Queering Survivorhood:

LGBTQ Youth Characters Resisting the Impacts of Sexualized Violence

by

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Abstract

There has been little research conducted in general that explores the impact of sexualized violence on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. There is even more limited qualitative research, and almost none of it from a therapeutic perspective. This led me to engage with the fictionalized stories of LGBTQ youth characters who have survived sexualized violence to learn how these stories might inform the work of helping professionals. This thesis provides a reflexive thematic analysis of three novels written by queer authors. Through the lens of response-based therapy, intersectional feminism, and queer theory, it considers the ways in which the characters are impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence and their responses to it. Findings indicate that the characters were affected by childhood sexual abuse at a time in their lives when their sexual identities were on the cusp of being formed. Their experiences with sexualized violence impacted the ways that the characters learned to live with contradictions; experienced ambivalence in the relationships with the adults who caused them harm; and engaged in small acts of resistance against the impact of sexualized violence in their lives to create futures in which they could thrive. The characters' experiences with casual sex and sex work are shown as an act of resistance against violence. This research aims to queer the discourses on LGBTQ youth who have experienced sexualized violence, expose the small acts of resistance that they perform against the impacts of sexualized violence, and transform the ways that child and youth care workers, therapists, social workers, and other helpers understand the resilience and experiences of LGBTQ survivors.

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In memory of my dad, who reminded me that I was deserving of love,

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Rationale

How are LGBTQ youth characters in queer-authored literature impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence? My research invites Child and Youth Care practitioners and other readers into the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) literary characters who have experienced sexualized violence, to help them understand this world through stories that they may not have access to themselves. The learning that can occur from reading about these experiences is very relevant to the Child and Youth Care field because so little attention has been paid to the lifeworld of LGBTQ children and youth in the Child and Youth Care field (Walker, 2020). Stories about surviving sexualized violence are framed through dominant discourses where cis straight men are always the abusers and cis straight women are always the victims. In my classes in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, it was my experience that trans identities were presented on a superficial level. This meant they were mostly referred to by challenging assumptions that gender can be only 'male' or 'female' or by understanding the 'risks' and 'resiliencies' of LGBTQ youth. Based on my observations in my classes and in my places of work, I am concerned that child and youth care practitioners may find it easy to overlook opportunities for learning about the ways LGBTQ youth make sense of their experiences, specifically with sexualized violence. I am also concerned that given their limited knowledge, practitioners may refer LGBTQ youth to 'gender specialists' for common concerns, instead of approaching new situations with curiosity and learning from the stories shared by LGBTQ youth. Stories can have a powerful effect on people, communities, and societies. We often seek out stories that, not only teach us about other people, but also teach us about ourselves.

I was drawn to researching the lives of LGBTQ literary characters who have experienced sexualized violence because of my own experiences as a queer and trans survivor of sexualized violence. The first time I heard the story about another child sexual abuse survivor who was a boy was the week before I turned 13. The story belonged to Steven Stayer. When Steven was seven years old, he was abducted by a man who groomed Steven into loving him. Steven escaped from this man when he was just shy of 15. When he went to the police for help, he told them that he knew his first name was Steven. Steven's story was first presented as a miniseries in 1989 and then as a memoir in 1991. Both the miniseries and the book detailed the ways that Steven survived his experiences with child sexual abuse (Echols, 1999; Friese, 1989).

Steven's story affected me so much as a fellow child sexual abuse survivor. My story began when a neighbour placed his hands on my nine-year old boy's body. While I could not recall the abuse, aside from a snapshot of the sunshine pouring through the sheer curtains of my best friend's bedroom, I grew up living through the effect that those hands left on me. All that I craved was an understanding of what was happening to me. That was when I discovered Steven.

Although Steven Stayer was a cis, straight teenage boy, his story was the closest that almost-13-year-old me could find myself in. There were not any Judy Blume novels for kids like me. Not only was I a child sexual abuse survivor, but I was also queer and questioning my gender. That is a lot for a nine-year old to process even without the abuse.

When sexualized violence is situated in a context where sexual orientation is centered, the binary opposition of men/women is disrupted, allowing men to become 'victims' and women to become 'aggressors' (George & Stith, 2014). When trans survivors are centered, we further disrupt these discourses as gender can be something other than male or female (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016). Despite this, we need to recognize that sexualized violence cannot

become ‘gender-neutral’, as LGBTQ people are still affected by gendered meanings and roles that impact the ways that they act individually and in relationship with one another even if their relationships involve people of the same gender (Baker et al., 2013).

Discourses about sexualized violence are often centered around the experiences of cis straight women being the survivors and cis straight men being the aggressors (George & Stith, 2014; Langenderfer-Magruder, Whitfield, Walls, Kattari, Ramos, 2016). This is shown in the novels that we read, the shows that we binge-watch, and the stories that we are told. While Child and Youth Care practitioners should not aim to disavow the experiences of cis straight women, we need to begin to listen to and try to understand the stories of LGBTQ youth survivors. This is part of the recent call for queering Child and Youth Care, as highlighted in a recent special issue of the *International Journal of Child and Youth Care*. While this research is not part of the special issue, my hope is that it will act as a companion to it and will contribute to the queering that is so essential to our field.

1.2 Positionality

I am a white, queer, trans woman. When I was born, I was gender assigned as male and was raised as the first son of two working-class parents. Shortly after my third birthday, my father moved out and my mother raised me and my toddler brother on her own. My father was mostly absent throughout my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. My mother depended on her aunts and sisters to watch us while she supported our family through clerical work.

When I was a child, I did not have a ‘moment’ when I realized that I was not straight or a boy. While my mother has never considered herself a feminist, she did not enforce gender roles on my brother and me. My body, voice, and style were very androgynous, and I was often

mistaken for a girl, even during early puberty. When I was nine years old, I was sexually abused by a family member of my best friend. While my mind has shielded me from most of what happened, the man wrote a letter to my mother detailing the abuse and labelling me as ‘gay’.

The trauma I experienced from the sexual abuse shaped my childhood and youth and had an impact on my ideas of love, connection, and sex. When I was a teenager, I was sexually assaulted by an ex-boyfriend while I was sleeping. He was eight years older than me, and we had been dating for a month. When I told my youth worker about the assault, he discouraged me from reporting it to the police because the police did not believe that men could be raped, especially not when they had once been in a relationship. When I told my mother, she told me to just forget about it. I also told my closest friends about this, and one of them told my ex-boyfriend what I had shared and began to spread rumours that I was lying about the assault. My ex-boyfriend then called me on the phone and told me to stop telling lies about him. After that, he told me that he loved me, missed me, and that he did not to mean to hurt me. Finally, he told me that he would kill me if I told anyone else what happened, especially the police. This relationship and the assault that followed was the beginning of many years of tumultuous relationships where I continuously lost myself and found myself again.

When first entering the Child and Youth care field as a queer person who rejected my gender, I felt conflicted about allowing my personal and professional selves to overlap. At first, I did not want to be known as ‘the trans youth worker’ or ‘the trans scholar’, but then I found myself medically transitioning while coordinating a program for LGBTQ youth and becoming a role model for many of the youth who were questioning their own gender. I became a fierce advocate for these youth, fighting alongside them advocating for non-gendered washrooms in schools and co-writing revisions to sexual orientation and gender identity policies for the school

board. I also became a support person for fellow survivors of sexualized violence, volunteering for a rape crisis line and accompanying women to the sexual assault services at Vancouver General Hospital. As I was completing my undergraduate degree in Child and Youth Care, I was named one of the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity's Youth Role Models of the year. This honour, and the letters of support written by the youth who nominated me, encouraged me to apply for graduate school with the goal of becoming 'the trans counsellor'. At the time of writing this thesis, there is only one other trans woman counsellor working in Metro Vancouver. I hope that I will be able to join her soon.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

My research uses reflexive thematic analysis to understand the ways that the lives of young LGBTQ characters are storied, with a specific focus on how they are impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence. I have deliberately made the choice to pursue my research by analyzing the lives of literary characters that have been developed by LGBTQ writers rather than seeking out former youth who have gone through this experience because I do not want to risk re-traumatizing these young people through my research. Stories are a way that we can better understand ourselves. Stories can bring people together. For Child and Youth Care practitioners, stories can be a way that we can better understand the children, youth, and families that we support. Using reflexive thematic analysis as my methodology, and queer theory, intersectional feminism, and response-based therapy as my theoretical orientations, this thesis will explore the ways that three LGBTQ characters in literature survive sexualized violence. Reflexive thematic analysis is a qualitative methodology that embraces creativity, researcher subjectivity, and flexibility (Braun & Clark, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis considers my

subjectivity to be an analytic resource in my research, allowing me to consider my own experiences as a queer youth survivor of sexualized violence. These experiences have not only influenced the selection of the LGBTQ literature that I have chosen for my sources but will also influence the themes and stories that I discover amongst those pages. Through this process, I hope that practitioners will be able to gain an understanding which will help them to better support young LGBTQ survivors.

My inquiry is situated within Canada and the United States in the 1990s. This story unfolds during a time near the end of the AIDS crisis when being queer was still a death sentence, sexual orientation was not yet protected from discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act, and being transsexual meant hating your body. This was a time of survival for queer kids, torn between the struggles of how to find themselves and how to escape from a society that hated us. This was also a time that marked the emergence of the intersectional feminist discourses about sexual violence, which began to slowly replace the radical feminist discourses which have often excluded the experiences of LGBTQ youth. In order to situate my inquiry within this decade, it is important for me to understand how the emergence of intersectional feminism came to be.

1.4 Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized into five chapters. In this chapter, I have provided my rationale for the research and my positionality, shared some of my story, and introduced my theoretical orientation. In the second chapter, I will provide a literature review about ways that LGBTQ youth survive sexualized violence in Canada and the United States as well as radical feminism and intersectional feminism and their discourses around sexualized violence. In the third chapter,

I will discuss my methodology, the criteria through which I selected the novels used in this research, and my theoretical orientations. In the fourth chapter, I will present the findings alongside the analysis. In the fifth chapter, I will provide a discussion and a conclusion.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review explores the ways that LGBTQ youth survive sexualized violence in Canada and the United States as well as radical feminism and intersectional feminism and their discourses around sexualized violence. This literature review is situated in research about LGBTQ youth survivors between 2010 and 2021 and in feminist discourse between 1949 and 2021.

2.2 Structure of Literature Review

To conduct this review, I defined sexualized violence as violence that includes all types of unwanted sexual contact and did not limit this to sexual assault, I used the search terms "sexualized violence", “college”, “youth”, “LGBT”, "rape", “sexual assault”, and “child sexual abuse” to identify the literature that is relevant to my topic of interest. The University of Victoria's Library Summon search, Google Scholar, and feminist philosophy reading lists were accessed to access a large range of relevant literature. Through database searching, I identified 785,728 records published between 2010-2021. From there, I began to use combinations of search terms to narrow down my search. The combination of “LGBT”, “youth”, and “sexual assault” identified 967 records. Most of the journal articles focused on LGBTQ adults or on LGBTQ youth’s experiences with non-sexualized violence, leading me to exclude those articles as they were not relevant to the topic. This literature review resulted in 32 works about LGBTQ youth survivors of sexualized violence, 20 works about intersectionality, and 19 works about feminist philosophy and discourses about sexualized violence. The following sections will explore the different ways that LGBTQ youth survive sexualized violence and the feminist

discourses that impact the ways that they survive.

2.3 Research about LGBTQ Survivors of Sexualized Violence

BC Adolescent Health Survey

Smith et al. (2019) surveyed 38,015 7th-12th grade students across British Columbia, asking questions about their health and risk and protective factors. They found that 11% of students reported experiencing sexual abuse, with 6% of students reported being forced into sexual activity against their will by another youth and 2% of students reported being forced in sexual activity against their will by an adult (Smith et al., 2019). The 2018 study showed an increase in sexual abuse and sexual harassment since the previous studies in 2008 and 2013 (Smith et al., 2019). In the 2013 study, Smith et al. (2014) found that 13% of females and 2% of males reported experiencing sexual abuse, with 7% of females and 2% of males reported being forced into sexual activity against their will by another youth and 2% of females and 1% of males reported being forced in sexual activity against their will by an adult. Three percent of females and 2% of males reported unwanted sex in the past year after drinking alcohol or using other drugs (Poon et al., 2015).

Two accompanying reports expand on the data collected from the 2013 and 2018 studies. From the 2018 study, Saewyc et al. (2021) found that 21% of trans girls, 22% of questioning youth, 27% of trans boys, and 28% of non-binary youth reported experiencing sexual abuse. This was compared to 4% of cis boys and 17% of cis girls. From the 2013 study, Poon et al. (2015) found that higher rates of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who are survivors of sexual abuse reported using substances before the last time they had sex compared to lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who were not survivors. While these studies provide rates of sexualized

violence experienced by students in British Columbia, the reported experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans students are quite limited.

The Canadian Trans & Non-Binary Youth Health Survey

The Canadian Trans & Non-Binary Youth Health Survey in 2015 and 2019 have allowed us additional insight into the experiences of trans youth survivors. Trans and non-binary youth reported high rates (63%-70%) of verbal sexual harassment (Taylor et al, 2020, Veale et al, 2015), including unwanted sexual comments, jokes, or gestures directed at them. 34-37% of trans and non-binary youth reported experiences of physical sexual harassment, including being touched, grabbed, pinched, or brushed against in a sexual way (Taylor et al., 2020, Veale et al. 2015), 46% of trans and non-binary youth reported being sexually abused, 14% were sexually abused by a member of their family and 31% were sexually abused by someone outside of their family) (Taylor et al., 2020) and 23-28% reported experiencing sexual assault (Taylor et al., 2020, Veale et al. 2015).

Child Sexual Abuse and Sexualized Violence in Adolescence

There has been little research conducted about LGBTQ youth's experiences with child sexual abuse and sexualized violence in adolescence. Sterzing et al., (2016) found that 32% of sexual minority youth reported experiences of sexual abuse. These experiences with sexual abuse were associated with experiences of being bullied (Sterzing et al., 2016). Zou and Andersen (2015) found that 30.2% of bisexual females, 19.3% of gay males, 18.4% of lesbians, and 9% of bisexual males reported having an adult or person at least five years older than them ever touch or fondle them or ask them to touch the adult's body in a sexual way before they were 16, compared to 13.7% of straight females and 4.2% of straight males. Seventeen percent of bisexual females, 12.6% of lesbians, 10.4% of gay males, and 9% of bisexual males reported having an

adult or person at least five years older than them ever attempt or actually in engage in oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with them before they were sixteen, compared to 9% of straight females and 2.6% of straight males (Sterzing et al., 2016). Johnson et al, (2016) found that trans college students were around 4.5 or 5 times as likely to report being sexually abused by a relative than cis female college students.

Mitchella et al. (2013) found that 81% of trans youth, 72% of lesbian/queer girls, 66% of bisexual girls, and 66% of gay/queer boys reported experiencing sexual harassment in the past year. Smith et al. (2020) found that sexual minority middle and high school students are at increased risk for sexual harassment among sexual minorities when compared to straight students; 95% of sexual minority women and 77.3% of sexual minority men reported a history of sexual harassment or assault while in middle or high school, compared to 80.3% of straight women and 41.3% of straight men. Marx et al. (2021) found that 32% of trans and gender non-conforming adolescents reported being sexually harassed.

Scheer et al. (2021) found that bisexual female youth reported higher rates of sexualized violence than straight female youth. White Hughto et al. (2016) found that bisexual high school students had higher odds of history of forced or unwanted sex than straight female students. Atteberry-Ash et al. (2020) found that LGBT youth and youth who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity are at higher risk of sexualized violence than cis straight youth. Marx et al. (2021) found that 22% of trans and gender non-conforming adolescents reported being forced to take part in sexual activity, with trans and gender non-conforming adolescents being twice as likely to report sexual victimization if they were assigned female at birth than if they were assigned male at birth.

Sexualized Violence in LGBTQ Young Adults

While still limited, there has been some research about LGBTQ young adult's experiences with sexualized violence. Swan et al. (2021) found that sexual minority college students were 2.08 times more likely to experience sexual assault than straight college students. This is supported by findings by Mellins et al. (2017) that LGBQ+ undergraduate students were at higher risk of sexual assault than straight undergraduate students. Anderson et al. (2017) found that GBQ men in college experienced significantly higher rates of sexual victimization in "the most severe categories" which included sexual coercion and rape, and similar rates of sexual aggression than straight men in college. Coulter et al. (2017) found that bisexual undergraduate students and students who were unsure about their sexuality reported higher rates of sexual assault in the past year than other students. Cis gay and bisexual male undergraduate students reported higher rates of sexual assault in the past year than cis straight male students, while there was no significant difference across cis female students of different sexualities. As well, cis lesbian, gay, and bisexual students have similar odds of sexual assault as cis female students.

Coulter et al. (2017) found that trans undergraduate students reported higher rates of sexual assault in the past year than cis students. Trans undergraduate students have higher odds of sexual assault than cis students, with Black trans undergraduate students had significantly higher odds of sexual assault than white trans students (Coulter et al., 2017). As well, Murchison, Boyd, and Pachankis (2017) found that the people who inflicted sexualized violence on LGBQ youth were often partners, acquaintances, or friends, with nearly one-third of the people who caused them harm being their partners.

