“SEE WHAT MY TRUTH HAS ALLOWED ME TO CREATE”: THE SELF-MAKING POTENTIAL OF MEMORY IN DAISY HERNÁNDEZ’S A CUP OF WATER UNDER MY BED: A MEMOIR AND ROXANE GAY’S HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY

By

ANDREINA ELENA FERNANDEZ

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2020
To remembering, being remembered, and healing in community
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking the two women whose memoirs I write about in this thesis: Daisy Hernández and Roxane Gay. I thank them for their generous words and the healing and growth their writing has inspired in me. I would also like to thank my thesis committee and the scholars whose involvement with this thesis has been indispensable. To Dr. Jillian Hernandez, the chair of my committee, for her unending support and confidence in my academic abilities. This thesis would not be what it is today without her guidance. To Dr. Manoucheka Celeste, my second reader, for being the first faculty member to really take an interest in me as a human being, for her constant reminders to be kind to myself, rest, and breathe, and, of course, for her vital feedback on this thesis. To Dr. Tanya Saunders, whose brilliant and engaging courses have been central to my academic growth and have left their mark on this thesis. To Logan Neser and Melissa Powers, my friends and cohort members, for their gracious feedback and support and to my entire cohort for their kindness and solidarity. I would also like to thank Donna Tuckey who always went above and beyond to ensure my success.

I extend a warm and loving thanks to all of my friends who listened to me complain, grounded me, and reminded me that there is life outside of this thesis. I would like to give a special thanks to a few of them. To the many lovely and powerful queer women and people of color in my life, I thank them for helping me find my place in this world, especially when it feels like there is none. To Madeleine Hill, who was the first person I came out to five years ago, I thank her for commiserating with me and helping me figure myself out. It was her push for me to take a philosophy course during our senior year that it set me on the path that led me to this master’s program. To Claudia
Luna, who, aside from being my forever friend, gifted me *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* nearly 5 years ago and waited patiently for me to finally get around to reading it. I hope the wait was worth it. To Nahal Khamisani, who knows, better than anyone, the immense challenge that it was to complete this thesis. I thank her for her patience, kindness, generosity, and presence in my life that made this project feel a little less insurmountable each day. Lastly, and most importantly, I thank mi mami, María Antonietta Diaz, y mi papi, Jorge Enrique Fernandez. Their unconditional love and support have taken me farther than I could have ever imagined, and I am grateful, every day (even on the days I do not show it) for them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......................................................... 4

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ..................................................... 7

## ABSTRACT ........................................................................... 8

## CHAPTER

### 1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................ 10

- A Note on Language .................................................................. 15
- Queer Women of Color Memoir: Selected Works ......................... 17
- Memoir, Life-Writing, and Women of Color Feminisms ................ 18
- Chapter Overview ..................................................................... 23

### 2 THREADS OF MEMORY, HILOS OF COMMUNITY: ON MEMORY,

- Language, and Belonging in Daisy Hernández’s *A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir* .......................................................... 26

- Stitching Memories, Crafting Subjectivity .................................. 27
  - *Hija, buscáme el hilo* and Other Threads of Migration ............ 28
  - Thread as Memory ...................................................................... 31
  - “Before language, there is love. Before love, memory” ............... 37
  - Language and Knowledge ............................................................ 37
  - Religion, Spirituality, & Coloniality in the Diaspora .................. 42
  - The American Dream of Successful Alienation ......................... 46

### 3 MEMORIES ON AND OF THE BODY: UNRULY TRUTHS IN ROXANE GAY’S

- *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* ............................................ 52

- Writing on the Body and of the Body .......................................... 57
  - (My) Body, her Body, the Body .................................................. 65
  - “Mine is, simply, a true story” ................................................. 68
  - Being Gay and/or Being gay ......................................................... 68
  - On being the Good daughter: Reconciling with respectability ....... 76
  - Toward Futures of Hunger and Healing ..................................... 81

### 4 CONCLUDING IN THE BEGINNING .................................... 86

## LIST OF REFERENCES .......................................................... 89

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ....................................................... 93
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QWOC</td>
<td>Queer Women of Color</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"SEE WHAT MY TRUTH HAS ALLOWED ME TO CREATE": THE SELF-MAKING POTENTIAL OF MEMORY IN DAISY HERNÁNDEZ’S A CUP OF WATER UNDER MY BED: A MEMOIR AND ROXANE GAY’S HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY

By
Andreina Elena Fernandez

May 2020

Chair: Jillian Hernandez
Major: Women’s Studies

Although often the medium of elite politicians, celebrities, and other high-status figures, women of color, particularly queer women of color (QWOC), are carving out a space in the mainstream memoir genre. I consider these QWOC memoirs to be part of an emerging mode of feminist cultural intervention that has roots in the Black, lesbian, and Third World feminist life writing that arose in the late 1970s and 1980s. I interpret these memoirs as mediums that allow for QWOC to write their own narratives and allow dominant culture a window into their subjectivities while also, importantly, serving as vehicles to understand how marginalization is created and perpetuated in the first place.

In this thesis, I perform a close reading of Daisy Hernández’s A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir (2014) and Roxane Gay’s Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body (2017). I explore how Hernández and Gay deploy their own queer analytics to reshape memories and form generative, meaningful narratives about their lives. I argue that these narratives allow them, and the reader, to better understand their subjectivities and the systems of power and oppression that structure their lives. Viewing QWOC memoirs as distinct creative formations allows us to understand the depths of the cultural critiques...
and discursive interventions these authors are making through their widely distributed and celebrated memoirs. As Hernández’s and Gay’s works demonstrate, QWOC narratives are powerful sources of knowledge that provide insight into the social workings of our worlds and write our very selves into existence.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.

—Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Lecture

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

I spent most of my childhood reading books in offices. My parents worked long hours so I would sit in an empty chair and read for hours. I would bring a book with me everywhere, there was always a chance I would need it. When I was a bit older, I would spend the summers at the library all day. My parents would drop me off in the morning and go to work. They would pick me up for lunch and then it would be right back to the library or to an empty seat at their office. Reading books transported me to new places, kept me engaged, and taught me about worlds outside my own. They also, importantly, developed my reading and writing skills quickly, a necessary skillset as the young daughter of immigrant parents who often asked for my help to translate documents or proofread letters.

I read so much, so often, about other people—real and imagined—and almost always found ways to connect to them. At first, I read mostly fiction, but growing up in a town with a big Jewish population and public schools that had us read at least one book about the Holocaust each year, I began to read personal accounts, fiction based on real events, and memoir. I am grateful for these books, and I developed a small obsession for them as a kid, because they taught me about the mundane, complex humanity of people in the most abject conditions and sparked a burgeoning political awareness in
me as early as 8 or 9 years old. What I rarely read, though, were stories that reminded me of my own, books about people who were familiar to me. It was not until my first year as an undergraduate at the University of Florida that I found a book that I saw myself in, and it spurred the love for memoir that has led me to this thesis.

It was the summer of 2013, I was walking around a bookstore and stumbled upon the “humor” section. I was a fan of Mindy Kaling’s show, *The Mindy Project*, so when I saw her name on the spine of a book, I eagerly grabbed it off the shelf. *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)*, I remember thinking something like, “that’s my concern too!” and opening it up to the first line “I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t chubby” (Kaling 2011, 11). This was definitely a book for me. I ended up reading it sprawled out on my bed in my freshly decorated dorm room, wide-eyed and grinning at the moments of Kaling’s life that felt so familiar to my own. In her short essays, she wrote with confidence and humor about moments, inner thoughts, and insecurities that, at the time, I could not imagine myself ever feeling comfortable discussing. Even her simple assertion of being chubby made my jaw drop. How did she feel comfortable saying that? Who confidently claims their chubbiness rather than shirking from the label in fear of the certain rejection that comes with it? In a time in my adolescence when I felt so lost and unsure of myself, I dreamed of attaining her security and voice. At seventeen, I was seeking desperately to connect the dots of my own life, to have a story that *made sense*, to have processed my experiences so fully that I could write cute and quirky life lessons about them. Reading *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* was the first time I ever read a woman’s life—
written in her own words, her own voice—that felt familiar, complicated, and imperfect, like my own.

