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**“A STRANGER IN AMERICA”: QUEER DIASPORIC WRITERS AND THE AMERICAN
POLITICS OF EXCLUSION**

By

Cat Stanfield

B.A., University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2020

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

University of Maine

May 2023

Advisory Committee:

Benjamin Friedlander, Professor of English, Advisor

Elizabeth Neiman, Associate Professor of English & Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Rosalie Purvis, Librarian Assistant Professor of Theatre and English

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By Cat Stanfield

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Benjamin Friedlander

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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Degree of Master of Arts
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While the academic concept of queer diasporic studies is relatively new, the epistemic future of this interdisciplinary, intersectional, and inclusive field is already imperiled. Throughout recent years, bills seeking to expunge critical race and queer theory from not only the public education sector, but from the legally-defined “general public” as well, have been proposed by legislators throughout the United States. To combat this assault upon marginalized educators, scholars, and authors, one must first understand what is at stake; the rich site of contemporary, queer diasporic poetry provides one such example. By situating these poems within their complex cultural, political, and historical contexts, the proximity of today’s oppressive legislature to America’s colonialist, imperialist, and even fascist history become disturbingly clear.

DEDICATION

For my beloved, Eri Cruz,
my partner and support in all things.

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I am indebted to the expert guidance of my advisor, Benjamin Friedlander, who has been a close and diligent reader of my work. Thank you, Victoria, for years of mentorship and encouragement. Thank you, Eri Cruz, for not only your incredible insight throughout the composition process of this thesis, but also for your love and companionship—even on the longest nights of writing and research.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past century, America has proven a fraught battleground upon which “non-normative” (non-white, non-heterosexual, etc.) persons have long fought for the inclusion of their respective subjectivities, experiences, and ideas within the greater canon of American literature, art, and film. Pioneering successes such as queer Chicago novelist Henry B. Fuller’s 1919 *Bertram Cope’s Year*—regarded by many as the first queer American novel¹—to Canadian-American poet Esla Gislów’s 1923 sapphic poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* suggests both public demand and obliging publishers alike, albeit within a country in which homosexuality was, at the time, explicitly illegal. Meanwhile, African-American activist W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1924 *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* and Okanogan novelist Mourning Dove’s 1927 *Cogewea* disputed the racist rhetoric pertaining to America’s ongoing proximity to colonization. Nonetheless, the widespread enactment of national and state obscenity laws proved a perpetual obstacle for early non-normative authors; for instance, Anthony Comstock’s Society for the Suppression of Vice² sought to make inaccessible “indecent literature [that] was not limited to erotic photographic or written depictions of sexual acts,” but also “birth control literature, medical studies of homosexuality, and plays and short stories with lesbian or other unorthodox sexual themes” to the general public (Chauncey 139). In tandem, the Committee of Fourteen³ rallied against “that unfortunate mixing of the races which . . .

¹ Bayard Taylor’s *Joseph and His Friend* (1870) and Theodore Winthrop’s *Cecil Dreeme* (1861) are also speculated to be the first queer American novel, although there appears to be no unanimous agreement as to whom the title belongs.

² 1872 - 1950

³ 1905 - 1932

always means danger [that is, interracial sex⁴], be it as portrayed in novels, pamphlets, poetry, or even among the patrons of public entertainment venues (Chauncey 139). Per these reform societies and their myriad iterations, to be non-normative in one's personhood was to belong to the "social evil"—queerness, blackness, and indigeneity were, pointedly, of no exception. To possess a single "socially evil" trait brought with it the threat of harm, arrest, and ostracization—what of those, then, whose racial, sexual, or gender identities intersected at such a damning crossroads? In subsequent decades, the raucous response to James Baldwin's 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* would perhaps pose an answer; Baldwin, who features exclusively white (queer) characters within the novel, states in a 1980 interview with Richard Goldstein:

I could certainly not possibly have—not at that point in my life—handled the other great weight, the 'negro problem.' The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it. (71)

Indeed, to shoulder compounded oppressions is to encounter additional instances of censorship, discrimination, and violence; Baldwin proceeds to stress that, as a result of intersectional oppression, he thus felt "like a stranger in America from almost every conceivable angle" (Goldstein 68). It is no coincidence that the media produced by those possessing queer diasporic subjectivities—such as that imparted upon Baldwin by his African-American heritage and homosexuality—are, be it by systemic racism, homophobia, or outright legislation, often purged from the public eye. After all, it is those forced to the fringes of society who are, perhaps, best positioned to identify and articulate America's failings to ensure equity for its citizens by means of firsthand experience.

⁴ Brackets Chauncey's.

The subversive potential of the queer diasporic subjectivity, as well as the mediums used in its expression, remain a locus of discrimination by institutional systems of oppression today. As the American state teeters upon the precipice of fascism—for which the success of anti-LGBTQIA2S+ and anti-CRT legislature is crucial—the voices of queer BIPOC diasporic subjects are within the crosshairs of state-sanctioned silence. While these are but two of many, North Dakota’s House Bill 1205 and Arizona’s Senate Bill 1412 illustrate what is, circa 2023, archetypal of such attempts towards the absolute censorship of queer and/or BIPOC narratives:

SECTION 2. A new section to chapter 12.1-27.1 of the North Dakota Century Code is created and enacted as follows:

Public libraries prohibited from maintaining or promoting certain books.

1. As used in this section:
 - a. "Explicit sexual material" does not include works of art that, when taken as a whole, have serious artistic significance, or works of anthropological significance, or materials used in science courses, including materials used in biology, anatomy, physiology, or sexual education classes. The term means any pictorial, three-dimensional, or visual depiction, including any photography, picture, or computer-generated image, showing:
 - (1) Human masturbation;
 - (2) Deviant sexual intercourse;
 - (3) Sexual intercourse;
 - (4) Direct physical stimulation of genitals;
 - (5) Sadomasochistic abuse;
 - (6) Postpubertal human genitals;
 - (7) Sexual preferences;
 - (8) Sexual activity;
 - (9) Sexual perversion;
 - (10) Sex-based classifications;
 - (11) Sexual identity, or
 - (12) Gender identity.
 - b. "Public library" means a library containing collections of books or periodicals for the general population to read, borrow, or refer to which is supported with funds derived from taxation.

Figure 1: North Dakota’s HB 1205

Sec. 2. Title 15, chapter 7, article 1, Arizona Revised Statutes, is amended by adding new sections 15-711.01 and 15-717.02, to read:

15-711.01. Instruction; child assault awareness; abuse prevention

NOTWITHSTANDING ANY OTHER LAW, AGE-APPROPRIATE AND GRADE-APPROPRIATE CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION REGARDING CHILD ASSAULT AWARENESS AND ABUSE PREVENTION IS ALLOWED.

15-717.02. Prohibited instruction; legal opinions; disciplinary action; legal action; civil penalty; applicability; definitions

A. AN EMPLOYEE OF A PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION WHO IS ACTING IN THE COURSE OF THE EMPLOYEE'S OFFICIAL DUTIES OR AN INDIVIDUAL OR ORGANIZATION THAT IS INVITED TO A PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION MAY NOT PROVIDE INSTRUCTION TO STUDENTS OR EMPLOYEES THAT PROMOTES OR ADVOCATES FOR ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONCEPTS:

1. BLAME OR JUDGMENT ON THE BASIS OF RACE OR ETHNICITY.

2. THAT ONE RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP IS INHERENTLY MORALLY OR INTELLECTUALLY SUPERIOR TO ANOTHER RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP.

3. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL, BY VIRTUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY, IS INHERENTLY RACIST OR OPPRESSIVE, WHETHER CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY.

4. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL SHOULD BE INVIDIOUSLY DISCRIMINATED AGAINST OR RECEIVE ADVERSE TREATMENT SOLELY OR PARTLY BECAUSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY.

5. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL'S MORAL CHARACTER IS DETERMINED BY THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY.

6. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL, BY VIRTUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY, BEARS RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS COMMITTED BY OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SAME RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP.

7. THAT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, MERITOCRACY OR TRAITS SUCH AS A HARD WORK ETHIC ARE RACIST OR WERE CREATED BY MEMBERS OF A PARTICULAR RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP TO OPPRESS MEMBERS OF ANOTHER RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP.

B. AN ATTORNEY ACTING ON BEHALF OF A PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION MAY REQUEST A LEGAL OPINION OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL OR THE COUNTY ATTORNEY FOR THE COUNTY IN WHICH THE PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION IS LOCATED AS TO WHETHER A PROPOSED ACTION WOULD VIOLATE THIS SECTION.

C. A TEACHER WHO VIOLATES THIS SECTION IS SUBJECT TO DISCIPLINARY ACTION, INCLUDING THE SUSPENSION OR REVOCATION OF THE TEACHER'S CERTIFICATE, AS THE STATE BOARD DEEMS APPROPRIATE.

Figure 2: Arizona's SB 1412

Notably, these bills each bear dire legal and professional consequences for those who refuse compliance; as cited in Arizona's SB 1412, "A teacher who violates this section is subject to disciplinary action" that may include "the suspension or revocation of the teacher's certificate" (Arizona). Meanwhile, North Dakota's HB 1205 explicitly threatens the businessowners of "any business establishment . . . where minors are or may be invited as part of the general public" (ex. public libraries, bookstores, newsstands, etc.) with a class B misdemeanor should any materials as listed in Figure 1 be available (North Dakota). Rather, any space deemed accessible to the "general public" is legally prohibited from selling, displaying, or facilitating access to any "explicit sexual material"; while restricting the general public's (particularly minors') access to content such as "human masturbation"

or “sodomasochistic abuse” may reasonably be regarded as a sensible, bi-partisan decision, it is the inclusion of phrases such as “deviant,” “sexual preferences,” “sexual identity,” and “gender identity” that signals the intent to not only censor, but *criminalize*, unrestricted access to accounts of queer existence. Queerness, per HB 1205, is inherently pornographic; to be queer is to be in a perpetually explicit state, at all times, places, and ages. Therefore, even queer-inclusive childrens’ literature, such as transgender activist and Human Rights Campaign Youth Ambassador Jazz Jennings’ semi-autobiographical *I Am Jazz*, is made proximate in content to, for example, D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; one, however, is the tale of a transgender child learning to accept herself and her identity, while the other details the explicit sexual exploits of its characters. Fettering queer narratives to age-restricted locations such as adult entertainment venues—a site from which queer media and representation has only recently been liberated—not only results in the erasure of queer authors, but greatly diminishes the cultural continuity of queer communities by broadly denying opportunities for engagement and visibility. The goal of HB 1205 and its facsimiles is not merely censorship: it is an attempt to vanish queer persons (authors, poets, artists, readers, scholars, etc.) from the general public.

Arizona’s SB 1412 enacts similar efforts to disappear marginalized narratives from the public sphere, specifically within “public educational institutions,” or educational institutions that are maintained using public funds: public elementary through high schools, community colleges, and state universities comprise but a few of this otherwise exhaustive list. While Arizona’s SB 1412 does not possess North Dakota HB 1205’s preoccupation with prohibiting (and thus, in time, eliminating) queer mediums, proponents of the bill nonetheless seek to enact the selfsame censorship upon academic discourse deemed “critical race theory” (or “CRT”). CRT, in short, provides an academic

framework within which scholars may “study and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” while, in unison, considering a “broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest . . . and questions the very foundations of the liberal order” (Delgado et al. 3).

That is to say, CRT encourages scholars to identify and confront the racial disparities found within American legislature, policies, and institutions that—deliberately or otherwise—continue to

reproduce inequalities between POC and their white counterparts, thereby seeking to disrupt the

“system of white-over-color ascendancy [that] serves important purposes . . . for the dominant group”

(Delgado et al. 8). Thus, Arizona lawmakers’ anxieties regarding the potential criticism of these systems may be observed in the following subsections of SB 1412:

Section A, 3: That an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or ethnicity, is inherently racist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Section A, 6: That an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or ethnicity, bears responsibility for acts committed by other members of the same race or ethnic group.

Section A, 7: That academic achievement, meritocracy or traits such as hard work ethic are racist or were created by members of a particular race or ethnic group to oppress members of another race or ethnic group.

Should SB 1412 and the myriad bills resembling it continue to succeed in be signed into law⁵, efforts to remedy the systemic racism found throughout the United States—be it notions of internalized racism, reparations, or even white privilege—shall succumb to a silence not unlike that sought by supporters of HB 1205, thus halting opportunities for progressive conversations within all public education systems.

