

Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

---

Theses and Dissertations

---

2021

## Queering Genre and Joy: Reclaiming and Navigating Queerness through Hybridity

Rebecca Meier

*Illinois State University*, [rmeier2@ilstu.edu](mailto:rmeier2@ilstu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd>

---

### Recommended Citation

Meier, Rebecca, "Queering Genre and Joy: Reclaiming and Navigating Queerness through Hybridity" (2021). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1454.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1454>

This Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact [ISUREd@ilstu.edu](mailto:ISUREd@ilstu.edu).

QUEERING GENRE AND JOY: RECLAIMING AND NAVIGATING  
QUEERNESS THROUGH HYBRIDITY

REBECCA MEIER

53 Pages

Throughout my experience in English education, queer texts and queer interpretations of texts have often been denied to me in favor of upholding more canonical and more cis-heteronormative works and analyses. This delayed my ability to write through my gender, sexuality, and overall queer identity, because I had no literary references to take inspiration from. The ways in which I played with genre and form in my work were discouraged because I was taught that my writing would not be taken seriously in academia if it did not represent the “official” literary canon. By melding together memoir, theory, poetry, and visual art, this creative thesis seeks to reclaim queerness where it has been denied to me throughout my academic and personal life, to navigate my own queerness through hybrid writing and visual forms, to offer those forms to others as a method of navigating one’s identity, and to challenge the notion that multimodal works like those that appear on various social media platforms are not to be taken as seriously as literary classics.

KEYWORDS: canon, genre, hybrid writing, queer, gender

QUEERING GENRE AND JOY: RECLAIMING AND NAVIGATING  
QUEERNESS THROUGH HYBRIDITY

REBECCA MEIER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2021

Copyright 2021 Rebecca Meier

QUEERING GENRE AND JOY: RECLAIMING AND NAVIGATING  
QUEERNESS THROUGH HYBRIDITY

REBECCA MEIER

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Gabriel Gudding, Chair

Ela Przybylo

Jason Whitesel

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to everyone in the English Studies Department at Illinois State University for teaching me, encouraging me, and growing alongside me as I found my footing as a graduate student. Thanks especially to Professor Gabriel Gudding, my chair, mentor, and friend; Dr. Ela Przybylo and Dr. Jason Whitesel, my committee members and brilliant forces of inspiration and motivation; Dr. Katherine Ellison, my graduate advisor; and Craig Heyne, Alice Vermillion, and Sam Moe, my forever workshop group. Without the guidance and community of such passionate and kind-hearted individuals, it would have taken me many years before I could learn to be so honest and free in my work.

Thanks also to my family, for supporting my decision to pursue my master's degree and for always insisting I know how to write when I feel that I have forgotten. Thank you to my partner, Ash, for reading and rereading drafts and for helping keep my feet on the ground throughout a project so large and so personal. Finally, thank you to the English Department at Bradley University for opening so many doors for me, including to friendship, to academia, and to the world of creative writing.

R. M.

## CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
FIGURES	iii
CHAPTER I: JAMES JOYCE, IMMOBILITY, AND ACADEMIA	2
CHAPTER II: BEING, THEORIZING, AND WRITING QUEER	10
CHAPTER III: QUEERING GENRE AND CANON	30
WORKS CITED	51

## FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Screenshot from a Google search for “queer definition.”	1
2. Screenshot from Brown’s YouTube video “a growing thing: a poem.”	33





# queer

/kwɪr/

*adjective*

1. strange; odd.

"she had a queer feeling that they were being watched"

Similar:

odd

strange

unusual

funny

peculiar

curious

bizarre



*verb*

INFORMAL

spoil or ruin (an agreement, event, or situation).

"Reg didn't want someone meddling and queering the deal at the last minute"

Similar:

spoil

damage

impair

harm

be detrimental to

mar

wreck



Definitions from Oxford Languages

[Feedback](#)

*Figure 1: Screenshot from a Google search for "queer definition."*

## CHAPTER I: JAMES JOYCE, IMMOBILITY, AND ACADEMIA

*“Am I allowed to do this?”*

I was coming to terms with my own queerness the first time I considered the multitude of meanings behind something or someone being “queer” (see Figure 1). It was in an advanced placement English class in my senior year of high school where we were discussing *Dubliners* by James Joyce, a collection of 15 short stories. “The Sisters” is a story of a young boy reflecting on his friend Father Flynn’s deteriorating physical and mental well-being after three strokes leave him paralyzed. During the conversations about the themes of immobility throughout the text, someone asked if Joyce was using the word “queer” in the sense of insinuating that this “odd” and “sick” priest, who is painted as a villain through descriptions of other characters’ discomfort around him, might be gay. I remember the uncomfortable heat that filled my body in reaction to the question posed, still feeling so rocky in my journey to accept myself when I had long considered myself a villain, too. Our teacher responded that queer as it is used in that book was likely synonymous with peculiar or off-putting, but that it could very well be tied in with a character’s sexuality.

This moment stands out in my mind as when I first felt the desire to argue against the use of queer in a derogatory way—the first time I wanted to fight back. I had already struggled with this specific twofoldedness of queer meaning both *not heterosexual* and, to put it simply, *bad*, within my own religious upbringing conflicting with my developing sexual identity. To witness this negative construal of queer written between the lines and interpretations of a text that is so well known in the world of English literature made me angry. I was experiencing my own state of immobility, frozen when I heard that labeling something “queer” suggests that it is different, odd, and out of place. To identify with queer was to feel as though I trapped myself in others’

minds in an unfavorable corner, as if their vision of me from then on was one with a permanent stain that I could do nothing to clean.

My undergraduate experience, while an improvement, was a very small improvement. I found myself surrounded by more people in the LGBTQ+ community, but I did not see myself in the curriculum I was being taught, and I had a difficult time expressing myself in writing my own creative work because of it. The literary “classics” were emphasized, and new interpretations that might queer those text often shut down by professors. I remember reading *Mrs. Dalloway* for the first time in a British literature class and feeling so connected with Clarissa and Sally’s relationship—the softness of the descriptions, the thrill of being in each other's presence, the obvious shared admiration. When I posed the possibilities of love between these characters, my professor waved me off and moved the discussion back to the talking points they had rehearsed in the decades they had been teaching this novel. Feeling dismissed and ignored, I lacked the vocabulary to fully articulate my discomfort with the scripts of heteronormative existence: “Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape” (Ahmed, “Queer Feelings” 425). My professor was comfortable in their long-standing interpretation of the text as strictly heterosexual, and my proposition that it could be open to queer interpretation would have taken them out of that familiar space.

In a poetry workshop, I felt like I might finally be able to express myself through exploration of form and visuals on the page, only to be told by my professor that they “didn’t like” visual poetry and that I should stick to more recognizable forms if I wanted to be published. Looking back on these experiences now, it feels as though my professors wanted to reinforce traditional interpretations of well-known texts and methods of writing poetry rather than

encourage different and unfamiliar possibilities. I see Bourdieu's ideas about keeping different structures of power in place here:

But Bourdieu's work in the sociology of education has shown, to the contrary, that schooling serves to reinforce, rather than diminish, social differences. The culture it transmits is largely that of the dominant classes, and it tends to perceive and classify as "natural" talent, and thus "natural" superiority, levels of knowledge among students which are in fact largely the result of an informal learning process taking place within the family. The educational system transforms social hierarchies into academic hierarchies and, by extension, into hierarchies of "merit." (Johnson 23)

Rather than queering works through writing or analysis, English curriculum reinforces cis-heterosexuality as a default lens of reading classic texts and discourages straying from recognizable forms of writing by teaching the same kinds over and over. Doing the work that I was drawn to discuss and make, the kind that felt most representative of myself and my queerness and my joy, would lead to me being written off as someone who did not take my creative writing studies seriously and, by extension, a writer who was not to be taken seriously.

Occasionally in these classes, there would be a shot at redemption to prove myself worthy of being in an English academic space: *What have you been reading recently?* A question which always frayed my nerves. Social media had been my go-to source for creative writing and queer theory since I was a teenager. With no encouragement to access online lectures, thick books of queer theory, or a mentor to mold my sense of direction as to where I might find this information, I turned to hashtags and search bars. Bringing up these online creative works in discussions often left that uncomfortable feeling in the air like I had "missed the memo" on the elitism of academic jargon and shared something from "low-brow" social media venues that embarrassed other students on my behalf, like they knew the professor did not approve but did not want to spend the time explaining why.