2.4 Risk and Protective Factors

There has been little published about the risk and protective factors for LGBTQ youth who experience sexualized violence. Marx et al. (2021) found that trans and gender non-conforming adolescents were more likely to report sexual victimization if they reported experiencing sexual harassment, bias-based peer victimisation, or problematic drug use. Murchison et al. (2017) found that LGBQ youth who experience internalized homophobia and a lack of sense of LGBQ community may be at risk for sexualized violence.

There has been some research about preventing sexualized violence for LGBTQ youth on campus. Coulter and Rankin (2020) found that LGBTQ students who reported inclusion of LGBTQ people on their campus also reported "significantly lower odds of experiencing sexual assault victimization" (p. 1351). Klein et al. (2021) found that campus sexual assault education programs often failed LGBTQ+ students. Campus sexual assault education programs were found to assume that there are only two genders, erasing the experiences of non-binary survivors. The materials created for students were separated into two categories: male and female, with a focus on toxic masculinity something that leads men to assault others and without a focus on the needs of LGBTQ+ students. While campus sexual assault education programs do address the ways that LGBTQ+ students survive sexual assault, these presentations are limited to LGBTQ+ audiences.

LGBTQ Youth with Histories of Sexualized Violence

There has been little research about LGBTQ youth with histories of sexualized violence. Rhew et al. (2017) found that young queer women (ages 18 – 25) who have experienced sexualized violence reported a 71% higher number of typical weekly drinks than those who have not experienced sexualized violence. Rhew et al. (2017) found that young queer women (ages 18 – 25) who have experienced sexualized violence reported a 63% higher number of alcohol-

related consequences than those who have not experienced sexualized violence. Alcohol use may be a way that these young queer women cope with their experiences with sexualized violence. Alcohol-related consequences may include risky behaviour, poor self-care, and blackout drinking (Read et al., 2006).

Backhaus et al. (2021) found that LGBTQ students who have a strong sense of belonging reported less depression and suicidal ideation following sexualized violence that students who have a low sense of belonging. Rimes et al. (2019) found that sexual abuse was significantly associated with LGB youth ever thinking about or attempting suicide in the past year or ever and the likeliness that they would ever attempt suicide one day.

Anderson et al. (2017) found that GBQ men in college were more likely to acknowledge their experiences as rape than straight men in college. Anderson et al. (2021) found that 79.9% of gender nonbinary youth were able to acknowledge their rape (able to label their rape as rape), compared to trans and cis male youth (17.9%). Anderson et al. (2021) found that bisexual nonbinary young adults were more likely to acknowledge their experiences as rape than bisexual trans young adults of all genders and cis bisexual young men. Anderson et al. (2021) found that queer youth who are out report higher rape acknowledgement than youth who are not out. Anderson et al. (2021) found that for bisexual youth adults, being able to acknowledge that their experiences were sexually violent are associated with being out and decreased mental health symptoms. Anderson et al. (2021) found that youth who were not able to acknowledge their rape also reported increased anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

2.5 Shifting from Radical Feminism to Intersectional Feminism

Radical Feminism

The radical feminists who emerged in the late 1960s, were building on the works of already deeply engaged feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. De Beauvoir (1949/2009) explored the treatment of women throughout history, separating sex from gender with her statement "One is not born but becomes a woman" (p. 267) and introduced the concept of Man as 'the default' and Woman as 'the Other'. For De Beauvoir, the goal of feminism was equality between men and women (de Beauvoir, 1949/2009). Friedan (1963) shone light on 'the problem that has no name', challenging the belief that the only way that women could achieve fulfillment was through femininity, which meant being a housewife and a mother. For Friedan, the goal of feminism was for woman to have a "full human identity" (p. 80), which would be fulfilled by being able to work outside of the home (Friedan, 1963).

In pushing past the goals of equality and careers, radical feminism promotes the viewpoint that patriarchy was forcing women into 'normative features' or 'socially prescribed requirements of femininity' which dominate and subordinate women (Schippers & Sapp, 2012). Building on de Beauvoir's theories, Millet (1970) presents a modern view of patriarchy and the ways that men subjugated women and proposed sex to have a "frequently neglected political aspect" (p. xxix). As Firestone (1970) pointed out at that time, the biological difference between men and women "did not necessitate the development of a class system – the domination of one group by another – the reproductive *functions* of these differences did" (p. 8). In response to Friedan's (1963)'s narrow focus on the experiences of American housewives, Firestone (1970) stated that "feminists have to question, not just all of *Western* culture, but the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature." (p. 2). Firestone called for not

just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself" (p. 11) as an end-goal of radical feminism. Daly (1978) pushed against the idea of 'equality', arguing that the concept "saps women by giving illusions of partial success while at the same time making [the] Success [of feminism] appear to be a far-distant, extremely difficult to obtain elusive objective'" (p. 375). As Daly pointed out, patriarchy causes feminists to fall into circular patterns of chasing after smaller successes in the form of the rights that can later be taken away, rather than focusing on the bigger success -- the elimination of the sex distinction.

As discussions among feminists continued, black radical feminists, such as Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1981) challenged the predominantly white feminist movement, which upheld a universal idea of sisterhood that lacked an analysis of equity and oppression based on women's experiences with race, thereby excluding women of colour from the movement. Lorde (1984) compares the power maintained through the whiteness and racism within the feminist movement to the power of a master, stating that the master's tools "may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 112). Additionally, Lorde (1984) critiqued Daly for perpetrating "the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background" (p. 69) with women of colour being "noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization" (p. 69). hooks (1989) questioned the objectification of Black women as the Other within the feminist movement, noting that Black women "have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (p. 42). Both Lorde and hooks questioned the ways that the radical feminist movement created the narrative about Black women and other women of colour, rather than amplifying the voices of these women and whole-heartedly including these women with their movement. The narratives about Black

women and white women are further highlighted when we explore radical feminist discourses about sexualized violence.

Intersectional Feminism

For feminists and LGBTQ people alike, the 1990s brought the introduction of intersectional feminism. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the term 'intersectionality' explores the ways that race, gender, and other characteristics are often viewed as "mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (p. 139) and introduces a way of recognizing the ways that race, gender, and other characteristics may intersect, that is, exert impact and work with one another. Growing out of critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2011), intersectionality first explored the ways that the concepts of sex discrimination and race discrimination "theoretically erased" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139) the experiences of Black women who experience a unique oppression based on being Black and female. Through the application of the intersectionality framework to three legal cases that focused on both racial-discrimination and sex-discrimination, Crenshaw (1989) highlighted the ways that Black women and other women of colour experience oppression at the intersections of race and gender, challenging the restrictive ideology of only focusing only on either sex discrimination or race discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). The ways that race, gender, and sexuality intersect "remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Collins, 2000, p. 21). Intersectional feminist theory analyzes how power systems communicate with one another, creating 'intersections' where people experience multiple forms of oppression (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013), thereby producing new spaces for "scholarship, identity, structure, and social activism" (Clarke & McCall, 2013, p. 351).

Intersectional feminism transforms femininity into something that can be reworked,

embodied, and performed to subvert patriarchal discourses (Schippers & Sapp, 2012) and decenters radical feminism's ideology that patriarchy is the enemy, dismissing the concept that men possess power and that women are powerless (George & Stith, 2014). In doing this, intersectional feminists replace the universal idea of sisterhood and the overarching edict that men as the only source of oppression, with an awareness of how the ways that women are marginalized based on race, sexual orientation, and class can create differences and inequity among women (George & Stith, 2014; Martinez, 2011). Intersectionality broadens the reach of feminism 'beyond patriarchy' when it comes to recognizing and understanding the origins of violence (George & Stith, 2014, p. 179). Through identifying multiple sources of oppression and violence (e.g. race, sexual orientation, and class), one can situate patriarchy alongside these other sources of violence and provide a fuller understanding of the ways that individuals survive violence, rather than only focusing on cis, straight, white women.

2.6 Feminism and LGBTQ Communities

Radical Feminism and LGBTQ Communities

Radical feminist leaders have often argued against the identities of LGBTQ peoples. Among radical feminists, gay men have often been seen as "misogynists of the worst order" (Firestone, 1970, p. 152). Both the cultures for gay men and straight men are focused on men loving one another. For gay men, this is shown through romance and sex, while for straight men, it is shown through brotherhood. As gay men do not experience romantic or sexual connections to women, radical feminists believe that gay men have no reason to love or align with women (Frye, 1983).

Lesbians were originally seen as a threat to the feminist movement, with Friedan, referring to lesbians as a "lavender menace" (Poirot, 2009, p. 263) and organizations such as the National Organization of Women campaigning against the inclusion of lesbians in the feminist movement as they were concerned about the public image of feminists. In response to the homophobia in the feminist movement, many lesbians embraced the idea of lesbian separatism, and began building intentional communities with other women (Poirot, 2009). To do this, lesbianism sought to "eliminate the gender-based underpinnings of sexual inequality in this view" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 57) by rejecting their male oppression and their patriarchal role as women being attractive and sexually available to men, and explicitly identifying themselves as 'lesbians' and as 'women-identified-women' (Poirot, 2009). This meant that lesbians recreated their own image of sexuality as women loving women and rejected the roles assigned to men in their lives. Lesbian voices became significant within the radical feminist movement, when Kate Millet, a radical feminist who was revered by Friedan and the National Organization of Women, was publicly outed as a lesbian by *Time Magazine*, providing the world with a face to the lesbian menace and feminism (Poirot, 2009).

Radical feminist ideology believes that transsexualism is socially constructed and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. Transsexual women are considered male and are excluded from women's communities and spaces. The history of this ideology dates to the 1970s. At the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference in Los Angeles, Robin Morgan objected to a transsexual woman who had planned to perform folk music at the event, stating from the stage:

> I will not call a male `she'; thirty-two years of suffering in this androcentric society, and of surviving, have earned me the title "woman"; one walk down the street by a male transvestite, five minutes of his being hassled (which he may enjoy), and then he dares,

> he *dares* to think he understands our pain? No, in our mothers' names and in our own, we must not call him sister (Goldberg, 2014, para. 2).

Morgan's call to reject a trans woman from being a sister to the radical feminist movement inspired a discourse about transsexual identities and bodies.

This discourse was driven by Mary Daly, a radical feminist theologian, and her doctoral student, Janice Raymond. Daly (1978) compared transsexuals to Frankenstein's monster, claiming that transsexual women put on 'female bodies' and that transsexualism was part of "male surgical siring which invades the female world with substitutes" (p. 71), with "'life-like' imitations of women, labeled 'The Real Thing'" (p. 72). Daly (1978) viewed transsexualism as "an *attempt* to change males into females" (p. 238), because transsexual women would continue to have male chromosomes and lack the life history and experience that non-transsexual women possess. Raymond (1979) viewed transsexual women as attempting to "possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have molded women" (p. 99), creating the discourse that transsexual women are reinforcing stereotypical gender roles through their gender presentation as women, and thereby reinforcing the gender oppression of women.

The 1980s and 1990s introduced new questions for radical feminism around transsexual people. Lesbian communities began to witness butch and masculine-of-center woman transitioning to become male in an act often referred to as 'butch flight'. Transsexual lesbians and transsexual queer women began to participate in lesbian circles, causing rifts between lesbians who believed that transsexual women were women and lesbians who believed that transsexual women were men (Jeffreys, 1997). These discussions have continued into the twenty-first century. Feminists consider gender-affirming surgeries to be a human rights and feminist rights issue. According to Jeffreys (1997), "the mutilation of healthy bodies and the

subjection of such bodies to dangerous and life-threatening continuing treatment violates such people's rights to live with dignity in the body into which they were born" (p. 59-60). Transsexual women are seen as castrating themselves to prove their belief that they were women and reinforcing the idea that women were seen as "defective males" (Greer, 1999, p. 81).

Radical feminist discourse about trans people in the twenty-first century has continued to build on its foundational ideologies. Regarding gender and gender roles as a form of oppression towards women, the goal of radical feminism has shifted to "dismantle gender wherever it rears its hydra-headed appearance" (Raymond, 2005, para. 6). While trans ideology aims to challenge and transcend gender, radical feminists believe that trans bodies are merely "exchanging one gendered identity for the other" (Raymond, 2005, para. 6). The goal of transitioning is reduced to "cosmetics, costumes, and surgery to match their bodies to gender caricatures" (Keith & Jensen, 2013, June 21, para. 27).

In her text *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*, radical feminist Jeffreys (2014) calls to an end of gender, writing that "the idea of 'gender identity' disappears biology and all the experiences that those with female biology have of being reared in caste system based on sex" (p. 6). As 'transsexual men' are lacking female biology and socialization, they cannot be women nor experience oppression as women. This ideology about trans identities can exist in a more 'casual' form within postmodern feminism. During an interview with Laverne Cox, feminist bell hooks shared that trans women reveled in traditional femininity – "a femininity that many feminist women feel, 'Oh, we've been trying to get away from that'" (The New School, 2014, October 13) and that Cox was "feeding into the patriarchal gaze in [her] blonde wigs" (The New School, 2014, October, 13). hooks, whose work is revered and often taught in university gender studies classrooms, reinforces the concern that support of

transsexualism leads to the acceptance of gender roles as innate, as opposed to being socially constructed (Murphy, 2016, September 27).

Radical feminists have rallied against initiatives created to support trans people. Aimed at protecting trans individuals from discrimination and hate propaganda, Bill C-16 has been accused of creating "a legal loophole for male sexual predators" (Campaign Life Coalition, 2016, para. 2) through providing trans people access to washrooms and change rooms that correspond to their gender identity. An update to a Vancouver School Board policy providing similar access was accused of using children "in some sort of social experiment that could have long-term negative repercussions" (Chang, 2014, April 22, para. 6). One of the main challenges towards radical feminist discourse about trans people has been the emergence of intersectional feminism.

Intersectional Feminism and LGBTQ Communities

Intersectionality can be used to highlight the ways that Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour who are trans are uniquely harmed. For example, out of the twenty-four confirmed homicides of trans women in the United States between November 20th, 2014 and November 19th, 2015, "seventeen of the victims... were black trans women or black gender-noncomforming people; four were Latina; [and only] three were white" (Holden, 2015, November 19, para. 11). Another example of this this is the mass murder on June 12th, 2016, when forty-nine people were killed at the Pulse Nightclub, a space that provided "a sense of comfort, solidarity, and celebration, to combat the hostility [they] encounter in the rest of the world" (Liss, 2016, June 27, p. 32). Even though the Pulse nightclub was "predominately for black and Latinx people, [and the murders took place] on a night that was Latin music night, with black and Latinx trans women on the bill" (X, 2016, p. 16), the sexualities, genders, and races of the victims were whitewashed (Laing, 2016, June 16).

Another form of erasure that takes place can be found in relation to Indigenous communities where Two-Spirit is an identity that is often associated with Indigenous people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans, but many Indigenous people do not claim this identity for themselves. At the same time, some queer Indigenous people feel pressured to identify as 'Two-Spirit' because not using the term could be seen as “self-colonizing” (Joy, 2015, para. 2). Many Two-Spirit youth movements believe that an essential piece of decolonization includes challenging heterosexism and trans-misogyny alongside racism (Dakin, 2012). Although the term is often associated with Indigenous people living on Turtle Island (Joy, 2015), it is important to recognize that Turtle Island consists of many languages, dialects, and customs (para. 22). It is essential to recognize the “unique history” (para. 35) and continuing oppression experiences by queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit peoples and bring attention to the too-often occurring appropriation of these identities by people who are not Indigenous, especially white settlers.

Intersectionality highlights the ways that trans women are uniquely harmed. Julia Serano (2007) coined the term 'trans-misogyny' to describe the intersection of transphobia and misogyny, which focuses on how trans women are ridiculed or dismissed “for their expressions of femaleness or femininity” (p. 14). In her text *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity,* Serano writes about the hyperfeminization and hypersexualization of trans women through media representation and the sensationalization of gender-affirming surgeries. These concepts contribute to the idea that femininity presented by trans women is 'artificial' and can be 'put on' and 'removed', reinforcing the radical feminist stance that trans women are actually men. Overall intersectionality helps us to understand the ways that the experiences of trans women are located within these intersections of identity and

helps us to view their experiences as multifaceted and influenced and affected by multiple life forces.

2.7 Feminist Discourses about Sexualized Violence

Radical Feminism and Sexualized Violence

In seeking to analyze the conditions more cogently under which sexual violence exists, radical feminism introduced what became the dominant theories surrounding violence against women, aiming to formulate a 'true knowledge' about this violence (Martinez, 2011). Radical feminist theories focus on patriarchy as the dominant origin of violence, situating the argument in gender roles and sex-based biological differences (Baker et al., 2013) and upholding the concept of men being 'the primary aggressors' and women being 'victims' (George & Stith, 2014). Through this lens, patriarchy is viewed as forcing women into 'normative features' or 'socially prescribed requirements of femininity' which dominate and subordinate women (Schippers & Sapp, 2012, p. 28).