Looking back on Kaling's book nearly seven years after I first picked it up, it is almost surprising just how impactful it was for me. *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* is funny and personal, highlighting the frequent awkward moments of Kaling’s life. But there are also quite a lot of Kaling’s ruminations on all manner of things, opinions that I do not share, and quips about friends and boys that I cannot quite relate to. Reading this today, it feels significantly less recognizable and less profound for me. When I first read it, though, I was starving for a narrative, any narrative, that I could recognize myself within. I grew up a chubby girl struggling with my body image and confused about my sexuality. I was a Venezuelan immigrant surrounded by the hyper-sexual representations of the uber-feminine women I was supposed to grow up to be. When I first found Kaling’s book, I had yet to claim my queer identity, all of my friends were thinner than me, wrapped up in the boys they were dating while I searched for ways to lose weight and ignore the confusing desire I wished I did not have. In the scarcity of self-defined and complex media representation for women of color, the few identities and experiences Kaling and I did share were enough for me and, thankfully, her book opened me up to the hidden (to me) universe of women’s life writing.

After reading Kaling’s book, I moved on to the other comedic memoirs that were popping up around the same time: Tina Fey’s *Bossypants* (2011), Amy Poehler’s *Yes Please* (2014), Mindy Kaling’s second book *Why Not Me?* (2015). These books were amusing and engaging, certainly more so than the academic texts I spent most of my
time reading. Still, there was something about my experience reading Kaling’s first book that I missed. I longed for that connection that made me feel less alone in the world and I was ready, now, for more than just a vaguely familiar story. I needed more than just recognition, I was looking for narratives that helped me place myself in the world and make sense of my experiences.

I moved through the rest of my time in undergrad in a blur of courses, student involvement, and burn out; I no longer found the joy and meaning in reading that I once did. That feeling of disillusionment persisted until just after graduation when Roxane Gay’s *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* was released in the summer of 2017. I listened to her narrate her audiobook and that familiar feeling of recognition appeared again; I felt known, understood, and seen through her telling of her life. More than that, though, her narrative and commentary about her life helped me connect the dots of my own. What was compelling to me about *Hunger* was its ability to connect broader social realities and critiques into Gay’s understanding of herself. Reading *Hunger*, I not only recognized my own complicated relationship with food, family, and sexuality, but I also experienced a deeply personal moment of politicized consciousness raising. *Hunger* helped me connect my lived experiences to a greater socio-political landscape and illustrated the complex and contradicting ways I had also engaged with cultural discourses of fatness, sexuality, gender, and more. In reading Gay’s truth, I began to uncover my own.

From then on, memoirs became my way to both escape from and connect to the world. After *Hunger*, I quickly began to find similar texts. First, *In the Country We Love* (2016), then *Redefining Realness* (2014), *You Can’t Touch My Hair* (2016), *Surpassing*
Certainty (2017), When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir (2018), A Cup of Water Under My Bed (2014), A Two-Spirit Journey (2016), Becoming (2018), Sick (2018), and most recently We Have Always Been Here (2019), all memoirs or autobiographies by women of color, all published between 2014 and 2019¹.

Although often the medium of elite politicians, celebrities, or other high-status figures, women of color, particularly queer women of color (QWOC), are beginning to carve out a space in the mainstream memoir genre. I posit that this recent proliferation of women of color memoir follows in the tradition of early women of color feminist life writing that asserted the value of writing of women’s lived experiences and interiority as essential to theorizing about their lives. In her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde writes about the use of poetry as a medium for the expression of our experiences and the knowledge those experiences foster. Lorde writes:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is how we give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (Lorde 2007, 37)

She asks us to understand poetry through its affect, through the feelings and experiences it names, produces, and evokes. This is essential because, as Lorde describes, rather than rely on fact, idea, or rationale, poetry relies on forms of knowing that are illegible to European epistemologies. For Lorde, poetry is how we name what has not yet been named, express the depths of our experiences, and, to take from the title of one of her essays, transform language into action.

Lorde’s theorization is integral to my thesis because it is through her understanding of poetry that I explore the power of QWOC memoir. The memoirs I engage with embody the essence of Lorde’s assertion. Queer women of color memoirs, as I will explore in this thesis, make visible the “hidden sources of our power” and “true knowledge” that can be known only through experience. As Lorde writes, “each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling” (Lorde 2007, 37). Queer women of color are tapping into this reserve to examine and record the knowledge of emotion and experience through memoir. In this thesis, I will perform a close reading of Daisy Hernández’s A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir (2014) and Roxane Gay’s Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body (2017) in order to understand the ways QWOC are using memoir as a medium for feminist theorizing and consciousness raising. Considering questions of memory, embodiment, and citizenship, I will identify and explore the knowledge, critiques, and interventions that I interpret in these memoirs.

A Note on Language

In this thesis, I will unite these memoirists under the umbrella terms “queer” and “women of color,” although they may not use these exact terms to describe themselves. Most commonly and recently, Hernández and Gay use the term bisexual to describe
themselves but both, at times, also refer to themselves or their community as “queer”. Sexuality is a complex negotiation for both of these women, and it involves and impacts their lives, and their telling of their lives, in ways that are not simply limited to the gender of their partners. The sexual experiences and identifications of these women are nuanced, complex, and they describe their sexuality accordingly. I use the term “queer” to unify their varied descriptions of non-normative desire, identification, and experience, allowing for a more fluid boundary for future contributions to this archive, while also always honoring the complexity and specificity of their sexual subjectivities.

Similarly, I chose to describe these works as written by “women of color” when referring to them in relation to one another, understanding that the history of this term is rooted in Black feminist organizing and was intended to be a politicized term that unifies women who are oppressed by white supremacy in a myriad of distinct and intersecting ways (Ross 2011). Understanding this history, it is essential to also acknowledge the criticism this term has received from Black women, in particular, in recent years. Critiques of the evolution of the term “women of color” stem from black women’s experiences of having the term used to undermine the specificity of their experiences (McCullers 2018). I recognize how this term has been employed broadly, without its politicized intention, to silence black women and do not suggest that the experiences of the memoirists I analyze are by any means representative of all non-white women or even of all women who share their specific social positions. Rather, I aim to use the term “women of color” only as a way to note the impact of white supremacy on the lives of these women, point to some of their shared social experiences, and index some of
their unifying creative and cultural affinities all while insisting on the necessity for the specificity of their experiences and individual politicized subjectivities.

**Queer Women of Color Memoir: Selected Works**

Although many QWOC memoirs would be apt selections for analysis, I have chosen to focus on Daisy Hernández’s and Roxane Gay’s memoirs because of my own connection to their histories of migration and their shared backgrounds as both creative writers and academics. Daisy Hernández is the daughter of Cuban and Colombian parents, a 2nd generation immigrant, and a bisexual woman. Hernández is also an Assistant Professor in the Creative Writing Program at Miami University in Ohio, the coeditor of Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism, and previously the editor of *ColorLines* magazine (“About” 2020). In her memoir *A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir*, Hernández explores the lessons she has learned from the women in her Cuban-Colombian family and how these lessons have guided her towards queer self-discovery. Roxane Gay is a Haitian American, bisexual, fat, Black woman, a 2nd generation immigrant or 1st generation U.S. American, and was previously a professor of creative writing. Her memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* explores the particularities of Gay’s life, focusing on the affects that her childhood rape has had on her body and, in turn, the ways she and society at large have treated her body. These two women are connected through their bisexuality, their connection to migration, their positionality as women of color, and their backgrounds as creative writers, self-proclaimed feminists, and professors. These varied connections become salient in their writing as Hernández and Gay both approach their memoirs through innovative and creative storytelling, an approach that I understand as reflective of their shared experiences of queerness and migration.
As I will explore further in what follows, Hernández and Gay deploy their own queer analytics to reshape memories and form generative, meaningful narratives of their life, narratives that allow them, and us, to better understand their subjectivities and the systems of power and oppression that structure their lives. I consider these memoirs as part of an emerging mode of feminist intervention that has its roots in the Black, lesbian, and third world women life writing that arose in the late 70s and 80s. It is my hope that viewing QWOC memoirs as a distinct creative formation will allow us to further understand the depths of the cultural critiques and interventions these women are making through their widely distributed memoirs.