Whether it be through social media or written works, creating has always been a means of survival for me. Audre Lorde writes of poetry as the process of survival from thought to action: “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (“Poetry Is Not a Luxury” 37). While Lorde is specifically talking about poetry, I feel this applies to all different types of creative writing for me. I wrote through my sexuality before I could ever think about it coherently, much less say it out loud. I am having a similar experience with my gender identity right now, and it is dominating my work. Happiness and self-discovery are emerging from my Instagram captions, my YouTube search history, my hybrid creative writing pieces. And yet, it has not been until starting my graduate degree that I have taken these routes seriously or been encouraged to do so. I had never before been so motivated by my professors to look beyond the canon and to experiment and create work that has such deep meaning to me, and to be given resources that steer me in the directions I am already walking towards.

I chose to explore genre and hybridity in this thesis because it is where I felt my desire to create queer works was the most denied to me by professors and other academic mentors. Oftentimes, I have been told to alter my creative writings into more recognizable forms in order to be taken seriously in English academic spaces and to be published in respected literary communities. Even as I set out to write this masters-level work, I asked my thesis committee, “Am I allowed to do this?” Which, in itself, feels like enough of a reason to push back against academic, traditional writing forms that discourage the queering of writing and interpretations of texts. Rather than try to fit myself into the kinds of works that are already known and accepted, I want to understand the logic that upholds the literary canon as it stands within academia and ask *why?* And where can I make room for myself?

“She goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over in the ‘words’ masculine persuasive forces of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about” (Rich 515–516).

p  
o  
p

high

pressure insides  
threaten to burst with  
words aching and  
e x p a n d i n g  
shaken until I Come  
Out spilling through  
every crack and hole  
you cannot untaste  
my spark / crackling  
identity fizzing on  
your tongue / spit me  
out or swallow me  
w h o l e

“pop”  
Rebecca Meier  
2019

straight girl falling

i dreamt i had sex with you on the edge of the golden gate bridge & then tumbled through the air in your arms, didn't wake up on impact. the bay & ocean mixed, fought, screamed, ripped my limbs from my body & i did not wake up, just swallowed salt until i felt like god might forgive me. bedsheet prayers & apologies to muir woods, whom i ignored in favor of two men holding hands on the path in front of me & my mother, who pointed out the church, steeple, doors in the arches of their fingertips. i didn't know it then, but the shapes i was seeing were keys to the locks closed on the fencing of that big bridge, & i thought about how that rusty horizon looked like a lovers' sunset from beneath the waves. phone cord sinews kept my limbs attached, jerked away from my body reaching for you, whole & unsunk, but sprang back with underwater whispers *don't jump*.

“straight girl falling”

Rebecca Meier

2020



## Family Car

My family sleeps through the nightly rain. I make wishes where the light deflects off slick black pavement. I step into autumn, pick up leaves that have fallen from shouldering wet with sickly stems, and adhere them to the sheen of the family car. Pale green undersides and neon beginnings paint navy blue night into spring. My sweat mingles with the raindrops until I cannot distinguish my nerves from where the sky ends. There is dread at the dead of these leaves, excitement at what my parents will think. They will notice soon. And in the morning there is sunlight, but I worry about how strongly I still smell of storm. The kitchen window shows the car sprouting, turning over new leaves. My parents do not look. My father reads the paper, my mother a book. A damp graveyard surrounds the car by the time my father looks up. He notes how clean it appears to be. My mother chimes in, thankful it has rained every night for weeks. Fallen green autopsies go unseen. I return to the humidity, lick the back of a leaf. I taste the salt of routine crisped into its curled edges before I stick it to the driver's side door. My parents do not look.

“Family Car”  
Rebecca Meier  
2019

## CHAPTER II: BEING, THEORIZING, AND WRITING QUEER

It took me longer than it should have for me to realize I was queer. I say “should have” because rather than investigate the feelings I was having regarding my sexuality and gender, I tried to straighten them and fit them into the categories I was taught. Sexy dreams about Joe Jonas *and* Demi Lovato from *Camp Rock*? Well, they are just dreams. Wanting to be around a specific girl all the time and getting jealous of anyone else (especially boyfriends) who she spent time with? Well, I just wanted to be her best friend. I even went so far as to *acknowledge* a crush I had on another girl in high school in my head and somehow never believe I could be anything but a heterosexual girl. Being queer was never in the realm of possibility for me, so I never considered it.

For my gender, too, I never considered wanting to flatten my chest or wear clothing from the men’s section to be anything deeper than fashion until I was in my twenties. After having a breast reduction surgery and experiencing gender euphoria at my newfound confidence in my masculinity, femininity, and androgyny, I have begun to try to explore these feelings about my gender a little more thoroughly. I never knew there were other options besides straight or girl, because I had never seen them represented in the books I read, shows I watched, or other media I consumed.

Queer troubles the categories of gender, sex, and sexuality (Prosser 33). Queerness is often defined by its relationship to the assumed norm of humans—from the womb, one is presumed heterosexual and to identify with the gender they are assigned at birth. This then spirals into what we read, what we watch, and what we think of other people, and those representations of people are assumed to be the default, “a script for an ideal life” (Ahmed, “Queer Feelings” 424). So, queer becomes the “other.” The coming out process is naming this

otherness, bringing it into existence, defined by its relation to the default. Jay Prosser argues that people equate non-transgender or straight gender as constative, as a standard to which other genders are examined and held (39). This emphasizes the distress of attempting to reach impossible standards set for binary genders. Trying to fulfill these roles as a queer person takes a toll, but so does failing to meet those standards, as others will see you as necessarily unhappy or othered.

When I came out to my family as bisexual in college, they expressed their concerns for my happiness from a place of love. They had always worried about my safety as a young woman in a patriarchal society, and now they felt they had to worry about my safety as a queer person, too. They did not want me to be denied life opportunities because of my identity or be attacked in the conservative Midwest because of whomever I loved—I believe they had envisioned a happy life for me with a caring husband and children, and this new information about me threatened that vision. In that moment, it makes sense to me that those were their cultivated emotions, because that is what is in every feel-good romcom movie, TV show, book, and any other form of consumable media about love. I do not think it always registers to the person who someone comes out to that embracing one's queer identity and following whoever it leads them to *is* what will bring them a happy life.

Sara Ahmed's concept of "gender fatalism," or "as if from sex, gender follows" (25), is another trapping of cis-heteronormativity, as if being declared a girl the instant one is born necessarily leads one to become a wife to a husband, a mother to children, and a keeper of a household, and that fulfilling these roles is the equivalent to one's happiness. Ahmed interrogates the tyranny of the "will": "Girls will be girls; girls will be happiest when they get married. Maybe that 'will be' can also be heard not only as prediction but as a moral instruction: not only