It is imperative that Americans do not view these exemplary bills as separate entities; although the objectives of HB 1205 and SB 1412 may at first appear disparate, an oppressive legislature enacted

⁵ Arizona SB 1412 was introduced on 1/26/22, passed the Senate on 2/24/2022, and passed the House on 5/25/22.

upon one marginalized population further establishes the political foundation needed to target another. For example, Arizona governor Doug Ducey is not only a proponent of the aforementioned SB 1412, but also the anti-LGBTQIA2S+ Senate Bill 1399 and anti-transgender Senate Bills 1138 and 1165; North Dakota's governor Doug Burgum, meanwhile, has pursued anti-CRT legislature via House Bill 1508 while, in tandem, continuing to promote the anti-LGBTQIA2S+ tenets of HB 1205. While the introduction and success of these bills most certainly warrants the outrage to which it has been met by cause-related activist groups, the means by which these discriminations *intersect* appears to be underrepresented in the discourse surrounding the immense harm such legislation has caused to—above all—queer BIPOC. Intersectional oppression indeed poses a significant threat to those belonging to the identity categories addressed by anti-LGBTQIA2S+ *and* anti-CRT legislation, resulting in a manifold silence that renders queer BIPOC's racial, cultural, gender, and sexual identities as, at once, prohibited from public discussion alongside state-mandated threats of legal action. In certain instances of diaspora, this devastating erasure may be even further compounded by both long-established and newly introduced anti-immigration bills, such as the century-old Section 1325 and 1326 of the US Code; in addition, the recently proposed State Immigration Enforcement Act that, per Arizona Representative Andy Biggs' sponsorship, "provides the explicit congressional authorization" to combat the ostensible "allowing [of] deportable aliens to remain in the country and incentivizing [of] illegal aliens to enter the country" (Arizona). The potential for deportation—a topic still salient within American political discourse in the aftermath of the Trump Administration—serves to silence BIPOC who, by making their or their loved ones' immigration status known, risk not only deportation, but also criminal charges and/or violence at the hands of the US Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE). Ergo, diasporic queer BIPOC's abilities to make known their experiences are—on all fronts—in peril of mass censorship within the United States, and thus, widespread erasure from all spheres accessible to the near-omnipresent “general public.” In the wake of unprecedented legislative movements against LGBTQIA2S+, BIPOC, and our migrant brothers and sisters, it is of utmost import to platform and engage their narratives—as well as the theoretical efforts surrounding them—as a means to embolden our collective ability to articulate the merit of these individuals and their respective mediums not only to the public, but also at the legislative level.

While diasporic studies—albeit a relatively new academic field—has received a great deal of interdisciplinary attention throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I have observed a substantial absence of scholarship regarding intersectional diasporic subjectivities within the literary field, particularly as it pertains to queer BIPOC diasporic subjects. Such omission proves duly salient when demarcating one's research solely to poetry and poetic prose, rather than to a broader range of literary publications that may include, say, memoirs and novels composed by authors belonging to cisgender, heterosexual subjectivities. Indeed, the “queer diasporic condition”—coined by queer theorist Meg Wesling as a union of non-normative “sexualit[ies], identit[ies], and desire” and diasporic notions of “geographical mobility, estrangement, or displacement of people”—has, troublingly, undergone a “critical slippage” within the fields of queer theory and diasporic studies alike (31). That is, a queer diasporic subject's sexual and/or gender identity, particularly as it impacts their movement, estrangement, or displacement from one place to another, is all too commonly absent from consideration as it pertains to the diasporic experience. Additionally, the possibilities for identification between queer and diasporic experiences are remarkable; for instance, the queer BIPOC diasporic

subject, per Jose Muñoz, cannot be “comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity” and exhibits perpetual transit, simultaneously “shuttling between different identity vectors” of racial, sexual, and gendered natures (32). I argue that queer diasporic literature reflects this “hybridity”; rather, “queers and postcolonial subjects” may call upon intersectional experiences of racism, xeno-, homo-, and transphobia to then enact comprehensive criticisms of the methods by which their country of residence, as well as its complicit population, purports and benefits from their oppression (Munoz 35). In addition, diasporic movement and the pluralistic geographical and cultural points of reference it provides may likewise be used to criticize power structures outside of and in relation to the subject’s country of origin. For example, Jamaican-Chinese-American poet Staceyann Chin—whose 2019 *Crossfire: A Litany for Survival* will be examined at length in a later chapter—employs cross-identification techniques in her poem “Traveling” to liken the homophobic discrimination she encounters in Jamaica to the racism she experiences upon American soil; per “Traveling,” neither America nor Jamaica is the inclusive “paradise” Chin seeks due to each country’s storied histories with oppression. Therefore, queerness, when belonging to the diasporic subject, may serve as a method by which to disrupt not only notions of hetero- and cisnormativity of multiple locales, but also to “trouble geographic and national stabilities” and enact a “mobile resistance” to white, hetero- and cisnormativity (Wesling 31). The criminalization of these accounts may then, perhaps, be attributed to their perceived potential to provoke—both among and beyond queer diasporic BIPOC—racial, sexual, and gender equity consciousness upon engaging with mediums (ex., poetry) that reveal national failings to ensure equality and fair treatment among all recognized identity categories.

With the tumultuous history of “non-normative” authors, their respective works, and the unprecedented revival of literary censorship throughout America in mind, this project strives to center a small selection of poetry that could—should queer, BIPOC, and/or diasporic subjectivities be legislated into silence—be not only criminalized in spaces belonging to the elusive “general public,” but also to the communities of whom these poets represent. Therefore, to engage these poems without the dire cultural and political contexts within which they were composed is to, arguably, read irresponsibly. Saeed Jones, author of *When the Only Light is Fire* and *Alive at the End of the World*, often interweaves references to racism and homophobia within various mythologies, historical events, and African-American pop culture. Natalie Diaz and Ocean Vuong, too, include myriad uncontextualized cultural anecdotes that may, to the unassuming reader, appear disparate from their queer diasporic experiences without further interrogation. Raquel Salas Rivera, Ryka Aoki, and the aforementioned Staceyann Chin also require further contextualization for outside readers insofar as their cultural and/or political objectives; Rivera, for instance, wields *Before Island is Volcano* as a means to pointedly critique US relations with Puerto Rico, while Aoki reconciles the means by which transphobia and racism intersect as a Japanese-American transwoman in *Why Dust Shall Never Settle Upon This Soul*. By extending the framework of Wesling’s “queer diasporic condition” to these poets’ works, we may hope to remedy the “critical slippage” that has, in past, commonly disregarded the crucial intersection of diaspora and queerness necessary to engage with these poems in full—and, in tandem, allow the poetry to validate the theoretical work of diasporic studies.

I. QUEER POETIC BLACK DIASPORAS

a. Saeed Jones's *When the Only Light is Fire* (2011) & *Alive at the End of the World* (2022)

In the rare prose piece “Saeed: or The Other One,” published in 2022’s *Alive at the End of the World*, Jones narrates a post-reading Q&A in which a white audience member unexpectedly interrogates a near-omnipresent aspect of queer diasporic poetry: pain. He writes:

“There is so much pain in your work,” he said. “It’s beautiful,” he said. “Gutting,” he said. “Searing,” he said. “Brutal, no—*bruising*,” he said. “But the pain, there is so much pain. Do you think you need your pain in order to write?”

“Oh, honey,” I answered in a voice that was mine as much as it wasn’t, “you’ve got it all wrong. My pain needs *me*.” (426)

Jones’s answer, while earning laughter from his audience, fails to satisfy the white spectator of his pain, who Jones writes, “stared at me blankly as if we were alone on a date and I had just disappointed him with my opinion on threesomes or food allergies”; Jones, meanwhile, notes the “brief panic [he] felt and killed behind [his] eyes every time he said the word ‘pain’” (*Alive* 439). Jones’s poetry is inextricable from a pervasive, persistent pain: pain that, in “Saeed: or The Other One,” becomes a sentient double of Jones himself (the titular “Other One”), illustrating the symbiotic relationship between poet and pain. Jones’s pain, importantly, is not one without an identifiable source: the most notable being that wrought by systemic and institutional racism, homophobia, and generational trauma in which the aforementioned were irrefutable catalysts. Likewise, Jones appears to reckon with

the relationship between his pain, his work, his spectators, and the performance necessary to maintain visibility as an intersectionally marginalized person while, simultaneously, preserving one's peace. At the prospect of addressing the "gutting, searing, brutal, bruising" experience of processing trauma through writing, Jones confesses to his doppelganger:

I started talking and didn't stop until I was nearly panting because I needed him to know that I had wanted to cry that night onstage. And it wasn't the man's question, really. Well, it was, in a way. It's just that I had been in the woods for so long and then I came to that man's question and it was like a clearing . . . I could've marched right into the middle of that field and listed my hurts one by one until I was free of them . . . But instead, I turned around and went back into the woods. That's what I always did. I went back into the woods. (*Alive* 1061).

To march upon the proverbial field—or stage—and "list [his] hurts" until he is "free of them" proves tempting, but Jones nonetheless admits, "They [his audience] want[s] to see me in that clearing . . . But I don't want to go out there for them," instead imparting the duty upon his eager "Other One" (1065). It may thus be understood that, to Jones, the externalization of his pain is a harrowing necessity, in no small part due to the imminent scrutiny of the (white, heterosexual) spectator, as well as the vulnerability of presenting oneself as black and queer in an otherwise hostile cultural climate. Consequently, the "Other One"—perhaps personifying Jones's "boy who feels all the pain we give him / but never bruises"—appears to be Jones's poetic (or authorial) voice, which in turn protects the "boy all alone in an electric dark telling himself a story to keep from crying without tears" (*Alive* 316⁶). Even so, Jones asserts that "a boy doesn't need to be a real boy to grieve like one"; it is through this "Other

⁶ "If You Had an Off Button, I'd Name You 'Off,'" *Alive at the End of the World*

One” who we, as spectators, are permitted to accompany Jones—albeit at a safe distance—through various manifestations of his intersectional pain (*Alive* 319⁷).

Throughout *Alive at the End of the World*, Jones presents readers with a series of poems entitled “Grief”; these seemingly disparate, numerical poems (“Grief #213,” “Grief #913,” “Grief #346,” and “Grief #1”)—listed here in order of their respective appearances—expound upon his previously proposed “list of hurts.” However, it is “Grief #913” that perhaps most pointedly addresses the intersection of Jones’s queerness, his blackness, and the ongoing efforts of American historical revisionism. Jones laments:

I grieve the boy I killed and the country fashioned out / of his bloodstains . . .

I grieve a continent, nations united by the way terror turns / me on . . .

I grieve my face / onto the covers of history books” (*Alive* 638).

While “Grief #913” may, at first, appear to take an explicitly sexual turn thereafter—that being at the mention of a “hot instant between thrust and gasp—’*I want you*’ and ‘*I had you*’”—the implications of race, particularly in the context of white (queer) America’s tenuous relationship to the black (queer) body, cannot afford to be lost amid the scandal of sexual allegory alone. GerShun Avilez, for instance, suggests that the black, queer body “is immersed in a veritable threat feedback loop” comprised of historical racialization, ethnicization, and even hypersexualization; the threats posed to the subject therein may range from overt violence to subtle, systemic discrimination that continues to occur both beyond and within the queer community at large (2). The “list of hurts” accumulated by Jones may then be understood to encompass “multiple kinds of threats (microaggressions, intimidation,

⁷ “If You Had . . .”

humiliation, displacements . . .) that racial and sexual minorities experience” as enacted by “racial projects of white supremacy, black racial normativity, and heteronormativity” (Alvarez 31, Bost 12).

Although Alvarez’ “threat feedback loop” is perhaps at its most evident when enacted by explicitly white subjects (ex., the aforementioned “projects of white supremacy”), it is likewise worth interrogating the means by which “black racial normativity” works in tandem alongside additional oppressive factors—such as homophobia and heteronormativity—in the context of Jones’s works. Despite his youth being spent in the American south—Jones was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and relocated to Lewisville, Texas thereafter—his earliest concerns pertaining to his sexuality were not marked by the presence of homophobic rhetoric in his household, but rather by the absence of homosexuality from discussion entirely. In his memoir, Jones recounts:

“Gay” wasn’t a word I could imagine actually hearing my mom say out loud. If I pictured her moving her lips, “AIDS” came out instead . . . I could feel the word “gay”—or maybe the word’s conspicuous absence—vibrating in the air between us. (*Lives* 8)

Jones can recall few conversations pertaining to homosexuality that were not concurrent with those of AIDS. While Jones’s mother appears to have intended no harm through such correlation—she is, after all, revealed to have lost a dear friend to the virus—the seemingly inextricable bond between “gay” and “AIDS” nonetheless impressed itself upon Jones’s early perception of his own homosexuality.

Additionally, ongoing public rhetoric in the 1980s and 1990s regarding AIDS did little to ease the anxieties of young, gay black men, who were “test[ing] positive for the virus at twice the rate of white men” throughout the 1990s, yet received little consideration as “health care providers and activists fail[ed] to disseminate information on safer sex beyond the white gay community” (Mumford 187).

Even as Jones attempts to better inform himself of homosexuality at a local bookstore, “all the books [he] found about being gay were also about AIDS” in which the subjects were “abandoned by their families, or worse, didn’t tell anyone that they were gay,” only to then “[die] of AIDS like it was a logical sequence of events, a mathematical formula, or a life cycle” (Lives 9). Jones illustrates his own engagement with this intersectional threat feedback loop as akin to “ma[king] the mistake of asking a fortune-teller to look into my future, and being punished for trying to look too far ahead”—henceforth, Jones appears to reckon with these outcomes as *inevitable*s rather than *possibilities* (Lives 10). Now “marked” with an invisible identifier of homosexuality—an assumed proximity to not only disease, but to social and corporeal death—Jones’s relationship to his sexuality undergoes a paranoid shift in which he fears his community may (or has already) identify/ied him as a homosexual and will ostracize him accordingly.

Jones’s sexual anxiety is further exacerbated by his Christian Evangelical grandmother, who succeeds in impressing upon Jones that he “needed church in the way [his] cousins did not,” and in his refusal to eschew his homosexuality, had become “the blood on their hands”—or his grandmother’s responsibility to wash free of sin (Lives 27). Henceforth—and perhaps stoked by the insistence of God’s omnipresent sight, now pointedly upon him—Jones develops a seeming preoccupation with the notion of being *gazed upon*: this gaze is, often, explicitly judgemental as it spectates his queerness. Jones uses “Terrible Boy” to illustrate a scene in which his “unclean” body is—despite the action he takes to prevent their gaze—witnessed by a member of his family:

Unclean under

A back-turned sun, I sing the sins

That brought me here:

I turned the family portrait face down

While he was on me . . .

I wake

In my unlit room.