**Memoir, Life-Writing, and Women of Color Feminisms**

Queer women of color memoirs, like Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* or Daisy Hernández’s *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, reveal the complexity of their author’s subjectivity and, in my view, form a contemporary iteration of a genealogy of women of color feminist life-writing. Forms of life-writing have long been integral to women of color theorizations of self. Seminal texts like *Sister Outsider and This Bridge Called My Back* are interventions in form and content that challenge dominant forms of knowledge production. These texts have shaped a tradition of life-writing that uses the deeply personal to reflect on and theorize about subjectivity and identity, all while also insisting on the value and importance of forms of writing, like poetry, that were not taken seriously in academic or activist spheres. Whereas Black and Third World (mostly lesbian) feminists in the late 20th and early 21st century often relied on self-publishing to circulate their interventions in both academic and social spheres, works written by women of color are being widely published by major imprints. In my view, memoir allows for the kind of creativity that
woman of color feminist life writing demands and so has become a site for the proliferation of this kind of writing.

Memoir is often critiqued for its lack of objectivity and reliance on the memory of the author (Couser 2012). Memoirists shape the stories of their lives, at times intentionally and at times not, to craft a narrative that most closely fits their own understanding of self (and the self they want to portray to the world). I assert that it is precisely this subjectivity that positions memoir as a site of remembering, documenting and asserting women of color narratives through their own interpretive and analytic lenses. I recognize that what is narrated in the memoirs of women of color may be subjective because it is shaped by memory. However, I choose to interpret the significance of memory, the ways in which memory is always political, rather than attempt to find an objective truth in these women’s accounts of their lives. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has written on the impact of memory. Mohanty writes, “Resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering, and of writing…The very practice of remembering against the grain of ‘public’ or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggle to assert knowledge that is outside the parameters of the dominant, suggests a rethinking of sociality itself” (Talpade Mohanty 2003, 83). I understand these memoirs as forms of remembering, documenting, and asserting their lives through their own interpretive lens.

In her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” Gloria Anzaldúa asserts the need for women of color writing, for its specificity and vulnerability (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, 163). Anzaldúa writes:

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experiences and worldview with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history,
our economics, and our vision…What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others. We must use what is important to us to get to the writing. No topic is too trivial. The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment. (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, 168)

For Anzaldúa, writing was a medium to create the self and assert herself in a world where she is rendered invisible. Writing, for Anzaldúa, was “the act of making soul, alchemy” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, 167). This embodied theory that Anzaldúa posits is performed in the memoirs of QWOC that I analyze.

As these women write the narratives of their lives, they theorize their subjectivities, what it means for them to exist as themselves. These women are writing on their embodiment and making their felt and experienced knowledges visible through these memoirs. In doing so, they assert what Avery Gordon (2008) calls “complex personhood.” As Gordon describes it, complex personhood “means that all people… remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (Gordon 2008, 4). Complex personhood, at its most basic level, “is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning” (Gordon 2008, 5). In writing their interpretations of their experiences, these memoirists remind us that QWOC are not abject figures. They are complex, filled with rich affective lives and reaching for belonging in varied ways.

Following the legacy of women of color life writing, memoir can serve as a way for marginalized people to write their narratives into a cultural imaginary that renders them invisible or, at best, one dimensional. They can be a formal way to integrate marginalized subjectivities into literary history and, without further inspection, could be
understood as a desire for normative acceptance through visibility. I interpret these memoirs, though, as a medium for both knowing the other and the self but also, importantly, as vehicles to understand how Otherness is created and perpetuated in the first place. Texts like *This Bridge Called My Back* were revolutionary not just because they documented the experiences of Black and Third World women, lesbians, and feminists but also because they did so as a direct intervention into the white-dominated feminist and gay and lesbian movements of the time. Writing about their lives made visible the tensions in these movements, formed a critique of oppressive social and cultural logics, and offered a queer and feminist vision for futures of coalitional liberation. Because memoirs allow their authors to be creative with the organization and lens of their life, in contrast to the more rigid and chronological autobiography, these memoirists are able to address social injustices through their framing of their own life experiences. Through memoir, QWOC are able to maintain this tradition of life writing as a means for social change.

Here, I turn to María Lugones’ conceptualization of “worlds” and “playful world-travelling,” to further explore the ways QWOC are engaging with the genre of memoir (Lugones 1987, 3). In Lugones’ theorization, a “world” is intended to elude any kind of fixed definition but is guided by certain characteristics, among these being that “it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people” (Lugones 1987, 9). A world, in Lugones’ sense, can be constructed by dominant or non-dominant groups, by many people or just a few, and as we travel through them, the attributes we embody can be altered. Although this ability to world travel is necessary for the outsider, as Lugones says, “it can also be willfully exercised by the outsider or by those who are at ease in
the mainstream” (Lugones 1987, 3). If we consider this ability to willfully exercise “world-travelling,” then engaging with QWOC memoirs can be a way to travel into a world that fully encapsulates the intricacies of their internal worlds, as a way to engage lovingly with someone whose being is often attributed as deviant in “mainstream constructions of life” (Lugones 1987, 3). Lugones writes that this form of travelling is loving, and it is a way to identify with others “because by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have travelled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we fully subjects to each other” (Lugones 1987, 17). Queer woman of color memoirs, then, can be understood as a written portal into a world in which the reader can identify with the memoirist.

However, as Carole Boyce Davies urges, I engage with Lugones’ theorization with caution. Boyce Davies is critical of Lugones’ use of “playful” because it connotes an ease and lack of concern with the material realities, and the impacts of tourism to popular tourist destinations, like the Caribbean. Thinking specifically about her own experience as a child in the Caribbean, Boyce Davies reflects on how tourists, who could be described as “playful world-travelers,” often exploit the Caribbean and engage with the region through the lens of their own pleasure and desire. For Boyce Davies, it is necessary to be attentive to how the language Lugones uses translates to the material world. Considering Lugones’ theorization, Boyce Davies writes,

> The Caribbean child that I was witnessed many tourists who seemed to be “playful world travelers” in my Caribbean city. We became the backdrop for their encounters. We were never fully thinking, acting beings. The Caribbean is too easily identified as the place of playful world travelling for us to engage that formulation without caution. (Boyce Davies 1994, 17)

In this passage, Boyce Davies offers a critique of tourism that is also reflective of the narrative of Antigua that Jamaica Kincaid offers in her life-writing, A Small Place. For
both Boyce Davies and Kincaid, tourists often understand themselves as a sort of “playful world traveler” but in doing so they reject the full humanity of the locals who reside in their tourist destinations and their own impact on socio-political and economic situation of the area (Boyce Davies 1994; Kincaid 2017). Places like the Caribbean, then, are reduced to places from which tourists get to return, places devoid of consequence and filled with people whose lives lack the complexity of the tourists. This engagement with the Caribbean by “playful world travelers” ends up further marginalizing the people whose world they seek to visit.

Just as Boyce Davies is attentive to the material impact of real-world “playful world-travelers,” I strive to be attentive to political economy in my analysis of the memoirs of these queer women of color. As I ruminate on the potential politics of QWOC memoir, I do not mean to imply that QWOC are writing memoirs to humanize themselves in the eyes of dominant groups or that these memoirs are just an exercise in inclusion. Rather, as I will continue to explore in this thesis, QWOC memoirs are projects of self-fashioning, of allowing others into our worlds, but more still, they are narratives that identify and intervene into the racist, sexist, classist, queerphobic, fatphobic, ableist logics that structure our lives and create the conditions that require these women to write themselves into “mainstream constructions of life” (Lugones 1987, 3).

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 2, “Threads of Memory, Hilos of Community: On Memory, Language, and Belonging in Daisy Hernández’s A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir,” I read Hernández’s memoir as a site of feminist theorization. Hernández’s memoir spans from early childhood to her late twenties, weaving through time and place to stitch together
chapters and sections that reflect on themes of migration, language, womanhood, sexuality, class, spirituality, and more. Tracing the appearance of *hilo*, or thread, in her memoir, I understand Hernández’s reference to hilo as both a metaphorical and material method to theorize her subjectivity. In Chapter 2, I explore how hilo serves as an analytic in Hernández’s memoir to trace and articulate the way memory shapes her subjectivity and I consider how this analytic may be useful for queer Latinx migrants to theorize their subjectivities. In the latter half of Chapter 2, I return to Audre Lorde to consider the knowledge Hernández shares through the recounting of her memories. In this section, I explore the epistemic significance of language in Hernández’s life and writing, the colonial legacies that structure Hernández’s experiences with religion and spirituality, and the role of assimilation, the myth of the American Dream, and the both physical and metaphorical departures in Hernández’s relationship with her family.