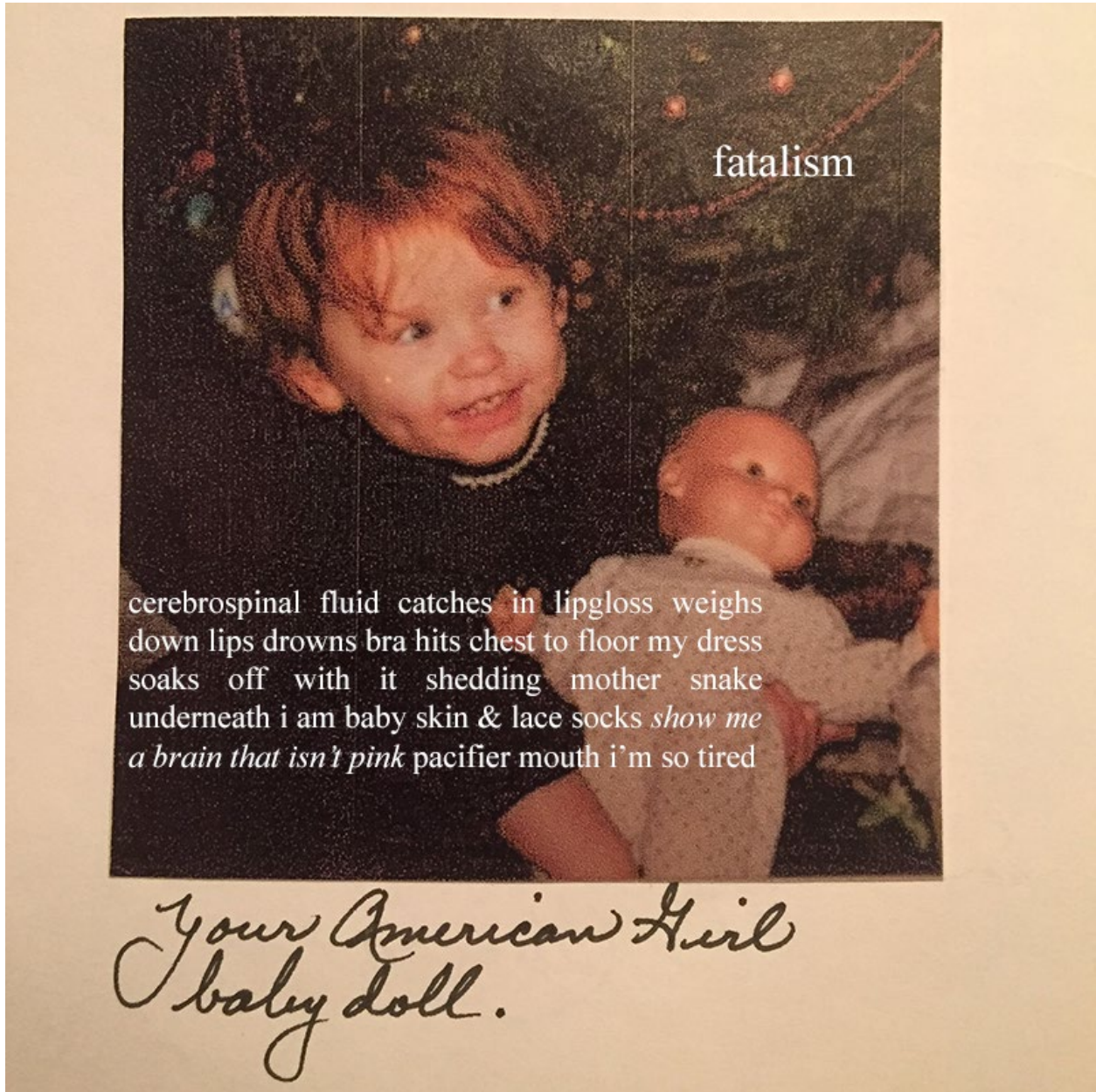
will she do this, but she will do this happily” (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 48). As soon as one is assigned a girl at birth, one must step into these roles excitedly and successfully as they reach adulthood, or else face certain unhappiness, unfulfillment, and othering. How could they possibly be happy without filling these roles, as women are expected to do? The same damning argument can then be made for sexuality.

Supporters may want the best for a queer person, and in this line of thinking, they will view queerness as straying from the path to happiness. As a queer person now navigating my own gender and how that relates to standards that are held for people assigned female at birth, it is exhausting to unpack all of the work my own family has done to raise a capital “G” Girl, even though it came from a place of love. Because they operated under the assumptions of happiness that Ahmed laid out, it felt as if my connection to my own queerness was stifled until adulthood. Yet, people embody gender differently in different times, contexts, and interactions: “One’s body doesn’t take on a fixed meaning to all people interpreting it. All bodies take on different meanings to different people in different circumstances and relationships. Gendered bodies become gendered through their interactions with self and others” (Alston-Stepnitz 8). My relationship to my gender can be different than the gender others perceive me to be, and my knowledge of my gender is influenced by the queer and trans people and resources I have access to. My family saw me as a Girl, but that does not necessarily mean I was one.

I am able to look back on my childhood years and apply the knowledge I have gained from studying queer and transgender theory, as well as earning a certificate in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, because of my ability to attend graduate school and be taught about these subjects. I recognize that I am reflecting with a hindsight bias, as well as the privileges of growing up in a white and middle-class family. To simply exist as a child is a privilege, as

children of color are often denied the experience of being children at all. I was not in a constant state of survival, facing racialized gender bias, or existing as a multiply marginalized and underrepresented person. These seemingly genderless years were only possible because of my privilege, and I am only able to continue analyzing them now because of that same white and middle-class privilege.

As a child, being a Girl did not truly register with me. Looking back, I view my childhood years as genderless—I was just a kid. I played on sports teams with boys, played video games with my brothers, dressed up in tu-tus and sparkles, and asked my mom to wear red lipstick. None of these activities had any deeper meaning than bringing me joy. I did not feel like I was categorizing myself by having fun. The first moments that I began to feel gendered were 1) when I took my shirt off to wrestle with my brothers and my mother told me to put it back on because *girls have to keep their shirts on because their chests are different*, only allowing me to keep it off when I argued that our chests looked the same, and 2) fighting with my mother about wearing a bra for the first time, because I wanted to feel t-shirts resting flat against my skin and no one else in my third grade classroom was wearing them. When I bring up these moments to my mother now, she does not remember them. She was just trying to raise me the best way she knew how. But to me, these moments stand out as harsh reminders of being gendered as Girl.



fatalism

cerebrospinal fluid catches in lipgloss weighs  
down lips drowns bra hits chest to floor my dress  
soaks off with it shedding mother snake  
underneath i am baby skin & lace socks *show me*  
*a brain that isn't pink* pacifier mouth i'm so tired

*Your American Heil  
baby doll.*

“fatalism”  
Rebecca Meier  
2020

## DDD

i mourn the loss of tshirts resting  
flat against my chest, the last time i  
felt free was when i wrestled  
my brothers & we all stripped to  
baby fat six packs, *we look the same*  
& mama disagreed, saw daughter  
to wife to mother to children  
written through my ribs & what they  
were made to carry

*what's under your shirt?*  
third grade so cruel, obviously it's  
your eyes & hallway laughter  
it's a rubber chicken's breasts, right  
keep squeezing & i'll find the joke somewhere

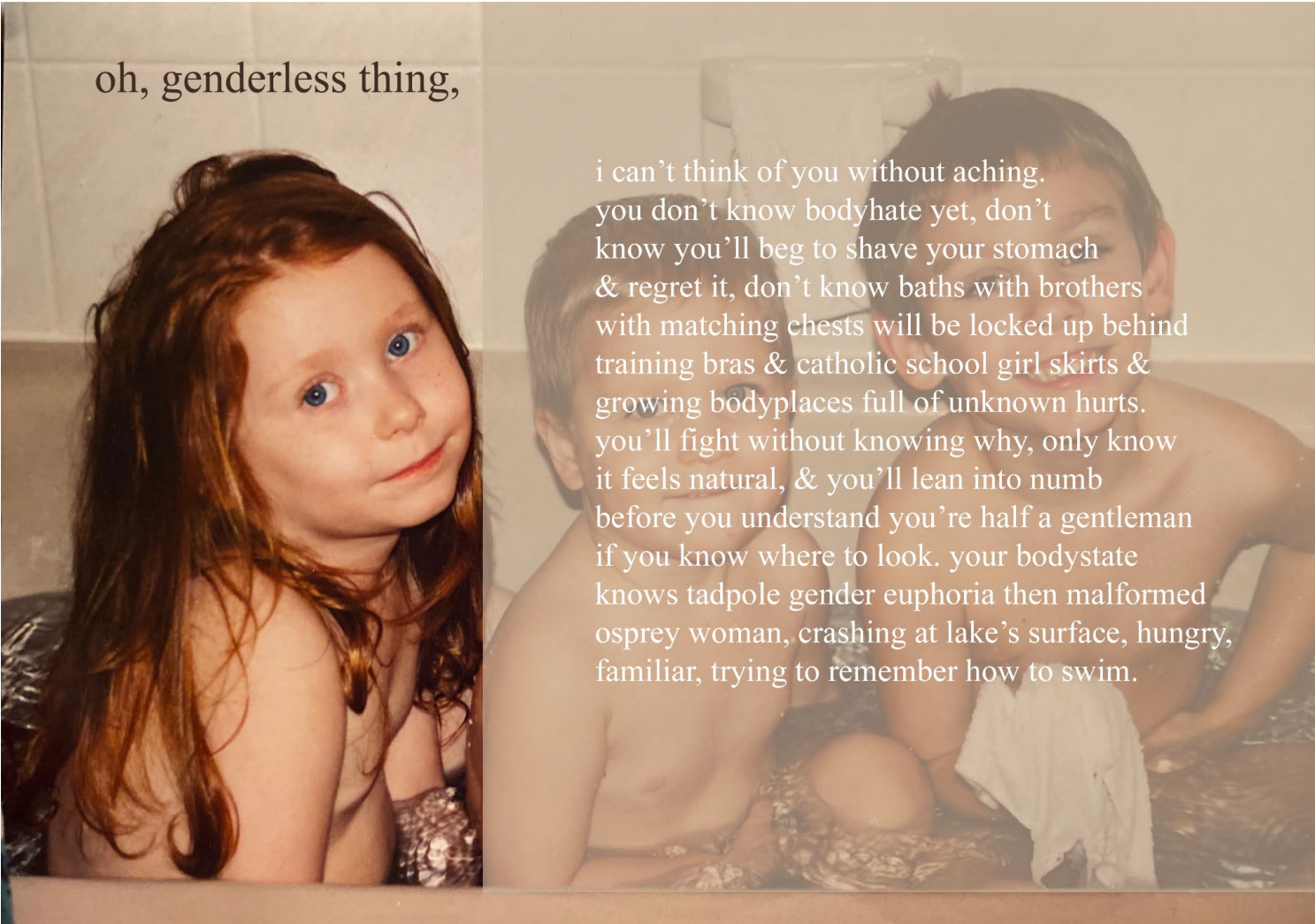
i went to physical therapy just last year  
& said *unscrew me, i want to*  
*meet who's underneath*  
she asked where it ached & i coughed  
up plastic feathers, baby shoes  
i kept my clothes on



