public events. This work pre-empts a hybrid style of writing that is

¹⁴³ Anne Whitehead and Michael Rossington have also noted that "... 'memory' currently serves as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse." (Rossington and Whitehead in Rossington and Whitehead, eds., 2007, p.10).

familiar today and often termed “auto-theory” – bridging historical and contemporary lesbian queer identified texts.¹⁴⁴

In the rest of this chapter, I will focus on *A Restricted Country*, Nestle’s seminal work of lesbian narratives, essays and poetry that serves as an archive or lesbian history . I will then examine what I consider to be the recurrent biomythographical framings of her subject matter. Nestle writes into her biomythographical work often absent cultural memory as told through social and interpersonal narratives. These often centre on the protagonist, the ever present subjective “I”. This first-person narrator is typical of the biomythographical voice, where the “I” comes to be representative of the previously silenced voice of the collective unseen.

I will then move on to explore the use of contextual history in the development and retention of lesbian/women’s shared cultural memories, a central thematic pillar in *A Restricted Country*. This serves to broach the link between the omnipresent ‘I’ (as found in Lorde, Feinberg, Allison *et al*) and the reestablishment of lost or buried cultural memories. I will demonstrate that such cultural memories are often embodied in Nestle’s work through the representation of queer sensuality and sexuality, which is not only related to human experience, but topographically to queer-occupied geographical spaces such as Riis Beach. In Nestle’s work this conjunction of memory and the physically sensuous (as a way to resist institutional and political

¹⁴⁴ A recent example of this is Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), a biographical retelling of queer life, which she names “auto-theory”, that deals with homophobia and transphobia, subjectivity, identity, class privilege and the meaning of queer family. This work blends the experiential into a queer theoretical framework – I would argue, however, that Nelson’s work is highly influenced by working-class, lesbian-identified, Black biomythographical authors of the late twentieth century.

violence), echo an ever-present subtext and query in biomythographical work: how do the oppressed survive in a climate of hostility, exclusion and repression?

I focus on five chapters in *A Restricted Country*, “I Am”, “The Bathroom Line”, “Esther’s Story”, “Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park 1960” and “Voices from Lesbian History”. Through these, I will unpack Nestle’s literary counterpoint to the inscription of lesbian negation on the contemporary reader’s imagination. In my analysis of “Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park 1960”, memory is topographised and queered as Nestle recalls the importance of this natural environment and social space to LGBT communities at a time when they were criminalised and incarcerated for their sexualities and assumed identities. Riis Beach, which has been a queer LGBT friendly park, landmark, and meeting place for decades, is currently under threat as the abandoned buildings around the so-called People’s Beach face demolition in advance of real estate development.¹⁴⁵ This corporate disruption of historical narratives and associated concepts of ‘progressive’ time and place is counteracted by Nestle’s and other biomythographical writers’ work. Their merging of landscape (both urban and rural) and social spaces through a queer lens was affirmatively disruptive, without seeking to obliterate and destroy working class histories. I shall further explore these aspects of the geographical, temporal and topographical queer lens in my reading of Leslie Feinberg and Frankie Hucklenbroich’s work in Chapter Four.

¹⁴⁵An audio file news clip about the history and importance of the beach is available online: <https://www.nycitynewsservice.com/2022/10/19/the-threat-to-peoples-beach/>.

Turning my attention to Nestle's "The Bathroom Line", the focus is again on a specifically lesbian phenomenon, the lesbian bar scene of the 1950s and 1960s. Like *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, Nestle's story reveals the resilience and resistance of a community that continued to create spaces for lesbian desire and connection despite being under the constant threat of exposure, arrest, and physical attack. Nestle also subtly demonstrates how the public account of Stonewall should be historically contextualised through parallel but less widely known stories of LGBT resistance to institutional violence across many communities in order to pluralise the narratives that are told.

Finally, I will examine "Esther's Story", a poignant romantic tale that explores the very contemporary subject matter of gender identity as it was conveyed or historically understood in the late twentieth century. In "Esther's Story", what may now be termed 'masc' or masculine lesbian identity or contemporaneously interpreted to be 'trans' is framed in the dynamic of butch-femme sexuality, lesbian romance, and the struggle of the self-identified 'passing' butch. In order to survive in the social and economic world, that at once both fetishises and emasculates their/her identity, the passing butch can only ever be fully realised in lesbian communities, lesbian interpersonal relationships and, in the case of this narrative, lesbian literature. In concluding this stage, I aim to identify Nestle's clear role in the development of biomythography as a genre, tradition, and movement.

The Rituals of Language

At first glance *A Restricted Country* seems experimental and initially less conceptually organised or deliberate in its compositional

make up. Comprised of twenty-six essays, narratives and one poem and published by the lesbian feminist press Firebrand under the editorship of Nancy Bereano, the text defies the boundaries of genre, style, and narrative just as it defies the supposed norms of gender, class, and sexuality. In the text's opening acknowledgments, Nestle credits Bereano and thanks her for having the "courage in wanting the whole manuscript, the erotic and the theoretical" (Nestle, 1987, p.6). She also goes on to thank Dorothy Allison, Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Patrick Califia, and Adrienne Rich. This goes some way to evidence the diversity and interconnectivity of lesbian feminist networks at this time, with Nestle thanking and citing feminist (trans) identified theorist, poet, and pornographer (Califia), Black feminist poets (Gomez) and Radical Feminists (Rich) alike. Again, this debunks the myth of a completely divided and segmented lesbian feminist scene, or it could be that like her contemporaries she created a new space for these networks to exist, flourish and be co-productive.

A Restricted Country melds personal testimonies, witness accounts, historiography, romance, memoir, and erotica. Even when the first person is not directly invoked, she remains present in the text as the ubiquitous omniscient narrator we meet in "I Am". Critically, *A Restricted Country* is an intergenerational text. Moving seamlessly from decade to decade, it recalls subjects as diverse as 1950s butch-femme bar life in New York, late eighteenth-century lesbian history, the personal connection between lesbians and 'prostitutes', working-class family life in the late 1940s, and Nestle's own participation in social and civil rights movements of the 1960s.¹⁴⁶ Configuring

¹⁴⁶ Throughout her active life Nestle has continued to connect transnational feminist lesbian, working-class and queer communities. Nestle now resides in Australia and

transhistorical intimacies, Nestle manages to be both confessional and analytic despite the relative brevity of her narratives (ranging from one to twenty-two pages in length). Published in 1987, at a pivotal time in the development of biomythography, it is a work that was written over several decades and composed while she was teaching at City University New York (CUNY) and developing the conceptual and material seeds of the LHA (initially in her own apartment).

The opening essay of *A Restricted Country*, entitled “I Am”, echoes Audre Lorde’s recurrent statements about biomythography as a genre (and as we shall discover, other key biomythographical authors). Nestle aimed to re-insert and re-gender the classic male categorisation of the individual self – the eternal ‘I’ – as a statement of individuality. Until the twentieth century, ‘I’ had principally been determined as a paternalistic marker of stability. In Kaja Silverman’s classic 1983 text *The Subject of Semiotics*, published one year after Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Silverman’s feminist reading of Structuralism and semiotic theory questioned the stability and authority of the individualist ‘I’ and acknowledged that “subjectivity is by no means an ideologically innocent condition” (Silverman, 1983, p.125). Silverman’s Post-structuralist analysis is an example of the parallel theoretical positions that are developed throughout biomythographical work.

In “I Am” Joan Nestle, in the tradition of Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, is asserting her role as the protagonist and narrator, in biomythographical mode Nestle brings to the fore the subjective (and often mythologised) ‘I’ that falls within the remit of my

continues to network internationally, more recently giving international workshops and simultaneously editing a book in Ljubljana and a journal in San Francisco.

biomythographical framework. The hybridised use of ‘I’, by both Lorde and Nestle, can be seen to be a declaration of subjectivity, existence, and survival through a more radical feminist lens. Using my own interpretation of Linda Anderson’s analysis of Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical work, I re-envision the reclamation of and declaration of *I Am* as a direct challenge to the patriarchal “masculine position of the subject”. (Anderson, 2001, p.96). This enables the subject, or in this case Nestle as narrator, to position herself at the intersections of gender, sex, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

In *A Restricted Country*, when Nestle gives shape to collective biomythography as archive by telling an array of connected yet disparate stories that position her subjects within a collective patriarchal context (or symbolic order), she is also undoing a paternalistic reading of the individual ‘I’. Following on from Lorde’s narrative framing of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Nestle joins a tradition of biomythographical writing that inherently positions the ‘I’ personally, historically and politically and through her use of language, as Silverman points out, “the ‘subject’ foregrounds the relationship between ethnology, psychoanalysis, and semiotics” (Silverman, 1983, p.130).¹⁴⁷

In the tradition of Lorde, Nestle’s *A Restricted Country* opens with a positional statement, using a declarative ‘I’ to represent the experiences of women whose lives remain undocumented. The declaration is personal whilst affirming multiple existences, her writing embodies a place where “my body made my history – all my

¹⁴⁷ Both Lorde and Nestle in Silverman’s terms, are addressing the bias of a ‘symbolic order’ that deploys paternal structures and narratives.

histories.” (Nestle, 1996, p.viii). Speaking dialogically, Nestle is telling stories for generations that are both a (silent) part of, and apart from, history; a literary tabula rasa, a self-defined historical axis. In the biomythographical style of a lesbian feminist bildungsroman, the narrator is in a position of authority to reinsert her voice despite her literary and linguistic negation. As Silverman articulates in her complex analysis of signifiers and the signified and their interaction in culturally inscribed language and discourse, “metaphor and metonymy are employed to create a dialectic of absence and presence” (Silverman, 1983, p.113). Likewise, in “I Am” there is an interplay of metaphor and metonymy to represent absence as presence in her writing.

For example, Nestle goes on in her two-page positional statement, “I Am” to state:

I have no rituals to call up lost worlds of power or love. I wear no belly strings and carry no beads that stretch back into time and connect me to ancestors who sang at small altars. (Nestle, 1996, p.2)

Instead, she has “no other name but the one I carry”, named after the “ghost” of her father. In this context, each element of her self-proclaimed identity as a Jewish, working-class, lesbian, femme cannot exist together because she has been disconnected and exiled from her own history, via literature and written histories. The title of the essay, “I Am” as she goes on to relate to the loss of her rites of ritual or Jewish symbolism becomes an almost incantatory loss as she cites the “ancestors who sang”, the absence iterative of her linguistic recollections that have no material legacy. This loss is also temporal, there is nothing to “connect” her back “into time” as she has been

placed outside of the myths that define her ethnicity and her people. Yet as witness and testimony, the narratives in *A Restricted Country* reclaim this ancestral heritage and placing, they carry the “ancient totems” that define “my land...this tenacious grip on life”. (Nestle, 1987, p.14). Nestle is replacing this loss of ritual, power, and a right to love within these parameters, with her own linguistic appropriation of cultural frameworks from which she has been historically forbidden. This frame of reference is also notably Jewish; she is of a people that have been historically persecuted, exterminated, and exiled. Nestle’s text referring to the dislocation of post-war Jewish lives through a maternal lens as she transcends the intersecting oppressions of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and female subjugation.

Unlike Lorde and Anzaldúa, Nestle, in acknowledging the influence of ancestral mythologies, is also deconstructing this concept and forging a path to the material present. Whereas Lorde and Anzaldúa call on a maternal ancestral mythology to re-inscribe a lost set of mythologies they believe to be in need of deification, instead Nestle acknowledges their presence but refutes or refuses their authority and power to determine the future of collective herstories. Here she politically diverges from Lorde’s vision of the spiritual maternal (which is intimately linked with Lorde’s analysis of lesbian sensuality) and replaces maternal spirituality with a defiant, often queered, desire. Nestle is challenging an assertion that the reclamation of maternal mythologies absolve historic deletion and a simplified (often liberal feminist) excavation and adoption of idealised maternal mythologies, stereotypes and tropes.¹⁴⁸ Further, she is identifying that

¹⁴⁸ This is exemplified by Nestle’s non-traditional lesbian feminist representation of the maternal and matriarchal in her narratives. Older women and mothers are portrayed as sexually active beings who demand sexual visibility no matter how their

such mythologies are still politicised and highly charged notions that can be weaponised to disempower women's sexuality. These embodied symbols and mythologies are to be found in the words, the structuring and creation of a paternal language that is not of 'her' people. In *Voices from Lesbian Herstory*, Nestle puts forth that a 'new territory' for lesbian narratives is urgently needed, "The Lesbian community is at a crossroads: we can either betray ourselves or carry our courage, culture, and intelligence into new territory." (Nestle, 1987, p.111).

Lesbian Embodiment and Textual Sensuality

history is a place where the body carries its own story

(Nestle, 1987, p.9).¹⁴⁹

Nestle situates the lesbian body and subject historically in her memoir infused narratives and poetry, creating a layer of sensuality in her texts. ¹⁵⁰ By focusing on the physical body as flesh and synthesis, Nestle documents the intimacy of women and people who in effect have not been allowed to publicly exist, cataloguing the minutiae of their desires and intimacies. She is thus giving bodies that are often

sexuality is publicly viewed or perceived and despite them being regularly punished for it. Nestle confronts this taboo, and the surrounding epithets of public shaming head on in "My Mother Liked to Fuck" and "Lesbians and Prostitutes: An Historical Sisterhood" (both featured in *A Restricted Country*).

¹⁴⁹ In my research I have referred to both the original 1987 Firebrand Books edition and Pandora edition (1996) of *A Restricted Country*. Between them there are subtle differences in page numbering, aesthetics, and layout but the text, order and content remain the same.

¹⁵⁰ In Kerry Macneils' study of Nestle and Lorde's respective transgressional narratives, Macneil discusses their use of edit as a storytelling mechanism that fuses with their narration of embodiment and memory: Macneil K. Bathroom Lines, Ky-Ky Girls, and Struggles: Butch/Femme Aesthetics, Identity Politics and Positionalities in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and Joan Nestle's *A Restricted Country*. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 1, pp.75–87.

invisibilised and negated by history a material permanence. In “I Am” Nestle further writes of:

the body that so often appears as the ahistorical force that we simply carry with us until, for those of us born healthy, it tumbles us to the earth of restricted movement (Nestle, 1987, p.9)

In her reference to the body as an apparently “ahistorical force”, Nestle questions the fundamental nature of humanism as an applied universal concept. Where in classical philosophy the body exists, in Silverman’s terms, “outside of discourse” (Silverman, 1983, p.128), here Nestle posits the classical male gendered rendition of the individual body as being one that is “restricted” rather than operating of its own free will. Nestle reminds us that some of our basic understandings of universal matter such as the *body* and *earth* are in fact imbued with a connotative meaning that is part of the adopted language that we “have learned in this world” (Nestle, 1987, p.13). Here language is fundamentally connected to the material. Nestle also outlines that her own disparate texts are *bodies* of work. They are populated by a physical presence and encounters where hopes and desires interact with joy despite the pain, suffering, and abuse her lesbian subjects face, often because of their female or non-gender conforming bodies. For Nestle any lesbian body must be, and is always, connected to lesbian culture.

“Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park 1960” forms part of a literary triptych in *A Restricted Country*, one of three portraits of lesbian experience spanning the 26-year journey of a sexually active lesbian

protagonist through short snapshots of her life.¹⁵¹ These are interspersed with other narratives and essays in the collection. The first in this sequence, “Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park 1960” disrupts sequential timeframes, equating the experiences of the lesbian body with the sea and land, and equating borderless universal nature (sea, land, and air) with a perceived sexuality and identity. Nestle lyrically affirms that the sea and earth is where the lesbian body belongs:

I may never change my name to nouns of sea or land or air, but I have loved this earth in all the ways she let me get close to her. Even the earth beneath the city streets sang to my legs as I strode around this city... (Nestle, 1987, p. 46)

A sense of spiritual alignment with the natural world lets the narrator holistically present her humanity outside of the strictures of legislation and urban regulations. With the elements mapping her way and giving her the confidence to stride in pride, feeling at one with the earth and in awe of its entirety, the gendering of the earth destabilises patriarchal power and normative sexualities. In a similar way, we can read the sea as representative of the biomythographical process – the sea is an ever-moving body of water, it recycles and builds on the waves of the past while creating waves anew. The energy of the sea’s force impacting on the environment around it.

In reminiscing about (Jacob) Riis Park and its beach as a queer-occupied space, Nestle offers a vision of a location and community where collective solidarity between gay men and lesbians goes some

¹⁵¹ The other two portraits that form the rest of this triptych being – “Lesbian Memories 2: The Lower East Side, 1966” and “Lesbian Memories 3: A Night With Emma, 1986”.

way to keeping its outsider occupants safe.¹⁵² Nestle as narrator tells of her love of and need for this space, which is a queer spiritual and communal lifeline for people who cannot otherwise be publicly visible. Nestle recalls in detail a two-hour subway journey that transports her and other lesbians to a destination that will offer carnivalesque visions of “strong butches... weightlifting garbage cans” and their tattoos that “bulge with womanly effort” (Nestle, 1987, p.46). On her travels to the beach the narrator is able to identify lesbian codes between fellow adventurers, the “gay passengers” whose “longing faces” were simultaneously “turned toward the sun waiting for them at the end of the line” (Nestle, 1987, p.46).

Just as this affirmative vignette builds, the narrator upsets the passage’s delineation of time and place, interjecting the narrator’s present self by identifying with an older couple, despite this being a story about her younger self. The narrator is both reflecting and projecting her lesbian herstory by identifying as an older narrator reminiscing on her former adventures in the 1980s with an elder lesbian sensibility: “Sometimes I would find my Lesbian couple, older women, wide-hipped, shoulders touching, sitting with their cooler filled with beer and cold chicken” (Nestle, 1987, p.46-47). To the narrator, specific lesbian or gay codes and identities merge eco-sexually with the earth, sea, and sand, notwithstanding:

hostile encounters, the usual stares at the freaks, whispered taunts of *faggot, lezzie, is that a man or a woman*, but we did not

¹⁵² Riis Park was named after Jacob Riis in 1914. Riis was a photojournalist and social reformer who documented working-class lives, most famously in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Amongst the Tenements of New York* (originally published in 1890). The beach is part of the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens (New York City Borough).

care. We were heading to the sun, to our piece of the beach where we could kiss and hug and enjoy looking at each other. (Nestle, 1987, p.47)

Primarily connected with the freedom of physical, sexual, and emotional expression is the right to engage in activities with others, where differences bond rather than divide marginalised communities, and shared spaces bring together diverse people with the similar need for their bodies to be in a safe space. “Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park 1960” is not only about the coming together of lesbian, gay and queer communities but also the codes and patterns of behavior that both connect and alienate people from hetero-normative societies.

Jacob Riis Park may be identified as a queer beach by Nestle but it has another social history reaching back into the late nineteenth century that predates her narrative. Built on the debris of a naval base as a cheap holiday destination for the city’s expanding immigrant population, Riis Park was designed to accommodate the needs of a poor New York population – socially transformed by migrant labour – who were seeking to escape from an urban city of industrial expansion and tough, often tedious, manual jobs. Despite the threat of being continually raided, Nestle recalls in “Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park 1960” that this did not stop gay, lesbian and queer people from letting their bodies be immersed in their surroundings, a form of eco-resistance in itself. On the way to Riis Park, queer and straight travellers alike take to public transport not yet certain of their allies or their safety in this public communal space. They aboard trains that carry them to their destination, searching for freedom together, looking for signifiers or codes that mark out their desire. The narrator defines their want to escape the intensity of the city as they travel past the

suburban sprawl of “beauty parlors”, “pizza joints” and “two story family houses”, past Flatbush to an almost promised land, a place that enables the narrator and generations of other queer people to enjoy the sensual freedoms that the sea offers them:

...at the end of the residential hegemony was the ocean I loved to dive into, that I watched turn purple in the late afternoon sun, that made me feel clean and young and strong, ready for a night of loving, my skin living with salt, clean enough for my lover’s tongue, my body reaching to give to my lover’s hands the fullness I had been given by the sea. (Nestle, 1987, p.47)

The narrator appears to be comparing “residential hegemony”, the urban housing associated with the American nuclear family of the 1950s, with their destination of the “promised land”, the sea, the sand – thus inverting these geographies of power. The internal world of the narrator equates freedom and nature with land that is beyond or outside of quotidian society and thus heteronormativity. This familiar scene of lovers in the sun is eroticised and queered by Nestle and the narrator who align the cleanliness of the salt and sea as a natural living entity with lesbian sexuality; here the salt could also be associated with the exertion of making love as well as the sweat of campaigning in antithesis to homophobic propaganda. To the narrator, to be “clean, young and strong” is also to be queer, sexual, and satiated by desire.

The queer body is held up to the light of day as that which yearns to be free, to be engaged in nature.¹⁵³ This is posed as natural, unlike bodies that are restricted in their desire by the concrete suburbs, repressive legislation, threats and intimidation or state violence. Although only three pages long, the story/memoir repeats words that extol positive imagery, fun, and a playfulness that is both loving and erotic, allowing lesbian women to enjoy the advantages of heterosexual coupledness in public spaces from which they are normally excluded. Nestle inverts the lesbian other into someone who belongs, by situating the protagonist in an LGBT or queer majority context. The reader must then reconsider their assertions of normality or abnormality, which can have the effect of obscuring and deleting histories. In Nestle's imagination, lesbian memory should be connected to the lesbian body and embodied desire.

However, the threat of surveillance, judgement, violence, and the fear of uncertainty are ever-present at the beach and, like Dorothy Allison's prose, Nestle's work is underpinned by political and social realities as the narrator is "forced to remember we were always watched: by teenagers...and more serious starers" (Nestle, 1987, p.48).¹⁵⁴ Yet still Nestle and her peers are "undaunted" even in the face of possible arrests and nature's power to democratise pain and

¹⁵³ Tammy Clemons short study on Eco-sexuality, as put forward by San Francisco based feminist activist and sex positive artist Annie Sprinkle (who had a high public profile as a self defined sex worker in the 1980s) and her wife Beth Stephens (who is a professor/artist) outlines the new queering of Eco-feminism/s and speaks to Nestle's rhapsodic engagement with nature: Clemons, T. L. (2014). Review of *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story*, by Beth Stephens. *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 20(1), pp. 91–93. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jappastud.20.1.0091>.

¹⁵⁴ Likewise teenagers themselves were a subculture who posed a threat in the 1950s, suggesting the intergenerational policing of the 'lesbian' other by the 'teenage' other – a common divisive tactic and product of any repressive state regime.

suffering when a young man is overpowered by the force of the sea and drowns. When the young man drowns it is the beachgoers who, in their micro-societal empathy, support the funeral and carry the coffin. This presages the thousands of funeral marches for young gay men during the 1980s AIDS crisis, for, “These are the freaks who had turned into a people to whom respect must be paid.” (Nestle, 1987, p.48). Just as nature has the power to overcome life, the living have the power to remember and honour the dead, and to immortalise them in prose.

Nestle mythologises historical and biographical memory in her work while freshly positing queer bodies in public and domestic spaces. These spheres of the public and domestic are not separated in lesbian biomythography; there may be attempts to exclude and oppress Black/lesbian and working-class bodies within these spheres, but these same bodies actively resist such an erasure of identity and self. Nestle focuses on female-aligned domestic concepts (such as home and motherhood) and relates these to a public social resistance, whether this be battling against the restriction of women’s bodily functions (“The Bathroom Line”) or asserting an adult woman’s right to sexual freedoms across socially constructed taboos (“My Mother Liked to Fuck”). Nestle wants her reader to share collective memories through a singular yet composite narrative of social resistance.

As I shall go on to discuss, Nestle deliberately – like many biomythographical authors – uses an elegiac and somewhat romantic lens through which to write her intertextual prose and poetry. In Nestle’s writing there is no difference between the beauty of sexuality and the grit of struggle, they are part of a complex and intertwined history that must be acknowledged, grappled with, and celebrated if future generations are to challenge historical social silencing and

violence. These emotional undercurrents that pull at the reader's sensory and affective heartstrings are also a tactic to draw in an audience and connect them, through empathy, with the experiential realities of people whose histories remain neglected and subjugated.

Pluralising Queer Resistance

We needed the Lesbian air of the Sea Colony to breathe the life we could not anywhere else, those of us who wanted to see women dance, make love, wear shirts and pants. Here, and in other bars like this one, we found each other and the space to be a sexually powerful butch-femme community. (Nestle, 1987, p.37)

Nestle revisits nature as a metaphor for freedom in the imagery that she uses in "The Bathroom Line"; here the necessity of "Lesbian air" (Nestle deliberately capitalises the term 'lesbian' throughout *A Restricted Country*) is compared with the liberation of women dancing and wearing "shirts and pants" – often the material symbols of their sexuality and identity. "The Bathroom Line" is one of several stories in *A Restricted Country* that recalls mid-twentieth century lesbian bar culture. The narrative around the Sea Colony bar is reminiscent of a folkloric sea yarn, where handsome butches swagger and the lesbians therein stave off the repressive society outside of their enclosed world. Nestle uses nautical seafaring language that would later become associated with butch/femme imagery throughout "The Bathroom Line".¹⁵⁵ Here Nestle playfully and consciously contextualises her work

¹⁵⁵ Nestle's work helped to influence and inform the aesthetics of lesbian youth culture and writers/artists in the 1990s, whose work included now iconic images of lesbian sexuality and experience such as Tammy Rae Carland's working-class lesbian

within a queer literary tradition and as part of a broader gay cultural apparatus. The sea and seafaring folk, such as sailors and navy personnel as well as those who adventure at sea, have often been used as a metaphor for sexual freedoms in literature. From Jean Genet to Audre Lorde – the sea has been queered in diverse and disruptive ways. It also serves as a metaphor for the unknown depths of human existence or undefined possibilities across all genres of literature – the sea representing renewal, transitions, and crossings, being pulled as it is by the eternally gendered moon.¹⁵⁶

Yet the Sea Colony, for all its allusions to queer freedom, is still regulated by hetero-patriarchal norms where women’s rights to basic bodily autonomy are policed and their sexuality monitored by both society and state, for “the most searing reminder of our colonized world was the bathroom line.” (Nestle, 1987, p.38).¹⁵⁷ Nestle reveals the bathroom line to be a controlled and regulated space, the lesbians in the bar monitored in case they have sex in the cubicles, with the bathroom line being guarded and policed by one of their own, “a short, square, handsome butch” (Nestle, 1987, p.38). Even their toileting habits are regulated and they are given a certain number of squares of toilet paper as they enter the bathroom. As they wait in line, the women are reminded that supposedly safe dissident spaces – owned

series. This depicted a range of butch (and femme) lesbians in ‘traditional’ gendered roles such as miners, sailors, and gas attendants. I further discuss Tammy Rae Carland’s work in relation to Dorothy Allison in Chapter 5.

¹⁵⁶ This constitutes an intertextual nod to the use of goddess and moon imagery that was referenced, particularly in mid-70s, by lesbians and throughout lesbian feminist public cultures. Arguably, these have now been mainstreamed by hetero-normative upper-class hippies and social media influencers, but ‘queer astrology’ remains very much in vogue.

¹⁵⁷ This is reminiscent of the current ‘bathroom debate’ across the U.S. and the use of public spaces as a way to regulate gender codes through a prism of public safety determines who can or cannot use public spaces that serve universal and necessary functions such as bathrooms in healthcare and educational establishments.

and run by lesbians (and often regulated by the mafia through extortion and bribery) – are still dangerous places colonised by the threat of homophobic hatred, anger, and outrage at what the morality police consider to be sexual deviance. As Nestle goes on to explain, “We had the images of smashed faces clear in our memories: our lovers, our friends who had not moved quickly enough.” (Nestle, 1987, p.38). These injustices that made spaces such as the Sea Colony both home and exile, also suggest a proverbial island adrift in an urban sea of shame and fear on which its inhabitants cast nets of survival:

It was the other nets, the nets of the righteous people, the ones that reached into our minds, that most threatened our breathing. These nets carried twisted in their invisible windings the words hate yourself because you are a freak, hate yourself because you look butch and femme, hate yourself because you are sexual. (Nestle, 1987, p.38)

Nestle here materialises the extended metaphor of the sea: the mental and psychological oppression lesbian women face is captured in an embodied act of relational self-hatred and shame via the “invisible windings” of a trawling net that captures and starves the “freaks” of the sea’s freedoms. The use of the term “righteous people” has dual connotations of a religious and moral righteousness but also a more recent ongoing struggle that butch/femme lesbians had in asserting their identities in a liberal feminist climate that was often as sexually repressive as the mainstream right wing moral majority. Later in *A Restricted Country*, in “Voices from Lesbian Herstory”, Nestle returns and complicates this history by overlapping strands of oppression, observing the way in which it filters into the everyday lives of

communities who adopt such destructive norms despite their own positionality:

...the renewed arrests on Long Island of men wearing women's clothing; the refusal to give S/M women space to talk and explore their sexuality; the hostility towards butch-femme lesbians- all of these bring back to me the first layer of my history: the memory of being queer, my inheritance from the fifties. (Nestle, 1987, p.111)

Nestle clearly links the deletion of these histories with societal hostility, imposed shame and psychic amnesia. As “the first layer” of Nestle’s history, her “inheritance” comes both from her direct experience as a lesbian and a woman striving for sexual autonomy but also from her being part of an interconnected diverse LGBT community. Although her femme identity can sometimes protect her from an external or public identification as a lesbian, it can also makes her more vulnerable to gender-based violence. Therefore, she is no further removed from the men arrested for wearing women’s clothes or the S/M women denied lesbian feminist space; they are individual and collective narratives that are not separate from but part of a people’s history.¹⁵⁸

The Sea Colony bar is nonetheless revealed as a space where a geographical and topographical tradition of lesbian ritual (spiritual and sexual) is visibly enacted. The words used in the bar name, “Sea” and “Colony”, together suggest freedom and isolation, expansiveness,

¹⁵⁸ We see this enacted most extremely in Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* where the protagonist and their lovers regularly experience sexual assault and gender-based violence as well as homophobic hatred.

and control.¹⁵⁹ As an historical site, the bar venue itself evidences working-class lesbian existence, framing it within a communal experience that has an almost sacred place in biomythographical texts, one in which mores and values are associated with ritual:¹⁶⁰

We had rituals too, back in the old days, rituals born out of our Lesbian time and place, the geography of the fifties. (Nestle, 1987 p.37)

It could be this ceremonial, ritual connectivity within communities that forms part of a working-class lesbian tradition, one that creates scope for resistance. These rituals pre-date but also link lesbian and queer trajectories of resistance – from the Coopers Do-nuts riots in 1959 to the Stonewall riots ten years later – the enactment of ritual connectivity is often cogently framed by shared identities. Although Nestle is referencing the Sea Colony specifically in that longer history of resistance (which have been repeatedly excluded from queer resistance narratives), she is also gendering queer experiences and including butch and femme voices:

But buried deep in our endurance was our fury. That line was practice and theory seared into one. We wove our freedoms, our

¹⁵⁹ The Sea Colony lesbian bar is a noted 'NYC LGBT Historic Site' and is included in the NYC LGBT Historic Site Project whose website names Nestle as a frequenter of this notorious lesbian establishment alongside her favourite lesbian pulp fiction writer Ann Bannon. The website even quotes "The Bathroom Line" and explains that, "The clientele mostly fit into a "butch-femme" dynamic, where the "butch", or more masculine-dressing of the pair, would take the "man's" role in the relationship – buy drinks, lead in dancing, open doors, etc. – and the "femme", or more feminine-presenting of the pair, would take the "woman's" role."
<https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/sea-colony/>.

¹⁶⁰ Lorde, Feinberg, Clarke, Parker and Hucklenbroich all have narratives that focus on the importance of urban lesbian bars in their experiential worlds.

culture, around their obstacles of hatred, but we also paid our price. Every time I took a fistful of toilet paper I swore eventual liberation. It would be, however, liberation with a memory.
(Nestle, 1987, p.39)

“The Bathroom Line” extols lesbian “liberation with a memory” by referencing a distinct era of violence and oppression in which lesbian women were punished for their sexual rejection of men and female sexuality was taboo. It is also a narrative that is historically dependent on both place and memory to exist. This surveillance of lesbians paralleled that of gay men, trans, and gender non-conforming people in many ways (such as the policing of public displays of affection or wearing the required number of articles of gendered clothing). Yet the homophobia women faced was also often intersected with the threat of gender-based violence and sexual assault. “The Bathroom Line”, in its reference to micro-surveillance and all-pervasive regulations, also reminds the reader of the associated threat women faced in both public and private spaces.¹⁶¹

Although “The Bathroom Line” may be a narrative that cites specific events and recalls a collective memory – biomythography interrupts the linearity of proposed historical monumentality and promotes recollections that do not belong to any one person or narrator. “One of the lessons I have learned in trying to live with history is that for every repression, *we* have found a suitable form of resistance.”
(Nestle, 1987, p.118, emphasis mine). Joan Nestle’s work, I argue, is

¹⁶¹ This echoes the current anti-human rights and transphobic stance of some U.S. states such as North Carolina. There, the Christian right is influencing the legitimization of anti-trans rhetoric and actions such as the banning of trans people from accessing either the bathrooms of their chosen gender or the provision of a neutral-gendered bathroom.

that of an historian, an archivist as well as a biomythographer. Nestle's stories weave in and out of civil and political North American history, inviting the ghosts that haunt its political landscape which, in *A Restricted Country*, includes civil rights struggles alongside personal testimony and communal experience. As the narrator/observer in *A Restricted Country*, she is mythologising women whose stories have been lost and subjugated; women who have contributed to a working-class history that has played a role in creating literary spaces where memories can be transformed into a shared history. Nestle was writing narratives and histories that could not be found anywhere else at the time they were written and she refused to accept the inevitability of this lost recollection.

In her work, Nestle explains that the fight for justice and visibility is always something that is interconnected with other social struggles and that it is part of a perpetual process. By going on to reference the Sea Colony in other essays and narratives in *A Restricted Country*, Nestle deliberately historicises lesbian experience and its material markers, as both a matter of universal concern and individual survival where, "Every present becomes a past, but caring enough to listen will keep us all alive." (Nestle, 1987, p.119)

Untold Femme/Butch Stories of the Forgotten Past

As I have suggested, Joan Nestle's desire to document the lives of marginalised women who often remain invisible in literature intertextually connects her with other biomythographers. For Nestle, it isn't just about visibility, it is about the act of remembering and preserving a past that politically can never be forgotten:

I need to keep alive the memory of passing women and their wives, the memory of Lesbians who because they “looked like men” were ridiculed, beaten, locked up, hidden away. (Nestle, 1987, p.112)

To forget or subjugate lesbian herstory is to perpetuate an historical violence that disconnects us from each other and ourselves. In “Esther’s Story”, Nestle uses what appears to be biographical material about a sexual encounter with an older stone butch to examine the untold tenderness, rituals and etiquette of butch-femme relationships, a side of lesbian sexuality and gender expression that had rarely been documented before the late 1970s and Nestle’s work.¹⁶² This brief one-night affair is between the femme narrator and Esther, a woman whose “profile was severe,” whose “grey hair” is styled in the “classic DA style” of the 1950s and who was also a “small slim woman” who “trembled with her gentleness”, whose desire for the narrator causes her to physically shake with both “respect and needs” (Nestle, 1987, pp.40-41). In her use of oppositional emotional and physical traits in Esther’s character detail, Nestle disrupts binary notions associated with gender and sexuality that equate certain modes of love, sexuality, relationships and physical expressions of desire with traditional gender codes.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Although there are references or inferences made to the butch-femme/lesbian relationships or equivalent ‘friendships’ and partnerships in relation to notable modernist women of the Left Bank, most famously Alice B Toklas and Gertrude Stein, and in pulp fiction and shorts in lesbian periodical publications such as *The Ladder*, Joan Nestle was one of the few literary pioneers that documented the history of femme-butch relationships and their social complexities in a representational and non-fetishistic way.

¹⁶³ In *A Sturdy Yes of A People* Joan Nestle presents a re-analysis of “Esther’s Story” that grapples with what she interprets to have been her propensity to cast Esther’s “passing” or “maleness” in a more womanly way” (Nestle, 2022, p.212). Nestle’s acknowledgement comes from her direct learning from a trans woman who comes to volunteer at LHA called Chelsea. This experience enables Nestle to reflect on her role

The narrator also highlights the impact of queer intergenerational love, care and sexual education for lesbian women who were marginalised, in an era of sexual prohibition and violence:

I was twenty and she was forty-five. I was out only two years and she had lived lifetimes as a freak. Her sexuality was a world of developed caring, and she had paid a dear price for daring to be as clearly defined as she was. (Nestle, 1987, p.42)

“Esther Story” is Nestle’s appearingly gentle tale of a romantic night of loving that is both subversive and counter-cultural in its depiction of lesbian desire, owing to the narrator’s references to key romantic signifiers throughout the narrative – for example, details that suggest the couple’s earnest desire such as the romantic steak dinner, the rituals of bathing and dressing to please one another. Nestle recreates a familiar and assumed domestic scene of the femme waiting to please her *man* but instead Esther is a ‘passing’ non-gender-conforming woman in the story; she is also polyamorous and has a long-term lover who is a prostitute.¹⁶⁴ The narrator and Esther have a one-night encounter that is never repeated, and the narrator as witness has the dual role of being the reliable biographer and the subject of Esther’s desire. The respect and pleasure each partner offer one another are

of potentially “burying” rather than “preserving a life” (Nestle, 2022, p.213) in her original rendering of “Esther’s Story”.

¹⁶⁴ I deliberately refer to Esther’s “passing” in a historical context but also in reference to Nestle’s description in the story. As per the previous footnote Nestle herself questioned whether she had encoded Esther’s identity and misread their potential trans identity. I use the gender determinate that is used by Nestle in the story, but this is a query that could be revisited in many late twentieth century lesbian, gay or queer texts. It is an area of revision that brings to light the complexities of the authorial voice but also reasserts biomythography’s potential critical role in creating space for such discussions to be had.

seen to be more taboo than their act of lovemaking – yet the women are neither victims of their sexuality nor are they asexual lesbians sublimating the imposed deviance that would have been, and still may be, associated with their encounter.¹⁶⁵

The couple's act is itself a form of sexual resistance as well as resilience. Here Joan-as-narrator's sexuality is intimately tied into the desire and the erotic response from her lover, a desire that the world does not seem to recognise and often erases. Through the eyes of society, the narrator does not have a sexuality without a "husband or boyfriend" but to Esther she is the centre of her sexual universe. This gives the narrator an opportunity to dismantle the myth of lesbian non-existence while simultaneously reflecting the desires of her lesbian audience. In her work Nestle was also kicking against the censorship, silencing, and sanitisation of lesbianism and lesbian/women's sexuality by a liberal and radical feminist movement. Parts of this movement had become intent on presenting a cohesive, essentialist notion of gender where oppression was determined by binary traits and hetero-normative relationships. This was largely born out of a deeply entrenched fear of lesbianism and shame alongside the suppression of all female sexual expression in society.

I wanted her to see my competent femme self, self-supporting and sturdy, and then I wanted her to reach under my dress, to penetrate the disguise I wore in a world that saw me as having no sexuality because I had neither boyfriend nor husband.

(Nestle, 1987, p.42)

¹⁶⁵ This is further explored in Chapter Four, where I discuss the complex depictions of lesbianism that Hucklenbroich narrates and exposes. This again proved uncomfortable to a certain part of the lesbian feminist movement and audience.

Nestle does not define this experience as being singularly about sexuality, nor does she present the biographical characters of her narratives to be anything less than complex people with diverse needs and desires. She acknowledges that for many lesbian women to survive they are often living full complex sexual lives in private, but she reminds us that these lives are often considered to be deviant in a public societal context. Crucially she also explores the emotional and psychological impact of this existential duality on individuals who have had to live as passing women, without any protection, support, or safety. Esther, like many passing women has had to emotionally remove herself from others to survive, her stone butch identity instead connected to 'passing' as a male and a masculinised gender expression. Nestle describes the meaning of this phrase early in the narrative and it is a key point of understanding within the text:

* The word passing is used (here) to represent a Lesbian who looked like a man to the straight world...Language here is inadequate, however. Neither passing nor transvestism explains the experience of a passing woman. Only she can. (Nestle, 1987 p.40)

Again, in "Esther's Story" Nestle returns to coastal imagery, as she has done in both the "The Bathroom Line" and "Lesbian Memories I: Riis Park 1960", but this time she uses it to personify the freedom the narrator feels with her butch lover and the safety to be found with another woman as Esther's "knees jutted out around me like a sharp cove on a rocky shore" (Nestle, 1987 p.40). Nestle demonstrates the ways in which the codes of the stone butch were understood and respected within a lesbian and particularly a femme-butch dynamic,

where these (unsaid) codes of being could also be indications of strength, resilience, and desire. These encoded histories inscribed in both language and touch: “The words the language of my people, floated through my head – untouchable, stone butch.” (Nestle, 1987, p.44).

Our Collective Selves

Like many of Nestle’s narratives in *A Restricted Country*, “Esther’s Story” revolves around the biomythographical protagonist, the ever-evolving ‘I’ or subject in the story. That is, the biomythographer who is recording life through the subjectivity of her own experiences with others. The narrators in Nestle’s work are never authoritative individual masters of their historical experiences but collective communicators, struggling against hetero-normative coercion in multiple ways, all the while making their physical presence known if not to a world external to their community at least to each other. Nestle often refers to and explores the idea of “our collective selves” in her writing:

To live with history is to have a memory not just of our own lives but of the lives of others, people we have never met but whose voices and actions connect us to our collective selves. (Nestle, 1987, p.110)

These “collective selves” enable Nestle to recite complex moments in history where lesbian women have been subjugated, and to connect discriminatory state action and violence against women with specific concerns such as censorship and homophobia. In “Voices from Lesbian Herstory”, Nestle reflects on the first play on Broadway to be closed in

1927 because of its suggestive lesbian themes, the arrest of forty-six Lesbians in a raid on a Lesbian bar in New York City in 1964, and the denouncement of photographs depicting Lesbian sexual activity as being obscene and pornographic. Intermittently Nestle's biomythographical rendering of history, like that of her peers, is able to demonstrate the trans-historical nature of oppression and tyranny, and also reveal queer communities' and individuals' counter-resistance:

I see the queer fifties, the Lesbian sixties, the feminist seventies, and it is clear that memory is something that goes beyond sequential incidents. (Nestle, 1987, p.119)

Joan Nestle's work was written in a time and era that is viewed by some as pre-dating recent understanding and developments in trans-inclusivity politics, including non-binary, non-conforming or fluid gender expression. The implication is that the complexities and inclusion of non-gender conforming people or trans people in queer communities or relationships was not previously documented and therefore did not exist. Yet to consider trans-inclusivity and gender expansiveness or non-conformity to be just a recent millennial discussion has the unintended effect of deleting specific parts of lesbian and queer history. This would be to do a disservice to the lives and loves of queer people and would play a role in disconnecting solidarity across generational lines.

In *A Restricted Country* and particularly "Esther's Story", Nestle clearly documents the deconstruction of gender norms and day-to-day lives of non-gender conforming people. This was in an era when people who did not conform to hetero-normativity and prescribed binary gender identities faced the threat of condoned street violence,

arrest and incarceration, sexual assault, and repeated personal and social humiliations.¹⁶⁶ As Nestle goes on to demonstrate in “Voices from Lesbian Herstory”, lesbian women – and particularly those who identified outside of prescribed female gender norms like Esther – had to find ways to survive economically and socially. They faced:

Shame and guilt, censorship and oversimplified sexual judgments, the refusal to listen and the inability to respect sexual difference (Nestle, 1987, p.117)

However, as Nestle also comments in the face of such public assault, “sexuality has always been our frontier” (Nestle, 1987, p. 116). The subjects of Nestle’s narratives are not desperate women on the edge, as in Ann Bannon’s Beebo Brinker series (much admired by Nestle) and other equivalent pulp fiction tales of a lesbian Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁶⁷ Nestle’s narratives humanise the lives of lesbian women, but she never compromises the complexities of living in a world that erodes and erases lesbian experience and existence.

This reminds us that Nestle was exposing the often class-based hypocrisy of essentialist ideas about lesbianism. Working-class lesbian women without an economic safety net in 1950s North America often had to survive outside of traditional economic systems, which could mean involvement in occupations that avoided surveillance or management systems, for instance black-market trading, prostitution, and gambling. These were often (and sometimes fictitiously) considered

¹⁶⁶ This is further explored in my analysis of *Stone Butch Blues*, Chapter Four.

¹⁶⁷ Nestle has pointed out the importance of these pulp fiction lesbian novels (no matter how salacious they were) as “survival texts” in a world where there were no depictions of lesbians or lesbian desire and sexuality. She did not see them as ‘trash’ literature but as part of a diverse lesbian literary history and tradition.

to be less exploitative and risky than unskilled blue-collar work such as factory line production or manual labour.¹⁶⁸ Nestle does not see this recourse to outsider employment as something that is morally corrupt or that those who embark in this work are degraded victims; it is instead more important to her to represent and archive these experiences and lives. To Nestle, the struggle to survive by whatever means may be a product of oppression and subjugation but obversely it can become a site of strength and resilience in lesbian communities.¹⁶⁹

In “The Bathroom Line”, “Esther’s Story” and “Lesbian Memories 1” Nestle documented narratives about specifically working-class lesbian experience in the 1950s. She regarded these lesbian narratives to be both a part of U.S. history and, as she reiterates, part of a people’s collective memory. The humiliating experiences of the bathroom line are not disconnected from the wider political oppressions of the time – such as the inequity and violence that women, disabled, Black and minoritised or marginalised people often faced from individuals, families, communities, society, and the state. As she goes on to discuss in “Voices from Lesbian Herstory”, McCarthyist Communist witch hunts and the demonisation of lesbianism are intersecting forms of oppression, the memories of which can also determine and inspire future strategies of defiance:

¹⁶⁸ This is well documented in Hucklenbroich’s *A Crystal Diary* (1997) as well as Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Kennedy and Davis’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993). It was also a direct challenge to the capitalist fallacy of ‘good’ exploitation such as taxed manual labour, and ‘bad’ exploitation such as under the table work and prostitution – a class and privilege-based assertion. From butches who often in ‘passing’ had certain roles excluded from them to lesbians who were unable to ‘pass’ in their own ways as heterosexual women in more female-identified occupations, queer women always faced multiple barriers in finding work.