Father standing at the door. (*Fire* 12)

“Turn[ing] the family portrait face down” cannot prevent Jones’s family, nor his community at large, from spectating (and in turn, casting judgment upon) his homosexuality. In “Kudzu,” even nature itself appears to recognize and shun his queerness:

I won’t be forgiven

for what I’ve made

of myself.

Soil recoils

from my hooked kisses.

Pines turn their backs

on me. They know

what I can do

with the wrap of my legs. (*Fire* 11)

Whether seen by family or nature, it is the “outing” gaze of others—that which illuminates the “sins” hidden by the “back-turned sun”—that renders Jones’s queerness tangible, rather than an unspoken specter; in addition, Jones’s sexuality is then exposed as a threat to his heteronormative community.

Notably, Jones’s grandmother uses the term “worldly” in reference to Jones throughout *Lives*; with this context in mind, it may be that the natural elements of “Kudzu” reflect the reaction that Jones anticipates from God himself—the recoiling soil, the pines who turn away—who, through his

omnipotence, would be a constant witness of Jones’s “worldly” homosexual (as opposed to “natural” heterosexual) escapades. While Jones’s grandmother does not specify that “worldly” is interchangeable with “homosexual,” it is used in reference to both his mother’s Buddhism and in response to finding Jones’s cut-outs of shirtless male models, thereby establishing a context within traditionally “non-Christian” behaviors within which homosexuality would surely be included. Through this lens, Jones is, to his grandmother, a “worldly” interloper who, as a black, gay man, may be regarded as “a threat to the biological and political future of the black racial family—that mythic connection that, albeit pathologized, makes black folks feel at home in America” (Bost 65). Attesting to precisely what comprises the “biological and political” aspects of the black family, E.L. Kornegay speculates:

First, black homophobia reveals a fear of challenging the places that have traditionally been the repository of our validation, pride, self-worth, whole-ness, and righteousness: *the Bible and the black church*. Second, black homophobia expresses the fear of losing the ability to claim a normative identity and the frail stability that comes along with it. (34-5)

With this in mind, one may interpret the many references to “burning” found throughout *When the Only Light is Fire*—“walk[ing] back / to [his] burning house,⁸” describing his lover as “[his] sky burned to blazing,”⁹ or “walk[ing] / burning / through the abandoned streets” with “[his] teeth / soot black”¹⁰—serve to explicitly invoke not only the fire-and-brimstone language of the Christian church, but also, more implicitly, the destruction of (or *cleansing* of, per a more progressive interpretation) Jones’s traditional “repository of validation” as a member of the black community. Returning to “Terrible Boy,” when Jones “[feeds] gasoline to the roots of the forsythia” as another man is “on

⁸ “Boy at the Edge of the Woods”

⁹ “Meridian”

¹⁰ “He Thinks He Can Leave Me”

[him],” it is perhaps his anticipation of the metaphorical spark—that is, his sexuality becoming known—that will scorch his remaining connections to the black racial family and, in tandem, lose the “frail stability” to be found within a “[black] normative identity” and the (albeit few) protections it affords.

Be it by the portrayals of reductive stereotypes or the language of inflammatory legislature, to be queer is to, in tandem, become the subject of hypersexualization, fetishization, and even sexual objectification; this process has historically—and disproportionately—targeted black men to an inordinate extent. Indeed, one need only look as far as the “antiquated stereotypes . . . of black men being promiscuous, animalistic, and threats [to white women]” to trace the methods by which black, gay bodies were—and are—“commodified [by white, gay men] as ‘exotic’ figures” (Richardson 3). Illustrating how such exotification manifests within the gay community, Darnell Moore (Jones’s contemporary¹¹ and fellow memorist), writes:

Black boys and men are read as hypersexual: strong enough to deal with anything that comes our way, possessed of a brutish masculinity that prevents us from feeling, enabling us to terrorize others’ bodies. Our dicks are caricatured as weapons or photographed as objects of desire . . . the only part of our bodies that’s coveted. (50-51)

Similarly—but most assuredly more pointedly—Jones appears to echo Moore’s sentiment, noting, “A man might still decide that when he looks at you, all he sees is a n[REDACTED], a faggot, or both” (*Lives* 106).

Notably, neutral signifiers of personhood (such as “man,” “person,” “human,” etc.) are withheld as possible outcomes, as within this “racialized field of vision,” the presence of the black, queer body is

¹¹ During his tenure as a reporter at BuzzFeed, Saeed Jones conducted an interview with Moore in May ‘18 regarding the publication of *No Ashes in the Fire* and the importance of queer black representation in literature.

¹² This term will be recurring throughout certain sections of this thesis; because I, myself, am not black, it will not appear in full at any point in this project. This extends to all racial slurs as occurring henceforth.

instead regarded as “a site of social and corporeal death” (Bost 37). Rather, when the black, queer subject is reduced to his genitals, he is thus rendered as little more than a sentient object—be it an object of desire, of violence, or otherwise—in which “the penis itself is metaphoric for a presumed hypersexuality that is both pleasurable to the white man as well as being dangerous,” and leaves “no actual place for the desire or pleasure of the black man, who, as a result of this type of objectification, does not exist as an individual” (Teunis 267-8). While Jones details a number of debasing sexual encounters with white, queer men throughout his writing, the racialized objectification described by Teunis is best demonstrated by Jones’s recollection of a specific, ill-fated hookup:

I could feel the words rising in his throat and wanted to dam the breach before—

“Come on!” he shouted, his spit coating my hand. He shook his mouth free of my grip. “Fuck me with that big black dick!”

That sentence had been in his head since he first saw my profile online . . . In that blue-lit bedroom, my black dick was all I was. I couldn’t even be [Saeed] anymore. That sentence, screamed out by a white man on all fours, was bigger than me . . . (*Lives* 104-105)

Humiliated, Jones recounts then “realizing that [he] wanted to use [his] body to ruin [the white man’s] body” by, albeit at his partner’s request, “be[ing] the black savage he saw when he looked up at [Jones]”; as the unnamed man continues a slur-laden tirade, Jones tries—and fails—to “fuck [his] hurt into [him]” (*Lives* 107). Jones cannot hope to subvert the roles of oppressor and oppressed when, per Teunis, the sexual dynamics between black and white queer men are nigh-inextricable from the latter’s racial privilege—that is, regardless of the context in which the sexual encounter takes place, “the power of the relationship lies fully with the white man . . . [and] it is ultimately intended to make sure that the power stays in the hands of the privileged” (Teunis 272). To engage in interracial sex as a queer black

subject, then, arguably carries with it the perpetual risk of becoming the target of a racist act. For instance, in “Prelude to Bruise,” Jones describes an incident in which his sexual partner professes, “I like my black boys broke, or broken. / I like to break my black boys in,” echoing the language used to describe the racist violence enacted upon James Byrd Jr.’s¹³ body in “Jasper, 1998: III”—“my body / broken breaking going gone” (*Light* 33, 24). The ongoing historical attribution of the black, male body as a perpetuator or victim of sexual and/or physical violence has not only caused irreparable harm to the means by which gay, black men are perceived not only in their immediate communities, but by America at large.

In a 2020 interview with the Southern Equality Campaign, Jones posits the inherent value of public engagement and discussion pertaining to recent rise in hate crimes within the United States, particularly towards “queer and trans people of color,” as well as the means by which he has used his platform to encourage awareness and action among his audience alike:

I do want to say that part of what I think is happening is that we are getting better at identifying instances of violence against queer people and trans people . . . If you have a bigger platform, more resources, more privilege, a big thing you can do is use your privilege to signal boost, draw attention to, and highlight what’s going on.

Jones’s poetry and activist efforts (as well as those of all authors as contained in this project) may be understood as both a mode of creative expression and an urgent “signal boost,” to which the latter’s success may be ascribed to Jones’s privilege of a significant readership. Additionally, when partaking in the writing of marginalized authors, Jones implores readers to “use that moment to look at the full

¹³ James Byrd Jr. (1949 - 1998) was a black American man who was brutally murdered by three white supremacists in Jasper, Texas. The case, due to the murderers’ racist motivations, is considered by many to be a modern-day lynching.

picture¹⁴—a picture that, importantly, necessitates historical, cultural, and even personal contextualization to comprehend (at least, to the best of individually limited subjectivities), and in turn disrupt, patterns of physical and ontological violence. The framework offered by queer diasporic studies provides an accessible means to begin and support this work, as exhibited by its ability to 1) embolden queer diasporic subjects of color to demonstrate the intersectional, “full picture” of their condition and 2) assist readers who do not possess these identities on a greater scale than that presented by singular, self-contained fields of study alone (ex., black studies, feminist studies, queer studies, etc.)

b. The Black Experience as Diasporic Experience

The “queerness” of queer diasporic studies has, to notorious proportions, struggled to maintain its footing when positioned within critical race theory, and vice-versa. That is to say, while queer theory has historically emphasized and interrogated notions of sexuality and gender (and thus deemphasized the impact of race, ethnicity, etc. upon the queer experience), critical race theory has, too, fallen short in its considerations of intersectionality in regards to the means by which non-racial identity categories may inform a person of color’s lived experience. Although this lapse in intersectionality may be observed in critical race theory at large, a number of scholars argue that this is disproportionality present within black and/or African American studies. In *Queering the Color Line, Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Siobhan Sommerville writes:

African American studies and lesbian and gay studies have been constituted out of a similar logic of identity-based scholarship and are, for me and others, the location of some of the most

¹⁴ SEC interview.

exciting and productive inquiries of the last two decades. Yet at this theoretical and historical juncture, the analogy often drawn between lesbian/gay and African American studies has produced unfortunate effects, including the illusion that they are parallel, rather than intersecting bodies of scholarship. (4)

It is the notion of blackness and queerness as “parallel”—that these identities are alike in their mutual marginalization, but are otherwise dissimilar—“obscures those who inhabit both identifications” by suggesting, albeit implicitly, that experiences of queerness and blackness are exclusive and, at most, are only peripherally “like” one another. By this logic, queer black poets such as Saeed Jones (who is African-American) and Staceyann Chin (who is Jamaican-Chinese-American) must then negotiate their blackness as separate from, but similar to, their queerness; that both poets directly address intersectional discrimination, as well as the constant intermingling of black and queer cultures, simply is not accounted for in this theoretical oversight. David Eng posits that the fault may lie within queer liberalism and the “language of colorblindness,” in which the “cleaving of race from (homo)sexuality, and (homo)sexuality from race . . . resist[s] any acknowledgement of the ways in which sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another” (9). Troublingly, the “colorblind” lens quickly proves incompatible with the lived experiences of queer black subjects, who are at once aware of the methods by which their racial, sexual, and/or gender identities compound to form intersectional marginalizations in America. Staceyann Chin addresses this colorblindness firsthand in “Speech Delivered in Chicago at 2006 Gay Games,” in which she writes:

I want to scream out loud
all oppression is connected, you dick

at the heart of every political action in history
 stood the dykes who were feminists
 the antiracists who were gay rights activists
 the men who believed being vulnerable
 could only make our community stronger (1551)

To enact a colorblind reading upon black queer poetry, then, is to explicitly deny the “coalitional and intellectual possibilities” (and, I argue, *realities*) through which blackness and queerness have worked in tandem for social progress, as well as the vast subjectivities, identities, and ideologies to be found within the category of “blackness” (Eng 4). For instance, Chin’s queerness cannot be divorced from her blackness, her womanness, her Jamaicanness, her Chineseness, or her (northern) Americanness; Jones’s queerness, likewise, is inseparable from his blackness, his maleness, and his (southern) Americanness. Stuart Hall suggests that this dire misconception of the “parallelism” Somerville cites may be mediated by “consider[ing] the black experience as diasporic experience” due to not only its substantial geographic expanse, but also the “immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects” (Hall 249). Therefore, by expanding the inclusive frameworks of queer diasporic studies into black studies, the myriad intersectionality to be found within black subjects (such as varying sexualities, genders, etc.) may be considered not as separate from “blackness” itself, but rather as components that inform how the “black experience” may vary from subject to subject as a pointedly non-homogeneous state.

c. **Staceyann Chin's *Crossfire: A Litany for Survival* (2019)**

Staceyann Chin's *Crossfire: A Litany for Survival* provides readers with what is, perhaps, the most archetypal framework of Wesling's "queer diasporic condition"—or, to reiterate, the intersectionality of non-normative "sexualit[ies], identit[ies], and desire" and diasporic "geographical mobility, estrangement, or displacement of people." Indeed, where as, say, Saeed Jones's diasporic condition is established upon an ancestral foundation within (African-)America, Chin's diasporic condition is, per the aforementioned "geographic mobility, estrangement, [and] displacement," first-generational. That is, while Chin's mother immigrated to Canada without her children in their infancy, she and her half-brother, Delano, were left in the care of her Jamaican family, only to undergo an abrupt separation upon their mother's return. Of this displacement, Chin writes in "Know When to Fold":

then our mother returned and separated us
sent him to Mount Salem
left me in a place called Paradise and disappeared again
. . . we became the single children of Sisyphus
pushing the rock of abandonment up disparate mountains (*Crossfire* 697)

While this initial movement occurred within the boundaries of Jamaican land, it is within Paradise that Chin first encounters the violent homophobia and sexual violence that, upon graduating from Montego Bay's Mount Alvernia High School and a stint at Shortwood Teacher's College, leads Chin to abandon her Sisyphean duties and instead seek refuge in the United States. Per Chin's 2009 memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise*, it is in the aftermath of failed sexual encounters with other Jamaican women that she considers immigration due to the seemingly imminent threat of homophobic violence

upon her person that, ultimately, renders close queer relations impossible. To a university classmate who inquires about her ongoing lack of consummation, Chin confides, “I suppose it is hard to ignore the fact that you could get jumped or raped or killed if somebody suspect you could be serious about a woman. Maybe I might have to leave Jamaica” (*Paradise* 244). However, this classmate is not Chin’s sole confidant; her brother, nearly estranged by distance, is revealed to accept Chin’s sexual identity.