“DDD”  
Rebecca Meier  
2020



oh, genderless thing,



i can't think of you without aching.  
you don't know bodyhate yet, don't  
know you'll beg to shave your stomach  
& regret it, don't know baths with brothers  
with matching chests will be locked up behind  
training bras & catholic school girl skirts &  
growing bodyplaces full of unknown hurts.  
you'll fight without knowing why, only know  
it feels natural, & you'll lean into numb  
before you understand you're half a gentleman  
if you know where to look. your bodystate  
knows tadpole gender euphoria then malformed  
osprey woman, crashing at lake's surface, hungry,  
familiar, trying to remember how to swim.

“oh, genderless thing,”  
Rebecca Meier  
2021



When I first began coming to terms with my sexuality, I spent every night in bed on my phone frantically searching for words on the Internet that I might fit. There was an urgency to know that I was not alone, to know that others felt what I was feeling, to know that there was a name to bring such feelings into existence. I settled on the word pansexual because I felt as though I *had* to put a name on my sexuality if I ever wanted anyone to believe me, even though the word did not feel quite right. I did not know that “queer” could be used as a descriptor for my sexuality, because I had only ever heard it used in negative contexts.

In “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler tackles the ambiguous nature of the word “queer” and the history of shame that cannot be separated from it, even in reclaiming and identifying with the word. She also discusses performativity and how perhaps no one can ever fully inhabit what it means to be queer, because “it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak” (Butler 19). The instability of this identity, then, creates a space for different possibilities of subversion of norms, political statements, and variability all within the same label. Moreover, declaring oneself “queer” as a performative speech act bears a particular connection to the first person: “Anyone’s use of ‘queer’ about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else” (Sedgwick, “Queer and Now” 9). I had always felt this simultaneous identification and disidentification with the word “queer,” because it has always felt so close yet so untouchable, saturated with both pride when a voluntary self-identification and shame when hurled by others as an insult.

“Queer” is performative in that it is a word that allows the world to speak for the person it is being identified with. In the cumulative power of repeated speech acts and writing, a word like queer produces what it names—and, in the case of queer, Butler argues that what it produces is shame. People can come to know their being through shame: “The term queer has operated as

one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject *through* that shaming interpellation” (Butler 19). Queer as a word has existed for centuries, and so it brings with it the history of its negative connotations. Although queer has seemingly become more widely accepted as a positive self-identifier, as the label pops up in social media bios and students can now minor in “queer studies,” Butler argues that shame is still present in how others identify us or in internalized oppression. According to Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life*, a bodily sensation such as shame is “not an organized or intentional response to something” (22). The shame that Butler asserts is part of queer is a reaction to being animated through the identification with an abject group. Comfort can be found in a queer community, yet the shame somehow remains isolating. Queer can be reclaimed as a label and the history behind it can be powerfully mobilized, but that history of shame cannot be entirely dismissed.

My own (dis)identifying with the word, then, has made itself known in my hybrid and experimental writing, because my writing is the space in which I figure out and work through my thoughts, feelings, and experiences. I feel as though the forms in which I have begun writing about my own queerness reflect the complexities of my experiences with sexuality and gender. Combining forms like prose, poetry, and visual art feels to me like queering the ways in which I have been taught to or expected to write in a way that is freeing. These forms of creation have made a space for me to play with writing, but also with the straight ideas of sexuality and gender that I have been taught throughout my life. There is room to identify myself outside definitions of a heterosexual, cisgender girl. And, writing about queer joy feels like a transformation of that shame. Queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam prefers to think of queer as taking pride in one’s shame, which is going to “a place where shame can be transformed into something that is not

pride, but not simply damage, either” (Halberstam, “Shame and White Gay Masculinity” 229).

The history of shame that is associated with queer does not need to remain a negative identifier, and it does not need to exist in opposition to the “gay pride” model that has corporations painting their logos rainbow during June. This shame can create a more complex space for explorations of queer identities and feelings. I think about the use of queer in *Dubliners* and how my writing about queer love and joy and acceptance and celebration transforms what was taught to me in the negative into a positive.

## IN WHICH QUEER IS ICE & WE ARE COLD

so close to frozen but we have all our toes. there is so much unease in this identity, so much uncertainty. if i tell you i'm queer i still go hot even though it's mine, isn't it? it's mine but it's not, not ours, not anyone's, my brother still makes AIDS jokes. i say it and we say it and we cool off in numbers, naked, bodies splayed out on this ice so we don't sink, but when i'm alone there's so much pressure and heat i could crack right through and everyone would call it natural causes, wouldn't you? i show you my fingertips, blued and pinked, and there is shame in torn skin tethered to bodies, our bodies, there is shame when you won't shake my hand. don't touch me. i'll force your face inches from the surface of this iced lake and i'll ask you to tell me the history now, to light a fire and thaw it through because when it's not a puddle it's the whole damn ocean. this freeze brings shame every time i breathe, did you know? every time. when there's more breath it's hard to tell who's screaming and i prefer it that way. our breath keeps the lake cold, even our laughs, our cries, there is no one else around for miles but we don't have anywhere else we need to be right now, nowhere else we can be right now. how did you become so lost? i've tried stepping off onto snow but my feet stick to the ice and i'd rather have them than be dead. you can tell me that's what you used to think and i won't believe you.

“IN WHICH QUEER IS ICE & WE ARE COLD”

Rebecca Meier

2020

## Intolerance

I hadn't seen a doctor about the pain. It started that June, years ago, working at Cupid Candies as an underpaid, teenage ice cream scooper. Seventeen was slicked into the braid that stuck out the back of my maroon cap, eyebrows full of wax like I had seen all the other girls do in the bathroom between classes. I felt the air soften with their perfumes, watched their smooth shoulders roll back in the mirror, lost my tongue when they thanked me for holding the door. Besides, coating my lashes in layered coats of thick mascara until there wasn't a whisper of ginger left helped distract me from the ache in my stomach. In the bathroom at work, I knotted my apron to cinch my waist smaller smaller smaller. The ice cream that

dripped

down my sides  
solidified into an inedible gunk that never fully washed out, not with soap or vinegar or bleach.  
Inside out I smelled like rotting milk.

Two boys twoboystwoboys came into the store, ordered a banana split to share  
to share.

I swallowed this picture them together felt it race cool fingers down my throat.  
My stomach juggled two spoons  
one banana boat  
one cherry on top  
tossed in waves of  
acid.

Could acid be so happy?

I asked for another antacid

when my manager walked behind the counter.  
Sink shrieking over rags soaked in bleach, I scrubbed dishes until my skin peeled from the heat. My hands looked like they'd been tossed in the dryer, flipped to show their seams. My stomach fizzled, popped, dissolved, extended its fleshy walls to ingest the rest of my organs. How together I felt when Linda said,

"It's such a *shame*,  
isn't it?  
And they're so good-  
looking, too."

Shame?

Shame knotted my intestines like maroon apron strings. I looked to them, sitting on the stains tethered so deeply to the fibers of the upholstery that the seats themselves took on new colors, ugly colors, dying colors.