Consciousness-raising sessions provided a space where women were able to connect with one another to share their experiences with sexism, misogyny, and violence. These women resisted the discourse that it was strangers who raped women and shared their experiences of the violence committed on them by their husbands and members of their families (Loney-Howes, 2020). One group that formed out of these consciousness-raising sessions was the group called "New York Radical Women," who published the text *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*. Naming the existence of a rape culture, Melani and Fodaski (1974) stated that "rape is fundamentally an aggressive rather than a sexual act, that its motivation and dynamics arise out of hostility rather than sexual need" (p. 82). This activism led to the formation of rape crisis

centres and marches to ‘Take Back the Night’ (Loney-Howes, 2020), providing further support for survivors of sexualized violence and awareness about rape.

Radical feminists aimed to disrupt the mainstream discourses about sexualized violence. In her analysis of sexual violence, Frye (1983) points out rape that is not seen as rape “unless the woman’s engagement in sexual intercourse is coerced… where the rapist (or rapists) literally physically controls the movements of the victim’s limbs and the location and position of her body” (p. 54). This means that if a woman did not fight off the man who raped her, or she has had previous sexual encounters with the man who raped her she is seen as having given her consent and therefore not the victim of rape and can also be depicted as enjoying what happened regardless of if she has been heterosexually active (she likes sex) or if she has not experienced any heterosexual activity (she is repressed and frustrated). In this vein, MacKinnon (1989) explored the ways that sexualized trauma manifests in women’s bodies and in the ways that they interact with men, and questioned how it is possible for sexualized violence to exist while “living in a fair society, of equality?” (p. 150). In answering this question MacKinnon suggested the dissonance that is created by the existence of rape and other forms of sexual violence in a society that claims to be free, fair and equal forces women cope with these abuses and violations through denial and portraying such sexuality “as just fine” or by describing themselves as “feel[ing] all right”, and by retreating into living in fear.

The racism within both mainstream and radical feminist discourses about sexualized violence had a specific impact on the ways that Black women were viewed as survivors. hooks (1981) asserts that Black women are predominately shown as the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute, as “sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black or white, […] a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped” (p. 52) and

calls into question the idea of all women having equality by exposing the ways that "black male rape of white women has attracted much more attention and is seen as much more significant than rape of black women by either white or black men", and that, afterwards, "like all rape victims in patriarchal society they were seen as having lost value and worth as a result of the humiliation they endured" (p. 53). Lorde (1984) calls the sexual hostility by Black men against Black women "a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear" (p. 120). Lorde shows that violence against Black women and children is made worse by their experiences of racism and the gendered expectations of powerlessness placed on them. The stories of Black women and women of colour with sexualized violence were overshadowed by the stories of white women about their experiences with sexualized violence. Much like the idea of 'sisterhood' often excluded Black women and other women of colour, the radical feminist movement had an impact on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans community members.

Intersectional Feminism and Sexualized Violence

Intersectional feminism challenges the dominant theories surrounding violence against women introduced by radical feminism. Intersectional feminist theories recognize that patriarchy is the dominant origin of violence but shifts away from the concept of men being 'the primary aggressors' and women being 'victims' (George & Stith, 2014). This shift opens up to the realities that men can also be survivors of sexualized violence and women can be the aggressors, while recognizing that sexualized violence does not only happen between men and women and not only to people who are straight and cis.

While radical feminism aimed to disrupt the mainstream discourses about sexualized violence, intersectional feminism subverts and builds on radical feminist discourses. The 1990s introduced a new reality with AIDS "painting everybody's sexual awakening with somber

mortality" (Marcus, 2010, p. 190) They were a time when many LGBTQ youth found that radical feminist philosophy had failed them and found themselves amongst other intersectional feminists who marched for abortion rights on Washington and could not remove themselves from Anita Hill televised testimony about Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas sexual harassing her, a moment in time which "riveted the nation and mobilized activism around sexual harassment" (Austin et al., 2014, p. 65). LGBTQ youth began to volunteer at rape crisis centres, hearing stories from survivors who did not believe that questioning women's rights under patriarchy would change the reality of being nearly destroyed by the men who sexually assaulted them (Marcus, 2010). According to Marcus (2010), youth were "mustering for battle against the idea that to be a girl was to be in grave danger that you could never fully escape, only manage by narrowing your life, your range, your wardrobe, your gaze" (p. 92-93). As Marcus saw it, these young people now sensed that a revolution was just beginning (Marcus, 2010).

Part of this revolution has been the inclusion of trans women in women-only spaces, including rape crisis centers. In 2003, Vancouver Rape Relief won a case with the Supreme Court of Canada granting them the right to exclude trans women from accessing services or working at their rape crisis centre. Vancouver Rape Relief had determined that Kimberly Nixon, a trans woman who was brought on as a volunteer for the rape crisis centre, was not a real woman because she was assigned male at birth. The case highlighted the lack of protection for trans people under British Columbia's Human Rights Code (Findlay, 2003). The case also highlighted the lack of services for trans survivors of sexualized violence. The exclusive behaviours of Vancouver Rape Relief encouraged other Vancouver-based services to allow access to trans survivors, including Victoria Sexual Assault Centre and WAVAW's Inclusion Project and the (Victoria Sexual Assault Centre, 2021; WAVAW, 2021).

This chapter has provided a review of the scholarly literature about the ways that LGBTQ youth survive sexualized violence in Canada and the United States as well as radical feminism and intersectional feminism and their discourses around sexualized violence. It has shown the divisive discourses about sexualized violence and LGBTQ people between radical feminism and intersectional feminism. Through this review, I have highlighted the ways that these discourses can impact LGBTQ survivors of sexualized violence, including the exclusion of trans women from many rape crisis centres. I have also highlighted a lack of qualitative research conducted about LGBTQ survivors of sexualized violence. This lack of research can create barriers for counsellors, social workers, and child and youth care practitioners in supporting LGBTQ clients who have survived sexualized violence. As well, the influence of radical feminist discourses on rape crisis centres can create unsafe and unsupported spaces and services for many LGBTQ survivors. I have also discussed the ways that LGBTQ youth survive sexualized violence in Canada and the United States as well as radical feminism and intersectional feminism and their discourses around sexualized violence. In the next chapter, I will discuss my methodology, the criteria through which I selected the novels used in this research, and my theoretical orientations. In the fourth chapter, I will present the findings alongside the analysis. In the fifth chapter, I will provide a discussion and a conclusion.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

How are LGBTQ youth characters in queer-authored literature impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence? As a scholar who is interested in the ways that LGBTQ youth are impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence, I wanted to conduct my research in a way that would not risk retraumatizing survivors of violence. When preparing to conduct the research that I have undertaken here, I was inspired by the ways that Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2009) drew on the experiences of characters in literature who were girls and women to analyze discourses about the impacts of misogyny in Western societies. Reading de Beauvoir's text encouraged me to reflect on the discourses about queerness, gender, and violence that I had absorbed through literature and film, and I acknowledged the power that can be invoked when creating characters and stories, especially when these characters and stories exist within the margins.

In her 1949 text *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir used narrative descriptions of women's lives, drawn from many sources including literature, and linked these descriptions to historical ideas. For example, through Colette's (1900/2001) schoolgirl character Claudine, de Beauvoir (1949/2009) explored the experiences of 'the girl', describing Claudine as "unripe fruit" and "half-wild, half-dutiful" and describing her experiences of "defend[ing] herself against man by exhibiting a childish and perverse nature" (p. 364) and of having lesbian tendencies that were "barely distinguishable from narcissistic delights" (p. 355). Through D.H. Lawrence's (1913) character Gertrude Morel, de Beauvoir (1949/2009) explored the experiences of 'the mother', highlighting Gertrude's attempts to "form a closed couple" (p. 536) with her son Paul. Through Virginia Woolf's character Clarissa Dalloway, de Beauvoir (1949/2009) explored the social lives

of ‘the women’, describing dinner parties as a “mystery” presided over by Clarissa who is “proud to feel she is the creator of a perfect moment, the dispenser of happiness and gaiety” (p. 582). de Beauvoir’s analysis of literary narratives is what led me to use reflexive thematic analysis to understand the ways that the lives of young LGBTQ characters are storied, with a specific focus on how they are impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence.

Reflexive thematic analysis is a qualitative methodology that embraces creativity, researcher subjectivity, and flexibility (Braun & Clark, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis is centered around the researcher’s stance and experiences, as

> the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research (Braun & Clark, 2019, p. 594).

Reflexive thematic analysis uses themes that act “as stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset” (Braun & Clark, 2019, p. 592). This represents a shift away from the typical qualitative data organization around shared *topics* (Braun & Clark, 2019), recognizing that “there is often little that unites the meanings within a topic summary other than the topic” (Braun & Clark, 2021, p. 5). Clark and Braun consider themes to be “complex, rich multifaceted stories” (Clarke & Braun, 2021b, para. 21) and discourage the researcher from diluting these stories into too many subthemes (Clarke & Braun, 2021b). These themes create a final analysis which is “the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative” (Braun & Clark, 2019, p. 591).

Reflexive thematic analysis considers my subjectivity to be an analytic resource in my research, rather than expecting me to remain objective like with many positivist methodologies.

Rather than considering subjectivity a 'bias' to be rejected from research, "reflexivity is the practice that enables you to reflect on how you shaped your research" (Clark & Braun, 2021b, para. 5). My experiences as a queer youth who came out in the early 1990s during the AIDS crisis and the emergence of the queer theory and intersectional feminism allowed me to shape the research so that it was situated within that same time-period. These experiences have not only influenced the selection of the LGBTQ literature that I have chosen for my sources but will also influence the themes and stories that I generate through my analysis.

3.2 Selection Criteria

I have been a fan of LGBTQ literature since my adolescence. I have often fell deep in love with the stories spun by LGBTQ authors and the authors' own stories shared in poetry and memoirs. As my use of reflexive thematic analysis was inspired by Amber Dawn's (2018) novel, *Sodom Road Exit,* I chose to select it as the first piece of literature in my study. *Sodom Road Exit* was a Globe and Mail Best Book of the Year and was shortlisted for a Lambda Literary Award and Sunburst Award (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021). *Sodom Road Exit*'s nomination for a Lambda Literary Award encouraged me to explore winners and nominees of the Lambda Literary Awards, which "celebrate vibrant, dynamic LGBTQ storytelling" (Lambda Literary, 2021, para. 1) for the other pieces of literature in my study. As a preliminary step, I chose 25 additional pieces of literature to review which helped to familiarize me with this body of work:

- Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*
- Casey Plett's *A Safe Girl to Love*
- Casey Plett's *Little Fish*
- Dennis Cooper's *Frisk*
- Dennis Cooper's *The Sluts*

- Hazel Jane Plante's *Little Encyclopedia (For Vivian)*
- Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*
- JT Leroy's *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*
- Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed*
- Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *Sketchasy*
- Miranda July's *The First Bad Man*
- Poppy Z. Brite's *Drawing Blood*
- Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*
- Rae Spoon's *First Spring Grass Fire*
- Richard Siken's *Crush*
- Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin*

I sorted through the list of selected Lambda Literary Award winners and nominees to see how they fit into the parameters of my study. The first parameter was to include narratives that were based in and/or published in the 1990s. My decision to focus on stories based in the 1990s originated from my initial idea of using autoethnography as my methodology. I was interested in situating my inquiry in that moment of time which was during the AIDS crisis and the emergence of queer theory and intersectional feminism. This was a time when many queer people who were assigned male at birth believe that their desire was a death sentence. As a queer youth, it was difficult to imagine outliving the twentieth century. While AIDS is not the focus of this research, it is there within the hearts of the characters. How can one be a survivor when they don't believe that they will be able to survive anything? Second, I was looking for narratives centered on characters who were under the age of twenty-five. Third, I was looking for narratives that included experiences of sexualized violence. Finally, I was looking for narratives that

explored the lives of the characters and how these lives were impacted by the experiences of sexualized violence. Based on these parameters, I was able to find two literary works to analyze in addition to *Sodom Road Exit*.

The three literary works that I chose to analyze for this thesis include: Amber Dawn's (2018) novel *Sodom Road Exit*; Scott Heim's (1995) novel *Mysterious* Skin; and Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's (2018) novel *Sketchasy*. Through the selection process, I was only able to find white characters who met the criteria for this research. The characters in the three novels include Starla Mia Martin, Neil, and Alexa. The character of Starla, created by Amber Dawn (2018), is a queer youth who is a child sexual abuse survivor forced to return to her hometown and live with her mother after dropping out of university and becoming indebted. The character of Neil, created by Heim (1995), is a gay youth who is a child sexual abuse survivor who has romanticized his abuser. The character of Alexa, created by Sycamore (2018), is a trans youth who survives incest through substance use and sex work. These three pieces of literature provided me with a wealth of rich narratives to explore and analyze.

3.3 Theoretical Orientations

Response-Based Therapy

My research will be grounded in the ideas of response-based therapy (Coates & Wade, 2007; Coates & Wade, 2016; Wade, 1997) and will be further informed by intersectional feminism (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, Crenshaw, 2011) and queer theory (Butler, 1993, Butler, 1999; Cannon et al., 2015). A core tenet of response-based therapy is the idea that *any* response to violence is a form of resistance. This tenet counters problematic understandings that assume that victims of violence do not resist. For example, it is

often believed that a survivor must 'fight back physically' in order to show resistance to violence. Response-based therapy is grounded in the understanding that resistance can involve any actions where survivors "refuse to comply with or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible (Wade, 1997, p. 25) but also the ways that survivors "imagine or establish a life based on respect and equality" (Wade, 1997, p. 25). Responses to violence are seen as different from the effects of violence or mental health concerns, as often the effects are out of the control of the survivors (Coates & Wade, 2016; Wade, 1997).

Response-based therapy invites me to consider the ways that the fictional characters resist sexualized violence and the impacts of that violence on their lives:

> The focus of the approach described here, … is to engage persons in a conversation concerning the details and implications of their own resistance. Through this process, persons begin to experience themselves as stronger, more insightful, and more capable of responding effectively to the difficulties that occasioned therapy (Wade, 1997, p. 24).

Response-based therapy recognizes that survivors can be impacted by the ways that others respond to their experiences with sexualized violence (Coates & Wade, 2007; Coates & Wade, 2016). Through social discourse and social responses, the experiences of survivors can be misrepresented and biased:

> Language can be used to conceal violence, obscure and mitigate offenders' responsibility, conceal victims' resistance, and blame and pathologize victims. Alternatively, language can be used to expose violence, clarify offenders' responsibility, elucidate and honor victims' resistance, and contest the blaming and pathologizing of victims (Coates & Wade, 2007, p. 513).

These misrepresentations and bias can take place in the ways that the violence is described by, not only the person who caused harm, but also by mental health professionals and through the criminal justice system (Coates & Wade, 2007; Coates & Wade, 2016). These social responses can impact the ways that survivors respond to the person who caused them harm and the supports that they access. Social responses may be positive or negative and can elicit different responses from the survivor, such as the survivor gaining trust and opening up to the person or shutting down and rejecting supports (Coates & Wade, 2016). Response-based therapy will guide my approach to data analysis by way of highlighting the ways that the fictional characters resist sexualized violence and the impacts of that violence on their lives**.** This approach will help me read the stories differently as I will pay attention to even the smallest (micro moves) acts of resistance that are often glossed over or obscured.

Intersectional Feminism

First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the term 'intersectionality' explores the ways that race, gender, and other characteristics are often viewed as "mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (p. 139) and introduces a way of recognizing the ways that race, gender, and other characteristics may intersect, that is, exert impact and work with one another. Growing out of critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2011), intersectionality first explored the ways that the concepts of sex discrimination and race discrimination "theoretically erased" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139) the experiences of Black women who experienced a unique oppression based on being Black and female. Through the application of the intersectionality framework to three legal cases that focused on both racial-discrimination and sex-discrimination, Crenshaw (1989) highlighted the ways that Black women and other women of colour experience oppression at the intersections of race and gender, challenging the restrictive ideology of only focusing only on

either sex discrimination or race discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). The ways that race, gender, and sexuality intersect "remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Collins, 2000, p. 21). Intersectional feminist theory analyzes how power systems communicate with one another, creating 'intersections' where people experience multiple forms of oppression (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Intersectional feminism will guide my approach to data analysis by way of highlighting the unique ways that the characters respond to sexualized violence through the intersecting lens of their gender, sexuality, and class. The lens of race was not highlighted as all three characters are white. I am also conscious as a white researcher of the risks around analyzing Black, Indigenous, and youth of colour's experiences with sexualized violence, as this analysis would be through a white lens (hooks, 1992).

My introduction to feminism happened during my early teenage years. I turned 13 in the spring of 1989, a time when 'women's lib' was an idea of the past. Raised by a single mother, I knew that sexism existed and impacted my family, but 'feminism' was a dirty word in our home. My feminism exploded over the next two years. Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon and the B-52s' Kate Pierson were featured in a controversial television advertisement about reproductive rights, which led to my mother accusing me of only being pro-choice because my favourite artists were (she wasn't completely wrong). The biggest shift towards me becoming an intersectional feminist was Anita Hill's sexual harassment allegations against US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. Her televised testimony taught me not only about racism and sexism, but the unique ways that Black women experience these oppressions. My becoming a feminist was forged in intersectionality. While I did not learn from books and theory, my feminist ethos was

formed alongside women of colour who allowed me to fight against racism and sexism alongside them.