Returning to “Know When to Fold,” Chin details her confession:

I took a chance / bated fate and told him
all about the girlish collisions on campus
. . . in Jamaica
the pretty girls residing in the smallest closets on campus (*Crossfire* 712)

Chin’s admission is, importantly, marked by anxiety pertaining to the “statistics / the rate at which they were killing people like me in Jamaica”; likewise, Chin assures that, due to a “stout diet of violent homophobia” throughout her early life, “[she] could get killed for talking about the things [she] wants to do with women” (*Crossfire* 712 & *Paradise* 247). Thus, Chin soon determines that America—New York City, in particular—may offer a potential locale in which she may engage her queerness without the compounded risks of legal action or discrimination. Chin’s tenuous relationship to her home country—and, later, to America itself—is and remains a focal point of her poetry.

To enact diasporic movement from one’s home country to another for what Sean Metzger deems refugee status is, of course, far more nuanced than the facile dichotomy of a “repressive island contrasted with the benevolent United States, which promises to shelter and perhaps grant citizenship to a persecuted individual” (Metzger). While Chin and other queer persons possessing “refugee status” may certainly receive more legislative protections in America than in their respective countries of

origin—more so in progressive cities such as Chin’s ultimate destination of New York City—one cannot assume a concordant promise of safety, acceptance, or even tolerance of an otherwise legal sexuality identity. For instance, as Chin shares the horror of the “stories [she] reads of gay men and lesbians who are attacked by mobs in rural Jamaica” prior to her relocation, she too questions America’s often-dithering relationship to its queer citizens (*Paradise* 252). In the aforementioned “Speech Delivered in Chicago at the 2006 Gay Games”—a nearly seventeen-year-old poem that has, unfortunately, become all too kairotic in the midst of recent anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation—Chin inquires:

as the violence against us increases
 where are the LGBT centers in those neighborhoods
 where assaults occur most frequently?
 . . . if the tragedy does not immediately impact you
 you don’t give a fuck (*Crossfire* 1586)

Then speaking to a global level, Chin concedes that “for all the landmarks we celebrate / we are still n[] / and faggots . . . created on the funny pages of a white, heteronormative world”; whether in Paradise, Jamaica or Manhattan, New York, the safety of queer persons—and particularly queer persons of color—often seems beyond one’s reach due to ongoing legislative battles, systemic racism, and a once-revolution that Chin deems not only “apathetic and individualistic,” but also “neo-conservative” in the means by which it seeks “apolitical[ity] . . . under the pretense of unity” (*Crossfire* 1562). As succinctly stated by Chin, there is no revolutionary change to be had without “giv[ing] a fuck” that not only extends beyond one’s own subjectivities, but is likewise unyielding in its efforts to disrupt and dismantle long-standing systems of racial, sexual, and gendered oppression.

Meanwhile, as Chin's poetry and autobiography alike have proven generally well-received in America—the latter proving the “first book-length piece of life writing to chronicle growing up lesbian in Jamaica”—the reception to her writings by her home country was less than warm (Stitt 2). Of the Jamaican press' general response, Chin writes:

My work was despised by many. Ridiculed by some. Mostly sensationalized in the Caribbean press. Every time I went home to read, there were numerous articles . . . which discussed my sexuality as a deviance, something I picked up in the amoral culture of the American North . . . It was always lesbian this and Jesus that and questions about how Jamaican I could be with my homosexuality so prevalent in my narrative. (*Crossfire* 132)

Just how Jamaican *could* Chin be as perceived by Jamaicans at large when queerness, in all forms, was (and continues to be) regarded as “an ideology that is incompatible with Jamaican culture” (Stitt 9)?

While some—and this “some” warrants emphasis—American authors may boast a measure of protections pertaining to their queerness, Chin could not carry such safeguards upon Jamaican soil; her past encounters in Jamaica with violent homophobia, ranging from verbal harrassment to an attempted “corrective rape” upon her person in which the perpetrators claimed to possess a heterosexualizing “rod of correction,” speak to the immediate threat posed each time she returned to her “home” country (*Paradise* 258). Further, in a particularly dire 2004 Human Rights Watch report—a time in which Chin had since immigrated, but continued to travel between the United States and Jamaica—it is revealed that “all twelve anglophone Caribbean nations in the British Commonwealth have laws on the book criminalizing same-sex behaviors . . . ranging from Trinidad and Tobago's prohibition against LGBT visitors to the criminalization of gay sex in Jamaica” (Stitt 7). This thorough ostracization of queer persons in Jamaica, regardless of race, gender, or even citizenship

status, is in no small part why Chin, in “Response to Danish,” claims to still write “for Jamaica / that rejected [her]” not only in nostalgia, but in hopes of large-scale social and cultural change. As of 2023, activists continue to call for Jamaica’s repeal of such harmful legislation, still meeting resistance even as fellow Caribbean countries such as Barbados, Antigua, and Barbuda have since abrogated anti-LGBTQIA2S+ laws. Truly, Chin’s diasporic condition is made most evident in the poems through which she juxtaposes her multifaceted racial and cultural identities and, in turn, reveals the means by which “both national contexts—Jamaica and the US—marginalize queer people and render their lives precarious” (Metzger).

III. QUEER POETIC INDIGENOUS & INTERNAL DIASPORAS

a. Differentiating the Indigenous & Internal Diasporic Condition

Although diasporic identities are often characterized by geographical movement (that is, a subject’s movement from a country of origin to another location)—such as Chin’s immigration from Jamaica to the United States, or even the ancestral diasporas that continue to inform the African-American experience—it must be understood that all diasporas do not necessarily begin with the movement of the diasporic subject. Indeed, a subject may need not move at all to have the diasporic condition superimposed upon them; particularly within the context of colonialism, a diasporic population may be created upon the colonization of said subjects’ place of origin and the establishment of a settler state that, in turn, may displace, assimilate, or overtly destroy the colonized body. Thus, when engaging with products of Indigenous diasporas, it is perhaps more generative to consider, in

tandem with geographical movement, the complexity of the diasporic condition as it pertains to “involuntary migration, the connections among dispersed migrants, and their enduring links to old homelands” (Lakomäki 678). The “in tandem” here must be emphasized, as such “involuntary migration” is representative of events such as the 1830 Indian Removal Act, the 1831 Trail of Tears, and other enactments of colonial violence that assert the inextricability of geographical movement from Indigenous diasporas; Lakomäki likewise reminds us that our considerations of Indigenous mobility must “be intertwined with an . . . understanding of how Native peoples thought about nationhood, community, and belonging” that may contrast settler understandings of the selfsame concepts (683). Rather, when engaging with Indigenous American poetry within the sphere of diasporic studies, the common assumption that the diasporic condition constitutes movement from one country to another—often by the subject or the subject’s ancestors—may prove incompatible with diasporic subjects who were (and are) native to a now-colonized country and have since been displaced (even within said country of origin); for contemporary Indigenous poets, this displacement frequently occurs within federal “Indian reservations,” such as Natalie Diaz’ upbringing in the Fort Mojave Indian Village of California. For Diaz, the Fort Mojave reservation was not only a site of generational displacement, but also an ongoing source of racial discrimination, harmful stereotypes, and hardships. In “That Which Cannot Be Stilled,” she writes:

Dirty Indian—a phrase blown like magnetite dust
 . . .
 Sometimes I believed them—I’d look around
 my reservation, around our yard, our house—
 Dirty, I’d say . . .

All my life I've been working

to get clean—to be clean is to be good, in America.

To be clean is the grind.

Except my desert is made of sand, my skin

the color of sand. It gets everywhere.

To be Indigenous in America, then, is to endure a perpetual onslaught of “magnetite dust”—or, perhaps, the country’s collective exhalation of racist vitriol that is, in turn, inhaled and internalized by the internally diasporic subject. Therefore, it may be understood that, when residing upon the colonized land of one’s ancestors, there is no air “clean” of the reminders of colonization; be it through appropriation (cultural, linguistic, or otherwise), generational displacement, or systemic discrimination, one surely cannot help but to feel “dirty” when the dominant culture ensures—and insists upon—your disparity. Truly, the cost of being “clean” in America is, after all, often reliant upon the fouling of another’s metaphorical (and literal) waters.

Similar considerations must be extended to those residing in US colonies, such as poet Raquel Salas Rivera’s home country of Puerto Rico, where the initial colonization (by the US) occurred in 1898 and concluded with the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act¹⁵ in which Puerto Ricans were henceforth granted US citizenship. Therefore, the Puerto Rican diasporic condition (as well as that of all residents of US territories) has become synonymous with the term “internal migrant,” not wholly unlike their Indigenous counterparts; while the two populations may at first appear disparate—particularly due to their geographical distance—the imposition of the United States upon their respective lands and

¹⁵ The initial dispersion of US citizenship per the Jones-Shafroth Act is/was restricted to those born on or after April 25th, 1898 (reflective of the year that the United States purchased Puerto Rico and its peoples from Spain as per the Treaty of Paris.)

ensuing colonization have resulted in similar enactments of cultural, socioeconomic, and ultimately structural violence towards these colonized populations. The colonization of language, too, proves a site of significant interest throughout Rivera's works—a concern that is commonly shared by Diaz, given the pair's mutual proximity to English and Spanish (and, in Diaz' case, Mojave.) Rivera's poetry, respectively, addresses not only this centuries-long history of colonization as it has occurred within Puerto Rico, but likewise provides contemporary contextualization as to the condition of Puerto Rico and its inhabitants throughout the Obama and Trump presidencies and, additionally, the concurrent devastation of (and US response to) Hurricane Maria in 2017. Diasporic poetry, then, affords a medium through which this precarious diasporic condition may be used by authors such as Diaz and Rivera to not only celebrate their indigeneity, but also to disrupt colonial narratives and assist in decolonizing American poetics at large.

b. Natalie Diaz' *When My Brother Was An Aztec* (2012) & *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020)

In the concluding stanzas of "American Arithmetic," Natalie Diaz implores, "I am begging: *Let me be lonely but not invisible*" (*Postcolonial* 17). The notion of "invisibility," when spoken by Diaz, implies far more than simply being unseen—eradication is, too, a means by which the selfsame invisibility manifests. Prior to this plea, Diaz details the harrowing "arithmetic"¹⁶ to be found throughout the daily lives of Indigenous Americans:

¹⁶Diaz notes in *Postcolonial Love Poem* that "American Arithmetic" was composed "in acknowledgement of, solidarity with, and in conversation with the police violence perpetrated against all black and brown peoples in the United States." (97)

Native Americans make up less than
one percent of the population of America.

0.8 percent of 100 percent.

...

Native Americans make up 1.9 percent
of all police killings, higher than any race,
And we exist as .8 percent of all Americans.

...

We are Americans and we are less than 1 percent
of Americans. We do a better job of dying
by police than we do existing. (*Postcolonial* 17)

Where the Indigenous subject goes, violence—particularly that enacted by the settler state, be it through policing or otherwise—is certain to follow; consequently, Heloise Thomas observes that, throughout Diaz’ poetry, “the self is forged and birthed in violence, constantly placed at the crossroads of historical and interpersonal forms of violence” under colonization (5). Driskill et al. further substantiate these troubling figures within the context of queer Indigenous populations, who have previously “ranked third in rates of HIV/AIDS diagnoses” and whose youth are “two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than any other youth” (Driskill et al. 210). Suicide rates are likewise overrepresented within Indigenous populations, noted by the CDC as “the second leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaskan native people . . . [and] 1.8 times higher than the national average” under colonization (Driskill et al. 211). In the enduring settler state, violence has become statistically inextricable from the Indigenous body; the Indigenous body’s proximity to death, disappearance, deliberate erasure, and its resulting invisibility is so pronounced as to warrant a widely

known stereotype unto itself: the “Vanishing Indian” of literature, film, and art alike. Generations of forced diaspora and dispossession, too, contribute to Diaz’ concerns of Indigenous futurity:

Angels don’t come to the reservation.

...

—everyone knows angels are white.

Quit bothering with angels, I say. They’re no good for Indians.

Remember what happened last time

some white god came floating across the ocean?

...

You better hope you never see angels on the rez. If you do, they’ll be marching
you off to

Zion or Oklahoma, or some other hell they’ve mapped out for us. (*Postcolonial* 5)¹⁷

Diaz’ usage of present- and future-tense lends itself to the urgent threat that the settler state continues to pose—the return of the “white angel” upon what remains of Indigenous territory is, as it is presented here, an imminent danger that may likewise be substantiated by settler encroachment to construct pipelines, recruit for the US military, and more. For the Indigenous subject, historical trauma is not something of the past to be reconciled, but rather an ongoing, relentless effort of the settler state to *ensure* Indigenous invisibility. In closing “American Arithmetic,” Diaz presents readers with a final statistic in which she reveals, “At the National Museum of the American Indian, / 68% of the collection is from the United States”—it is in no small part through the queer diasporic framework that Diaz reclaims her agency, resists coloniality, and disrupts settler narratives in her efforts to “not become a museum of [her]self” (*Postcolonial* 18).

¹⁷ “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination . . .”