They were laughing, the boys, spooning ice cream into each other's mouths, garnishing freckles with whipped cream, cherry stem fingers tied beneath the table.

"There's nothing wrong with them, Linda."

"You don't think there's anything *wrong* with them?"

"No. I don't."

"Are you saying you would do that, too? Be with a girl like that?"

I saw her eyes  
her vision  
balanced  
closer

malfunctioning shake machine  
of me the taste  
on my tongue  
to milk expired

trying to blend  
foreign  
not vomit  
sanitizer

"Yes. I am."

"No. You wouldn't."

"Yes. I would."

"No. You wouldn't."

I shivered.

"My stomach hurts."

"No. It doesn't. Get back to work."

And I did. And I did.

The bathroom smelled like gallons of purple soap    there was no air left    saw temptation in  
buckets of bleach    felt desire burst between my teeth    burned seven years of skill cells off  
my body    saw my bones remained unchanged    wept at my slouching reflection    threw  
up chocolate syrup    viscous blood    stomach crawled up my esophagus    begged to be  
cleaned    my own organs with saliva    drank dish soap    gagged on bubbles

I straightened my cap  
    straightened my apron  
        pulled it tight to prevent self-evisceration.

The following months saw no return of the boys. I only saw myself in bathroom mirrors with the  
lights off. My stomach ached until I moved away.

-

My sister is seventeen now, hair long, brows filled, lashes curled. We drove past the store with  
the same *NOW HIRING* in the same shade of maroon my hands go when they've touched ice. I  
saw them    the years    four of them    melting ice cream thick down my face. She asked if  
she should apply. I told her my stomach was pumped; my hands smell of bleach.

“Intolerance”  
Rebecca Meier  
2019

As the meaning of queer is ever-changing and adapted to accommodate new groups and movements, no one who identifies with the term can fully inhabit what it means at any given point. Butler argues that it “will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized” (21). The ways in which queer is currently employed nowadays is different than how queer was used in the past, and it is almost certainly different than how it will be used in the future.

With regard to reclaiming the label “queer,” Butler writes that “it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak” (Butler 19). I would not be able to reclaim queer for myself without it having existed in the past. However, giving name and relation to this complex, ambiguous nature of queer can bring with it new problems, such as the ability to be “out” and to openly identify with the word in the first place. Who gets to decide who is queer, and who is *able* to be queer? And, perhaps an even more difficult task: how does one explain queer to someone who is not and does not have the same sensation of shame? According to Ahmed, giving “the problem a name can be experienced as magnifying the problem; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise would remain scattered experiences into a tangible thing” (*Living a Feminist Life* 34). When I started discovering my own queer identity, it offered me relief in putting a word to my feelings; however, it also opened up a new world of complex emotions and thoughts that I had to begin to work through for myself. I still am working through them, and I predict that I always will be. My bisexuality, my queerness, they transcend and deconstruct binary formulations, which is both freeing and constraining simultaneously (Angelides 61). This is one reason why writing about my queerness lends itself to hybrid writing styles—the form



itself deconstructs the blueprint forms of normative writing that have been passed down to me through the academy.

Queerness can interrupt gender fatalism, sexuality fatalism, and biological essentialism by demonstrating happiness in ways that are not societally associated with the success and fulfillment of one's gender ascription, "normative" sexuality, and/or biological "destiny." For me, creating hybrid works are queer not only in what my content often focuses on, but in the ways that such works queer literary genres and modes. Multimodal counter-storytelling communicates the dynamic sense of queer, and queer rhetoricians know the value of the interplay between different representational modes: "In multimodal, even multimedia representations of queerness we see the possibility not just for fixing identities nor for ushering in untrammelled identity fluidity, but for understanding how the figuring of queerness may work identity and its construction in very specific ways—both personally and politically" (Alexander & Rhodes 198). In sum: there is room to explore personal relations to queerness in terms of gender, sexuality, and genre in hybrid writing forms.

We are in this moment of queer—not in the future yet and with the past still present and affecting us now. There is an instability to queer temporalities in this sense, and yet queer time-binding is needed by many who identify with it in the ways it is changing and existing right now. And queerness cannot be simply boiled down to shame, because the beauty of being queer lies in its complexities—writing about queer joy, I would argue, is even more of a reclamation of self, because it reveals that straying from paths of cis-heterosexuality does not necessitate unhappiness.

He

*after "She" by Harry Styles*

who is this he in my mattress groove who  
left his chest on the hospital floor & puts on

a masculine dress in the morning, grows his hair out  
long & it's different this time, because he won't think

of she, no, won't see her again until leg hairs go unshaven &  
she considers donating those to wigs for kids, too. such a

space for daydream fluid life time existence flows inward  
& out from body to floral pink bedsheets like a shadow puppet

dance, lit by the moon in his uterus. sometimes gender  
is a boat & sometimes it is the ocean, & other sometimes still it's

the life preserver or anchor shaped like a bra or pokémon boxers,  
the ones that prompted his sister to say *it's okay if you're a boy,*

*you can tell us.* he, the girl, bought them with a button-up shirt  
with his own money & he was so happy to pair them with

lipstick—she'd never felt so handsome before, even when the buttons  
strained against future surgery site & her hair retained the indent. my

gender is a lace glove on fingers you wouldn't expect, pulled off  
between teeth, obscured & seductive, don't you want more? me, too.

"He"

Rebecca Meier

2021

phonecalls with my mother

the first time you say *date*  
you mean fruit  
find a harmless sweetness  
in that shriveled up skin  
nothing romantic  
i suppose

the next time you say *date*  
you mean boys  
nothing fruitful  
in ovary walls of flowers  
even though they turn into  
skin that holds in fruit seeds  
in the same way that i  
turn into skin that holds  
my blossom in  
don't you suppose  
soft flesh is not meant to bruise  
but to sweeten and ripen  
alongside wombs synchronizing  
at harvest  
i don't need you to worry  
about my colors

the last time you say *date*  
you mean enjoy it  
at the movie theater between  
my hand and hers i find  
a seed warmed from three years  
of handling passed  
from my nervous palm  
to your pocket and back again  
i know you aren't talking  
about fruit this time

“phonecalls with my mother”  
Rebecca Meier  
2019

i imagine writing a song

like pulling fruit from a still life painting. darling, at the risk of sounding cliché, i kissed you once & knew what your bedsheets would feel like against my back. my pillows know the wetness of your name like a flower i've never touched & you make me damn happy. the train comes so early in st. louis & we should be asleep, shouldn't we, but the tree outside looks like a woman dancing & i've sweat through all my lace. how sour, how sweet. i've never known pink like your touch, warm stones in my hands in february. i keep pebbles in my shoes these days & taste the timing of this like pistachio cake my mother only bakes on my birthday. have you met chicago in a dream? i've seen her standing at the corners of the sun on fuzzy blue mornings. she is always smiling.

“i imagine writing a song”

Rebecca Meier

2020

the end of june

is dedicated to touching, trailing  
a finger across the soft watermelon edge  
of pink insides & pausing halfway through  
the first bite of a grape, i've never judged a fruit  
by its seeds in my teeth & i kiss with my retainers in,  
i wash my hands & the bubbles gasp when they pop from  
wet fingers flicking water & are my roommates breathless  
from laughter or are they kissing behind my mirror,  
tomorrow morning i'll tell my girlfriend he can  
hold my hand if he can find one clean

“the end of june”  
Rebecca Meier  
2020

### CHAPTER III: QUEERING GENRE AND CANON

Not all people in the LGBTQ+ community identify with the word “queer” or seek to subvert societal norms with their existence—in fact, some seek to fit themselves into those norms as much as they can, or they think only of existing in whatever way feels most organic to them without thinking of the larger society as a whole. Jay Prosser’s response to Butler critiques her assertions about transgender people’s gender performativity, arguing instead that transgender folks and their unique experiences of gender are not inherently subversive or even queer. Prosser writes that many trans people simply want the right to exist: “Namely there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, *to be*” (Prosser 39). Some trans people seek out those supposed steps to happiness that Ahmed describes with gender fatalism, and they are happy to do so. Even in my own works about my complicated relationship to gender, I do not always seek to be subversive or queer; my queerness and my gender are not necessarily created in relation to each other or to straight, cisgender people. I can write a piece that does not play with genre, solely focused on my womanhood, and I can feel accomplished doing so.