Chapter 3, “Memories on and of the Body: Unruly Truths in Roxane Gay’s *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*,” follows a similar organizational structure as the Chapter 2. In the first half of the Chapter 3, I conduct a close reading of Gay’s memoir to uncover the significance of Gay’s use of the body as the organizing logic of her memoir. Placing *Hunger* in conversation with queer fat studies and queer and trans Black and Latinx studies, I work through the implications of understanding Gay’s body as a repository of memory, experience, and knowledge. I go on to explore the ways Gay refuses simplistic narratives of the self and deconstructs the implicit and internalized logics that structure her life. I posit that, in doing this, Gay offers not only her own theorization of her subjectivity, but also a politic born of her embodied experiences.
In Chapter 4, “Concluding in the Beginning,” I will return to the epigraphs that began Chapter 1. Through Morrison’s and Lorde’s words, I will reflect on the significance of *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* and *Hunger*. Considering the messiness of memory and narrative, I urge us to think of memoir as a strategy of self-making and an assertion of the self against discourses and systems that silence us. As I ruminate on the power of Hernández’s and Gay’s memoirs, I offer this thesis as a point of entry for further consideration of the myriad of ways queer women of color document and narrate our subjectivities.
CHAPTER 2
THREADS OF MEMORY, HILOS OF COMMUNITY: ON MEMORY, LANGUAGE, AND BELONGING IN DAISY HERNÁNDEZ’S A CUP OF WATER UNDER MY BED: A MEMOIR

A Cup of Water Under My Bed opens with a dedication. It reads “para todas las hijas,” translated literally to English as “For all the daughters.” This statement, “para todas las hijas,” evokes the weight of daughterhood, its lineage, and the history it embodies. Being an hija is tricky, sticky, even, if we consider Sara Ahmed’s theorization of the term as “saturated with affect… sites of personal and social tension” (Ahmed 2014, 11). In her memoir, Hernández masterfully shows us how hijas, willingly or not, are shaped by generations of love, pain, language, movement, and memory.

Daisy Hernández is an hija. The bisexual daughter of a Cuban father and Colombian mother, she writes about the lessons, spoken and felt, that have been passed down to her. For Hernández, as demonstrated in her memoir, writing is critical to her understanding of self. Reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s “Poetry is not a Luxury” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, Hernández states, “Writing is how I leave my family and how I take them with me” (Hernández 2014, 179). A Cup of Water Under My Bed engages with a tradition of women of color feminist life-writing that uses the particularities of lived experience to reflect on and theorize about subjectivity and identity. Hernández’s memoir is both theoretical intervention and praxis, a site of recognition for hijas everywhere (myself included). Explaining her dedication, Hernández says her memoir attempts to answer the question: “How do we navigate the lessons that were taught by our families when they collide with the dreams we have for ourselves?” (Vives 2014). Reflecting on her own life experiences, Hernández answers just that. From her position at the crossroads of cultures, Cuban, Colombian, and U.S.
American, Hernández identifies and explores the tensions the arise as she grapples with these different sets of expectations and traditions and reconciles her own desires within them. Ruminating on memory, love, language, spirituality, labor, and class, Hernández tackles questions of citizenship, community, and belonging.

_A Cup of Water Under My Bed_ traces Hernández’s experiences from childhood through her late twenties when she decided to move away from her family to California. Hernández organizes her memoir using a loose thematic structure rather than chronology. Enclosed by a preface and an afterword, _A Cup of Water Under My Bed_ is divided into three main sections, simply, “one,” “two,” and “three.” Within each of these sections are self-contained essays that focus on a particular aspect of Hernández’s life and move back and forth in time. Thematically, “one” focuses on Hernández’s family, their values, practices, and traditions. “Two” highlights Hernández’s narrative surrounding her sexuality. The final section, “Three,” considers the racialized discourses surrounding labor and class that impact Hernández, her family, and the various subjects she meets during her time as a journalist for _The New York Times_. In Chapter 2, I will first place Hernández’s memoir in conversation with scholarship that theorizes on queer of color subject formation in order to analyze the strategies of narration that Hernández utilizes to make sense of her memory and craft her subjectivity. In the latter half of Chapter 2, I bring forward particular themes in Hernández’s memoir that question what citizenship, community, and belonging can look like for a queer Latinx child of immigrants.

**Stitching Memories, Crafting Subjectivity**

_A Cup of Water Under My Bed_ is a stitching of memories. Writing in her own memoir about her tía Chuchi’s memoir draft, Hernández writes “…memories are like
thread. They can be tugged and loosened and stitched in different directions” (Hernández 2014, 180). Although she writes this about her tía Chuchi’s experience, her own memoir can be understood through these terms. Crafting this narrative of her life, Hernández stitches together the threads, or hilos, of memory that, like the blouses her mother sews, “birth the shape” of her subjectivity (Hernández 2014, 21). To do so, these threads must pierce through fabric: the fabric of a green blusa her mother sews, fabric stores where racist ladies tell Hernández and her family to speak English, fábricas that exploit her family’s labor, the fabric and fabrication of heteropatriarchal citizenship that threatens to undo generations of women’s careful stitching. Thread as metaphor and material appears many times throughout A Cup of Water and is reminiscent of Omise’eko Natasha Tinsley’s call for metaphors rooted in materiality. Tinsley reminds us that “metaphors provide conceptual bridges between the lived and the possible that use language queerly to map other roads of becoming” (Omise’eko Natasha Tinsley 2008, 212). Hernández, using the thread her mother and tías labor and care with, unspools her own memory. In what follows, I will explore how Hernández applies thread as both metaphor and material, rhetorical strategy and analytic, in the formation of her queer Latina subjectivity.

Hija, buscame el hilo and Other Threads of Migration

Colorful spools of thread, a pair of tiny scissors, and thin needles dance around the bottom of a small tin. My mother’s hands hem the tattered bottoms of my too-long boot cut jeans, worn from being dragged under my shoes for weeks or months while I insist that they are fine as they are. Finally, I have given in, agreed to be marked by the visibly hemmed jeans, the original hem cut or folded in. Mami cuts the excess thread and hands the dark blue jeans back to me. Not long after, or maybe just before, I am
sitting on the couch in some woman’s home, *una amiga de una amiga de mi mamá*, or something like that. I am learning to cross-stitch, knit, and sew. It is my turn to unspool the thread and create.

Growing up as a 1.5 generation immigrant\(^1\), many of the experiences Hernández discusses resonate with my own and her decision to structure her memoir using thread speaks to my own immigrant subjectivity. Hernández’s use of thread is deeply rooted in her experience as a low-income daughter of immigrants and her family’s experiences working in fábricas. These threads also serve as material that can connect readers with a shared migratory, class, and/or gender-based experience. Meaning is etched onto thread by people whose lives are surrounded by it. For me, thread was shrouded in the fear of not belonging. It represented my inability to fit into the clothing sold at the stores where all the other girls shopped, the need to alter and mend and to do what we could with what we had. It was also saturated with gendered expectation, ones that even as a child I knew did not feel quite right. Although the meaning I attach to thread is distinct from Hernández, the way I am able to use thread to make visible tensions between my reality and the expectations that surrounded me is a reflection of Hernández’s theorization. These kinds of associations that thread evokes are useful to understand how the materiality of hilo can be deployed as a queer analytic to understand a shared experience of Latinx migratory identity.

The pieces, spools, and stitches of thread in *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* stretch across continents through migration and persist in the diaspora. In Bogota,

---

\(^1\) A 1.5 generation immigrant refers to someone who is foreign-born but immigrated during childhood and thus lies somewhere between 1\(^{st}\) generation (foreign-born and immigrated in adulthood) and 2\(^{nd}\) generation (child of immigrants born in the country to which their parents immigrated).
women’s needles are strung with thread at the fábrica where Hernández’s mother first worked. At the fabric store in Union City spools abound the bins “like a Cubana holding up the ends of her apron” (Hernández 2014, 5). In Fairview, a white, “English-only town,” Hernández’s mother stuffs spools of thread into the shed in their yard. The factories in New Jersey are teeming with “fabric and thread and women’s voices” (Hernández 2014, 27). Under her parents’ bed, Hernández finds: “a book, a pencil, a spool of thread” (Hernández 2014, 66). Thread is a constant presence in Hernández’s life; it serves as a metaphor for memory beyond the conceptual realm because of its physical recurrence and significance in her life. Thread bears witness to Hernández’s life and the lives of the women who shape her; it is a physical link across time and space that carries the ephemeral, affective knowledges of generations of Hernández’s family.