¹⁶⁹ As I’ve suggested it also calls into question the modes of capitalist economy that are seen to be *legitimate* but are in fact systems of exploitation and corruption, where people are traded and prostituted in a multitude of ways.

I need to remember what it was like to fight for sexual territory in the time of Joseph McCarthy. I need to remember the humiliation and the courage of standing on the bathroom line. (Nestle, 1987, p.111)

In a pre-internet age, the work of Nestle and her contemporaries helped to build and sustain a movement among their own generation that sought ways to preserve and honour the hard-won rights and societal changes of women that had gone before them. They also helped to found a Third Wave feminist movement from the mid 1990s onward that deconstructed stable singular majority identities and validated the importance of an intersectional approach to feminism/s.¹⁷⁰

Conclusion: Lesbian Voices from Herstory

In their promotion of *A Sturdy Yes of A People* and celebration of Joan Nestle's life on the 29 November 2022, Sinister Wisdom held a live online discussion that was free and publicly accessible to all.¹⁷¹ Just under 100 people tuned in to listen to Joan Nestle read from and comment on her book of collected essays, poetry, and prose. At one point during the event in which Nestle emotively read her work and spoke freely to her audience, she interrupted herself to say, "I'm interested in how people leave places behind and how they carry that with them", before pausing to compose herself again, a thoughtful silence punctuating the air and impressing upon the audience that

¹⁷⁰ Nestle intertextually references her own stories in *A Restricted Country* – a method often used in biomythography where there are not enough published narratives of relevance to refer to, so the biomythographer must reference their own.

¹⁷¹ Joan Nestle's online book launch for *A Sturdy Yes of A People* (2022) can be found here: available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvE0MEEJyZM>.

there are many narratives of change and memory Nestle carries with her that are yet to be written. During that moment it was as if the audience became tuned into the fact that, without Nestle, they may not have had the knowledge, the courage, or the literary spaces to be.

Joan Nestle's involvement and influence in the lesbian, gay and other New Left liberation movements in the late twentieth century would go undocumented if not for the lesbian archiving and preservation activism that has been invested in keeping her work alive, much of which she has instigated herself. Despite her work being vital in the documentation of marginalised queer lives in the late twentieth century, Nestle's work is still unfairly treated as marginal literature. As the history of Sinister Wisdom publications demonstrates, Joan Nestle has taken on many different roles in the development of her own and other authors' biomythographical work. She has also been formative in the creation of structural spaces and social forums for this genre of work. Yet the entirety of her role in the development of lesbian feminist literature and feminist publishing remains unrecognised. Whereas many of her contemporaries, as I outline throughout my thesis, are the unsung heroines of twentieth-century literature, Joan Nestle has suffered this fate while additionally remaining unacknowledged for her foundational role in the development of lesbian literature in the late twentieth century, in which she centred the archive and intergenerational knowledge production. As an author whose writing is often held to be almost sacred in lesbian literary circles, it is surprising to find that her work, outside of a short period during the early 1990s feminist publishing boom, is still relatively unknown.

In this chapter I made a deliberate effort not to reductively contextualise or label Nestle's work within a purely Post-structuralist framework despite my references to the work of Kaja Silverman, Foucault and semiotics. I posit instead that Nestle's biomythographical work bridged Second, Radical, Post-structuralist and Third Wave feminisms. I wish to parallel this outsider framing of her work (and my thesis) within disparate schools of thought to demonstrate the full and vast theoretical ecology in which Biomythography developed. Biomythography and the radical (and often experimental) writing of lesbian feminists such as Nestle, were instrumental to the late twentieth century's politicised unravelling of language, genre, and theory. Social changes and the mechanisms behind them (philosophy, linguistics, and political theory amongst others) are not self-contained strands of historical phenomena; they take place within a greater context of interwoven dialogues and discourses.¹⁷²

Earlier in this chapter I posed a question that possibly drives the writing of all the authors featured in this thesis – how do the oppressed survive in a climate of hostility, exclusion, and hatred? For Nestle, like her contemporaries, the answer lay in writing those who survive (and those who don't) into literary cultural production and thus into existence. But she knew that this alone was not enough, that she needed to preserve this work and the unwritten narratives of lesbian

¹⁷² Suzanna Danuta Walters further clarifies this context: "The growth of queer theory and queer politics must be placed in a social and political context. The most important pieces of this are, of course, the AIDS crisis, the rise of postmodern/post-structural theory, the politics of academia, the sex debates, and recent critiques of feminism." (Walters, 1996, p.837).

Walters, S. D. (1996). From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More like a Fag?). *Signs*, 21(4), pp.830–869. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175026>.

women in an archive that would remain accessible to future generations. The Lesbian Herstory Archive provides that material space of preservation and knowledge, where the narratives of thousands of lesbian women live on. Without the LHA we would surely lack the historical connective tissues of embodied lesbian experience in the twentieth century.

As I have aimed to demonstrate in this chapter, Nestle's biomythographical writing arguably documents the stories of a people who "have no mythologies" and her other strands of work (in publishing and archiving) embeds these narratives within larger archives that also have material historical impetus. Her literary work offers an archive where the topography of place, and socio-political events, anchor the temporal reality of the histories that she explores. This brings us back to the work of Marshall and Tortorici's *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies* (2022), their placing of the archive within a considered preservation of "dissident historical knowledge" :

Born first from liberation-era struggles to turn away from histories of omission, queer archiving gained its footing by making a stand on the grounds of evidence – that gender and sexual difference had left historical traces... (Marshall and Tortorici, 2022, p.9)

Nestle's work demonstrates how biomythography *preserves* whilst it *re-imagines* a history, a literature, a narrative of the people "who have no memories of other lands beneath their feet" (Nestle, 1987, p.13).

In the following chapters I will draw on the insight I've gained from my study of Joan Nestle's work in its consideration of the literary archive, and the resounding role that lesbian women have had in the safe keeping and custodianship of biomythography. Indeed, the power of the biomythographical archive is something that remains a central concern in my focus on Pat Parker in the next chapter. Underlying this line of enquiry is the historical misogyny and homophobia of the publishing industry alongside the cultural backlash faced by a generation of lesbian feminist women who no longer fit into a contemporary feminist or revolutionary profile. There is no doubt that Joan Nestle's work, and legacy, will continue to influence lesbian literature, lesbian editing, the (still relatively small) lesbian publishing industry, the development of experimental literature and the conceptual imagination of contemporary lesbian writers. Whether she will be fully acknowledged for the true impact that her work and the legacy of her activism has had on literature is another question and I hope that this thesis can contribute somewhat to this omission. As I will reiterate in my conclusion, the historical erasure of working-class, Black and minoritised lesbian women's lives is something that will continue unless in Nestle's words we "create our history everyday".¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Taken from an interview with Joan Nestle and Jim Monahan: Monahan, J. and Nestle, J. (1979). Notes on Radical Archiving from a Lesbian Feminist Perspective. *Gay Insurgent* 4/5, 11(4).
<https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/an-early-conversation-about-ga/voice-2-joan-nestle>.

CHAPTER 3: PAT PARKER

The Queer Trickster

In this chapter I shall explore the writing of Pat Parker both through her published poetry and an archive of her work to be found at the Schlesinger Library, based at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, which currently houses the most complete Pat Parker archive in the world. Pat Parker was a radical Black feminist poet, whose literary and political contribution to the women's liberation movement (WLM) is still emerging. With the publication of two key volumes in the past few years, *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989* (Sapphic Classics) and *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (Sapphic Classics), both of which cite Parker's unpublished materials from the archive, it seems an apt time to be further exploring her life and work and thus countering their neglect.¹⁷⁴

In the following chapter I will be moving through the life and work of Pat Parker in a slightly unusual way compared to my other chapters. This is because Pat Parker is the only biomythographical writer I feature in this thesis whose personal archive and papers I have had the opportunity to visit in person.¹⁷⁵ This leads me to

¹⁷⁴ Published in 2018, *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989* (Sapphic Classics) and in 2016 *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (Sapphic Classics) respectively, both books are published as part of the "Sapphic Classics" series which is an imprint through A Midsummer Nights Press and Sinister Wisdom. Note that Joan Nestle's *A Sturdy Yes of A People* (2022) is published as a "Sapphic Classic" (no 's' is included at the end of Classic for this imprint) – this is only through Sinister Wisdom's publishing imprint only.

¹⁷⁵ Based at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America – most commonly referred to as the Schlesinger Library, "illuminates the lives of

approach this chapter in an alternative way, focusing on the material life of Pat Parker and what the archive itself reveals and says about her life. I therefore move through this chapter by first contextualising her work theoretically, examining the life of Parker as a poet, activist, and visionary, before exploring the relationship between her personal experiences and her poetry. I then purposively return my focus to the Pat Parker archive to examine the bearing of her political positioning and identity on her poetry as well as the importance of her archive in the recognition and futurity of biomythography. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on her life, output, and activism by drawing together a four-point overview of what I consider to be the many challenges that Parker and her biomythographical contemporaries faced and how this impacted on their own lives and the reception of their work.

Through an analysis of Parker's life, archive, and poetry in this chapter I will also examine an often-underrepresented theoretical analysis of lesbian poetry which helped to further establish and influence feminist critical theory in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. In returning to Bonnie Zimmerman's theoretical work, I will further exemplify how her theories on lesbian literature often relate to Pat Parker's body of work. That is, a body of work that was visceral and connected intimately to the rhythms and challenges of her life as a Black lesbian. This brings to focus what Bonnie Zimmerman regarded to be the core themes in lesbian literature by and for lesbians: behaviour and choice, subjectivity, textuality, and self-representation.

American women past and present through its collections, research support, public programming, and exhibitions, all while advancing Harvard Radcliffe Institute's commitment to women, gender, and society." <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library>. I was fortunate enough to have a few days with the collection in November 2017.

Parker's poetry defied categorisation and broke racialised gender norms by placing the experiences of Black working-class lesbians (particularly Black butch identified lesbians) at the centre of her feminist and social justice movement activism. Although many female poets have since gone into this terrain and her Radical Feminist contemporaries may have also explored this subject matter – few interwove them in the biomythographical ways that Parker did. This approach of centring the Black lesbian voice arguably informs all of Parker's poetry (both subtextually and explicitly) and reflects a principal concern of my biomythographical framework. This is further evidenced by Parker's activism in areas such as women's health, reproductive rights, internationalist anti-racism, and lesbian liberation which underpinned her politically held view that the patriarchal abuse of power features in all oppression.

A Plurality of Voices

As Lesbians, we cannot allow our concern with the politics of sexuality under patriarchy to become absorbed in the study of mere textuality.

(Wolfe and Penelope, 1993, p.5).

Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope outline a key concern of the biomythographical text, that questions of 'textuality' for lesbian (and working-class) writers can never exist outside of a patriarchal political context. But there is another juncture that is missing from the work of many lesbian critical theorists of the 1990s, and that is the dimension of race. Pat Parker brings race squarely to the fore of her work, as a construct to be questioned, but also as a set of embedded (and often oppressively violent) structures that exist around her intersecting

identities. This approach further explains the connections between Parker's writing and her activism and encourages her readers to consider the struggles that drive her focus on racism, misogyny and classism. It also examines the ways that the active marginalisation of her work shines a light on the harsh realities of many biomythographical authors' careers, as her material reality often limited her literary ambitions.

As we have observed through Joan Nestle's body of work in the previous chapter, biomythography views the past through the lens of collective social movement as opposed to the static ideology of a perceived cultural inheritance or individualised recollection. The biomythographical works I refer to in this thesis have reshaped perceptions of cultural memory and language into tools of political and social change – as well as disrupting literary genres.¹⁷⁶ In the following chapters my exploration of the language used by Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde in their biomythographical work, attempts to demonstrate the deliberate manipulation or even appropriation of a literary language steeped in oppressive bias and communicative inadequacies, a process which they often address openly in their texts.¹⁷⁷ ¹⁷⁸ In self-reflexive biomythographical discourse, semiotics and visual coding are used simultaneously to question patriarchal hegemony with each text working at multiple levels of interpretation.

¹⁷⁶ In the spirit of inventive interpretation, the work of the biomythographer, and indeed the critical theoretician is to analyse this material within a newly configured understanding of history. This reconfiguration could consider history as a process of people's social movement rather than cultural inheritance.

¹⁷⁷ I refer to 'literary language' here to highlight it as a written form of language rather than to privilege it as being the superior or only linguistic mode of value, as biomythography includes multiple modes of communication (oral, performance, pre-verbal, pictorial, photographic, typographical marks, etc.).

However, the complexity of ‘simultaneity’ within a text (as flagged in my Introduction) is rarely explored in relation to Black/feminist/working-class lesbian literature. Biomythography is therefore often expressed through modes of expression beyond the literary text alone such as performance poetry, reportage, political commentary, and visual art. Black/feminist/working-class lesbian literature, in particular the biomythographical, has been classified, even by its defenders and supporters, as somehow *lesser than* rather than as it should be seen – as *radically different to* – literary and genre orthodoxy.

Following on from these concepts there is a necessity and urgency featured in the multi-vocal discourse of Pat Parker’s work that refers to a re-imagining of collectivist creativity in a Black feminist context. Carol Boyce Davies refers to this modality as a form of “critical relationality” where such discourses are “synchronic” and “multiply articulated” (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.56). I would also argue that this aspect further entrenches a sense of the mythical in Parker’s and other Black feminist biomythographical works that are choric or created for multiple voices. This re-connects Parker’s work to Henry Louis Gates’s analysis of the trickster as well as Mae G. Henderson’s theory of simultaneity in Black discourse:

black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses. This discursive diversity or simultaneity of discourse, I call “speaking in tongues” (Henderson, in Gates, ed., 1990, p.122)

In examining Pat Parker’s life and work it is worth establishing some cross connections with Joan Nestle to ascertain the context from

which Parker was writing. Despite being less well known than their contemporaries Audre Lorde and Leslie Feinberg, both Nestle and Parker have influenced several generations of feminist writers whilst their work and lives remains little critiqued or documented. Both writers in James Baldwin's words "bear witness" to a form of cultural memory and demonstrate that biomythography as a genre cannot exist outside of cultural, communal and social domains.¹⁷⁹ Through their work they created a platform for political lesbian texts and biomythography; that is, they demonstrated the importance of archiving lesbian memory (both as literary and material historical articles), and the positioning of subjective experience and social progress as a means of radical collective resistance. Nestle and Parker each made a unique literary contribution to biomythography, through their well-crafted, affective prose and poetry.¹⁸⁰

Both Parker and Nestle's work documents, substantiates, and re-interprets social and cultural memory through multiple lenses that are fundamentally experiential. Connected by their deliberately accessible use of language and storytelling, both use minimalist prose or poetry and succinct methods of conveying their ideas and inner worlds, which are often reflective of wider communal or societal experiences. There is a consciousness in their work of there being an inherited patriarchal language that often mutes the speaker and a wish to make complex literary modes comprehensible in order to speak directly to their reader – that differentiates much of their work from

¹⁷⁹ In the film *I Am Not Your Negro* Baldwin discusses bearing witness to the struggles of his literary role in the civil rights movement, whilst also fearing violence and even death because of the racism he witnessed, documented, and encountered. *I Am Not Your Negro*. (2016). [Film] Raoul Peck. dir. USA: Velvet Film.

¹⁸⁰ Although Parker is facing a small wave of renewed interest, Nestle remains a much-undervalued writer, historian and editor.

other biomythographical writers. They also share a dislocation from their Radical Feminist contemporaries in the centralisation of their lesbian identity and sexuality throughout their work, often improvising with words dialogically to create their own intelligible language. Both women have what I consider to be an archivist's approach to their work; Nestle through her legacy in founding the Lesbian History Archives, Parker with her singular determination to be a well-known poet and to have her process documented for posterity (Parker only recently achieving this objective posthumously, via her archive at the Schlesinger Library). Significantly, both Nestle and Parker approached this need to document working-class lesbian lives as part of their role as writers, seriously.

Defining the Lesbian Self

The (re-)creation and material existence of the lesbian subject, however tenuous that description is, as Wolfe and Penelope note in their introduction to *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory* entitled "Sexual Identity/Textual Politics", still emboldens the ability "to deconstruct the notion that women can be seen only in relation to men, and defined only in terms of male discourse in order to create a position from which to speak and be heard" (Wolfe and Penelope, 1993, p.3).¹⁸¹ As the editors of a text that is also subtitled "Lesbian Cultural Criticism" explain, the erasure of human agency and subjectivity and its postmodern replacement with textuality can de-historicise an embedded twentieth-century cultural and social understanding of lesbianism as a pathological abnormality. Pat Parker's work is

¹⁸¹ Here Wolfe and Penelope appear to be influenced by Patricia Waugh's analysis of postmodern fiction from a feminist perspective, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989).

testimony to what Wolfe and Penelope regard as a lesbian identity that exists and maintains its ontological status “materially, outside of discourse” (ibid) and I would add outside of such a damaging pathological diagnosis.¹⁸² ¹⁸³ Echoing this, Sally R. Munt goes on to explain in their introduction to *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (which she edits that, “there is no eternal lesbian essence outside the frame of cultural *change* and historical determination” (Munt, in Munt, ed., 1992, p.xviii). Parker’s work, in its weaving together of the material and experiential thus creates a poetry of cultural resistance that is reflective of her lived reality.

Lesbian critical theory pre-empts Queer Theory but does not depart from a questioning of gender as a construct, one that has in turn both oppressed and essentialised lesbian identity. The contemporary denial of this aspect of lesbian cultural work further compounds the immediate need to reconsider lesbian criticism, particularly criticism from its golden era in the early 1990s in the U.S.¹⁸⁴ Lesbian critics and theorists such as Bonnie Zimmerman and Sally R. Munt, like other lesbian/queer writers, crossed over into the more corporate leaning publishing world from their popular feminist underground positions; from what could be considered marginality into

¹⁸² In their Introduction, Wolfe and Penelope summarise the longstanding theoretical development of the term ‘lesbian’ coined by the German sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1897. They juxtapose this by pointing out that the word ‘heterosexual’ appeared afterwards and while this term has become normalised it likewise referred to a perverse “appetite” for the opposite sex in the OED but one in which men partook.

¹⁸³ The term Sapphism had long been in use to indicate lesbianism within a wider context of women loving women and/or spending their lives in the company of other women.

¹⁸⁴ A broader understanding of Black/lesbian feminist theory that I discuss in the Introduction to this thesis is needed in order to be able to properly draw on ‘cultural work’ by people who are marginalised and often excluded from the dominant vantagepoints of critical theory, where all too often the ephemeral and non-tangible is dismissed as being invalid.

the mainstream. Munt comments that lesbian literary output cannot be “considered enough to construct a tradition let alone a canon” (Munt, in Munt, ed., 1992, p.xvii), particularly when critiqued in a context outside of lesbian public cultures. A cooption and assimilation of aspects of lesbian-focused theoretical work into broader theory and Queer Theory, has had a negative impact on the afterlife of the work of biomythographical writers such as Parker. I disagree with Munt’s assessment here, in that I believe the legacy of biomythography *does* leave behind a sturdy “tradition”, as I am attempting to demonstrate in this thesis. I do, however, agree with her astute analysis of the commercial crossover of selected lesbian criticism:

The production of even these texts is a testimony to the social movements of the Thatcher/Reagan years, and their inscription within a consumerist aesthetic. A postmodern culture has seen the development of reading communities with purchasing power, which publishers have rightly perceived as potential micro-markets. (Munt, in Munt, ed., 1992, p.xvii).¹⁸⁵

In contrast, Parker’s writing, as her archive clearly proves, failed to be economically viable for her as a Black working-class mother. The only ‘micro-markets’ that Parker benefitted from were independent networks of lesbian women who supported her work in universities, bookshops, and community spaces. In her work Parker was both poeticising the impact of socio-economic oppression and theorising its connectivity to racism, lesbi-phobia, specie-ism, and

¹⁸⁵ Munt’s commentary on the lack of lesbian criticism may be based on the *type* of lesbian criticism they are referring to. Munt was less receptive to Radical Feminist lesbian literary criticism, of which there appeared to be more than enough to consider it part of a tradition of women’s literature and to which I refer throughout this thesis.

violent misogyny. Her writing is hard hitting and what she gives voice to lies outside of what was amenable to 'mainstream' audiences and the cultural zeitgeist of the time.

Pre-biomythography, "classic' lesbian theory proceeded from a set of assumptions: that one could (with difficulty, perhaps) define a category called lesbian, that lesbians shared certain experiences and concepts, and those discursive practices – literary texts, critical analyses, political theories – proceed from lived experience." (Zimmerman, in Munt, ed., 1992, p.2). As Zimmerman points out this assumption grates with postmodernist and deconstructive modes of analyses and the associated 'critical debate' of the 1980s which questioned categories of "Experience, authenticity, voice, writer' and even the term 'lesbian' itself" (Zimmerman, 1992, p.2). As she goes on to chart in "Lesbians Like This and That: Notes on Lesbian Criticism for the Nineties", Post-structuralist theories have irrevocably changed lesbian criticism and, as I would concur, further supported an erosion of this form of study. Such critical depletion is often founded on what are ill-considered to be fixed identity categories. This takes things in a direction that encompasses male subjectivity, but also a well-trod male discourse where the lesbian/female body often becomes invisible, ever fragmented, disassociated from lived experience, with the realities and threats of gender-based violence against women and girls being overlooked.^{186 187}

¹⁸⁶ Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* mentions lesbian sexuality only a few times and does not seek to fully consider the historical context, dynamics, or particularities of lesbian sexuality.

¹⁸⁷ I am not dismissing Post-structuralism or Deconstruction. I am however questioning the moorings, associated systems of knowledge and implications of these and other 'isms'.

Zimmerman regards socially constructed theories to be questioning “the validity of positing any kind of essentialist, universal or trans-historical identity such as ‘woman’ or ‘lesbian’” (ibid). She also observes that this disrupting of a concept of a “unified lesbian identity” comes not from “deconstruction” or “gay and lesbian” studies but from “lesbians of colour”. I would suggest, though, that this stance has likewise, in parallel, been adopted by a dominant matrix of critical systems to exclude and denounce lesbian critical thinking.

Zimmerman goes on to expand upon this point:

The primary strategies of the recent past, therefore, have involved the deconstruction of the lesbian as a unified, essentialist, ontological being and the reconstruction of the lesbian as a metaphor and/or subject position. (Zimmerman, in Munt, ed.,1992, p.3)

Zimmerman later contends that lesbian critics (from the 1990s onwards) “seem less interested in what we see than in the act of seeing itself; less concerned with the product (the text) than with the process (critical reading)” (Zimmerman, in Munt, ed.,1992, p.3). Pivotaly she names something that biomythography re-establishes to be part of the tradition of lesbian literary production – a pedagogy of “essential, ‘deep’ *knowledge*” and “historically situated *knowing*.” (ibid). Whereas Zimmerman goes on to suggest that 1990s criticism “stands at an intersection between lesbian separatism and deconstruction”, she regards this as presenting “tantalising possibilities, as well as obvious problems” (ibid). Although Zimmerman discusses how “fragmentation, difference and mutability are useful in undermining monolithic notions of the ‘Lesbian Self’” (Zimmerman, in Munt, ed.,1992, p.9), she

describes this way of thinking about shifting and often historically time bound identities as feeding an approach that considers:

Lesbian history and literary tradition [as] a shifting matrix of behaviours, choices, subjectivities, textualities and self-representations that is always situated within a specific historical context. The notion of 'history', 'tradition' or 'culture' rests not so much with the actors in the past as with the readers in the present. (Zimmerman, in Munt, ed., 1992, p.9)

If we consider this approach to be integral to the formation, development, and production of biomythographical work, the possibility of marginalised identities adopting biomythography based on the work of textual foremothers is a pertinent legacy. It is one that involves Black, working-class and minoritised lesbians writing at the margins socially, creatively, and politically (to this I would also now add critically). It is within this "specific historical context" that Pat Parker's work must be situated as it correlates with and uses as a strategy the integrated activity and activism of the Black lesbian feminist movement, or literary networks to be more precise. Parker's oeuvre of work (which includes poetry, political pamphlets, diaries, and letters) was not only marginalised by the dominant hegemonies or what de Lauretis refers to as "tangential relations" but also the behaviours, choices (or lack of choice), subjectivity, textuality, and self-representation that situated her texts within a specific historical context. As Zimmerman suggests, the 'history', 'tradition' and 'culture' that cocooned this work, is oft forgotten when analysing this period. ¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ The deletion of this period from the pantheon and development of diverse literary voices remains associated with the double-bind and shame of being part of a female tradition and/or lesbian tradition.

In an essay that considers the ‘literary ideology’ of Audre Lorde’s *Zami* in relation to feminist practice and the lived experience of lesbians, Katie King puts forth that Lorde’s naming of the genre biomythography defines a “variety of generic strategies in the construction of gay and lesbian identity in the USA”. (King in Munt, ed., 1992, p.62)

Following Parker’s death in 1989 (and the erstwhile further commodification of late twentieth century literary and critical voicings via post-modern purchasing power), lesbian cultural theory becomes enmeshed in systems of dissolution or what could be called a matrix of dominant critical theory, that queried gendered experiences and their construction. I would argue that in reframing lesbian critical work within a broader understanding of intertextual cultural work – one can better reflect the dimensions of biomythography as a genre. As I go on to discuss in later chapters, writers such as Dorothy Allison developed their own intertextual lesbian criticism and theory with its popularity reaching a peak in the pre-internet years of the early 1990s.

The Pat Parker Papers – A Life Untold

Throughout this thesis I avoid detailing biographical information about each main writer, but I am making Pat Parker the exception to this rule as there is very little written about her life, and this information is critical to a fuller understanding of her work. I believe that this lack of knowledge about her life has also led to her work being further neglected. By delving into Parker’s archive and examining her work through a biographical lens we bring to the fore key questions about the extent to which biomythography as a tradition must be informed by the personal and the experiential if it is to be

authentic. Having access to the Pat Parker archive radically changes any view of Parker as a minor contemporary of Lorde and reasserts her contextual place in the development of biomythography and the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM).

The Pat Parker Papers were donated to the Schlesinger Library by Parker's life partner Marty Dunham and their adopted daughter Anastasia. They contain unpublished drafts of her poetry and drama as well as multiple edited reworkings of her better-known poems. They also include her political pamphlets, administrative letters about her poetry readings, correspondence with publishers, journal entries, calendars, and work-based diaries as well as digitised video excerpts and audio of her readings and work.¹⁸⁹ The papers are fascinating in the way they reveal how Parker's poetic work and career is woven into even the most seemingly mundane parts of the collection such as pay slips from the Oakland Centre for Women's Health (where she worked for a number of years) that denote a move from full to part-time work to focus on her writing. As well as items charting her routine everyday life (such as softball team meetings, dinner with friends, financial matters), evidencing her commitment to writing but also her ability, even in times of financial difficulty, to consider her poetic life as being a central part of her identity.

The archives which are chronologically ordered, give a detailed account of Parker's personal, social, and cultural life. She analyses her political and artistic development in her letters and articles and can,

¹⁸⁹ It should be noted that the commodification of archives in the U.S. and the privatisation of Radical Feminist work, poses a particular ethical problem in a digital age. The lack of extant archives available in my research area is frustrating to any twenty-first century researcher.

on occasion, seem fully absorbed in her work and the promotion of it. Parker had a very ordered approach to the administration and the marketing of her writing for short bursts of time, with long gaps (sometimes of several years) to be found in her papers when she appears to be disillusioned with her role as a poet or she is busy surviving financially.¹⁹⁰ Finances are a recurring theme in her correspondence to other poets (including Audre Lorde) with some of her most revealing archives about the WLM and Black feminist movement being in relation to her earnings: publisher's fees, speaker's fees and conference appearance fees.¹⁹¹ In correspondence related archives in which she negotiates finances her attitude ranges from being wholly generous of her time, particularly those in support of political and feminist causes – to being resentful and demanding, churlish and sometimes even self-destructive in her approach.

It is often Parker's constant interruptions, particularly those whilst she had to earn a living, of her life as a poet that present the greatest challenges to her literary output. She appears to have a clear delineation of the relationship between her family, home, romantic life, and the production of her poetry – a common trait for women who are outside of patriarchal or paternal lines of either power or financial support. In the collected papers there remains some unpublished work that Parker clearly did not want to be printed, which evidences her ability to scrutinise, edit and select her own work – something that she often took to painstaking extremes. Over the course of seven years, she wrote to three different lovers about her collections *Child of Myself*

¹⁹⁰ Pat Parker was posthumously regarded as a “forerunning black lesbian poet” (Shockley in Parker, 1999, p.37) by her contemporaries and yet her small body of written work has often been out of print.

¹⁹¹ Seen in Series II, CORRESPONDENCE, 1964-1989 (#1.18-8.5, E.1) & Series I, BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL, 1944-1989 (#1.1-1.17, FD.1, Mem.1-Mem.3).

(1972) and *Pit Stop* (1973) which contain poems that were written during and spanned the marriages to both her first husbands and her first women lovers.¹⁹²

Although Pat Parker's life as a feminist activist and poet is touched upon in many of her posthumous releases such as *Movement in Black* (1978), there is little mention of her life before she was an out lesbian by the contemporary peers who have written prefaces or short essays about her. As a poet and Black lesbian feminist activist it is clear, throughout the archives, that her poetic influences reached beyond these identities. Her experiences in heterosexual relationships with Black men and her close relationship with her family, particularly her sister (that is also evidenced in her archive) tell us about a woman who was as much shaped by her formative and early experiences of being an artist, particularly in her 20s in 1950s and 1960s America, as by her relationships with Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Merle Woo, Judy Grahn, Chrystos, and other notable lesbian feminist writers or even her involvement in the Oakland Women's Centre for Health.¹⁹³ Parker was an economic poet who did not leave a large legacy of poetry. She was however a prolific letter writer and other information about her life – her artistic influences, her development as a writer, the struggles she faced financially, creatively, and personally – is evidenced as much through her correspondence with peers, admirers,

¹⁹² Versions of both of these collections can now be found online at the Lesbian Poetry Archives which has an accessible scanned archive of first editions and journals resourced from lesbian archives and libraries across the U.S.

<http://www.lesbianpoetryarchive.org/node/8>.

¹⁹³ This list also includes writers such as Cheryl Clarke and Chrystos who both knew Pat Parker personally and actively supported her work over the years.

publishers, and organisers as it is by the accounts of her close friends and family.¹⁹⁴

Parker's marriages to playwright Ed Bullins and poet Bob Parker (from whom she derives her surname, as her maiden name was Cooks) give an insight into elements of her politicised writing style. In correspondence with Bullins and later Bob Parker (who were not liked by Parker's family) there is a fragile sense of self-worth as a writer. In these relationships, she appears to have taken on the domesticated role of supporting both her male partners financially and emotionally while attempting to write her own work and earn a living from the literary margins. References to the historical deletion of women as artists and activists are very much related to her own personal experiences of abuse from men and her exclusion from literary recognition when she was in relationships with men, which initially impacted on the development of her own work, before she came out as a lesbian. As she states in one of her many versions of her biography in the Schlesinger Library archives:

In 1963, when her contemporary women poets were extolling the wonders of flowers and babies, she was writing about the inequality of relationships between men and women. (Parker, "Biography", undated, in Series I, BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL, 1944-1989, Schlesinger Library)

In 1971, the death of Parker's beloved sister Shirley Jones Cooks can be seen as a turning point in the development of her work. While

¹⁹⁴ Seen in Series II, CORRESPONDENCE, 1964-1989 (#1.18-8.5, E.1) & Series I, BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL, 1944-1989 (#1.1-1.17, FD.1, Mem.1-Mem.3)

“Womanslaughter” (1978), her poem that recounts Shirley’s death at the hands of her estranged ex-partner, rejects what she sees to be an implicit and endemic violation of women’s bodies, psychological being and spirituality by men – it is not published until seven years after Shirley’s death.¹⁹⁵ In 1978, alongside this change in the direction and focus of Parker’s work, she also comes out as a lesbian and starts to edit work she started in the late 1960s to greater effect.¹⁹⁶ It is at this point in her career that she starts to place more value in her poetry and attempts to market her own work by developing or tapping into feminist networks that she hopes will support her poetry.¹⁹⁷

Pat Parker’s Raw Vernacular

Pat Parker was out there with her black body being a dyke poet, rapping on violence, black folks’ ways, political repression, and quotidian late twentieth century madneses.

(Clarke in Parker, 1999, p.15)

¹⁹⁵ Violence against women and girls is a recurrent biomythographical theme that I touch on throughout my thesis. By gender-based violence and violence against women and girls (VAWG), I refer to the abuse and violation of women and girls’ physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and psychological safety. Statistically this is mostly perpetrated by men in intimate, familial, community or state contexts and can occur in domestic, work and war related environments. VAWG can lead to physical, psychological, sexual, reproductive, and economic harm, long term trauma, and death, the impacts of which can be personal as well as well affective and inter-generational. The threat of such violence serves as a wider family, community or societal control mechanism over women’s rights, bodily autonomy, and sexual freedoms.

¹⁹⁶ As in Dorothy Allison’s writing, violence against women and girls ebbs and flows throughout her work, as a backdrop to the political placing of women in society by men. It remains menacing and threatening but is often discussed in a matter-of-fact way, to heighten the reader’s sense of this being an imposed normalcy in women and girls’ lives.

¹⁹⁷ I would propose that this is often the impetus for the development of new creative disciplines and genres such as biomythography, where a new way of expressing political and social changes or critiques cannot be served by existent literary or theoretical modes.

The first thing you do is to forget i'm Black
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black

(Parker, 1999, p.99)

There is probably no better way to describe and re-imagine the material and visceral realisation (and impact) of Pat Parker's poetry than Cheryl Clarke's introduction to Parker's posthumous collection *Movement in Black*. In this essay Clarke both radicalises and contextualises Parker's work, situating her within a wider tradition of radical Black poetry (Clarke lists Parker's literary contemporaries as being Don L. Lees, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni) while placing her squarely in a Black lesbian tradition that, along with Lorde, evoked a "hard literacy of blackness" in which "her family and the working-class roots of her black consciousness were the subtexts" (Clarke in Parker, 1999, p.17). That is to say Clarke believed that Parker:

projected her blackness to its raw vernacular core – part of the freight for being a dyke. One's blackness must never be in question when so much else is under attack and suspicion, i.e. one's personhood, one's beauty, one's sex (Clarke in Parker, 1999, p.17)

Parker's tendency to relay the "speak-the-truth-to-the-people" (Clarke in Parker, 1999, p.20) approach to poetry was believed by many of her contemporaries to be both her strength and weakness. Parker's "plain, insightful, honest" (Shockley in Parker, 1999, p.37) language has often disguised both the deep imaginative impact and political influence that

Parker's work had on critical thinking and poetry of the time.¹⁹⁸ Even when, as Audre Lorde commented in 1978, "a line falters" in Parker's poetry (Lorde in Parker, 1999 p.32), she continues to critically and poetically engage both readers and writers.¹⁹⁹

Parker's poetry conveys what we might call a trickster minimalism; a refinement of words and phrases that do not eradicate the Black vernacular of her working-class roots, her deliberate continuation of a performative oral tradition, her maternal ancestry, or her attention to the multi-layered contradictions of being a poor, Black lesbian poet. Parker's subject matter can be read in multiple ways that promote its immediate alignment with political and social ideologies of the far left and many liberation movements of the time, of which she was an active part (gay, Black/feminist, internationalist, socialist, and Black radical). But her work also deals with complex and nuanced reflections on living with intersecting and multiple differences as a Black lesbian woman in a world of 'womanslaughter' and the racist genocide of the Jonestown Massacre in 1978 where, as Parker observes:

...the message
was simple
was sharp

¹⁹⁸ Tamara L. Spira's response to Parker's polemical and revolutionary tone that span across her poetry and activism was to re-engage with her work in relation to contemporary struggles against oppression: Spira T. L. (2022). "I Give You a World Incomplete": Pat Parker's Revolution and the Unfinished Legacy of 1970s Feminist Radicalisms. *Feminist studies*, 48, pp. 60–80.

¹⁹⁹ In *Warrior Poet* (2006), Lorde's official biography by Alexis De Veaux, she characterizes the extent of Parker's influence on Lorde and cites her influence across the U.S. on Black lesbian poetry in her diaries alongside her account of being a former lover of Parker, and a slighted one at that, something which may have informed her sometimes negative critique of Parker's poetry.

there is a place for niggers
but not amongst good white folk
(Parker, 1985, p.54)

Parker's poetry is visceral, rooted in a Southern (Baptist) feminist tradition of deep story telling whilst often using an African American choric tradition of call and response to embolden her political axis. In *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement and the Queer Literary Canon* (2018), Jaime Harker refers to the specificity of Southern lesbian identity as being one that was racialised, "For southern lesbian feminists, race was not something that was later "added" to feminism; it was always an essential part of their understanding of their region and their identities." (Harker, 2018, p.75)

The live, public renditions of her poetry often involved different women poets from all over the U.S. who participated in choric renditions of her work, most notably "Movement in Black". I believe the poverty of the critical analysis of Parker's work and, as Lorde and Clarke both comment – what is believed to be the undisciplined element of her work – lies in a fundamentally misunderstood pillar of her art, that is her belief in the purity of the oral poetic tradition. In short, her poems come alive when they are being read aloud, to an audience, particularly one that is willing to interact. This is exemplified by the recurrent use of repetition, double meaning and call and response (including the use of shifting narrative perspectives) particularly in her longer poems such as "Goat Child", "Don't Let the Fascists Speak", "Where Will You Be", "Movement in Black", "Womanslaughter" and "For Audre".

Invisible Identities: All the Names We Forgot to Say

In “Liberation Front” the second part of Parker’s collection *Movement in Black* (1978) the poem “Don’t Let the Fascists Speak” carves out her political position: “I am a child of America/a step child”. As speaker she is aware of her own double consciousness in surviving and dealing with dominant oppressive systems and institutions and this response aptly juxtaposes the voice of a chorus of fascists who recount their ‘rights’ and as they cry “*let the Nazis speak*” (their voices are always an italicised chorus differentiated from the main speaker).²⁰⁰ The call of the right wing that allows the Nazis to speak is also the same chorus that articulates its rights as being those inscribed in U.S. law and First Amendment constitutional rights; that is, they believe:

the Bill of Rights
was written
to protect
us

(Parker, 1999, p. 92, Don’t Let the Fascists Speak)

While legal mechanisms disavow the voices of the powerless, the Supreme Court defends “*freedom of speech*” and the caricature of “hanging niggers” as a warning to school children, at the same time defining as “illegal” or fascistic anything that interrupts the dominant supremacist discourse. Here Parker deftly conveys how language is itself a corruptible medium. By inserting her speaker’s subjectivity in

²⁰⁰ This very much echoes contemporary First Amendment ‘free speech’ arguments in the U.S. in 2023 that are being used to promote political ideologies of the far right.

the first person as the “greasy-legged/Black child” she describes how she has grown up imbibing these fascistic messages as part of her family life but explains that this didn’t stop her from “conjuring” “images/ a black panther” (Parker, 1999, p. 94).²⁰¹ Parker goes on to explain in her poem “Where Will You Be” (a title that echoes socialist liberation slogans of the early twentieth-century) that there are a variety of military and institutional bodies (that the speaker lists) whose only aim, despite their alleged bureaucratic and scientific roles, is to “remove the evil/ the queerness/the faggotry/the perverseness/from their midst” (Parker, 1999, p.107). These nameless and yet all-powerful forces of supremacy and patriarchy will often be faceless and subtle, and yet they materialise in familiar guises:

They will come in robes
to rehabilitate
and white coats
to subjugate
and where will you be
when they come?
(Parker, 1999 p.106, Don’t Let the Fascists Speak)

Again, the motif of “Where Will You Be” is rhetorical, asking the reader and the audience to move into action, consciousness and being with an emphasis on the reader’s responsibility to enact the speakers words and recognise their own potential to progress and vocalise collective movement.

²⁰¹ The very use of the word “conjure” also intertextually connects Parker’s work both historically and critically to the work of Spillers and Price, in particular *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985), and their identification of an African American women’s literary tradition.

“Where Will You Be” echoes a subtle public delineation and marginalisation of the term ‘lesbian’. This draws attention to right-wing attitudes towards lesbians and the broader use in the twentieth century of pseudo-scientific terms to define lesbian sexuality. Terms that were associated with sickness and abnormality that still impact on how we historicise and use that term to embody sexual identity. If we eradicate the voices of radical lesbians, particularly those that have been historically erased or marginalised, as either defunct or ‘incorrect’ then we continue a cycle of historical shaming and erasure that Parker defines in *Movement in Black* as: ²⁰²

... all the names we forgot to say
& all the names we didn’t know
& all the names we don’t know, yet
(Parker, 1999, p.125, *Movement in Black*)

Here, as in her collection *Movement in Black*, Parker is also acknowledging the presence of many versions, viewpoints, and interpretations of historical events, while still rooting the power of people en masse to change material reality to a course that is more aligned with social justice.²⁰³

²⁰² I use ‘radical’ etymologically here to mean a departure from tradition and as a way to affect fundamental meaning rather than in the feminist context. Many of the texts I refer to challenge the limitations and contestability of Radical Feminism. I would also note the way that these texts are often marginalised and so become, in Halberstam’s words, ‘queered’.

²⁰³ Charting the political interventions (success and failures) from Second Wave solidarity campaigns, liberation struggles and activism, Rosalyn Baxandall gives us a detailed insight into the complexities of what we would now call intersectional movement building: Baxandall, R. (2001). Re-Visioning the Women’s Liberation Movement’s Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists. *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), pp. 225–245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178460>.

At this point we will turn to “Where Will You Be” and “Movement in Black” more fully as examples of Parker’s biomythographical poetry which question and subvert social (and national) memory. In these poems she brings into her work a key biomythographical concern of mine as featured in my framework; that of the social construction of the self, the community, and the ways that this relates to identity and representation. I believe that this informs the inclusion of choric refrains throughout her poetry which brings an ever-present multitude of voices into her work, the voices of women who have experienced, witnessed, and participated in historical/social upheaval and progressive change.

Movement in Black

As outlined, Parker’s poetry is written to be read aloud and performed – it is deliberately minimalist in her careful and consciously restrained use of words – but is also encoded with a lesbian intertextuality. Parker’s ability to write with agency whilst centring physical and spatial experiences in visceral ways places her within an African American soothsayer tradition, as well as within the scope of the biomythographical truth teller. In addition, it underpins her as being, what Cheryl Clarke declares in the expanded edition of Parker’s posthumous collection *Movement in Black*, a “Queer Trickster”.²⁰⁴ Parker’s work is indisputably part of an African American Black vernacular tradition that uses mythological wordplay to demonstrate

²⁰⁴ Here I refer to Gloria I. Joseph’s Afrocentric worldview and placing of Black lesbian spirituality within a cosmological context in her essay “Sojourner Truth: Archetypal Black Feminist” in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (1990).

her 'indeterminacy, her performance of multiple roles and her interpretative power' (Clarke in Parker, 1999, p.15).²⁰⁵ Being defined as the 'Queer Trickster' also aligns Parker with an array of potential trans-historical Black lesbian identities, which she takes delight in assuming (and having her roving chorus adopt when performing). The trickster in Parker's work has a depth; Parker allows her trickster to pay attention to the multi-layered contradictions of being a poor, Black lesbian poet. Parker also speaks with a mischievous wit as this mythical trickster, appearing in person as the speaker or as cameos throughout her stylised, well-crafted and accessible poems.

We can see this in Parker's extended poem "Goat Child". This is a multi-vocal articulation of the speaker's childhood, which throughout uses biographical anchors such as dates of birth, family identifiers, locations and so on. The playful subject of the poem or the "Goat Child" artfully switches gender, perspective, and tense to make the poem a porch tale that could be regaled by an intergenerational family chorus as it rattles along with the intensity and intimacy of a conversation with a girlfriend or confidant. The poem spans a 22-year period to tell the mythical but also biographical tale of the politicisation and coming of age of a young Black female artist (thus repeating a recurrent biomythographical journey or bildungsroman) who is defending her "right to/wear cowboy boots even if/ i was a girl which no one/had bothered to tell me" (Parker, 1999, p.51). Here the trickster figure in Pat Parker's poem is rooted, biomythographically, in her own

²⁰⁵ As Henry Louis Gates Jr. examines in his extended study of the trickster *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), this is a preserved oral tradition where words alone signify multiple meanings and often denote narratives within narratives, which I would observe theoretically has similarities to biomythography. Biomythography differs from Gates' theory of 'interrelation' firstly in its referencing and framing around lesbian texts, but also in its use of (biomythographical) language rooted as it is in a lesbian feminist tradition as well as Black feminist tradition.

constructed self-narrative, written both in the more intimate first person and the omniscient ever present authorial voice.