Viewing identities as solely existing in opposition to the “default” or “natural” sexuality and gender binaries is harmful to queer people whose lives and experiences are much more complicated than that. Queer and transgender theory challenges the binary sex/gender system, but it can also create a new binary opposition of subversive transgender people in opposition to mainstage cis-heterosexuals: “For if transgender figures gender performativity, nontransgender or straight gender is assigned (to work within Butler’s own framework of speech-act theory) the category of the constative” (Prosser 39). The same is true of queer writers—not everyone will write about their identity or do so in a way that is meant to disrupt the straight canon. Even

within groups of writers who identify with queerness, there is “no direct, mechanistic correlation between the writer’s objective position in society and the type of writing he or she [or they] will produce” (Johnson 13). Some will find ways to write within recognizable forms and express what they set out to:

For me, a kind of formalism, a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects. Education made it easy to accumulate tools for this particular formalist project, because the texts that magnetized me happened to be novels and poems; it’s impressed me deeply the way others of my generation and since seem to have invented for themselves, in the spontaneity of great need, the tools for a formalist apprehension of other less prestigious, more ubiquitous kinds of text: genre movies, advertising, comic strips. (Sedgwick, “Queer and Now” 5)

Writing does not have to defy genre in order to be queer—queer writing and queer genres can exist separately or together. There is no one way to be queer, and there is no one way to write about it.

Some authors, like Savannah Brown, have their hands in traditional as well as multimodal expressive outlets. Her poem “a growing thing” first appeared on her YouTube channel in 2019 (*see* Figure 2), an exploration of conversing with one’s younger self from the perspective of being years older. Her voice—both as an auditory narration and as it is present in the words themselves—are put into conversation with warm summer visuals, often with mirrored effects, as she reads to the camera and to a younger version of herself. Later, in her poetry collection *Sweetdark*, the same poem appears without the visuals or audio, but still playing with white space and the laying out of the words on the page. The first video I recall seeing from her (that has since been either unlisted or deleted from her channel) was a short, personal essay about gender and gender expression, in which she details the freeing experience of buying clothes from the men’s section for the first time. This was the first time I really thought about gender and

gender expression, and I would not discuss it in academic spaces for nearly another half a decade or so.

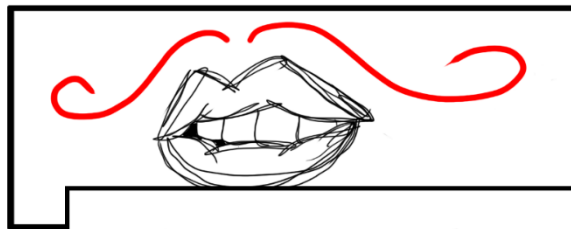
All this being said, there are some who find joy in subverting gender norms with their gender identity, and there are queer writers who find joy in subverting genre norms, too. For example, someone who identifies as a “gender confusion” or “gender fuck” is one who “deliberately seeks to cause or enjoys when they create confusion regarding their own gender” (“Genderfucks and Confusions” 0:44–0:55). This is something I seek to do in my own hybrid writing by using both he and she pronouns, and I think the desire to do so comes from the same motivation I have to explore my gender identity. In the same way that she/her pronouns have named me since birth, I feel that he/him also represents me. Writing in such a way is not what is usually expected from me, and I enjoy causing a reader to think more deeply about gender. I feel represented in my own writing when I bring pieces of gender, of queerness, of different genres into a new light.





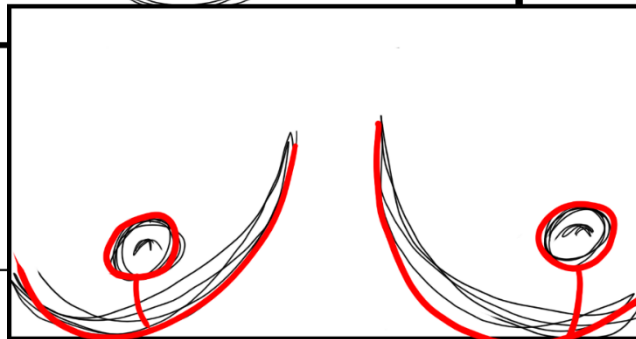
*Figure 2: Screenshot from Brown's YouTube video "a growing thing: a poem."*

# Body of WORK



“What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other.”

It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better.



But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female.”

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

“Body of Work”  
Rebecca Meier  
2020

Especially regarding the Internet, Alexander and Rhodes “believe that exploring queerness through multimodality—that is, taking advantage of the increasingly rich ways of figuring and composing—may help us develop productive insights into the experiences of the queer, the possibilities of multimodal composing, and the possibilities (and limits) of figuring the queer” (188). Everything I learned about queerness until graduate school came from video essays, poetry, and social media captions. Miles McKenna’s scrapbook-style video essays documenting his transgender and queer experience and Ash Hardell’s poetry and content surrounding pronouns, gender, sexuality, resources, hardships, and joys are two popular resources for queer people with currently 1.16 million and 642,000 subscribers, respectively. There are elements of playfulness and seriousness, pride and shame in both channels, with personal Q&A sessions or video diaries, oftentimes with guests from different backgrounds, identities, and professions. These forums, to me, have always been the epitome of access to queer theory, knowledge, and joy. Now, although I have greater access to texts and guidance on where I can seek out further research, I still find myself turning to these online creations first and drawn to make my own. Perhaps it is the sense of community in real time comments sections and following various accounts that follow mine, but I also think there is something to be said about the visual and auditory experiences that text cannot do alone. A similar logic applies to other forms of hybrid writing, whether that be combinations of genres, adding visual elements, and/or doing both simultaneously.

The structures in place in both academia and society at large have constantly been re-establishing themselves in order to keep tradition alive. The people in power want to keep hold of their power, so they want to get rid of any potential competition to replace the positions they occupy. Pierre Bourdieu’s work on fields and cultural production detail such a theory:

One of its central concerns is the role of culture in the reproduction of social structures, or the way in which unequal power relations, unrecognized as such and thus accepted as legitimate, are embedded in the systems of classification used to describe and discuss everyday life—as well as cultural practices—and in the ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of society. (Johnson 2)

When applied to academia, this concept of the “habitus” reproduces domination through institutions via the unequal distribution of cultural capital and it provides not only the reasoning as to why the same books are taught, but also the inequitable conditions in which the same *kinds* of books are taught, by the same kinds of people—namely, white, elite cis-heterosexual men. In 2018, 53% of full-time professors were white men (“Race/ethnicity of college faculty”). White men overrepresented among full-time faculty members means that the white Western male viewpoint becomes the most influential genre on campus: indeed, “[g]enres communicate indirectly with the society where they are operative through their institutionalization” (Todorov 200). Canonizing certain texts and consistently teaching straight, white, elitist interpretations of those texts limits queer people’s abilities to see and find themselves represented in the academy, and this is especially true for queer people of color.

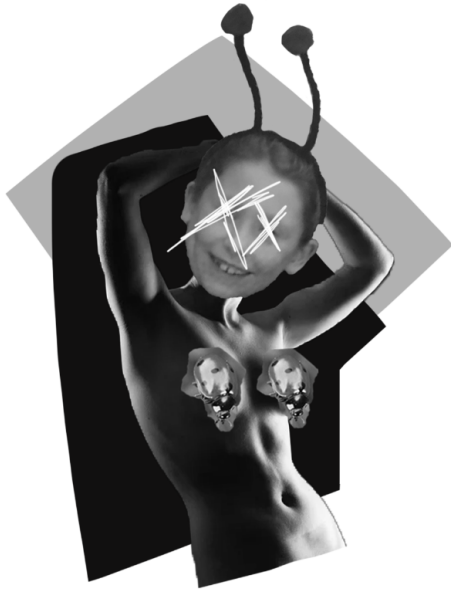
Of course, it is important to acknowledge that queer theory in a university setting exists at all. This is a step forward in educating people about themselves, others, their bodies, their feelings. And there is an argument to be made that a queer canon does already exist, separate from the larger literary canon: “To the extent that such an identity is traceable, there is clearly the possibility, now being realized within literary criticism, for assembling alternative canons of lesbian and gay male writing *as* minority canons, as a literature of oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making” (Sedgwick, “From *Epistemology of the Closet*” 747). However, queer has always been present within texts and media throughout history—it just has not always been acknowledged. As Ahmed writes, “queer theory has been defined not only as

heteronormative, but as anti-normative” (“Queer Feelings” 426). If straight is taught as the normative, then going back and queering readings of texts is a reclamation. Writing through queer feelings is a reclamation. Queering genres is a reclamation.