Responding to Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s call to situate theory and metaphor in the material, Vanessa Agard-Jones in “What the Sands Remember” presents the sands of the Caribbean, of Martinique in particular, as carrying both material and metaphysical queer meaning and history. In Agard-Jones’ theorization of the regionally specific queer experience in Martinique, sand is a material representation of what José Esteban Muñoz theorizes as ephemera, “the traces left behind from queer relations” (Muñoz 2009, 328). Agard-Jones challenges the narrative of queer invisibility that dominates the region, a narrative imposed through the postcolonial context, by positing sand as bearing witness to the queerness of the region, as the ephemera, the queer evidence, that documents queer life (Agard-Jones 2012). Hernández’s use of thread in A Cup of Water Under My Bed serves a similar function. Hernández’s narrative of
queerness, diaspora, racialization, and coloniality is told through memory, emotion, desire, and cariño. They are experiences expressed through registers that go unheard in a traditional telling of history. Thread is her own form of queer evidence that documents her queer life, materializes felt knowledge, and is necessarily entangled with the racialized, migrant experiences of her family. Si le seguimos el hilo, if we follow the thread, we can uncover the generations of knowledge and history that shape Hernández’s understanding of self.

Thread as Memory

To understand the significance of the metaphor of thread in A Cup of Water Under My Bed, we must start at the end or, more aptly, the after, el después. In her final chapter, “Después,” Hernández opens with a description of how her mother tailors a skirt:

[…] she turns the skirt inside out and lays it on the ironing board. She exams the seams, the places where the hilo is holding everything together, giving it shape, form, purpose. She adjusts her eyeglasses, makes her decisions, and picks up the scissors, the tiny ones that fit in the palm of her hand. The tips of the blades poke out like extra dedos, so that for a moment my mother looks like a woman with seven fingers, two of them silver.

Her hands are swift, almost brutal. She slips the silver dedos under the thread and yanks it from its place in the fabric. In English, we would say she’s removing the stitching. In Spanish, however, the word is desbaratar. If you ask my mother what she’s doing with the skirt, she will keep her eyes on the hilo and say, “Desbaratandola.” Not a taking away, but a taking apart. It is what I am doing here right now, what I have been doing in all the pages before. I have the story, and I am turning it inside out, laying it down on the ironing board, taking it apart with silver dedos, desbaratandola so I can put it back together again the way I want, the way that makes sense now. (Hernández 2014, 173)

This imagery, Hernández’s mother careful and purposeful as she takes apart the skirt at its seams, evokes a similar image of Hernández as she reworks her memory, refuses
the linear chronology that may have once clumsily stitched together her life and sews a narrative in queer time (Muñoz 2009, 25). Muñoz theorizes queer time as subverting what he calls “straight time” (Muñoz 2009, 25). Straight time, in Muñoz’s theorization, is linear and promises no future aside from a normative heterosexual future. Queer time, then, rejects this linearity and is a “path and a movement to a greater openness to the world” (Muñoz 2009, 25). For Muñoz, queer of color identity formation is based in this rejection of straight time and it is through this rejection that queers of color can imagine a queer future and strive towards it in their present. Hernández’s non-linear temporal logics decenter the expectations of straight time and reform her past through a logic that privileges affect and collectivity. As Muñoz writes “The present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (Muñoz 2009, 27). This attention to affect is essential in Hernández’s subject formation. As she takes apart and puts back together the significant moments of her life in this memoir, Hernández centers emotion and relation to understand her life in a “way that makes sense now,” in her present (Hernández 2014, 173).

Threads, in Hernández’s memoir, can be read as a map for what Sara Ahmed calls “affective inheritance” (Ahmed 2017, 20). For Ahmed, feminist consciousness is this affective inheritance; it is “how our own struggles to make sense of realities that are difficult to grasp become part of a wider struggle, a struggle to be, to make sense of being” (Ahmed 2017, 20). Throughout her memoir, Hernández situates the stories of her life within chapters, creates themes, and threads between them to make sense of her being. The concept of inheritance appears in the epigraph to the memoir, which
contains a quote by Sandra Cisneros: “What does a woman inherit that tells her how to go?” This epigraph cues the reader to search for this inheritance in Hernández’s memoir. Ahmed’s theorization of “affective inheritance” is useful to make visible the knowledge and history passed through thread.

Delving into the archive of stories her mother has shared with her over the years in the chapter “Stories She Tells Us,” Hernández shares that her mother’s stories always begin at the beginning, “which is to say the first time she left her mother” (Hernández 2014, 21). The first time Hernández’s mother leaves her own mother is for a job at a fábrica where she marks the places where other women will sow pockets onto men’s blazers. Here, in the fábrica in Bogota, thread is ever present and in Hernández’s mother’s young mind, the women who work there are unlike any other, they speak without hesitation, curse even and “their voices puncture the air like threaded needles” (Hernández 2014, 22). For Hernández’s young ears, too, this is a revelation. In this context, the willfulness and agency of these women to shirk any notion of traditional womanhood becomes a puncture, their voices the threaded needles that disrupt the fabric of womanhood that both Hernández and her mother had at one point believed as truth. Their voices are like threaded needles, they pierce, and they alter. They are one of the threads both Hernández and her mother come to inherit. We can return here to Sara Ahmed’s theorization of feminism as affective inheritance. This thread, which stretches from the fábrica in Bogota to Hernández’s childhood bedroom in Union City is one of the threads of Hernández’s feminist consciousness. As Sara Ahmed tell us, “Becoming a feminist [is] about becoming audible… feminism as acquiring a voice,” and so, for Hernández, feminism is inherited from, among many other threads, her mother’s
stories and the voices of the women at her mother’s first fábrica in Bogota (Ahmed 2017, 73).

In the narrative of Hernández’s life, women are made up of thread, of memory, of “something unnamed but substantial” (Hernández 2014, 21). Hernández’s mother is “a muñeca de trapo…a large rag doll, a careful gathering of cotton fabric and thread” (Hernández 2014, 21). Her tías are “three pieces of thread cut from the spool” (Hernández 2014, 10). Her tía Dora is “a piece of silk hilo” (Hernández 2014, 10). Her tía Chuchi “is a library,” a repository of stories: memories (Hernández 2014, 39). Not only are women described as being thread but also the imagery of thread and stitching appears only in proximity to women. Mothers, tías, women of the fábricas are the ones who thread needles and pierce fabric. Men, her father in particular, deal only in unaltered fabric, they are never the agents of memory, never who stitch together, create, or heal. For Hernández, women bear the responsibility of passing knowledge and history, they are the ones who thread her story. Even at the factory where Hernández’s father works, he does not engage with thread. Her father guides the flow of the factory, which Hernández notably describes as a dollhouse. He spends his shifts “replacing broken needles and naked spools, and he carries the bundles of fabric into another room, where they are loaded onto trucks” (Hernández 2014, 137). Her mother, in contrast, the “large rag doll” in her story, manipulates and stitches the pieces of fabric, passes the nearly finished product onto another woman to “cut the ends of the hilo” (Hernández 2014, 21; 2014, 137). It is her mother, and the other women in the factory, who define how threads and memory are distributed.
Just as the threads of Hernández’s affective inheritance provide her with an embodied history of feminist resistance and point to the aspects of womanhood she should accept as part of herself, they are also marred with the knowledge of what she should reject, distance herself from, and understand as Other. This becomes clear in Hernández’s discussion of her father’s belief in Santería. Throughout her childhood, Hernández had no name and no reason for the mysterious candy dish hidden behind the boiler. At church on Sundays she wonders why her father is never required to attend. When her tía Chuci, the library, reveals that her father does indeed have a religion and it is Santería, the open secret becomes legible to her. When Hernández comes across a box in her home with a bird inside, she asks her mother what it is: “It’s your father’s things,” she says, not looking up from the pants whose hem she’s taken apart. The box moves in spurts on the floor, but my mother snips at the thread and says no more” (Hernández 2014, 49). In this moment, her mother marks Santería as something Hernández should define herself against, something to be left unnamed, unspoken, and unincorporated into her own identity. The act of snipping at the thread then signals a rupture and a denial, the significance of which I will return to in a later section.