Importantly the subject of “Goat Child” will become, without apologies, a Black lesbian, and interchangeably a queer Black woman and ‘butch dyke’, using subtle differentiations in identity markers throughout her poetry to consolidate her timeless trickster guise. As Parker determines, what is inscribed on the lesbian body (without permission) is an internalised conflict born of socially embedded hetero-normative family expectations and it is not until the Goat Child of the poem declares herself “O-U-T OUT” in her 20s that this trickster figure confidently reappears “charged/ muscles tensed” and ready to leap “into a new time” (Parker, 1999, p.49). However, Parker’s trickster has been subjugated and disconnected from her heritage, but more than that she has been taught to “not know” about her heritage.²⁰⁶

not knowing the words,
the gestures,
not knowing
history or heritage
not knowing
(Parker, 1999, p.49, Goat Child)

Critically, Parker uses performativity as much as form and vision to channel her trickster energy, connecting an emerging feminist oral tradition with her self-identified African maternal ancestry. For instance we can envisage Parker the poet as Eshu – one of the primary

²⁰⁶ Another key biomythographical facet – the work tends to address the deliberate denial of representation, by presenting multiple narratives that can be seen to have always occupied a space of invisibility.

orishas or spirits in Yorùbá religion – extending a contemporary queer lesbian version of this mythical archetype; she is a patron of the road, travelling from state to state in the U.S. performing her poetry, always with a troupe of Black and minoritised lesbian poets in tow.²⁰⁷

In “Movement in Black”, (after which Parker’s 1999 reissued collection is titled) the speaker assertively repeats in the first person throughout her poem that “I am the Black woman/ and I have been all over” (Parker, 1999, p.120).²⁰⁸:

I was on the bus with Rosa Parks
& in the streets with Martin King
I was marching
and singing
and crying
and praying
I was with SNCC
& I was with CORE
I was in Watts
when the streets
were burning
I was a Panther in Oakland
in New York
with NOW
in San Francisco

²⁰⁷ Pat Parker travelled widely in Africa toward the end of her life; she went to Kenya and Ghana in 1985 with two separate United Nations delegations alongside her own travels in Nairobi and Accra.

²⁰⁸ This decision was of course made in the absence of Parker following her premature passing, suggesting that the mythologisation of a narratorial textual process can be reciprocal.

with gay liberation
in D.C. with
the radical dykes
yes I was there
& I'm still moving
(Parker, 1999, p.122, Movement in Black)

Here the female lesbian subject fearlessly adopts multiple and intersecting identities, each one strengthening the next and relativising her singular identity with an historical collective struggle fought by both her trans-national ancestors of the past and contemporary radicals of the present.²⁰⁹ This includes her inhabiting a role as a member of the Black Panthers, itself the stuff of myth and legend. These multiple identities are also polyvocal, their poetic diction materially occupying converging spatial and temporal realities. This again exemplifies Parker's 'raw vernacular', the list constituting a moving body of radical historical simultaneities, that both politically and textually interconnect. They portray overlapping political beliefs and contradictions that Parker, in an act of both solidarity and revolution, importantly refuses to differentiate or hierarchise. Parker demonstrates a contradiction of what Wolfe and Penelope observe to be the fragmentation of the historical materiality of marginalised experiences through a postmodern lens. In "Sexual Identity/Textual Politics", Wolfe and Penelope explain that just as "Poststructuralist discourse" had "become a dominant force in Anglo-American criticisms" in the late 1970s and early 1980s, so this "precise juncture in history" was also a time:

²⁰⁹ In her archives, Parker is often documented as being an active participant and organiser in the many political struggles she (poetically and creatively) aligns herself with.

when Lesbians, women of color, poor and working-class women, and others on the periphery of patriarchy have begun to find a literary and critical voice, to seek social and political equality, to become visible, to establish their identities for themselves, identities that had been denied them within patriarchy and patriarchal discourse. (Wolfe and Penelope, 1993, p.5)

“Movement in Black” in its very title evokes the need for parallel political struggles which focus on and represent diverse experiences through rapidly moving frames of historical reality and lived experience.^{210 211} Parker’s subject matter in “Movement in Black” is firmly aligned with political and social ideologies of the far left and many liberation movements of the time, in which she was actively involved (gay liberation movement, Black panthers, feminist health movement, Black feminist and Black radical collectives). Her poetry deals with complex and nuanced reflections on living with intersecting and multiple differences as a Black lesbian woman in a world of gender-based violence and endemic racist genocide.²¹²

²¹⁰ In this comparative study of Parker’s work with lesser-known poet Willyce Kim, Mimi Van Ausdall’s presents an inter-cultural exploration of two poets involved in the WIP movement as alongside grassroots organising. Van Ausdall’s analysis of political blackness or ‘Third World Feminism’ evidences the way such activism informed what would come to be known as intersectionality: Van Ausdall, M. I. (2015). “The Day All of the Different Parts of Me Can Come Along”: Intersectionality and U.S. Third World Feminism in the Poetry of Pat Parker and Willyce Kim. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19, pp. 336–356.

²¹¹ In addition, the speaker’s resultant historical shapeshifting across these movements can also be seen to be a part of Parker’s trickster aesthetic.

²¹² As outlined in my thesis Introduction, violence against women and girls is a key biomythographical theme, one Parker intersectionally connects to racism. Parker’s poetry defied categorisation and broke gender norms through its very depiction of violence against women and girls as a gender-based phenomenon often interlinked with other forms of oppression. This was driven by her own personal experiences – her first husband pushed her down a flight of stairs, leading to a miscarriage – and the loss of her sister to domestic homicide as recited in “Womanslaughter”. In Parker’s poetry the speaker seems ever aware of male violence but doesn’t allow it to

Archiving Black Feminist Biomythography

The Pat Parker Papers reveal an unromantic literary career that was often a struggle to maintain and although relatively (rather than only posthumously) successful, it did not meet Parker's own expectations of herself as a poet or of her reception as a poet.²¹³ Despite her own self-doubt, the Pat Parker archives reveal a poet who was recognised by her peers and within the biomythographical movement, no matter how poorly resourced, networked or understood that literary movement was.²¹⁴ They also reveal a dialogic intertextuality with other Black/lesbian feminist writers in the development of her work that is distinctly biomythographical. Thematic elements in Parker's work such as recurrent life experiences, emerging identities and political consciousness resonated both in her poetry and in correspondence with other biomythographical writers such as Lorde, Woo, Chrystos, Rich and Sanchez. The papers provide evidence of an engaged and intellectually astute poet whose work was politically and socially charged enough to represent and articulate the voices and experiences

control the direction of her poetry or the narratives that weave collections thematically together. This component of my biomythographical framework is reasserted by Parker's depiction of her activism (poetic and material) in areas such as women's health, reproductive rights, anti-racism, and lesbian liberation that underpin her observation that the patriarchal abuse of power features in all forms oppression.

²¹³ Pat Parker maintained that as an artist she was unsupported, this is a feeling that she refers to repeatedly in her letters, however this appears to be more related to her notion of what success *should* look like, rather than reality.

²¹⁴ The Pat Parker Papers give a real insight into the precarious existence of a relatively successful Black feminist poet in their inclusion of her day-to-day struggle with tax audits, debt, appointment diaries, hospital visits, adoption rights, emotional tangles with ex-lovers and arguments with feminist organisers over speaker/performance fees.

of Black lesbian women in a truly meaningful and multi-faceted manner.²¹⁵

According to her archival papers, and as apparent in the introduction to the posthumous edition of *Movement in Black*, Parker was considered by her peers and supporters to have immense social and oratory skills that enabled her to engage with diverse audiences and to fill venues (in her archives she cites having “read for as few as few as ten people and as many as 300,000 at one time”).²¹⁶ In letters and correspondence with Parker, Lorde discusses these talents as she believed that they would enhance Parker’s poetry career. Yet Parker’s reciprocal correspondence with Lorde alongside her diaries and assorted notes demonstrate her innate doubts about her own ability as a writer and her poetic voice.²¹⁷ ²¹⁸ In these letters, Parker repeatedly asks questions as to whether she will make it as a poet, if her work is really good enough and whether there is truly an interest in her work.

²¹⁵ Audre Lorde, Chrystos, and Parker’s supporters – particularly feminist event organisers, referred to her charm and ability to bring a vast amount of energy and social capital to her poetry events and readings.

²¹⁶ Series I, BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL, 1944-1989 (#1.1-1.17, FD.1, Mem.1-Mem.3).

²¹⁷ This doubt and insecurity are often framed by Parker’s exclusion or lack of recognition as a poet by the lesbian feminist movement, which appears to be both racialised/racist as well as lesbophobic. In a letter to Audre Lorde, 13th November 1985, Parker cites that her one-time collaborator and fellow poet, Judy Grahn with whom she collaborated on *Where Would I Be Without You* (a recording and release of poetry and music on vinyl, released by the lesbian owned Olivia Records in 1976) had excluded her from her book *The Highest Apple*, which was a collection of essays about lesbian poets. In Parker’s letter to Lorde she says this leaves her “angry” and “hurt” but also determined to “prevent people from dismissing me and what I’m doing” and to “not let them get away with it.” (Parker in Sullivan and Enszer, eds., 2018, p.62). Also, to be found in Series I, BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL, 1944-1989 (#1.1-1.17, FD.1, Mem.1-Mem.3).

²¹⁸ The archives include scrap paper notes on the corner of bills and backs of envelopes, which reflect her own assertions that she would one day be a recognised and revered poet (a tongue in cheek ambition but one that she believed in) and her meticulous approach to archiving herself; this was demonstrated, for example, by her retention of numerous diaries and calendars that often had only a few entries in them.

She also doubts her ability to represent her ideas and convey these thoughts and feelings to others. In the few surviving videos of her poetry performances she exudes confidence, authority and a sense of her own power as a poet and public speaker but when in correspondence with trusted people in her life – particularly her sister, early lovers and publishers – she reveals someone who was often split between her own ego and power to exert influence over others (particularly lovers), and a crippling self-doubt about her work and its future that was deeply felt.²¹⁹ Diagnosed with breast cancer between 1983 and 1984, with initial health scares starting as early as the late 1970s, Parker’s poetic and written output started to decline by the mid 1980s (she died in 1989). Her urgency to order and collate her poetry archive and legacy is evident in her correspondence with new publishers and women’s festivals in which she references her past achievements, her catalogue of work and suggests that she should be a better recognised literary figure.²²⁰

Parker’s archive also documents an important political and social shift between the late 1970s and 1990s that underlines this thesis. The 1990s saw a significant change in the agency of the

²¹⁹ The videos in the collection were transferred from floppy disk by the Schlesinger Library and are still in the process of being digitised. In March 2018 I was sent a digitised performance of her reading at Washington State University by the library that was not available when I visited the archive in November 2017. Digital recordings (video and audio) are an important source of evidence for Pat Parker and Second Wave feminist scholars in the future as they highlight the popularity of Parker’s readings and their public reception; such readings were not marginal events, often taking place in auditoriums to large audiences (in the Pat Parker archive there are references to academic audiences of five thousand people and women’s festival audiences of three hundred thousand people).

²²⁰ Pat Parker catalogued much of the archive herself in advance of her death, this included post-dating manuscripts and paper-based paraphernalia. This suggests that posthumously elements of the self-scribed biomythographical could, upon examination, also be traced in her archive. The Schlesinger Library catalogue and archive order largely replicates the filing system that Parker used before her death.

underground feminist movement, with elements of it being exploited and capitalised upon and some being reimagined and newly actioned by younger women whose lives had arguably been advantaged by the WLM that Parker had been a part of in preceding decades.²²¹ The twenty-box collection of the Pat Parker archive (which has been split into multiple cartons, across six thematic areas) contains 6 videos of her reciting her poetry and numerous tape recordings. Some of these videos and tape recordings evidence Pat Parker's early involvement in the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement, something which appear to be formative in the politicisation of her poetry. They also strengthen our understanding of her alliances with politically diverse communities of colour and minoritised people whom she considered to be under 'siege'.^{222 223}

Parker wholly understood and worked from an intersectional understanding of oppression, even if she did not name it as such. Her work informed by a clear realisation that her blackness, her lesbianism, her poverty, and being subject to abuse by her former husbands (as well as the domestic homicide of her sister), had led to

²²¹ The 1990s saw aspects of 'cultural' feminism mainstreamed with major publishing contracts and recognition for post-punk (often considered post-feminist) writers such as Kathy Acker, which would have been unimaginable in 1977 – and the adoption or co-option of 'grrl power'. Much of this I consider to be surface liberal feminist declarations of women's equality which in effect mostly benefitted white middle- and upper-class women and professionals.

²²² That is the movement of young feminist women who benefitted from further education and had freely attended university, who were actively addressing issues of inequality through sub cultural alliances such as the Riot Grrrl and the Queercore movement.

²²³ The Schlesinger Library is still working on the development of their Pat Parker video archives, which include material from sources other than those donated by Marty Dunham and Parker's daughter Anastasia.

her involvement in multiple strands of the WLM and a political stance that no oppression or injustice stands alone in isolation.²²⁴

Conclusion: Struggle and Unity

By deploying a contextual theoretical approach, Wolfe and Penelope argue that the lesbian text (that is texts created and narrated by and for lesbians) and related “activities must be pluralized, multiplied, complicated and pluralized again because there is no single, narrow, one sentence definition of “The Lesbian””.²²⁵ In the words of Angela Y. Davis, Pat Parker’s poetry and activism remains a “radical challenge to the racist, patriarchal, and heterosexist ideologies.” (Davis in Parker, 1999, p.28). I would maintain that this applies as much to the “times in which she lived” (Davis in Parker, 1999, p.28) as to contemporary troubles which, 30 years after its composition, are still evoked in Parker’s poem “Don’t Let the Fascists Speak” (Parker, 1999, p.92). Parker consistently made a case that the silencing of representational Black and working-class lesbian voices mutes collective social histories and denies the connectivity of lesbian identities as material embodied relations of both personal and wider political value. This is why Joan Nestle (who was also a great admirer, promoter and archiver of Parker’s work), concluded that “history is a place where the body carries its own story” (Nestle, 1987, p.9). Against this backdrop, I press for us to both fully appreciate and urgently recognise the contributions of Parker and other biomythographers,

²²⁴ Seen in Series II, CORRESPONDENCE, 1964-1989 (#1.18-8.5, E.1) & Series I, BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL, 1944-1989 (#1.1-1.17, FD.1, Mem.1-Mem.3).

²²⁵ By suggesting that I define lesbian texts as led by and for lesbians, I do not mean to determine that it is a closed readership or that it should be – I do so to highlight the visibility of lesbians as readers and lesbian consumers of literature. I do however concur with Zimmerman in determining lesbian texts to be those written by women which pertain to or who have had lesbian experiences –sexual or non-sexual.

rather than see them as footnotes to an outdated pre-Queer Theory set of feminisms or out of fashion Second Wave feminist herstories.

Through a prism of the experiential, Pat Parker used diverse poetic modalities to express a consciousness informed by her lesbian identity. But Parker's work was, like Lorde's, also rooted in the ways she was racialised within that lesbian identity. Her poetry was committed to exploring not only interlocking lesbian identities but multiple racialised identities. Her oeuvre evidences the emergence of a poet whose distinct linguistic drive and pared back vernacular form, in theme and consciousness, could be seen to align with Lorde's literary output – but in its execution remained unique. The subject matters of Parker's work – her sexuality, violence against women and children, racism, poverty, misogyny, and inequity – were also presented through an internationalist lens. Like Leslie Feinberg whose politics and work I shall examine in the next chapter, Parker's political concerns were Marxist in their analysis of race and class. As I have outlined, her archive in the Schlesinger Library demonstrates that the material and nominatively biographical aspects of her lived experience greatly informed the direction and focus of her literary work.

In conclusion, I would recap that there are four distinct elements to Parker's poetry that demonstrate the ways in which biomythography negotiated specific external barriers that both detracted from the writer's ability to further sustain and nurture her art whilst also forming the subject matter or concerns of her writing. In consideration of the neglect toward Pat Parker's work following her premature death from breast cancer (which was impacted by her poverty), I believe it is important for me to outline the significant challenges that Black,

minoritised, lesbian, working-class writers often faced in the late twentieth century.

- The first is economic, and involves the toll that racism, misogyny, and homophobia had on the ability of writers such as Parker to dedicate themselves to their art and to sustain a living from it. Like Feinberg, Parker's financial circumstances were precarious, she didn't have a mainstream publisher, as Lorde did, and often worked in poorly paid jobs, living in a cycle of debt and working poverty, especially when undergoing her breast cancer treatment.
- The second challenge is their adoption of a distinct language style, or in Parker's case what Clarke termed the "black vernacular" and to some degree a biomythographical vernacular. Parker, more than any other writer I include in this thesis, chose to bring together African American communities, lesbian communities, and activist communities via a poetic language of collectivist resistance, in form and content. Parker's style was well defined, sparse and to the point, and her work still resonates with performance and slam poetry today, including the use of the audience to both uphold or further generate and convey communality.
- The third element is Parker's biographical mythmaking and her deliberate tactic of embedding her own lived experience into an ancestral biography by posing as a transhistorical 'queer trickster' – which informed her adaptation of a long held African American literary tradition. As I have commented, this represented a distinct "simultaneity of discourse", a dialogic willingness to engage with other poetic and political voices, that can be found throughout Parker's work.

- The fourth concern is the unapologetic interconnectivity between activism and biomythography in Parker's literary output – her poetry cannot be divorced from her political activism, which is interwoven into even her most personal writing. Struggle and the unity or commonality of struggle positioned Parker politically as an internationalist (like Feinberg) and personally as a socialist. When examining both her poetry and her archive, the reader cannot ignore the dynamic, inextricable relation between these political and personal aspects of her life's work and deeply held convictions.

In the Pat Parker archive there is a notable tension between Parker's lack of literary confidence and her stridence as a performance poet who knew her worth, and the clashing economic realities of being a Black working-class lesbian who existed outside of the academy. Parker's health appears to have been worsened by the brunt and shock of her struggle to survive (economically, physically, and creatively) and the racism and misogyny that continued to plague America in the late twentieth century. Passing away decades before her work was fully recognised and celebrated, I would argue that Parker unfortunately remains in the critical shadows, despite the influence she has had on performance poetry, lesbian writing and the African American poetic tradition. Parker's work has – in untraced ways – shaped a generation of poets and writers who have never had the privilege of reading or knowing her poetry and writing.

In this chapter I have investigated the intersectional struggles of Parker (via my exploration of her Schlesinger Library based archive) and the impact that her socio-economic marginalisation and racialisation had on her ability to write and participate in literary life.

In the next chapter I further consider the ways that working-class identities are interwoven into the literary imagination of biomythography through a specific set of lesbian identities. As I turn to the work of Leslie Feinberg and Frankie Hucklenbroich in the next chapter – Hucklenbroich being another writer whose work has received very little critical attention – I will further consider how the narratives of marginalised working-class women in the mid to late-twentieth century were excluded and women's (particularly lesbian women's) experiences deliberately muted.

CHAPTER 4: LESLIE FEINBERG & FRANKIE HUCKLENBROICH

Tales of Heroism and Survival

Don't tell me you're honoring me by saying you can tell this story better than I did.

(Leslie Feinberg)²²⁶

In *Blue, Too: More Writing By (for and about) Working-Class Queers* (2014), Wendell Ricketts brings together the writing of twenty working-class LGBT writers to challenge the lack of visibility of working-class writers or discussions of working-class identities in queer fiction. The first part of the text is dedicated to writing that explores the intersection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer identities with experiences of being working class. The volume challenges the idea of working-class writers being lesser than, non-existent or assimilating their experiences into that of a perceived literary class. Writing from the margins, Ricketts both promotes the work of the authors of each short story and provides a long-form contextual essay and study guide to embed this work within, and outside of, the academy in an informed way.²²⁷ In the first part of Ricketts' analysis of working-class queer fiction, which functions as a connector between the short stories in the collection and the study guide, entitled "Class/Mates: Further Outings in the Literatures and Cultures of the Ga(y)ted Community – An Afterword", he opens with questions that are pertinent to a discussion of biomythography: "Where are we? How

²²⁶ Quote taken from Leslie Feinberg's website; <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/>.

²²⁷ In the foreword Ricketts cites that it took six years to find a publisher for this text and was "rejected by fifty-seven publishers." (Ricketts, 2014, p.i).

do we imagine our lives and reconstruct our histories? Given the chance, what kinds of stories would we tell?”

As part of the process of writing a history of working-class LGBT literature he discusses the important contribution of working-class lesbian writers, the role they played in a fuller representation of LGBT writing (and lesbian writing more specifically) and how organised they were in developing their networks and taking the means of publishing production into their own hands. Ricketts is clear about their ability to do this through an intersectional framework, being inclusive of class, economics, race and notably butch-femme identities in their approach:

One of the most striking contrasts between lesbian and gay-male cultural production in the post-World War II period, in fact, has been the insistence by many lesbian writers, scholars, and organizers on keeping the issue of class (and, more broadly, of economics) in constant intellectual and cultural play...devoted to the working-class lesbian theme, particularly as class intersects gender, race, and butch/femme dynamics.

(Ricketts, 2014, p.265-6)

In this chapter I will explore Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Frankie Hucklenbroich’s *A Crystal Diary* (1997). Feinberg and Hucklenbroich are discussed in Ricketts’s exploration of lesbian working-class texts, this collection being one of the few critical engagements with Hucklenbroich’s writing in print. Connecting lesbian sexuality and working-class experiences, he discusses how important these texts are as “Both books revolve around blue-collar, “stone butch” lesbian protagonists...and, though often painful, are tales of ultimate survival and perseverance that present working-class experience as

both valuable and heroic.” (Ricketts, 2014, p.267). This raises several thematic avenues that I go on to discuss in this chapter: biomythography that is written specifically through a butch or in this case stone butch lens and how this affects the modes and themes of this work; the narratives that are constructed around such butch identities; and how the working-class experience is represented.²²⁸ The way that Ricketts considers the ‘valuable and heroic’ in these texts is also of interest, as my chapter will consider the ways in which female masculinities are celebrated in biomythography and how this intertextually and thematically drives forward the genre. In addition to Ricketts perspective, my framing includes the anthropological work of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, Jack Halberstam’s queered theoretical discussion of masculinities, trans identities and temporality, and a return to the lesbian feminist literary theory of Bonnie Zimmerman.

In my study of *Stone Butch Blues*’ publishing history, I will examine the development of Feinberg’s work and the biomythographical mechanisms they deployed to centre their protagonist as a survivor rather than victim – despite the immense amount of violence that she is subject to in Feinberg’s narrative. This reveals a core component of biomythographical writing according to my framework – the subversion of shame to power meaningful connectivity (both with the reader and between characters). This resistance extends to Feinberg not only *telling* the story but also publishing and owning the story; thus, storytelling becomes an act of resistance. I then turn to

²²⁸ As Joan Nestle has commented, any lesbian history that doesn’t include both femme and butch identities is one that neglects and impoverishes society. “But a women’s history that has no place for femme-butch women will find itself impoverished.” (Nestle, 1992, p.19).

A Crystal Diary by Frankie Hucklenbroich who received a lot of support in the development of her work from other biomythographical contemporaries, particularly Joan Nestle. Continuing with some of the themes to be found in *Stone Butch Blues* I turn my attention to the form and episodic nature of her work to engage with Hucklenbroich's more experimental or outsider approach to storytelling, which includes references to some challenging subject material. Hucklenbroich's unfolding text appears to be told in real time but is in fact non-chronological and uses a biomythographical device of layering stories within stories in an almost Russian doll like fashion in order to represent the many adventures of her protagonist.

Female Masculinities

As explored in Chapter 1, *Persistent Desire* edited by Nestle charts butch-femme relationships from the 1840s right through to the early 1990s. Published by Alyson Books, *Persistent Desire* brings together iterations of two chapters from what would eventually become *Stone Butch Blues*; the opening chapter of *Stone Butch Blues* titled "Letter to a Fifties Femme from a Stone Butch" and what would become Chapter 3 – titled "Butch to Butch: A Love Song" in Nestle's edited collection. In *Persistent Desire*, the latter is chronologically situated before the "Letter" and appears to be textually disconnected as it has a more traditional layout, is less melancholy and doesn't feature the same named characters that "Butch to Butch" does. Like Lorde's episodic masterpiece *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* which was presented in numerous iterations in lesbian journals, these versions of what would become Chapter 1 and 3 respectively in *Stone Butch Blues* differ greatly despite *Persistent Desire* being published only approximately nine months before the publication of *Stone Butch*

Blues.²²⁹ This suggests that Feinberg had been developing, adapting and editing what could be presumed to be biographical episodes from hir own life with the deliberate intention to document an invisible historiography rather than a full length novel.²³⁰ Like Lorde, Feinberg's work had been developed amongst their peers, reflecting the community in which they could comfortably exist. A community in which they were encouraged and nurtured to develop their writing as part of a literary genre which, at that time, had no mainstream publishing or institutional support.

Joan Nestle, as a lesbian archivist as well as a writer, intimately understood the need to record and document lesbian history in whatever form it presented itself. The histories she documented in her own essays and edited works would form part of a tapestry of biomythographical experience – to be pieced together by the reader who recognised the text's (often fragmented) signifiers and codified references. Without the insight and support of Nestle and other textual archivists and editors such as Moraga and Anzaldúa, Feinberg's historiography and other testimonies may not have survived.²³¹ I suggest that this is particularly true of the work of Hucklenbroich and

²²⁹ Lorde was featured in various lesbian feminist journals in the 1970s and 80s and was also given editorial and layout/design responsibilities. These journals included *Heresies* and *Conditions*.

²³⁰ Throughout this thesis I honour the preferred pronouns of Feinberg which zhe chose to be interchangeable as a way to represent their lesbian, butch and trans identities. Feinberg preferred to use the following pronouns: zhe, ze and hir, I therefore use both terms. In *Stone Butch Blues* Feinberg uses the pronouns she/her for her protagonist Jess.

²³¹ Women's literary history, pre-biomythography is often dominated by women who are financially stabilised by men or male wealth and who come from a distinct class background – even when they refute that background. Barbara Smith in conversation with Cherríe Moraga in *The New Lesbian Studies* (1996) called these writers "Rich White Women" (Moraga in Zimmerman and McNaron, 1996, p.23). Pat Parker's life and archive fully reveals the precarious life of the marginalised artist, as discussed in the previous chapter.

to a lesser extent Feinberg whose texts about female masculinities and butch lesbian identity predated any theoretical or political interest in such subjectivities. As I have stated in my introduction to this thesis, biomythography and Second Wave feminist working-class/lesbian writers have influenced and directed arguably middle class, Post-structuralist gender, queer and trans theoretical texts, and narratives – even where they remain unacknowledged or appear to be in antithesis to the positioning of that theory.²³²

In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Kennedy and Davis examine the codes and etiquette of what they term ‘butch-fem narratives’ over the course of four decades (1930/40s - 1970/80s). Based on the oral histories of over forty-five butch and femme identified women (seven of whom were women of colour), Kennedy and Davis’s text is a micro-cosmic analysis of lesbianism and the Buffalo, New York lesbian community of the time. Via a self-declared anthropological approach, they develop a social and political framework in which they contextualise butch-femme lives and behaviours. Their text gives us the historical platform from which to further develop complex and nuanced readings of working-class lesbian literature which can root Feinberg and Hucklenbroich’s biomythography in a lineage of both biomythographical storytelling and lived experiences. This makes novels such as *Stone Butch Blues*, even more relevant to the social history of lesbian lives in the mid to late twentieth century and avoids what Kennedy and Davis describe as:

²³² And continue to do so; see the explosion in contemporary renderings of trans-feminist liberation zines and other published material.

Lesbian-feminism's negative valuation of butch-fem communities ... a response to the explicit sexuality these communities expressed through butch-fem roles. From the beginning, lesbian feminists tended to downplay sexuality between women in an attempt to free lesbians from the stigma of sexual deviance. (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p.11)

I would add to Kennedy and Davis's observations, that such "valuations" also enabled a highly influential part of the lesbian movement (mostly middle-class or economically more privileged women) that was gaining a platform and mainstream media attention to distinguish themselves from what they determined to be the baseline socio-economic powerlessness of working-class communities of women – both lesbian and heterosexual women. This can be considered an extension of what Halberstam, in a temporal context, determines to be "the schedule of normativity" (Halberstam, 1993, p.7) and notably Derek Jarman in much of his written work in a UK 1970s to early 1990s context, has observed as being the heteronormative assimilation of queer politics by self-elected and publicly adopted representatives of a 'respectable homosexuality'.²³³ ²³⁴ That is, a 'respectable homosexuality' that does not threaten the socio-economic stability of the ruling classes through the co-option of what we now witness to be a widespread politics of diversity representation. ²³⁵ Rather than a socialist re-envisioning of a fair and just society and the redistribution of wealth, it could be argued that some leftist leaning white liberal

²³³ Derek Jarman's *At Your Own Risk: A Saints Testament* (1993) is a polemical journey into late twentieth century gay culture in the UK.

²³⁴ I will delve into this more in Chapter Five of this thesis as we consider Dorothy Allison's work and the impact of the co-option of sex-positive lesbian biomythography at the dawn of a neoliberalist twenty-first century.

²³⁵ Recently well exemplified by the multi-national corporate world's performative response to Black Lives Matter.

middle-class lesbian feminists were mainstreaming the struggle to benefit just a certain demographic of their movement.

PART 1: STONE BUTCH BLUES

Publishing the Unimagined

Stone Butch Blues is not merely a “working-class” novel- it is a novel that embodies class.

(Leslie Feinberg)²³⁶

Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*’ publication journey charts the complicated history of the independent lesbian/queer feminist press in the U.S. in the 1990s. As neo-liberal commercialism and advanced capitalism began to both co-opt and eradicate the independent publishing world, Feinberg’s work became a casualty of this fraught context and despite high demand for their work, *Stone Butch Blues* was out of print for seven years.²³⁷ Originally published by Firebrand books in 1993 (the same publisher responsible for *A Crystal Diary*), the rights to *Stone Butch Blues* were then bought by the LGBT publisher Alyson Publications in 2003.²³⁸ When Alyson Books (formerly Alyson Publications) filed for bankruptcy in 2012, Feinberg was left without any ownership rights over the manuscript of *Stone Butch Blues* and had to take Alyson Books to court to retrieve the author copyright of

²³⁶ Taken from Feinberg’s website <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/words/>.

²³⁷ Firebrand and Alyson Books versions of *Stone Butch Blues* are on sale for anywhere between £27 and £180 online; this price continues to escalate despite the text being available as a free PDF online.

²³⁸ Firebrand books have published nearly all of the biomythographical authors featured in this thesis; as I outline in my Introduction publishers such as Nancy Bereano and other lesbian feminist identified women involved in publishing played a key role in platforming the work of biomythographers such as Dorothy Allison, Frankie Hucklenbroich, and Leslie Feinberg.

their work.²³⁹ Like other biomythographical writers whose books also sold tens of thousands of copies via independent publishing houses, Feinberg received few royalties in their lifetime, and the battle for the rights of their book is estimated to have cost more than the royalties zhe received from Alyson Books.

Small independent publishing houses in the 1970s and 80s had often relied on a few popular and publicly significant works such as *Stone Butch Blues*, and relatively higher-profile lesbian authors, such as Leslie Feinberg, to be able to publish other work by lesser-known marginalised writers. As a self-declared working-class Marxist and Revolutionary Communist, Feinberg chose to support the independent publishing houses rather than signing to corporate publishers.²⁴⁰ As Feinberg writes in 2014 for their website which, thanks to hir partner the late Minnie Bruce Pratt, stands as a posthumous legacy of their work and political activism:

The revolutionary and anti-capitalist movements for social and economic justice have given me so much in life. I give this novel [*Stone Butch Blues*] back as a tiny handmade gift, flaws and all, to the workers and oppressed of the world.²⁴¹

As a disabled person (zhe suffered from Lyme Disease for over a decade), Feinberg considered full accessibility in all its forms to be an ethical act of resistance in line with hir own political beliefs and values

²³⁹ Alyson Books, although it ceased materially publishing texts in 2013, continued to exist digitally online until 2019.

²⁴⁰ The 1990s saw the height of a boom of neoliberalist cultural imperatives. The subsumption of the underground press and DIY music culture into mainstream corporate labels, publishers and news corporations marks a turning point in the notion or illusion of art being by its existence radical and transformational.

²⁴¹ Taken from Feinberg's website <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/words/>.

.²⁴² ²⁴³ Unlike their fellow Firebrand authors such as Dorothy Allison, who went on to sign with mainstream publishers such as Penguin, Feinberg – even in poverty – remained staunchly true to their anti-capitalist ideals, eventually publishing hir work online and enabling free access to their writing via the internet.²⁴⁴ ²⁴⁵

There has been much written about Feinberg’s intellectual and theoretical work in relation to queer and trans lives, but there has been less attention paid to their analysis of class *and* capitalism in relation to working-class lesbian communities.²⁴⁶ ²⁴⁷ Like Hucklenbroich, Feinberg’s work was prophetic in exploring and documenting the lived material realities of butch lesbian, masculine identified queer and trans people decades before there was a shift in wider cultural and social visibility for queer and trans, or as Feinberg terms it ‘transgender’ communities. Whilst this was a focus of

²⁴² As Feinberg’s life became further impacted by Lyme Disease, a condition which eventually killed hir, disability rights became a focus of their life; the connection between poverty, queerness, disability through the lens of their struggle with Lyme Disease, corporate pharma and state oppression – was written about in detail in their long form essay, ‘Casualty of an Undeclared War’ :

<https://transgenderwarrior.org/casualty/>.

²⁴³ Alexandre Barils’ own reflection on the intersections between disability and trans identity (or the embodiment of that identity) is influenced by and complements Feinberg’s political analysis: Baril, A. (2015). transness as debility: rethinking intersections between trans and disabled embodiments. *Feminist Review*, 111, pp.59–74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572216>.

²⁴⁴ *Stone Butch Blues* is today available as a free PDF download from Feinberg’s posthumous website: <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/words/>.

²⁴⁵ Feinberg explored franchising *Stone Butch Blues* and its screen rights but turned down the opportunity and in turn large financial rewards, fearing that their art, work, and political values would be undermined.

²⁴⁶ “In Feinberg’s assessment, meaningful resistance can only take place when there is a revolutionary working-class consciousness, and the yearning for this consciousness that has marked every page of the novel becomes more pronounced at its close.” (Moses, 1999, p.93): Moses, C. (1999). Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*. *Studies in the Novel*, 31(1), pp.74–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533313>.

²⁴⁷ An exception to this is Roslayn Baxandall’s article in which inter-racial working-class communities are acknowledged throughout her paper. Baxandall, R. (2001). Re-Visioning the Women’s Liberation Movement’s Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists. *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), pp.225–245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178460>.

Feinberg's work, his literature was always situated within a conscious Marxist analysis of class exploitation and the purposeful exclusion of the marginalised by the ruling classes. Although there are many obvious connections to be made between Feinberg and Post-structuralist theorists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault due to their focus on the constructions of gender and/or theoretical analysis of power, I would contend that Feinberg's work relates more to a literary tradition of Cultural Materialism in its Marxism, subject matter, and far leftist union consciousness.²⁴⁸

Like biomythography, Cultural Materialism is theoretically grounded in lived material histories and narratives that document and purposefully explore alternate readings of race, class, gender, and sexuality in a wider socio-economic political context; one that situates marginality within an analysis of state power – and in a biomythographical context – patriarchal state violence. Cultural Materialism challenges the dominance and authority of the literary canon and critiques the role institutionalised state power has in the development of the literary imagination.²⁴⁹ Importantly it has a focus on the experiential, the role of the active-witness rather than the passive-observer as protagonist, and an authentic representation of subjectivity which aligns Cultural Materialism with biomythography. This is particularly apparent in the work of Feinberg which often stylistically bridges documentary realism and the experimental and

²⁴⁸ See Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* Volume I (1978) and Judith Butler's highly influential *Gender Trouble* (1990). Both are also considered to be amongst the founding texts of Queer Theory.

²⁴⁹ Sadly Cultural Materialism does not in its earlier renderings by Raymond Williams et al, focus on issues such as patriarchy, colonialism, and the lack of visibility of other further marginalised groups. By the 1980s Hazel Carby and to a certain extent Stuart Hall and others were addressing this oversight.

improvisational elements of biomythography within a broader tradition of late twentieth century lesbian literature.²⁵⁰

As a member of the Workers World Party as well as being an Internationalist, and a Marxist – Feinberg like other biomythographers regarded their work to be politically aligned with a critique of structural inequality and state power.²⁵¹ Feinberg’s literature was rooted in a materialist analysis of the world that had been creatively developed within a more experimental biomythographical collectivist and lesbian-feminist consciousness raising context. That is a radical lesbian literary enclave of feminist journals and edited collections which provided a space for biomythographical work to be further developed in a receptive cultural environment amongst an audience that understood its social references.²⁵² Feinberg’s combination of accessible prose, that spoke to a unique subject matter, with the stylistic incorporation of experimental temporality, embedded and mythologised a sense of the ‘real’ in hir work. This involved a narrative retelling of an untold history in opposition to what Tamsin Wilton identifies as, “multiple suppressions” that are “predicated on the political imperative to justify and maintain the subordination not only of women but also of working-class people and people of colour.” (Wilton, 1995, p.61) As Wilton goes

²⁵⁰ By ‘lesbian literature’ I refer to thematic concerns and often insular knowledge production that comes from a tradition of writing that works in opposition to the hetero-normative axis of the literary canon. Although texts by self-defined lesbians are very varied in political and social content, as Bonnie Zimmerman points out, they share a commonality of being ‘other’ and outside of a ‘normative’ literary framework.

²⁵¹ The Workers World Party (WWP) is an American Marxist-Leninist anti-imperialist and staunchly anti-racist organisation that formed in the 1950s as part of a more radical and class-conscious movement. Members included those who had formerly been part of the Socialist Worker’s Party. WWP was known for its pro-LGBT rights stance and for having Black organisers in positions of leadership – which differentiated it from other working-class leftist parties.

²⁵² See Chapter One and my analysis of *The Persistent Desire* edited by Joan Nestle.

on to critically observe, “Individual women who have escaped erasure have almost always been able to do so because of their racial privilege and socio-economic status.” (Wilton, 1995, p.61). I would argue that biomythography enabled many women to escape such potential literary erasure.

In her 1995 academic text, *Lesbian Studies. Setting An Agenda* (1995), Tamsin Wilton attempts to develop a theoretical and political framework for lesbians and lesbianism. Wilton identifies that the term ‘lesbian’ was becoming indelibly complex and cites it as being a definition and identity wrought with complications both in the context of the ‘New Right’ and ‘Queer Activism’. Wilton’s theoretical approach fell out of favour in the early Noughties as the dissolution of the gender binary unearthed and disorientated conceptual terms that were thought to be rooted in a stand-off between the seeming polarities of sex and gender (biology and culture). The need for an apt theoretical framework that fits both contemporary and historical framings is once again sparked by a re-reading and interpretation of *Stone Butch Blues* in a contemporary post *Gender Trouble* world.²⁵³ That Feinberg’s protagonist in *Stone Butch Blues* considers themselves ‘lesbian’ – politically socially and culturally, whilst also identifying as ‘passing’ with ‘masculinised’ traits, emphasises Wilton’s assertion that:

Any attempt to stake out intellectual territory for lesbian studies must engage with the problematic nature of a liberatory politics predicated upon its status as stigmatised ‘other’ within the discursive regime of heteropatriarchy. (Wilton, 1995, p.3)

²⁵³ Here I refer to Judith Butler’s seminal and much cited work *Gender Trouble* (1990).

For Feinberg, their identity went far beyond any social definition or descriptor and the terms they chose to define themselves by, which were interchangeable and multiple, including ‘hir, Ze, Zhe’, were likewise statements of intent; both personally and politically. According to Minnie Bruce Pratt Feinberg “stressed” that it was not the role of the “state authorities to assign who were or were not hir [Feinberg’s] loved ones but rather that zhe/she would define hir chosen family, citing Marx who said that ‘the exchange value of love- is love.’”

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Significant Other

Minnie Bruce Pratt was an established lesbian poet and educator when she met Feinberg at one of hir readings where she “ fell in love with Leslie because of hir voice, hir vision and hir revolutionary optimism.” ²⁵⁵ Feinberg’s own sense of identity was often (at least publicly) situated through hir significant and longstanding relationship with the lesbian poet Minnie Bruce Pratt. As lovers, partners and eventually spouses, their twenty-two-year relationship, and the creative output that resulted from their relationship, warrants a thesis of its own. ²⁵⁶ Both Feinberg and Pratt

²⁵⁴ This is taken from Feinberg’s posthumous website; the content and this quote were written by Leslie Feinberg and their partner/wife Minnie Bruce Pratt months before Feinberg’s death: <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/>.

²⁵⁵ Just as I was submitting this thesis in May 2023 Minnie Bruce Pratt passed away, leaving the legacy of not only her own work and writing, but that of Feinberg for whom she was a dedicated custodian.

²⁵⁶ Many of the relationships between late twentieth century lesbian artists and their partners warrants further attention and research. Working class lesbian artists were often making art in a hostile and socio-economically disadvantaged environment and if it weren’t for the support of their partners or lovers, they may not have been able to create the work they did or to have survived financially. There is documented

wrote extensively about their relationship, the political, social, emotional, and spiritual impact they had on each other's lives – and the role they each played in supporting their partner's writing. They continually acknowledged each other and their relationship publicly as a form of political resistance and in the face of acts of violence, exclusion, and derision that they experienced as a result of being publicly out lesbians.²⁵⁷

In their biographical study of gender, creativity and the personal relationships between well-known artists, *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnerships* (1993), Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron examine thirteen well known historical figures in the world of art and literature from Augustin Rodin and Camille Claudel to Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. The text is a fascinating insight into the dynamics of creative couplings through a feminist lens who in addition to navigating their own artistic careers were often

evidence of this in relation to Audre Lorde, Joan Nestle and Dorothy Allison whose long-term partners and lovers helped to support and sustain them and in the case of Lorde and Allison, also support their children. Hucklenbroich also cites the support of her partner in providing the stability and support she needed to write *A Crystal Diary* in the Acknowledgements of her book.

²⁵⁷ Amongst many acts of violence and abuse both Feinberg and Pratt experienced, was Pratt's legal severance from her two sons due to her coming out as a lesbian. Decades later she was able to reunite with her sons when they were adults, but the impact on her was something she never recovered from, and it greatly influenced her political and literary work: "When I lost custody of my children I had to say to myself I'm not going to be a tragedy I'm going to keep going I'm going to be part of making a new world." (quote taken from "Celebrating Minnie Bruce Pratt's New Poetry Collection Magnified", uploaded by Sinister Wisdom 17th December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1B6LvN-N-Y>). Pratt wrote extensively about this form of institutionalised abuse and the violence enacted on lesbian mothers, the marginalised and the poor in the U.S. in the late twentieth century. Perpetrators' weaponisation of children and the use of the family court system to further abuse women continues to be an escalating issue. The UN VAWG Rapporteur recently conducted an international research project on the increase in widescale failures of the family court system to prevent this form of abuse: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5336-custody-violence-against-women-and-violence-against-children>.

supporting (and in some cases inhibiting) the careers and domestic lives of their partner. Chadwick and de Courtivron iron out the often “impoverished” “stereotypes, myths and images we have inherited” (Chadwick and de Courtivron, 1993, p.11) documenting the ways that these partners “broke free” of heteronormative expectations to be able to prioritise and execute their art. They also unravel the realities faced by many working-class lesbian biomythographical writers who were often working in socio-economically and time-constrained conditions without any prospect of receiving either financial rewards or critical accolades for their work:

The realities of artistic partnership also include domestic arrangements which are not bound by the model of heterosexual union. Here the complexities, and the possibilities for rethinking notions of partnership and creativity, are even more challenging in that gendered roles are often blurred, and the partners are called upon to reinvent, to refigure the myths into new realities. (Whitney and de Courtivron, 1993, pp.11-12)

This opens up an array of questions pertinent to biomythography which I am unable to fully explore in this thesis, but feel I should still raise: in what distinct ways were working-class lesbian partnerships catalysts for a wider proliferation of lesbian artists and writers? did lesbian intimate partnerships (bearing in mind their often tangential different economic status and social power compared with that of gay men of the time) have a role in nurturing not only other lesbian artists but also the collective? I would also query the extent to which lesbian intimate relationships can be seen to differ from hetero ‘normative’ and middle- or upper-class relationships in their ability to support dual creativity, or to challenge these ongoing

emotional and practical struggles that were never truly resolved in many examples of artistic relationships given by Chadwick and de Courtrivon.²⁵⁸

From the available literary evidence, namely Feinberg and Pratt's prose, poetry, and Feinberg's legacy website, it appears that each partner proactively supported one another and greatly influenced each other's work and politics. I would also suggest that the power of their union established a third artistic or political public persona. Both Feinberg and Pratt experienced high levels of violence, abuse, and exclusion due to their sexuality, their love for women, gender expression and each other – and yet (with what appears to be due to the trust, safety, and security of their relationship together) they chose to make their personal material lives part of a lesbian public that they shared with audiences. Minnie Bruce Pratt's output in many of her essays, publications, political articles and her biomythography *S/HE* incorporate Feinberg's voice and positioning. In Pratt's analysis of her relationship with Feinberg she concluded that, "we worked all the time, we loved all the time"²⁵⁹ Even a brief search into their relationship on the internet brings up a range of beautiful and deliberately posed and marketed portraits of the couple and evidence of the amount of time each took to support one another at public events alongside their mutual admiration of each other's work.

²⁵⁸ I owe my decision to further explore or consider the contribution of biomythographer's intimate partners to Professor John Howard and Dr. Josh Pugh, who alerted me to the necessity and importance of including this in my thesis. I am grateful for their scholarly interjection.

²⁵⁹ Quote taken from: "Celebrating Minnie Bruce Pratt's New Poetry Collection Magnified", uploaded by Sinister Wisdom 17th December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1B6LvN-N-Y>.