Queer Theory

Queer theory exposes the essentialism of sex binaries, gender binaries, and heterosexual desire, and the specific power that these categories hold. Expanding on Simone de Beauvoir's claim that 'one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman', gender theorist Judith Butler (1999) notes "it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (p. 45). The binary of man and woman is maintained through compliance with the heterosexual matrix which guides ideas around 'normal' gender and desire (Butler, 1999). Gender has been given different forms throughout history in ways that are incoherent and inconsistent with modern Western views of gender (Butler, 1999). Gender can only be conceived of in the ways that is intersects with other identities such as race, class, and sex (Butler, 1999).

Queer theory questions what is 'normal' and exposes power dynamics and inequalities that allow normality to exist, allowing differences to emerge (Cannon et al., 2015). Queer theorists expose the ways that power seems to thrive within the heteronormative gender binary system. Radical feminist restrictions of the meaning of gender allow for "exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (Butler, 1999, p. viii). The dominance of heterosexuality is secured by the policing of gender through the ideas of two normative genders and a normative sexuality. The binary gender system leaves:

> no room for references of sexuality to be theorized apart from the rigid framework of gender difference or the kinds of sexual regulation that do not take gender as their

primary objects (i.e., the prohibition of sodomy, public sex, consensual homosexuality) (Butler, 1993, p. 182).

While recognizing the demands that the patriarchal binary gender system places on girls and women to express femininity, queer theory describes gender as being performative; that is as the enactment of gender roles and expectations that one is expected to carry out. Butler (1999) invites people to "consider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (p. 189-190). For Butler, gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 45). Queer theory will guide my approach to data analysis by way of highlighting the ways that the characters respond to sexualized violence through a lens that is not restricted to the sex binaries, gender binaries, and heterosexual desire that is often used to frame the experiences of survivors of sexualized violence.

My coming out as queer quickly followed my identification with feminism. I came out during a time when 'gay' stood for 'got AIDS yet'. Aside from gay men dying everywhere, the only reflection of my queerness was found in 'very special episodes' of television shows and through Madonna's rumoured relationship with Sandra Bernhard. New Queer Cinema films like *My Own Private Idaho* allowed me to find my queerness on the screen. This representation encouraged me to come out to my friends and family and to find a new family who loved, accepted, and celebrated me. With their support, I was able to develop kinship with amazing queer people of different ages and learn about the ongoing history of queer liberation, the

misogyny within gay culture, and the ways that I could begin to dismantle my own gender identity.

Through these three approaches, I will explore the ways that the three characters respond to sexualized violence and the social responses that they face as queer and trans survivors. I believe that intersectional feminism, queer theory, and response-based therapy can make useful contributions to understanding the experiences of the characters in this study. Through my analysis, I will explore the ways that the fictional characters resist sexualized violence and the impacts of that violence on their lives through the intersecting lens of their multiple and fluid identities, rather than attempting to understand their ways of survival through a lens that is only based on the common ground of their sexualities and their inclusion in the LGBTQ acronym.

3.4 Approach to Analysis

Using reflexive thematic analysis as my methodology and informed by my theoretical orientation, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases of thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, revising themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun et al., 2019). To become familiar with the data, I did an initial reading of the three books. I had previously read Scott Heim's (1995) *Mysterious* Skin in 2004, and Amber Dawn's (2018) *Sodom Road Exit* in 2018. This was my first time reading Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's (2018) *Sketchasy*.

As I read over the books for the first time as part of this thesis, I found myself surprised with what I found. Many of the themes that I had anticipated through my literature review, such as experiences with homophobia when accessing support services, were not found in the books. Rather, I found stories of resistance in the ways that the three characters grew into their

queerness and sexualities with their histories with child sexual abuse. They found this queerness in books, film, and friendships. They found community where they fucked and fell in love. They resisted the idea that sexualized violence would not allow them to experience all the intimacy and love that they deserved. While familiarizing myself with the novels, I recorded casual notes about the sexualized violence that the characters experienced and the ways that the characters survived and resisted sexualized violence. I made casual notes about their connections to the adults who caused them harm and to the people who they had sex with and fell in love with.

I recorded casual notes about the ways the characters experienced oppression. While the characters' experiences with oppression was interesting from a sociological view, I questioned how this oppression tied into the impacts of sexualized violence. As mentioned earlier, the experiences of oppression I had expected to find, such as experiences with homophobia when accessing support services, were not found in the books. What I did find was the ways that oppression touched the characters while they were in relationship to others and the ways that these relationships were impacted by sexualized violence. Homophobia, classism, and transphobia hang over these characters' relationships with the adults who harmed them (e.g. class tension between a daughter and her mother) and with those who they feel safest with (e.g. homophobia experienced by a couple who are also navigating intimacy after violence).

Next, I did a second reading of the three books, coding different sentences, paragraphs, and pages that stood out to me. Through this process, I was led by my research question and my casual notes. Based on my initial reading and familiarization with the sexualized violence that the characters experienced I coded the data based on impact of abuse, survival/resistance, and structural oppression.

When constructing the themes, I noticed patterns in the ways that the three characters experienced intimacy and relationships in a way that resisted the idea that their experiences with child sexual abuse had left them 'too damaged' to be able to enjoy intimacy and have healthy relationships. I noticed the ways that the three characters responded to the adults who caused them harm. For Starla, the adult who caused her harm was her mother, as her mother provided her boyfriends with access to Starla's bedroom by inviting them into the family home. For Alexa, the adult who caused her harm was her father, as her father continuously denies that he sexually abused Alexa as a child. For Neil, the relationship with the adult who caused him harm is complicated. The adult who caused Neil harm was his childhood baseball coach and Neil believes that he and the coach were in love with one another. Neil was able to confront his coach by learning of the experiences of Brian, who was sexually abused by the coach alongside Neil.

I continued with the six phases of thematic analysis and began to construct, revise, and define themes (Braun et al., 2019). I re-read each novel and took notes on the ways that the characters responded to the people in their lives. I as attended to the way that each relationship interweaved with one another; relationships bumping into relationships while being impacted by childhood sexual abuse. These multiple readings allowed me to pull deeper from the pages, re-discovering paragraphs and sentences that had not been recorded during previous reads. Some of these narrative moments surprised me. How had I missed these? I shed so many tears when copying paragraphs and pages to my laptop, these stories of survival touching my own survivor heart. This process resulted in the generation of three themes that will be presented in the next chapter.

3.5 Reliability and Ethical Considerations

Braun and Clarke (2019) have conceptualized the trustworthiness of qualitative research through their standards about theoretical knowingness, researcher assumptions, reflexivity, and transparency:

> Reflexive TA needs to be implemented with theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research (p. 594).

This trustworthiness exists within each decision made by the researcher around coding, theme development, and analysis. As part of my ethical stance using reflexive thematic analysis, I developed themes that "reflect considerable analytic 'work,' and are actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). I adopted a reflexive and thoughtful stance in my research "to develop a richer more nuanced reading of the data, rather than seeking a consensus on meaning" (p. 594).

As I am a queer survivor of sexualized violence, including childhood sexual abuse, I am an insider researcher or a member of the group that I am researching. Because of this, it is very important for me to be transparent about my assumptions about the inquiry and the ways that my assumptions inform my approach to research. Reflexive thematic research allow me to shape my research as a fellow survivor and to be explicit about my experiences with sexualized violence and the ways that these experiences have shaped my research (Clark & Braun, 2021b). As a white queer trans woman in 2022, the ways that I research the ways that LGBTQ youth survive sexualized violence in the 1990s is necessarily different than a researcher who is cis, straight, or

a person of colour, or is conducting research in a different time. Another researcher who is cis, straight, or a person of colour might discover different themes amongst the sources. The texts that I analyzed brought me back to my own experiences as a queer survivor, as well as to my own learning of how to navigate through intimacy and relationships laced with trauma, and my memories of how this was all overshadowed by the belief that I would one day die from AIDS.

In this chapter, I have discussed my methodology, the criteria through which I selected the novels used in this research, and my theoretical orientations. In the next chapter, I will present the findings alongside the analysis. In the fifth chapter, I will provide a discussion and a conclusion.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

4.1 Orientation

How are LGBTQ youth characters in queer-authored literature impacted by their experiences with sexualized violence? This section will provide the publishers' summaries of each of the novels to orientate the reader to the characters and the stories. Each of the stories of childhood sexual abuse and its impacts are embedded in a larger narrative which I might not fully expand on in this thesis. My choices were systematic and carefully considered, not random, and were guided by specific criteria. Neil, Starla and Alexa are the primary focus, as I wanted to center the queer character's storyline and context and their relationship with other characters. For instance, the novel *Mysterious Skin* is told from the perspectives of different characters and centers around two childhood sexual abuse survivors: Brian and Neil. For this thesis, I have chosen to focus on Neil's story, as Brian's sexual orientation is not made explicit in the novel. As well, the novel *Sodom Road Exit* is a paranormal thriller that involves a ghost who possesses Starla, a childhood sexual abuse survivor. While the narrative is centered around the mystery behind the ghost and Crystal Beach –Starla's childhood home– it also focuses on Starla's relationships with her mother and Starla's girlfriend Tamara.

To provide an introduction to the larger stories, I have included the publisher summaries for each of the three novels below.

Mysterious Skin. Scott Heim (1995).

At the age of eight Brian Lackey is found bleeding under the crawl space of his house, having endured something so traumatic that he cannot remember an entire five–hour period of time. During the following years he slowly recalls details from that night, but these fragments are not enough to explain what happened to him, and he begins to believe that he may have been

the victim of an alien encounter. Neil McCormick is fully aware of the events from that summer of 1981. Wise beyond his years, curious about his developing sexuality, Neil found what he perceived to be love and guidance from his baseball coach. Now, ten years later, he is a teenage hustler, unaware of the dangerous path his life is taking. His recklessness is governed by idealized memories of his coach, memories that unexpectedly change when Brian comes to Neil for help and, ultimately, the truth.[1]

Sodom Road Exit. Amber Dawn (2018).

It's the summer of 1990, and Crystal Beach in Ontario has lost its beloved, long-running amusement park, leaving the lakeside village a virtual ghost town. It is back to this fallen community Starla Mia Martin must return to live with her overbearing mother after dropping out of university and racking up significant debt. But an economic downturn, mother-daughter drama, and Generation X disillusionment soon prove to be the least of Starla's troubles: a mysterious and salacious force begins to dog Starla; inexplicable sounds in the night and unimaginable sights spotted on the periphery. Soon enough, Starla must confront the unresolved traumas that haunt Crystal Beach. Sodom Road Exit might read like a conventional paranormal thriller, except that Starla is far from a conventional protagonist. Where others might feel fear, Starla feels lust and queer desire. When others might run, Starla draws the horror nearer. And in turn, she draws a host of capricious characters toward her--all of them challenged to seek answers beyond their own temporal realities.[2]

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[1] Summary retrieved from https://www.harpercollins.ca/9780063139008/mysterious-skin/

[2] Summary retrieved from https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/S/Sodom-Road-Exit

Sketchtasy. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (2018).

Sketchtasy takes place in that late-night moment when everything comes together, and everything falls apart: it's an urgent, glittering, devastating novel about the perils of queer world-making in the mid-'90s. This is Boston in 1995, a city defined by a rabid fear of difference. Alexa, an incisive twenty-one-year-old queen, faces everyday brutality with determined nonchalance. Rejecting middle-class pretensions, she negotiates past and present traumas with a scathing critique of the world. Drawn to the ecstasy of drugged-out escapades, Alexa searches for nourishment in a gay culture bonded by clubs and conformity, willful apathy, and the spectre of AIDS. Is there any hope for communal care? Sketchtasy brings 1990s gay culture startlingly back to life, as Alexa and her friends grapple with the impact of growing up at a time when desire and death are intertwined. With an intoxicating voice and unruly cadence, this is a shattering, incandescent novel that conjures the pain and pageantry of struggling to imagine a future.[3]

Using reflexive thematic analysis as my methodology, and queer theory, intersectional feminism, and response-based therapy as my theoretical orientations, I constructed three themes in response to my research question. These themes represent patterned responses among the characters across the stories: (1) learning to live with contradictions; (2) ambivalence in relationships with adults who caused them harm, and (3) casual sex as a form of resistance to violence. Figure one (1) provides a visual representation of the themes and sub-themes.

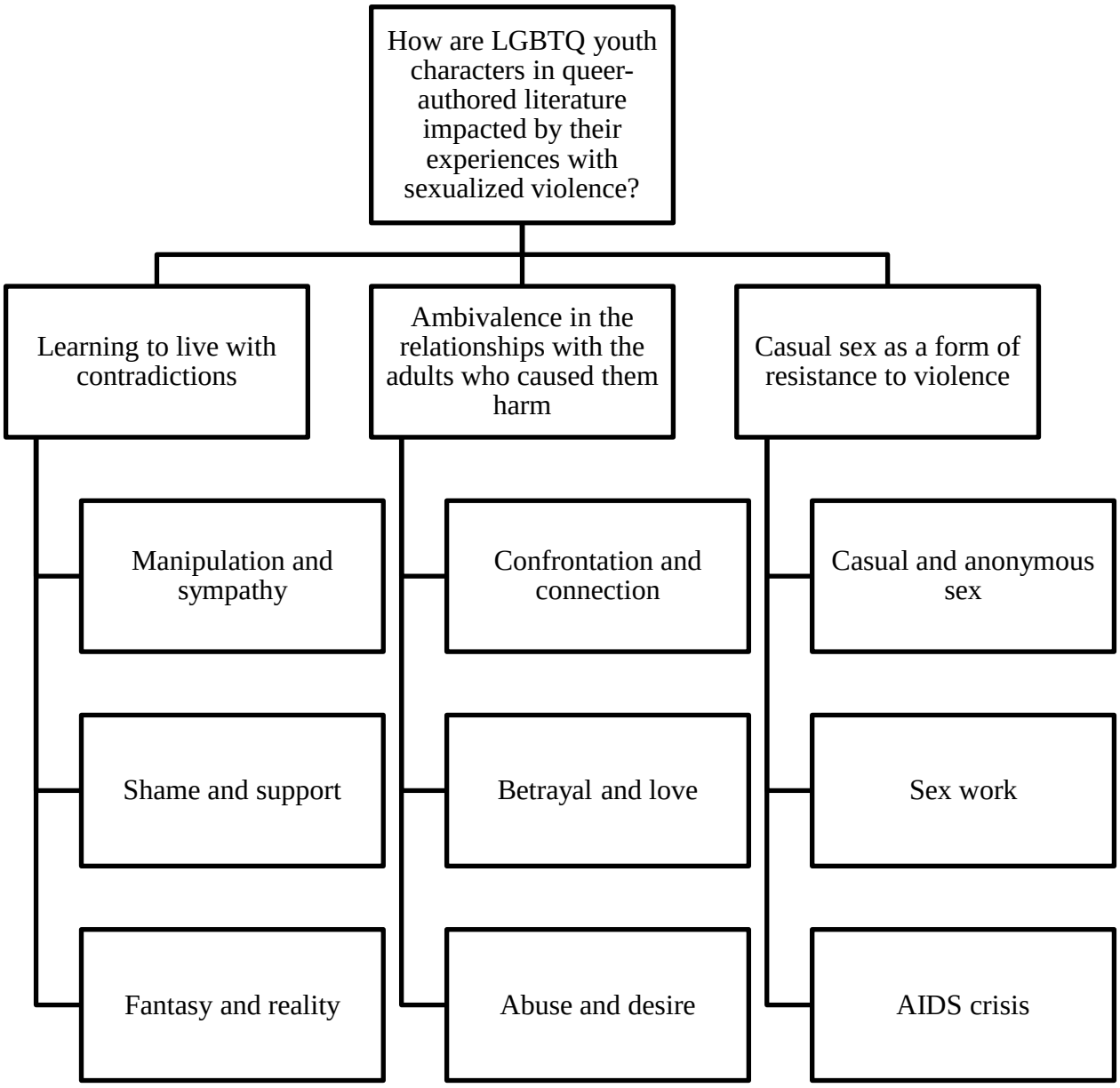
While Alexa and Starla wish for their father and mother (respectfully) to be honest about the abuse, they both also yearn for that parent-child connection. For Neil, the romanticized image

[3] Summary retrieved from https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/S/Sketchtasy

of Coach that he has carried throughout his childhood and adolescence is confronted when he reconnects with another survivor of Coach's abuse.

Figure 1

A code tree for the research question, the three themes, and the nine sub-themes.