Throughout Diaz' poetry, readers may soon find that she "presents queerness and Indigeneity as intrinsically connected . . . [as] situated positionalities against a hegemonic order that relies on multiple modes of domination" and for whom "intimacy is ceaselessly entangled with historical trauma" (Thomas 6, 9) That is to say, queerness, as a subversive condition in relation to colonial frameworks and the heteronormative settler state at large, not only compounds itself with Diaz' Indigeneity in regards to her experiences of intersectional oppression, but in tandem affords her anti-colonial poetics a likewise compounded method to disrupt the selfsame "modes of domination." Queerness, same-sex desire, and gender nonconformity in general were, of course, to be found among Indigenous tribes long before colonialist efforts sought to recontextualize these occurrences as "sinful" or "unnatural" through a Western assimilationist lens. As recently as the 1970s, gender-nonconforming roles still retained a place in Mojave society, as detailed by Bonnie Godbill:

Phenotypic females may attain a status called "hwame" and behave in a manner approaching that of Mojave men, even marrying another phenotypic female and acting as a provider by hunting and fishing with the men. Phenotypic males, on the other hand, through means of an initiation ceremony, become "alyha" and take up the clothing and behaviors of tribal women, forming a "family" by marrying another phenotypic male. The only social restrictions imposed on "hwame" were in regard to male leadership. (Godbill 326)

It is not only the Mojave who have historically exhibited a great deal of cultural fluidity as it pertains to tribal members' sexualities, genders, and social roles alike; "two-spirit" may be the most contemporary of these identities, in no small part due to its recent coinage at the 1990 Native American/First Nations Gay & Lesbian Conference to replace the offensive term "berdache," which had once been imposed upon Indigenous gender non-conforming peoples by European colonizers. Diaz herself is certain to

address “trans, nonbinary, and two-spirit people” in the dedications of *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Qwo-Li Driskill describes the two-spirit identity as one that “is meant to be inclusive, ambiguous, and fluid” while “challeng[ing] the field of anthropology’s [ongoing] use of the word *berdache*, but also to the white-dominated GLTBQ community’s labels and taxonomies” and is, importantly, “distinct from dominant constructions of GLTBQ identities” (72-3). This distinction, in part, may be observed in Diaz’ poems pertaining directly to queerness, queer sex, and queer love; for instance, rarely does Diaz’ poetry express the “dominant” form of (Western) queer shame that may be found in, say, the poetry of Jones and Chin—rather, for Diaz, “intimacy is ceaselessly entangled with [Indigenous-specific] historical trauma” and is, at times, inextricable from colonialism as enacted upon Indigenous bodies (Thomas 9). In “Monday Aubade,” Diaz invokes imagery of the Europeans’ landing upon the “New World shore” to describe a sexual encounter with an unnamed lover:

salt-heavy and laced in form, a caravel
 crushing the swells, parting each
 like blue-skirted thighs—lay before me
 another New World shore the gods
 have chained me to . . . (*Postcolonial* 83)

Similarly, in “I, Minotaur,” Diaz implores her lover: “Here I am, at your thighs—lilac-lit pools of ablution / Take my body and make of it— / A Nation, a confession” (*Postcolonial* 57). While it may perhaps seem peculiar to non-Indigenous readers to *eroticize* the language of colonization, Driskill provides crucial context insofar as “two-spirit critiques see the erotic as a tool in decolonial struggles,” particularly as “Native women’s erotic lives disrupt genocidal misogyny and hold colonial powers

accountable for past and present abuses” (85). It is not that Diaz sees herself (or her lover, the act of sex, etc.) as a colonizing force, but instead her “counter-appropriation” of the language of colonization that enables such disruption to occur—by using it, Diaz engages in what is a “healing erotic” for her (and her queer Indigenous readership), and is in tandem reveals the “living history of Native women’s bodies [as a] mythic foundation of the United States” (Driskill 85).

Language, as established, is an additional site of significant colonization upon which Diaz—who, in addition to her poetry, directs a language revitalization program alongside the few remaining Elder speakers¹⁸ of the Mojave language—frequently confronts throughout her collections, particularly in 2012’s *When My Brother Was an Aztec* and 2020’s *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Indeed, the theft, erasure, and even ridicule of Diaz’ Mojave language (as well as *where* she may use it, *what* she may do with it, and *to whom* she may speak it) is a recurring point of reference within her poetry. One such instance may be observed in “Manhattan is a Lenape Word,” in which Diaz’ Indigenous diasporic condition and generational displacement informs her portrayal of the ongoing appropriation of Indigenous languages upon colonized land:

I’m the only Native American
 on the 8th floor of this hotel or any,
 looking out any window
 of a turn-of-the-century building
 in Manhattan.

Manhattan is a Lenape word.

¹⁸ As of the 2015 census, there were approximately 200 speakers of Mojave in the United States.

. . . How can a century or heart turn
 if nobody asks, *Where have all*
the Natives gone? (Postcolonial 14)

As Diaz gazes upon Manhattan below, one cannot assume that her white American counterparts, though possessing an identical view of the city, may likewise consider its Lenape origins¹⁹—“Mana-hatta,” or “Island of Many Hills.” Instead, Diaz declares in “Cloud Watching” that “language is a cemetery”; in other words, the modern borough of Manhattan is the metaphorical headstone atop the *Island of Many Hills*’ remains, even going so far as to don its former name and date of death-as-colonized: 1624, as it was “founded” by the Dutch Republic (*Brother*, 21). Certainly, Indigenous names prove a consistent point of interrogation throughout Diaz’ poetry insofar as their proximity to colonialism. As Diaz continues in “Cloud Watching,” she mourns the early loss of Indigenous linguistic identities as, instead, new “census names [were] given to Mojaves; / George and Martha Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Robin Hood, Rip Van Winkle”; the erasure of Mojave names brought with it forced linguistic assimilation, through which centuries of Mojave languaging practices endured a near-apocalyptic disruption. After their initial imposition, the Mojave population has historically “adhered scrupulously to their alien pseudonyms in order to not jeopardize allotments of land that might be made to them or their heirs by the Department of the Interior²⁰,” however, “this conformity does not mean they have accepted these English names as belonging to them” (Sherer 8) In

¹⁹ A number of scholars also consider the origin of “Manhattan” to be Algonquin (in which the meaning is verbatim to that of the Lenape language), or, alternatively, “Mennahatenk” (Where One Gathers Bows) in Munsee.

²⁰ “The Department of the Interior manages public lands and minerals, national parks, and wildlife refuges and *upholds Federal trust responsibilities to Indian tribes and Native Alaskans.*” (USA.gov)

a 2020 interview with *Electric Literature's* Arriel Vinson, Diaz further elucidates the troubled relationship between Indigeneity and the English language as enforced:

English is prophetic . . . It tells us what to do, who we are, how to relate to one another, who is “us” and who is “them.” It is hard for me not to become the things I have always been told that I am. Especially when those words have been threaded into my words, into my language and thinking and touching.

Diaz’ poetry, then, may be understood as not only a means to engage and reconnect with the Mojave language, but also as a site upon which she begins a linguistic decolonization of *self*—her Latin name, “Natalie²¹,” receives marked attention in this context. For instance, in “Snake-Light,” Diaz claims that “[she] has another name— / [she] has a rattlesnake name,” noting that “in the beginning, the letter N / was the image of a snake” (*Postcolonial* 85). She likewise illustrates the role of the rattlesnake in Mojave culture:

In my Mojave language, when you desire
the rattlesnake, you call out its first name,

Hikwiir.

You can’t know the rattlesnake’s power

if you’ve never felt its first name stretch and strike
in your mouth—like making lightning. (*Postcolonial* 84)

The reverence as held for the rattlesnake by the Mojave tribe is further emphasized by Diaz’ grandmother, whom Diaz recounts insisting that she remove the “rattle tied on a cord [she] wore around her neck”—she was given the rattle by her Tío Facundo, who had previously “skinned a

²¹ “Natalie” is from the Latin “natale domini,” or “the birth of the Lord.”

rattlesnake in [their] backyard / [and] fried it in el disco” (*Postcolonial* 87). Comparing the act to wearing her *own* foot around her neck, Diaz’ grandmother contends, “*We don’t eat snakes. They are our sisters*”²² (*Postcolonial* 87). Contarily—and in what may perhaps be a pointed reference to the violent colonization and cultural genocide endured by generations of Indigenous persons—Diaz describes the harrowing “rattlesnake rodeos” found throughout the United States:

Americans celebrate the rattlesnake in rattlesnake rodeos—
round them up, kill them, sell them . . .

Rattlesnakes skinned to their tales, torsos rewritten
as italic slope, meat darkening and arched
among the almost-white prairie grasses—
the rattlesnake read and interpreted, rendered

a classic American character in a classic American font. (*Postcolonial* 84)

When writing her own name, Diaz envisions the “N”—or the aforementioned “image of the snake”—as “writhing on the page,” “sing[ing],” and “glow[ing],”²³ it is surely her Latinized name that has, in contrast, been “rewritten,” “interpreted,” and “rendered,” thereby assimilating Diaz as a “classic American character in a classic American font.” Through linguistic colonization, Diaz (and her ancestors) are (and have been) recast in Thomas’ “illegitimate national imaginary” that, like Jones’s African-American status, permits these internally-diasporic communities a “citizenship” that is often, and at once, oppressive, exploitative, and appropriative.

²² Emphasis Diaz’.

²³ “Snake-Light” (*Postcolonial* 85)

c. **Raquel Salas Rivera's *Antes Que Isla Es Volcán/Before Island is Volcano* (2022) & *X/Ex/Exis: Poemas Para la Nación/Poems for the Nation* (2021)**

While Raquel Salas Rivera places an emphasis on the decolonization of language that is not wholly unlike Diaz's—as, perhaps, first signaled by the bilingual titles of their poetry volumes—the relationship that each poet possesses to their respective languages are by no means homogeneous despite a common proximity to the Spanish language. Diaz, for instance, has published predominantly English-language poetry in which brief interjections of Mojave and Spanish, such as singular words or short phrases, encourage readers to engage in close analysis and consider precisely what these languages may be capable of portraying that English cannot. Rivera, meanwhile, chooses to allot their languages equal space within their publications—that is, each volume is wholly bilingual; whether situating each poem beside its bilingual counterpart (*X/Ex/Exis*) or placing said counterparts within a “second” volume as contained within the text (*Antes Que Isla Es Volcán/Island is Volcano*), Rivera ensures that readers cannot meaningfully engage with their poetry without recognizing the crucial role that bilinguality has played in its publication.



Figure 3: The bilingual covers of *Antes Que Isla Es Volcán/Island is Volcano*. (Beacon Press, 2022)

Note that regardless of the language in which one may choose to read *Antes Que Isla Es Volcán/Island is Volcano*, the book is explicitly bilingual—rather, by simply turning the book over, one may access the original Spanish or its English translation. By ensuring that each language appears in the same volume, Rivera perhaps suggests an inherent linguistic equality that may have otherwise been absent had the English and Spanish publications been separated. Similarly, in *X/Ex/Exis*, Rivera situates their poems' English translations directly beside their Spanish counterparts:

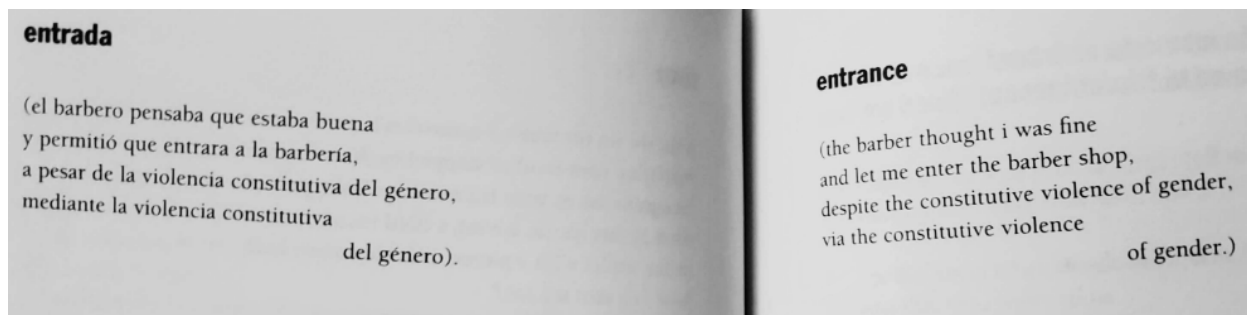


Figure 4: An example of the situation of Spanish and English poems as seen throughout *X/Ex/Exis*.

(University of Arizona Press, 2021)

Rivera’s seeming equilibrium between their languages has been hard-fought, as it is Rivera’s storied history of diasporic movement between Puerto Rico, and the United States that has rendered their proximity to bilinguality especially tenuous. In “A Note on Translation” for *Waxwing Literary Journal*, Rivera reveals:

After living out my elementary school years in the US, I was unprepared for high school in Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico. Having acquired an undergraduate degree in Puerto Rico, I was unprepared for graduate school in Philadelphia . . . My bilingualism was treated by my teachers, professors and peers as something that had to be contained, a dangerous and infectious substance.