Although Whitney and de Courtivron's text captures the blurring of gendered roles and relationship parameters between creative couples, it doesn't go into the fact that lesbian women were often both representing and serving their collective lesbian community (known and unknown). It appears that lesbian biomythographers wanted to ensure that they opened future spaces by changing public attitudes toward so called 'outsider' working-class lesbian relationships. As we look back on the lives and creative and political output of the biomythographers I have featured in my thesis, through a contemporary lens, we can easily see how influential and important their work was (and continues to be) in making safer spaces for lesbian lives, creativity, and ways of living.²⁶⁰ At Minnie Bruce Pratt's 2021 celebration of her then newly published poetry book *Magnified* (Wesleyan University Press, 2021), a book dedicated to and largely about her relationship with Feinberg and the grief of losing her life partner, Pratt recalled the momentous impact that she, Feinberg and other radical lesbians (and I would argue biomythographers) have made politically and socially:

I really do know words and actions matter...we're always making the future in the present with what we say and what we

²⁶⁰ Two years before she passed, in March 2021, Minnie Bruce Pratt read from her then new book of poetry *Magnified* (Wesleyan University Press, 2021) dedicated to Feinberg and written in memoriam and dedication to her memory, at a celebration event hosted by Sinister Wisdom that is available on YouTube. A few minutes after introducing herself, Pratt shares that her first poetry reading as an out lesbian was hosted by Sinister Wisdom in 1979 and that she was so nervous to be reading poetry as an out lesbian, that she had to hold onto the podium because her knees were shaking "so hard". She then goes on to say "It's a very different moment to be here. All of us together. We have made this space." The event was uploaded 17th December 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1B6LvN-N-Y>.

do, and collectively when we do that we can come to another world...and we have. We have made new worlds.²⁶¹

Old Gay Femmes

The 1993 edition of *Stone Butch Blues* opens with an “Acknowledgements” page that includes the names of women who had influenced and supported the development of both the narrative and the publication of the novel. Thanking fellow biomythographers Joan Nestle and Dorothy Allison as well as hir femme lover Minnie Bruce Pratt, Feinberg positions themselves within a lesbian historiography of femme-butcht narrators.²⁶²

And I want to recognise all the other “old gay” femmes, including Madeleine Davis and Joan Nestle, who consistently spoke up to defend butcht lives as well as their own when voices like mine could not be heard. (Feinberg, 1993, p.3)

Written episodically by Feinberg over a number of years, like Audre Lorde’s biomythography *Zami*, *Stone Butch Blues* tells (often via self-referential detail), the story of a self-identified stone butcht lesbian, Jess Goldberg – from her teens in the 1950s through to adulthood in the 1970s.²⁶³ Jess is a Jewish working-class unionist, whose life reflects many intersecting identities and experiences over the three decades

²⁶¹ Quote taken from: “Celebrating Minnie Bruce Pratt’s New Poetry Collection Magnified”, uploaded by Sinister Wisdom 17th December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1B6LvN-N-Y>.

²⁶² Feinberg references Dorothy Allison in the Acknowledgements to *Stone Butch Blues*: “Lord have mercy, girl, if I couldn’t take criticism from a femme I wouldn’t be here today telling this story!” (Feinberg, 1993, p.3).

²⁶³ Feinberg never described *Stone Butch Blues* as a biography but did acknowledge that it reflected hir personal experiences. Zhe did, however, always position the text as a ‘novel’.

that this novel spans. Jess finds a sense of place and community with other lesbians, despite the structural and patriarchal violence she faces in her day-to-day life because of their chosen and perceived identity. Often having to ‘pass’ as a man to survive, Feinberg’s protagonist exists in a world of poverty, oppression, exclusion, and hatred because of their masculine identity, sexuality and political beliefs.²⁶⁴ Narrated through a series of intimate relationships, *Stone Butch Blues* pays homage to the strength and complex beauty of the femme-butcht lesbian, queer and working-class communities that both nurtured Jess and helped her to survive with a strong sense of self preservation and pride.²⁶⁵

Although *Stone Butch Blues* stands as a fully formed sequential narrative, its subject matter is closely linked to the development of Feinberg’s intellectual and political work that consistently attempted to define and decolonise what Feinberg termed ‘Transgender’ identities. Feinberg’s pamphlet *Trans Liberation* (1992) published and circulated a year before *Stone Butch Blues*, pre-emptively outlines Feinberg’s own trans identity but also contextualises the political positionality of *Stone Butch Blues*. *Trans Liberation* was written within Marxist orientated frameworks of working-class liberation and historical materialism, connecting these struggles with the lived experiences of trans people. Whilst Feinberg herself was very clear that *Stone Butch Blues* would contribute to what zhe considered to be a history of ‘Transgender’ stories, Feinberg (who identified as both

²⁶⁴ Importantly to Jess and the narrator, these identities are interlinked, none of them able to exist without the other. This contradicts many other readings of *Stone Butch Blues*, where the focus is on gender and sexuality with little considerations of Feinberg’s broader political references and the political context of their work.

²⁶⁵ These are the same communities that Feinberg references in their political commentary and writing.

lesbian and transgender) like Nestle was writing about lesbian working-class culture as well as the structural inequalities and violence that individuals and communities faced. In the “Acknowledgements” to *Stone Butch Blues* Feinberg pays tribute to this connectivity between trans people and the broader lesbian and queer community. This includes a reference to Marsha P. Johnson who Feinberg references as being one of the trans women who initiated the Stonewall riot at a time when she remained unacknowledged in this public history.²⁶⁶ Feinberg also examines Johnson’s political, social, and cultural significance in a world that punishes, violates and murders “transgendered human beings”:

A special thanks to the butches, passing women, drag kings and drag queens, FTM brothers and MTF sisters-transsexual and transvestite – who urged me to keep writing, even if one sketch can’t illustrate every life. In loving memory to you, Marsha “Pay It no Mind” Johnson- found floating in the Hudson River on July 4, 1992...and to the many other transgendered human beings whose lives ended in violence. (Feinberg, 1993, p.3)

In the wake of an ever-divisive emerging neoliberal commercialism in the arts – LGBT, Black, minoritised, and marginalised people’s literature, art and music was seen as a threat to the mainstream, centrist, and right leaning publishing industry – pre-internet – that often reflected the interests of an elitist and more economically privileged readership. Amidst a political and state reaction to the waves of street activism in the U.S. in the mid to late

²⁶⁶ This is often a contested assertion as the more contemporary assignments of trans identity are seen to be projected onto historical figures and there is disagreement about who the initiators of the riot were.

twentieth century, even in more liberal leaning states such as New York and California, marginalised writers' work became increasingly censored and frozen out. Such cultural backlashes, that centred bodily and sexual autonomy (particularly lesbian and gay identified sexual autonomy) came to the fore in the early 1990s. As liberal feminism was also becoming mainstreamed and co-opted, feminist censorship campaigns, which often impacted on the most marginalised, played into the hands of the religious and political right, the Dworkin-MacKinnon Anti-Pornography Ordinance being a prime example of this.²⁶⁷ ²⁶⁸Liberation orientated, and transformational politics were once again seen as a threat to the state and the sovereignty of America's free-market expansionism. However, this public censorship conversely led to a re-emergence of a radical literary underground that was independent, irreverent, and pushed new boundaries – particularly in relation to sexuality and identity. This meant that in the 1990s lesbian feminist imprints, journals, and cross arts initiatives were once again able to sustain themselves, keeping an ecosystem of lesbian, queer or women owned businesses afloat. ²⁶⁹ ²⁷⁰

As discussed earlier, a gender binary-focused contemporary retelling of Second Wave feminist texts as representing a monolithic set of political beliefs and cliched experiences, betrays the power of

²⁶⁷ I further explore this in Chapter Five, in my discussion of Dorothy Allison's work, the feminist Lesbian Sex Wars and the subsequent impact of the notorious 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality.

²⁶⁸ "For some feminist scholars, however, like Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin, academic theorizing marks the failure of the theory and politics of feminism." (Cacoullos, 2001, p.79)

²⁶⁹ An example of this shift in readership mirrored the rise of DIY aesthetics and an underground subculture that included zines and newer more radical journals such *On Our Backs* as outlined in previous chapters.

²⁷⁰ See also Chapter Five on Dorothy Allison, and Jaime Harker's *The Lesbian South* (2018).

alternative truths and narratives. Lesbian writers, who in their reading of gender denoted its complexity through a deliberate lack of singularity in their own narrative making, were able to create spaces of contradiction and experimentation within their texts. Jaime Harker observes that as an identity the term 'lesbian':

in the earliest days of women's liberation, functioned much as queer functions today – as a radical disruptive force that claimed a “universalist” critique of existing social structures like the family, and even constructions of gender (Harker, 2018, p.13).

Unfortunately, in their analysis of lesbianism and lesbian historiography, post-modernist and other contemporary feminisms have often misunderstood or have simplified lesbian biomythographical work as an undistinguished, ill-informed mass of 'wimmin's biography'. They have abstracted elements of the work of particular individuals, such as Feinberg and Lorde, to support contemporary narratives of LGBT historical progression or Queer Theory. This co-option, as outlined in previous chapters, erases the socio-political import of collectivist movements. In relation to this, Feinberg makes an astute observation about the need for solidarity, speaking from the viewpoint of the collectivist 'we' where:

Solidarity is built on understanding how and why oppression exists and who profits from it. It is our view that revolutionary changes in human society can do away with inequality, bigotry and intolerance. ²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Quote taken from Feinberg's website as above: <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/>.

Capitalism thus arguably reduces the scope of collective narratives to a consumable package of intergenerational belonging and non-belonging. In the biomythographical tradition of lesbian narration, *Stone Butch Blues* defies and resists the cliché of the protagonist being the (male and heterosexual) heroic individual – that familiar gendered trope of political fiction.²⁷²

Letters to a 50s Femme

I will now turn to *Stone Butch Blues*, consider the epistolary opening of the novel and discuss its inter-textual relationship to the elements and themes that sit within my biomythographical framework. A substantive narrative within a narrative, Chapter One of *Stone Butch Blues* proleptically outlines a number of leitmotifs that will recur throughout the novel; themes of homophobia, anti-butch hatred, class oppression, gender regulation within an urban context of poverty, survival, and community-making. The opening pages of *Stone Butch Blues* act as a succinct attempt to encapsulate and distil subjectivity through creative story telling. These biomythographical themes situate the protagonist of the book in places of simultaneous danger and resistance. The opening of *Stone Butch Blues* can also be seen to represent a key discourse that runs throughout the novel. Feinberg has written a social history that courses the story of Jess's life (the butch protagonist) through the social turbulence, gendered violence, and economic instability of the mid twentieth century (1950s-1970s). It would be easy to make ready comparisons with *A Crystal Diary*, when considering the subject matter of *Stone Butch Blues* and aligning the

²⁷² As I outline early on in this thesis, biomythography as a 'lesbian tradition' differs from the historical and political biographies or narratives of men of all sexualities.

texts – in terms of a gendered biographical framing – but Feinberg charts a very different course even to Hucklenbroich, in their use of narrative, genre, and style to evoke female masculinities and queer defiance.²⁷³

As already mentioned, an early iteration of the opening chapter of *Stone Butch Blues* originally featured in the collection edited by Joan Nestle, *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, as an epistolary short story titled “Letter to a Fifties Femme from a Stone Butch”. As is common with biomythography, earlier versions of what came to be known as *Stone Butch Blues*, featured in edited collections and journals as both extracts from the full novel and stand-alone narratives in progress. This supported the development of Feinberg’s full text and the wider visibility of Feinberg’s work to a lesbian and femme-butch audience and community. In *Persistent Desire*, the two extracts from *Stone Butch Blues* included in the collection appear, at first, to be outside of the scope of the novel and unconnected, both short extracts are more akin to a documented oral history or a partial biographical representation of the life of a fictional narrator, rather than an integrated full length biomythography.

Stone Butch Blues opens with a seven-page letter of italicised text written in a tone of familiarity and intimacy that is often extended

²⁷³ The perilous consequences of a ‘masculinised’ butch appearance went far beyond style alone, as outlined by Alix Genter, “As any gender non-conformist in the postwar period knew, wearing clothing that did not correspond with your sex could easily become grounds for harassment, violence and arrest.” (Genter, 2016, p.614): Genter, A. (2016). Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Fashion and Queer Legibility in New York City, 1945–1969. *Feminist Studies*, 42(3), pp. 604–631. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0604>.

to both the subject of the letter and the reader. At the beginning of the letter the reader could assume that this is a heteronormative romance as it references a common romance trope; that of a meteorological metaphor, the use of a lightning storm, to evoke the correspondent's inner turmoil. This narrative device is often used in fiction, especially where there may be a complex plot or the need to exemplify extreme emotions, but it is exploited and exposed to be a heteronormative cliché in Feinberg's text. In *Stone Butch Blues*, the use of a colloquial letter is as stylistically queered as it is codified, with the reader's attention averted to initially think of a male suitor.²⁷⁴ The textual typeset and indentations also set the tradition of letter writing askew, as the short, punctuated paragraphs become independent statements in their own right – indicative of the unnerving narrative about to unfold as the novel progresses.²⁷⁵

Dear Theresa,

I'm lying on my bed missing you, my eyes all swollen, hot tears running down my face. There's a fierce summer lightning storm raging outside.

Tonight I walked down the streets looking for you in every woman's face, as I have each night of this lonely exile. (Feinberg, 1993, p.5)

Despite the romantic poetic tone of the second line of the letter, the security of an assumed gender is dislodged by the use of the term "lonely exile". This separates the letter writer from the recipient as

²⁷⁴ As the novel has become better known, the mystery of a female lesbian suitor has been debunked.

²⁷⁵ Feinberg worked as a typesetter amongst other manual trades such as factory work.

well as readers; however, as the novel maps the journey of the working-class outsider in “exile” longing to be with their female partner, gradually the protagonist becomes known.²⁷⁶

Although the letter’s narrator is identified outside of a determined gender binary, the clear retention of lesbian identity within the matrix of their femme-butch relations and their sexuality (if considered within both Harker and Wilton’s definition of lesbianism) is never questioned. As the novel progresses the gender identification of the protagonist is intersected with an historical positioning of working-class butch lesbian identity. The narrator of the letter struggles to say what is beyond their own comprehension in a world that not only rejects but, as we come to learn through the course of the text, is also brutally violent toward non-gender conforming lesbians. The letter to “Theresa” evokes the hetero-patriarchal realities of the 1950s which strictly relied on gender binaries in promoting the U.S. post war industrial economy and men’s return to a hyper-masculinised Fordism.²⁷⁷

This positioning of butch-femme working-class communities puts the opening of *Stone Butch Blues* into another narrative context, one in which both Feinberg and Jess as narrators exist in different temporalities. They are still struggling with their place as politicised working-class butches in a world that they are exiled from in multiple

²⁷⁶ As explained, I use ‘they, hir, zhe etc.’ for Feinberg, however, there are times when I will refer, as Feinberg does in the text, to Jess as ‘she’ as well as ‘they’ to represent the ambiguity and struggle for Jess to determine their butch lesbian and masculinised identity.

²⁷⁷ Fordism (named after the lead motor company industrialist of the early twentieth century, Henry Ford) describes the mass industrialisation, economic expansionism and consumption capitalism that informed the U.S.’s economic systems from the 1950s onwards, completely reshaping and redefining the ‘American Dream’.

social and economic ways. Jess romantically yearns for Theresa as a working-class femme, “*looking for you in every woman’s face, as I have each night of this lonely exile.*” (Feinberg, 1993, p.5). From this statement we can determine that this letter, and the text, are written from a future temporality, and that Jess’s union with Theresa had taken place in an era that Jess fears to be long gone – a new generation of lesbian-feminists who do not value butch-femme culture effectively erasing their stories:

Well, we sat in a coffee shop and she talked about Democratic politics and seminars and photography and problems with her co-op and how she’s so opposed to rent control. Small wonder – Daddy is a real estate developer... Then she finally said how she hates this society for what it’s done to “women like me” who hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men. I felt myself getting flushed and my face twitched and I started telling her, all cool and calm, about how women like me existed since the dawn of time, before there was oppression (Feinberg, 1993, pp.5-6)

Here the narrator explicitly references class differences through the prism of Theresa’s material and familial circumstances and privileges. Theresa talks about “*Democratic politics and seminars and photography*” whereas in juxtaposition to this, the rest of the novel will focus on Jess’s experiences and involvement in union politics, manual labour, factory culture and the working-class bar scene that map the course of her life. Theresa has a family that supports her, but the letter suggests that they only accept some aspects of her identity and only as long as they fall within gender conforming codes. In writing this letter Jess is able to remain “*all cool and calm*” and Feinberg as author

projects a confidence in his own identity which she believes has “*existed since the dawn of time*”.

Here we can see Feinberg enacting elements of my biomythographical framework through their narration of the epistolary prose. In this non-chronological opening to the novel, the narrator is giving the reader an insight into Jess’s identity, personality, struggles and societal positioning through their focus on Theresa, that reveals the protagonist’s subjectivity. This experimental approach is encoded throughout the letter and the urgency of which brings Jess to the centre of the narrative, even though the narrator is writing (and speaking) to Theresa. The linguistic mechanisms used by Feinberg highlight class and positionality differences, they give the reader an intense sense of Jess’s societal dislocation and reveal the stark differences between Jess and Theresa’s gender identity and sexuality – even though both are identified within the narrative as being ‘lesbian’.

Jess’s experience as a butch lesbian and all she has achieved and resisted in her pursuit of self-determination and the right to exist in community becomes a theme in the narrative. Feinberg as narrator is forming a counter-public history that re-asserts the ways that butch women such as Jess, whose histories are often seen as ‘pre-political’ (Kennedy and Davis), set the very foundation for lesbian-feminist liberation. Multiple (queer) temporalities are again engaged as we recognise a three-way dialogue emerging between the generations of butches that are represented in this moment. These include Jess the protagonist as the letter’s author reminiscing on their past life and love, Jess the narrator of *Stone Butch Blues* who is living out, and here articulating, an historic temporality in the novel and Feinberg as narrator in the present whose life experiences are biographically

inscribed in the text. This is exemplified by Jess reminiscing about elder butch-femme lesbians from multiple temporal positions in just a few sentences:

See, I loved them too, and I understood their pain and their shame because I was so much like them. I loved the lines etched on their faces and hands and the curves of their work-weary shoulders. Sometimes I looked in the mirror and wondered what I would look like when I was their age. (Feinberg, 1993, p.7)

This framing of butch lineage and ancestry, that unlike Theresa's heritage, is not rooted in Jess's patrilineal family lines but in community, brings to the fore the challenges faced by lesbian and queer communities in relation to an assumed adoption of heteronormative temporality/chronological time. There is a sense of generational difference, a reference to the elder butches' "age", the idea of a 'mirroring' of identities through the physical process of aging. Jess's queered temporality differs from Theresa, her life can never be understood outside of her community of butches and their shared sense of belonging. And this sense of belonging remains outside of the historical timeframes that have socially excluded her.

Jess's letter is a one-sided dialogue that positions Theresa as an informal witness and participant in the letter's activities and serves as the narrator's alibi to the truth telling contained in the text. In the letter Jess clearly spells out the ways that the personal and the political will go hand in hand throughout the novel. Love is at the root of Feinberg's approach to liberation, and Jess's feelings and protectiveness toward Theresa are likewise rooted in a respect and love not only for Theresa but for the community to which they belong. In

Jess' eyes one cannot exist without the other, "*Besides this was my community, the only one we belonged to*" (Feinberg, 1993, p.7), the tenderness of their love for one another fortifying their resilience in the face of extreme violence and persecution.²⁷⁸

As the letter goes on to recall, Theresa and Jess's experiences of oppression, violence, and hatred and their ability to survive this together affirms their commitment to one another at interpersonal and community levels.

*When the biggots came in it was time to fight, and fight we did.
Fought hard-femme and butch, women and men together.*
(Feinberg, 1993, p.7)

*Did I survive? I guess I did. But only because I knew I might get
home to you.* (Feinberg, 1993, p.9)

The protectiveness of many butch lesbians toward their femme partners (and vice versa) comes to the fore here, although lesbian sexuality remains societally invisible femme women and female bodies are still sexualised and violated. The cultural normalisation of sexual violence and misogyny is subverted through the couple's femme-butach dynamic, as exemplified in their communication, particularly Theresa's desire and recognition of her butch lover's identity, "*And I remember that look in your eyes again. You didn't just know me, you liked what you saw.*" (Feinberg, 1993, p.6). There is a sense of protective safety

²⁷⁸ Also see Moses, C. (1999). Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. *Studies in the Novel*, 31(1), pp. 74–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533313>. Like Wendell Ricketts, Moses situates class and sexuality within a queer matrix.

toward one another, secured by their relationship and the community they belong to, amidst the reality of economic precarity, violence, and danger. Kennedy and Davis go on to explain:

If the world was dangerous for butches, it was equally so for the fems in their company, whom the butches felt they needed to protect. (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p.181)

The adoption of masculinised identities by working-class lesbians can be seen to be both a symbolic and structural protective mechanism. Butch lesbians and female masculinities, as explored in the work of Feinberg (and Hucklenbroich), posed a direct threat to hetero-patriarchy and its multifarious forms of institutional and economic power.

Jess goes on to explain in her letter to Theresa that butch-femme bar life was forever under attack. The police knew the lesbian bars and would raid them frequently, enjoying the sadistic ritual of having masculine identified butches prove that they had at least three items of feminine attire on beneath their butch clothing. This gave the police an excuse to ridicule, punish, and sexually assault them. Clothes were a political statement in butch-femme bar culture, one that differentiated sexual preferences, sexualities, and social roles in queer spaces.²⁷⁹ As a centrist left-leaning liberal lesbian-feminist movement took ownership of lesbianism as an identity and alternative lifestyle,

²⁷⁹ We can revisit Alix Genter's study of Butch-Femme culture which reflects on the political act of clothing and attire for a butch: "Indeed many women were very aware that if their attire appeared too masculine, they were in danger of being stopped by police and even arrested for violating what became known in lesbian vernacular as the "three-piece-clothing law" (Genter, 2016, p.616-17).

butch-femme identities became more associated with lower, working-class identities.²⁸⁰

Working-class lesbians had a key role in shaping their history, transforming their social life, sexual expression, relationships, and identity. Together these changes created the consciousness of kind necessary for the boldness that was to characterize gay liberation. (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p.372)

As Jess outlines in their letter to Theresa, when the cops entered the lesbian bars, the music stopped. Women who stepped outside of gender norms and resisted hetero-patriarchy were humiliated, sexually violated, and assaulted. Their obstinate refusal to ‘switch clothing’ or ‘return’ to an expected normative female dress code gave license for society to attempt to regulate their behaviour, and when they refused to do so, to punish them in severe ways. But in the face of this, Jess recalls the way that Theresa softens and ameliorates the pain of the multiple sexual assaults that Jess will continue to experience at the hands of the police throughout the rest of the text:

²⁸⁰ That is until its reclamation in the 1990s, as demonstrated in my discussion of Munt and Cherry’s 1998 text *Butch/Femme*, when these identities merged with a new queer set of aesthetics. In parallel working-class butch-femme communities have continued to exist outside of Queer Theory and academia. This is exemplified in a UK context by the recent “We/Us” exhibition by Roman Manfredi (2023) <https://spacestationsixtyfive.com/we-us/>, and the re-invigoration of the butch lesbian bar scene and events such as ButchPlease! a twice monthly lesbian club night at the Vauxhall Tavern which is usually sold out (the Vauxhall Tavern has been a working-class LGBT venue for over 4 decades), both demonstrate an ongoing butch-femme subculture that reaches across class lines.

*You loosened my tie, unbuttoned my collar, and touched my face.
I saw the pain and fear for me in your face, and I whispered it
would be alright. We knew it wouldn't be.
I never told you what they did to us down there – queens in one
tank, stone butches in the next – but you knew. (Feinberg, 1993,
p.8)*

As I reference in the nine components of my biomythographical framework, violence against women and girls is a continuing theme throughout my chosen texts. It is interwoven into the narratives, essays, and poetry, on occasions more explicitly than others and the potential of male (and state) violence is an ever-looming threat. Whether this be implied or actual, the endemic nature of violence against women and girls is exacerbated by other intersecting identities such as sexuality, race, class, and gender expression. Jess experiences extreme forms of physical and sexual violence throughout *Stone Butch Blues*. Despite her pain and fear Jess sees her role as being a protector of femmes and in this case Theresa. Throughout the narrative Jess may be mired in public shame but she still manages to exude a stone butch pride whilst juggling the expectations and community pressures that accompany this. As Dominick La Capra discusses in "History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory", the trauma of violence often becomes a deferred memory, impacting on the survivor's sense of time and place, as well as their identity. Arguably one that could be seen to be inherited by successive marginalised communities:

Traumatic memory...may involve belated temporality and a period of latency between a real or fantasized early event and a later one that somehow recalls it and triggers renewed

repression, dissociation, or foreclosure and intrusive behaviour.
(LaCapra in Rossington and Whitehead, eds., 2007, p.207)

As a stone butch Jess may never reveal the extent of the violence she experiences to her lovers, but the narrator makes sure that the violations and abuse are documented, that the reader intimately understands the level of trauma that Jess sustains physically, mentally, and spiritually.

The use of short paragraphs in the letter that opens *Stone Butch Blues* retains both a familiar and casual feel, despite the complexity of its communicative ruptures. As in Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, there seems to be an implied audience who share the lived experiences of the author and the narrator in the familiar renderings of this epistolary sequence. The use of a letter to open *Stone Butch Blues*, gives the reader a sense of realism and an accessible in road into both known and hidden histories, but the letter in its content and style remains experimental and poetic. Indeed, the letter serves to reset linear heteronormative time as its shifting trajectory navigates three decades of Jess's life. Like the sepia photographs of long forgotten family members featured in Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (explored in the next chapter), *Stone Butch Blues* presents textual snapshots of a butch-femme existence that no longer exists.²⁸¹

²⁸¹ Dorothy Allison, who came of age as a working-class lesbian in a post-bar lesbian feminist culture in the 1970s straddles this often seemingly contradictory period between pre-political butch-femme culture and lesbian feminism – doing so with a strong critique of the latter that would influence a generation of 1990s dykes who *did* incorporate working-class butch-femme history into their personal identities and larger community culture.

For the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, their place is always marginal and determined by others; as the narrator of the letter goes on to identify, a form of enforced 'exile' is a recurrent feeling and place for those with gender identities outside of heteronormative formations. The performativity of these entrenched gender binaries is so easily displaced by the multiple levels of violence that the lesbians in *Stone Butch Blues* experience. We see Jess experience the socially sanctioned interpersonal violence that she refuses to perform on her fellow butches and femme lovers, the subtle socio-economic violence of the activist community in its class division, and the state sanctioned violence of discriminatory laws and their enactment by institutions and state agents. *Stone Butch Blues* deploys the narratives of the marginalised and those in gender exile to resist this violence and to counter the oppressive regulation of behaviours that were seen by mainstream America to threaten the mid-twentieth-century U.S. political regime.

PART 2: A Crystal Diary

Passing Identities

I have delineated that biomythography often merged borders, gender, and genre to develop a political language of movement that could hold and support the then shifting tides of marginalised lesbian identity, as well as pushing the boundaries of literary experimentation. Whilst the contemporary mainstream may have subverted biomythographical narratives such as *Zami* and *Stone Butch Blues* into more simplistic literary understandings of political resistance (often decontextualised) there remain other unknown or muted biomythographical texts that do not serve the same contemporary

social narrative or political/cultural milieu – wherever that zeitgeist may be temporarily docked.

One such text that appears to have been sublimated into this no person's land of literary exile is Frankie Hucklenbroich's *A Crystal Diary*. This arguably parodic take on the hyper-masculinised working-class imaginary of writers such as Nelson Algren and queer 'Beat' writers William Burroughs and Herbert Huncke, re-asserts lesbian/women's narratives to be as daring, subversive, on topic and as avant-garde as the works of their male contemporaries. *A Crystal Diary's* episodic narratives challenge the very male-identified genre of experimental underground literary work, usually a writing style that is not seen to encompass narratives driven by women's independent agency and self-enactment. It should be noted that a post Beat genre of experimental work that centred the socially excluded outsider was further mythologised and popularised by the first wave of U.S. punk and post-punk in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Biomythography emerged in parallel to this radical subculture and despite Kim Gordon's (of Sonic Youth) well versed proclamation that "girls invented punk rock" the first wave of the punk rock movement sublimated and gave little representation to lesbian narratives.^{282 283}

Where Frankie Hucklenbroich's work superficially departs from other biomythographies is in the extremity of her depiction of a biomythographical butch lesbian working-class life at the margins of

²⁸² Of course, there were a few exceptions to this, one such exception being Lizzie Borden's 1983 feminist film *Born in Flames*, a dystopian classic that boasts a women-dominated post-punk soundtrack that includes The Bloods and The Red Krayola.

²⁸³ However, gay male public cultures were starting to emerge more fully at this time, many of which have crossed from the avant-garde underground into the contemporary mainstream, such as the recent popularisation of Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz's work.

society as she openly depicts the protagonist's unruly participation in criminal activity, substance use and abusive behaviour throughout the text. Whereas writers such as Allison and Feinberg make a nod to the margins of an existence that can only be lived outside of what is 'lawful', Hucklenbroich makes no such subtle diversions away from the protagonist's (and her own) early life as a self-described outlaw. To some sympathetic readers the outlaw behaviours she narrates could be seen to be the product of the protagonist's social exile, poverty and survival, but I don't think that this is Hucklenbroich's aim. She doesn't try to prettify the facts of this often-brutal life on the edge; instead, she depicts her outlaws as having a heavy dose of gusto, humour, and grace. Hucklenbroich as narrator appears to believe in the sheer power of a narrative's existence more than its sanctity or morality and she never provides either justification or an apology for its contents.²⁸⁴

As described, I believe that Hucklenbroich situates her work at the border of a male experimental literary genre sharing the material realities of social exclusion, poverty, and exploitation, that are rarely included lesbian narratives. This speaks to Maggie Nelson's most recent critical work *On Freedom* (2021), in which she explores freedom as a concept and enactment in four contextual areas: art, substance use, sex and sexuality, and the climate crisis. Nelson pragmatizes the role of art in furthering political and social freedoms that she believes should never be fascistically fixed or dormant enough to appease the political climate of an observed 'right' or 'left' in ever differing ages of censorship. She insists that extant art continues to live on through

²⁸⁴ This attitude would inform the lesbian and dyke sex radicals of the 1990s, as described in my discussion of *On Our Backs*, where working-class women were unashamed to fully explore and represent their lives, their creativity, and their sexuality.

different ages and must be viewed within multiple contexts such as the time in which it was made and the “disjuncts between”:

Yet one of art’s most compelling features is how it showcases the disjuncts between the time of composition, the time of dissemination and the time of consideration – disjuncts that can summon us to humility and wonder. (Nelson, 2021, p.28)

Despite Hucklenbroich’s literary absence (*A Crystal Diary* is no longer in print and appears to have had only one pressing by Firebrand Books in 1997) *A Crystal Diary* is important to include in any discussion of biomythography as it shines a light on the more subversive elements of biomythography, and on the narratives and material realities of so many women that otherwise could be woefully lost. For the women and communities depicted may never conform to the ‘progressive politics’ of the contemporary left, thus complicating what Maggie Nelson terms in *On Freedom* to be “The idea that artistic transgression aligns with what we might now call progressive politics...” (Nelson, 2021, p.25). Hucklenbroich’s work questions whether the expectations placed on lesbian and outsider women’s writing to be more ‘politically progressive’ rather than creatively free are another barrier to their access to the literary canon. A barrier that is not imposed on writers such as Burroughs and Algren whose personal and textual transgressions are seen to be more of an indication of their genius than their moral corruption.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ During several long searches on the internet to try and find any Hucklenbroich related material (as there is so little written about *A Crystal Diary*) I came across a number of excoriating reviews from men and women alike who repeatedly used terms such as ‘depraved’ and ‘disgusting’ to describe Hucklenbroich’s text. This exemplifies the different standards that male and female authors are held to in popular-adjacent culture. Although you could term her work ‘challenging’ it is not what I would even consider to be mildly sexually explicit or violent in its depictions of criminal activity,

Nelson's centring of temporality (as shifting moments in time), when considering and interpreting freedom and art, reference Jack Halberstam's 2005 work *In a Queer Time and Place*. Halberstam's seminal text examines the cultural representation of trans people (termed 'transgender' by Halberstam throughout their text) and what we might think of more broadly as female and lesbian masculinities in the 1990s and early noughties. Halberstam's theoretical consideration of queer temporality connects with the biomythographical works in this thesis – but I would suggest that Hucklenbroich's *A Crystal Diary* serves here as the dialogical catalyst between Halberstam's concept and biomythography. In her nomadic exploration of what may be viewed as trauma in a reproductive temporality (that is, female or butch lesbian experience as a mode of trauma in its presumed dysfunctional position *outside* of 'femininity' or femaleness) – Hucklenbroich inverts this understanding to make visible what Halberstam terms "geographies of resistance" (Halberstam, 2005, p.98) that permeate the text. Alongside these, multiple self-identifiers and positioned voices inherent in biomythography work to structure queer temporalities in the narrative. There is also an interdependence between queer temporality, the disruption of chronology, and the geographic locations in *A Crystal Diary*. Whilst Halberstam explores queer and trans geographies within a rural/urban dynamic, particularly in relation to art, trauma and violence, *A Crystal Diary* has parallels with Lorde's *Zami* in its inter-locational and thus cross-cultural expansiveness.

sexuality or drug taking, but it is open and explicit about butch-femme lesbian culture.

A Crystal Diary's narratives sweep across more than a dozen locations (U.S. cities and towns) and traverse across three states, each chapter appearing to be set in a different geographical location and environment. These ever-changing geographies and the instability of each environment, operates to further disrupt hetero-patriarchal normalcy – particularly the normalcy expected of a woman in mid-century America. Akin to the cliché of a generation of young male Beat writers fueled by drugs and hardwired energy, rejecting the life their parents expected them to lead as promising educated young men, with their insatiable sexual appetite (creative and physical) – *A Crystal Diary* maps out a different type of 'road novel' in an alternative social and political space to an erstwhile similarly marginalised audience. Hucklenbroich's biomythography doesn't need to prove that the fabric of American life is duplicitous, corrupt, and deliberately misrepresented by the cultural elite (as per the Beats) in its evocation of daily life veiled as biographical narratives. Instead, her text fully realises the experiences of living in a cultural climate in which mainstream society considers marginalised working-class communities to be innately immoral. Whereas the young Beat writers were rejecting their entitlement to take up white collar corporate roles and expectations that they felt may have inhibited their creative freedom to write, lesbian working-class biomythographers had little choice but to locationally, personally, and creatively improvise, writing in often unpredictable, unsafe happenstance circumstances. As I shall go on to explain, biomythography creates a very different literary mode for what Halberstam terms the "mobilization of trauma" (Halberstam, 2005, p.17).

Bouncing Baby Butches

It would be too easy to equivocate, romanticise, and assimilate Frankie Hucklenbroich's narrative of mid-twentieth-century working-class butch outlaw existence into a set of butch-femme love stories. Many of the twenty-three episodes (twenty-one chapters plus a prologue and epilogue), despite their raw energy, have a subtle tenderness. In addition to this framing Hucklenbroich's 'novel' is endorsed by Joan Nestle (who features Hucklenbroich in her *Women on Women* Collections Series) alongside the obligatory acknowledgement of her support.²⁸⁶ But Hucklenbroich's text carves out a different literary space and place in this thesis. Although *A Crystal Diary* shares some thematic content with Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* it offers a distinct take on a working-class butch narrative. Soaked in the rich potential of sexual and substance-based transgressions (always a page turner), Hucklenbroich's prologue is bold and brassy in its textual dexterity from its opening paragraph onwards:

BOUNCING BABY BUTCHES, boiling and bursting with glands. Kids with our fledgling hormones doing a cha-cha-cha down teenage bloodstreams, anonymous libidinous messages colliding inside our crotches like microscopic car wrecks (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.9)

Alliteratively undoing centuries of teenage girls' sexual sublimation (or exploitation) in one opening paragraph, Hucklenbroich from the outset of *A Crystal Diary*, interlinks sexuality with textuality. In

²⁸⁶ Joan Nestle (along with Naomi Holoch) edited *Women on Women: An Anthology of American Lesbian Short Fiction* (Series 1 and 2) and *Women on Women: A New Anthology of American Lesbian Fiction* Series 3. They were published by Plume (before they became a division of the Penguin group) in 1990, 1993 and 1996. An extract from Hucklenbroich's biomythographical text is featured in series 3.

Hucklenbroich's text teenage butch lesbians are driven by the heat of their hormones and libido, and are physically robust in their desire and language, nervously reciting "*Shit/damn/pussy/screw*" (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p. 9) as "brand new" words in their emerging teenage lexicon. The opening paragraphs of *A Crystal Diary* set the tone of the book, described loosely on the jacket as a 'novel', and give the reader an immediate insight into a lineage of butches and femmes engaging in cultural traditions that incorporate the text's biomythographical themes, and who are by proxy "Women who will fight to work for their right to be butch, their right to love femmes" (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.11).

A Crystal Diary's opening "Prologue: St Louis, 1957" gives the reader an immediate context for the world of the narrator Nicky, a hard wired, tough, no nonsense, smart-talking butch born into a post-McCarthyite U.S. steeped in homophobia and the hatred of anything arbitrarily deemed to be 'un-American' or 'queer'. Coming of age in the 1950s, Nicky is a product of an era of hyper-sexualised teen masculinities as exemplified by James Dean, Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley:

with their slicked back hair, pouty lips in a slight sneer and a smouldering look about the eyes...Many butches developed a style that was at once tough and erotically enticing; simultaneously careless and intense. (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, pp.158-159)

These are teenage pin ups from an era of rock and roll whose arguably queered masculinities juxtapose the increased domestic servitude of a generation of women who were once again expected to

don an apron and serve their man at home after being briefly liberated by the Second World War. Many women in this era had tasted the potential freedoms of independent incomes and lives that did not revolve around serving husbands and children before themselves. The same generation of women now being forced back into the kitchen, aided by the false allure of a consumerist capitalism and paternalism, also gave birth to a generation of children who had another way of understanding their supposed sex and gender, many of whom contradicted the values of their parents, activating seismic political and social changes in the late twentieth century.

Where Hucklenbroich's narrative departs from many of the other biomythographical texts in this thesis, is her absolute certainty of place in a lesbian and butch-femme world. The interior and exterior world of Hucklenbroich's protagonist narrator Nicky and her sense of identity are very secure, and she portrays a world of lesbians – both femmes and butches – who likewise know who they are, what they want and who they desire no matter the barriers that are presented to them. Nicky's working-class marginality is her strength, whilst the ever-present threat and actualisation of violence and danger lurks. Her visible existence as a butch lesbian is something she is unable to, and never tries to, disguise – deviating from the usual tropes of biographical LGBT tales of coming out in the 1950s and 1960s. In Nicky's world the femmes and butches know the code and who they are; it is the external world that keeps mis-identifying their lives and threatening their existence. These threats frequently position Nicky as a social outlaw, when in fact she is often defending her lovers, her friends, her community, her way of life and what she feels is her right to self-determination.

A Crystal Diary is an excellent example of a biomythographical text that uses the guise of memoir or biography to guide (or manipulate) the reader into having empathy for a protagonist that seriously challenges gendered expectations and norms. Nicky is not just resilient and tough, but at times cruel, lewd, abusive, and offensive. Hucklenbroich uses the power of her narration, via sharp editing decisions, to control how much or little we will witness this behaviour in each episode or chapter – and the ways in which the narrative will be temporally connected/disconnected, and her characters received. When Nicky defies authority, social mores and the law the reader remains on side with her reasoning and understands the often-circumstantial choices she has to make even when they can't morally agree – charmed as ever by the narrator's daring. The ability of the author to push the text beyond the realms of memoir or autobiography in order to take ownership of the delivery of the story and to decide what will be told or withheld, resonates within biomythography's modality of resistance.

Smart and Butch Enough

Despite being described by its publishers, for want of a genre, as an 'autobiographical first novel' *A Crystal Diary* can, like most biomythographical texts, be read as episodic and sequential in its delivery, retaining a chronological insecurity, the sections being both interdependent and able to stand alone. Each of the chapters charts the escapades of Nicky a working-class Catholic raised butch whose days and nights, at a superficial level, revolve around sexual encounters with femmes, rivalling fellow butches, hustling for the next dollar, and often excessively relying on alcohol and other substances to get through it all. But this summary of the text is guilty of reducing

Hucklenbroich's intense series of short stories, into a catalogue of high wire adventures without recognising that Hucklenbroich is cleverly transforming the lives of the working-class lesbians and women outsiders she features, into (revised) literary heroines. Each narrative encapsulates the subjects' full humanity without sainthood; women are valued in their entirety and allowed their complex and contradictory selves to be seen and understood. This is done despite the endless threats and enactment of male and state violence, incarceration, exile, and erasure.

Like Kennedy and Davis's aforementioned study of lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York – *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold – A Crystal Diary* demonstrates how lesbians in the 1950s built solid and dependable, though often complex, communities throughout the U.S. Their lesbian survival, particularly their safety, income, and health, was often dependent on one another and on the strength of their community. With the emergence of liberal lesbian-feminism, factions of which which disapproved of and often misunderstood 'masculinised' identities and a wider LGBT community push toward assimilation, butch-femme communities were often reviled as being archaic in their adoption of what was mistakenly seen to be heteronormative roles. But as Kennedy and Davis outline these working-class communities should be recognised as precursors to the lesbian feminist movement and more widely the gay liberation movement:

...working-class lesbians pioneered ways of socialising together and creating intimate sexual relationships without losing the ability of earning a living. Who these working-class lesbians were and how they developed forms of community that had

lasting influence on the homophile, gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements are central issues in this book. (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, p.3).

There is a difference to be noted between Hucklenbroich's representation of butch-femme lives and Kennedy and Davis's oral histories and anthropological analysis, published in 1993 four years before *A Crystal Diary* was published. The approach that Kennedy and Davis take throughout their detailed analysis of four decades of working-class butch-femme lives, is that of identifying a very separate subcultural existence that was largely invisible in many public cultures. Hucklenbroich, Nestle, and Feinberg portray a more complicated scenario where working-class communities outside of the butch-femme community can be seen to sometimes provide support and solidarity – although this can take the form in their narratives of a simultaneous economic extraction as well as provision of resources and care. Both Hucklenbroich and Feinberg portray clear alliances amongst working-class communities amidst the political and authoritarian threats and violence that they face, as demonstrated by Jess's support from union comrades in *Stone Butch Blues*, or Nicky's mother Rose's subtle support of Jo Koerner in Hucklenbroich's "Salisbury Joe". In *A Crystal Diary* there is the sense of a need for a certain level of literary protectionism around working-class communities who may be, to differing degrees, criminalised, morally demonised and exploited by the state; this complexity is something that Dorothy Allison also explores in her work.

Hucklenbroich's protagonist Nicky is constantly crossing cultural and social borders as well as geographical ones, persistently merging the colliding worlds of people living on society's periphery in

differing states of survival. There are positionalities from which her butch identity crosses over into other realms – such as her affinities with working-class men (criminally and socially), the loving influence of her mother and a Catholic upbringing in a community that she is bonded with but knows will reject both her sexuality and identity. Hucklenbroich’s work reveals the intersections and clashes that can occur between subjugated identities (gender, race, and sexuality) and wider working-class communities –which she observantly portrays as being contradictory and repressive, as well as being liberatory and demonstrably defiant. As Halberstam reflects “All too often, community models are offered only as a generalized model of many individuals rather than as a complex interactive model of space, embodiment, locality and desire.” (Halberstam, 2005, p.45)

Surviving and travelling through these interracial working-class communities, Hucklenbroich depicts both an economic interdependence and instability between communities. This is particularly true in the central narrative “A Crystal Diary” from which Hucklenbroich’s book takes its title. Like *Stone Butch Blues* Hucklenbroich’s ‘novel’ appears to revolve around a principal memoir from which the rest of the chapters have been developed. The chapters temporally switch back and forth, referencing events and people that are mentioned non-chronologically throughout the book. Focusing on one of Nicky’s lowest ebbs in her substance use, “A Crystal Diary” is a twenty-page chapter where Nicky recalls how she got stuck in an apartment being staked out by the police, waiting for her lover Diane to turn tricks and sell enough crack to supplement her own habit. She sets both the tone of this story and the reason why she writes as coming from “Instant paranoia. What to do? What to do?” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.143).

There is a restless anxiousness that pervades this story as Nicky looks back on her initial introduction to Diane Grafeo and her journey into heavy crack addiction. She recalls the early days of their tense and impassioned relationship which now only seems to revolve around their next fix or high. When Nicky first encounters her lover to be, she is warned against Diane by her friend Candy at the Chukkers gay bar "...she's bad news. Don't go looking to get burned my friend." (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.152). Nicky foolishly thinks she's smart and butch enough to save Diane from her addiction, "I was the one who was going to change Diane." (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.141). A common subtextual theme in similar lesbian accounts is the generosity by which the working-class femmes placate the performative role of the butch as being the dominant lover, decision-maker, or partner. That is, the femme usually outwits the mimicry of such performative masculinities, often silently, with love and kindness.

Just as Hucklenbroich brings Diane and Nicky to the audience's attention via a written narrative exploration of their lives, so the narrator plays with the irony of her audience reading about characters who read – and in doing so shatters the stereotypes of working-class communities being non-literate and poorly read. For it is Diane and Nicky's shared love of literature that brings them together:

We stared at each other. She said I'm reading *Steppenwolf*. Also the *Duino Elegies*. Do you know who Rilke is?