4.2 Learning to Live with Contradictions

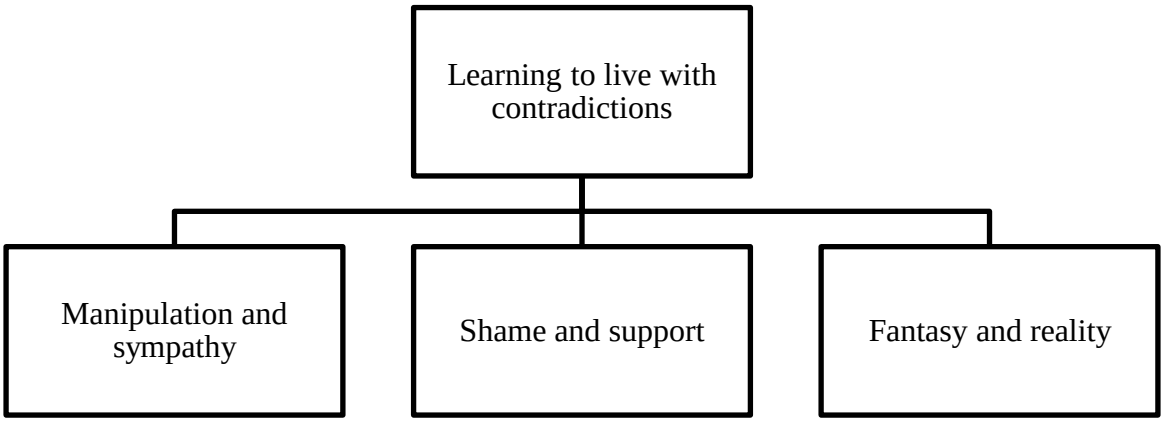
The first theme in the narratives explores the ways that the characters are learning to live with contradictions. These contradictions include manipulation and sympathy, shame and support, and fantasy and reality. Through learning how to live with these contradictions, the characters are able to find a sense of closure from the childhood sexual abuse. Figure two (2) provides a visual representation of the theme and sub-themes.

Manipulation and Sympathy

Alexa is learning to live with the manipulation and sympathy that she receives from her father. Alexa's father sexually abused Alexa when she was a child. Her father has denied the abuse and tries to manipulate Alexa into believing that the abuse never happened. The love that Alexa's father gives her seem inconsistent. Alexa reflects on the differences between how her

Figure 2

A code tree for the theme Learning to live with contradictions



father treated her in public and in private:

> I'm talking about when I was kid and whenever you would invite your friends over they were impressed because I knew the capital of Madagascar, they liked it when I would name the different kinds of cheeses or when Dad told them I was reading the same books he was, like that biography of Stalin, remember that? They thought I was so smart – what did you want to be when you grow up, doctor or lawyer? And there was that time Dad was driving me home from school, and I was telling him about my day, and he just kept nodding his head and I knew he wasn't paying attention. So I said: I'm just going to open the door right here and lie down in the middle of traffic. And he said okay, that sounds good. That sounds good. He said: that sounds good (Sycamore, 2018, p. 115-116).

Alexa has learned to anticipate getting into arguments with her parents. When Alexa tells her father over the phone that she won't be able to complete her semester at college, she is surprised by her father's reaction:

> I can't believe my father's not screaming at me. All he says is that he and my mother won't support me anymore. He doesn't even remind me that I only have a semester left to get off academic probation, and then I can go anywhere I want. He says what are you going to do now, and I tell him I found a job phone canvassing. He doesn't ask me any more questions. He doesn't even ask for the car back -- I thought I might have to drive down to DC. And I don't even want to think about DC. But instead he tells me that I should be in therapy, and I don't tell him I was thinking therapy might be useful while I'm getting ready to confront him. I just say I'll think about it (Sycamore, 2018, p. 37).

Alexa feels shocked when her father does not have the expected reaction to Alexa not being able to complete college. She expects conflict and fighting rather than sympathy as this is what is

predicted in her relationship with her father. In these situation, Alexa responds silently by preparing to confront her father about the abuse.

Throughout the novel, Alexa communicates with her parents over the phone. Sometimes during calls with her mother, her father would listen in on the other extension. After Alexa confronts her father about the sexual abuse, he leaves her an answering machine message:

> He called once, and left a message saying only a monster could do what I accused him of. He said he was in analysis at the time -- nothing like this ever came up in analysis so it couldn't be real. And then I left him a message telling him not to call me again unless he was ready to acknowledge the abuse (Sycamore, 2018, p. 126-127).

Her father's message is a continuation of denial of incest and accusations that Alexa thinks of him as a monster. Alexa responds to this lack of apology by setting boundaries with her father, recognizing that her earlier confrontation has not yet changed their relationship. This response could also be an act of resistance which moves Alexa along in her healing from the abuse without a possible mending of her relationship with her father.

Shame and Support

Starla is learning to live with the shame and support that she receives from her mother. Starla's mother Barbara often dated men who lived on the other side of the Canada-United States border and only usually for a few months at more. The first of Barbara's boyfriends who sexually abused Starla was named Noel. Starla was eight-years old. The love that Starla's mother, Barbara, gives her seems inconsistent. Starla reflects on the mix of care and avoidance that she experienced from Barbara:

> I try to call off the many memories of her materializing everywhereallthetime, of growing up overwhelmed by her pervasive presence, her disregard for privacy. Or her flip side,

> her talent for ignoring me for weeks on end – usually timed with new romances or with break-ups. Always one extreme or the other, like having two different mothers, neither of them family-sitcom nurturing (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 53).

The experiences shared by Starla reveal the contradictory messages and attention that she received from her mother and father. For Starla, the attention that she receives from Barbara is dependent on Barbara's relationships with men. Starla describes the idea that her family home is a brothel, an idea shared by their neighbours (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 53). When Barbara is not in a relationship, Starla is fawned over in a way that seems artificial and disingenuous. These contradictions connect back to the lack of safety that Starla and Alexa experienced in their childhoods, as the love and affection that they experience from their parents is inconsistent and unpredictable, and marked with the history of sexual abuse.

The inconsistency of support and the shame continues through the ways that Barbara downplays the sexualization of her child. When Starla turns 13, the sexual abuse from Barbara's boyfriends shifts to creepy, unwanted attention:

> Barbara was always drawn to vulture-like men who came on strong and overpowering and insatiable. Men who watched me enter and exit the bathroom. Men who found reasons to sit next to me on the sofa. Men who said, "Are you sure you're only thirteen?" and "Pretty girls are supposed to smile," and "I'll teach you how to mow the lawn/drive a car/mix a drink/iron a shirt/tie a tie," and "Your future husband will thank me," and "It's just a joke, right, Barbara? Tell her it's just a joke." And Barbara laughed along, always advising me to "Enjoy it while you can. There will come a day when you'll be insulted when men don't pay attention to you" (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 61-62).

Starla's interactions with Barbara reveal the contradictory ways that young girls may be seen as being sexual beings, rather than being sexualized by the adults in their lives. While we hope that parents would recognize the ways that their children are being sexualized, Barbara is seen as normalizing and encouraging the behaviour from her boyfriends. She fails to recognize the heinousness of the sexual comments towards a child, rather viewing the comments through her own experiences as an adult. As well, she is viewing these comments through heterosexual normativity and assuming that Starla will grow up desiring attention from men.

Starla has learned to anticipate getting into arguments with Barbara. Returning to her childhood home, Starla anticipates the first fight that she will have with her mother:

> Our first fight could be as little as four hours away. […] She'll tap her size-nine foot, and I will shrink a little each time the comfortable rubber sole meets the floor. *You think you can just waltz in and …*" (Amber Dawn, 2017, p. 33).

These interactions reveal the ways that Starla feels on edge with her parents and are emotionally prepared for confrontation, rather than anticipating love. After anticipating a fight, Starla experiences a momentary sweetness from her mother, who slowly sings to her from outside of her bedroom door. This quickly moves to Barbara snapping her lips at Starla – a familiar foreshadowing of the fight that follows, making Starla feel unwelcome in her childhood home. The responses from Starla highlight the contradictions in her mother's behaviours that she has grown up with. She expects conflict and fighting rather than love and support as this is what is predicted in her relationship with her mother. In these situations, Starla responds verbally by pointing out the inconsistency in her mother's argument.

Money issues are a source of conflict between Starla and Barbara, especially since Starla's debt was the reason that she returned home. When Starla and Barbara run into the

mother of one of Starla's old classmates, the two mothers joke about how their daughters are 'still here' at home:

> Barbara perches her elbow on my shoulder, tugs a lock of my hair playfully. The two mothers grin at one another – a parental understanding passes between them. Somehow this is even more uncomfortable than when she forbade me to buy condoms [at the local pharmacy]. "Still here," was Barbara's wording, as if I've been sponging off her this whole time. Still here. I haven't even been home for twenty-four hours (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 47).

Barbara's comments about Starla being 'still here' imply that Starla is an inconvenience rather than a welcome member of the family. Barbara presents herself as a loving mother who takes care of Starla, both emotionally and financially. While Starla is annoyed by Barbara's behaviour, she is not surprised. She often responds with silent annoyance, like in this example, or with silent shame, when Barbara tells Starla's boss that Barbara oversees Starla's paycheques. Through this control, Barbara slices away at Starla's autonomy, much like Starla's lack of safety as a child. This ends up pushing Starla further away from Barbara.

Near the end of the novel, Barbara is confronted with the dangers that Starla has experienced due to a haunted piece of carnival memorabilia that Barbara had bought. As Starla lays on the carpeted floor, Barbara apologizes to Starla, telling Starla that she did not know:

> "I didn't know. I'm sorry, Starla." The fine fibres of Rose's carpet taste awfully salty between my lips. Rose's carpet tickles my skin. Rose's carpet can miraculously recite all the words to "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizises for my Childhood" by poet Sharon Olds. This might be the closest I'll get to validation, to closure. I press my ear down. Listening. Listening. Listening. Maybe I can trust poetry -- and carpets? The

> carpet arrives at the last line of the poem, "… who would I be now that I have forgiven you" (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 393).

Barbara's apologies to Starla about the haunted piece act as a stand-in for the apologies that Starla has always wanted but were never granted. This highlights the contradiction between Barbara recognizing the danger that Starla is presently in and the danger that Starla experienced as a child. Starla responds to this apology as if Barbara is finally acknowledging and apologizing for the danger that she exposed Starla as a child. This response can be read as an act of resistance against the abuse which moves Starla along in her healing from the abuse and towards a possible mending of her relationship with her mother.

Fantasy and Reality

Neil is learning to live with the fantasy and reality around his relationship with Coach. Neil shares his awareness that he was being sexually abused, while also not wanting the abuse to stop. Reflecting on the abuse, Neil shares: "I knew what was happening. Half of me realized it wasn't right. The other half wanted it to happen" (Heim, 1995, p. 35). Two years following the abuse, Neil expands on this contradiction when disclosing about the sexual abuse for the first time with his friend Wendy:

> Sometimes I wanted to tell everyone what was going on. Then he'd do this to me again, and I knew how badly he really wanted it. … Every time he'd do it he'd roll up a five-dollar bill, brand-new so I could even hear it nap and he'd slip it into the back pocket of my jeans or my baseball pants or whatever. It was like getting an allowance. I knew how much it meant to him, in a way, and after a while, it kept going further and further (Heim, 1995, p. 71-72).

Neil's experiences reveal the complexities that can be experienced by childhood sexual abuse survivors who are queer. Neil finds himself attracted to Coach when they first meet, as Coach reminds Neil of the models in his mother's Playgirl magazines. Neil is excited by the attention that Coach shows him. Following the abuse, Neil thinks of Coach as his first love. By responding to the sexual abuse in a way that encourages the abuse to continue, Neil is acting out his fantasies of queer desire and queer love. Neil may also consider the abuse as an affirmation of his own queerness.

Since his childhood, Neil's memories of Coach have been filled with love and desire. Neil is confronted with lost memories when he reconnects with Brian, another baseball player from his childhood:

> It was love, I told myself. Coach had loved me. But there had been others, boys whose faces I'd seen smiling from his photo albums. And I could remember three separate times when he'd brought over boys home to join in, to add fuel to the forbidden. Had one of the three been Brian? These boys' faces stayed vague, beyond surfacing. Perhaps Coach's emotions for them had caused me to feel jealous, inadequate, or damaged; whatever the reason, I had dislocated my memories of them. And their names were as incapable of being conjured as the names of men I'd tricked with from Carey Park, from Ruby's, from anywhere. When it came to names, I remembered *Coach* and nothing more (Heim, 1995, p. 227).

Through his reconnection with Brian, Neil begins to unlock lost memories which form the true nature around his experiences with childhood sexual abuse. These memories provide him with missing pieces which highlight the contradiction between Coach loving him and Coach sexually

abusing him. Through these memories, Neil begins to question the reasons that his mind has pushed these names and faces to the back of his mind.

These memories allow Neil to be able to acknowledge that Coach had sexually abused Brian. Neil remembers the emptiness in Brian's eyes as Coach drives them home following an episode of sexual abuse:

> And I could remember Brian – yes, at least I thought I understood his piece in my past – as he'd sat in the station wagon's backseat, arms held stiff at his sides, his baseball glove still on. The car sped toward Little River, and as the town approached I kept turning to look at Brian, the black pinpricks of his eyes all blurring and blazing, as if trying to focus on something special that was once there, but was there no longer (Heim, 1995, p. 233).

Unlocking the memories of Brian allow Neil to recognize the contradictions between Coach's manipulation around Neil consenting to the sexual acts and Neil being a survivor of sexual abuse. These memories provide him with missing pieces which highlight the contradiction between Coach loving him and Coach sexually abusing him. Neil witnesses the loss of something special in Brian's eyes and begins to consider his experiences as sexual abuse through Brian's own experiences.

These memories allow Neil to be able to realize that Coach had sexually abused him. Neil's "once-beautiful memories" (Heim, 1995, p. 240) continue to shift, allowing him to question the idealized version of him enjoying the childhood sexual abuse:

> I pictured the black scar on his thumbnail, now fishing around in the place where only one other person had been, so many years before. I briefly drifted back there. "Tell me you like it, Neil, tell Coach how much you like it. I'd told him so. Had that been truth, or just a stream of gibberish? "Tell me" (Heim, 1995, p. 244).

Neil tells Brian about how Neil responded to Coach during the sexual abuse:

> "And he took off my clothes. I wasn't even conscious about being naked; it's like God or whoever had created me to be that way. And I oohed and aahed to give the impression that what he was doing to me was the greatest thing I'd ever known." In a way, I thought it was. Or it had been, at one time, now only part of memory (p. 287).

Through Brian's experiences, Neil shifts from the idea consenting to having sex with Coach to the reality of Coach having sexually abused him. He questions the 'truths' of enjoyment of the sex and the ways that he performed for Coach. Neil responds to Coach's sexual abuse by being honest with Brian and sharing all of the details that are remembered about the night Coach sexually abused Neil and Brian. The novel ends with Neil holding Brian in his arms and stroking Brian's hair while apologizing for everything that happened.

Analysis

The first theme about learning to live with contradictions reveals how the characters experience manipulation, shame and fantasy as a result of their experiences with childhood sexual abuse. Alexa experiences manipulation from her father around the childhood sexual abuse, a continuation of the manipulations that adults often use to groom children as part of childhood sexual abuse (Katz & Barnetz, 2015). The shame that Starla experiences from her mother is a continuation of the shame that many childhood sexual abuse survivors experience shame as they process through what has happened or continues to happen to them (MacGinley et al., 2019). The fantasies that Neil maintains of his experiences with Coach overshadow the realities of the childhood sexual abuse, repressing dark memories like many other childhood sexual abuse survivors have (Sigurdardottir & Halldorsdottir, 2013).

Response-based therapy allows us to recognize smalls acts of resistance performed by the characters in response the contradictions that they are learning to live with. As a child, Starla responds to the sexual abuse by drawing red x's on part of the wall that no one else can find. The x's act both as proof that the sexual abuse was happening and as a hidden opposition to the violence that she is experiencing (Wade, 1997). This small act of resistance is revisited when Starla returns to her childhood home and finds the x's. She remembers the way that she fought back with each tiny line of the x's following every instance of abuse.

As young adults, Alexa and Starla perform small acts of resistance against the conditions in their families that allowed the childhood sexual abuse possible (Wade, 1997). Alexa resists the manipulation that she experiences from her parents by silently preparing to confront her father about the sexual abuse after a phone call where her father insists that Alexa should be in therapy. Using the therapy sessions paid for by her father, Alexa works towards uncovering her lost memories and planning on how to bring the sexual abuse forward to her parents.

Returning to her childhood home and the place where the childhood sexual abuse happened, Starla resists the contradicting shame and support that she experiences from her mother, Barbara. While Barbara refuses to acknowledge how she put her daughter in danger as a child, she takes some responsibility for the danger that Starla experiences throughout the novel. Starla performs a small act of resistance by imagining her mother's apology as an apology for the childhood sexual abuse. This small act allows Starla to imagine a relationship with her mother based on respect and equality (Wade, 1997).

Using an intersectional feminist lens, we can better understand the unique experiences of the characters. Their experiences as LGBTQ youth are different than youth who are straight or cis (Buchanan & Jamieson, 2017). Alexa, Neil, and Starla were affected by childhood sexual

abuse at a time in their lives where their sexual identities were on the cusp of or beginning to be formed (Walker et al., 2012). This is coupled with possible feelings of "mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, confusion, and isolation" (Walker et al., 2012, p. 391) which can be experienced by survivors of all sexual identities. As well, Alexa and Neil both live in poverty. The overwhelming debts that Starla accumulated while studying in Toronto are a significant tension between mother and daughter.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who experience rejection from their family experience more struggles with their sexual identity (Bregman et al., 2013). This rejection may push LGBTQ youth into being forced into learning to live with contradictions from their families, much like the manipulation, sympathy, shame, and support experienced by Alexa and Starla. As young adults, Alexa and Starla both hide many parts of their lives from their parents, putting physical and emotional distance between themselves and their childhood homes. When returning to Crystal Beach, Starla hides all parts of her queerness from everyone around her, including her mother, while she is open about her queerness in Toronto. The return to her hometown pulls her back into the shame that she experienced during her old life there, compounding with the shame brought with the childhood sexual abuse that took place in her childhood bedroom.