When I think of queer theory or writing in academia, I think of elective courses. I think of going out of my way to find myself in theory and literature, because even though I exist in my work and people like me have existed in works for a long time, the queerness in the scholarly canon has been overlooked or ignored outside of courses designed specifically to dissect it. To this end, “In this interaction the new pluralized mini-canons have largely failed to dislodge the master-canon from its empirical centrality in such institutional practices as publishing and teaching, although they have made certain specific works and authors newly available for inclusion in the master-canon” (Sedgwick, “From *Epistemology of the Closet*” 746). The struggles I have faced in my educational journey are in place because of the tradition of teaching those master texts and those dominant theories. The introduction to an excerpt by Sedgwick argues that “The very existence of canons, she suggests, helps to limit the permissible readings of texts by preemptively placing them within a particular tradition” (“From *Epistemology of the Closet*” 744). As I am finishing my second degree in English, I can say that the majority of my studies have not covered queer or hybrid writings at all. Thus, I have not been able to write in these ways until recently, which has impeded my discovery of my own identities. I have not even had the knowledge to approach the texts I have been taught (like *The Great Gatsby*, three times) from a queer theoretical perspective. Influential feminist poet Adrienne Rich writes, “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (512). If I cannot find myself represented, it is hard to feel like I can exist. Looking back at the

literature I have been taught all my life with eyes that seek out and successfully find queerness validates my existence now by giving me language and examples to describe my own experiences.

nice tits / dead ladybugs



the park / highschool hallways / an uncle's barbecue & an unfamiliar man who guessed or wished i was going into college / in my third grade training bra / under bathroom lights / the front of the class / an expensive carnival in a parking lot / a sleepover with a friend who said she wouldn't mind / victoria's secret dressing rooms in eighth grade / gas station parking lots / on the futon between needles & ink / catholic school gymnasium / junior high dance / the eyes of boys in the corner of mine / behind the couch / smashed into the front door frame / between buildings / a bedroom in the corner after a pool party / the bathtub / all over my words / the cafeteria table where i went to pick up an award / in my jacket sleeves the day i wanted to wear a tank top / the text in which a man asked me to meet him somewhere more private / in the cookie a boy bought me after school / in my boots / the biography section of the town library / apple orchard & no cell phone reception / sidewalk to a budget meeting / the local teen center / prom / the lunch table / beneath the window / the only bar outside of crivitz wisconsin / christmas day / the thanksgiving break i took three shots before anyone else started drinking / grade school choral concert / ice cream sundaes i was paid to make / my hoodie / new year's eve / recess on the blacktop / in my hair / on my hands

“nice tits / dead ladybugs”

Rebecca Meier

2020

“to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” (Sedgwick, “Queer and Now” 5).



*The birth of venus in my bathroom, alone*

It's always when I'm touching myself in the bath that I see a spider where I normally wouldn't, head upright and less self-indulgent. I spot one, now, dangling from the bottom of the cabinet beneath the sink, dancing aerial silks, and wonder if this is something I'm not meant to see, either.

Moments ago, I looked into the mirror, bare, hair pulled back in the way I've always hated because it left me nowhere to hide, and I thought *wow, I look beautiful*. I'd never seen a delicate girl study me, all soft angles and freckles from the shoulders up, lashes golden in the light.

The house is warm, womb-like. The mirror is steamed over and reminiscent of the frame of the first painting I ever saw my body in at the St. Louis Art Museum. A woman with thick brushstroke thighs, soft stomach, heavy breasts. *Nana, Female Nude, 1911, oil on canvas*. The description read *sensual*, but her expression always read *pained* to me.

Running my hands over the smooth, raised skin of the scars on my chest, I remember the marble statues that always got the tummy folds and cherub butts just right. I tried to take a picture for comparison, but the lens didn't have the same vision.

I worried the spider would descend onto my feet below the cabinet as I bent over to wash my face in the sink, but upon closer inspection, it was just a clump of hair.

*"The birth of venus in my bathroom, alone"*

Rebecca Meier

2021

gentle perception

i walked to cvs today & no one questioned my body. no one pointed out the ways in which i've altered, redecorated, home renovated what's inside my bra, no one asked to see the scars for proof. no one said *hey, you walked past in a life months ago, years even, and you were different then, easier*. they did not see protrusion of reachable fathomable feminine, collections of catcall whistles (& didn't they grow every time another rang), roadmap to pieces of a woman i recognize. their attention might have found bright hair, thrifted clothes, but no, there is no chest here. i passed a puddle & saw a human in there for the first time, he seemed friendly (he was not trapped, no, just visiting, smiling). & am i not woman, please do let me know, i am still figuring it out but surely i am this, queered sack of flesh standing in the aisle between bananas & banana chips, & aren't they both fruit, still.

“gentle perception”  
Rebecca Meier  
2021

## My body chirps, too

My scars are the rim of a paper cup, half moons with a seam up the middle that meets the circles around my areolas. Flipped upside down and holding a cricket against an envelope addressed to the last person who lived here, the cup is ready to be transported back outside. Inside, the cricket kicks.

\*\*\*

“It’s like a cricket graveyard.”

I had to admit that one of the things I had noticed since moving to Normal was the absurd amount of crickets. One of my supervisors, Hal, had announced this when I pointed out the smashed body in the corner next to the stairs that descended into the kitchen. The severed legs looked a lot like mine, thick at the thighs and tapering into slim shins.

The office was laid out in that charming way that told you the building hadn’t always been what it was then. It opened into a long room full of computers and desks with a group of small private offices at the far end. There was a doorway at the back left end at the top of a short set of stairs which led to a tight little landing, and you could turn left down a hallway or right down the stairs to the kitchen. The bathroom was at the other end of the kitchen.

There were cricket corpses everywhere.

Next to the toilet, the stairs, under the desks, between bookshelves. In the quiet space often filled with morning turning to afternoon and the soft clicks of several hands on keyboards, a cricket would pipe up from somewhere in the building. From our concentrated computer bubbles, we editors would emerge and search for the source of the chirping. But, as crickets do, it would go silent as soon as we approached.

Somehow, the carpet ate the sound of Hal's footsteps. We would jump as he approached to check in on us or to give us a new assignment, sensing his presence only when he was right behind our swivel chairs, waiting for us to realize he was there. It's with this same silence that he would squish crickets throughout the day, without us ever noticing.

I once counted at least five on a single trip to the bathroom. I saw my reflections in their shiny bodies, saw my boxer briefs through the rips in my jeans, saw my girlfriend's hoodie. I don't remember seeing myself in the mirror.

\*\*\*

*Google search: are crickets gendered?*

\*\*\*

Celia called me before I moved in to tell me that our townhouse had a cricket problem.

I wasn't surprised. I had lived in Normal the year before and had expected nothing less when moving back. We had been discussing what I should bring with me when my parents drove me back to town when I heard her voice trip over itself. There wasn't a natural way to bring up the fact that she couldn't figure out where they were coming from, but they were big and they scared her.

"I used to catch crickets when I was a kid," I told her. I would take care of them when I got there.

\*\*\*

I had never liked weeding with Grammy in Wisconsin. All the adults told me I should help, that Grammy's body couldn't take all that bending and kneeling like my childish legs could, but that didn't mean I wanted to bend or kneel instead. And no matter how many times she pointed out

what was a weed and what wasn't, they all tangled together and wound over each other until I was uprooting what she had planted by mistake, laying their bodies back in the dirt I pulled them from so that I wouldn't disappoint her if she saw.

We drove six hours from the south suburbs of Chicago to northern Wisconsin at least once every summer to spend a week at Grammy's house on the lake. My body existed in strange extremities in that space, even as a kid. There are too many pictures of me in jeans and t-shirts too tight to be comfortable, but also pictures of me wearing loose shirts over my bathing suits. Bikinis and baggy sweaters. Greasy hair at all different lengths.

Grammy once told me that if I caught a cricket while helping her weed the berm, I could feed it to the fish. I'd seen my mother and her sisters swat triangle flies and flick them off the pier at the lake down the hill from the house, laughing when the fish ate them and left bubbles in their wake.

After weeding, I crouched down just the same as I did while catching frogs, practically sitting on my ankles. I waited for the small flash of energy between the stems. I caught one, felt it bounce between my palms, desperate.