The rupture of memory, the cutting of thread, is just as necessary in the formation of Hernández’s subjectivity. The points of rupture in these threads of memory are central to not only Hernández but also her mother and tías. For these women, the cutting of thread was a necessary departure to their own subjectivities because through their experience of migration. After leaving her own mother, to labor and to migrate, Hernández’s mother becomes “like a new spool of thread” (Hernández 2014, 27). When
her tías finally emigrate, Hernández describes them as “three pieces of thread cut from the spool” (Hernández 2014, 10). The women in Hernández’s life are no strangers to breakage and come to be understood through it. It seems that this is why, when Hernández is honest with her family about her bisexuality and faces their rejection, the break does not cause her to cut herself off from her family. Even when she decides to move to San Francisco, her mother and tías did not challenge her or ask her to stay (despite their disgust with the queerness of the city): “They are not those kinds of women. Maybe it was because they knew migration. Maybe it was because their own mother had let them leave home. Maybe they thought I was a piece of hilo or a word you couldn’t keep in your mouth” (Hernández 2014, 175). For Hernández and her family, these ruptures, separations, and movements are an essential part of their subject formation and, despite the pain or disagreement, are necessary.

Ultimately, what Hernández comes to name towards the end of her memoir is how these affective ties between women are what structure her life and define how she understands herself. Although she may have come to reconcile how, for their own reasons, the women in her life have passed down affective knowledge about gender, religion, and sexuality that complicated and contradicted Hernández’s identity, her subjectivity is tied up with theirs. Despite the pain of their rejection and distance, for Hernández, “some stitches cannot be undone” (Hernández 2014, 177). Only through a temporal rearrangement of her past is Hernández able to connect the affective knowledge that has shaped her and come to envision her own queer future, a future that reckons with and cannot be disentangled from the stitches the women in her life have sowed.
“Before language, there is love. Before love, memory”

This quote, “Before language, there is love. Before love, memory,” appears in the first few pages of *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* (Hernández 2014, 5). It feels quite fitting to open this section because this memoir, after all, is a project of memory. It communicates, in its lyrical prose, Hernández’s deep love for her family and for the threads of memories that tie them together, that sew these “stitches [that] cannot be undone” (Hernández 2014, 177). Writing, language, is how Hernández remains connected with her family and her culture and it is also how she makes their and her memories and knowledge known. Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde teaches us that “It is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone can we survive…” (Lorde 2007, 43). In this section, through a close reading of specific chapters and excerpts from the memoir, I will explore some of the truths Hernández speaks, what she teaches us through her narrative of memory, love, and language.

**Language and Knowledge**

There are several moments in which Daisy Hernández explicitly brings up the impact of feminists and feminist theory in her life and many more where Hernández tells of the knowledge her family and community produce and disseminate. For Hernández, explicitly feminist spaces serve as mediums for her development of self and are often the sites where she becomes conscious of some of her life circumstances. What becomes clear in her memoir is that these spaces often do this through their ability to name that which she has already felt and experienced in her life, that which the women in her life already knew, and often what her mother and tíes have tried so hard to teach her. Throughout *A Cup of Water* Hernández crafts her narrative in ways that make
these connections visible and in so doing engages in a form of praxis that honors the knowledges of the women in her life. Although the entirety of Hernández’s memoir can be read as this kind of praxis, I will use selections from the chapter “Stories She Tells Us” to elucidate this argument. I begin with an instance in which Hernández discusses feminism with her mother. I then consider the tensions between empirical and embodied knowledges in the various stories Hernández’s mother recounts in the chapter.

The second chapter of Hernández’s memoir, “Stories She Tells Us” recounts short stories of women in Hernández’s life that seem to have shaped how she understands womanhood, particularly her own racialized, migrant womanhood. She writes stories her mother told her and stories she recalls of her mother. The only story which does not center her mother is one where Hernández attends a feminist writing group for the first time. As she sits on a couch in a room at New York University, she listens to a South Asian woman’s writing about “loving and hating where you come from” (Hernández 2014, 29). It is in this moment that Hernández realizes that “…shame and memories need not oppress us. Naming carries its own brilliant power” (Hernández 2014, 30). Hernández names this realization in the final pages of this chapter, after recounting pages of painful stories of her mother’s migration and claiming that very power of naming her experiences. Following this lesson in feminist storytelling, Hernández tells the story of the first time she introduced her mother to feminism. This anecdote is one that I believe encapsulates Hernández’s intervention. Here, in the tradition of seminal works like This Bridge Called My Back and Sister Outsider, Hernández reveals how woman of color develop complex understandings of themselves
and their circumstances despite the Eurocentric expectation that this kind of theorizing must be empirical, academic, and written.

The story begins in the kitchen. Thinking of her mother struggling at her work and the newly learned feminist theory she has been surrounded by, Hernández writes, “Feminism, I want her to know, is what will liberate her. She should organize with the other women at the factory to demand their back wages. This is what women have done before. I’ve read about it” (Hernández 2014, 30). Here, as Hernández recalls her inner monologue, she believes the feminist knowledge she has read at New York University to be the authority, the kind of knowledge that her mother would not have had access to, what was her responsibility to teach her mother. In this moment, Hernández fails to understand how her mother’s life experiences have taught her much of the feminist theory she herself needed to read at a university. Later in this short story, Hernández realizes this failing on her part. As she sits, again in the kitchen, she reads a book by Gloria Anzaldúa, presumably *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. Her mother, for what Hernández recalls as the first time in the 16 years she has been reading at the kitchen table, asks her about what she is reading. Startled by her mother’s interest, Hernández writes about her breathless explanation of Anzaldúa’s theory, stumbling out in strained Spanish:

I stare at her, slightly disoriented. Before I can think too much, I am racing, the Spanish words stumbling out of my mouth as I explain Gloria’s ideas of the borderlands, of living “in between” as feminists, as Colombianas, as women who belong to more than one land and one culture. We are neither here nor there, I conclude, almost out of breath. *Ni aquí, ni alla.*

My mother nods. She lowers her eyes to the book’s cover, then looks back at me, waiting for more, and the idea begins to bloom in me: my mother already knows this. (Hernández 2014, 31)
What becomes clear to Hernández in this moment is the knowledge her mother possesses and how, although not the written feminist theory of the academy, her mother understands and knows the theories *Borderlands* articulates because her mother has lived them. In an ironic moment of growth and recognition, Hernández, in her newly acquired feminist consciousness, seems to finally understand the very intervention Anzaldúa asserts in *Borderlands*; that is, the significance and value of embodied forms of knowledge, meaning the ways we learn and know through lived experiences, and the necessity of recognizing and writing of this knowledge as a form of resistance to the dominant, Eurocentric, frameworks that define knowledge through a presumably factual and objective frame.

It is significant to note Gloria Anzaldúa’s appearance in this anecdote. Throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa writes a history of the border, the United States, Mexico, and Chicanx people that is rooted in her experiences and told through poetry and prose, English and Spanish, and the material and the spiritual. Anzaldúa makes a deliberate choice to present her work in this way and it serves to further the very theory she is developing. Many of these dualities can be interpreted as representing the cultures on either side of Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” (Anzaldúa 2007, 99). English, prose, and the material signifying the dominant Anglo culture and Spanish, poetry, and the spiritual representing Mexican and Chicanx culture. Anzaldúa’s choice to write by intermixing these dualities, then, can be seen as making this consciousness material on the pages of *Borderlands*. In this way, we can begin to see how Hernández’s invocation of Anzaldúa in this anecdote points to the way *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* follows in this tradition. In *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, the
combination of English and Spanish can be noted throughout, in fact, even the excerpt above contains both. In Hernández’ text, the English/ Spanish interplay works in much the same way as in *Borderlands*: it signifies a switch not only in language but in culture, in history, in ways of knowing.