Using a queer theory lens, we can better understand the unique experiences of the characters as they learn to live with contradiction, as queer theory allows us to move from either/or binary thinking to allow for nuanced thinking. Queer theory highlights the ways that the characters respond to sexualized violence through a lens that is not restricted to the sex binaries, gender binaries, and heterosexual desire (Butler, 1999; Cannon et al., 2015) and disrupts binary thinking about surviving sexualized violence (Cannon et al., 2015; Vachon, 2020).

Queering our perspective of survivors of childhood sexual abuse allow us to notice the tensions between Starla and her mother, Barbara. When Barbara witnesses her boyfriends sexualizing her daughter, Barbara normalizes and encourages the behaviour from her boyfriends. Barbara reinforces both the comments and heterosexual normativity with her assumptions that the comments should be welcomed by Starla, and that Starla will grow up desiring attention from men.

Queer theory allows us to question the binary assumptions that readers may have about the ways that the characters are learning to live with contradictions. Alexa confronts her father about the childhood sexual abuse, but her father refuses to acknowledge or apologize for the abuse. While Alexa does not receive the response that she had hoped for, she is still able to move forward in her healing process. Recognizing that Alexa does not need an acknowledgement or apology in order to heal disrupts the either/or assumptions that may be made about survivors of sexualized violence (Cannon et al., 2015; Vachon, 2020). Alexa is able to set boundaries and maintain these boundaries with her father *and* embrace the possibility that she will once day have a relationship with her father.

Neil learns to live with the contradictions of the fantasy and reality with his experiences with childhood sexual abuse through his shared experiences with Brian. While Neil grew up recognizing that Coach having sex with children was wrong, Neil believed that he and Coach loved one another and that he consented to having sex with Coach. Unlike Brian, Neil does not believe that his childhood was ruined by Coach. Neil allows himself to remember the ways that Coach had manipulated him around consenting to sex and realizes that he was never in love with Coach. Queer theory also allows us to disrupt the either/or assumptions around the ways that children who have been sexually abused react to the abuse (Cannon et al., 2015; Vachon, 2020).

Neil's experiences exist in a space different from consent and being ruined, but in a space where he acknowledges that he was sexually abused.

This section examined the ways that the characters are learning how to live with contradictions. After returning to Crystal Beach, Alexa maintains boundaries with her father alongside the possibility of a future relationship. Starla revisits the hidden opposition to the violence that she experienced while imagining a relationship with her mother based on respect and equality. Neil's experiences disrupt the binary ideas around consenting to sex and being ruined by abuse. The next theme will explore the characters' ambivalence in the relationships with the adults who caused them harm.

4.3 Ambivalence in the Relationships with the Adults Who Caused Them Harm

The second theme in the narratives explores the characters' ambivalence in the relationships with the adults who caused them harm. This section will explore the ways that the characters' feelings towards the adults shift and contradict with one another throughout their stories, mixing with love, desire for connection, disrespect, and disconnect. Figure three (3) provides a visual representation of the theme and sub-themes.

Confrontation and Connection

In response to Alexa learning to live with the manipulation and sympathy that she receives from her father, she experiences ambivalent feelings of confrontation and connection. When Alexa was thirteen, her feelings around her parents changed: "I decided I had no respect for my parents at all but I was still trapped and now I don't want to talk to them ever again" (Sycamore, 2018, p. 209). While Alexa's memories of the childhood sexual abuse have not yet returned, she is able to sense the danger that exists within her house. Alexa responds to this sense

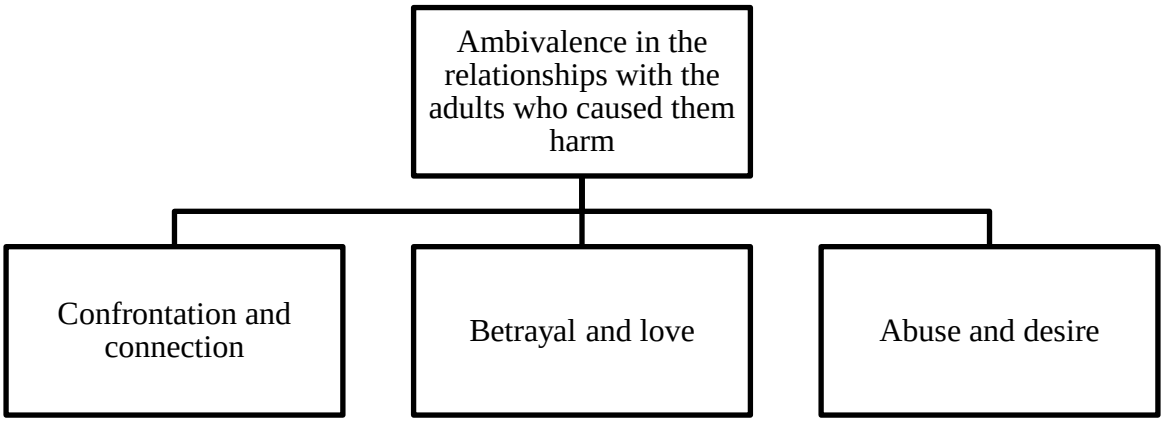
of danger by distancing herself as much as she can from her parents. She recognizes that she is trapped and unsafe within her childhood home and begins to come up with plans to escape to an idea of safety.

Throughout her story, Alexa's ambivalence around her father as a young adult are shown through incest flashbacks and her plans to confront her father. Alexa begins to see a new therapist and lets him know that she is preparing to confront her father:

> I tell Barry I'm getting ready to confront my father about sexually abusing me as a kid so I want to go right to the memories that I'm aware of but can't always feel. I want to figure out everything that happened, I want to know exactly when and where and I know maybe that's impossible so if I can't know then at least I want to feel it (Sycamore, 2018,

Figure 3

A code tree for the theme Ambivalence in the relationships with the adults who caused them harm



p. 67).

Barry guides Alexa through hypnotic trances where Alexa practices protecting herself from her father. She had previously seen a therapist, who guided Alexa away from talking about the abuse and accused Alexa of giving him mixed messages. Confronting her father is a huge risk for Alexa as it could rupture her relationship with both of her parents. Alexa believes that this is the most important response that she can have to the sexual abuse.

Alexa confronts her father during a phone call from her parents where they bring up the sexual abuse. Alexa's mother begins to ask about Alexa's claims that she was sexually abused by someone in the family, and Alexa realizes that her father is also on the phone with her mother:

> And here's the moment where my heart stops, I mean I can't tell you about that moment I can only tell you about the moment after. Because my father's on the phone and he's saying: Karla thinks you believe something sexual happens between us. And I don't know what to say. And my father says it again (Sycamore, 2018, p. 114).

The realization that her father is on the phone and addressing the sexual abuse leaves Alexa feeling speechless. She responds by dropping the phone and running to the bathroom, knowing that she can confront her father in that moment. She does some coke, reminds herself that she is ready, and tells her parents that she has started therapy again so she can confront her father.

Alexa's father calls Alexa psychotic and blames her therapist for their conversation. Alexa's parents tell her that they are worried about her 'lifestyle' and that she might be in danger. Alexa responds by repeating the confrontation and setting a boundary with her father:

> That's when I say I know you sexually abused me, you raped me, you molested me, and I don't want to talk to you ever again unless you can come to terms with it. And then he starts screaming again so I hang up the phone. I hang up the phone and unplug it, and

> then I take a deep breath. I go into the bathroom, and I do another bump. I feel like a different person. I feel totally calm. I feel fine. I feel like I can go on with the rest of my life (Sycamore, 2018, p. 117).

Alexa confronts her father in a way that is calm and direct, just as she has practiced in her therapy sessions. She responds her to her father's screaming by setting a boundary, ending the call, and unplugging the phone. This response allows her to disconnect from her father and his lies about the abuse both physically and emotionally. While this response does not resolve in her father admitting to the abuse, it allows Alexa to go on with the rest of her life knowing that the confrontation is now in the past.

There is a moment when Alexa is about to confront her father and she reflects on wanting a nice moment between them first: "I wanted to invite them to Boston. I wanted to spend a day together first, do something relaxing, appreciate anything of value that we might have together" (Sycamore, 2018, p. 114). After spending her adolescence hating her parents and distancing herself as much as she could from them, Alexa still dreams of a time when they can appreciate one another. She believes in the possibilities of change but recognizes that her relationship with her parents cannot change until her father admits to the childhood sexual abuse.

Betrayal and Love

As Starla learns to live with the shame and support that she receives from her mother, she experiences ambivalent feelings of betrayal and love. Returning to her childhood home as a young adult, Starla is reminded of those feelings of danger and harm and feelings of hatred towards herself and her mother, Barbara. She goes to her bedroom and is confronted with the "x" that she marked on the wall the first night that Noel sexually abused her:

> I didn't imagine the furious thud of my body suddenly rolling onto my bedroom floor. Nor the sharp crane of my neck as I edged my head under the bed. I urged my eyes to swiftly adjust to the shadow, frantically scanning the wall just above the skirting board. Inches away from fallen Jesus I spot the first small squiggly "x" drawn on the wallpaper in Jiffy Marker. Half a dozen more "x"'s sprawl upward, some in black or blue permanent marker, others in faded number two pencil. For a moment, I want to yank my bed away from the wall to count how many "x"'s there are (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 34).

The evidence of the "x"'s proves to her the times that her mother's boyfriends sexually abused her:

> And isn't this what survivors of childhood sexual abuse want? Proof? Some concrete evidence that confirms we didn't make this shit up. I've read *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*. I should consider myself fortunate that I have the validation of an x. And another x. Another xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx… I still wonder why Barbara kept a child molester around the longest. Was he extra charming with her, extra patient and tender and fun for her, so he could have ongoing access to me? (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 61).

The "x"s are proof of memories that Starla's brain have repressed, as Noel becomes "negative space" (Amber Dawn, p. 61) once he enters her bedroom. Her childhood bedroom and the "x"'s evoke hatred towards herself and Barbara:

> I hate myself for feeling like this, again. I hate being back in my old room. I might hate my own mother. "Losers live in the past. Losers live in the past. Losers live in the past." I don't know who I'm quoting, but this motivational-speak too has become a chant (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 62).

The return to her childhood bedroom reminds Starla of the inconsistency of love and care and the lack of safety discussed in the earlier theme about living with contradiction. The proof of her experiences with childhood sexual abuse and the lack of protection from Barbara moves Starla to wonder if she hates her mother. Starla blames her mother for providing access to Noel and the other men to Starla and her bedroom. As well, this segment highlights the ways that survivors of childhood sexual abuse who have repressed memories may search for a way to prove that the abuse happened.

Reconnecting with her mother, Starla pushes herself to show love towards Barbara, knowing that this love will likely be rejected. Finding Barbara sitting on Starla's childhood bed, Starla tells herself: "Go. In. Sit beside. Your mother. Perform actions of attachment. Act tender and maybe real tenderness will follow" (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 53). She shares many sweet moments between herself and Barbara. While visiting the Crystal Lake amusement park grounds, Starla remembers feeling safe with Barbara as they rode the sky ride together:

> This slab of concrete is where I would have boarded the sky ride. I'm certain that I stood exactly here, waiting for the turquoise-blue gondola to coast down. This sky ride was one of the few that Barbara would go on. She'd squeeze my hand in strong pulses as we floated above Lake Erie. It didn't matter how old I got, her hand was always bigger than mine (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 59).

Starla experiences feelings of hatred when Barbara comments on Starla's childhood. Barbara tells her new boyfriend Rahn that Starla has been a 'sourpuss' since she was seven, the age that Starla was when Noel began to sexually abuse her:

> We've had this conversation before. Maybe once, maybe several times, maybe I'm too 'sour' to be sure how many times I've asserted the boundary where I tell Barbara she has

> no right to comment on my mood as a child or teenager. That she lost that parental privilege when she brought a predator into the house years ago. Or, if she can't help herself, which it seems she can't, she can talk about what a moody child I was, if she also owns up to being a shitty mother within the same conversation (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 165-166).

Barbara's comment about Starla being a 'sourpuss' since she was seven brings Starla back into the memories of her childhood. Again, she is reminded of the inconsistency of love and care and the lack of safety that she experienced with Barbara. In this segment, Starla reflects on how Barbara seemed unaware of the childhood sexual abuse and discounted the ways that Starla survived through the abuse as being a moody child. As an adolescent, Starla would respond by setting boundaries with Barbara, asking Barbara not to make comments on Starla's childhood. In this present-day example, Starla responded by leaving the room and going into her bedroom to take space from Barbara.

Starla freezes when Rahn comments on how Starla inherited 'Barbara's good looks', but later finds herself warming up to Rahn: "I hope Rahn lasts another few weeks. He's nice. More than nice. If my mother was smart, she'd at least wait until after her birthday to carry out her knee-jerk pattern break-up" (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 169).

While in university, Starla wrote a letter to her mother, confronting her about how she exposed Starla to sexual abuse. Starla reflects on this letter while back in her childhood home:

> Somewhere in this claustrophobic bungalow is that letter I wrote to Barbara, during my campus women's centre revelations, about how she failed to protect me from sexual abuse. Most likely I wrote the words "sexual abuse" in that letter. I was so damn empowered to break the silence or whatever the fuck. I can't imagine writing those words

> now, actually putting it down on paper or speaking it aloud. Apparently, I've lost my voice. And not only can't I imagine being acknowledged by Barbara (who never wrote me back) it occurs to me that I no longer care about her acknowledgement. What could she possibly say to remedy the venom between us? (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 173-174)

Starla's letter provided her with a way to confront her mother in a way that protected her from immediate risk or response. While her mother never responded to the letter, it is likely that she still read the words. This segment highlights two ways that Starla has responded to her mother, both acts of resistance. The past letter was a direct response driven by empowerment. The present-day response of no longer caring about Barbara's acknowledgment recognizes that, in this moment, confronting her mother might not help their relationship.

Starla and Barbara experience a moment of reckoning when Barbara discovers that Starla is again moving out of her childhood home. When Starla notices Barbara standing in the doorway, Starla thinks of the questions that she wishes her mother would ask:

> Here is her chance to ask me if I am gay. The chance for her to ask where I'm moving to, when I'm leaving. Was I really molested as a kid? Is she a bad mother? Can I perform miracles? Am I haunted? Will I live to see twenty-five? To ask me anything at all? (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 308).

When Barbara goes into the basement to find bins for packing, Starla becomes frustrated: "I don't have the skill to make our relationship work. Or maybe I don't care. Both and neither are true" (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 308-309). Barbara tells Starla that she dreamed Starla would "get over being so fucking angry" and they could finally be friends.:

> A hundred responses, which range from "I love you" to "I wish I was raised by wolves," parade through my thoughts. I wish I had an angel-sanctioned task to assign us. How

> much easier would that be? I say, “I suppose you did better than me. I didn’t even have the dream” (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 310).

On a piece of loose-leaf paper tucked into a poetry book by Sharon Olds, Starla writes that she and Barbara still have time for that friendship. This poetry book is visited again when Barbara apologizes to Starla about the danger that Starla was presently in. Starla realizes that she had lost the ability to dream about having a friendship with her mother and voices this to Barbara. The conversation between Starla and Barbara marks a crossroads where Starla begins the journey towards healing and forgiveness for her mother.

As Starla worries about surviving the ghostly horrors of Crystal Lake, she reflects on the love that she has for her mother:

> I wish that she’ll never have to bury her child. That one day I’ll make her proud. Or at the very least, I’ll keep living. Those two wishes are enough. Right now, they have to be enough (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 387-388).

These moments highlight the love that Starla has for Barbara, despite the memories of her childhood and their present-day tensions. In these passages, we witness that importance of Starla’s longing for her mother to see her and to give her love and affection. This begins with Starla as a child, holding her mother’s hand which always seems bigger than her own, and stretches to Starla’s wishes that Barbara will not have to grieve for her dead child. Starla throughout the years wants her mother to be proud of her.

Abuse and Desire

As Neil learns to live with the fantasy and reality around his relationship with Coach, he experiences ambivalent feelings of abuse and desire. Neil’s thoughts of Coach are a mixture of

awareness that what Coach did was wrong and romance. The idea that Coach's behaviour was wrong does not stop Neil from thinking fondly on the experiences:

> Oftentimes I wonder where Coach lives, what's he's doing, whether like prison or lynch mobs or disease hasn't killed him. But looking back it doesn't matter. What matters is how, for the first time in my life, I felt as if I existed *for* something (Heim, 1995, p. 38).

As Neil has not have any contact with Coach since the summer that the sexual abuse took place, he is left to rumours around town about Coach and his own imagination:

> I knew he'd moved from Hutchinson. At school, I'd heard a grapevine story about someone's parents being suspicious, causing Coach to quit Little League. At that precise moment, he might have been laying in a bed in some other state with another kid like me. For all I knew, he could have been dead (Heim, 1995, p. 88).