I ran down the hill towards the water, my shoes dragging up sand onto the pier. I dropped it in, bent over the side, and watched. Its legs spasmed, seeking solid ground to bounce away from. The sunfish, attracted to the movement on the water's surface, came to inspect the anomaly. The quickest to recognize *food!* swam up, mouth agape, and swallowed it whole.

There was no laughter bubbling up from my stomach like I had expected there would be, like my mother and aunts had. Instead, I remember the empty feeling of my stomach, bile bouncing off my organ walls like cricket legs.

\*\*\*

I always found it funny how much it hurt my back to sit on doctors' examination tables when I went in for appointments about back pain. Surely they were in on the joke, saw the irony in the collapse of my spine. I explained this to my mother when she came back into the room after I made her leave so I could get undressed. I was hiding a tattoo from her. Shame, too.

My chest felt like the most obvious secret in every room I entered, in every bra I filled, in every material it stretched and strained against. I'd never been aware of something that I'd felt so disconnected from. Dressing room mirrors lied to me, because that's not what I looked like. It couldn't be. I always turned to the side, pressed my hand into where the top of my spine began to curve into my neck, tried to straighten myself out. It just made my chest stick out further to stand up straight, suck my stomach in, call myself a boy. Even in a room with a surgeon who specialized in breast reductions, it felt like there was too much attention on my chest.

The doctor tried to hide his surprise when he pulled back the hospital gown and was greeted by two sagging eyes on such a young body. I hid them well under sports bras much too small and, when freed, they sprang forth and extended like a cricket's jumping legs. He took in my morphology, and I could see him beginning to formulate an argument to present to insurance in hopes of covering the cost of surgery.

I wanted to laugh when the doctor held my breast heavy in his hand. I imagined it detaching with a clean snap like a head from a thorax. I wished it would.

\*\*\*

"I don't know how to say this, but," Celia said, standing in the living room of our new townhouse and gesturing to her chest, "nice."

This was my parents' introduction to my roommate, and we laughed as they carried my totes and bags in through the back door. I felt restless, helpless, as my father grunted as he hauled the heaviest of my things up the stairs to my bedroom. The surgeon had advised against any sort of heavy lifting for at least six weeks post-op.

\*\*\*

*A text to my girlfriend: do u think crickets can be non-binary*

\*\*\*

It was soon after moving in with Celia that I saw the first cricket.

I had been sitting on one of the bar stools at the island in the kitchen, near the back door of our townhouse. Celia was on the couch where the kitchen opened up into the living room with her headphones on, focusing in on some assignment on her laptop.

It was crawling near the fridge, directly to my right. I got one of those uncomfortable rushes of heat through my body, the kind where I knew something was wrong and I had to act quickly. I tried calling to Celia, waving my arms, but she didn't notice, couldn't hear me. I knew I had claimed catching crickets as my job, but when presented with it, I had no idea what to do. I needed someone else to tell me.

Several pairs of our shoes sat behind me next to the doormat. I grabbed one and slapped it down on the bug, hard. Celia turned to me with half of her attention, headphones still on one ear. "Cricket," I told her. My body was still hot. She turned back to her work.

I lifted the shoe and saw the way the cricket's body segmented and twitched in its own blood. I set the sole back down on the corpse and left it there.

\*\*\*

The waiting was the worst. Every day I watched my phone screen, waited for it to light up with the insurance company's number. Waited to know if the weeks of standing in the cold outside the physical therapy office for the bus, the countless doctors' visits and sweaty phone calls, the

years of pain and discomfort and disconnect were worth it. My family couldn't afford the operation without insurance.

Approaching surgery, there was so much noise until I got close. Then it was silence. Long, long, long silence.

\*\*\*

I write about my body. Sometimes it's wounds still healing, itchier than anyone warns you they'll be. Sometimes it's a collection of scars and dissolvable stitches that have yet to be spit out. Sometimes it's euphoria, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's a girl, sometimes it's not. Sometimes I'm a girl. Sometimes I'm not.

I study language. I twist words in and out of each other, watch them meander over feelings and lick labels like they're sealing envelopes shut. The more I think about it, the more it feels like I need to find an envelope to fit my body into, addressed to sender.

\*\*\*

It's dark in the fall when you have to be at work before the sun does. October dawns come cold, streetlit, and demanding coffee. I could see my breath and hear the crows, perching on the powerlines and squawking from the rooftops of neighboring apartment buildings and townhouses. I wondered if crows fed on crickets. I wondered if I laid down in the alley with my limbs spread if they would eat me, too.

\*\*\*

When I woke up after surgery, it felt like I had wings. My back was light. My chest was small.



Everything was still fuzzy as a nurse wheeled me down a hallway towards my dad, waiting near the car just outside the hospital. He was on the phone with someone. My mom, probably. “Yeah, it’s a huge difference,” he was saying. “You can tell.”

I got home, went into the bathroom, looked in the mirror.

Saw myself. Saw myself, saw my reflection, saw me for the first time in twenty-two years of existing.

Cried. Cried, cried, cried.

\*\*\*

Celia dragged the mirror up the stairs, one step at a time. Even though it was mine and I had bought it from the thrift store with every intention of bringing it to my room myself, she wouldn’t hear any of it. “You’re still healing,” she said.

The mirror in our bathroom was too high above the sink for me to check how my chest was healing. My new one, big and oval and beautiful and golden around the edges, was tall enough for me to see my whole body. That night, I stood naked and took in a body I had never seen before. It looked like mine. It *was* mine.

I put on an assortment of different clothes to see how they would lay against me now. I tried on a dress and felt like a boy. I wore a button-up and felt like a girl. I looked in the mirror and saw a person. How freeing, how light.

\*\*\*

*A text from my mom: U look so good, not that u didn't before, nice dress. I haven't seen u in something so fitted ☺♥*

\*\*\*

I keep a paper cup on the washing machine near the back door, next to a pile of mail meant for me. The fliers are perfect to slide beneath the cup, holding crickets steady and safe until they can be freed.

“My body chirps, too”  
Rebecca Meier  
2020

## WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- . "Queer Feelings." *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose with Andrea Bebell and Susan Potter, Routledge, 2013, 422-441.
- Alexander, Johnathan and Jacqueline Rhodes. "Queerness, Multimodality, and the Possibilities of Re/Orientation." *Composing Media Composing Embodiment*, edited by Anne Frances Wysocki and Kristin L. Arola, Utah State University Press, 2012, 188-212.
- Alston-Stepnitz, Kimberly. "Bodies." *Perspectives: On Gender and Sexual Orientation*, APA, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, 7-8.
- Angelides, Steven. "The Queer Intervention." *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose with Andrea Bebell and Susan Potter, Routledge, 2013, 60-73.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Fourth edition, Aunt Lute Books, 2012.
- Brown, Savannah. "a growing thing." *Sweetdark*, self-published, 2020.
- Butler, Judith. "Critically Queer." *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose with Andrea Bebell and Susan Potter, Routledge, 2013, 18-31.
- "Genderfucks and Confusions." *YouTube*, uploaded by Ash Hardell, 16 November 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqO34uI4rwg>.
- "a growing thing." *YouTube*, uploaded by Savannah Brown, 18 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BQaMYwp6-c>.

- Halberstam, J. Jack. "Shame and White Gay Masculinity." *Social Text*, vol. 23, nos. 3–4, 2005, 219–233.
- "I AM MILES | MILESCRONICLES." *YouTube*, uploaded by MilesChronicles, 1 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ly1uQAsVfgI>.
- Johnson, Randal. "Editor's Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture." *The Field of Cultural Production*, by Pierre Bourdieu and edited by Randal Johnson, Columbia University Press, 1993, 1–25.
- Lorde, Audre. "Poetry is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 2007, 36–39.
- Prosser, Jay. "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex." *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose with Andrea Bebell and Susan Potter, Routledge, 2013, 32–59.
- "Race/ethnicity of college faculty." *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *Criticism: Major Statements*, edited by Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson, fourth edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000, 511–524.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "From *Epistemology of the Closet*." *Criticism: Major Statements*, edited by Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson, fourth edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000, 744–750.
- . "Queer and Now." *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose with Andrea Bebell and Susan Potter, Routledge, 2013, 3–17.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Origin of Genres." *Modern Genre Theory*, by David Duff, Routledge, 2000, 193–209.