In an earlier story in “Stories She Tells Us,” Hernández recalls a scene in her childhood as she tries to teach her mother English, requesting her mother “Pon atención” and becoming frustrated at her mother’s lack of commitment to her lessons (Hernández 2014, 27). Reflecting on this, Hernández writes “I am so young. I think language is all a woman needs” (Hernández 2014, 27). Language, English in particular, appears here as a tool of access, what Hernández believes will bring her mother success. Language, in Hernández’s narrative, stands in for epistemic access, and for socio-political and economic achievement. As a child, Hernández understands that what happens in English is the key to U.S. American success and it is this observation that causes her to “begin resenting Spanish” because of the abjection and condemnation it represents (Hernández 2014, 11). Hernández’s departure from Spanish indicates a departure from her mother as well, along with their shared culture, knowledge, and history. As Hernández grows, she begins to learn the limitations of English and the value of Spanish. Hernández comes to this reflection in her memoir just after the scene I discussed earlier, when she speaks about Gloria Anzaldúa to her mother. She writes, “It was me, not my mother, who needed English, who needed the stories and feminist theories. Without them, I might never have come back to her” (Hernández 2014, 32). In both Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* and Hernández’s *A Cup of Water*, the Spanish and English languages appear in narratives of the particularities of their lives and remind us
of how English, and the epistemology it represents, fails to comprehend or articulate their embodiment of this in-betweenness, Hernández’s “ni aquí, ni alla,” Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” (Hernández 2014, 31; Anzaldúa 2007, 99).

Hernández’s memoir, then, and this chapter in particular, is a form of praxis in which Hernández situates the oral storytelling tradition of her mother within her written work, retells those stories as legitimate knowledge that shaped her understanding of what it means to be a woman, and frames them using the linguistic tactics she has learned from women of color feminists like Anzaldúa. The stories Hernández’s mother tells communicate the lessons she tries to impart on Hernández. In her memoir, Hernández tells these stories not only to detail the knowledge they produce but also to reflect on how her resistance to them in her youth shaped her understanding of self.

**Religion, Spirituality, & Coloniality in the Diaspora**

Growing up, Hernández attended Catholic School. She was surrounded by Catholicism at school and at home. For a while, she quite liked it, she liked the catchy songs, the incense, and the lighting of candles. Her father, however, did not attend church. This was suspicious and worrisome to a young Daisy Hernández who received no explanation for his absence. Her father was also an alcoholic who often became emotionally and sometimes physically violent. As a devout child who believed wholeheartedly in the teachings of the Catholic Church, Hernández believed she knew what caused her father to be this way. She thought, “But I know the truth. The problem is my father’s godless” (Hernández 2014, 38). Her father, though, was not godless.

At fourteen, she finally learns that her father does have a religion: Santería. About a year after learning of the existence of Santería, a teacher at her Catholic high school tells her that the stories in the Bible are parables. Hernández’s belief in
Catholicism shatters and, as punishment, she thinks, she is hospitalized after a car accident. In an act of *cariño*, Hernández’s father keeps vigil all night, praying to the *guerreros*. For Hernández, Santería humanizes her father: “The sweetest part of my father is his candy dish” (Hernández 2014, 43). The candy dish, and the collection of gesture, affect, memory, and epistemology it represents, creates an affective tie between her and her father, mediated by Elegguá and the other *guerreros*, and expressed through gestures of worship.

Throughout Hernández’s account of her relationship to Catholicism and Santería is a sense of what Juana María Rodríguez calls “embodied sociality,” “a sense of collectivity” accessed through movement (Rodríguez 2014, 110). Reflecting on M. Jacqui Alexander’s work on the sacred, Rodríguez theorizes about the gestural practices of dance that “in all its forms— secular and sacred—enacts an embodied sociality that exceeds the time and place of its articulation” (Rodríguez 2014, 110). Rodríguez points to how repeated spiritual gestural practices produce meaning, identity, and community (in similar ways to gender and sexuality). In *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* we can note Hernández’s attention to and fascination with gestures of worship. Even her early connection to Catholicism manifests through the gestural, what maintains her interest is the singing and the lighting candles and incense. When describing moments when she witnesses people practicing Santería, she writes about how people “press their fingers gently” at the feet of San Lázaro and their “lips move in silent prayer” (Hernández 2014, 46). She notices the careful way her family places offerings and light *velas* for him. During her first experience participating in a ritual, she
is struck by how the santera “cracks open a coconut” and listens what it has to say (Hernández 2014, 50). The ritual continues and Hernández writes:

But for a while, it is only us and the woman, and on the floor, Elegguá in his clay dish, along with Ochosi and Oggún and the tin rooster. Ana says prayers that sound like songs, and I find myself tapping my foot to the beat. She blows tobacco smoke at Elegguá, which at first looks insulting, like smoking in someone’s face, but after a few seconds it appears romantic and submissive, like a woman offering her lips to a lover. (Hernández 2014, 50)

In this excerpt we can see just how significant these gestural practices felt to Hernández. She notes the way her foot tapped to the beat of the prayer, a gesture that alludes to Rodriguez’s theorization of dance, spirituality, and subject formation, and the sensuality and intimacy conveyed as the santera blows smoke.

Hernández expresses a connection to these gestures of worship and, despite her decision to write off religion in high school, she finds herself praying to Elegguá. “I don’t know why I do this,” she says, “except that the rock with cowrie shells and candies has been with me ever since I can remember, since before the saints on the radiator, since before Jesus even. And he has never lied to me” (Hernández 2014, 45). Over a decade later, Hernández finds herself just outside San Francisco, she’s as far as she has ever been from her family, but she seeks out a santera, Yvette, for comfort and advice. Recalling the first time she met Yvette, she writes about the familiar gestures of worship, the candles, the flowers, and the cups of water (Hernández 2014, 67). These gestures mark community, an embodied sociality that is entangled in memory and history.

As Hernández reflects on these experiences in her memoir, she writes about coming across academic writings about Santería. In her memoir, in a style reminiscent
of both Alexander’s and Tinsley’s call to uncover submerged histories, she explains and
imagines the history of Santería with the narrative below:

When the white men arrived in Africa, they failed to see the gods. They beat the Yorubans, shoved them onto ships, across the oceans, and never suspected that the holy ones were heading for Cuba, too. Once they realized it, that the orishas had arrived in the Americas—the Yorubans drummed and danced and sang, the spirits came down and took hold of their heads and wrists and feet—the Spaniards forbade their practice of the religion. They thought they could outsmart Elegguá.

It’s the end of the day. I can imagine dusk crawling across the sugarcane fields. A slave woman is working with a fractured arm. It’s in a makeshift sling. She’s worried the bone will grow crooked now. She needs the orisha Babalú-Ayé, but how? Where and when?

Someone knows. They’ve seen him here in Cuba, except the Spaniards call him San Lázaro. Like Babalú-Ayé in the Yoruban stories, the Catholic santo has open sores on his legs. And, so, the woman procures a small statue. She places San Lázaro on a table in her shack, offers the santo frutas y tabaco and begs for mercy. She can pray freely now and not worry about breaking the law.

It began like this perhaps: The saint in public and the orisha in secret. The bleeding Jesus in the living room and Elegguá in the basement. And high above our heads, the tin rooster my mother keeps above the kitchen cupboard: Ósun, the one who brings messages when your life is in danger. (Hernández 2014, 48)

Santería, as Hernández reminds us, is a product of the colonial encounter. It carries the weight of this history and those who practice it remember, translate, and pass down that history through gesture. Considering the aesthetic of San Lázaro with his tortured body and crutches, Hernández writes that among those praying to him “The consensus is palpable: only a man who has suffered like this can know what we need and keep us safe from harm” (Hernández 2014, 46). This statement reflects the impact of not only the colonial encounter that led to the formation of Santería but also the suffering of generations of Afro-Cubans and now migrants, separated by time, water, and land who carry with them these affective histories. As Juana María Rodríguez writes, “culture is
bound up with the historical haunting of affective residue, that which is unseen but sensed" (Rodríguez 2014, 107). Hernández, through her writing, makes visible in the ordinariness of her family’s gestures of care and worship, the coloniality that continues to mark and impact the lives of diasporic Cuban subjects, and the forms of community that are born of survival.