The idea that Coach might be dead further cements the romantic idealization:

> That idea seemed incredible romantic. If I'd been alone and high, my imagination would have roamed – me dressed in black, lumbering towards Coach's open coffin, a tear on my cheek, to center a single white lily on his motionless and impeccable chest (Heim, 1995, p. 88).

As mentioned in the earlier theme about living with contradictions, Neil's experiences reveal the complexities that can be experienced by childhood sexual abuse survivors who are queer. Neil imagines Coach as being his first love and compares all other men (young and old) to Coach. While he sometimes hooks up with guys his own age, he finds himself mostly attracted to older men who remind him of Coach. For Neil, his experiences with Coach have become an integral part of his queer identity as well as his emotional and sexual development. While the characters

recognize the danger and harm that stemmed from their experiences sexual abuse, Neil considers his experiences with Coach to be part of growing up queer.

Neil begins to experience ambivalence in his feelings about Coach when he reconnects with Brian. Through witnessing the effects of the shared trauma on Brian, Neil is faced with the realities of his relationship with Coach:

> And I could remember Coach, as well, perhaps better now than ever before. But something had changed. “Love” -- that was what I’d always termed the emotion I’d carried for Coach. Now it was different, an emotion I had no adequate word for (Heim, 1995, p. 289).

Neil tells Brian about the summer that the abuse took place, reflecting on the belief that he and Coach were in love with one another:

> “This will sound odd, but when it first started happening, the feeling I felt more than anything else was honoured.” Brian looked at the floor, nodding. “He had chosen me, you know? Out of all the boys on the team, he’d picked me. Like I’d been blessed or something. He taught me things no other boy on the team or at school could know. I was his… After that, there was no turning back. From then on, I’d do anything he wanted. It lasted that whole summer. We were … in love.” Those words were no longer accurate. I tried to spit out a laugh when I said them, possibly because I’d never said them aloud, had only kept them silent, for years, inside my head. But my throat had no laughter left in it. “I guess I sound like I’m preaching, like there’s a moral here, that I should start bawling and scream ‘my childhood was taken from me,’ But I don’t believe that” (Heim, 1995, p. 285-286).

Through Brian's experiences, Neil shifts from the idea that he and Coach loved one another to recognizing that Coach had sexually abused him. Neil shifts away from imagining Coach as being his first love, while also acknowledging that he does not consider himself a victim. While Neil recognizes the harm that Coach caused him and the other boys that summer, he still considers his experiences with Coach to be part of growing up queer. Through Brian's healing and learning the details of the truth, Neil experiences a sense of awareness and closure on that idealized chapter of his life.

Analysis

The second theme about ambivalence reveals the characters' shifting feelings of contradiction and connection, betrayal and love, and abuse and desire because of their experiences with childhood sexual abuse. Alexa meets with different therapist in preparation for confronting her father about the childhood sexual abuse, a goal often encouraged for survivors of incest (Kirschner et al, 2014). Starla feels betrayed by her mother who ignored the childhood sexual abuse and failed to protect Starla. Alongside the trauma that they continue to experience, Alexa and Starla crave connection and love from the family members who caused them harm. While research has been conducted about the desire of adults who sexually abuse children (Liddle, 1993), Neil experiences desire towards Coach, who sexually abused Neil as a child – a desire that continues through adolescence and into young adulthood.

Response-based therapy allows us to recognize smalls acts of resistance performed by the characters in response to the ambivalence that they feel towards the adults who caused them harm. As a young teen, Alexa responds to the sexual abuse by deciding that she no longer has respect for her parents and would never talk to them again. These decisions by Alexa act as a silent opposition to the violence that she is experiencing (Wade, 1997). While no longer having

respect for her parents, she does engage enough in a relationship with them so her parents to support her financially while she is in university. After confronting her father over the phone and distancing herself from her parents, Alexa performs a small act of resistance by setting boundaries with her father, giving herself the opportunity to establish a life away from her parents where she can thrive (Wade, 1997).

For Starla, the red x's on part of the wall of her childhood bedroom that no one else can find act not only as a hidden opposition to the violence, but also as proof that the sexual abuse happened (Wade, 1997). After returning to her childhood home, Starla feels validation in the proof that the sexual abuse had actually happened, as her brain as repressed many of the memories. It has been years since she witnessed the x's, and those years had created doubt in her mind.

Starla performs small acts of resistance after Barbara's new boyfriend Rahn joins their lives, reminding Starla of her mother's boyfriends who had sexually abused her as a child. Patterns from Starla's childhood and adolescence revisit the mother and daughter, as Barbara tells Rahn that Starla had been a 'sourpuss' since she was a child. Starla responds to Barbara's comments in the same way that she would as an adolescent – by setting boundaries with her Barbara and taking physical space.

The difference between adolescent Starla and young adult Starla lays in the interactions between Starla and Barbara's boyfriend Rahn. Starla notices that Rahm does not affirm Barbara's comments about Starla being a 'sourpuss'. Starla freezes when Rahn comments on how Starla inherited 'Barbara's good looks', but later finds herself warming up to Rahn. When Rahn asks to join Starla in her bedroom, Starla reminds herself that Rahn is not going to harm her, like Barbara's past boyfriends had. Starla welcomes Rahn as part of her and Barbara's life.

Through these small acts of resistance against the impact of the childhood sexual abuse on her relationship with her mother, Starla is able to dream of a relationship with her mother based on respect and equality (Wade, 1997) – a dream that she had never experienced.

Using an intersectional feminist lens, we can better understand the ambiguity that the characters felt towards the adults in their lives. Parents and caregivers of LGBTQ youth can have different knowledges about queer identities and sexualities and may not have any queer people in their lives or communities. They may initially react to their children being LGBTQ with suspicion, certainly, or surprise (van Bergan et al., 2021). LGBTQ youth risk facing rejection and frustration from their parents and caregivers when they come out (van Bergan et al., 2021). During the 1980s and 1990s, LGBTQ youth risked facing discrimination and stigmatization around HIV and AIDS from their parents and caregivers (van Bergan et al., 2021). Parents and caregivers might not even know how to begin conversations about queer sex with the children or adolescents in their lives (Flores et al., 2019).

While the reader is aware that Starla hides her queerness from her mother, it is not revealed if Alexa and Neil are 'out' to their families. This lack of disclosure does not take away from the desire for connection and love that the characters have for the adults in their lives. Regardless of whether the characters are 'out' or not, they may still experience the fear of rejection and frustration that comes with being an LGBTQ youth, especially in the 1990s. Every child craves the love, connection, and acceptance that they deserve, regardless of their families' views on sexuality and gender.

Queer theory allows us to explore the ambivalence in the feelings that Neil has for Coach. As mentioned in the previous theme, Neil's experiences exist in a space different from consent and being ruined, but in a space where he acknowledges that he was sexually abused (Cannon et

al., 2015; Vachon, 2020). A contributing factor to this is the desire that Neil has for Coach. This desire is a queered desire (Butler, 1999; Cannon et al., 2015), a desire that reveals the complexities that can be experienced by childhood sexual abuse survivors who are queer. Through the childhood sexual abuse, Neil acts out his fantasies of queer desire and queer love. Neil may also consider the abuse as an affirmation of his own queerness. Neil imagines Coach as being his first love and compares all other men (young and old) to Coach. While the characters recognize the danger and harm that stemmed from their experiences sexual abuse, Neil considers his experiences with Coach to be part of growing up queer.

This section examined the ways that the characters experience ambivalence in the relationships with the adults who caused them harm. Alexa gives herself the opportunity to establish a life away from her parents where she can thrive. Starla dreams of a relationship with her mother based on respect and equality. Neil experiences a queered desire towards the man who sexually abused him. The final theme will explore the way that the characters use casual sex as a form of resistance to violence.

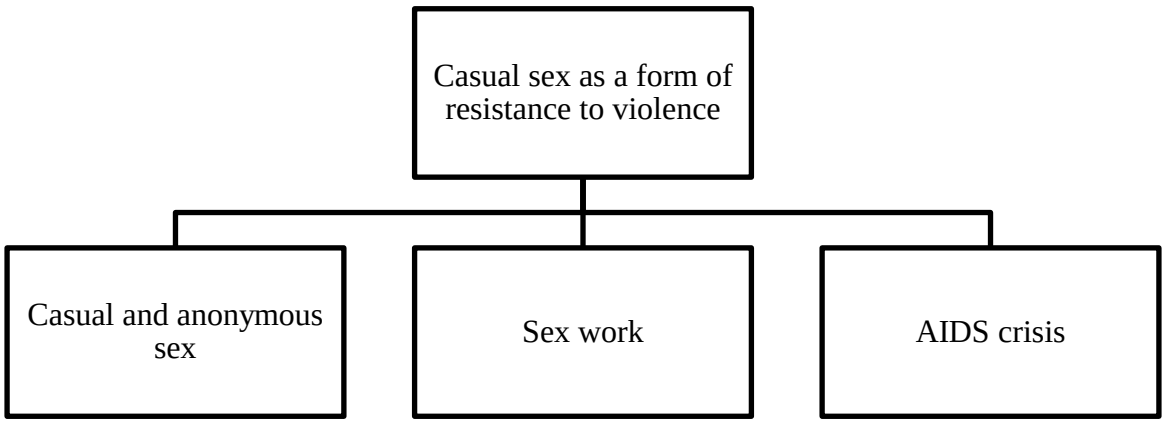
4.4 Casual Sex as a Form of Resistance to Violence.

The third theme in the narratives explores the ways that the characters use casual sex as a form of resistance to violence. The characters' experiences with sex develop as they grow from adolescence to adulthood. As young adults, the characters navigate through casual and anonymous sex, sex work, and the AIDS crisis. Figure four (4) provides a visual representation of the theme and sub-themes.

As an adolescent, Alexa used sex with older men in bathrooms to explore her queerness and sexuality. Re-reading David Wojnarowicz's 1991 memoir *Close to the Knives*, she reflects on first engaging in anonymous sex:

> The way driving becomes sex becomes imagination becomes intimacy becomes loneliness, you turn the page past the rest stop and the silhouette of a man, to an image of a guy jerking off in the top left corner of the page, but it's the next page where I see myself in this guy who leans forward to suck someone off. Someone's resting his hand on my head as he leans back into something so close to pain while the background looks like smoke billowing up – the theatre the truck stop the bathroom the park, whatever makes sense and doesn't make sense this hope for connection. That's what David first gave me, a language for talking about my own desires that before I still thought I needed to

Figure 4
A code tree for the theme Casual sex as a form of resistance to violence



> overcome. Because when I went to those bathrooms as a teenager I was trying not to feel, over and over again these old guys, guys like Nate with pasty skin and pink sweaty bodies, over and over again these guys sucking the drive I hated but couldn't stop. And then afterward, once I remembered about my father, I thought oh, I wanted to beat him, to anything else. […] And I thought oh, this is what sex could mean, should mean – a flash, an explosion, a connection so rare, so possible, so hopeful, so empty (Sycamore, 2018, p. 205-206).

Alexa describes her sex drive as something that she hated but could not stop as she connects her sexuality to the abuse that she experienced by her father. While Neil saw his experiences with Coach an integral part of his queer identity, Alexa may have considered that the childhood sexual abuse caused her to become attracted to men. For Alexa, sex is an act of resistance that she uses to confront the shameful feelings about desire and sexuality. For Alexa, it wasn't until she was intimate with someone that she trusted that she was able to begin to understand the sexual abuse that she had experienced as a child.

Not only was having sex with men a way to win the battle against the stigma of her desire and sexuality, but it was a way to resist the violence brought on by her father. Alexa reflects on how the bathrooms where she engaged in anonymous sex were located on the way to her father's office:

> I was on the way to my father's office, and doesn't that make so much sense now. Because first I was trying not to feel anything in these interactions that I craved in spite of all my shame, and then I was aware of something else, I didn't know what exactly, but there was a way that this secret world felt like a trap but also a place I could escape to. I

> will never be on the way to my father's office again, but maybe I'm still looking for the place that I can escape to (Sycamore, 2018, p. 207).

The connection of the bathroom to her father's office expands on the way that casual and anonymous sex can be a form of resistance against the abuse that she experiences by her father. This segment also makes a connection between the shame and secrecy of both the anonymous sex and the sexual abuse. The bathroom represents a space of both entrapment and escape, yet a temporary way to escape from the shame.

Casual sex follows the characters into young adulthood. Starla's sexual encounters are usually one-night stands and short-term flings, earning her a reputation as someone who would not want a second date. One night, she is awakened by the cries from a woman on the other side of her apartment door:

> I crept out of bed and crouched down on my bamboo doormat to listen to the delicate and asinine pleadings of this drunken fuck. "I don't understand why you are avoiding me," and, "You can't tell me there wasn't a connection," and, "Am I nothing to you." The volume rose with each question, until one question was repeatedly shouted: "Am I nothing?" […] The question "Am I nothing?" tormented me for weeks afterward. Why should I have to endorse someone else's existence? Most days, I barely know what's holding me to this earth. Do I go around demanding others to validate my worth? No. I do not (Amber Dawn, 2018, p. 29-30).

To avoid her one-night stands finding her again, Starla removed the numbers of her apartment from her door. For Starla, casual sex is not only an act of resistance to the sexual abuse, but also to developing feelings for or connections with other women. She often forgets the names of the

women that she has sex with and wonders why they would want to spend the night afterwards. Casual sex is a way for Starla to protect her heart from allowing herself to be vulnerable.

Many of Neil's and Alexa's sexual experiences as a young adult in the novels have been for money. While Neil has been with a few guys this age, he is fascinated with the idea of being with an older man again. He has also been fascinated with the idea of sex work since he was a kid:

> "Old gays will pay anything to get off with someone else. Anything different than their own hands," I said. "It's that feeling of a young guy's skin touching theirs. Think of it as a service. They could get something from me, and I could get something from them" (Heim, 1995, p. 85).

Sex work can be a way to ensure the casualness and anonymity of sex:

> He knew nothing about me, nothing but a first name, four measly letters that could have been another lie. He didn't know a single truth about my life. He didn't even know my face, a face that wouldn't be the same tomorrow, in the mundane light of day (Heim, 1995, p. 168).

Sex work allows Neil and Alexa to maintain a sense of control over their sexual encounters. They are able to set the conditions and limitations around what they are willing to do with their tricks. They can be themselves or to put on a new identity. Neil visits a local gay bar, where he pretends to be the son of an actor and a stewardess, only in town for a week. Alexa uses the name Tyler and presents herself in a boyish manner when tricking. This sense of control allows them to regain the sexual agency that was stolen from them during their experiences with childhood sexual abuse.

Sex work mixed with substance use can be a way for Neil and Alexa to access pleasure and joy. Neil shares a moment of pleasure when tricking while on acid:

> I wasn't hard – typical when I'm tripping – and I nudged his leg away when he tried to maneuver it up my thigh. I thought how this wasn't sex, really, just another experience. Yet it was what I wanted: the heavy contact, the two bodies shoving and slamming together, the stuff that could be proved the next day by bruises. I also wanted the thrill of knowing I made him happy. I wanted him to return to Wichita and tell his buddies about it. "Guess what, I made it with an eighteen-year-old tonight" (Heim, 1995, p. 168).

Alexa shares about experiencing euphoria and pleasure with a trick after doing some coke:

> When I look him in the eyes again there's nothing but desire and I wonder if he sees that too. Holding my head while I'm sucking his dick like he wants to make sure I don't anywhere, and I'm wondering why it can't always be like this -- sex, sex work, my life, the music, Boston, the bed, my skin, the air, sweat on his legs, leg hairs, a map, this map, my breathing, hope, close your eyes, eyelashes, pulse, the light, a game, my heartbeat, intimacy -- and how can someone's dick in my mouth feel like a hug, but also there's the feeling right in my head, everywhere and nowhere… Now he's rubbing my thighs, yes, exactly like that, how is it that sometimes they know right away, and sometimes they never figure it out, no matter how many times you tell them (Sycamore, 2018, p. 81-82).

Those outside of queer communities may not understand the ways that substance use can be a route to joy for queer youth. They may also not understand how pleasure can be often denied to queer youth. For queer youth, especially those who are surviving sexualized violence, this joy and pleasure can be an act of resistance against the homophobia that they are living amongst.

Neil and Alexa both share about their experiences with tricks who had AIDS. Many of Neil's tricks assure him that he doesn't have to worry about contracting AIDS in Kansas: "It was the first time I'd heard a man say that, but it wouldn't be the last" (Heim, 1995, p. 89). After having sex with tricks, Neil would attempt to cleanse himself of any HIV transmission:

> I remember a detail from the days when I'd first had sex for money. Then, when I arrived home from my Carey Park tricks, I'd scarf down whatever food I could find to rid myself of their anonymous tongues' residues. My duty done. I'd ease back into my little life. Those days were a fairy tale now. I spat on the subway car's floor to hopefully obliterate any smidgeon of virus he might have deposited there. If only I could use some similar gesture for my ass (Heim, 1995, p. 248).