Despite having found immense success in their poetic career—Rivera was not only the 2018-2019 Poet Laureate of Philadelphia, but likewise boasts a great many awards both domestically and internationally—it is only when Rivera began self-translating their poetry that they began to “heal [their] relationship with a bilingual self who struggled intensely to learn standardized dialects of both languages” and, in turn, hopes to “inspire poets who work primarily in English to decolonize their reading practices and learn more about the work being written, performed, and published in Puerto Rico” (*Waxwing*). Indeed, the process of self-translation has provided the “deeply bilingual” Rivera

not only a means by which to enact this decolonization within the space of their own poetry, but to likewise “unfold a third space in which English and Spanish coexist, meld, and separate in surprising ways that do not necessarily correspond to ordinary speech patterns” (Galvin 32-3). That is to say, products of self-translation may be syntactically imperfect to the monolingual reader (the monolingual English speaker, in particular), as there exists no single language to succinctly embody multilingual expression; instead, Rivera and their self-translating contemporaries “extract and adapt the most nutritious marrow from the linguistic and literary traditions of both Spanish and English to craft a poetics that is distinctly their own” (Galvin 33). Self-translation is, too, a method to shield one’s work from colonizing influence to which it may otherwise be vulnerable in the process of publication. For instance, linguistic nuances exclusive to Rivera’s diasporic condition could—if translated by another—undergo unintended interpretations based upon the translator’s own subjectivities and ontological distance. Benign mistranslations are not the only concern of the bilingual poet, however, who must also consider the “power dynamics inherent in translation” that may be deliberately exerted upon the writings of marginalized groups—therefore, advocates of self-translation (such as Rivera) assert that it is “significant for a people to translate themselves rather than to cede to the violent process of colonial interpretation and transmission” (Galvin 40). This necessity of this resistance proves especially salient in the works of diasporic subjects whose national identities reflect a colonized/colonizer dichotomy, such as the commonwealth Puerto Rico to the United States.

Puerto Rico’s present (and precarious) status as “unincorporated territory” of the United States proves illustrative of the island’s ongoing struggle against colonization; prior to the

aforementioned Jones-Shafroth Act in which the United States acquired ownership of Puerto Rico, the past efforts of Spanish colonies had resulted in immeasurable violence against—and, in turn, the near-erasure of—the indigenous Taíno population. It is this extensive legacy of subjugation to which Rivera gestures throughout “In Puerto Rico We Inherit Your Wars,” harkening to the significant obstacles that those seeking to reclaim, restore, or simply reconnect with their indigenous heritage must undertake:

under the church in mayagüez there are
 taíno bones
 the father knows it
 all the fathers

he said *take this ribbon and measure the*
 church dimensions
tell me if it's worth
destroying faith for some bones (Exis 53)

It is the unnamed, presumably Catholic church in Mayagüez—now a pillar²⁴ of the Puerto Rican community’s subsequent centuries of colonization—that stands between the recovery of Taíno “bones” (be it literal *bones* or, instead, a metaphor for cultural resurgence) and “destroying faith” through the disruption of settler-imposed systems that have, over the course of many centuries, become crucial components of contemporary Puerto Rican culture. For Rivera, however, continuity necessitates such disruption, as the prospect of burying Puerto Rico’s harrowing history alongside the bones of those it was built upon is comparable to creating “the scene of a crime” (*Exis 53*). As the

²⁴ As of the 2020 US Census, 97% of Puerto Ricans identify as Christian (69% Catholic, 25% Protestant, 2% Other.)

stability of the Puerto Rican identity remains compromised by its “unincorporated” state, Rivera likewise laments the “children [who] have no idea who assassinates their futures” and “erase their own faces, confused²⁵,” seemingly unaware of the bones atop which they tread and by whom their national narrative is shaped (*Volcano* 9). Rivera makes an appeal to these selfsame children in “And Because You Were Born Here,” ensuring that the anonymous “assassin” who looms still within the settler state is revealed:

you are sick

because they told your parents the stains in the sky
were renovations.

the proof they offered was the pentecostal church
and its parking.

...

you also get sick because the water is sick
because the buildings have asbestos, because your feet
touch the ground and you breathe while you sleep. (*Volcano* 7)

The ruthless exploitation of Puerto Ricans throughout ongoing colonization efforts has, it seems, established a thin line between the “taíno bones . . . under the church in mayagüez” and what may be—without legislative intervention—the bones of modern Puerto Ricans beneath “the pentecostal church / and its parking.” The United States, in particular, has accumulated a storied history of “limiting the political engagement and representation of Puerto Ricans, crippling their self-management of finances, preventing help from the international community . . . [and]

²⁵ “Julia Keleher Confesses She Believes in the End of History”

encouraging precarious borrowing practices” that has resulted in grievous losses—be it fiscal, cultural, or otherwise—for the Puerto Rican people while, consequently, further indebting them to the US (Straub 1609). While the option of bankruptcy may indeed seem ideal in Puerto Rico’s position, the island’s “unincorporated” status has historically failed to provide it the same protections as statehood. Instead, a Fiscal Oversight Committee (under US jurisdiction) acquired fiscal control of Puerto Rico in 2016, who henceforth “necessitated massive cuts to public services such as pensions, schools, and emergency services to reduce public spending” (Straub 1612). Critics of PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability²⁶), the US federal law through which the FOC was established, included not only former Puerto Rican governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, who deemed it “a crude exercise of colonial power²⁷,” but also Rivera themselves, who writes:

i feel rage towards my white friends
 who don’t care about the imposition of the control board,
 for whom this is the first dictatorship.²⁸ (*Exís* 81)

Puerto Rico’s public infrastructure likewise suffered under PROMESA, ranging from Rivera’s descriptions of polluted water and asbestos to dire structural vulnerabilities that culminated in the catastrophic damage wrought by Hurricane Maria in 2017. The United States’ response proved notoriously botched, in which “miscommunication and a lack of coordination” between FEMA, PREPA²⁹, and private contractors resulted in reconstruction that was “highly inefficient, ineffective,

²⁶ PROMESA was signed into law by President Barack Obama on 6/30/2016.

²⁷

<https://acevedovila.net/2016/06/testimony-of-the-former-governor-of-puerto-rico-anibal-acevedo-vila-before-the-united-nations-special-committee-on-decolonization-june-20-2016/>

²⁸ “I Fight With My Girlfriend Because the Fascists Want Me Dead”

²⁹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority

and expensive,” while the distribution of material resources and donations were often plagued by delays, should they arrive at all (Straub 1614). The chaos of Hurricane Maria had, seemingly overnight, exposed the myriad failings of the United States to protect its commonwealth citizens; with many Puerto Ricans facing community-wide devastation, immigrating to nearby US soil was necessary for survival. Rivera published a brief collection in response to the aftermath entitled *While They Sleep (Under the Bed is Another Country)*, detailing this mass diaspora in multiple poems, such as “no existe un mundo poshuracán”:

the airlines offer tickets for \$50
if you wanted to leave home
forever
they are depressed (*Sleep* 40)

It is this grievous, perpetual “exercise of colonial power” that has long rendered the Puerto Rican diasporic condition as markedly erratic, in which—as recently as 2017—numerous Puerto Ricans must immigrate from their “unincorporated” home to the US in pursuit of improved conditions that should, by right, be afforded any US citizen.

Prior to examining the precise methods by which Rivera illustrates, navigates, and even interrogates the roles of gender and sexuality within their poetry, it first warrants the assertion that Rivera’s own identification as a queer, non-binary person is, emphatically, inextricable from their creative work. This may be seen most prominently in *X/Ex/Exis*, where Rivera spends exponentially more time considering their gender and sexual identities in relation to Puerto Rico and the US as opposed to the later *Before Island is Volcano*, in which their internally diasporic condition (and their

national identity *as* diasporic) is most often positioned at the fore. For instance, in “The Cut,” Rivera pauses to clarify that, many of the poems contained in the volume share a common catalyst that could, in fact, be overlooked by readers unaccustomed to nonbinary and/or transgender³⁰ authorship. They write:

if you don't understand that i'm talking about gender,
it's because you haven't seen the statistics that say
i probably won't survive
the climactic changes
i harbor in my chest. (*Exis* 17)

It is not only a greater risk of suicide among nonbinary and transgender populations that Rivera references, here, but also the harrowing statistics pertaining to recent violence against gender-nonconforming Puerto Ricans. Per a 2020 analysis conducted by Florida International University regarding transphobic violence within the US, “Puerto Rico, which has only 1% of the United States population, accounted for 15% of transgender killings in 2020—more than any other state³¹”; likewise, as recently as 2023, the US-based National LGBTQ Task Force has called for “authorities to act immediately to address the ongoing anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender violence in Puerto Rico,” citing the accumulated murders of eighteen queer and/or transgender individuals within the past “year and a half³².” While this rise in transphobic violence may most certainly be attributed to the onslaught of anti-transgender rhetoric within the United States at large,

³⁰ I will henceforth be using the word “transgender” to encompass trans *and* nonbinary identities, as the term indicates an umbrella differentiation between one’s gender identity and assigned sex at birth.

³¹ <https://sfmn.fiu.edu/transgender-murders-plague-puerto-rico/>

³² <https://www.thetaskforce.org/anti-lgbt-violence-in-puerto-rico-must-stop-now/>

Puerto Rican scholars such as FIU’s own Shiella Rodriguez-Madera posit that “traditional gender norms, usually described as *machismo* and *marianismo*, place cultural value on adherence to polarized and rigid definitions of gender and sexuality” that may contribute to Puerto Rico’s status as an ongoing locus of violence towards nonconformers (Rodriguez-Madera et al. 2) Contrary to common understandings of the “male” and “female” dichotomy, in which both may exist independently from the other, traditional notions of “machismo” and “marianismo” are codependent—that is, for one (in this case, a cisgender male) to achieve “machismo,” he must acquire a (cisgender female) counterpart who, in tandem, embodies “marianismo” and vice-versa. In “Unveiling Sexual Identity in the Face of Marianismo,” Kiran Hussain explains the curious—and restrictive—symbiosis between the two:

The role of machismo posits that men have a duty to protect and exert dominance, aggression, and oppression on women; while marianismo constitutes women’s obedience, submission to men, and selfless devotion to family as a way to emulate the Virgin Mary . . . Thus, in some capacity, men’s honor is dependent on women’s behavior, while women’s moral and spiritual stature is contingent on the behavior of men. (74)

For a number of Puerto Ricans, then, the integrity of the family unit is not merely reliant upon heterosexual partnerships alone, but likewise to the couple’s mutual adherence to “machismo” and “marianismo.” Transgenderism, of course, provides a significant disruption to this hetero- and cis-normative ideology; consequently, transgender Puerto Ricans are often upon the receiving end of insistent efforts by their families, communities, and otherwise to encourage gender conformity. That is to say, Puerto Rico’s emphasis on performative femininity, masculinity, and the respective expectations

prescribes what Rivera deems a “gender license”³³ to its citizens that is nigh impossible to exchange—even with insistence that it is, in fact, the incorrect “license” for its owner (*Exis* 11). In “The Cut,” Rivera expresses the frustrations wrought by “my mother calling me *daughter* / despite my corrections,” a term which they liken to “the trans cliché of the blouse that / that fits but doesn’t look right”; rather, as they don the ill-fitting blouse of marianismo, Rivera resorts to simply dreaming of a pseudo-parallel universe in which “i didn’t lie to my family for years, / faking i was the good daughter . . . but i wasn’t asleep, nor good, nor a daughter³⁴” (*Exis* 13, 7). Further exacerbating Rivera’s dysphoric distress are the limitations of the Spanish language, in which the exclusivity of gendered terminologies affords them little respite—Rivera laments that “in this, our language / there exists no plural that doesn’t deny me” (*Exis* 21). Rather, while Rivera employs the usage of singular “they/them” pronouns in English, there are presently no widely recognized, gender-neutral pronouns in the Spanish language. Therefore, it may be understood that to eschew the masculine/feminine binary in (Puerto Rican) Spanish is to—because of this oversight—undergo exclusion from not only one’s own language, but from the ability to assert one’s personhood to oneself and others. Rivera, rather than conceding to the lack of representation in their native tongue, exercises linguistic sovereignty by *creating* a term of self-identification anew. As Rivera explains in a 2018 interview with CityWide Stories:

Sometimes I describe my gender as “buchipluma,” which in the Puerto Rican dialect of Spanish means flaky, but also can be read as a neologism that combines “bucha” and “pluma” and the feminine “a” with the gender neutral “i” ending. In other words, I’m a feathered butch.

³³ “Flowers”

³⁴ “Memories of the Good Daughter”

There definitely aren't any feathered butch conventions, but there are ways of celebrating that identity on a daily basis . . .

While this term is indeed exclusive to Rivera as opposed to being representative of a community, what Rivera has done here is nonetheless analogous to that of preceding efforts by Indigenous activists to establish the term “two-spirit” on behalf of those for whom existing terminologies failed to resonate. Where the language and cultural scope of one's colonizers may fail to represent the colonized population, the latter may innovate in its stead, thereby creating positions of belonging by asserting a more inclusive national imaginary.

Although their voice is one of the most prominent of queer Puerto Rican activists, Rivera is certainly not alone in demanding significant change from the United States and Puerto Rican governments; despite the disturbing rise in transphobic violence, 2023 has been a particularly lucrative year for Puerto Rico in regards to LGBTQIA2S+ rights, in which multiple bills seeking greater nondiscrimination measures³⁵ found success in the Puerto Rican House of Representatives and Senate alike. As further advances are made towards the bipartisan Puerto Rico Status Act³⁶, the decision between statehood, independence, or free association with the US shall be of marked importance to the futures of queer Puerto Ricans for whom these changes could spell protection—such as through the enshrinement of existing non-discrimination measures—or criminalization, in which existing and future protections could, in fact, be repealed and replaced by oppressive countermeasures. The

³⁵ Several of these non-discrimination bills may be seen in Puerto Rico's HB 1725 (2009), SB 238 (2013), and HB 488 (2013).

³⁶ As of 12/16/2022, the Puerto Rico Status Act passed the House of Representatives; the plebiscite to determine Puerto Rico's political status will be held on 11/5/2023, well after the composition of this thesis.

accounts of Rivera and their Puerto Rican contemporaries will be of utmost import as this inevitable shift draws closer, as will the integrity and compassion of the politicians chosen to represent them.