I nodded and I saw her smile for the first time. (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.154)

The irony and misfit of the pair's soon to be narrated socio-cultural outlaw existence alongside these avant-garde literary staples

are not missed by Hucklenbroich as narrator, her sharp rejoinders in the story reveal layers of acerbic wit. Again, temporally, the chronology of the story is reversed several times. It is only after the audience reads the passage below that we learn that Nicky and Diane got together because of their shared interest in literature. It is only upon reading this story a second or third time that its tongue in cheek humour emerges more fully.

I'd write reams of excellent lesbian poetry in the evenings, each word a modest offering to her. I would then preen beneath her fulsome praise. And I'd bury my grateful face between her legs at least nightly. (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.141)

Hucklenbroich's references to Hesse and Rilke in "A Crystal Diary" speak to the presumed juxtaposition of working-class lives and a relationship with literature. This reminds the audience that often the role of the working-class in literature is always to be the ever observed subject or object; that they are not seen to play a participatory role in the creation, writing or development of 'literature' as an artform. This sets up the precedential cliché that if working-class people are to be the authors of their own lives, then they will often have little choice afforded them but to write from the footnotes of history or to be considered through recorded oral histories and literary marginalia (including memoir). For late twentieth-century lesbian working-class authors writing biomythographical literature, this knowledge created several important subtextual modalities (and tensions) that are rarely recognised or analysed in literary criticism.

Salisbury Joe

After considering the ways that butch identified narrators and authors have helped to both inform and represent queer temporalities, just as their work enables us to re-examine lesbian lives and their counter public narratives, I will turn my focus and attention to the preoccupations in *A Crystal Diary* as being correlative with other biomythographical work. Firstly, I consider ‘Salisbury Joe’, involving Nicky’s childhood recollections of Jo Koerner whose bold defiance and willingness to ride out the threats of violence from a mob of local men and to hold firmly onto her identity as a butch lesbian, thematically influences and drives forward the collection of stories in *A Crystal Diary*. I will then briefly touch on Chapters Nine and Ten of *A Crystal Diary* which extends one narrative over the course of two further chapters – “Las Vegas 1962” and “How to Get Served a Drink in Las Vegas”. These stories both chart an influential and important relationship in Nicky’s adult life with an older femme Shawn, however, it is their orientation around geographical and cultural references which is of interest for the purpose of this chapter.

“Salisbury Joe” comes after *A Crystal Diary*’s prologue titled “Prologue: St. Louis, 1957” which focuses on an eight-year-old Nicky, this bildungsroman homage to butch visibility and pride, setting a narratological tone and thematic precedent for the following chapters. “Salisbury Joe” opens with Nicky asking herself whether her “true vocation” as a “spectacular [Carmelite] nun-saint” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.17) will come true; the reader already knows the answer. That is, although the community Nicky will enter as an adult will centre around women, the devotional aspect of it may not be directed toward God. When young Nicky encounters Jo Koerner, Jo has just returned to Salisbury Street, St. Louis from the Women’s Army Corps (WACS) and we learn that Nicky knew Jo before she “went away to the WACS and

came back queer” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.18). The narrator’s reference to WACS is significant as their promotion of women into secondary army roles away from the gaze of men and domesticity was regarded by many in the 1940s and 1950s to be sexually and otherwise immoral – and thus became associated with the masculinisation of women.²⁸⁷ The threat of WACS’ women’s masculinisation, particularly during and after the second world war, was no doubt further exacerbated by the WACS physical training leaflet which opened with the quip “Your Job: To Replace Men. Be Ready To Take Over”. WACS, like many a nunnery no doubt, also created safe spaces for a number of queer outsider women to remain independent and offered an escape from what would have been – using Halberstam’s framework – the stifling reality of heteronormative reproductive temporality, as well as the opportunity to travel freely without the accompaniment of men.

Jo Koerner (whose first name is symbolically masculinised in the title of the story as ‘Joe’) never identifies herself in the narrative. Indeed, the reader is forced to identify her or with her through several signifiers that Nicky as both child and adult narrator selects. Jo’s voice is not present in the text (she is rarely even quoted by the narrator) – this serves to embolden the way in which femininities are embodied and represented through the lens of both the reproductive temporality of the Salisbury community and the queer temporality of Nicky. As a child narrator Nicky’s preternatural knowledge of their queerness also undermines a sense of chronological time, further subverting the

²⁸⁷ A Crystal Diary was published just two years before Leisa D. Meyer’s *Creating G.I. Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* published by Columbia University Press in 1998. The rediscovery of this muted herstory reflective of a late twentieth century fascination with reorientating historical gender stereotypes and what would come to be understood as the intersectional overlap between race and sex-based discrimination and oppression.

narrative. Jo, via Nicky's portrayal of her character, is a lesbian heroine who refuses to abide by the rules of feminine appearance and domesticity, living and breathing her butch visibility, even at the expense of danger and violence to herself.

Following the main events of the narrative in which Jo Koerner battles with the barbershop patriarchs to get a haircut that she is denied solely because of her sex and butch appearance, the final gendered twist in the tale of 'Salisbury Joe' sees Jo Koerner getting the short back and sides she wants and driving into the sunset with Verldean Prater, the femme that barbershop patriarchs spend their days lusting after. This affirms the butch heroine Jo as the romantic and mythical lead character in an alternate lesbian led universe. The butch lesbian overcoming her subjection to public humiliation, shame and violence is a recurrent theme in so many biomythographical narratives about butch masculinities, but "Salisbury Joe" pushes the bounds of this motif. Its portrayal of the triumphant victorious protagonist who returns to slay the barbershop patriarch dragons and rescue the glamorous damsel from small town patriarchs – epitomises the boldness and futurity of Hucklenbroich's mythological gender-bending storytelling. Hucklenbroich presents her heroine Jo as a butch woman who is primarily sought after, desired and loved by other women, surviving against all the odds without the need for men. Thus, through this utopian representation, biomythography inverts and rejects the predictable tragic denouement of the female outlaw. To survive, the subjects of biomythography must reject traditional narratives in which, under male penmanship, their heroic butches and dissenting women would be exiled, muted, or murdered.

In Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy*, he explores the literature of canonised male authors whose works of tragedy he contextualises as the art of a linear – and often 'progressive' – chronological literary tradition where "tragedy is an interpretation of experience" (Williams, 1979, p.19). Alternatively, Halberstam's cultural location of temporality, one that is neither chronologically progressive nor bound by reproductive time or space, echoes Afrofuturism's multiple continuums: a set of metaphysical parallels powered by quantum physics as much as by Black power and revolution.²⁸⁸ As Williams goes on to discuss in his evaluation of Greek Tragedy and its purpose in bringing communities together; the narrative of the tragedy speaking to a sense of public experience and mourning:

What the form then embodies is not an isolable metaphysical stance, rooted in individual experience, but a shared and indeed collective experience, at once and indistinguishably metaphysical and social. (Williams, 1979, p.18)

We can see biomythography, to some extent, as bringing both of these temporal viewpoints together (multiplicity rather than linearity and the shared or collective) in order to shape distinctive lesbian butch-femme narrative making. Outside of their protective communities, at the risk of violence, incarceration, societal hatred, and dejection, butch-femme lesbians, as the story 'Salisbury Joe' demonstrates, were often unable to take up public space, to openly demonstrate their love, their desire, their existence. Yet through the biomythographical text this

²⁸⁸ This reminds us of a very different but parallel organic cultural development in a similar timeframe (1950's-1990's) as biomythography, that of Afrofuturism, which evoked another temporality, space and set of paradigms that could be occupied by Black communities. A physical and metaphysical space of being – where in the words of African American visionary musician and poet Sun Ra, 'space is the place'.

“interpretation of experience” can be articulated, focalised, celebrated and lived in full.

In a Queer Place

In Halberstam’s theoretical unpacking of ‘queer temporality’ and ‘postmodern geographies’, through cultural evocations of trans and masculine embodiment Halberstam observes that queer ‘subcultural practices’ have “the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space”. (Halberstam, 2005, p.2) *A Queer Time and Place* identifies frameworks for assessing political and social change – and the critical language that is needed to do this without relying on the “middle class logic of reproductive temporality” (Halberstam, 2005, p.4). That is, finding ways to disrupt the notion of women or queer people’s essential connection with a biological reproductive time to further the nation state’s promotion of heteronormativity and thus reproductive power. In disrupting a heteronormative temporality – this “queer adjustment in the way in which we think about time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space” (Halberstam, 2005, p.6). Halberstam is observing that queer temporalities are held by space, embodiment, locality, and desire. Halberstam in particular uses the public’s fascination with the murder of Brandon Teena, a trans man, at the age of twenty-one in 1993 to present “a particular set of late-twentieth-century cultural anxieties about place, space, locality and metropolitanism.” (Halberstam, 2005, p.25)

As discussed, *A Crystal Diary* traverses a number of American cities (namely Denver, St Louis and Las Vegas); places that are not usually viewed as being queer metropolises or the usual sites of mid

twentieth-century gay freedom and progression.²⁸⁹ The story “Las Vegas, 1962” articulates Halberstam’s presentation of a queer “place, space, locality” and the temporal ways that lesbian desire can subvert and occupy it. We observe this in Hucklenbroich’s scenic description of an American landscape interspersed with the celebrity of Las Vegas, “the Sands and the Stardust” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.115) for “There was just Vegas, out there on the sand all by herself, like a sexy woman sunning alone on a giant beach.” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.115). Here the likes of Dinah Washington, Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. – inspirers of butch masculinities and high femme luxury – are one and the same to the narrator when “Under the thick, black desert sky powdered with stars” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.115). As one chapter slides into the next with the opening line “VEGAS HAD BEEN GOOD FOR US” (Hucklenbroich, 1997, p.121), indicating another adventure to be textually recalled, so the reader is eased into another episode of Nicky’s hustling ways; same city, different time.

CONCLUSION: Awakening

Biomythography is a genre that at its core holds a socio-economic lens up to subjects that cannot be abstracted from their political and cultural context nor divorced from their historical moorings. Hucklenbroich and Feinberg’s biomythographical texts are radical and formational in their use of narratives that have a materialist emphasis – here the mythical and biographical are rooted in the lived experiences and realities of surviving economic subjugation, lesbiphobia, male violence and class repression. They are

²⁸⁹ Although Hucklenbroich does set one chapter in San Francisco, the episode offers a sense of the transitional, the protagonist passing through this West Coast city, on the way back to middle America.

personal testimonies presenting the reader with complex, nuanced and sometimes difficult illustrations of collectivist outsider communities; of the intimacies and hidden vulnerabilities of working-class women battling to survive a social discourse of poverty and exclusion.

In *Stone Butch Blues* and *A Crystal Diary* both authors examine the literary ‘outsider’, typically gendered, and framed in U.S. literature as a male hero, and how that automatically pushes the lesbian or female-identified outsider into an alternate space or what Jack Halberstam regards to be a ‘queered temporality’ that is often working against the dehumanisation and exclusion of the butch lesbian subject. Whereas Feinberg and Hucklenbroich’s popular male literary contemporaries would likely have sensationalised or weaponised lesbianism and women’s sexual independence as markers of an innate deviancy in their novels, instead working-class lesbian biomythographers created new temporalities in which to exist that were expansive, heroic, and resolutely defiant. In doing so they connected their experiences with an audience that was hungry to be fully represented and to exist in print.²⁹⁰ As Hucklenbroich states in “Awakening”, one of her few poems to be published posthumously by the (now) online *Lavender Review*:²⁹¹

I am hungry.

Hungry. You have left no scrap of meat,
no stiffening honeycomb to suck; (Hucklenbroich, 2020)

²⁹⁰ We could also cite popular authors such as Henry Miller and John Updike amongst other literary subcultures as being connected with the Beats.

²⁹¹ This rare published or publicly available poem by Frankie Hucklenbroich can be found online, via the Lavender Review’s website, amongst the work of many other notable biomythographers: <https://www.lavrev.net/2020/06/frankie-hucklenbroich.html>.

As the social consensus for gay liberation and queer progression took hold in the 1990s, biomythography mapped a trajectory of resistance, spinning narratives and spanning lost temporalities to document and archive the histories of women who changed the course of social and cultural liberation in the late twentieth century. As I shall explore in the next chapter of this thesis, via my analysis of Dorothy Allison's work, sexual liberation was an important part of this trajectory and came about through a productive yet wrought radical lesbian resistance against class oppression, male violence, liberal feminist morality making and social derision.

CHAPTER 5: DOROTHY ALLISON

I Knew Myself Queer

By the time I understood that I was queer, the habit of hiding was deeply set in me, so deeply that it was not a choice but an instinct. Hide, hide to survive, I thought, knowing that if I told the truth about my life, my family, my sexual desire, my history, I would move over into that unknown territory, the land of they, would never have the chance to name my own life, to understand it or claim it. (Allison, 1994, p.14)

In the previous chapter I considered the relationality between class, identity, socio-economic exclusion and narrative making – probing the inherent role that these intersecting components have in the making of biomythography. Biomythography could be seen to advance literary spaces for working-class lesbian women, and women who are labelled or conceive themselves to be societal ‘outlaws’ – particularly non-gender conforming lesbians. This enables the ‘outlaw’ biomythographer to further include their own or other representations of lesbian subjectivity and working-class experience into more ‘traditional’ modalities of storytelling. In this chapter we turn to the work of Dorothy Allison, a working-class lesbian whose writing comes to represent the end of the biomythographical period I am examining and whose working-class identity was firmly mythologised throughout her oeuvre as she aimed to retell one story in a myriad of different ways:

I knew there was only one story that would haunt me until I understood how to tell it – the complicated, painful story of how

my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl. (Allison, 1994, p.34)

In her work Allison describes herself as a self-pronounced lesbian sex radical who is “not only a lesbian but a transgressive lesbian-femme, masochistic, as sexually aggressive as the women I seek out, and as pornographic in my imagination and sexual activities as the heterosexual hegemony has ever believed.” (Allison, 1994, p.23). Allison’s writing interlaces intense childhood memories with her emboldened lesbian sexuality, hard edged truth telling, and vulnerable empathetic memoir infused stories about working-class men and women who formed her community growing up. Allison also brings a particular aspect of biomythography, referenced throughout the thesis, into sharp focus; that of the juxtaposition between political lesbianism and radical lesbian sexuality, with biomythographical literature occupying a third political and theoretical space between Radical Feminism and Post-structuralist feminisms/Queer Theory.

Allison’s better known texts were published in the early 1990s by mainstream publishing houses who benefitted commercially from the increased appetite for lesbian fiction, ‘experiential’ orientated texts, and memoir. ²⁹² ²⁹³ ²⁹⁴During this period lesbian authored work was

²⁹³ I refer to ‘experiential’ text throughout the thesis, as a way to bring together a myriad of women’s texts that are indiscriminately labeled in varying ways; auto/biography, memoir, auto-realist fiction, auto-theory and cultural theory- but in fact all have a strong line of ‘experientialism’ at their core; that is, the focalising and very feminist valuing of personal experience as a way to inform a truth or subjectivity that resonates with material lived experiences. Experience rather than literary qualifications was promoted and continually defended by feminist/queer creatives and theorists, and became associated with notions of ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture.

²⁹⁴ Although Allison can be seen to have financially benefitted from the timing of her publications and received economic rewards that few of her biomythographical contemporaries received, she was by no means a wealthy woman. As the incredibly

more readily mainstreamed in the U.S., in part due to the promotional work of women/lesbian owned book stores and the increasing number of women and lesbians being employed and having senior roles in the commercial book trade and publishing. Dorothy Allison's short 'memoir' *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), was first published by American publisher E.P. Dutton (who became an imprint of the Penguin group in the late 1980's). This publication came swiftly off the back of the success of Allison's previous work; *Trash* (1988), *The Women Who Hate Me* (1991), *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (1994).²⁹⁵ Significantly, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* was published before her last novel *Cavedweller* (1998), which marked an end to the height of Allison's literary productivity so far.²⁹⁶ Each of these texts arguably focus on biographical elements of Allison's own life, they reframe and reinterpret the same or similar biographical experiences through different lenses, characters and perspectives.²⁹⁷

insightful 1995 New York Times Magazine article on Allison (by Alexis Jetter) explains "recognition didn't help her finances. (The \$25,000 for the movie rights to "Bastard," as well as a \$100,000-plus advance for her next novel, "Cavedweller," was swallowed up by debts and a down payment on a house" (Jetter, 1995, no pagination).

²⁹⁵ All these texts were either nominated for the Lambda Literary Award or Stonewall Book Award, *Two or Three Things* was a finalist in both awards and *Trash*, *Skin* and *Cavedweller* were winners of these awards (*Skin* winning both the Stonewall Book and Lambda Awards).

²⁹⁶ Although Dorothy Allison has made reference to having other full-length books in development most notably one titled, *She Who*, they have not been published. Since the publication of *Cavedweller*. Allison has published one short story titled *Jason Who Will Be Famous* (2009), which veers away in theme and content from all of Allison's previous work.

²⁹⁷ In Allison's interview with the New York Times Magazine, Jetter summarises this impulse to tell and retell the same story and the way that this blurs the boundary between biographical detail and storytelling: "even she can't always tell where the truth ends and the story begins." (Jetter, 1995, no pagination)

Allison's work is grounded within what Jaime Harker has suggestively defined as a 'transgressive' Southern lesbian literary tradition. One that includes the likes of experimentalist Bertha Harris, essayist Mab Segrest and fellow biomythographical writer Pat Parker, for Harker this is a "literary tradition" that "engages radicalism, sexuality, and utopian spaces." (Harker, 2018, p.15). This chimes with some key tenets of biomythography as the genre has a tendency to transgress beyond known thematic boundaries and to politically extend beyond the page. In her 2018 text, *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement*, Jaime Harker calls this approach to writing the "queer and the grotesque" (Harker, 2018, p.101), a feminist lesbian way of interpreting the world that was as politically radical as it was socially transgressive. As Harker goes onto explain:

Many topics we consider contemporary concerns in feminism such as intersectionality, polyamory, and transnationalism – were debated from the earliest days of the movement. Women's liberation was a combative, simultaneous, and complicated braid of multiple conversations, movements and manifestos. (Harker, 2018, p.9)

Like biomythography, the Southern lesbian tradition, as Harker explains it, works fundamentally within the structures of power and resistance that lesbian authors, particularly marginalised lesbian women live and create their work. Harker's study also reminds the non-U.S. reader about the statewide political divide between the North and the South of the U.S., which has resulted in cultural and artistic differences that are influenced by a sense of this geographic division, regionality, and racialised history. What Harker stresses is the way

that the South has cultivated a unique artistic voice in response to these differences that is informed by both its 'outsider' and 'queer' (in broader terms than sexuality alone) status. She writes of:

The creation of a South grounded in different ideologies and notions of power, one in which "radical", "queer", and "southern" are not mutually exclusive... in their explorations of radical politics, transgressive sexuality, and queer space. (Harker, 2018, p.7)

The idea of Allison occupying space as a writer working in the 'Southern tradition', was important to her and the subject matter and geographical location of her work (including the use of Southern linguistic references) were equally important in her role as storyteller. Writing as a female-storyteller-as-witness, reflecting on intergenerational poverty, abuse, the imposition of structural inequality, Allison continually references the privileged position that she has as the narrator. She is a storyteller who wants to break the 'objective', curated lens that silences the voices of working-class subjugated communities, whilst revealing the impact of economic and social oppression on the poor and how this exacerbates gender-based violence.

When I began there was only the suspicion that making up the story as you went along was the way to survive. And if I know anything, I know how to survive, how to remake the world in a story. (Allison, 1996, p.4)

This self-reflexive voice counteracts the deletion of the subject's narrative within her family, her community and, more broadly, on the

written page. Themes of violence against women and girls, the harm and threats perpetrated by men and the impact of these on communities, rebound throughout *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*. The women in the text are continually finding creative ways to survive and resist both personal and structural violence, as Allison comments, the kind of violence that also places working-class women, “in all those photos taken at mining disasters, floods and fires” (Allison, 1996, p.33). Allison meanwhile tries to redress this balance by repositioning women as the survivors rather than the voiceless victims of violence. By interspersing photographs throughout her text, Allison subverts societally imposed stereotypes, juxtaposing ‘happy’ and often aesthetically pleasing photographs with her bold, witty and unfettered text to contradict a public narrative about working-class communities and to counter the silencing of survivors within these communities.

The implicit acknowledgement that male violence is an ever-present danger for women and girls, particularly working-class women and girls, and that the state institutionalises such violence connects the work of Allison with Parker. Although their styles are very different, their open accessible dialogue, their condensed and quick-witted quips and their use of direct language to counter the trauma and shame of abuse – is strikingly similar. Allison, like Parker, centralises a primary biomythographical component as her stories and work is informed by her subjective experiences and a knowledge that violence against women and girls is endemic. This understanding also appears to inform the societal or personal choices her narrators or characters make but it never *directs* or controls the story itself. Allison’s work focuses on the humanness of her protagonists and although violence and abuse inform and feature in her composition, the power of the narration and storytelling averts from this becoming

exploitative or of shock value to the audience. This reasserts what I suggest Allison is trying to do through her biomythographical output: to connect her storytelling with her readership/audience and to engage elements of these stories with lived reality in a deep, meaningful, present – and yet – transformational way.

Early on in *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, the narrator sarcastically explains, via working class tropes, that the only way for working-class Southern women in Greenville to escape from their community is through illicit sexual encounters, alcohol, violence, bearing children and most importantly telling stories. Yet all remain only temporary measures as the author reminds us that there are few economically and socially viable escape routes, that poverty and societal position continually ground poor people's flights and dreams. Allison is sure to tell her audience the "hard truth" about the realities of poverty and oppression and how this filters down to a personal level, impacting reflectively on the working-class storyteller herself reminding us that an individual's or a community's stories are often all that they own:

I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have...

The story becomes the thing needed. (Allison, 1996, p.3)

The opening essay of Dorothy Allison's 1994 biomythographical collection of essays and memoir-based narratives, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* speaks to my claim that biomythography enables the writer to indirectly reach her truth telling and to mythologise the self without exposure, risk, and harm. As

biomythography works within a protective collectivism, the writer can take risks with subject matter to avoid, in Allison's words, their work being "...undercut by an urge to fit us into the acceptable myths and theories of both mainstream society and lesbian-feminist reinterpretation." (Allison, 1994, p.15). *Skin* is an incredible body of work that brings together all the elements of biomythography I outlined in my Introduction, and although it is a collection of essays it flows together as a cohesive narrative. Supplementing critical engagement with her biomythographical writing, it gives the reader a foundation on which to better understand Allison's work and biomythography.²⁹⁸ *Skin* brings together twenty-three essays and narratives; most are story-based memoirs that reference much of the material she uses in her best known and best-selling books, *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Trash* – again exemplifying the intertextual and dialogic nature of biomythography. It also provides a frame of reference for Allison's political activism and informs her distinct approach to writing.

In this chapter my main focus is on Allison's lesser known and most performative text, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1996). By exploring her use of non-traditional subject matter; violence, class oppression and sexual exclusion, I will incorporate an analysis of

²⁹⁸ See Gilmore, L. (2001). Limit Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity. *Biography*, 24(1), pp. 128–139.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23540313>.

Leigh Gilmore's essay veers into an analysis of trauma through legal frameworks and imaginings – and the inadequacy of 'self' to represent our own narratives when that 'self' is traumatised "Telling the story of one's life suggests a conversion of trauma's morbid contents into speech, and thereby, the prospect of working through trauma's hold on the subject." (Gilmore, 2001, p.129). This raises a few important queries in relation to Allison's work – does the urge to tell our story post trauma come from the need for righteous justice or the need to be heard? And can it ever really serve either function?

Allison's insertion of lesbian and queer subjectivity into conceptions of the family based narrative. I will initially discuss her role in the so-called Lesbian Sex Wars in an attempt to historicise the impact of this ideological division in lesbian feminism and the additional fears and threats that were associated with being an out queer 'sex radical' just three decades ago.²⁹⁹ I will then turn to her legacy and influence on a younger generation of working-class punk 'outlaw' lesbians who would go on to form their own subcultural lesbian publics – by making comparisons with the photography of Tammy Rae Carland whose work poignantly shares the signifiers of working-class women's lives in ways that echo Allison. Carland's representation of everyday lesbian experience and female sexuality within the stereotyped framing of national identity alludes to a central concern in Allison's work. As she writes "It is frustrating to me that so many people divide the erotic and the everyday into such stubbornly segregated categories." (Allison, 1994, p.94).

The Lesbian Outlaw

I knew myself queer. It wasn't just that I was lesbian. It was that all of my sexual fantasies were so perverse in every sense of the definition. I knew myself an outlaw. So all of my imagination

²⁹⁹ Both Elisa Glick and Laura Guy have written in-depth memoirs of the Lesbian Sex Wars from different viewpoints: Glick, E. (2000). Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression. *Feminist Review*, 64, pp.19–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395699> and Guy, L. (2016). Sex Wars Revisited. *Aperture*, 225, pp. 54–59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44404710>. "In feminism's sex wars of the 1980s, pro-sex feminists argued, persuasively I think, that radical feminism's representation of women as disempowered actors fails to see women as sexual subjects in their own right" (Glick, 2000, p.20)

was about being an outlaw. (Allison in Pratt, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.31)

Allison's positioning as a "queer" with "perverse" fantasies, and the risks she took in openly and bravely stating this in the late twentieth century, are a core part of her literary identity and this positioning underpins her writing and style. Allison's 'outlaw' imagination (which she recounts as being with her since childhood) gives her the impetus, after surviving sexual violence and incest, to synthesise what I observe to be the hard vernacular of Parker with the storytelling grace of Nestle.³⁰⁰ However, Allison's work is particularly distinct in the ways that it brings together deep political concerns about lesbian feminist politics *and* sexuality. As she discusses in her essay "Public Silence, Public Terror" about the Lesbian Sex Wars in *Skin*, her engagement with other lesbian writers, thinkers and activists is important in her work and activism. This includes her engagement with the biomythographical work of women of colour: "*Bridge* gave me a new way to look at my life because it was so full of

³⁰⁰ Allison work is unique in its approach to sexual abuse and sexuality, but I am unsure as to whether her work can be fully understood through a contemporary socio-political lens. In the 1990's at a time when writers such as Kathy Acker and Lydia Lunch were exploring the darker imaginings of women's sexuality in their writing and pushing the boundaries between sexual autonomy and sexual taboos, their audiences had to reckon with their literary subjects being both participants and survivors of certain sexual practices that could be seen to be abusive but from the subject's perspective are also considered liberatory. Allison's ability to write through these taboos and to maintain her subject's sexual autonomy whilst also reckoning with the ways in which sexuality can often be informed by experiences of abuse led her to be scrutinised more readily by the WLM than it did her wider quotidian audience. Jetter frames this well: "Her work was labeled pornographic, and she was heckled at readings by anti-porn activists. But Allison refused to be silenced. "The huge issue for any incest survivor is learning to enjoy sex. It is why I do the sexually explicit writing that I do." (Jetter, 1995, no pagination). As an aside, I witnessed Lydia Lunch having the same treatment from lesbian feminists at one of her poetry readings in the 1990's in the UK, throughout which she remained fully composed.

the lives of women who, while they were different from me, voiced the same hopes, the same desperate desires to change what any of us is allowed.” (Allison, 1994, p.115). This intertextual biomythographical reference to *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color* affirms her deep commitment and emotional bond to radical feminist and lesbian politics, despite the fact that it estranged her from her family:

Becoming a political activist with an almost religious fervor was the thing I did that most outraged my family and the Southern working-class community they were part of. (Allison, 1994, p.25)

And, for similar reasons of class and identity, estranged her from the feminist movement: “Traditional feminist theory has had a limited understanding of class differences and of how sexuality and self are shaped by both desire and denial.” (Allison, 1994, p.15)

Like Audre Lorde, Allison’s work received mainstream recognition, including having one of her most famous books, *Trash*, turned into a film directed by Anjelica Huston.³⁰¹ I would observe that the timing of Allison’s emergence as a published writer was pivotal to her mainstream success. That is, her work was produced and published toward the latter end of biomythography’s golden age, while her formative years were influenced by the women’s liberation movement (WLM) and her participation in its activism in the 1970s. Despite her eventual departure from the Radical Feminist part of the WLM – which became synonymous with the women against pornography

³⁰¹ Huston’s film is seen to largely deviate from Allison’s book, particularly in its examination of incest and rape. Dorothy Allison herself has unusually made no comment on the film.

(WAP) movement – her involvement was a shaping force in her life that she adopted like a religion, “If there had not been a women’s liberation movement in the early ’70s, I would not have started writing. I would not be alive.” (Allison in Dietzel, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.42). Allison herself notes that, despite her political differences with the WLM, especially in relation to sexuality, it was coming of age, creative independence, and working for and within the WLM that gave her the context in which to develop her work, as well as find the networks and potential lesbian publishers to support her output.

When Allison struck her mainstream book deals in the early to mid 1990s with Dutton and Plume and Penguin, she already had 15 years of editing and writing for feminist and gay journals such as *Conditions* and *Out/Look* magazine, alongside developing and writing her own work and poetry. Initially Allison was picked up by Firebrand Books who published *Trash: Short Stories*, reprinted *The Women Who Hate Me* and brought out *Skin* her book of essays on sexuality, class and literature. The late twentieth century launch of her literary career meant that much of the lesbian literary groundwork and networks had already been established by the likes of Joan Nestle, Pat Parker and Leslie Feinberg. As Allison came to notoriety, she did so via a slightly different route, her work resonating with a politically engaged and well-read lesbian audience *as well as* a burgeoning mainstream female audience that was hungry and ready for literature that referenced authentic and complex experiences of gender-based violence and trauma.

As explained in the previous chapter, particularly in relation to Frankie Hucklenbroich’s work, the role of the protagonist as outlaw, sexual or otherwise, is central to the development of the

biomythographical narrative. This identity extends a place of belonging to those for whom it is too dangerous to write their lives into existing recognised genres, including biography, to the taste of mainstream publishers. The notion of the sexual outlaw and societal outsider, is embedded in the culturally conceived deviance of butch-femme relationships in the mid twentieth century. In Feinberg and Hucklenbroich's work they give a clear understanding of the no persons land that many lesbian women occupied where they were often shunned, damned, and violated by heteronormative middle America and anti-homophile laws. These sexual outlaws were also rejected by middle-class liberal feminists, who saw them as a shameful blot on the 'progressive' lesbian landscape, a stance that had more in common with the Christian right's pro-censorship politics despite their pro-life position and condemnation of certain sexual freedoms for women.

The Lesbian Sex Wars: Losing Her Religion

Allison came to political consciousness at a time when some lesbian women were rejecting any assumptions that their sex lives would avoid what were considered by radical feminist lesbians to be 'patriarchal' sexual practices such as sado-masochism and bondage play (BDSM). Whilst many proponents of butch-femme relationships had already started to unravel aspects of these taboos in their work, it wasn't until the 1990s that the so called 'Sex War' became more visible and the controversies around liberatory sexual practices a mainstream topic. A combination of advancements in communications and publishing (pre- internet) as well as the progressive direction of several liberation movements around race, gender, and LGBT rights aided an international conversation around post-censorship sexualities,

pornography, and sexual freedoms.³⁰² The catapulting of female sexuality, sex work and pornography into the public eye made it a wide stream cultural phenomenon which is best articulated by the cultural furor and publicity around Madonna's 1992 erotic 'coffee table' book *Sex*, which despite its popularity amongst lesbians, was to some an extractive capitalist publicity stunt that greatly advanced Madonna's career.

The 1982 Barnard Conference on sexuality was seen as a pivotal moment in the decade of Lesbian Sex Wars to come. Organised by Gayle Rubin, Carol Vance, and Ellen Dubois amongst others, the focus of the conference was to have open discussions about women's sexuality beyond reproduction and heteronormativity – the taboo of women's sexuality and sexual experimentation a fundamental feminist concern. However, the conference turned out to be highly controversial and politically charged and it was condemned by the very feminist movement from which it was spawned, having a profound effect on the politics of a generation of lesbian and queer identified women.

Even for those of us with backgrounds as political activists who thought we had some handle on sexual anxiety and its variations in this society, the revelations of shame, fear, and guilt that occurred after the Barnard Sex Scandal and the period

³⁰² Another rendition of the Sex Wars, from a Radical Feminist point of view by Anne Ferguson pre-empts the mounting rift between feminisms that would eventually collapse Second Wave feminist collectivism – as it had been: Ferguson, A. (1984). Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists. *Signs*, 10(1), pp. 106–112. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174240>.

of public controversy that was its aftermath – since labeled the Sex Wars – were simply overwhelming. (Allison, 1994, p.108)

The conference was picketed by Women Against Pornography (members included Andrea Dworkin and Susan Brownmiller) whose ‘puritanical’ pro-censorship stance on women’s sexuality they determined to be the only feminist stance to take. Post Barnard Conference there was a split in what had been a broader Radical Feminist movement which resulted in lesbian sexual practices being scrutinised from within the movement. Allison was amongst those who attended the conference and both she and her work was deeply affected by the fall out and what appears to have been the enactment of vicious lesbian feminist cancellations:

That’s what happened at the Barnard Conference...Not only did they picket, they published leaflets which named eight of us as being essentially anti-feminist terrorists...It turned into a nightmare. A lot of people lost their jobs. Plenty of people had nervous breakdowns, left town, disappeared. I wrote poems...I left my lover, I stopped having sex. (Allison in Dietzel, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.47)

As Allison outlines in the same interview “a lot of us lost our religion” because “The Women’s Movement was not the safe place we imagined it to be.” (Allison in Dietzel, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.47). The poetry book that Allison wrote as a result, *The Women Who Hate Me*, also bears the complex disillusionment and heartache that follows being disregarded and effectively cancelled by a movement in which you’ve felt held, listened to, and understood. The title poem in the *The Women Who Hate Me* speaks to the pain, hurt and ensuing identity crisis that

emerged from such personal attacks and Allison's rejection from a community of women that she trusted and worked so hard to support. She views the rejection of her sexual desire and her political positioning around that desire, as being no different in principle than the violence and rejection she experienced from the working-class community and family members who were also amongst her sexual abusers. But as Allison points out so brilliantly and sharply in the title poem, "The Women Who Hate Me" this 'self-righteous' behaviour "...cut me/as men can't. Men don't count." (Allison, 1991, p.21):

God on their right shoulder
righteousness on their left,
the women who hate me never use words
like hate speak instead of nature
of the spirit not housed in the flesh
as if my body, a temple of sin,
didn't mirror their own.
(Allison, 1991, p. 23)

Here, the speaker interconnects class, sexuality and power. Her body is considered a "temple of sin" that doesn't reflect those of her middle-class lovers who position themselves authoritatively, despite all they share as lesbian women – the speaker's looks, behaviour, and values will never "mirror their own". The underlying sentiment and themes of "The Women Who Hate Me" recur in Allison's later narrative work as she writes about the vulnerabilities of being humiliated and shamed by the women that she had believed in so devoutly, that she had once sought safety from after leaving her family.

Allison recognises that her experiences, her (classed) body, her sexuality and thus her writing are highly politicised spaces that may also be impacted by external authoritarian legal and social structures. But she discerns that so much of her life has been ruled by the seemingly simple concept of 'belonging', which fuels her imagination and her writing. To ensure that someone doesn't belong, structural violence in its many forms (interpersonal, communal, institutional, state) is levelled against those who for often arbitrary identity-based reasons are considered to be the outsiders, the rejected, the outlaws. Because of this positioning, Allison had no choice but to be political and defiant in her work: "Writing became an act of resistance; only in that way could she control how the story ended." (Jetter, 1995, no pagination). How an individual responds to this and connects to others in spite of often violent and life-threatening experiences of attempted erasure is the narrative force that underpins Allison's work, where the narrator or her protagonist's sexuality often becomes the reason for her persecution and the catalyst of her survival:

In my imagination there was this real clear link between where I belonged, who I belonged with, and that whole nation of the invisible, the dead, and the damned. I thought myself damned. Literally. I thought myself evil. Not just because I was poor and hopeless and raped and violated, and masturbating to being raped and violated, I felt myself on the edge of the world, and I was clinging to everyone else I saw on the edge with me. And loved all those people on the edge with me. (Allison in Pratt, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.31)

Allison's recourse to her childhood abuse, imagination, and fantasies, which she notes throughout her narratives and references in her

essays, are also the reason for her exclusion from quotidian and political lesbianism but never from her working-class world or from “those... on the edge”, unable to pass judgement because they too are clinging onto life, even when they don’t accept her.

Allison’s political stance on sexual freedoms, individual rights and sexuality is one that is not exactly nor universally shared by the biomythographers in this thesis, particularly Audre Lorde, but I would argue that all of them in their work did progress an anti-censorship and pro-sexual liberation stance in different ways. Allison’s direction of a particular strand of sexual politics that was pro-sex work, anti-censorship and embraced many of the sexual liberation standpoints that previous generations of lesbian activists had rejected – was also generationally influenced and indirectly built on the work of other biomythographers such as Lorde.

Queering the Visual

As I have already outlined, the means of literary production in the late twentieth century – due to the advancement of technology such as photocopiers and cheaper communication systems – opened up a world of possibilities to a generation of liberation movements who now had access to national and international platforms, publications, and social visibility. Although biomythography reached its peak pre-internet, the advancement of the world wide web and digital technologies made this work more accessible and enabled already

published material to reach future digital audiences.³⁰³ ³⁰⁴ This is not to underestimate the continued effort it took to create, produce, and publish magazines and texts for distribution.

In relation to the Lesbian Sex Wars of the 1990s, and Dorothy Allison's work and activism around sexual liberation, it seems apt to reference *On Our Backs* magazine (published between 1984-2006), which almost singlehandedly documented and politicised queer women's sexuality in the late 1980s and 1990s and continues to be a highly influential archive of lesbian and queer sexuality in the present day. It should also be noted that Allison herself featured as an iconic lesbian centre spread in an edition of *On Our Backs* magazine and her erotic fiction was also featured in the magazine. The published photograph of Allison is iconic, depicting her dressed head to toe in denim, hair flowing, assertively yet coyly looking at the camera, casually seated on a black motorbike.

On Our Backs was lesbian/queer owned and authored monthly publication that focused on the representation and promotion of queer and lesbian women's sexuality. Candid, bold and direct, the magazine had a sizable over (and under) the counter readership, but it still struggled to financially stay afloat. Bringing women's sexuality to the fore, the magazine featured sexually explicit, suggestive, and creative photographs depicting queer and lesbian sexuality and outsider

³⁰³ See Chapter Four on Feinberg's digital legacy and continued readership via hir website.

³⁰⁴ Linda Anderson predicted the role that the internet would go on to play in the dislocation of the 'private self' in public forums when she wrote *Autobiography* in 2001: "The internet provides a way for the private self to negotiate a relationship with social space and with others, but it would probably be wrong now, or in the future, to simplify the complicated dialectic between the personal and the public which is thus played out." (Anderson, 2001, p.124).

culture. The magazine was also highly influential in styling and depicting lesbian and queer sexuality in an artistic way as conveyed by its often beautifully styled erotic photography. As Phyllis Christopher, who has recently had a retrospective photography book published featuring her work with *On Our Backs*, explains “I think we were developing a lesbian visual language. We were developing a way to identify one another.” (Christopher, 2022, p.133) ³⁰⁵

The publication had an array of well-known queer and lesbian women at its helm throughout its decade of production, including Susie Bright, Phyllis Christopher, and Lulu Belliveau. It also featured a number of self-proclaimed sex outlaws and genre defying artists and photographers such as Del LaGrace Volcano, Carol Queen and Kathy Acker. Unapologetic in its full celebration of women’s sexuality and eroticism, *On Our Backs* faced numerous legal challenges and demonstrations against its work from the Radical Feminist lesbian community as well as religious arbiters of morality such as the Christian Right, as a result: “Feminist bookstores often wouldn’t carry the magazine because they felt it was anti-woman and violence against women.” (Christopher, 2022, pp.128-9). More recently the historical and aesthetic importance of *On Our Backs* has been widely recognised and its contributors and editors celebrated for their revolutionary work and influence. After 30 years of neglect its archive has at last been bought and preserved by Brown University Library, Providence.

³⁰⁵ Phyllis Christopher, who relocated from San Francisco to the Northeast of England over a decade ago, has had a number of retrospective exhibitions of her work from this period. Most notably at the Baltic, Gateshead (2022) and Grand Union Gallery Birmingham (2022):
Christopher, P. (2022). *Interviews* [Videos].
<https://baltic.art/whats-on/1E-phyllis-christophercontacts/>
<https://grand-union.org.uk/exhibitions/phyllis-christopher-2/#interview-2>.

Let Me Tell You A Story

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make.

(Allison, 1996, p.3)

Two or Three Things I Know for Sure differs from Dorothy Allison's other texts: it is a 93-page novella, printed in a smaller A5 size format than the standard novel, and is supplemented by 25 photographs from Allison's personal collection that illustrate the text. The appearance of photographs evenly dispersed throughout the text creates a sense of security that the stories contained in the book are true, biographical and that the narrator is wholly reliable. However, there is a caveat, or "Author's Note" listed two pages after the index of family photographs at the back of the book that suggests otherwise, as the names of family members have been "changed" and other "characters are composites" (Allison, 1996, p.97). The "Author's Note" also outlines the development of the text through several performed iterations and performances that had "changed with each production" (Allison, 1996, p.97). The note may be a legal caveat, but it also suggests that Allison always intended this to be a manipulated biography, a text that both references and mythologises her life and the life of her family, where "Behind the story I tell is the one I don't." (Allison, 199, p.39). This intimately links Allison's approach with the biomythographical, in her use of the experiential and fictional to tell 'truths' that are deemed to be unfamiliar or outside of the realm of standard biographical life writing.

The “Author’s Note” also refutes the genres that are attached to the text by critics, which despite similarity in content are not used in relation to Allison’s preceding work such as *Trash* or *The Women Who Hate Me*. While the reviews of *Two or Three Things*, on the book jacket itself and the inner blurbs, constantly refer to the text as a ‘memoir’, Allison herself does not refer to the text as either memoir or biography. As I have already outlined, in many working-class or marginalised communities storytelling may be adopted as an oral tradition that is valued but not necessarily replicated by the written text. Allison explicitly discusses the lack of credibility that marginalised people’s life stories often have in the public’s imagination, disavowing the potentially excluded writer from claiming a space for her own life narrative or biography in the written text (and more specifically in this instance) discrediting working-class women’s accounts of abuse. As Allison explains, working-class women’s agency in relation to telling their own narratives is often compromised, “...when poor white trash talks about violence and rape and lesbianism, she’s just telling stories.” (Allison in Birnbaum, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.108)

Allison’s use of photography and the visual in *Two or Three Things* blurs literary modalities as much as it does genre. Her use of ‘family’ photographs that in fact (unknown to the audience) include unidentified extended family and community members brings to the fore a key component of my biomythographical framework in its rejection of the internal/external dichotomies of storytelling and the biographical expectation of ‘truthtelling’. The audience presumes that the photographs Allison uses must be of her family, because they are framed within a text *about* her family. Instead, the photographs further blur these subjective dimensions, as the audience relates Allison’s narrative to a ‘family biography’ which is in fact a

narrativised version of Allison's family history that she deploys to draw out further fictive truths.

With a focus on two generations of an extended family history, *Two or Three Things* has a theatrical yet lyrical quality.³⁰⁶ *Two or Three Things* is also a text about narrative, the struggle to write narrative as well as the preemptive reasons for doing so. It questions the ownership and the representation of stories, and especially the use of performance and genre.³⁰⁷ In Annette Kuhn's "Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination" she observes the ways that telling and defining our own stories about the past, about our family history, often involves a selective editing process that may mean that our versions differ from other members of our family:

Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves. To the extent that memory provides their raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account – whether forgotten or repressed – as by what is actually told. (Kuhn in Rossington and Whitehead, eds., 2007, p.231)

Allison defies the genres and narratives that have so often imprisoned marginalised peoples in simplistic either/or dichotomies of oppression

³⁰⁶ This is arguably a way of realising many related themes and stories that resonate throughout her full-length novels and short stories; poverty, working-class cultures, lesbianism, sexuality, gender-based violence and male oppression.

³⁰⁷ Allison's stories are written around and based upon repeated memories from her childhood as Timothy Adams comments, "*Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* is then the story of the story to which she continually returns" (Adams, 2004, p.86) Adams, T. D. (2004). Telling Stories in Dorothy Allison's "Two or Three Things I Know for Sure." *The Southern Literary Journal*, 36(2), pp. 82–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067791>.

and escape. In the opening pages of the text Allison as author/narrator identifies the urgency of this struggle:

But where am I in the stories I tell? Not the storyteller but the woman in the story. What is the truth about her? She was one of them, one of the legendary women who ran away. A witch queen, a warrior maiden, a mother with a canvas suitcase, a daughter with broken bones. Women who run away because they must. I ran because if I had not, I would have died. (Allison, 1996, p.4).

Structurally Allison's text opens in a typically biomythographical way, with a pre-emptory reflection on the narrative to follow, the (uncertain) placing of the subjective "I" and a declaration of her need to tell a story. Over the following four pages she repeats the phrase "Let me tell you a story" three times and the narrator refers to herself as the 'storyteller,' reclaiming ownership of not only the narrative but the right to tell this particular story and be believed. This allows the text to have multiple feminist vantage points; it is a way for the survivor to reclaim her story from the abuser, for the female narrator to reclaim the tradition of storytelling from men, for the poor white working-class lesbian to write herself and her maternal ancestry into the ledgers of textual print whilst defying genre, and for the new mother to rewrite the family wrongs for the next generations of her family (particularly for the next generation of Gibson girls), who will need to 'remake the world in a story'.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ Allison poignantly spins a tale for her niece about her mother's beauty towards the end of the text (pp.84-85), rewriting stories about the beauty of Gibson sisters that delete some of the generational pain and misogynist abuse experienced by the women in the Gibson family.