Both Alexa and Neil meet with tricks who have AIDS. Alexa gets naked with a trick and realizes that he looks emancipated: "I'm starting to get hard from the pressure of our bodies, even though when I look at his face in this light I can only think about death" (Sycamore, 2018, p. 47). When Neil's trick undresses, Neil observes that he is emancipated and scattered with KS lesions. The tricks ask Alexa and Neil to massage them and to jerk off in front of them. Afterwards, Neil describes the trick to Wendy:

> I tell her the whole story. I described the cab ride, the hotel, the room, his body, his skin. "After the massage, all I did was stand at the side of the room, jerking off. That's what he wanted. There it was, this surreal mixture of the hotel's décor and this guy's obvious disease. He just sprawled on the bed, watching me, jerking off until he came." I refrained from detailing the dainty pattern of white come/purple blotches on Zeke's chest (Heim, 1995, p. 237).

Joy and pleasure are two things that were stolen from many queer people. This is even more significant for queer youth who grew up in the early-to-mid-1990s where AIDS was thought of as a death sentence. These youth never experience the joy and pleasure of the pre-AIDS decade of queer liberation. While marked with fear, the empathy and compassion that Neil and Alexa give to their tricks living with AIDS is one of the most beautiful acts of resistance in the novels.

Analysis

The third and final theme about the characters using casual sex as a form of resistance to violence reveals the characters' experiences with sex work, the AIDS crisis, and the impact of their experiences with childhood sexual abuse. Alexa hooks up with anonymous men in bathrooms, at first, to confront the shameful feelings about desire and sexuality, and now, to engage in desire, Neil uses sex work as way to have sex with older men who remind him of Coach. While in Toronto, Starla hooks up with women from bars, using casual sex to protect her heart from allowing herself to be vulnerable.

Response-based therapy allows us to recognize smalls acts of resistance performed by the characters with casual sex in response to their experiences with childhood sexual abuse. As a teen, Alexa performs small acts of resistance against her shameful feelings about desire and sexuality by having anonymous sex with older men in bathrooms (Wade, 1997). By diving into desire, Alexa drowns out the idea that the sexual abuse at the hands of her father could be the reason that she is now attracted to men.

While Alexa performs small acts of resistance to push her way through vulnerability, Starla uses casual sex to protect herself against the vulnerability that is caused by the abuse. Starla performs small acts of resistance through one-night stands and short-term flings (Wade,

1997). She maintains the anonymity of the hook-ups by removing the numbers from her apartment door and the doors of her neighbours' apartments, creating a barrier between her home and the possibility of intimate connections.

Using an intersectional feminist lens, we can better understand the ways that LGBTQ youth may use casual sex as a form of resistance in their lives. While gay men have been found to be more likely to have casual sex than lesbians, LGBTQ people may experience stigma with having casual or anonymous lovers (Matsick, 2021). The 1980s and 1990s were a time when joy and pleasure were stolen from many queer people. Alexa, Neil, and Starla have grown up in a generation that was too young to experience desire that came with gay liberation and too early to know a future with modern HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment (Sycamore, 2021). Already impacted by the shame and isolation brought on by homophobia, sexism, and transphobia (Walker et al., 2012), LGBTQ youth in the 1990s came into their sexual identities believing that their desire was a death sentence. LGBTQ survivors today experience increased risk of contracting HIV (Boroughs et al., 2015). For LGBTQ survivors, casual sex can be an act of resistance against a hateful world and a terminal disease and a way to take control over their sexualities. Clay's (2022) research on 'wild self-care' supports the argument of casual sex as a form of resistance to violence. The cruising that Alexa and Neil practice is seen as a form of emancipatory self-care, which allows LGBTQ youth to "create new ways of being" (p. 78) through sexual freedom and personal empowerment. Living in poverty, Alexa and Neil both rely on trading sex for money in order to support themselves financially.

Using a queer theory lens, we can better the ways that casual sex is a form of resistance against the characters' experiences with childhood sexual abuse. Many LGBTQ youth have relied on sex work as a way to survive (Reframe Health and Justice, 2018), including LGBTQ

survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Koben & Bimbi, 2014). The normalization of sex work in LGBTQ communities (Butler, 1999; Cannon et al., 2015) allows us to disrupt binary thinking about sex workers (Cannon et al., 2015; Vachon, 2020). This is important in recognizing Neil's experiences with trading sex for money. Neil's early experiences with trading sex for money can be considered child sexual exploitation because of his young age, and this is not something that I am disputing. When working with LGBTQ youth, and especially with survivors of sexualized violence, it is essential that we consider the youth's experiences from their perspective. This allows us to queer the binaries of sexual exploitation and sex work (Cannon et al., 2015; Vachon, 2020) and recognizing the ways that Neil and Alexa use sex work both as a way to resist against the impacts of sexualized violence and to have control over their sexual experiences. The practice of sex work is seen as a form of therapeutic self-care, which allows LGBTQ youth to process through healing and recovery from trauma (Clay, 2022).

This section examined the ways that the characters use casual sex as a form of resistance to violence. Casual sex acts as a way to resist against vulnerability. a hateful world and a terminal disease and a way to take control over their sexualities. In this chapter, I have presented the findings alongside the analysis. In the final chapter, I will provide a discussion of the implications of these findings for future research and practice in child and youth care and other allied professions.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

When I was seventeen, my friends and I began to hang out at drop-in spaces for LGBTQ youth. While most of the groups were places to hang out (and ended up being places to hook up), there was a group in East Vancouver run by two queer Indigenous women who used the tradition of a talking circle. Together, we sat on the floor in a circle while a talking stick was passed from person to person. When you were holding the talking stick, it was your turn to share. When you were not holding the talking stick, it was your turn to listen.

It was during these traditional talking circles that I first heard stories by other LGBTQ youth who had experienced sexualized violence. In these talking circles, I learned to hold space for my fellow survivors and their stories. I learned how to hold space for myself and my own stories. I also learned that I was not a monster for what I had experienced as a child.

It was during these traditional talking circles that I first shared about my own experiences with sexualized violence. It was while I would hold space for my fellow survivors and their stories that I began to date a man who was older than me. One night after we had broken up, we ended up at the same party and I ended up crashing alone in his bed. I woke up to him sexually assaulting me. In these talking circles, I was able to share about the violence without judgement. Every week, the people around me held space for me to process through all the feelings of shame and fear and confusion and regret that had overtaken me. Aside from my best friend's home an hour away and without a ride, this support group was the only thing that was keeping me alive.

As I read these three novels, I came to better understand my fractured relationship with my mother. As I previously shared, my story began when a neighbour placed his hands on my nine-year old boy's body. I could not recall the abuse, aside from a snapshot of the sunshine

pouring through the sheer curtains of my best friend's bedroom. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I would secretly unearth a box from my mother's bedroom. Buried within that box was an unsealed envelope from the police station that contained the letter from my abuser:

Your son is weird.

Your son is gay.

He loves it when he makes love to me.

The playhouse will be fun.

I am gay too.

The letter was the only proof that I had of the abuse taking place. My mother never asked me about what has happened. Instead, she watched the impacts of the sexualized violence take their toll on her oldest child, changing me from a happy and outgoing child to someone who was suicidal and withdrawn. In her eyes, I became someone who was unlikeable, and this dislike worsened after I came out as queer.

It was small acts of resistance against the impacts of sexualized violence, paired with the desire for the love, connection, and acceptance that I craved from my mother and the desire for the joy and pleasure were stolen from me and other queer youth, led me to be adopted into my best friend's family. These desires allowed me to, like Starla, imagine a relationship with her mother based on respect and equality while, like Alexa, giving myself the opportunity to establish a life where I could thrive.

Discourses on LGBTQ youth often focus on the desire to be seen as their authentic selves and to reject the shame and isolation forced on them through homophobia and transphobia. Child and youth care practitioners are taught to celebrate the lives of LGBTQ youth through the creation of safe spaces, using non-gendered language and pronouns, and proclaiming that love is

love. While these are all important ways to support LGBTQ youth, it presents a sanitized and friendly version of care and shifts the conversations away from the sexual desire and practices of LGBTQ youth.

While we are living in a time with HIV and AIDS prevention and treatments, LGBTQ youth are still impacted by the idea that their desire is a death sentence. Joy and pleasure continue to be denied to LGBTQ youth through homophobic and transphobic discourse disguised as protecting children and 'the family'. The bodily autonomy of LGBTQ youth has been threatened by adults who do not believe that the youth are able to have informed consent over their lives. LGBTQ youth are seen as needing to be protected from professionals who provide them with information about sexual health or gender-affirming medical care.

When reading the three novels, it can be easy to focus on the sexual trauma experienced by the characters. We may sympathize with the incest flashbacks that haunt Alexa throughout her story. We may judge Starla's girlfriend Tamara for the way that she reacted to Starla's disclosure about being sexually abused as a child. We may wonder if Neil became a sex worker because Coach groomed and abused him. I was also curious about these narratives, reflecting on all the assumptions that people had made about me as a survivor of sexualized violence. A deeper reading of the novels shows the reader how casual sex and sex work could be read as small acts of resistance against the ideas that survivors are broken and not able to love or fuck or experience desire. The denial of desire for LGBTQ youth is also the denial of sexual freedom, pleasure, processing through trauma, and transformative ways of care (Clay, 2022) and the denial of bodily autonomy.

Clay's (2022) research on 'wild self-care' supports the argument of casual sex as a form of resistance to violence. The cruising that Alexa and Neil practice is seen as a form of

emancipatory self-care, which allows LGBTQ youth to “create new ways of being” (p. 78) through sexual freedom and personal empowerment. This is also seen in the ways that Starla prefers hooking up with strangers over dating and relationships as she has control over her sexual practices. The practice of sex work is seen as a form of therapeutic self-care, which allows LGBTQ youth to process through healing and recovery from trauma (Clay, 2022). While it can be easy to focus on Alexa and Neil’s sexual practices as child sexual exploitation, shifting our orientation to view their sexual practices as resistance to violence challenge us to queer our ideas about adolescent sexual consent and bodily autonomy. By centering the LGBTQ youth’s own perspectives of their sexual desire and sexual practices, we can embrace their small acts of resistance through bodily autonomy, sexual freedom.

5.2 Recommendations for Practitioners

It is impossible to recommend a singular framework for working with LGBTQ youth who have experienced sexualized violence as everyone’s healing journey is unique. What might work for one person could traumatically harm another. Rather than providing a therapeutic process that practitioners can use, I am offering some of my own insights based on two decades of working with LGBTQ youth and my experiences working with sexual assault survivors. These suggestions can be used by practitioners in a variety of fields, from youth workers to registered clinical counsellors.

When responding to a sexual assault disclosure, it is important to use a trauma-informed approach. Be cautious in the way that you respond to the disclosure, as your response can significantly impact the youth. Remember that the youth sees you as a safe and trustworthy person. Check in on what the youth needs in the moment and follow their lead. Be sure to

support the youth using active listening skills and let them know that you are glad that they are telling you about what happened. Show the youth that you believe them by validating their feelings and assuring them that what happened is not their fault. Support the youth with empowering themselves through resources and respecting their decisions on any next steps. Remember that everyone responds to sexualized violence in different ways (Ending Violence Association of BC, n.d.).

In order to support LGBTQ youth who have experienced sexualized violence, it is essential to know how to support LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth are not a monolith. There are more different sexual and gender identities than one can imagine, and with more being discovered as someone better understands themselves. We can support LGBTQ youth by checking in about their name and pronouns. Often, the name that is on the youth's file is not the same name that they use with everyone. Be curious about how youth describe their relationships with other people, rather than assuming that they are in a monogamous relationship. Ask the youth about who is important to them as a way to learn about who their support systems are.

Ending Violence Association of BC (2021a) offers guiding principles for practicing inclusion to support LGBT2SQ+ survivors. These include:

- LGBT2SQ+ people are experts in making the best decisions for their own lives. You can honour these skills and acknowledge how much time and energy goes into this process by taking on some of the work of creating safety in your practices and organizations.
- Be explicit and specific: Blanket inclusion statements are not enough. Be clear about what you are committed to and transparent about how you are working on that commitment and where you fall short.
- The needs of LGBT2SQ+ survivors are incredibly diverse. We cannot make a one size fits all solution. Rather, we can center the expertise of LGBT2SQ+ survivors and listen and adapt to what they need and want.
- No one will be perfect in their practices. Rather than aspiring to perfection, focus on continually doing better and be accountable when you make mistakes and/or cause harm (p. 1).

It is important to recognize how small LGBTQ communities are, even in larger cities. It can be common to encounter the person who harmed you at community events, book launches, and even a friend's birthday party. There is a chance that you might share the same doctor or counsellor, or even end up in the same group therapy session. There can be a culture of silence that drapes across LGBTQ communities, where people who cause harm are whispered about in private but never confronted in person. I remember when I first started to hang out in queer spaces, and I was warned about which people to never allow myself to be alone with. When people who cause harm are exiled from their communities, they often move to a new city, where they are embraced because of their queerness and their risks of violence are concealed. When a person discloses their experiences with sexual violence, there may be fractures within the LGBTQ community, with people choosing to believe the person who caused the harm despite their own public support of survivors in general. Community support given to the person who caused harm is often based on social power or popularity and the person who disclosed about their experiences often becomes rejected by the community, resulting in further isolation and loss of supports. This can mirror the rejection and isolation that they may have experienced from their families (Bregman et al., 2013).

Understanding the unique needs of LGBTQ youth who have experienced sexualized violence provides us with a foundation on which we can layer on our own therapeutic orientations. There are many different therapeutic orientations that are successful with supporting survivors of sexualized violence. Here, I present some ways that practitioners may work with LGBTQ youth who have survived sexualized violence, drawing from collaborative therapy (Anderson, 2007), response-based therapy (Coates & Wade, 2007; Coates & Wade, 2016; Wade, 1997), and feminist therapy (Enns, 2011).

Recognise that the young person is *the* expert of their life. This allows the youth to teach us about themselves, their perspectives, and their preferences. We learn from the youth about their meanings and understandings of sexualized violence. This means taking caution when asking questions and making comments. We need to ensure that what we are introducing fits with the youth and the conversation that we are sharing. It is essential to be aware of the intent of our knowledge and never to take an authoritative stance (Anderson, 2007).

Work with the youth to find the small acts of resistance that they perform in response to sexualized violence. This allows us to reframe the ways that the youth may believe that they did not 'fight back' against the violence. Alongside the youth, we can discover the ways that they "refuse to comply with or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible (Wade, 1997, p. 25). We can discover the ways that they "imagine or establish a life based on respect and equality" (Wade, 1997, p. 25). We can work with the youth to reject many of the messages that they receive about their experiences with sexualized violence. These can be the words and opinions shared by their friends, partners, and families. These can be the ways that the person who hurt them present their story about what happened. These can be the messages that they received from youth workers or mental health practitioners that they have accessed for support (Coates & Wade, 2007; Coates & Wade, 2016).

Recognize the youth's sociocultural context and the intersecting oppression that they may experience. This allows us to work with the youth to empower themselves by encouraging resistance to oppression and recognizing the external societal factors that are causing them harm. Alongside the youth, we can discover how gender and cultural identities shape their experiences and the ways that they are impacted by sexualized violence. As practitioners, we must not only

resist imbalances of power are happening to the youth in their lives, but also in our therapeutic relationship. This includes communicating our values with the youth, collaborating on mutual goals for our work together, and being open if we are not the best fit for one another (Enns, 2011).

Recognize the ways that the youth practices ‘wild self-care’ in their lives (Clay, 2022). This allows us to create a safer space for the youth to teach us about themselves, their perspectives, and their preferences (Anderson, 2007). Alongside the youth, we can discover the importance of sexual freedom and personal empowerment through public sex, the development of power relations and personal boundaries through kink, and the therapeutic effects of substances. If you experience discomfort with the ways that the youth takes care of themselves, be sure to unpack this with your supervisor or consider that you might not be the best fit for the youth (Enns, 2011).

Be aware of LGBTQ youth resources in your community, specifically resources that are inclusive to trans women, trans-feminine people, and sex workers. LGBTQ youth who have experienced sexualized violence may have had negative experiences with different resources and may be afraid to access something new. It is important to network with other practitioners who work with LGBTQ youth so you can keep updated on new resources in our community and where not to refer youth.

5.3 Conclusion

Where do we go from here? There is something transformative and powerful that we find in stories. Months after I began to write this thesis, the global pandemic began, and I was laid off from my job coordinating a complex care program for youth. This allowed me to spend more

time reading queer literature (my favourite!) and I shifted away from traditional youth work to working as a library technician. It is beautiful because I can witness first-hand the impact of stories on children and youth from storytime readings, book recommendations, and the excitement of Summer Reading Club. Through books, people can find themselves in literary mirrors and have their experiences reflected back to themselves (Bishop, 1990).

Through the stories of Alexa, Neil, and Starla, we have learned so much about the impacts of sexualized violence on LGBTQ youth characters in queer-authored literature. We have witnessed as they navigated through contradictions and ambivalance in their relationships and resisted violence through their desire. We have learned of how they fought back in the smallest but powerful ways that are often overlooked when talking about sexualized violence. We queered the ways that we think about survival, about self-care, and responses to violence. We have transformed the ways that we understand the resilience and experiences of LGBTQ survivors.

I challenge you to search for the mirrors that the youth you support find themselves reflected in. Transform these mirrors into sliding glass doors and step into their stories (Bishop, 1990). Knowledge is not always found with academia and discourse. Take a chance and follow Alice down the rabbit hole. We will be down there, sharing our stories of survival and resistance. You are always welcome to join us for a cup of tea.

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