IV. QUEER POETIC ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER DIASPORAS

a. Politics of (Dis-)Belonging in Queer Diasporic API Communities

While queer diasporic studies is a relatively new field as compared to a number of its counterparts, there nonetheless exists an extensive—and perhaps surprising—amount of well-established, significant scholarship pertaining to, specifically, queer Asian-American and Pacific Islander (API) diasporas. David Eng’s 1997 *“Out Here and Over There”: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian-American Studies* has proven to be an especially seminal text within the field, where he asserts the systemic methods by which APIs still retain a “dubious claim to citizenship and place within the US nation-state” and have, likewise, been “historically configured as either unassimilable aliens or perversely assimilated” (Eng 350). Rather, per Eng and his contemporaries, the hyphen in “Asian-American” suggests a great deal of dissonance between these identities as opposed to connection, let alone coexistence. This may be attributed to a number of factors, including (but most certainly not limited to) enduring notions of estrangement as it pertains to the API subject’s “Asian-” and “-American” status—while this conflict is certainly not exclusive to any one diasporic population, it is remarkably pronounced among “alien” API communities. Dorothy Wang posits that because the API subject is so often perceived by others as neither Asian *nor* American—but instead an

“unassimilable” outlier—the resulting alienation from each national identity ensures that “Asian-Americans [are] viewed as perpetual foreigners, fresh off the boat,” regardless of the length of their American citizenship and/or ties to their country of origin (274). The externally diasporic subject is thereby unable to ever satisfy the conditions of “American-ness” as a result of an interminable “immigrant” status that appears to supersede all possibilities of belonging; in tandem, the geographical (and possibly ontological) distance from the subject’s country of origin further obfuscates opportunities for greater identification, aggregating alongside imperialist systems of discrimination to render otherwise *bicultural* subjects *acultural*, suggesting instead that their presence in the United States belies an *absence* of place, origin, and even national identity. A number of Asian-American scholars assert that this “blank slate” is not destined to remain neutral, but to rather become a product of—or perhaps a testimony to—American nationalism and narratives of immigration success stories in which the API subject becomes a “model minority.” In “Narrating Against Assimilation and the Empire,” Wen Liu details the “white-washing” of the API experience:

In many ways, *forgetting* one’s history is the precondition of achieving the “good Asian-American life” that is inseparable from the American Dream: hard work, family values, economic advancement, and the promise of future prosperity for the next generation, where some Asian-Americans are recruited for middle-class status by making racial politics secondary to their lives. (177)

This places an exceptional burden upon APIs who seek to confront and reconcile their diasporic identities, as such work necessitates disrupting the primary (and limited) means through which one may otherwise attain some semblance of a “recognizable and recognizably legitimate Asian-American racial identity” within the United States; the API subject must not only *remember* their history,

however fraught it may be, but must simultaneously demand visibility in a country that has long benefited from their silent assimilation (Eng 353).

The already-nebulous state of the Asian-American diasporic condition may be further exacerbated when coupled alongside a subject's queerness, culminating in manifold erasure that is not wholly unlike that described by the poets of previous chapters. That is to say, America's "historical legacy that has unrelentingly configured Asian-Americans as exterior or eccentric to the US nation-state" is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the selfsame legacy that has long enacted "pervasive structures of normative heterosexuality" upon non-normative bodies throughout centuries of colonization, imperialization, and the general subjugation of non-white populations (Eng 351). Just as APIs are encouraged by the American nation-state to "mak[e] racial politics secondary to their lives" and thus to abstain from criticizing "centuries of colonial and racialized wars, labor migration, [and] capitalist expansion," the queer API community is likewise expected to "get over queer suffering and to look forward to the neoliberal promises of assimilation and inclusion" (Liu 178). Such an expectation is, of course, nigh unfathomable when such "queer suffering" is so often proximate to the API subject.

b. Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* (2016) & *Time is a Mother* (2022)

Upon completing Ocean Vuong's *A Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, readers are met with a startlingly brief "About the Author" section in which only a single sentence pertaining to Vuong's life may be found: "Born in Saigon, Vietnam, Ocean Vuong lives in New York City" (89). Indeed, where other authors often attribute such a space to promote additional publications, list awards and/or

achievements, or even offer cursory glimpses of their lives beyond the printed page, Vuong offers readers but two facts alone—where he once was (Vietnam) and where he is now (America.) Notably, Vuong neither identifies himself as Vietnamese, American, or even Vietnamese-American within this statement; rather, this declaration of his diasporic condition emphasizes geographical movement as opposed to revealing the status of Vuong’s self-perceived national identity. Vuong’s diasporic condition is particularly unstable insofar as his early displacement from then-wartime Vietnam, having immigrated at his mother’s behest at the mere age of two. In contrast to authors such as Chin, whose diasporic trajectory allotted for the independent development of two defined national identities (Jamaican and American), the formation of Vuong’s diasporic subjectivity was (and is) instead reliant upon a received history of Vietnam as imparted by his mother, Rose, rather than Vuong’s firsthand experiences. Thus, Vuong’s own Vietnamese-American identity is in no small part a reflection of his mother’s, whose refugee status compounded alongside systemic issues such as racism, poverty, and the residual trauma of the Vietnam War to establish an intergenerational diasporic identity—one between mother and son—as informed by her firsthand (and, by proxy, Vuong’s secondhand) experiences. In “Headfirst,” Vuong shares—through his mother’s words— the brutality that preceded his birth as a survivor of war:

When they ask you
 where you’re from
 tell them your name
 was fleshed from the toothless mouth
 of a war-woman.
 That you were not born

but crawled, headfirst—
 into the hunger of dogs. (*Wounds* 20-21)

Certainly, the child of the Vietnamese “war-woman”—cast by the United States alongside other refugees as “a thorn in normative history” and inextricable from the wartime violence enacted by and upon the Vietnamese military—could not have anticipated the “hunger of [the] dogs” awaiting across the ocean (Pelaud 20). Having traced his lineage directly to the earliest years of the Vietnam War, in which Vuong’s grandmother encountered and thereafter wed his grandfather—an American soldier sent abroad—the events contained within the twenty-year conflict are of recurring interest to Vuong, particularly as his point of origin. Alternatively, in Vuong’s own words, “An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. / Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me” (*Wounds* 70). Vuong’s family was, like many, separated and dispersed throughout various countries during mass exodus that occurred in the concluding years of the Vietnam War; prior to their arrival in the United States, Vuong and his family—now consisting of his grandmother, mother, and aunt—were among the approximate “60,000 [of] 130,000³⁷” who were unceremoniously displaced in refugee camps across China, Thailand, and the Philippines. As these refugees awaited emigration approval, many endured abject poverty and abuse that resulted in “a sense of helplessness and dependency” that was, more often than not, exacerbated by an overwhelming shortage of basic resources and overcrowding (Pelaud 11). In the midst of this uncertainty, however, Vuong reveals a rare moment of respite that, without his interjection, would prove otherwise unknowable in a 2017 interview with *The Guardian*’s Claire Armitstead. Directing readers to the cover image of *Night Sky*

³⁷ Statistics provided by Pelaud, pg. 14.

With Exit Wounds, in which a young Vuong sits between two smiling women—one of whom is his mother—Armitstead writes:

The elegance is deceptive: it was taken when the family were living in poverty in a refugee camp in the Philippines, en route for the US, after being expelled from Vietnam. Vuong, the only child in the three-generation exodus, was two years old. A fellow refugee was bartering photographs for food. “That picture cost my family three tins of rice, according to my mother,” [Vuong] says. “Each of us gave up our ration just to be seen.”



Figure 5: An unnamed woman (likely Vuong’s aunt or grandmother), Vuong, and his mother.

While Vuong and his family were successfully dispatched from the refugee camp into the United States within a year’s time, a number of Vietnamese refugees were not so fortunate; per Pelaud, “those who

could not flee . . . and emigrated later suffered tremendously in post-war Vietnam from unemployment, malnutrition, and oppressive government measures” (9). That is not to imply, however, that the imminent threat of violence towards the diasporic Vietnamese subject ceased upon one’s arrival to the United States. Rather, a poor public opinion and enduring resentments towards the Vietnamese population flourished as the Orderly Departure Program admitted over two-hundred-thousand refugees from 1978 to 1982—a number that only grew in the years to come. Making matters worse, approximately “fifty-four percent of Americans opposed receiving Vietnamese refugees, [with] only thirty-six percent favor[ing] their immigration”; additionally, those in opposition proved especially vulnerable to ongoing “war rhetoric that portrays Asians as ‘g****’ who deserve no mercy and demand extermination” (Pelaud 14). In “Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds,” Vuong recalls an early encounter with such nationalistic patriotism:

everyone cheering as another

brown g*** crumbles under John Wayne’s M16, Vietnam
burning on the screen, let it slide through their ears,

clean, like a promise . . . (*Wounds* 26)

With such a fraught arrival upon American soil, employing Liu’s aforementioned notion of “*forgetting* one’s history”—or, in especially dire circumstances, denying it outright—became not only crucial to the diasporic Vietnamese subject’s assimilation, but also to their survival within a hostile nation-state. Additional sites of marginalization belonging to this newly diasporic population—many of whom arrived impoverished, in poor health (if not wounded and/or disabled), and deeply traumatized—only

served to amplify internal and external notions of “unassimilability” among Vietnamese-Americans. When these factors are compounded alongside queerness, as is the case with Vuong, the opportunity to establish a stable national identity becomes further compromised.

Vuong’s status as a queer, first-generation immigrant and refugee in the United States necessitates that he must, while in a perpetual state of negotiation with the “extended duration of the refugee experience,” simultaneously confront the “limit[ed] range of epistemological and ontological possibilities for refugee and queer subjects” as imposed upon those belonging to the API diaspora (Cho 132). That is, Vuong’s queer *and* Vietnamese identities serve to situate him within the perdurable peripheral of the American national imaginary—thus, when Vuong *is* perceived by (particularly white) American nationals, it is often through a reductive, racially and/or sexually essentialist lens. Vuong narrates one such example in the prose piece “Not Even This”:

Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brooklyn for an “artsy vibe,” a young woman said, sipping her drink, *You’re so lucky. You’re gay plus you get to write about war and stuff. I’m just white.*
[Pause] *I got nothing.* [Laughter, glasses clinking.] (*Mother* 46)

To write from the Vietnamese subjectivity—queer, heterosexual, or otherwise—is to be expected to abide to the historically constraining canon of Vietnamese-American literary tropes, in which authors are expected to “process the traumas of war and forced migrations inflicted upon Vietnamese-Americans” in order to “provide emotive resolution for the larger white American public” (Tran 11). To address one’s queerness within the selfsame narrative is, therefore, not only to disrupt heteronormative American culture at large, but to also further alienate oneself from what may otherwise remain of the “recognizable and recognizably legitimate Asian-American racial identity.”

Narratives pertaining to the painful nuances of Asian-American queerness, however, may be understood to possess commercial value in the United States—not unlike that which Jones struggles to reconcile in “Saeed: Or, The Other One.” Expanding on this exploitative consumption of queer diasporic pain, Vuong attests to the profound marketability of API trauma that directs readers’ attentions to the succinctly-phrased “war and stuff”:

. . . everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters,
turns
to gold.

Our sorrow Midas-touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow.³⁸ (*Mother* 46)

It is a precise pain that American readers often demand of diasporic API subjects, and with it, the intersectional nuances of Vietnamese-American queerness are instead subsumed by expectations to engage solely within the parameters of “refugee experiences of forced migration . . . [or] themes of history and identity that address inherited memories of Vietnam and the war” (Tran 13). Although these narratives are indeed integral to the preservation of Vietnamese wartime history—as well as to efforts within the Vietnamese-American population to engage in community-wide healing—they are nonetheless restrained as to what may, and perhaps most importantly, *what may not be*, said by these subjects. Consequently, Vietnamese-Americans are “largely absent from the images produced by both the political and the commercial sectors of the mainstream gay and lesbian communities,” whose prescribed “novelty” within the American queer community may result in fetishization—not wholly unlike that previously detailed by Jones (Fung 237). In “Künstlerroman,” Vuong shares an excerpt of

³⁸ “Not Even This”

an online chatlog that, albeit brief, captures a common experience of queer API men among their potential suitors:

The boy sitting at a desktop computer as, one by one, the words, often accompanied by unsolicited dick pics, vanish from AOL Chat screens.

asl? stats?

...

are you asian or are you normal?

...

hey i won't hurt you

call me

faggot

I need you

fuck you (Mother 70-1)

As perhaps exhibited by the “normal” (i.e., presumably white) solicitor’s hostility towards Vuong’s speaker—in which said speaker is promptly rendered racially abnormal (“are you asian or are you normal?”), abject (“faggot”), and proximate to potentially dangerous power dynamics (“hey i won’t hurt you”)—one may begin to see the assumed subordination of the queer API subject by their white American counterparts, who have long established a “tightly structured hierarchy in which white men are indisputably at the top of the sexual desirability stakes and Asian men are somewhere far beneath them” (Jackson 183). That is, while the speaker’s solicitor claims, “I need you,” there exists an implicit “You need me”; while the solicitor appears to be in pursuit of sex alone, many “unassimilable” Asian-American men may see an opportunity to integrate into the greater American queer community

via the resources that could be received by affiliation with the dominant group, possibly leading to an exploitative sexual dynamic in which these resources may be used as leverage against the marginalized party. In turn, API MSM³⁹ are “highly vulnerable to sexual violence,” as illustrated by a 2018 study in which “14.4% [of cisgender, homosexual API subjects] reported experiencing sexual violence in the last twelve months” at the time of data collection (Hershow et al. 2). The pain wrought by this pervasive racial asymmetry—particularly as it appears between homosexual men—remains underrepresented among discourses pertaining to the queer diasporic condition, in which this absence is exacerbated by the erasure of API narratives that fail to, again, “provide emotive resolution for the larger white American public.”

c. **Ryka Aoki’s *Why Dust Shall Never Settle Upon This Soul* (2015) and *Seasonal Velocities* (2012)**

In the early spring season of 2005, the young, self-proclaimed “trans goth dyke⁴⁰” Ryka Aoki stood upon the University of California stage in preparation for her performance piece, “Being Home”; a shakuhachi⁴¹, a small brass bell, and a kimono lay beside her, unused. Aoki reveals shortly thereafter that she “[has] just come home from a road trip, from a reading—as a girl, for only the

³⁹ “Men who have sex with men”; while I do not use this terminology elsewhere, it is reflective of the language used in the cited study.