From the opening lines in *Two or Three Things* Allison connects storytelling with nature, with tales to be told from a humid climate and Southern landscape that physically and intimately connects generations of women's lives, which like the subjects of the stories are hidden in its topography:

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY, I used to whisper to my sisters,
hiding with them behind the red-dirt bean hills and row on row
of strawberries. (Allison, 1996, p.1)

The women who will feature in her story about the Gibson family are two generations of sisters – siblings Dorothy (as protagonist and storyteller), Wanda and Anna, the sisters' mother Ruth Gibson and 'Aunt Dot'. With Allison as the biomythographical narrator telling the story to her sisters, she "whispers" this as they "hide" in the wings of the stage upon which this story will be performed, offering an aside to inform the reader about the narrative about to unfold.³⁰⁹ The protagonist is thus visualising from the wings (and pictorially in the text) her maternal ancestral physicality; the women's "thin and sharp" faces, "high cheekbones and restless eyes" (Allison, 1996, p.1). From the opening of the book Allison demarcates the default class positionality of 'the author', and inverts this through a direct familiar engagement with her audience. She then confronts the reader with a range of class-based prejudices that the author's metatextual commentary disavows, as well as dispelling clichés about the role of and execution of the narrative. By confronting such prejudice, taking

³⁰⁹ This is reminiscent of Lorde's *Zami*. When on holiday with her sisters the younger Lorde wants to share the secrets and stories of her older siblings. Like Lorde who positions the 'I' as narrator in *Zami*, in *Two of Three Things I Know for Sure*, Allison also asserts and affirms "I" to be her first person narrator, the storyteller – who drives forward the narrative as well as the staged performance.

ownership of the text, and inverting the narrative of documentation about the 'other' as being victim of their (implied) own circumstances, Allison rewrites the biographical genre into a fictional mode:

Peasants, that's what we are and always have been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum. I can make a story out of it, out of us. Make it pretty or sad, laughable or haunting. Dress it up with legend and aura and romance. (Allison, 1996, p.1)

Within this opening page Allison paints a picture, frames an initial impression, while supplementing this imagery with family snaps of the beaming Gibson girls – well dressed, beautiful and resplendent in their scenic positioning. As *Two or Three Things* unfolds, the emphasis on the scene by scene narrative (which is almost dramaturgical) is in itself a Russian doll like story within a story. As Allison as narrator reels off the list of class related labels and insults, she reclaims the right to make up a story in which ever way she pleases, one that is: "sad", "laughable", "haunting" (Allison, 1996, pp. 1-2). The reference here to the different moods and forms the story might take, presses her self-reflexivity about storytelling further. She is, after all, in a position of power, as storyteller/author, a position not usually occupied by white working-class 'dykes' or 'trash'.³¹⁰ Allison is clear that she has a story to be told and performed and in doing so she is

³¹⁰ In the 1995 New York Times Magazine article, Allison deliberately and brilliantly debunks the assumed shame of being 'white trash' and working-class as well as challenging elitist notions of where 'art' should be sold and consumed: "Allison takes great pride in her "white trash" roots; for her the ultimate tribute is that her books are on sale at Costco, the giant of warehouse clubs. "I think it's wonderful that people in pickup trucks are buying two flats of dog food and a copy of 'Bastard,' " she exults in her Carolina accent. "I want my view of the world to be right up there next to gallon boxes of Tide."(Jetter, 1995, no pagination)

creating her own mythologies, something reaffirmed by her references to 'magic' as a powerful spiritual driver for telling the tale.

Significantly, the text presents the author as an 'outsider', as she goes on to say she aligns herself with the ones that 'ran away', this vocalisation tinged with remorse and survivor's guilt. *Two or Three Things* is charged by a need to represent not just her outsider self, who grew up to be a lesbian rather than to have babies but also the women who raised her and so remain part of her, that resisted the abuse as much as they were able to. ³¹¹ Allison as narrator is thus asking why the stories of working-class people today cannot also be considered part of a continued mythological folkloric adventure one that casts a critical eye on the 'aura' and 'romance' of sanitised fairytales, instead of the "witch queens who cooked their enemies in great open pots" (Allison, 1996, p.2).

To Allison representation is key; she is authentically writing her subjects into actuality, writing the lost stories of poor working-class women as resisters and survivors rather than victims into a literary absence. Her text affirming that her subjects have their own worthy stories to tell, although they may have "ran away" to survive and tell them. The narrator immediately places herself centrally in multiple roles as the storyteller, the survivor, and the heroine, engaging the reader with a lineage of women and the storytelling traditions that thread throughout women's writing:

³¹¹ Later in the story Allison tells the audience about Anne, Dorothy's sister, who also grew up to be a 'Gibson woman' and have babies.

Let me tell you about the women who ran away. All those legendary women who ran away. (Allison, 1996, p.1)

Allison is not objectifying the experiences of the women she writes about but is instead grappling with the way that these experiences have shaped their lives beyond, for example, the simplistic yoke of the 'working-class hero' (usually the male manual worker subject to industrial exploitation). Experiences that have often been historically defined in literature by nineteenth century literary realists who operated within and often inadvertently replicated structural inequality. Allison is additionally wrestling with the complexity of her own experiences, and her want to ensure that working-class women's lives have a visibility and that their stories be honoured and retold from a position of presence (through Allison's representation), rather than absence. In *Two or Three Things*, Allison is thus reinterpreting another mythical trope, the legend of the heroic female storyteller who survives to tell the tale.

MY MAMA DIED AT MIDNIGHT ON A SATURDAY (Allison, 1996, p.12)

When Dorothy's 'mama' Ruth Gibson dies, she thinks that the death of her mother automatically symbolises the death of matriarchal femininity in her life, rather than to signify what will in fact become, the biomythographical documentation of her life in print. This trajectory begins with the depiction of her mother's death, a woman who in her existence symbolised the 'appropriate woman' (which can also be read to mean 'appropriately feminine woman') in the narrator's imagination. The protagonist's mother Ruth is pictured as a beautiful teenager, "beautiful, that hard thing, beautiful" (Allison, 1996, p.20).

She is perfectly attired in virginal white, plump lipped and smiling at the camera with both anticipation and eagerness in a seemingly confident way, but after staring at the photograph the viewer notices Ruth Gibson's stomach appears to be tightly clenched as she sits with a curved rather than straight back. Mama Ruth's death also simultaneously signals the end of the Gibson matriarchs' reign and subjugation but as Allison contends immediately after her death, "Of all the things I had imagined, this was the one I had not foreseen. We had become Mama." (Allison, 1996, p.16). *Two or Three Things* is written using a vivid phraseology, often using language to suggest the repressed traits of Allison's featured characters. For example, Allison's sister Anne is described as demonstrably reacting to the death of her mama with "Twenty minutes of howling and then silence, and death happening and then the closing of a book." (Allison, 1996, p.13). Life events are connected to physical expression and a dramatic sensibility that is playful in its use of literary metaphors.

Allison narrates her biomythography through the multiple fleeting viewpoints of her maternal family. As she explains in interviews in the Mae Miller Claxton edited *Conversations* series, she and her mother would often hide from Allison's stepfather, just to 'sneak' the chance to read.³¹² Although Allison's mother doesn't have the privilege of reflecting on her life or writing her own memoir, Allison instead reclaims a space to privilege the voices of "women like my family" (San Francisco Public Library, YouTube, 2017). This focus on the maternal family and acts of reading and storytelling as an act of

³¹² Claxton, M. M. ed. (2012). *Conversations with Dorothy Allison*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

love and care between women, is also reminiscent of Audre Lorde's storytelling with her sisters in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Allison recalls the moments she and her mother would secretly bond together by reading crime thrillers. Her stepfather would disrupt this bond, saying they "was dirty books" but this secret unity that informed Allison's writing remained a powerful force as she describes in a 1995 interview with Susanne Dietzel:

A lot of women are storytellers, but we never make the transition to becoming a writer...mostly we believe our stories aren't important, and that if they are important, they're dangerous and therefore too dangerous to tell anyone. (Allison in Dietzel, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.42)

As intergenerational storytellers, each woman in the Gibson family has collectively contributed to the written history of their family and each has their own viewpoint in Allison's text. Notwithstanding a lifetime of subjection to male abuse and coercive control, Ruth Gibson was still as "mean and stubborn" (Allison, 1996, p.14) as her daughter. Despite the physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse Allison endured from her stepfather, and Allison's youthful resentment of her mother staying with that "evil motherfucker", Ruth Gibson is never seen through a prism of the hardship of her life but through her creative transgressions, her attempts to protect Allison and her other daughters and to (psychologically if not physically) escape from abuse herself.³¹³

³¹³ Coercive control is a term developed by Evan Stark but it has been recognised as a recurring form of violence by feminist activists for decades. Coercive control is usually perpetrated over a period of time, or afforded the space to be a repetitive form of abuse and is often so normalised as to be rendered invisible in a relationship. Considered as part of a spectrum of forms of violence against women and girls, coercive control is a pattern of behaviours which undermine an individual's sense of being and self-worth, and can take the form of controlling aspects of an individual's

Like other biomythographers, particularly Lorde, Nestle and Hucklenbroich, Allison strategically reclaims a sense of moral integrity for her community as a class of people who are deliberately exploited, socially derided and shamed. She does this first of all by spinning working-class cultural and material references into the familiar through repetition – embedding them into her narrative so that they become naturalised in the text, and then by making these references both comedic and poignant to engage her audience in the humanity of her subjects. This approach refutes externally projected markers of stigma and shame and enables Allison as author/narrator to “write the stories I wasn’t able to read” (San Francisco Public Library, YouTube, 2017).

Allison as narrator uses the same amount of consideration and empathy when discussing her mother’s precious bingo attire or her mother’s tenacity when she worked in a diner for forty years –both act as symbols of resistance. Allison disempowers the cultural shame associated with working-class fashion and pastimes, playing with the class bias of typical literary subjects (and their writers) by positing that her mother’s bingo outfit *is* equivalent to her Baptist Church Sunday best. To honour their mother’s death, the sisters do so through a shared, intimate engagement with their “Mama’s things” – items of clothing that were important to their mother but significantly are not of any material economic value. Almost in sync with one another they are “guided” by their mother to bury her in her “bingo outfit”:

day to day life through veiled threats, subtle derision, put downs and a range of imposed mechanisms of control such as verbal name calling or isolation.

We had gone through Mama's things together, talked about buying something special, but finally chosen clothes for Mama that she had worn and loved- her lucky shirt, loose fitting cotton trousers, and her most comfortable shoes. "Only woman ever buried in her bingo outfit," I would tell friends later. But choosing these clothes we had not laughed; we had felt guided by what Mama would have wanted. (Allison, 1996, p.14)

As Dorothy's sister Wanda fastens Mama's lucky necklace, a silver racehorse, this additional nod to gambling alongside the bingo outfit contingently represents both freedom and constraint. Although their mother and Aunt Dot enjoy bingo throughout their lives, this 'feminised' form of gambling also stands for a containment of their opportunities, the limitations of their lives. But the bingo halls of Greenville were also likely to be all female spaces, which provided a few hours of respite, of safety for women, in which they could take small economic risks that they controlled. . Such visualisations of material ephemera bring to life and actively perform and symbolise a number of hidden narratives in Allison's text about female subjectivity and experience.

An Archive of Feelings

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich's 2003 queer theoretical work on the discourse of trauma in queer and lesbian counter publics, the author homes in on the 1990s as an era of queer performance art in which trauma was radically engaged with in an effort to de-pathologise lesbian and queer sexuality. As Cvetkovich explains:

Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. (Cvetkovich, 2003, p.7)

In *An Archive of Feelings* it is no surprise that Cvetkovich references the work of Allison alongside that of other biomythographers such as Nestle and Feinberg. Her study brings together the theoretical and the visual, focusing on the emergence of a tradition of lesbian or queer performance artists in the 1990s who were using their experiential and often ancestral trauma (and queer lineage) as a central part of their performance work. At the time of writing *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich was witnessing (and participating) in an explosion of not only queer performance art but also DIY arts activism, organised by and for queer identified women and people through lesbian punk DIY networks. When discussing the work of Jewish lesbian performance artist Lisa Kron, Cvetkovich talks about the ways that queer performance art is tied into queer culture:

Forced to draw on memory and personal experience to construct an archive in the wake of a dominant culture that provides either silence or homophobic representations of their lives, queers have used solo performance as a forum for personal histories that are social and cultural ones. There is a significant link between performance art and testimony in terms of a

shared desire to build culture out of memory. (Cvetkovich, 2003, p.26)

As I have outlined in the previous few chapters, oppression and trauma have often been thematic twin pillars that have connected biomythographical authors to their work – facilitating the transformation of these experiences into art. This has also informed the way that each author has responded to recurring structural barriers such as a lack of literary industry support and recognition, or the poverty in which so many found themselves despite having sold thousands of books. Each author faced numerous challenges that go beyond the writing process itself, which influenced their need to consolidate and invest in their community and the broader women's liberation movement. This has been both creatively alchemical and politically deliberate, each resisting the silencing of their authentic voice no matter the violence and exclusion they encountered whilst developing, writing, or publishing their work. Around these fault lines of social and political resistance, biomythography as a genre and mode incorporated visceral ways of embodying struggle not only in the written evocation of their experiences, but also in the ways that this work could relate to audiences in a performative context. Before elaborating more on this aspect of biomythography in Allison's *Two or Three Things*, I want to set a context for this interaction between writing and visceral performativity, and the way that this exploration of identity within these conditions influenced Queer Theory and academia before being fully embraced by the late 1990s contemporary LGBT movement.

In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's re-evaluation of shame in Henry James's work she explores the impact of emotions such as shame in

queer life and the way that such emotions are embodied, performed, and expressed:

I want to say that at least for certain (“queer”) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 65)

Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003) looks at the way that shame and embarrassment, despite being deeply entrenched and historically rooted in narrative subjugation, can also be recognised in two centuries of queer culture as part of a trajectory of progressive creative endeavor and can be thus re-imagined as something useful and productive rather than something negative and detracting. As I discuss throughout this thesis, shame is an integral emotion in the biomythographical text, one that is physically felt, repeatedly referenced, and perpetually re-imagined as protagonists manage to survive its often-debilitating emotional impact and placing as a form of politically structured oppression. Sedgwick argues that in order to not only survive but further value ‘queer culture’ – the participant in, and recorder of, queer culture must recognise that:

The forms taken by shame are not distinct “toxic” parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation. (Sedgwick, 2003, p.63)

“Metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration” are consistent drivers in the biomythographical narrative that centres

around the outlaw or outsider protagonist. The use of this trajectory as a narrative arc is almost biblical in its patterning, replacing the lack or absence of lesbian and queer stories and storytellers. The use of shame (as a symbolic as well narratorial device) also enables the audience to identify with the feelings of the biomythographical subject. In this context shame is of critical value to queer creativity and the interpretation and reiteration of the culture to which that creativity belongs. Likewise, the texts I discuss in this thesis bear witness to shame as an integral part of a lesbian or 'queered' biomythographical journey and emancipation from heterosexism. It shapes the reactions of protagonists within the texts at micro and macro levels and propels individuals and communities to find creative ways to survive and continue even if that means envisioning other worlds where they can exist.

As Allison discloses in *Two or Three Things* "In the world as I remade it, nothing was forbidden; everything was possible." (Allison, 1996, p.2). Here shame is redressed and associated with being female as a natal identity which also intersects with other socially constructed identities that she struggles with – but her foremost identity, one that connects her generationally with the women in her family, appears to be that of survivor.³¹⁴ As Sedgwick testifies "Shame interests me politically...because it generates and legitimizes the place of identity—the question of identity." (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 65). As a survivor of male violence, poverty, exclusion, class-based exploitation, and sexual abuse, the protagonist of *Two or Three Things* understands shame innately as

³¹⁴ Allison often refers to her 'version' of being female as being 'inappropriate' in the cultural and social context to which she was raised. This is also her way of interpreting her gender identity as an out 'dyke', who never wanted to wear 'itsy bitsy' heels and dresses.

a constant feeling and presence in her life and her family dynamic – but she does not allow it to override her other feelings or identities.

Sedgwick identifies a performativity and power to shame that is not only about subjective oppression but improvised notions or ways of adapting, fitting in or remaining outside of the world of the oppressor who shames.³¹⁵ The identity that Allison will later take on as the “mean one-eyed dyke” is interchangeable with her identities as a woman and lesbian but this intersection of identities also exacerbates her lack of recourse to structural justice. When the protagonist is a child, like Hucklenbroich, she initially believes she deserves to be punished if not by the perpetrators then by God for not being ‘appropriate’ in her feminine and female identity. However, as a child she also observes the paradox that her maternal family and women in her community are also being abused and shamed in spite of their successful attempts at ‘appropriate’ hyper femininity. This discordance generates a resilience in Dorothy that is hard kept and fought for, that she associates with a self-protective idealised physical and animalistic strength:

For years and years, I convinced myself that I was unbreakable, an animal with animal strength or something not human at all.
(Allison, 1996, p.38)

Here Allison takes ownership of and inverts the nineteenth century culturally atavistic trope used historically to dehumanise poor working-class communities (and to keep them in physically exhausting,

³¹⁵ This could range from internalised voices to interpersonal, community, institutional and/ or state violence.

dangerous, and exploitative work environments). She reclaims this presumed class-based stereotype of ‘animality’ as a form of strength. This pushes her audience to recognise that stories about working-class families and children are rarely told by working-class women, who are so often the object of pity or contempt, their ‘animalistic’ qualities also associated with a base sexuality that supposedly leads to their sexual abuse. As Allison explains, “I hope that in story I can make real the kind of people too often held in contempt- girls and poor people, Southerner and queers, desperate ambitious outsiders.” (Allison in Tuthill, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.163).

Going back to the mainstay of Cvetkovich’s argument that queer performance is a way to de-pathologise queer trauma, *Two or Three Things* can be seen to deviate from a purely literary text, as the notion of performance is inherently built into the language and visualisation of its narrative. Despite being the inappropriate woman who feels she cannot perform femininity in the ways her maternal family could, Dorothy also knows that despite a lack of feminine guile her female body is still as vulnerable and exploited as those of the other women in her family due to her sex and community positionality, the violence she experiences is not just related to the performance of hetero-normative femininity. In spite of what she deems to be her inadequately performed femininity Dorothy continues to be abused, and eventually she realises that it is the substance, the symbolism *and* her embodiment of the feminine (as part of the physical body) combined that present the greatest risk. She recognises that there is a social link between femininity and its associated or presumed vulnerability to structural violence; that the credence of a violently abusive man is constructed from many layers of entitled physical and socially reproduced power.

Radical Kinds of Recovery Work

The representation of white working-class American women, and the use of bingo and everyday apparel to represent the lives of working-class women living in poverty, have also been referenced by Tammy Rae Carland in her 2008 visual exhibition *Archive of My Feelings*.³¹⁶ Clearly a nod to Cvetkovich's text, the exhibition speaks to Cvetkovich's assertion that:

The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value. (Cvetkovich, 2003, pp.7-8)

Archive of My Feelings was an exhibition of objects photographed and framed by Carland that used personal memorabilia and material objects to represent aspects of her lived experience and identity as a working-class queer artist. Bringing together a collection of composite photographs of multiple different sized objects, it was intended to represent and replicate the material object's

³¹⁶ Tammy Rae Carland is a queer lesbian feminist photographer who was prominent as an organiser during the first wave of Riot Grrrl and was a feminist zine pioneer, artist, performer and record label owner (Carland co-founded Mr. Lady Records with her former partner the musician Kaia Wilson). Carland's work became prominent in the early 1990s in the U.S. her work, like that of Allison, reimagines white working-class lesbian lives in formerly industrialised towns and cities and transposes them into mainstream cultural dialogues. *Archive of My Feelings* is an unusual break in Carland's subject matter which usually echoes the imaginative performative work of Cindy Sherman and the direct queer referencing of Catherin Opie's early portraits of lesbians and queer people in the 1990s.

meaningfulness to marginalised people who under ever progressive forms of neo-liberal and advanced capitalism have been excluded from access to certain economic privileges and material goods.³¹⁷ In a 2013 interview with Cvetkovich in *Art Journal Open* Carland, in a Radical or Marxist Feminist tradition, explains the importance of the material object in a socio-political context:

What I'm doing is taking advantage of the first-handedness of objects that represent my own experience, to give value to personal experience. I'm trying to get beyond my postmodern damage—which is how I refer to the generational experience of being trained to critique the critique of the critique. Whereas the archive is about the original, the thing itself, and you get to work directly from a poignant moment, or object, or letter, or experience that you can consider to be both authentic and subjective.

(Tammy Rae Carland, 2014, no pagination)

This aesthetic reaching for the authentic also involves a mode that is mythical and abstract; each facsimile of the life size object 'refigures' (Sedgwick) the meaning of the original object from a personal memento with an associated meaning into a public space to be shared, into a space where working-class signifiers may not be familiar or visible. In effect this becomes a material performance, using an array of ephemera; where Allison does this with language as visualisation, Carland does it with visualisation as a language that creates the biographical snapshot. In Carland's work this is an important act of

³¹⁷ One can argue now that advanced capitalism has de-regulated ownership through the mass production and cheapening of material objects, and that this creates the further stratification of objects and ownership.

resistance that acknowledges the ‘metamorphoses’ (Sedgwick) of the object’s meaning, connecting her work to Allison and the biomythographical tradition. This amplification of personal experience to create new narrative spaces of existence is an integral part of the artist’s work and is best represented in Carland’s photographs of the items her mother left behind in her apartment when she died called *My Inheritance*. These life sized photographs of objects that are neither beautified nor exoticised but are instead positioned in the photograph to encapsulate one woman’s life. The physical presence of a photograph of her mother’s life size objects bearing down from a gallery wall are making present in the (elitist) gallery space, her mother’s lifetime of absence. An absence that is physical, historical, symbolic, creative, and subjective. The objects photographed for this piece of work include a bingo card, a stained and patched house tabard and a cross-stitched sand-timer shape that reads “Born to Bingo”.

In the same interview with Cvetkovich, Carland, no doubt influenced by Nestle, considers the lesbian archives as material or creative forms and as “radical kinds of recovery work”:

The queer archive is about making connections with the deeply sedimented histories of violence and survival that form the social, political, and cultural environments we inhabit in the U.S. Unless we do radical kinds of recovery work around archives, and also grapple with profoundly absent archives—by acknowledging missing lives and missing feelings—we can’t move forward. (Tammy Rae Carland, 2014, no pagination)

This brings us back to Allison’s vivid conjuring of meaningful everyday material objects in her work and the connectivity of this with a sense of

preservation, of an archive of (queer connected) lives that have been erstwhile neglected. Once Ruth Gibson has physically departed (although she is narratively present throughout *Two or Three Things*), Dorothy is able to reconstruct meaningful memories of her mother and their subjective connection with and to material objects. Like her bingo outfit, the objects that Dorothy can touch, such as the silk sewing kit bag that she regretfully loses at a poetry reading, are imprinted with narratives connected to her maternal family, narratives that Allison feels she has a responsibility to tell. As Allison recalls in the 1995 Jetter article, "The bottom line," she says, "is I'm writing to save the dead. I'm writing to save the people I have lost, some of whose bodies are still walking around." (Jetter, 1995, no pagination). It is only when her mother dies that Dorothy is able to consider her mother's life holistically, as a life outside of the narrator's own limited understanding of Ruth Gibson as her mother, for it is only then that the narrator "remembered the pictures." (Allison, 1996, p. 17). As Dorothy and her sisters go back through the photographs featuring people that their mother never fully explained the significance of (or even who they were) that Allison takes on the responsibility of reconstructing their lost narratives using the additional photographs (and memories) of her extended childhood family and community. The photographs representing the textual silences of these women's lives:

Mama would touch the pictures tentatively, as if her memories were more real than the images, as if she did not want to look too hard at the reality of all those people lost and gone. (Allison, 1996, p.19)

These "pictures" include photographs of family members Allison didn't personally know but who became legendary in the narrative of

the Gibson family unit, such as “an uncle that killed his wife” which Dorothy’s “shameless” grandma Mattie Lee Gibson tells her about behind her mother’s back.³¹⁸ But whereas her mother persuaded Dorothy’s aunts not to “tell stories she didn’t want them to tell” (Allison, 1996, p.25) and never told stories to Dorothy herself, Allison is creatively resisting the deletion of these narratives; no matter how painful or contradictory they may be, they remain important and valid in the text, just as they were in Ruth Gibson’s life. The story of marital abuse that her grandma Mattie tells is juxtaposed with ‘mama’s’ navigation of male violence through her use of self-protective secrecy and a publicly maintained “sense of propriety” (Allison, 1996, p.25). The lives of the Gibson women bolstered by their hard working-class sensibility and storytelling skills:

My mama worked forty years as a waitress, teasing quarters out of truckers, and dimes out of hairdressers, pouring extra coffee for a nickel, or telling an almost true story for half a dollar.
(Allison, 1996, p.25)

Allison’s reclamation of female working-class subjectivities and analysis of her mother’s strategies for survival, takes us back to Tammy Rae Carland’s visual portrayal of subjectivity, queer codes of being and her representation of working-class authenticity. Carland’s *Billy and Katie* series, her photograph *On Becoming: Billy and Katie 1964 #8* features a self-portrait of the photographer dressed as a diner

³¹⁸ Allison’s use of photographs is a key part of the text, T.D, Adams considers the way that the photographs work to further narrate some ‘truth’, some accuracy, of this Adams is quite critical. “Allison’s use of photographs in her memoir would seem at first to be for purposes of documentary, to reinforce the accuracy of her narrative.” (Adams, 2004, p.88)

Adams, T. D. (2004). “Telling Stories in Dorothy Allison’s “Two or Three Things I Know for Sure.”” *The Southern Literary Journal*, 36(2), 82–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067791>

waitress.³¹⁹ Like the mother of the biomythographical narrator of *Two or Three Things* (and the author Allison), Carland's mother was a diner waitress, a figure much mythologised in twentieth century American culture.³²⁰ In this black and white portrait Carland as Katie is descending the external stone stairs of a small house and her figure is framed by the house's porch. Her outfit is pristine, unwrinkled, starched, and immaculate, over her arm a beautiful 1950s era cardigan is draped and she wears a patterned half apron – which seems almost out of place against her white uniform – that is more like a home 'pinny', with pockets large enough to hold a lot of items.³²¹ Katie's skirt is above her knees, she has on flesh-coloured stockings and soft soled white plimsoles. The subject holds a gaze that is both determined and set to task, her hair pinned back with a coiffured wave at her hairline. She is conscious of the camera, and looks both filmic and familiar; she is an image we have seen before.

Carland's visual rendering of a 1950s diner waitress parallels Allison's own biomythographical construction of a 'queer archive' in *Two or Three Things*, which is borne from historical absence. Reimagined within the context of a documentary style photographic series, Billy and Katie's compositional portraits in black and white play with hyper real working-class representations of gender and sexual identity, this could be through the fictionalities of Billy and Katie's (potentially butch-femme lesbian) relationship or the complex representations of the self and identity. Carland depicts herself in the self-portraits as

³¹⁹ The Tammy Rae Carland's photographs I reference and discuss can all be viewed here: <https://jessicasilvermangallery.com/tammy-rae-carland/selected-works/>.

³²⁰ As well as often being the only working-class representation of women in mainstream culture and art from photography to film and literature.

³²¹ An apt localised colloquialism, 'pinny' (apron) is often rhymed with 'hinny' (female) in traditional working-class UK Geordie folklore, where rhyming words with different object related meanings become interchangeable in their symbolism and meaning.

both Billy and Katie, dressed in traditional male (gas attendant, construction worker, manual labourer) and female (housewife, mother, waitress) attire. As we eventually recognise the subject in all of the photographs to be Carland herself, so the viewer has to re-position their gaze. A queer reading of the photograph will identify obvious signifiers of butch or femme identity, sexual coding (such as the use of hankies) and queer desire, but in referencing such iconoclastic American stereotypes, the photographs also make space for a different response from audiences less familiar with these codes – a response that is perhaps nostalgic and romantic. Either way the aesthetic composition and visual references render the photographs to be, in Carland and Allison’s terms, ‘authentic’ representations of working-class lives by working-class artists.³²² Like Allison, Carland refutes shame by fully capturing working-class identity through a deliberately queered (and sometimes theoretical) gaze, which transforms heteronormative readings of class and poverty in creative, improvisational and often beautiful ways.

Theory Piece and Performance

Allison’s *Two or Three Things* plays with the fine line between truth and mythologisation that is a foundational element and hook in biomythographical work, through its performative aspects and orientation toward a narrative that also serves as a “theory piece”. In

³²² In their 2013 online interview for *Art Journal Open* Carland and Cvetkovich discuss the importance of reclaiming words such as ‘authentic’ as a means of representation that avoids what they term the ‘postmodern damage’ that critiques the materialised reality and experience of marginalised people away. Carland, T. and Cvetkovich, A. (2013). Sharing and Archive of Feelings: A Conversation. *Art Journal* 72(2).
<https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3960>.

an interview conducted a decade after her text was published, Allison confirms that her ‘novella’ should not be considered a ‘memoir’ despite its biographical affinities with her life:

I always knew that I was writing stories and taking it away from writing autobiography. I don’t think I’m capable of writing autobiography. Even in the memoir, *Two or Three Things*, it’s not really a memoir. It’s a theory piece about storytelling in which I retell stories and then research some of them and come to the conclusion that it’s almost impossible to ever find out what’s true in my family. (Allison in Birnbaum, Claxton, ed., 2012, p.108)

Performance and the performativity of language play a key part in Allison’s literary obfuscation of the truth, partly in order to avoid, as I explained earlier, the dangers presented to survivors who make experiential disclosures or share views unbecoming of ‘victims’. This threat and danger continues to be physical, emotional and psychological (as the Barnard Conference fall out exemplified), and we still socially witness a public disbelief angled at survivors of violence as well as the denigration of their lived realities outside of identities associated with being a disempowered victim of male violence.

Like other biomythographies, most notably Lorde’s oeuvre of work, Allison’s text is intersectional in its content, for Allison cannot be seen within one identity, but maintains and explores her multiple identities as a white working-class, femme, lesbian woman and a writer who is also a survivor of childhood abuse, male violence, and

poverty.³²³ In its structure, *Two or Three Things* is a text without lead characters that democratically divides its stories amongst two generations of Gibson ‘girls’, offering a monologue where the text speaks intimately to an undisclosed addressee and is written as much for the narrator and her family as for a wider audience. Through non-chronological flashbacks and references, often hinted at rather than explicitly laid out, the text unfolds in sequences, within temporal notions of ‘then’ (childhood before leaving the Gibson family home) and ‘now’ (her life as a published author speaking retrospectively about her experiences of her childhood) stages of Dorothy Allison as narrator’s life.

Two or Three Things reimagines a powerless childhood through the eyes of a now empowered adult, with the words resonating through a before/after lens within a non-linear timeframe. Like Pat Parker’s *Movement in Black*, Allison discusses her text as having evolved with every production as it was originally performed four years before its publication. Even when read as a written text rather than observed and listened to as an oral/spoken word work, it retains a play-like performative feel with its direct first-person narration and style that is both secretive and revealing. Stylistically, *Two or Three Things* offers short sentences of direct conversational syntax; it has no chapter markings but reads as one ongoing monologue with capitalised words spelling out changes in emphasis, scene, timeframes and sites. Akin to

³²³ Theories about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) were developed in the early 1990s, analysing the ways that childhood abuse and other experiences such as loss, prolonged illness, deprivation, addicted parents amongst other forms of disadvantage, affected the long-term outcomes for children who experienced such adversity. Based on longitudinal studies originating in California by researchers such as David Finkelhor, they clearly demonstrated links between negative physical health and mental health outcomes and ACEs. These studies are now being revisited and are gaining a level of institutionalised credibility that is not to be without critique.

stage directions, there appear to be a number of transformational episodes or scenes, interspersed with introspective monologues as the narrator switches congruently between past and present experiences without the need to explicitly signpost through temporal markers.

Allison's text is chronologically deceptive, the pictorial element – photographs of women maturing from childhood through to adulthood – sequences a progression of time not matched by the period-switching text itself. The photographs provide the audience with recognisable stylistic eras in the U.S.: the 1950s – 60s and 1970s-early 1980s, hinting a thematic nod to changes in wider political and social conditions that directly impacted working-class communities and women. Allison as both author and narrator references her direct involvement in the struggle to address these conditions through her feminist and equalities activism, experiences of homophobia (and resistance to it), and community-centric socialism. She does this whilst maintaining a focus on the intimacies of the narrator's domestic life as a child, her academic endeavours, and her romantic and sexual encounters. Fashion and other material objects visually reflect stylistic eras that also date the text, such as the clothing and objects her 'mama' is buried in carrying both emotional weight and political significance.

In order to further 'visualise' the narrative, and for the audience to read it as a 'theory piece' and performance, *Two or Three Things* interweaves visual snapshots of the narrator's childhood through written vignettes of earlier family life and, following her escape from that life, family conversations. Allison cites that she also used the same photographs as reference points when she performed the text live. As narrator (performed or textual) she uses the photographs to

recall living with her family (sisters Wanda and Anne and her mother Ruth Gibson) in an extended family and community network where daily lives are mired in social codes, particularly gendered codes, that all the women no matter their ages are expected to follow. The published photographs depict women whose faces can be seen to bear years of hardship and joy; they are not airbrushed or idealised, they represent the lived and material experiences Allison is attempting to capture.

In her work, Allison reclaims the 'I' that has often been taken away from marginalised lesbian, and working-class writers. Its reclamation represents a narrative modality that centres on the lived experiences of the subject and is told *by and for* the communities from which the narrative has arisen. Although biomythographical writing usually focuses on a main female protagonist, it speaks from a collective context, and artistically anchors itself as a tradition within the greater scope of myth and storytelling, hence Allison's references to fairytales and folklore.

Conclusion: All You Have to Believe is The Truth

I can tell you anything. All you have to believe is the truth.

(Allison, 1996, p.94)

Dorothy Allison pushes the boundaries of (radical) feminist literature to include the voices, experiences, and politics of women from the margins, she is transgressive in her thinking about – and explicit representation of – lesbian desire and class. For Allison, and Joan Nestle, lesbian sexuality is an active, progressive, demonstrative physical want, messy and contradictory, it involves a queered,

politicised understanding of power and a re-prioritisation of these dynamics in the representation of sexual identity. Here Allison uses what I determine to be key a biomythographical component (as per my framework) in her use of the protagonist's sexuality as the mechanism to shift a potentially 'victim'-orientated story imbued with shame into one that is powered by the protagonist's *resistance* to that shame. She artfully enables her narrator to share her experiences of violence, abuse, poverty, and exclusion without having to pull back from the grit, detail and 'dirt' that inform it, which greatly enriches the text. Allison's writing encapsulates biomythography's ability to disrupt genre expectations with *Two or Three Things* defying the narrative constraints of auto/biographical texts which anchor the necessity of 'truth' and reliable memory making in order to retell an 'authentic' or accurate story.

In my next chapter I will turn to the biomythographical work of Gloria Anzaldúa, whose co-edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, was the starting point of this thesis. By critically realigning Anzaldúa's work with biomythography as a genre, I will put forth an interpretation which deviates from its co-option into a range of theoretical schools, including Queer Theory. Not only will I return to Anzaldúa's origins as a self-defined woman of colour in the Black feminist movement but also, more specifically, I will explore the way that she furthered the biomythographical use of poetry, language, and mythology to create new spaces of colonial and literary resistance.

CHAPTER 6: GLORIA ANZALDÚA

Speaking in Tongues

Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.97).

Anzaldúa's work exemplifies the poetics of political resistance.

(Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.9)

Introduction

In his critically acclaimed 2009 study *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz, examines queerness as an “ideality”, a futurity imagined but not yet lived: “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.” (Muñoz, 2009, p.1). In this reimagining and move away from early noughties anti-relational (often individualistic and white gay male centred) queer critique, Muñoz goes back to his early years as a punk DIY enthusiast in the 1980s to explain how: “my writings bring in my own personal experience as another way to ground historical queer sites with lived queer experience.” (Muñoz, 2009, p.3) *Cruising Utopia* draws on the theoretical work of Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School, referencing European philosophical leftisms which informed the libertarian movement of 1968. Taking the 1960s as a decade and wave of revolutionary activism across Europe and the United States, he cites that his “critical methodology can best be described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (Muñoz, 2009, p.4).

While Muñoz invokes this decade of social revolution throughout *Cruising Utopia*, his futuristic envisioning includes the use of more contemporary political, social, and artistic references. He does this to reinvest in a social theory and ‘queers of colour’ critique that has been subsumed by a move toward, what I observe to be neoliberal individualism, or in Muñoz’s words an “anti-relational thesis” which he historically analyses from a 2009 perspective. Muñoz writes that this positionality has eradicated the “romance of community” to distance itself from the “contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference,” something compelling or a theoretical re-engagement with “an understanding of queerness as collectivity.” (Muñoz, 2009, p.11).

Muñoz’s queer futuristic call to arms appears to be both welcome and virtuosic, yet this patina of queer collective hope and unity somewhat overwrites and erases both the work and influence of Black, minoritised, working-class and non-gender conforming women writers, to whom Queer Theory owes a massive debt. That is, women whose work, theory, and activism, I would argue, created the intellectual, imaginary, and embodied spaces in which Queer Theory has always been grounded. A common thread in accounts of the development of Queer Theory of the early 2000s runs from post Stonewall queer liberation via Western leftist male white philosophers to Post-structuralist spaces of imagined futurities, positing the becoming of a “Concrete utopia...historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential.” (Muñoz, 2009, p.3). At this juncture Black, minoritised and working-class women, particularly lesbians and gender non-conforming women are still overwritten despite Queer Theory’s debt to them all.

In short, Muñoz's eloquent and hopeful theoretical work, which does briefly mention Gloria Anzaldúa for two paragraphs, falls prey to the 'Western' philosophical academic quagmire of closed inter-textual referencing. Even while attempting to create new post colonialist and post patriarchal material spaces of existence and thought in recognition that multiple marginalised voices have been deleted from the conversation, too often theorists can echo the master texts through contemporary lenses. The very issues of race, class, gender, and marginality that Muñoz highlights as being absent from early 2000s Queer Theory remain muted – theoretically – in *Queer Utopia*.

In advancing this critique, I am not seeking to undermine the importance of Muñoz and other queer theorists' work; that is not my aim. Rather, in scrutinising established and now traditional (in themselves canonical) understandings of Queer Theory, I wish to expand theoretical consciousness, address a major literary injustice in its exclusion of lesbian biomythography, and create a platform for texts that I argue have always been part of an unrecognised literary tradition.

To(o) Queer the Writer

I also found that *Borderlands* was either really appreciated, and used with appreciation or else it was appropriated. When it was appropriated, it was taken over and used in a token way by white theorists who would write about gender but make brief references to race and class and mention my name, or mention Audre Lorde or Maxine Hong Kingston, but as an aside. They never integrated our theories into their writing.

(Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.192)

My start via Muñoz in this chapter may seem indirect, but it exposes a hidden angle that is central to my analysis of Anzaldúa's writing. Over the last few decades Gloria Anzaldúa's work, particularly *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), has been referenced frequently by queer theorists and post-structuralist/colonialist scholars – but it has not been engaged with to the depth or with the level of acknowledgement I believe it should have been, as AnaLouise Keatings queries “Why have theorists so often ignored Anzaldúa's ground-breaking contributions to queer theory?” (Keating, 2009, p.5).³²⁴ Anzaldúa's text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a text crammed with lyrical beauty, innovative aesthetics, and incredibly insightful post-colonial political observations, it is a holistic work that speaks both to and from the tradition of biomythography. Merging narrative, poetry, theory, feminist mythology and Anzaldúa's own spiritual renderings of her ancestry, *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a truly experimental work, one that holds its own both within and outside of the biomythographical sphere. But it is also a work that exists within its own historical biomythographical ecology; from the development of the work right through to its publication, it is the result of an era of politicised, feminist, collectivist activism. Therefore, I believe that the text should not be regarded as a stand-alone text of genius or intellectually detached from that context.

³²⁴ All Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* references herein are taken from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* 25th Anniversary Fourth Edition published in 2012 by Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco. I will refer to the text throughout as *Borderlands/La Frontera* as well as *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

As I shall go on to frame in this Chapter, Gloria Anzaldúa's work – particularly *Borderlands/La Frontera* – asks its readers to consider identity in a broader political and socio-historical context through personal experiences (individual and collective) rarely documented or imagined in literature. Anzaldúa drives forward several concerns which are of import to the development of this thesis, they include; the author's questioning of the usefulness or truth of fixed identities and genres; immovable spirituality as an inherent part of ancestral history making; and the absence and exclusion of the experiential as a tacit pre-requisite used in the gendered racialisation of the literary imagination. Anzaldúa also pertinently questions whether, through the prism of myth and memory making, the writer can productively disorientate linear historical biographies.

Published the same year as Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, AnaLouise Keating's text *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2009), draws on her knowledge as an Anzaldúa scholar, and her personal friendship and creative literary partnership with Anzaldúa. Divided into three broad sections that are not chronologically organised, the collection brings together writings by Anzaldúa that have remained unpublished, or little known since her death in 2004. Over the course of the *Reader*, Keating selects and briefly introduces writing that falls into categories that retain the theoretical underpinnings of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* before, during and after its publication. Keating explains that much of Anzaldúa's literary output included elements of 'Borderland theory' in different states of composition. Keating also concludes that Anzaldúa has not yet been fully recognised for the influence she had on critical and literary theory. In the course of generating a theoretical framework for her writing Keating observes Anzaldúa's perfectionism arising in her continual need to edit her work

for years after it was originally drafted. Whilst this shines a light on her literary diligence, it also points to the level of scrutiny and pressure Anzaldúa and other biomythographical writers (such as Parker who also had a similar approach to her work) may have been placed under as marginalised artists. Often their work was written over long periods of time, something which was both practically and creatively motivated – in short this was arguably part of their writing process – but, as I have posed throughout my thesis, the material factors of a lack of economic stability, support, and publishing opportunities were also driving factors in this approach.

Anzaldúa, herself, noted the ways that her work had been appropriated and her theoretical ideas adopted without acknowledgement by white, male, and gay scholars:

They appropriate our experiences and even our lives and “write us up”. They occupy theorizing space, and though their theories aim to enable and emancipate, they often disempower and neo-colonize.

(Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.165)

As Anzaldúa decided to disidentify herself from specific terms that she felt had been imposed on her such as ‘lesbian’ – which she read to be middle class and white – in order to develop other formations of being, she became more and more frustrated with the co-option of her work (and the associated collectivist tradition) by the Queer Theory and literary ‘establishment’.³²⁵

³²⁵ Ian Barnard discusses Anzaldúa’s feelings about what she felt to be the co-option of her identity. A co-option that extended to her theoretical work and writing: “Although she expresses reservations about the word “queer” ... Particularly in its embodiment in a

Anzaldúa's poem "The New Speakers" written in the mid 1970s defines her stance on the ways that her gender, her race, and other assumptions about her identity interfere with a full recognition of her literary output, influenced as it was by diverse literary sources and genres including mythology, new age and indigenous spiritualism and the white male canon of the twentieth century. The poem reiterates her thinking about gender and presages its infiltration into a language which informs Post-structuralism and Queer Theory:

Critics label the speakers: male, female.
They assign genitals to our words
but we're not just penises or vaginas
nor are our words easy to classify
(Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.24)

As I discussed in my earlier examination of *This Bridge Called My Back* in Chapter One, language, style, and creative experimentation is a critical element in developing a literary representation of individuals whose voices are deleted from the dominant cultural and community narratives. The use of language regarded to be that of the coloniser and patriarch and rooted in cultural traditions that have oppressed and subjugated certain people, is repurposed by each biomythographer to create a new biomythographical mode, one that is multivarious, dialogical, and often deploys a unique vernacular.

white queer theory that seeks to unify queers or appropriate queers of color, Anzaldúa argues that the historically non-genteel connotations of "queer" gives more room to maneuver [sic] its definitional [sic] parameters." (Barnard, 1997, p.38). Barnard, I. (1997). Gloria Anzaldúa's Queer Mestisaje. *MELUS*, 22(1), pp. 35–53.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/468079>.

In “Speaking in Tongues” an essay from 1980, which was written in the form of a letter, Anzaldúa reminds us that for indigenous, migrant, minoritised women of colour the very act of writing or speaking is dangerous yet necessary. Anzaldúa herself experienced much danger and many violations in her lifetime; she was physically assaulted and mugged twice and consistently experienced racism, homophobia, ableism, and misogyny throughout her lifetime. Her disability and early death from diabetes progressed prematurely due to poverty and exclusion from a privatised U.S. health care system. Disability is often a class-related issue, something that each woman I have included in this thesis experienced either after a prolonged illness such as cancer in the case of Parker, Lorde and Nestle or in lifelong disabilities due to physical trauma and rupture as endured by Allison and Feinberg. As Anzaldúa explains in her epistolary essay (the use of the epistolary being another frequent literary device used in biomythography), which she also included fittingly in *This Bridge Called My Back*:

Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.

(Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.33)

Crossing Borders of Consciousness

Anzaldúa’s theoretical, biomythographical, self-described ‘auto-historia’ *Borderlands/La Frontera* blends poetry with historicism, myth

with biography, and narratorial experimentation with dream like sequences that inflect Chicana cultural references with a fluid materiality. The text is divided into two sections that can be read in dialogue with one another or as theory and practice.³²⁶ Both parts of the text retain a fluency that evokes both a familiar poetic symbolism for the reader and what Anzaldúa describes as an ‘alien’ element: “Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element.” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.19).³²⁷ For Anzaldúa the borderlands are a physical and metaphorical territory that occupy a space outside of colonial and patriarchal containment, where the language of her text cannot be easily co-opted by people external to her own culture and community. Anzaldúa’s lyrical writing connects with and represents multiple sonorous aspects of her identity; its polyvocal narrator constructs textual harmonies within each section of the book. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*’s use of multiple linguistic and cultural layers, it seems as though the text can never be truly translated, and it can never be fully understood by one audience, this contributes to what I would regard to be its ever-evolving role in critical theory.³²⁸ According to Cantu and Hurado, this premise and richness helps us to:

understand and theorise the social, economic, sexual and political experiences of individuals who are exposed to

³²⁶ Anzaldúa’s practice included the breadth of speaking truth to theory through her biographical poetry.

³²⁷ Anzaldúa refers to the ‘alien’ experience as intimately connected with ones who dwell in marginal or borderland spaces, reclaiming this state of being as a valid creative force.

³²⁸ *Borderlands* has theoretically informed a number of disciplines, which continues to expand from Queer and feminist theory through to auto-historia, auto-theory, Chicana studies and modern language theory. The power of the text lies in its inability to be fixed; it is in effect a textual borderland, a place of transition and of ever evolving meanings and interpretations.

contradictory social systems and develop what Anzaldúa termed *la facultad* (the ability or gift)
(Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.7)

The first part of the book “ASTREVESANDRO FRONTERAS/CROSSING BORDERS” (from herein “Crossing Borders”) foregrounds a biomythographical history where fact and myth are combined to reveal another set of histories, those of indigenous people forced to become refugees in their homeland, allowing a re-reading and re-interpretation of indigenous American pasts. In seven parts this section retells versions of genocidal atrocity and subjugation alongside the notion of there being an originary myth for exiled people, one that is heavily symbolic and mystical. Although the first part of the text recants an historical retelling of indigenous Chicana, Aztec, and First Nation people’s narratives, it is primarily ordered around the emancipatory tale of a working-class Chicana lesbian – offering a bildungsroman narrative in a seemingly non-linear form. The second part of the text “Un Agitado Viento/Ehécatl, The Wind”, presents the poetic voice of the biomythographical ‘self’ and the hybrid identities reflected in the first part of the book. These queered and feminised reflective voices are followed by six sections of poetry that recapture the themes in “Crossing Borders” and have anecdotal connections to the first part of the text. It is however, the first half of “Crossing Borders” that best exemplifies and frames the biomythographical work of Anzaldúa and her complex and experimental use of language, genre, form, tradition, and myth.

The seven sections of “Crossing Borders” are steeped in the mythical symbolism of indigenous Aztec culture where pictorial symbols are used to denote more than one meaning or object. These

ancient methods included the use of ideograms to express common meanings, which opens up another interpretative consideration of Anzaldúa's language as being fused with symbolic imagery. The original text of *Borderlands* and each published edition's front cover is illustrated with the Aztec symbol for the wind, Ehécatl, which can be seen to stand for the creative voice and the hybridity of voices that a borderland space can represent or encounter. "Crossing Borders" moves from Anzaldúa's rendition of homeland histories through to the development of her own cultural resistance in the face of what she terms and defines "Cultural Tyranny" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.38), revealing the intersectional oppressions that take her from her homeland to the Borderlands.

In Chapter Three of *Borderlands/La Frontera* the myth of the god of war – emblematised in the serpent and eagle – is reinterpreted as a matriarchal war cry against oppression, wherein "Waging War" is Anzaldúa's "Cosmic Duty", leading to the creation of her own creative space of hybridity – a "Coatlicue" state. This is where the female subject is objectified but then directly uses this experience to transcend objectification as a state of being via self-transfiguration. Spiritually Anzaldúa thinks of this as a "Prelude to Crossing" that leads to the overcoming of a 'tradition' of silence, the cultural and spiritual subjugation of the self before the emergence of the shamanic state Anzaldúa recalls in "Tlilli Tiapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink". That is, the translation of a spiritual emergence and political astuteness into the written word, invoking the power of the text and writing as a 'sensuous' act.³²⁹ The final part of "Crossing Borders"

³²⁹ Writing as a sensuous act is a theme that also recurs throughout Audre Lorde's 1983 biomythography *Zami*, and can be found in other biomythographical texts

entitled “La conciencia de la mestizo/Towards a New Consciousness” identifies the emergence of a new way of thinking and being in relation to the self or identity. This includes personal and political struggle as being part of the emergence and liberation of the subject’s imagination, an interchangeable state of consciousness where identity forms part of a fluid set of understandings. Here Anzaldúa outlines that:

There are many modes of consciousness: the rational, reasoning mode, which is to me connected to external reality, with the world that we inhabit right now; and the other modes of consciousness connected with the world of imagination, the world of fantasy, and the world of images. (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.103)

Anzaldúa seamlessly blends myth and magic; what we might consider to be a ‘magicorealism’ permeates her texts, and her multi-lingual narratives reflect an inner dialogue that is both fluent and obtuse in her use of multiple languages, plains of consciousness, and evocative expression.³³⁰ Similarly, she switches styles and codes of reference, slipping in and out of other poets’ and writers’ voices, thus

including the work of Dorothy Allison and Joan Nestle, in different spiritual and intimate ways.

³³⁰ Remapping the role of magical realism in the autobiographical work of Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta’s *The Autobiography of Brown Buffalo* (1974), Frederick Luis Aldama discusses “Chicano/a novelists” use of “magicorealism as a storytelling mode that allows their characters to engage with and question restrictive ideologies and such divisions as those that separate Latin American from U.S., metropolitan from rural...Western from indigenous; they use magicorealism as a self-reflexive storytelling mode that has the potential to expand the reader’s perception of the world.” (Aldama, 2003, p.63). Aldama then goes onto explain a key difference in post-colonial auto/biographical work (within a Chicana/o historical context): “Certain ethnic – and postcolonial-identified autobiographers choose to foreground the fictionality of their writing of the self; these autobiographers choose to destabilize readers’ consumption of their life stories as fact...One such mode is magicorealism”. (Aldama, 2003, p.63).

encoding the myths that she translates into her text whilst creating her own originary account of *La Frontera* where:

Inherent in the creative act is a spiritual, psychic component – one of spiritual excavation, of adventuring into the inner void, extrapolating meaning from it and sending it out into the world. To do this kind of work requires the total person – body, soul, mind and spirit. (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.135)

Such blending of modes and forms of knowing, as well as the posing of a holistic process, makes the elements of biomythography indicated more explicit. This engages Anzaldúa's audience in a similar textually embodied experience or self-written mythologising narrative.

Like other biomythographers Anzaldúa often suspends and extends temporality in her work. The transhistorical divine is ever present; the subject is not located in a specific timeframe but defined as part of an undefined historical period and ancestry. This propels a continuum theory of lesbian or queer spirituality, which both refers back to and projects forward elements of experience, time, and existence. Through her biomythographical writing Anzaldúa is able to suggest a spiritual and physical dislocation from her immediate surroundings; that is a connection with both unstated elements of everyday living and an ethereal sense of being the 'other.' The 'other', often embodied by non-gender conforming girls, highly alert and sensitive to their environments – is embraced by Anzaldúa both spiritually and physically.³³¹

³³¹ This understanding of gender non-conformity should be contextualised by the era in which Anzaldúa was born, which differs from – though in some ways parallels – a current understanding of non-binary or other gender fluid identities. Codes of binary

Speaking Across the Divide

Anzaldúa was born into the sixth generation of a Chicana family in 1942, twenty-five miles from the U.S. Mexican border on a ranch settlement, to farm worker parents who migrated between Texas and the Midwest. Living most of her youth as part of a majority ethnicity that were governed by a white minority, she attended the Pan American University with a white professoriate. Her family valued her education, despite their deeply entrenched sexist and binary attitude toward gender and sexuality. Anzaldúa carried in her work a Southern Texas tradition; a blend of U.S. and Mexican culture, history and language that created a unique but, in some ways, contentious sense of identity. In the Fourth Edition Introduction to *Borderlands/La Frontera* Cantu and Hurtado observe:

Anzaldúa establishes the border between these two countries as a metaphor for all types of crossings – between geopolitical boundaries, sexual transgressions, social dislocations and the crossings necessary to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. (Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.6)

Politically Anzaldúa's work speaks of a need to retain a specific cultural and literary presence in order to document the devastation of colonisation and enslavement. Throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa references destructive forces that have fuelled intersectional oppression: European and U.S. colonialism, patriarchal religion and

gender, particularly for girls growing up in the early to mid-twentieth century were further impacted by a political and social climate that was punitive and violent to girls who deviated from the strictures of gender codes in identity, expression, sexuality, or lifestyle.

gender-based violence. Both Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith have noted in their essay “Feminist and Cultural Memory: An Introduction” that:

Preoccupations with the gendered politics of decolonization, exile, migration, and immigration have given rise to questions about the archive and the transmission of memory across spatial and generational boundaries. (Hirsch and Smith in Rossington and Whitehead eds., 2007, p.223).

Anzaldúa’s writing is shaped by ancestral layers of genocide, oppression and cultural annihilation and her experiences as a U.S. citizen, living for part of her life on colonised mainland U.S. territory (chiefly California and New York), that that she recognises to be indigenous land.

As a child and young woman, Anzaldúa’s reference points and experiences were largely rural, her resettlement into more urban settings in California came later in her adult life. Throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa names her own spiritual experiences, reframing and reclaiming these as a formative part of her rural childhood that she has transposed into her adult life. Through her biomythographical work Anzaldúa redetermines spirituality within a feminist paradigm, making it a naturalised and shared collective experience that is rooted in intersectionality. As a woman of colour in the U.S. she has experiences of racism and colonialism; as a working-class woman she has encountered exploitation and class hegemony; as a lesbian or, as she preferred to be identified, queer woman, she faced a violent response to her expression of desire. Anzaldúa refuses to disconnect her lived experiences from her work and writing, bringing

an intersectional politics into her creativity as an integral part of her cultural activism and writing. The struggles she documents also inform a storytelling tradition that had long been sustained by her maternal ancestors and nurtured by the lands from which generations of her family came. These aspects, as Cantu and Hurtado point out, came from “her own lived experiences and honored every event in her life that helped her construct her own lens as she experienced the world.” (Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.3)

In her writing Anzaldúa makes numerous references to her childhood, which she presents as being steeped in a profound spiritual relationship with the rural environment in which she was raised. She recalls and connects the political injustice of imperialist U.S. policies that negatively impacted on generations of local indigenous populations with the unforgiving (but cherished) dry arid landscape of her homeland, whose fertility her family depended on to survive. She also writes about her strident feminist awareness of the disparity and unfairness of girlhood growing up in a patriarchally dominated farming community, she articulates in detail the way that this imperialist and paternalistic environment affected her maternal family members. She compares this with the lives of other women survivors of violence, contrasting the endemic racism that her family and communities faced in the context of intra-familial abuse with the external facing threats from the state.³³² Women of colour being unable to escape the misogyny and patriarchal abuse of the men in their

³³² Anzaldúa’s text ensures that the reader acknowledges and understands the historical, political, and social positioning of *Borderlands’* narrator in relation to colonisation, capitalism, ecocide, and patriarchy, but the narrator – through her mythological (and critical) relationalities – retains an agency that is anchored in her maternal, matriarchal, spiritual past; itself a history of resistance, defiance, and survival.

communities and communities of colour being unable to escape the racism and imperialism of U.S. political domination. To textually disrupt these hegemonic forces (imperialism, patriarchy, structural and familial violence), the narrator of *Borderlands/La Frontera* finds safety and clarity in the ancestral mythology of her maternal lineage and her spiritual connection with the land.³³³ Childhood experiences thus inform Anzaldúa's intersectional mestiza consciousness; her theoretical references are a part of, and emerge from, her embodied spirituality and creativity:

So my whole thing with spirituality has been this experience with this other alien in the body, the spirit, the writing, and the sexuality. When I was young I was one with the trees, the land, and my mother; there weren't any borders. (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.88)

Anzaldúa's perspectives on the artificial and often destructive imposition of material, psychological, and spiritual borders as a means of division rather than a place of transition have their origins in her sense of self and home; as a child she experienced being whole, experiencing herself to be as at one with the land as she was at one with her mother. This merging of her maternal ancestry and embodied sense of home in the face of borders and disunity, captures a schism which she utilises to articulate the reality of shifting identities or

³³³ Chinisole has grounded this spiritual literary tradition (through a Black feminist lens) as being grounded in the "matrilineal" and connected to the material and spiritual concept of home and the self. This can be observed to be a distinct tenet of biomythography, as Chinisole goes on to point out in her study of Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Black women retain "a special sense of home as a locus of self-definition and power" (Chinisole in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.379).

feelings in her text.^{334 335} As Anzaldúa goes on to describe in her 1998 interview with Linda Smuckler, writing was a way of unifying and bringing together the many parts of herself and her identity that were being bordered, divided and othered:

When I got so far from my feeling, my body, my soul I was – like other, other, other. But then something kept snapping. I had to gather; I had to look at these walls, divisions, gradations of being other other other, and determine where they all belonged. It was an energy of refocusing and bringing it all back together.

(Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.89)

Borderlands / La Frontera and other biomythographical texts such as Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* illustrate the impact and violent aftereffects of colonisation, they deal with the experiences of living as part of a colonising nation, an entity which people materially exist within but are simultaneously spiritually avoidant of, where the "process of marginalizing others has roots in colonization." (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.288). *Borderlands* grapples with this dichotomy through the narrator's re-negotiation of the spiritual self and creation of new theoretical understandings of gender, sexuality and (in relation to nation, state and political disenfranchisement) new mestiza

³³⁴ In Chapter Seven I briefly expand on the Black feminist matrilineal in my return to Lorde's biomythographical poetry collections *The Black Unicorn* and *Between Ourselves*.

³³⁵ The racialisation and reclamation of black motherhood through the work of creativity and poetry is fully explored in Alexis Pauline Gumbs's appraisal of Audre Lorde's work Gumbs, A.D. (2010). *We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminisms 1968 -1996*. Retrieved from: http://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/2398/D_Gumbs_Alexis_a_201005.pdf?sequ.

consciousness.³³⁶ In common with Lorde in *The Black Unicorn*, Anzaldúa creates textual landscapes for the outsider imagination, rooted in everyday lesbian or queer experience, that fortify a feminist re-interpretation of the racialised maternal myth.

As a woman who holistically envisaged her life and the world through her writing, Anzaldúa's language can be seen to suggest that her homeland landscapes are now lost or hidden mythical environments. For Lorde something similar is evoked in *The Black Unicorn* where a spiritual connection is made between the roots of her African heritage and the land of her Caribbean ancestors – she translates this worldview through the prism of an urban western environment in which she is minoritised. Anzaldúa's position vis-à-vis a set of conflicting identities parallels the theoretical underpinnings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern whose nationality conflicts with a cultural heritage that has been colonised by the rulers of that nation (Spivak, 1990). This merging of worlds, which each writer inhabits and reflects upon, shapes the political direction of their work in which myth and mythologisation inhabit equally co-productive spaces.³³⁷

³³⁶ Erika Aigner-Varoz points to the shifting metaphors of Anzaldúa's roving mythical beasts, stalking the lands from which they have been exiled: "The Shadow-Beast reflects Anzaldúa's attempt to create an all-inclusive, symbiotic metaphor" (Aigner-Varoz, 2000, p.60). Aigner-Varoz, E. (2000). Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera. *MELUS*, 25(2), pp. 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468218>.

³³⁷ In conversation with Sneja Gunew in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990), Spivak further elaborates on the need for the colonised subject (or 'Third World Woman' as she defines her) to be listened to outside of a reductive homogenised singular identity: "There are many subject positions one must inhabit; one is not just one thing. That is when a political consciousness comes in." (Spivak in Harasym, 1990, p.60).

The Shadow-Beast

This book, then, speaks of my existence. My preoccupations with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation; with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes at these confluent streams; with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows. (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.19)

Reconfiguring the myth of the ‘Americas’ Anzaldúa opens “The Homeland, Aztlán: El Otro Mexico” with a quote from a 1973 historical text that topographically places the Aztecas del Norte (people of the Southwest) as part of the Anishinaabe diaspora – related indigenous U.S. and Canadian First Nation tribes. The origin story of Aztlán or the Aztecs, is considered to be a founding narrative in Chicana mythology with the Southwest of the U.S. being their (now colonised) territory. Opening the chapter with a poem Anzaldúa prophetically states:

I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other time and places a violent clash
(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.23)

Anzaldúa thus rewrites and corrects the historical mistakes of generations, with an emphasis on the biographical to both symbolically and emotionally root the experience of colonisation. Anzaldúa uses this “topography of displacement” (Salivadar-Hull in Anzaldúa, 1999, p.2)

and the geographical familiarity of the strait of Southwest America as an embodied mass intimately connected to the oppression of her own physical being and culture:

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh
spits me splits me
me raja me raja
This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.23)

Each stanza of the poem (as above) bears a similarity to the staggered and elongated landmass of southwest Texas before it officially crosses the Mexican border; the “U.S. –Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.25).³³⁸ The border pictured here replicates the emotional split between cultures and countries that she feels as an immigrant in colonised lands that historically belonged to her people. To Anzaldúa this is a third country, her homeland, “This home” (capitalised when associated with her own identity, to associate her language with the materiality of home), “a border culture”, “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.”

³³⁸ In “Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities” Avtar Brah speaks to this conceptual visualisation of a bordered landmass as a politicised reference to the politics of location. “Together the concepts of border and diaspora reference the politics of location.” (Brah in Rossington and Whitehead (eds), 2007, p.286).

(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.25) Anzaldúa is all too aware that “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*.” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.25). Her idea of a “third country” also pertains to a critical space of belonging, politicised and exemplified as La Frontera. Cantu and Hurtado go on to describe how:

La Frontera (the border) is also the geographical area that is most susceptible to *la mezcla* (hybridity)...Anzaldúa argues that living in the borderlands creates a third space between cultures and social systems.

(Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.6)

Anzaldúa observes that if a borderland is imposed upon a colonised people to divide and corrupt, then we should also question the way that this same set of structures uses fear and retribution to inform mass colonisation. Where a hegemony of a small ruling minority based on skin colour and non-indigenous cultural heritage exists, how can a people live if not in a “constant state of transition and what meaning does this have for their stories.” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.23).

Anzaldúa goes on to contextualise *Borderlands/La Frontera* and her emerging Borderland theory with an historical overview of Chicana culture and the Chicana people’s relationship to the land mass that became the U.S., reaching back to the Aztecs in 3500 B.C. By integrating Spanish and English as one confluent language in her text, she is able to express and articulate the dialogical nature of bi-lingual experiences and memory. In addition, the use of different mythical references further illustrates her Borderlands theory, such as the symbolism of the eagle in Huitzilopochtli the god of war myth. Her work speaks in multiple idioms, through both closed and open

dialogues, using dialect to exemplify gender, class-consciousness, and political understandings. Anzaldúa goes on to align colonial migration with the historic Anglo colonisers of Texas (which was formerly part of Mexico) where she asserts that the native Tejanos of Mexico “lost their land over night and became foreigners.” She is clear this was an “imperialist takeover” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.28).

Bringing in the work of singers, poets, and historians throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa demonstrates a scholarly and referential approach to her work as a way to ground a new historicism, one that elevates the personal and the biographical and where the female self remains present and articulate within the narrative. Whilst the history of Texas, South American colonisation and North American imperialism can be quoted from a variety of history books it is the personal journey of Anzaldúa’s family that imparts the greatest impact on the reader. Anzaldúa intimately charts these intersecting forces of colonisation, imperialism and a Eurocentric paternalism on the capitalist driven exploitation of working-class indigenous families. Anzaldúa references First Nation sayings and proverbs to connect the spirituality of different indigenous peoples within her use of language and narrative, avoiding the monolithic drive of a modern neo-liberal rhetoric and what she regards to be the cultural bankruptcy of the colonisers. Revisiting the idea of the ‘alien’ at the border, Anzaldúa uses a Navajo protection battle song to demonstrate the resistance of the colonised and a resolute spirituality that can neither be owned nor co-opted: “now among the alien gods with/weapons of magic I am” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.33). This modality of ‘magic’ self-possession is a

battle cry against deletion and genocide, where indigenous people are forced to be refugees or immigrants in their own country.³³⁹

Ending her first chapter in an historical exploration of Chicana oppression, Anzaldúa highlights a key part of her Borderlands theory that predates Kimberley Crenshaw's definition of 'intersectionality', by outlining the impact of interlocking oppressions in both a micro and macro context.³⁴⁰ She thus recognises that to be a woman, a woman of colour, a poor woman of colour at a certain historical point in time and to be a refugee or an economic dependent creates additional risks and barriers. For the borderlands can also be dangerous places, places of vulnerability; women of colour at the margins have less choice and face systemic institutional and legislative discrimination that can result in their exploitation and harm.³⁴¹ Documenting the risks of undocumented migrant Chicana women, Anzaldúa recounts how "*La mojada, la mujer indocumentada* is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence...As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain." (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.35). Anzaldúa as narrator thus opens up a dialogue about intersectional oppression, the risks that women of colour are exposed to everyday, and the way that

³³⁹ This concept was touched upon in *This Bridge Called My Back*, in the section that Anzaldúa names as 'Refugees of a World on Fire'.

³⁴⁰ Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241-1299. <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/files/2020/02/1229039.pdf>.

³⁴¹ This echoes the recent violent racist rhetoric still being used, post Trump's 2016 presidency, in relation to migrants crossing the Mexican/U.S. border. The inflammatory anti-immigrant language of the populist right continues to fuel division across Western and European countries, policies and discussion of this matter remain entrenched in a mythical national identity, hatred of the 'other' – in narratives of fear.

supra-capitalist structures impact upon individuals. But Anzaldúa affirms that still:

This is her home
this thin edge of
barbwire

(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.35)

The identification of forms of cultural oppression and how these affect a people's identity, the complex relationships with their culture and myth, and an inscribed sense of self (the narrator having an experience of living as part of a culture and writing 'outside' of that culture) – are further explored in Chapters Two and Three of *Borderlands*. As they progress, these chapters start to shift historical modes, the idea of the “New Mestiza” emerging to be the protagonist of the text. The New Mestiza is a woman of dual Spanish and Native American heritage, and as Anzaldúa outlines, a woman in movement, at the margins, but tapping into a tradition of resistance. Here Tara Lockhart in her study of Anzaldúa emphasises that self-conscious connection between her identity and the language she uses in her writing:

Although readers of Anzaldúa's work have much to learn about her particular experience of mestiza identity, her work also shows that the act of writing itself assists individuals in coming to know and express the complexities of identity (Tara Lockhart, 2006).³⁴²

³⁴² Lockhart, T. (2006). Writing the Self: Gloria Anzaldúa, Textual Form, and Feminist Epistemology. Issue title: *Knowledge*, 20. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.ark5583.0020.002>.

Anzaldúa's text goes on to describe movement and rebellion against the colonisers – an ancestral movement presided over by six generations of family – opening Chapter Two, '*Movimientos de rebeldia y las culturas que traicionan*' (Rebellious Movements and Traitorous Cultures) with a page of untranslated Spanish. This is as much a statement of intent against the colonisation of her socio-linguistic culture as it is a way to communicate with her ancestors and her allies. It is a message of liberation against repression from the leaders and elders of her many communities; Anzaldúa refuses to bear silent witness to the spiritual subjugation and physical elimination of her people. The author is "filled with rage" to be oppressed in multiple ways as a lesbian, a woman, a Chicana, and her rebellion as a "loudmouth" is not confined to the struggle of her people for independence it is also a personal struggle for her own liberation.

To Anzaldúa's this struggle is not just about the tradition of cultural resistance that is part of a *transfrontera feminista*; her feminism globally connects the lives of all women on the margins in countries that are colonised. To Anzaldúa this socio-cultural tyranny is also patriarchal tyranny. As the first part of *Borderlands* develops from historical narrative into biomythography we enter a cyclical 'autohistoria' (as Anzaldúa named it) that reclaims the pre-colonial traditions of her ancestors within a Chicana feminist framework, one that includes intersectional feminisms. The language, faith and imposed cultural traditions of the coloniser are being transgressed through a reinterpretation of storytelling, myth, and history. Again,

using a biomythographical trope of reflecting on and reinhabiting childhood to re-imagine a truthful unsullied world, the narrator goes on to define 'The Strength of My Rebellion', as having to "leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.38). Defining herself as a "Shadow-Beast" the rebel also defies community authorities and the supposed 'tribal rights' of her communities over women. Here socio-cultural tyranny is exposed to be those:

Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, [and] are transmitted to us through the culture.

(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.38)

Anzaldúa is very clear when she outlines that "Culture is made by those in power – men" where women are expected to "show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.38-39). Without further recourse to the founding history of Chapter One, she refers to the intimate experiences of her mother and grandmother and the complicity of church and state in their oppression. The sanctity of women, the spiritual and the divine in women, is to be reclaimed and understood, while the Adam and Eve originary myth is rejected by Anzaldúa as the colonisers' reduction of women to negative tropes related to their sex and gender. As the narrator goes on to explain, the Borderlands – as political, social, and historical spaces – are also places of transition. Anzaldúa explores gender as a place of transformation, change, and the "magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.41).

Anzaldúa wants to dismantle the social dualities that oppress queer sexuality and genders that are seen to be outside of binary dualities. She begins to develop her theories more clearly around lesbian/queer sexuality and gender as the narrator identifies gender identity as “two in one body, both male and female”. (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.41).³⁴³ Anzaldúa here reclaims what she considers to be an indigenous understanding of fluid sexuality, an understanding of gender variance in a pre-colonialist time in North and Central America. Proclaiming a queer identity removed from ‘Western’ lesbians – who are identified as being mostly white and middle class by Anzaldúa – she was able to fully incorporate her mestiza consciousness into her analysis of colonialism by distancing herself from the term ‘lesbian’: “As for “lesbians” I prefer the word queer or “patlache” – lesbian is an identity label that others give me, especially editors of anthologies that reprint my work.” (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.300).

As I have outlined, cultural, social, spiritual geographies also come to represent transformational spaces where sexual borderlands meet the spiritual in *Borderlands*. According to Anzaldúa there can be a sexual and spiritual unity across manmade colonial territories, even those that have invaded psychic freedoms and psychological sovereignty. She explains:

The actual physical borderland I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. southwest/ Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual

³⁴³ The merging of mythology with queer identity is a theme throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*: “As a queer person Anzaldúa claims to be “both male and female” and therefore to have access to different worlds” (Aigner-Varoz, 2000, p.57).

borderlands ...are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other...where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy's resistance (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.19)

At these imposed manmade borders, geographies invented for the purpose of political gain, Anzaldúa identifies how colonisation has denied the history and sexual/identities of indigenous people. Anzaldúa recalls these denied histories as being part of an alternative North American heritage of "magico-religious thinking" that contradicts the imposed Catholic religion and supports her "choice to be queer". Sexuality also divides the borderlands of the colonised and the coloniser; here queerness and lesbianism can provide both refuge and danger. In the wilderness of the Borderlands there can be no home, no belonging without confronting the 'Shadow-Beast'; that is, the internalised homophobia and racism that incite panic and an inability to react or move, wherein non-gender conforming women of colour and lesbians are as immobilised by their "inner" culture or life as they are by external structures: "Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of herself." (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.22).

But for Anzaldúa it is both resistance and the ancestral remembrance of a history of resistance that forges the narrator's path. *Borderlands* creates more questions and queries than it does solutions, but to the narrator this is the process of struggle; to ask the questions and raise the issues is part of the new consciousness, ensuring they remain visible. When Anzaldúa writes "My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance" (Anzaldúa, 2012,

p.43), she reminds us that her text is creating another historical space of being and thinking:

Most notably *Borderlands* lay the groundwork for critical interventions in the development of a Chicana Third Space Feminist approach in literary criticism as well as in cultural and other disciplines. (Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.9)

Anzaldúa does not romanticise ancestry; she does not wish to go back to a time when the “dark-skinned’ woman was silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century,” where “For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard” (Anzaldúa, 2012, pp.44-45). Just as she acknowledges the hybridity of her identity, so she proclaims the hybridity of her resistance:

The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world – a perspective, a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample *mestiza* heart.
(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.45)

Entering the Serpent

The New Mestiza is a subject who is developing her multi-faceted identities, is resisting silence, and creating new spaces; she is engaged in the ecological and colonial struggle for the ground she stands on. As the narrator goes on to substantiate in Chapters Three and Four of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, there is a connection between the eradication of female deities, such as la Virgen de Guadalupe and

Madilani, and the oppression of Chicana women. In Chapter Three, “Entering the Serpent”, Anzaldúa reclaims not only feminine deities but her own power where both god and the spirits reside. Whilst the colonisers’ Catholicism has obscured the founding myths of her ancestors, folklore symbolism and pagan imagery still remain visible in contemporary Chicana culture. This fortifies the narrator’s spiritual allegiance with these spiritual and mythological female deities such as the creator goddess Huitzilopochtli and Coatlicue the serpent goddess.

In “Entering the Serpent” and “The Coatlicue State” the innate spirituality the narrator felt as a child is used as an emotional resource to unite her with her ancestral home and spiritual lands, the energy of which can safeguard her journey into the borderland. Observing a pre-Cortesian history that instils a wider understanding of the emergence of her own feminist spirituality, Anzaldúa offers a vision of synthesis and embodied unity:

Forty years it’s taken me to enter the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body and the animal soul. (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.48)

Anzaldúa writes of the dualism of a male-dominated ‘Azteca-Mexica’ culture that eradicated the female deities and divided upper and lower world elements (into light and dark, soul and body). It is this eradication of matrilineal Aztec culture that Anzaldúa explores in her analysis of la Virgen de Guadalupe, which she regards to be the most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the “chicano/*mexicano*” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.52), and a symbol that unifies the working classes. But la Virgen de Guadalupe also mediates “between humans and the divine, between this reality and the reality of spirit entities”; she is a

“spiritual, political and psychological symbol” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.52) for the Chicanas as a mixed heritage people, whose ambiguity in all aspects she champions. According to Anzaldúa the pagan superstitions of a colonised people are often grounded in a means of survival to ward off harm against themselves and their ancestors.

The narrator recites the patterns and cycles of her life in *Borderlands/La Frontera* including the language she adopts and reconfigures. Through narrative turns and her use of language Anzaldúa denies that the paternal world of linguistic order and structured rationalisation have any sovereignty in her text. Her borderland worldview negates ‘progressive’ trajectories as Anzaldúa reclaims the sophistication of an ecologically centred culture in touch with the spiritual divinity that exists outside of the realm of objectification and ownership. Her cultural activism remains a firm part of what AnaLouise Keating terms “spiritual activism”. In “Entering the Serpent” Anzaldúa bravely crosses into a psychic and religious territory that formerly upheld patriarchal traditions and restricted the power of women in Chicano culture.

In the “Coatlicue State” the narrator abandons the fear of reclaiming the spiritual; here she sees through the untruth of colonisation and patriarchy, of the subjugation of many people by the few. Using traditional Catholic proverbs that reiterate religious superstition, Anzaldúa tackles the root of her need to commune with maternal deities, to unbind herself from the shame and taboo of being sexually or spiritually “abnormal”. She rejects the route of escaping from the “threat of shame or fear” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.67) via self-destruction, hatred, addiction, and violence. It is through her reconnection with feminine archetypes such as Coatlicue (both serpent

and twin), who is the “consuming internal whirlwind...the incarnation of cosmic processes” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.69), that Anzaldúa reclaims the strength of resistance. According to Anzaldúa this is the prelude to leaving behind fear, shame, self-hatred; the crossing to another psychic state of being as well as to another understanding of the self and her own shifting political territory. We learn that this is a state of physical and psychic transcendence for Anzaldúa the narrator:

Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing grows thicker everyday. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone. That which abides: my vigilance, my thousand sleepless serpent eyes blinking in the night, forever open. I am not afraid. (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.73)

Here the narrator herself becomes a deity, channelling the energy of transformation, of male and female vitality, growing her own power as the phallic ‘thin thing’ grows thicker. She is an archetype embodying many, her power is collective, her resistance multiple.

Anzaldúa’s mixture of Spanish, Nahuatl (indigenous/Chicana Spanish) and English throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, defies the coloniser’s language, and challenges Anglo linguistic legitimacy (and arguably the canon) as another form of cultural imperialism. The punishment she receives at school for speaking her mother tongue is mirrored by the gendered expectations of her community, reflecting attempts by both state institutions and her family to enforce gender codes to tame and control the physical behaviour and creative expression of the narrator’s girlhood and indigeneity. The bold and free flowing language and typeset of *Borderlands/La Frontera* (which includes capitalised letters and emboldened typography throughout)

stresses the importance of linguistic resistance as a means of survival. Anzaldúa's examination of a language encoded with patriarchal linguistic mechanisms that silence and berate women, parallels the coloniser's cultural impositions on her birth nation. In defying both institutional and familial dominance, the narrator simultaneously experiences anger from her own Mexican and Chicana communities for being a cultural 'traitor' and speaking the oppressor's language. With such political dichotomies in mind, she deems Chicano Spanish a "border tongue" a "living language" for:

what recourse is left...but to create their own language? A language which they cannot connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves...We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.

(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.77)

This hybridity of language and identity is interchangeable with the need for a homeland, a secret language for those who are crossing the borders away from colonialist *pochismos* or Anglicised Mexicans. The text's use of archaisms and a relaxation of the linguistic rules found in formal Spanish also extends to the way phrases sound orally as well as on the page. Anzaldúa utilises a hybridised language where Spanish is Anglicised, English is Hispanicised, formal syntax is relaxed, linguistic rules regularly broken and theoretical concepts are synthesised into poetry. Her hybridisation of Spanish and Nahuatl contests what she considers to be a Eurocentric and U.S. "linguistic terrorism" or a class-based bias against indigenous people. For Anzaldúa, language inscribes cultural identity into the borderlands; it enables mythical storytelling to become a powerful poetic literary voice:

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue-my woman's voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

(Anzaldúa, 2012, p.81)

In writing her narrative in a hybrid tongue she bestows the importance of the written word, while documenting stories by people who are never heard outside of an encoded oral tradition. Anzaldúa is positioning herself and her matriarchal ancestors outside of the language of the father a paternalistic hegemony of religion, nation-state, and community – to maintain a sense of her own cultural identity. As Avtar Brah comments in “Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities”,

Self-reflexive autobiographical accounts often provide critical insights into political ramifications of border crossings across multiple positioning. (Brah in Rossington and Whitehead, eds., 2007, p.286)

Anzaldúa shapes her biomythographical language and narratives to reflect this place of hybridity where multiple dialectical and linguistic crossings merge. She must make such linguistic “border crossings” to fully tell her story, to write her biomythography.³⁴⁴

³⁴⁴ This closely parallels Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic exploration of gendered language in “When Our Lips Speak Together”. She opens her essay (originally written in 1980) with the rhetorical declaration: “If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so?” To Irigaray “speaking in sameness” is driven by patriarchal discourse, a mutated imitation that enables men to do what they've been “doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak” Irigaray

In Chapter Six, 'Tlilli, Tlapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink' Anzaldúa recalls the importance of the storyteller, in any community, as a shaman creator, linking this into the act of writing. But for Anzaldúa poetry and prose are spiritually charged, part of a complex cyclical process, they are connected to the spiritual totems, proverbs, deities, rituals, and sacred objects of life – where “invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.89) and “words are the cables that hold up the bridge” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.91). The art that Anzaldúa considers to be ‘tribal’ contradicts what she determines to be ‘Western’ art – an art that often positions itself authoritatively as an unquestionable dictate with an unlimited freedom to appropriate other/colonised cultures. In the face of an ethnocentrism that could be seen to exploit and misconstrue the metaphors and symbols of indigenous culture and essentialise an innate connection to the earth, the body and spirituality, Anzaldúa articulates her alternative stance, posing that “...for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.97). She thus refuses dualities or hierarchies within which embodied or spiritual knowledge is considered oppositional to – rather than at one with – the material or physical body.

In the second edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999), Sonia Salvidar-Hull critically interprets Anzaldúa’s use of transformative power as the coming together of aspects of her identity.³⁴⁵ Here she

prophetically says that if women continue to do this “we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves.” (Irigaray, 1985, p.205).

³⁴⁵ I would argue that the second edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera* has a more radical and politically aligned foreword by Sonia Salvidar-Hull than later editions. This can be seen to reflect the end of a politicised feminist decade before the further

outlines that the simultaneity of Anzaldúa's Chicana heritage and cultural resistance is an integral part of her queer/lesbian feminism, in contradiction to the colonisers' nation building trope of dominance and subjugation. In the fourth edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2012) Norma E. Cantu and Aida Hurtado further syncretise the way that Anzaldúa's work informs "Chicana Feminisms" by intersectionally bringing together these aspects of her identity to create a new space for theory:

The academic field of Chicana Feminisms, which was in its early stages in the 1980s, [and] readily embraced the work of Gloria Anzaldúa – writer, public intellectual, and one of the first Chicanas to publically claim her sexuality.

(Cantu and Hurtado in Anzaldúa, 2012, p.5)

Although this is an important acknowledgement, Anzaldúa's writing, and work goes beyond the "academic fields" that often "embraced" her work. Her mestiza consciousness/intersectional identities are rooted in a non-linear history of difference, diversity, and struggle that on occasion may be in conflict with tenets of academia. Anzaldúa's biomythographical linguistic and stylistic approach throughout *Borderlands* ignite a review of the binary logic that often pervades fixed categories, disciplines, or genres. As Tara Lockhart notes, such matters directly affect the style and form of Anzaldúa's writing throughout *Borderlands*:

co-opting of feminist owned publishers, a softening of the literary world's political edges and the need to make texts more 'accessible' and commercial. Although the Aunt Lute edition remains a radical text, the shifting forewords can be seen to chart a wider historical and political bent in the publishing industry at this time.

A particular strength of Anzaldúa's work, then, is the way in which "form" and "content" necessitate one another – bleeding into and shaping one another – thus clearly subverting this long problematic binary. More than an object lesson in hybrid form, Anzaldúa's essays make visible the generic and linguistic boundaries that shape our acts of reading and composing and in turn shape our perceptions of the world around us, including our identity positions.

(Tara Lockhart, 2006, no pagination)

I suggest that in *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa can also be seen to move beyond hybridity and the creation of a third space; her borderlands are not a place of stasis or resignation, they are a biomythographical place of transition and fluidity. Her borderlands exist at the margins of culture, language, myth, history and the politics of a nation, they are places of transformation, collective movement and a reconfigured way of thinking about and reviewing the world. The acts of the everyday in these transitional spaces are where we will find a new way to narrate and write our histories; these are histories intimately connected with the self, where multiple and shifting identities may reside, beside historical fact and personal testimony.

Conclusion: The New Mestiza Nation ³⁴⁶

The new mestizas have a connection with particular places, a connection to particular races, a connection to new notions of

³⁴⁶ "Anzaldúa draws a parallel between queers and mestizas in making the provocative claim that all marginalized people are mestizas." (Barnard, 1997, p.42)

ethnicity, to a new tribalism that is devoid of any kind of romantic illusions. The new mestiza is a liminal subject who lives in the borderlands between cultures, races, languages and genders. In this state of in-betweeness the mestiza can mediate, translate, negotiate and navigate these different locations. (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.209)

Developed from Anzaldúa's theoretical intersectional considerations of mestiza consciousness, *Borderlands* uses personal, spiritual, historical narratives to inscribe cultural awareness and holistic ways of co-existing with the natural world and its inhabitants. No doubt influenced by her part in the eco-feminist movement as well as her own experiences of rurality, Anzaldúa uses the concept and landscape of the border to represent transformation, synergy and (indigenous) spirituality. Whilst the new mestiza exists in specific geographical places that are named and mapped – in the case of *Borderlands/La Frontera* the border between Texas and Mexico – the new mestiza also “inhabit multiple worlds because of their gender, sexuality, color, class, body, personality, spiritual beliefs and/or other life experiences.” (Keating, 2009, p.10). Of central importance in my approach to this thesis is biomythography's navigation of ‘multiple worlds’ and identities, the merging of literary modalities that could be seen to mirror Anzaldúa's own theoretical framing of her work, as described by Keating:

Anzaldúa herself describes this text as “autohistoria-teoria,” a term she coined to describe women of color interventions into and transformations of traditional western autobiographical forms. Autohistoria-teoria includes both life story and self reflection on this story. Writers of Autohistoria-teoria blend

their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth and other forms of theorizing. By doing so, they create interwoven individual and collective identities. (Keating, 2009, P.9)

In naming her text an “Autohistoria- teoria” (or story of the self and self-knowledge practices) and dismantling “traditional western autobiographical forms” Anzaldúa goes some way toward conceptualising aspects of biomythography, particularly in her observation of the “interwoven individual and collective identities” it often contains. I would argue, however, that in Keating’s interpretation of Autohistoria- teoria the wider contextual genre, tradition and movement that is part of biomythography – is lost. Anzaldúa herself, observed the ways that her work had been appropriated and her theoretical ideas adopted without acknowledgement within ascendant scholarship and thought in the late twentieth century. As Anzaldúa decided to disidentify herself with specific terms that had been imposed on her in order to develop other formations of being, she became more and more frustrated with the co-option of her work and, in particular, of the appropriation from within the Queer Theory ‘establishment’. This served to disenfranchise her further from a sense of literary belonging:

They control the production of queer knowledge [...] Higher up in the hierarchy of gay politics and gay aesthetics, they most readily get their work published and disseminated...They appropriate our experiences and even our lives and “write us up”. They occupy theorizing space, and though their theories aim to enable and emancipate, they often disempower and neo-colonize. (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.165)

What Keating, from the vantage point of a literary scholar, misses out in describing Autohistoria-teoria is the importance of the socio-political placing of Anzaldúa's work, which we are often only able to fully gauge retrospectively. Anzaldúa's writing is influenced and spiritually emboldened by the collective experiences of generations of women of colour, of ancestral matriarchs and goddesses whose voices and narratives have often been negated. This differentiation, whilst respecting Anzaldúa's own definition of her work, is critical to placing *Borderlands* within the tradition and genre of biomythography – which both anchors the theoretical and innovative dimensions of the work but also gives it a fuller context, creating a platform of textual authority to reposition the full importance of Anzaldúa's entire body of work, as well as *Borderlands/La Frontera*, alongside that of her peers.

Where I fully agree with Keating is in her analysis of the significance of Anzaldúa's work in a tradition and movement of collective mergence, enshrining its place in the symbiotic development of theoretical and social transformation that serves to represent the unrepresented in literature. Anzaldúa created new worlds through her writing, progressing the very futurity that Muñoz refers to in *Queer Utopias*; but these worlds, like those of Lorde, Parker, Nestle, Allison, Hucklenbroich, and Feinberg, are the continued narratives of generations of her ancestors, women she may not have known but to whom she is spiritually and politically connected. This is the contribution of biomythography as a literary tradition that strives to drive forward liberatory struggle and transformational change as much as it does the power of storytelling and narrative making. The reason why I argue so fervently that biomythography must be recognised as a tradition, genre and movement is suggestively touched upon by

Keating in the close of her Introduction to the *Reader* when discussing the meaning of Anzaldúa's work:

She did not believe that any particular person or group- not Chicana, not queers, not women, not tejanas, not mexicanas, not personal friends or colleagues – had an exclusive superior, insider perspective into her theories and her writings. Anzaldúa's *inclusionary vision*, coupled with her ability to create expansive new categories and interconnections, makes her work vital to contemporary social actors, thinkers and scholars. (Keating, 2009, p.12 -italics my own)

As I shall pose again in my concluding chapter, biomythography is a revolutionary literary form, and one informed by such an 'inclusionary vision'. The lack of recognition afforded my selected writers can be seen as both an indicator and condition of biomythography as a sublimated genre and tradition. As I next turn the lens back on the work of Audre Lorde, who coined the term biomythography, I will reconsider the key principles and markers of the biomythographical text and the widespread influence this work has had politically, socially, intellectually, and culturally. I will also argue for a re-evaluation of this work as being part of not only a distinct politicised movement but also a set of experiments in narrative, theory, and style or mode, often borne from diverse radical collectivist and activist roots.

In the next chapter I will explore Audre Lorde's poetry collection *Between Our Selves* (1976), firstly examining its publication history and then its connection to a mythological language of feeling and affectivity, informed as it is by trauma, in a poetic form. In comparing

such seemingly disparate work throughout this thesis, I attempt to demonstrate the concurrent underpinnings, themes and modes that can be observed in all biomythographical texts. This includes the ways in which the use of language is creatively mythologised. In Lorde's often underappreciated collection *Between Our Selves*, we can observe in language, and in the mythologisation of life stories, the development of an identifiable biomythographical discourse. This speaks to my sense of biomythography as blurring and re-delineating the concepts (or ideologies) of truth, authenticity, and history. Audre Lorde, like other biomythographical writers destabilises memory, internalised understandings, and representations of the self (particularly within the collective) by questioning the ways that (past) identities are formed and constructed as she offers the reader a multitude of voices and 'versions' of any one story.

CHAPTER 7: AUDRE LORDE

The Transformation of Silence into Action

In this final chapter I will befittingly close my exploration of biomythography with the poetry of Audre Lorde. References to Lorde and her work have been threaded throughout my thesis and in this final chapter I aim to reiterate her considerable influence and role in biomythography more fully.