⁴⁰ While this phrase does not appear in Aoki’s poetry volumes, this moniker is frequently used in her public appearances (such as poetry readings, speeches, etc.) and social media profiles.

⁴¹ A bamboo or hardwood flute used primarily in zen Buddhist meditation and Japanese folk music.

second time”—upon this confession, she then exits the stage, only to return donning the kimono and poised to play the once-neglected shakuhachi. Aoki speaks, once again:

This is a shakuhachi...it's not a proper instrument for women to play. Not just because most monks are men. I've been told it looks too much like someone giving head. Not just because most monks are men.

(shakuhachi)

I'm as much of a shakuhachi player as I am a woman. I'm always afraid a real player, who has spent years with a scowling master in a Japanese bamboo grove—learning how to play a single perfect note would hear me and know I have never been to Japan. (*Velocities* 145)

As Aoki—a Japanese-American transgender woman—denotes to her audience that she is, in fact, “as much as a shakuhachi player as [she] is a woman,” thereby vocalizing a shared (and in this case, intersectional) concern of transgender and diasporic communities alike as it pertains to necessity of asserting one's identities while retaining the awareness that, in doing so, one becomes vulnerable to questions of legitimacy and belonging within affiliated spaces. Truly, as much as “Being Home” is a performance piece, it likewise gestures to the myriad means by which Aoki must *perform* her respective identities (national, gender, etc.) off-stage. As she removes the kimono, places the shakuhachi aside, and departs from the University of California, Aoki's expression of her identities henceforth enters and engages in a perpetual—and often uncomfortable—flux. Aoki's queerness has been a phantom subject among her Japanese-American family members, present but unacknowledged; rather, while Aoki has long (and openly) served the queer community over years of public advocacy, a sharp contrast may be observed in the reticent means by which Aoki navigates the familial sphere. In a 2012 interview with

A-Line Magazine, Aoki discloses that she has abstained from verbally “coming out” to, specifically, her mother and father:

Well, I’ve never come out. It doesn’t mean I’m in the closet, it just means certain things are unsaid . . . My family is really old school . . . My father kicked my auntie out of the house just for going out with a white guy. My mother called my gay cousin an “it.” A little bit of a different generation. So I tried to come out to them much more socially, and well, [they’re] not so interested in talking about that.

“Old school,” in the context of this excerpt, likely deviates from common Western notions of “traditionalism”; while the phrase may carry connotations of structural and/or religious bigotry to some—particularly to queer Americans—the Japanese reception of transgender subjects proves unique in the rationalizations through which it renders them abject. The mandatory koseki, or “family registry,” that documents the identities and family relations of Japanese citizens on the basis of family law, is one such obstacle. Notorious for not only the “rigid ideals of family it is based upon [and] the social exclusion it enforces,” but also the extensive criteria⁴² that must be met to legally change one’s gender, the koseki serves as an institutional commitment to a strict, assigned-gender-at-birth binary that explicitly excludes transgender individuals (Dale 148). In the event of a birth or marriage that may alter one’s status within the koseki, gendered roles such as mother, daughter, father, and son may be applied to suit the circumstances—but, pointedly, cannot be changed henceforth. The structure as illustrated within the koseki, then, may be regarded as the foundation upon which the (idealized) Japanese national family unit is built; to deviate from this structure is to, therefore, compromise the

⁴² To change one’s gender in the koseki, one must be unmarried, of legal-adult age, and “have genitals that resemble that of the desired gender.” Dale adds, “the procedures necessary to fulfill this requirement are not covered by medical support.” Likewise, one “must not have a child who is a minor, and one must not have functioning reproductive glands.” (148)

integrity of the family itself, as “any arrangement outside the koseki system would also symbolize inequality and exclusion” (Dale 150). Thus, as Aoki laments that “[she] needs to be the dutiful daughter but [she’s] not, and they don’t recognize [her] that way,” it is not only that her family does not perceive her as female, but also signals her displacement from the Japanese family unit altogether (*A-Line*). For Aoki’s first-generation immigrant parents—who most certainly possess or previously possessed a koseki prior to their relocation—their reluctance to acknowledge their daughter’s gender (and, in tandem, Aoki’s own hesitance to “come out”) may be better understood when this crucial document is considered, as well as the means by which it further complicates the lives of queer Japanese-Americans whose families retain dual citizenship.

While Aoki’s familial dynamic requires significant contextualization as it pertains to her intergenerational Japanese identity, Aoki and her Japanese-American family have nonetheless witnessed a lifetime of transphobic rhetoric, violence, and consequent death as it occurs upon American soil. Prolonged proximity to such vitriol has had, it seems, a profound impact upon Aoki’s mother, as perhaps evidenced by her overt espousal of homophobic, transphobic, and even racist rhetoric. In “The Woman of Water Dreams,” Aoki attests to the means by which her mother’s bigotry manifests:

... one who calls gay people “it,”
 hearsays immigrants and AIDS,
 would disown her firstborn if she knew
 what sins her sins had spawned. (*Soul* 15)

Although the restrictive koseki system and cultural Japanese incarnations of hetero- and cisnormativity have surely shaped the lens through which Aoki’s mother perceives the queer subject, Aoki harkens to

her family’s diasporic resettlement in Hawai’i to further elucidate the source of such discrimination. Rather, the Hawaiian term “māhū”—historically used in reference to “a person of mixed gender who had found sanctuary in the domain of Laka, god/goddess of the ancient hula”—has, by no small number of Hawaiians, been weaponized as a debasing pseudo-slur against their queer counterparts (Robertson 313). This term receives significant attention in Aoki’s “Sophisticated Hula,” in which she writes:

Mahu means many different things . . . I know it means trans, queer, homosexual, seer, healer.

But growing up, that word mostly meant ridicule. Unspeakable. It means being cut off from a community and family life that you depend on for food, support, communication, sense of place, even sense of self . . . You used to laugh at the word, watch your older cousins, your aunts shake their heads . . . you ingest the poison in the words with all the good things about your family, too. (*Velocities* 823).

The Hawaiian cultural stigma of the “māhū,” then, may therefore magnify pre-existing biases against the queer community at large and serves as a basis for the ongoing mistreatment of queer API subjects. As expected, this discrimination has had a severely negative impact on said subjects that may be observed in various heightened risk factors. In a 2021 study regarding violence and mental health outcomes among transgender API adults in the United States, Becerra et al. revealed the following:

Nearly 67% reported experiencing any abuse, 52% reported abuse from a romantic/sexual partner(s), while 29% reported harassment/abuse while trying to use bathrooms. Moreover, 82% reported suicidal thoughts, 40% reported suicidal attempts, and 39% had SPD⁴³. (1)

⁴³ Serious Psychological Distress

Having experienced a number of these situations first- or secondhand, Aoki wields her poetry as a means to illustrate the harrowing realities that the American transgender community, API or otherwise, must navigate throughout their everyday lives. The annual Transgender Day of Remembrance⁴⁴—observed in the United States on November 20th—is a recurring point of reference for Aoki, who has composed numerous prose pieces and poetry alike in reflection of the events that have made its inception necessary; per Aoki, TDOR signifies a time in which “the names of trans people / change color and fall,” to therein be “mispronounced, sainted, / ceded to anonymous candles, / anonymous flame⁴⁵” (*Soul* 8). The “anonymity,” in this sense, often exacerbated by the frequency in which transgender bodies are the targets of violence (whether through murder or suicide, as indicated by Becerra above), is a significant source of frustration for Aoki; she mourns that she and the transgender community seem to exist within a ruthless cycle of “vigils, birthdays, [and] vigils⁴⁶,” rendering the deaths of transgender persons so common as to threaten its normalization within their daily lives (*Soul* 12). For transgender *and* API subjects, the latter of whom are already “largely absent” from the limited scope of mainstream queer visibility, the threat of erasure then intersects and compounds to enact “obliterations, attempted erasures of humanity, identity, [and] existence” upon an already-disenfranchised population (*Velocities* 1104).

⁴⁴ Henceforth abbreviated as TDOR.

⁴⁵ “The Woman of Water Dreams”

⁴⁶ “The Woman . . . ”

V. CONCLUSION

Should the myriad anti-LGBTQIA2S+ and anti-CRT bills as previously discussed continue to find footing within the United States—this thesis, and others like it, could be expunged from the ever-ill-defined “general public” and, via recent threats to higher education, public and state universities as well. As a scholar who is not only queer myself, but who likewise devotes the majority of my research to the fields targeted by such legislation, I must assert that I am not simply presenting a factual description of this fascist assault on the queer population and academia alike, but have also used this project to engage in interpretative labor based on, in no small part, my own stakes in this dire situation. As recently as February 2023, Republican politicians such as Florida Rep. Alex Andrade have targeted public universities with bills such as HB 999, seeking to eliminate the possibility of majoring or minoring in “critical race theory, gender studies, intersectionality, or any derivative major or minor of these belief systems,” thereby threatening the epistemic future of queer and/or critical race scholarship and, in tandem, those of students, faculty members, and their respective departments who seek to engage with these invaluable fields. Florida governor Ron DeSantis has since promoted this bill in press conferences and news releases alike, in which he asserts that Florida will “build off of our higher education reforms by aligning core curriculum to the values of liberty and the Western tradition” by “eliminating politicized bureaucracies like DEI” (Florida). For many higher education institutions—particularly those in rural, conservative areas—the policies and programs implemented by DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) are the sole source of support for students whose sexual, racial, gender, or religious identities remain excluded from DeSantis’ “Western tradition.” By no means is this

the only bill seeking to expand restrictions upon LGBTQIA2S+ and CRT curricula—rather, similar bills have been proposed in “red” (ex. Florida’s HB 999) and “blue” (ex. Colorado’s HB 1206⁴⁷) states alike, with their success (or failure) thereafter often dependent upon state government majorities with little consideration for state residents. America, I reiterate, stands upon a dangerous precipice which, if indulged, will enact untold harm upon marginalized communities—doubly so to those such as the queer diasporic subject of color, who must then endure manifold erasure from the American “general public.”

With previous legislative considerations in mind, it must likewise be asserted that the works contained *within* this thesis (be it poetry, scholarship, or otherwise), are in immediate danger of disappearance due to their simultaneous proximity to queer *and* critical race theories. This erasure impedes—if not prevents entirely—the development of an accessible queer diasporic literary or scholastic canon, thus exacerbating established issues of underrepresentation as it pertains to queer diasporic authorship. The scope of representation needed within the field of queer diasporic studies is seemingly infinite, as perhaps best portrayed by the juxtaposition of poets contained within what could otherwise be perceived as homogeneous diasporas; Saeed Jones’s experiences within the black diaspora may possess superficial similarities to that of Staceyann Chin’s, for instance, but the two are by no means parallel. Though Natalie Diaz and Raquel Salas Rivera may both belong to internal American diasporas, the vast differentiation between Mojave and Puerto Rican cultures ensure that their subjectivities cannot be contained within a singular category. Likewise, Ocean Vuong’s positionality as

⁴⁷ Colorado’s HB 1206 was a common-language anti-CRT bill that, as of 3/22/22, has “failed” insofar as being postponed indefinitely.

a Vietnamese refugee in America proves markedly unlike Ryka Aoki's, who was born to voluntary first-generation immigrants and thus received birthright citizenship within the United States. Even beyond geographic diasporas, the authors' respective gender identities and sexualities further expand the seemingly infinite breadth of queer diasporic experiences. To have such legislative restrictions imposed upon queer diasporic voices, then, is to compromise the field's intersectional integrity altogether—one of the many objectives of anti-LGBTQIA2S+ and anti-CRT bills.

Indeed, as this thesis engages with a vibrant wealth of contributions to the ever-expanding field of queer diasporic studies, the trajectory of the aforementioned legislature may well determine whether this project will or will not, ultimately, serve as a small epitaph to the works that could soon succumb to systemically and institutionally oppressive measures. Queer diasporic studies, to survive as an interdisciplinary field, necessitates that its scholars consider the crucial intersections of race, gender, and sexuality that inform a subject's complex experiences; without significant intervention, the future of queer diasporic studies as an accessible field appears especially grim. Thus, here I interject and implore: contact your representatives and school districts, support organizations that seek to combat such harmful legislation, and perhaps most importantly, engage with and make visible the works of queer diasporic subjects in the face of fascism. Our governments, independently, will not save us; as often, we must do this work ourselves.

**Revolution? A blood sport.
Because dead queers are easier to pray to.
Because they don't talk back
and kill the buzz.**

Ryka Aoki, "A Song of Someplace Yet to Fall"

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Originally from Cleveland, Tennessee, Cat Stanfield (*b.* 1991) has received their B.A. from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Chattanooga, Tennessee. They joined the University of Maine in 2021 as a Teaching Assistant and Graduate student with a concentration in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in the Department of English. They are a candidate for a MA in English from the University of Maine in May 2023.