As discussed in my thesis Introduction, the publication of *The Black Unicorn* (1978) can be seen to signify the beginning of the biomythographical era. The collection introduces Lorde's new direction of literary travel in its thematic scope and range, its dialogical voice, and its inter-referentiality, pre-empting her full length biomythographical narrative *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Published to wide acclaim, *The Black Unicorn* is often cited as being Lorde's best received and most significant collection of poetry, marking a revolutionary and staunchly Black feminist shift in her work; one that voiced political dissidence and affected an experimental mythical edge.³⁴⁷ *The Black Unicorn*, is therefore often viewed as a cohesive stand-alone collection of poetry, but it was in fact anticipated by Lorde's short-run poetry collection *Between Our Selves* (1976). Despite its limited copies, and eventual absorption into the *The Black Unicorn*, I consider *Between Our Selves* to be amongst Lorde's most important and revolutionary work as it courses her critical transition through the "desert where I am lost/without imagery or magic/trying to make power

³⁴⁷ Lorde received much praise and many positive reviews for this collection, including attention from establishment journals alongside feminist journals. Lorde, A. (1977). The Black Unicorn. *The American Poetry Review*, 6(6), pp. 35–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27775769>.

out of hatred and destruction” (Lorde, 1997, p.215, “Power”). An often-overlooked poetry collection in Lorde’s oeuvre, *Between Our Selves* (1976) signals her spiritual, political, and personal calling to biomythography.

The Borderlands of Biomythography

To ground this chapter and Lorde’s poetry collection *Between Our Selves* within a wider biomythographical framework I wish to first analyse the inter-relationship to be found in Anzaldúa and Lorde’s work in reference to their occupation of a third or ‘borderland’ space in post-colonial narrative making. As established in my previous chapter, *Borderlands/La Frontera* merges the poetic and symbolic with the rolling narrative of a lesbian or queer spiritual biography and, in another mode, as gestured to, this can also be seen in *Between Our Selves* (and *The Black Unicorn*). Such texts reminisce and recall the authors’ own spiritual journeys in the present tense, weaving together an excavated mystical femininity that is neither fixed nor rooted in any institutional or religious frame of reference. Rather these texts elaborate mythologies that centralise female deities and the spiritual maternal (Chinosole).³⁴⁸ While Anzaldúa and Lorde were both brought up in religious (Christian/Catholic) households and within a discourse of both patriarchal colonialism, they recognised that racism fuelled the often violent programmes of assimilation that their parents had to adopt in order to survive. Their writing is imprinted with the complexity of their direct experiences as Black women/women of colour,

³⁴⁸ In my MA by Research, which focused on Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, I examined the role of what Chinosole determined to be the ‘mythical maternal’ in Lorde’s work in detail, identifying the way that she de-personalised and mythologically re-imagined her maternal ancestry through interwoven narratives that described both her familial and intimate/sexual relationships.

whose culture has been both repressed and appropriated and whose near ancestors lived as colonised and enslaved people (physically and spiritually).

Anzaldúa and Lorde both narrate (and curate) their own mythological narratives, offering a polyvocal reconfiguration of biographical language, form, and style. They see the spiritual as an innate part of their biographical journey, and something that is, or can be, experienced by other lesbian Black/women of colour, through the continuation of a literary tradition. Neither writer separates their political feminism from the emotional and spiritual evolvment of their biomythographical worlds. Although these worlds are often imbued with a spiritual mysticism or “magicorealism”, these are never entirely imagined and have a critical relationality with the matriarchal or maternally centred experiences of their foremothers.³⁴⁹ Where Lorde focuses on the ‘lesbian maternal’ as an urban woman seeking ancestral land and mythologies, Anzaldúa instead honours the spiritual maternal that is infused with animalistic renderings of the rural landscape in which she was raised.

Both Anzaldúa and Lorde sharpen key biomythographical components from the framework I offered in my Introduction, by interlacing material, spiritual and subjective dimensions to reject internal/external dichotomies between their inner and material worlds. There is an obvious blending of these modes through their playful use and manipulation of typographical markers. Whereas other

³⁴⁹ Like Parker, Lorde was also considered to have tapped into folkloric archetypes, but for Lorde this was seen to be more related to the matriarchal in her prose and *Zami*. Provost, K., & Lorde, A. (1995). “Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde”. *MELUS*, 20(4), pp.45–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467889>.

biomythographers may use or refer to the visual in their work (such as Allison's use of photographs and Nestle's use of the archive) Anzaldúa and Lorde consistently use typography, particularly the layout of their words on the page, to make their biomythographical markers.³⁵⁰

Lorde's poetry is strengthened by her inner struggles with her own power, sense of self (ego) and sexuality, whereas Anzaldúa's writing is spiritually galvanised by a belief in transformation and transcendence. In "A Woman Speaks" Lorde struggles in the face of her "errors". Here "pride" and "scorn" are racialised and deemed to be "treacherous with old magic" yet her words will still in humility be known, even where they appear to be unwritten for "when the sea turns back/it will leave my shape behind." (Lorde, 1997, p.234).³⁵¹

Lorde and Anzaldúa write about experiences that reflect the postcolonial discourse of the subaltern but do so through their own lens of experience where the mystical and spiritual is always located in an historical axis, their work keeping a political and instructive value.³⁵² Lorde embodies the colonial legacy of slavery and its intersections with patriarchal oppression in *Between Our Selves* along with multiple figurative and spiritual representations of matriarchal power, desire, and sexuality. Meanwhile Anzaldúa's borderlands are transitional spaces for individuals and a place of ancestral energy where the limits

³⁵⁰ Typographical markers include the use of capitalisation, line breaks, text differentiation (use of bold/indented text). It is used through their work, particularly their use of word layout in poetry to signify everything from emotional disruption to topographical features. An example being Anzaldúa's layout of the lines of her poem so that they visually outline the Texan/Mexican border in "The Homeland, Aztlán: El Otro Mexico" (*Borderlands/La Frontera*).

³⁵¹ "A Woman Speaks" appears in Lorde's 1978 collection *The Black Unicorn*.

³⁵² Hazel Carby and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak both consider the Black female body to have been "colonised by white male power and practices," relating "economic/political power and economic/sexual power." (Carby, 1987, pp.143-4).

to creative potential are unknown. But for both writers, the figurative embodiment and the geopolitical siting of transition, desire and power are often sparked from the ashes of colonialist genocide and oppression. These sites of transition and power reclaim a third space and a borderland, that is timeless and yet specific, and evidenced by the survival of the oppressed.³⁵³

Borderlands/La Frontera also presents intersecting geopolitical sites of struggle, contestation, and transformation, inhabiting a juncture where:

it is hard to maintain a fine balance between cultural ethnicity and the continuing survival of the culture, between traditional culture and the evolving hybrid culture. How much must remain the same, how much must change. (Anzaldúa in Keating, 2009, p.115).

Representing a metaphorical space for multiple spiritual visions and transformations as well as political struggles, the border is a suggestive hinterland where magical exchanges can take place. Yet it is also importantly a site of evolution, of creative discovery- it presents

³⁵³ In her study of Lorde, Margaret Morris considers the representation of the self (a focus on identity) in her work, calling on Braidotti, Morris queries the fixidity of any embodied self at the intersection of the physical and the symbolic (or I would say mythical). This is driven by Lorde's need to embrace her entirety to 'fuel' her resistance. "Lorde's vision of a wholeness beyond the destructive effects of oppression fuels her resistance to racism and other forms of oppression." (Morris, 2002, p. 170):

Morris, M. K. (2002). "Audre Lorde: Textual Authority and the Embodied Self". *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 23(1), pp.168–188. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3347282>.

a biomythographical homeland, a place of futurity and the imagination, as Lorde notes in the inscription (or prologue) to *Between Our Selves* which is taken from her poem “School Note”:

for the embattled
there is no place
that cannot be
home
nor is
(Lorde, 1997,213)

Places of Possibility: The Language of Feeling

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. (Lorde, 1996, p.95)

In *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (2004), Alexis De Veaux clearly demarcates Lorde’s life into two parts; pre and post the mid 1970s with 1978 being a major transition or time of change in the development of her work. I would also suggest that *Between Our Selves*, completed in 1976, two years before her diagnosis of breast cancer and her departure from her partner Frances Clayton, likewise reflects Lorde’s transformation poetically and spiritually – toward a new consciousness. Significantly, despite Lorde’s new-found confidence and belief in herself as a poet, this shift in artistic direction could be seen as a moment of exposure and vulnerability for Lorde who was already well established as a poet and had a literary agent and future designs on finding a permanent major publishing house for her poetry. When Lorde decided to publish *Between Our Selves* with her lifelong

friend and fellow poet Diane Di Prima, whose alternative press Eidolon Editions, had just received an Endowment for the Arts award, she was aiming the collection at an audience familiar with her work, with whom she could be more intimate and experimental.³⁵⁴ Lorde's personal, creative and material circumstances throughout the process of writing and publishing *Between Our Selves*, exemplify how biomythography was a conscious literary movement, occurring within a specific socio-cultural context, although yet to be fully defined.

In the original pressing of *Between Our Selves* Lorde used her own drawing of two intersecting crocodiles as a frontispiece. In her biography of Lorde, De Veaux notes that she chose an "Asante adinkra symbol she had discovered in Ghana. The proverb translated 'they can share one stomach yet they fight for food.'" (De Veaux, 2004, p.158) De Veaux poses that Lorde's volume of poetry marks her "spiritual transformation in Africa" with the connection between "living and ancestral worlds", this new spiritualism infusing her poems (De Veaux, 2004, p.158). This connectivity between 'ancient' homelands and female spiritual ancestors in Lorde's work (themes also familiar to Anzaldúa's work) tackles U.S. cultural imperialism and its attempted eradication of African female mythologies and heritage. Although the geographical frame of reference may seem a departure from Lorde's existing work in a U.S. context, the theme of belonging and finding a spiritual home is to be found throughout biomythographical texts, whether this be in lesbian bars or the arms of another woman.

³⁵⁴ The late Diane Di Prima was a childhood friend of Lorde whose work was notoriously leftfield and experimental, and who was more involved or associated with the avant-garde Beat scene than Lorde was.

Between Our Selves, on many levels, also represents a conscious shift in the explicitly political and socio-cultural dimension of Lorde's poetry and its further incorporation of metaphorical and allegorical modes. The collection anticipates her later move to her ancestral homeland and eventual settlement with Gloria I. Joseph in St. Croix in the Caribbean Sea. *Between Our Selves* can be seen to bear a closer relation to Lorde's political essays and their recurrent themes of political and social injustice that are most notably distilled in Lorde's essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" (originally published in the feminist journal *Chrysalis* in 1977), than to her previous poetry collections.

The seven poems that populate *Between Our Selves* echo with the same themes found in "Poetry is Not a Luxury"; those of the complexities of personal and political power and the creativity or destruction it can harness, connections to ancestral consciousness where creativity and a dream state reside, Black female identity and intergenerational trauma. Lorde evokes a place where, "power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient and it is deep." (Lorde, 1996, p.95) Known for its examination of the power of poetry and writing, "Poetry is Not a Luxury" also names the ambivalence she believes to be ever present in politicised literature, an ambivalence that often parallels the social and political realities of the marginalised writer.

By the late twentieth century the clichéd literary sovereignty (and indeed mythology) of the writer/poet as a lone (often white male) who was usually a troubled genius was disintegrating under the weight of socio-political pressures and progressive cultural change. As a Black feminist lesbian poet in the mid 1970s, who had attained a mainstream publisher (W.W. Norton), there were many risks for Lorde

in publicly embracing a politically charged agenda that sought to advance radical social change. *Between Our Selves* sees a seismic transference of direction in Lorde's work – away from the familiarity of her former poetic style which can be found in her previous collection *Coal* (1976). *Between Our Selves* brings Lorde's poetry into closer political alignment with Pat Parker (whom she was clearly influenced by), moving away from the dominant poetic traditions of the time toward a more personal, identity oriented and politically feminist biomythographical output. Whilst this approach may seem familiar to present day audiences, in the mid 1970s, radically political poetry that centralised the experiential in relation to intersecting identities (particularly race, sexuality and gender) was often seen to be both dissident and impoverished.

The experiential focus, intergenerational components and the genre rupture *Between Our Selves* presented in the world of poetry, mirrors aspects of Dorothy Allison's performance-based text *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*. Lorde's preoccupations with gender-based violence, death and the deliberate erasure of her heritage parallel that of Allison and coincide with Allison's departure from a more traditional prose narrative form to one that included performative elements, photography, and theatrical references. Like Lorde's poetic work, Allison's texts employ the language of 'feeling' to performatively 'queer' or disrupt a language that innately excludes them as Black or working-class lesbian women. This language of feeling sees both writers choose biomythography as a genre of creative experimentation to leverage lasting radical social and political change within a late twentieth century literary landscape of absence.

Between Our Selves may be a chap book of just 22 pages, but it carves a powerful symbolic space for Lorde's voice as both speaker and author. In representing political and social concerns in tandem with offering biographically informed experiential poetry, Lorde addresses destructive binaries. These include that of the political and social self, the poetic and rhetorical self, revealing how each of her identities is so often split and compartmentalised within discriminatory structures. In addressing 'Our Selves' Lorde is reflexively naming multiple selves that are determined at three levels; the biographical self, the imagined interlocutor, and the reader/audience.

This creates a sense of multiple positionings and declarations that might serve a protective function; that is, to protect the speaker from the 'dangers' of a restrictive biographical mode and the categories of the canon, which "mak[e] most lesbians invisible or by making a few too visible, objectified and lonely." Lorde writes, "I must protect myself against that" (quoted by Calvin in Hall, 2004, p. 108). Instead, *Between Our Selves* gives voice to Black African feminine deities and mythologies that have been absent from poetry, staging a dialogue between absent diasporic generations of women whose voices have been erased from literature. Lorde charts her matriarchal ancestors through a spiritual dialogue that visualises (and lyrically recovers) their lives from intergenerational violence and harm.

Published by Eidolon Press, just after the success of Lorde's poetry collection *Coal* (which was published by mainstream publishers W.W. Norton) with an original run of just 1100 hand printed volumes, *Between Our Selves* can be seen as a statement of poetic intent focused on a politicised lesbian audience. Lorde's return to an independent feminist publisher (and limited printing run), can be interpreted as

her creative desire to hone her work in this transitional phase of her literary development and to do so in a more intimate way. As discussed, *Between Our Selves* merged Lorde's poetic aesthetic and political ethos, more directly marking a segue way between her feminist activism and literary output; the personal and the political. *Between Our Selves* (and later *The Black Unicorn*), references female African deities and goddesses, nudging toward a feminist Pan-Africanist political stance, but she does so by incorporating representations of her personal identity, often through a theoretical lens. Throughout the collection the reader is startled by Lorde's sharp dialectic and the wavering tonal differences that often range from expansive and authoritative (as in "Power" and "A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children") to esoteric and introverted, connecting abstract personal experiences with a symbolic universalism:

Humility lies
in the face of history
and I have forgiven myself
for him
for the white meat
we all consumed in secret
(Lorde, 1997, p.224 "Between Our Selves")

For an audience who may have been unfamiliar with Lorde's use of African mythology and symbolism at the time that *Between Our Selves* was published, she uses the experiential to connect with the reader and to bridge this gap; "This is a simple poem/For the mothers sisters daughters" (Lorde, 1997, p.220 "Scar"). In Lorde's work, no matter the mythological, symbolic, or metaphorical elements of her poetry, she makes sure that there is a constant recourse to, and anchoring in, the

lived material realities of (her) existence. Textually grounding the experiential is a biomythographical literary tool and Lorde's poems serve as a warning for the reader to always be aware of the difference between the poetry and rhetoric she cites in her poem "Power".

Lorde's literary turn or development can be viewed through the lens of what Bonnie Zimmerman has identified as the fourth stage of lesbian literature in her study of lesbian women's writing of the late twentieth century. By drawing on the work of Barbara Smith, Susan J. Wolfe, and Elaine Showalter, Zimmerman attempts to define this fourth stage of lesbian literature as helping to "shape a lesbian consciousness, community, and culture from the movement's beginning" (Zimmerman, 1990, p.2). Looking back from our present context, Zimmerman's work is neglectful of a wider anti-racist structural analysis, but she does still consider the obvious disconnect between the content and subject matter of lesbian literature from mainstream literature, as a potential site for political, social and cultural transformation. Zimmerman surmises that, "Since lesbianism is a disruptive, experimental lifestyle, the argument runs, lesbian writing ought to be radically transformative" (Zimmerman, 1990, p.16). Zimmerman identifies that contrary to the diminishment of women's writing as being outside of the canon and "naïve and unsatisfying in both form and content" (Zimmerman, 1990, p.17), that it has in fact heralded experimental enquiries and styles. It has also included genres that "reject conventional language" and employ "postmodernist techniques (such as self-referentiality, unconventional plot structure, an unstable chronology and narrative voice) to disrupt the illusion that the goings-on in the text simply mirror 'real life'" (Zimmerman, 1990, p.16).

In both its subject matter and publication format, *Between Our Selves* can be viewed as a ‘rupture’ in the rhythm of Lorde’s work as well as being radically transformative in its literary and cultural impact. The intimacy and selfhood of Lorde’s poetic style merges with a disturbing backdrop of intergenerational trauma, structural oppression, and racialised violence. *Between Our Selves* becomes an act of transgression, exemplifying the “experimental” and political elements of lesbian writing that rejects “conventional language” to which Zimmerman refers. As Lorde reiterates in *Sister Outsider* it is a language of feeling:

This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. (Lorde, 1996, p.95).

The Power of Poetry and Rhetoric

The struggle for social justice is explicitly framed in *Between Our Selves* within a hetero-patriarchal context, one that is both racialised and specifically gendered in its references throughout the collection to female reproduction and the caretaking of children. There is also an uncertain struggle within the text itself, posing a vulnerability for the poet who alone feels powerless to change the reality of racialised bloodshed, of the centuries of violence against women, of colonisation and genocide. As observed by Lorde, this is where the material circumstances of women’s power and their political sway are structurally subjugated, rather than enhanced, by intersecting identities. While biomythographers are not monolithic in their world views and politics, nor their chosen forms and representation of female subjectivities, like Lorde, they work to

question the reader's understanding of truth (as mythology) and search for new modes of addressing and voicing histories of the marginalised.

Between Our Selves explores the act of poetry making as a powerful force, an act of defense against the violence and tyranny of white supremacy, imperialism, and patriarchy. Both the writer and the reader, within the changing dynamics of social, historical, and political arenas, can sense their own power and powerlessness under the weight of external discourse.³⁵⁵ In her opening poem of the collection, "Power", Lorde outlines that the making of poetry and art comes with a heavy political responsibility; that there is a difference between words written for effect and those written with authentic intent:

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children
(Lorde, 1997, p.215)

Here Lorde is articulating the vulnerability of exposing her political self within a creative/artistic space in an act that could dismantle the security of her identity as a poet. Such vulnerability is at the core of this collection, as she balances the responsibilities of being a poet and an activist and the dangers this presents to her as an individual, a

³⁵⁵ In her essay "Identity politics revisited: On Audre Lorde, intersectionality, and mobilizing writing styles" Kaisa Ilmonen makes reference to Lorde's belief in the political potential of what would become known as "identity politics" and Black feminism's confidence in the political usefulness of intersectionality. Both concepts still play a role in the cultural and political challenges of contemporary times. Ilmonen K. (2019). "Identity politics revisited: On Audre Lorde, intersectionality, and mobilizing writing styles." *The European journal of women's studies*, 26, pp. 7–22.

mother and a citizen. In actively resisting violence, in defending herself, what is the individual expected to sacrifice? Is she to sacrifice her own life, her art, her principles, or the life of her children?

In “Power” Lorde openly struggles with the tension between art and activism; that is, creativity that erodes the demarcation of imaginary and social realities. The position of the artist, who can no longer refute their responsibility to speak truth to power is exposed. At the same time, the creative world may parallel the socio-political landscape; for Lorde this is a world without the necessary structured support for Black communities where the subject is “without imagery or magic/ trying to make power out of the hatred and destruction” (Lorde, 1997, p.215). As a collection *Between Our Selves* is Lorde’s nuanced rendition of a public discourse, as the title indicates, addressed to her own community, to other Black feminists and lesbians. It constitutes a protest against the onslaught of societal and institutional racism and the enslavement and genocide of Black people. The poetic speaker feels limited in her ability to resolve the task at hand, as she says in “Power”:

trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker
(Lorde, 1997, p.215)

Using images of scarcity – the desert, the last moments of breath, “dry lips” and thirst – “Power” contrasts this sense of personal inadequacy with a brutality that is often reflected in Lorde’s depiction of an

unforgiving and relentlessly harsh atavistic environment.³⁵⁶ In focusing on racism and social injustice, intersectional oppressions that are often normalised and corroborated by the language of the state, “Power” explores the state’s part in murdering a ten-year-old Black boy who is killed by a white police officer, who is then set free by a majoritively white jury. The institutional and structural violence of this act is not halted by the inclusion of one Black woman juror as she is “dragged”, “her 4’10” Black Woman’s frame/over the hot coals/of four centuries of male approval” (Lorde, 1997, p.216). Lorde uses the coercion and silencing of the Black female juror to represent a systemic abuse of power, an attitude she believes is deeply embedded in the national psyche and “four centuries of white male approval” (Lorde, 1997, p.2016). To Lorde, this injustice is one of many patriarchal displays of violence that are often perpetrated at the intersections of racism and misogyny. The recognition and documentation of such violations become inseparable from the work of a Black feminist poet, who must resist having her words and politics co-opted:

But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
(Lorde, 1997, p.216)

As *Between Our Selves* unfolds, the thematic trajectory of the poems becomes more explicit; as one of Lorde’s most forceful collections of poems, it tonally plays with the extremity and violence that Black women and children are subject to. “School Note”, which comes after

³⁵⁶ In “Outside” from the *Between Our Selves* collection, Lorde defines this as like being “In the center of a harsh and spectrumed city/all things are natural and strange” (Lorde, 1997, p.226).

“Power”, echoes its use of children to represent a sense of vulnerability amidst an environmental nihilism in which the speaker’s children “play with skulls”. Lorde repeats this phrase in the opening line of each stanza, the reference to “*My children*” enunciating an ethical principle and collective responsibility for the guardianship and protection of Black children’s wellbeing:

My children play with skulls
for their classrooms
are guarded by warlocks
(Lorde, 1997, p.217)

Here the warlocks are masters of the state, an omnipresent extension of the institutional racism encountered in “Power”, all pervasive, they shadow even a child’s right to play and education. Rescinding the potential collapse of her resistance, the speaker of the poem improvises an imaginary defence using the power of her words as she has no other weapons. “Embattling” against the amnesia of history, she believes she can find a place of belonging even if it is temporary. In “School Note” she goes on to deploy a double negative “cannot be/nor is” to best describe the insecure liminality of the speaker’s location as a person of multiple identities in a threatening environment:

My children play with skulls
and remember
for the embattled
there is no place
that cannot be
home
nor is.

(Lorde, 1997, p.217)

Lorde reckons with the position of a people torn from their indigenous homeland their children subject to an educational “holocaust” and the ignorant racism and discrimination that makes schoolyards equivalent to “graveyards”. Still Lorde’s poem is a testimony to her faith in education as a potential force of social change, where the “embattled” and aware can reclaim their home, societal place, and agency for “there is no place/that cannot be/home”. The speaker brings in a magical but threatening chorus of external voices such as the “warlocks” “who scream at the walls collapsing”. The repeated image and symbol of the word “skulls” in the opening line of every stanza represent a lost ancestor, the skull has no way in and of itself to make memories, but is instead, without flesh, a symbol of death which is all living beings’ fate.

The notion of collective guardianship as resistance in an environment devoid of morality or ethics, is countered in “Solstice” by an unearthing of the imperialist root causes of a community’s abandonment of its ancestral knowledge:

We forget to water the plantain shoots
when our houses were full of borrowed meat
and our stomachs with the gift of strangers
(Lorde, 1997, p.218)

Lorde invokes traditional forms of sustenance; the imposition of non-indigenous protein sources and “borrowed meat” represents the destruction of farmland and communities, the displacement of the native “plantain shoots” (which reference her African-Caribbean

heritage). This metaphor of a colonised and dying natural landscape represents the loss of Black communities who have been “vacated by the spirits” (Lorde, 1997, p.218) of ancestral wisdom and knowledge:

because our land is barren
the farms are choked
with stunted rows of straw
(Lorde, 1997, p.218)

The exploited land and subsequent ecocide connect with Lorde’s analysis of cultural imperialism as she associates the barren land that lacks fecundity with the intellectual impoverishment of its people. The lack of a fertile space for her community and multiple selves is tied into a deficit of creative nurturance which can like the “barren” land leave an emotional and physical void of emptiness:

Our skins are empty
They have been vacated by the spirits
who are angered by our reluctance
to feed them
(Lorde, 1997, p.218)

In “Between Ourselves” the void left in “Solstice” becomes a murderous self-hate, leaving only empty shells of people, without meaning, and individuals without community. This abandonment of, or deliberate excision from, ancestral knowledge and spirituality in “Solstice” leads to racialised people’s disconnection from one another, and an inability to sustain themselves or be sustained by their community. The subject of her poem “Between Ourselves” (which unlike the collection’s title, notably conjoins “our” and “selves” into one

word) is frustrated by a lack of collective Black resistance, of a patriarchal betrayal that leads to a fragmentation solidarity and communality, as well as safety and wellbeing:

Once when I walked into a room
my eyes would see only one or two black faces
for contact or reassurance or a sign
I was not alone
now walking into a room full of blackness
that would destroy me for any difference
where shall my eyes look?
Once it was easy to know
who were my people.
(Lorde, 1997, p.223)

The “reassurance”, the “sign” of solidarity, has shifted; indeed, the speaker intimates the way that her intersecting differences as a Black lesbian will significantly impact on the support she will receive from the Black community. This fragmentation of the self replicates a structural oppression that becomes internalised, and significantly impacts on the ability of communities to resist racism and the abandonment of each other in the face of such “betrayal” The speaker identifies, as Lorde does repeatedly throughout her work, that the destruction of matriarchal and maternal power in communities and cultural contexts, alongside imperialism and racism, undermines the individual, the family and ultimately the power of the collective to survive:

and whenever I try to eat
the words

of easy blackness as salvation
I taste the colour
Of my grandmother's first betrayal.
(Lorde, 1997, p.224)

Lorde's final poem in *Between Our Selves*, "Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children", employs an extended metaphor of children standing for creative expression and female creativity. Whilst an acknowledged artistic cliché, this image and association is one rarely used before by Black lesbian women in addressing their historical exclusion from the arts and being recognised as artists in their own right and from the means to share their creative work. "Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children" also points to the wasted potential of both ancestral and matriarchal stories that have never been told or shared between generations. Like Allison, Lorde equivocates women's literary or written storytelling with oral storytelling, both authors point to the enforced disconnect between these modalities being rooted in the exclusion of women's narratives from public discourse. Like Anzaldúa there is an implicit intersectionality in Lorde's work that is related through her biomythographical approach to integrating matriarchal mythologies and the language of ancestral spirituality.

In "Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children" Lorde extends the metaphor of creativity and birth into one of disruption and potential death. The rhythmic pulse of the phrase, "warred and whored and slaughtered" (mid poem), and its use of iambic rhythm could be seen to represent the earth's ever present heartbeat as it carries the weight of human destruction, ecocide, genocide and oppression. This could also be read as a matriarchal war cry, one that could be an expression of collective pain or a chant for survival:

Centuries of wasted children
warred and whored and slaughtered
anoint me guardian
for life.
(Lorde, 1997, p.228)

Here “warred and whored”, in the context of the full poem, draws equivalencies between forced sexual exploitation, violence, death and military conflict reminding the reader that gender-based violence and the control of women’s reproductive rights are both intrinsic tactics of war. The speaker acts as an omnipresent witness to this devastation, and in the role of poet/mother takes on the responsibility of “guardian/for life”. By using a spiritual or religious frame of reference (“anoint”) for this transferal of responsibility– the speaker is conferring divinity to this act. As the speaker goes on to mourn the loss of children to racism and male violence, she also makes reference to the creativity lost to centuries of patriarchal war, imperialism and colonisation. In “dragging its trail of wasted blood/onto the ground” and expediting her repeated efforts to address this she is “broken” and her quest can only be carried out in reaction to the bloodshed only able to “yield/one drop of blood/which I know instantly/is lost.” Although Lorde as speaker ambiguously refers to the action of wiping up blood as something that should be done by the perpetrators of these crimes, her articulation of this action is laced with frustration as she considers that the vengeful death of such perpetrators may be the only remedy to this violence and destruction:

I am bent
forever

wiping up blood
that should be
you.
(Lorde, 1997, p.229)

Between Our Selves in its multi-vocal poetic style, and its reference to bleak landscapes of violence from which hope springs forth, encapsulates many of the contradictory and polarising strands of the late 1970s U.S. feminist movement. As the speaker struggles with her multiple identities and sense of purpose in the face of oppression, she conveys a frustration at her inability to prevent both the metaphorical and the material death of her community/culture and (without recourse to socio-political powers) a reliance on vengeance to address racism, male violence, and the oppression of women's, particularly mothers' rights. These articulations are reminiscent of Pat Parker's formative poems that combine her personal experiences and observations of racism, lesbi-phobia and misogyny to represent wider specific institutional injustices from state violence to slavery and homicide. In its consideration of the relationality between generations of women across ancestral and transnational boundaries who experience similar forms of oppression and harm – *Between Our Selves* brings together core biomythographical themes and exemplifies the urgency and drive that informs the radical and transformational elements of this movement.

Reclaiming the Language of Transformation

Between Our Selves serves as the catalyst, or in keeping with the thesis metaphor used so far, serves as the creative visionary *bridge* between Lorde's poetry collections *Coal* and *The Black Unicorn*

charting a transformational change in Lorde's poetry over a two year period. In briefly turning to *The Black Unicorn* and Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", we can further probe the notion of biomythographical 'truth' telling and ask who holds this power to tell such truths that need to be told and who remains afraid and silenced? Lorde has purposively inserted each poem from *Between Our Selves* at specific intervals into *The Black Unicorn*, using these poems to rhetorically speak to the fears that the latter collection raises. Lorde opens *The Black Unicorn* with a poem of the same name stating that she is "restless" and "impatient" to escape from the shackles of being "not free". This involves a re-examination of the symmetries and tensions between action and words or rhetoric, truth and fear or silence. The speaker has undergone a transformation, she is ready to reveal her unharnessed and undisciplined power and potential:

The black unicorn is greedy
The black unicorn is impatient
The black unicorn *was* mistaken
(Lorde, 1997, p.233, italics mine)

Lorde's Afrocentric reimagining of matriarchal ancestry in *The Black Unicorn* partially rewrites a mythological and imaginary herstory to bring attention to these (often historical) symmetries and to bridge these tensions. Her reference to the mythological Orisha gods and goddesses of Western Nigeria, the mother and goddess of the seas Yemanjá, the spritely trickster Eshu and the courageous and highly skilled Amazonian women warriors of Dahomey establishes a greater credence to her mythmaking. By embedding maternal divinities and

African mythological beings with the power to spiritually act in the contemporary world in her poetry, she is able to articulate the transformation of pain, fear and suffering into the righteous anger of resistance in the face of injustice.

Published the same year as Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", her poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* frames and references these personal and universal fears including those of death, silence, and erasure. In her poem from the collection, "A Litany for Survival", as she stands on the "shoreline" of what she determines to be the "constant edges of decision" (Lorde, 1997, p.255)", her answer to how she should respond to fear echoes into a void of silence; one that is "crucial and alone". The sharp, purposeful, and often forceful language in *The Black Unicorn* acts as a reminder of her own strength and determination as she falters at the edges of fear. This collection fittingly ends with "Solace" (taken from *Between Our Selves*) in which the speaker and Lorde have both learned and through an exploration of matriarchal ancestry and mythology, that from the depths of fear creativity, resistance and freedoms are realised:

may I never lose
that terror
that keeps me brave
May I owe nothing
that I cannot repay.
(Lorde, 1997, p.329)

In Lorde's speech and essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", first published in the feminist journal *Sinister*

Wisdom in 1978 and later published as part of *The Cancer Journals* (1980), she speaks with a sense of literary urgency spurred on by her own sense of mortality. Lorde opens the text with a plea to her audience: ³⁵⁷

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood.
(Lorde in Byrd, Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.39)

In “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, Lorde binds fear with silence, giving us an insight into why the biomythographers I have discussed risked their livelihoods, relationships, and safety (which often led to their social, literary and economic insecurity) in order to continue their journey as writers and archive their lives. Lorde succinctly describes the potential driver for this mission:

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.

(Lorde in Byrd, Cole, Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.42)

For Lorde the fear of silence, rather than that of contradiction or fallibility, is a primary concern when she is confronted with serious

³⁵⁷ As cited, a version of this paper was originally delivered at the Modern Language Association’s Lesbian and Literature panel in Chicago, Illinois in December 1977.

illness. Here, the sleights of a literary world are contextualised and the marginalisation of Black lesbian women mitigated by the greater need to speak. This drives her to ask, “Of what have I ever been afraid?” (Lorde in Byrd, Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.39). It is not that Lorde is no longer afraid of the consequences of expressing her authentic self (she confesses “of course I am afraid”) – but as she goes on to share, “the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.” (Lorde in Byrd, Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.40).

This sense of danger and the word ‘fear’ recur throughout “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, as Lorde struggles to find a way to mediate or level the threat of silence as an embodied risk. She identifies the cause to be both publicly and personally contained – that it is the fear of social alienation, exclusion, and a looming, sinister almost McCarthyite connection made between language and extinction, a “fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgement, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation.” (Lorde in Byrd, Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.41). She appears to be speaking to her biomythographical sisters when she proclaims “we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us.” (Lorde in Byrd, Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.42). Lorde’s literary influence and activism is equally and intimately connected with her sexuality; that is, with her identity as a lesbian woman who lives at the “edges” and social margins, the spaces that are demarcated by Anzaldúa’s conception of colonially shaped borderlands, or in Nestle’s terms the borders of sexual identity. As the speaker in her poem “A Litany for Survival” says, there is little option “for those of us

who cannot indulge/the passing dreams of choice/who love in doorways coming and going.” (Lorde, 1997, p.255).³⁵⁸

Throughout my thesis I have referred to my biomythographical framework and the ways in which each text relates to this framework. Arguably Audre Lorde’s pioneering work *Zami* is *the* touchstone biomythographical text and incorporates all nine elements of my framework, but I would suggest that likewise her poetry, from *Between Our Selves* onwards, also fits into this schema dialogically and can be seen to be acting as the structure for Lorde’s textual production of prose, essays, journal articles and speeches.

Reaching toward several conclusions in my thesis. I would suggest that the power of Lorde’s biomythographical language is multivalent and that the legacy of her work is imprinted in the biomythographical text as I define it. Her purposeful use of myth and the spiritual maternal becomes a way to reify and effectively communicate (and archive) transhistorical understandings of marginalised women’s lives, spiritual ancestry, and literary moorings . In the face of erasure, like other biomythographical writers that worked alongside her, she deftly uses language to re-envision parts of the historical master text in opposition to colonialism, gender-based violence, racism, and patriarchal coercion. The conscious resistance of silence and (re)insertion or placing of lesbian and marginalised people’s narratives within an historical context is one of the key objectives of my own thesis. As I observe in my thesis conclusion, biomythography was a transformational literary tool that enabled Black, minoritised,

³⁵⁸ Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany for Survival” is included in her 1978 aforementioned poetry collection *The Black Unicorn*.

and working-class lesbian writers to centre their experiences and mythologise their realities in order to articulate a set of truths that defied silence and fear.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the Legacy of Biomythography

“When We Are Alone We Are Afraid”³⁵⁹

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
for by this weapon
the illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hope to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive

(Audre Lorde, “Litany of Survival”)

This thesis has been a labour of both love and recovery. At the advent of this project my aim was to further develop some of the initial ideas and theories formulated in my 2016 MA by Research. This thesis now brings together almost a decade of study focused on biomythography. The socio-political shifts of the last few years have impacted on this work, and although the overall direction of the project has not changed, my understanding of the importance of the featured texts has.³⁶⁰ My argument remains that biomythography was in itself a literary movement, tradition and genre, one that – despite its lack of visibility

³⁵⁹ Taken from Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany of Survival,” published in 1978, as discussed in Chapter 7.

³⁶⁰ These socio-political shifts have included (in no particular order) Covid-19, global financial market crashes, the Black Lives Matter movement, a global rise in domestic violence, femicide, fundamentalism, military conflict, the #Me Too movement and the onslaught of right-wing populism amongst others.

– continues to influence literature, culture, theory, and social justice movements today.

The writers who shaped biomythographical literature were working predictively ahead of their time, they were forging spaces for a future generation of Black, minoritised, lesbian and working-class women to not only be listened to and read but for their narratives and their visions (utopian and otherwise) to ambitiously change how readers think about and recognise themselves in the social world. Sandwiched between the 1970s commitments of the Radical Feminist movement and post sexual revolution – as well as the soon-to-be political cynicism of a socially infused advanced capitalism which ushered the way into the free market neoliberalism of the 1990s – biomythography continues to politically mirror the world in which we are now living.

Although the biomythographical authors' literary legacy has oft been abstracted and appropriated, biomythographical collective cultures, networks and practices ensured that their work was given the space to develop and the material means to be published and distributed, not to mention the carving out of archives (both in-text and in material archives/libraries) for the work to be preserved and to live on. The biomythographers' control of the means of production has imparted a legacy for future feminist activism and sub-cultural movements to take root. As the U.S. battles with a new (and old) set of urgent social and political issues, particularly climate crisis, anti-Human Rights and pro-life legislation, racism and deeply embedded socio-economic inequalities and poverty, biomythography can be seen to be a reckoning, a consideration of *what could be* and an appropriate literary response to these dilemmas.

It is unlikely that any of the biomythographical authors I have discussed would have been able to exist and create independently or be remembered, if not for their involvement with and support from other lesbians, other women, other writers, other visionary radicals. Their collaboration and creative development within Black/lesbian/feminist collectivist contexts enabled a belief in the power of political transformation, and inextricably connected their work and their writing to their activism and survival struggles. While in my MA dissertation I focused on the struggle for the self, for the situated and subjective narrative 'I', particularly in memoir-related texts – this project has brought me nearer to an understanding that for the subjective 'I' to exist in biomythography there must always be a community, a collaboration of thought and voice, and that without it minoritised writers will be unable to make the art that needs to be made. In the face of the injustice, violence and discrimination still experienced by too many, even in (or especially in) the digital and hyper connected world in which we live, it is helpful to pause and consider how much we are able to achieve when we bring our words, ideas and energy together and work collectively to bring them to fruition.

In my thesis, I hope that I have captured the struggles that preoccupied my biomythographical writers uncompromisingly; such flaws and contradictions are to be found in any movement or any endeavor to achieve change, whether collective or individual, and I believe that they are something to be positively embraced in the trajectory of writers and artists. Primarily, I have sought to challenge the notion that biomythography, as an unrecognised genre, was an inconsequential or minor literary moment or vein. I believe that,

despite dismissal and co-option, the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa, Dorothy Allison, Leslie Feinberg, Frankie Hucklenbroich, Audre Lorde, Joan Nestle and Pat Parker continues to disrupt literary assumptions and inspire new generations of writers, activists, and thinkers to engage with their legacies. In this, the role of the archive perhaps demonstrates the ultimate act of the movement's resistance to literary deletion.

As expansive and diverse as my scope has been, I feel that this thesis has examined a set of ideas and texts that converge, overlap and on occasion have become modalities in themselves. I have used the metaphor of the bridge several times in relation to biomythographical work, putting forward the idea that biomythography took lesbian literature through a number of transitions that were social, historical and political. Indeed, I have posed that the innovation, invention, and experimentalism involved in the means of publication and the developing forms of biomythography enabled cultural transformation to take place. Through the naming of biomythography as a genre, tradition, and movement and the formulation of my nine biomythographical components, I have attempted to enact a form of scholarly resistance, a way to re-envision literary legacies as something we can review and revise. The title of this thesis, *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives*, speaks to the idea that there can be no biomythography, indeed no literature, without the represented, experiential, subjective self, *and* each other.

Throughout my thesis I have aimed to question the stability of genre and tradition. Where I had formerly considered the destabilisation of the subject, in a present time of such attack on women's, trans and non-gender conforming people's bodily autonomy I

feel it is more important than ever to consider the material (although non-essentialised) body in a political climate of dehumanisation and the erosion of the means for the collective to care for one another. A constant concern in biomythography is the life-saving significance of community, family, kin, and those we love. We cannot live without our lives or ourselves because our lives are intertwined with each other; the collective 'we' is one that must embrace and protect the individual T.

Collectivising Creativity

My thesis has used an intersectional and hybrid framework in its approach. Biomythography-making often involved improvisation and creative exchange, feeding into its intertextuality, notwithstanding its variety. By highlighting the theoretical, political, and philosophical underpinnings shared by the works, I have tried to restore biomythography's critical intent. However, a prior lack of critical attention led me in conceptualising my study to deploy a range of historical, theoretical, and intertextual approaches. Early in the writing of this thesis I realised the value of starting with a matrix of the theoretical and critical work of the biomythographical era itself; something that proved to challenge a range of assumptions and contemporary misunderstandings about the primary texts and authors, but also directed the destinations at which I have arrived.

Biomythography was created to be accessible and non-exclusionary. It allowed there to be fissures or contradictions within which the text was able to defy literary norms and expectations. At the time the texts were written it could be argued that they purposefully resisted categorisation, which may have contributed to the neglect of

their collectivist moorings. Through multiple discourses biomythography was able to express a range of positionalities: butch-femme (inclusive of what we now call trans-masculine identities), working-class, sex radical, Black, minoritised, migrant, queer and indigenous. These pluralities and the inventive means of their expression challenge staid cultural forms and discriminatory political values and structures. Although these present a number of challenges for the scholar, they also open up new spaces for the development of biomythographical epistemologies – I have only skimmed the surface of this as a potential area of research. For example, I hope that there will be future studies on biomythography and its interdisciplinary modalities such as photography, music, performance, and video art – and a further exploration of the role it played in critical theory and philosophical development both in and outside of the academy.

I still conclude that the lesbian working-class movement that brought biomythography into being has not been fully recognised and that often this tradition and genre has been decontextualised and devalued, never by its audience of readers, but by the very literary structures to which it could never fully belong nor conform. By affirming biomythography's place I have tried to emphasise the experimental and innovative aspects of the work and to highlight how some of its contributions have been assimilated into contemporary thinking without acknowledgement. I suggest too that this has often obscured biomythography's unique contribution to literature as a way of developing work as well as the groundbreaking works produced.

Reaching My Own Biomythographical Conclusion

In the Introduction to this thesis, I opened with a statement: that biomythography must be recognised as a critical genre, tradition, and movement – especially in relation to there being no wide-scale studies focused on this work and its context to date. I posited the transformational potential of the biomythographical text, in both historical and contemporary terms. I also sought to establish biomythography’s importance in shaping new sites of literary creativity and exploration, new theoretical connections, and new avenues of social, political, and cultural resistance.

I asked a number of critical questions in my Introduction that have structured my investigation into biomythography and the chosen texts. Initially I considered the lack of scholarship on the interconnective relationality of biomythographical texts and the development of what I, more strongly than ever, argue *to be* a genre, tradition, and movement. By exploring a wide range of literary texts, I have been able to compare their modes and dialogical fabric and look at how this spoke to and resonated with the direction of biomythography as a socio-politically oriented artistic movement. I formulated a nine-point framework, identifying key elements of biomythography, something which then helped with understanding shared aspects, themes, and forms of voicing, and how the texts are in dialogue with one another. This led to a further examination of the texts’ historical and intellectual context, including their publishing history and the struggles involved in feminist print culture as these directly impacted the work.

Thinking back to the questions and frames of my Introduction, we can further conclude: (1) that biomythography did much to advance and expand understandings of subjectivities, social identities and

gender expressions in ways that have not been recognised or acknowledged, this being in part due to a dismissal of both the focus on marginalised lesbian lives and texts perceived as belonging to a 'redundant' Second Wave feminism; (2) that a lack of biomythographical scholarship does not denote its insignificance, indeed in its pro-liberation stances and defiance of heteropatriarchal hegemonies, many of the works' radical inter-textual, anti-racist, lesbian-feminist, and working-class values were unable to fit into existent theoretical lenses and literary structures; and (3) in its experimental articulations, modes and forms, arising from the experiential, the spiritual, the material and the layering and mythologisation of life stories, we find the constitution of a unique genre, one reflective of a collectivist tradition and a particular literary period.

This group of biomythographers through invention, application, collectivisation and determination narrated at the intersections of identity and from the margins of society. In the struggle to support the voices of lesbians minoritised along race, sexuality, and class lines they created a genre, tradition, and movement, and an archive to care for and restore these narratives. In doing so they recovered the perspectives and work of lesbian and women writers who were without a literary space. Biomythography materialised and realised thoughts, desires, and experiences, envisioning them as historically present no matter the exclusion faced. The writers' counter-narratives of resistance to the oppression and violence they experienced because of who they loved, supported, and cared for, through their biomythographical work, will continue to create radical spaces of defiance and transformation for those who follow.

As I draw this thesis to a close, I wish to reinforce the incredible intellectual gift that biomythography has left to future generations of writers, scholars, creatives, archivists, activists, and readers. In beginning to recover this work, I have fulfilled my long-held commitment to analyse, explore and celebrate the work of lesbian writers who saved my life and the lives of so many other lesbian women along the way. Gloria Anzaldúa, Dorothy Allison, Leslie Feinberg, Frankie Hucklenbroich, Audre Lorde, Joan Nestle and Pat Parker, amongst other women who made biomythographical work between 1978 and 1998, have socio-historically embedded the lesbian narratives that so many of us have searched for and on discovery held so precious. In the words of the inimitable Joan Nestle:

To live with history is to have a memory not just of our own lives but of the lives of others, people we have never met but whose voices and actions connect us to our collective selves. (Nestle, 2022 p.380)

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