**The American Dream of Successful Alienation**

Throughout Hernández’s childhood, people would always tell her she was going somewhere, going to be something, but to her dismay, she says, “No one ever says where I am going, but they are sure that a place is waiting for me. By the time I am nine years old and translating my report card for my father, I know he is not going with me” (Hernández 2014, 141). Hernández knows, from an early age, that just as her mother, father, and tías had to leave their families, she would need to leave as well; leaving was part of the deal, part of the migration and upward mobility that defined her life. Throughout her memoir, Hernández explores the conflict between the success she was expected to attain, the American Dream she was oriented toward, and her desire to remain connected to her family. This American Dream was “where rich people live and don’t worry about money or being treated badly when they don’t know all the English words or behave como una india” (Hernández 2014, 119). In other words, it was a white, rich, assimilated place, the place that meant success. Hernández was constantly being pushed toward this place and it required leaving behind her family to become the financially secure, assimilated American they could not become.

In this section, I turn to Sara Ahmed’s theorization of orientation in her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) to explore this “somewhere” that Hernández is constantly oriented towards. Ahmed enters the phenomenological question of orientation through
her interest in sexual orientation. However, as she explores, theorizing about orientation is useful to understand all relations, sexual or otherwise. Expanding on her theorization of orientations, Ahmed writes:

The concept of “orientations” allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return. (Ahmed 2006, 21)

Ahmed’s formulation of orientations is useful when considering the expectations of upward mobility and assimilation that Hernández describes throughout *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*. Ahmed writes that migration produces its own kind of orientation, one that is torn in opposing directions, both “toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home” (Ahmed 2006, 10). As migrants, Hernández’s family embodies this migrant orientation, longing for home, Cuba for Hernández’s father and Colombia for her mother, while also seeking to create a home for Hernández in the United States, knowing that they will always exist in a liminal space of disorientation in this “not yet home” place (Ahmed 2006, 10). If, as Ahmed explains, to live a good life one must orient oneself towards social good, Hernández, as the daughter of migrants, must orient her life out of the liminality of her family’s place in the United States and toward the creation of home, citizenship, and normative belonging.

At various points throughout *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, Hernández explores how class, race, and labor shape her migrant families experience in the United States. As Hernández describes, these forces create the conditions that define her families *lucha* and positions her family as the antithesis to the American Dream she is meant to represent and achieve. Hernández’s orientation toward this American Dream is defined
by the ways her family disorients and is disoriented by the institutions and places they inhabit. In the third and final section of *A Cup of Water*, “My Father’s Hands,” Hernández focuses on her father and his *lucha*. Here, her father’s hands represent the class, migrant, and racialized histories that have shaped his and Hernández’s life. This metonymy, hands that labor, people who labor, reminds us of the swift and meticulous hands of the women in Hernández’s life, hands that sew, mend, and connect. In this chapter, Hernández narrates her family’s struggle to navigate unemployment, language barriers, racialized and gendered labor practices, and the ebbs and flows of U.S. trade policy that directly impact her family’s job prospects.

As a child, Hernández becomes the interpreter, the translator and the access point for her parents to U.S. American employment and social supports. Factories call. Hernández picks up. They ask for her father. She takes a message: “Tell your dad to come at eight, not five” “Tell him he can file for unemployment” (Hernández 2014, 138). She relays the message in Spanish. It goes on like this, messages and report cards and dentists, and unemployment offices, all the moments when Hernández is the bridge between her parents and the English-speaking world around them. Through these experiences, Hernández learns that she is meant to escape this life in translation, leaving her family and what she has known all her life behind in the process. Reflecting on a moment when she drops her father off at an unemployment office before going to a college microeconomics class, Hernández writes:

[…] I drive away. It is what my father expects of me, what we all expect of me. I am to avoid manual labor, to graduate from college, to work with white people, to earn enough money to buy a house in a white neighborhood. I am to be one of those people who say they are of Hispanic heritage, who say they grew up in difficult circumstances, who
see the assimilation of one person as the progress of a community. (Hernández 2014, 143)

In this scene, Hernández quite literally orients her body away from her father and all he represents. Through this orientation, Hernández illustrates how becoming more assimilated, distancing herself from her family, her class background, the forms of labor her family was accustomed to, and the places where her family lived were all essential to the American Dream, the progress Hernández’s family desired for her.

For Hernández, though, leaving her family was not so simple. This departure developed into a deep desire to return, one reflected in her attachment to Santeria, her return to Spanish, and her connection to feminist theory that explained her feeling of in-betweenness. Hernández constantly attempts to reorient herself and tells us that this desire to return is born out of the push to leave. She writes:

It is a story as old as time, that we always find what we needed was right at home.

But, therein is the riddle: a child has to leave to return. My mother had to. She says it often. She only appreciated her mother, only understood her mother, after she had left home.

I had to leave, too. It was me, not my mother, who needed English, who needed the stories and feminist theories. Without them, I might never have come back to her. (Hernández 2014, 31–32)

There are so many of Hernández’s stories that remind me of my own, so many reasons to choose this memoir for study. I certainly relate to her recounting of being a symbol of upward mobility and serving as a linguistic and cultural bridge. But it is, perhaps, this riddle that was most central in my decision to select this memoir for analysis. I am no stranger to this riddle, leaving and returning are bound up in my migrant family as well. Some of us create new homes here and others long to return. We know that oftentimes leaving is the only way to move forward.
The challenge for the queer daughter, though, for both Hernández and I, lies in this orientation forward. When forward is the mythical American Dream, queerness is antithetical to its manifestation. Although we are meant to orient ourselves away from our family in many ways, our departure from heteronormativity is not a welcome one. It will not move us forward. Although we have been trained to leave, this rupture does not orient us correctly, does not poise us for success, or allow us to return the debt of our life by the promise of social good (Ahmed 2006, 21).

Further still, queerness orients us away even from the homes that have been lost. This becomes apparent in A Cup of Water Under My Bed when Hernández’s mother reacts with shock when Hernández comes out to her. Describing this moment, Hernández recounts the conversation with her mother. First, her mother stammers, “I’ve never heard of this. This doesn’t happen in Colombia,” and Hernández replies, “You haven’t been in Colombia in twenty-seven years,” to which her mother responds, “But I never saw anything like this there” (Hernández 2014, 84). In this interaction, Hernández’s mother turns toward life in Colombia, in the home lost, to disparage Hernández’s sexuality; the implication here is that, if this does not happen in Colombia, then this is the fault of assimilation to the United States. Returning to Ahmed’s formulation of the migrant orientation, queerness is disorienting to both the home lost (Colombia) and the not yet home (United States).

Queerness, then, is its own kind of departure for the queer daughter and orients us toward a new, unimagined future. This kind of orientation, though, is familiar in its liminality, reminiscent of the precarious orientation of our migrant parents. For the queer daughter, the lost home is the imagined U.S. American one that never was, and the not-
yet home is a yet to be explored queer future. Both the queer daughter and the migrant are oriented toward an unknown, unwritten future. Migrant orientation, then, can be understood as its own kind of queer orientation, one with the potential for unimagined possibilities.

I relate the potential of this queer migrant orientation to Hernández’s riddle, that a child must leave to return. Much like Hernández’s hilo, queer and migrant orientations are malleable, they can bend and stretch, fray and mend in new directions. It is that adaptability, born of migrant memory and embodied experience, that teaches the child of migrants the potential of this kind of coming and going. Hernández, for instance, remains connected to her family, even those who do not understand or accept her queerness because she and they both understand the necessity of this kind of queer orientation, of leaving. As Hernández reminds us, there are “some stiches [that] cannot be undone” (Hernández 2014, 177). Rather, it is through the fraying and mending of those stitches, all those memories of leaving while still remaining attached, that her connections to her family are able withstand the disorientation of queerness and she is able to produce her own subjectivity. It is the healing power of these memories of migration that allow queer hijas, like Hernández and me, to leave and to return, to unspool thread in new directions, and to create homes in spaces that are disoriented by our presence.
CHAPTER 3
MEMORIES ON AND OF THE BODY: UNRULY TRUTHS IN ROXANE GAY’S
HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY

When I first read *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* the summer after I graduated from college, I felt a profound connection to Gay and the intimate story she shared. I remember listening to Roxane Gay narrate the audiobook, completely encapsulated by her storytelling, reluctant to press pause or take a break until I had listened to it all. I have read *Hunger* several times since that first instance and it never fails to evoke this feeling; it is one that I find difficult to name but is certainly a form of intimacy and recognition. I remember reading the opening pages to *Hunger* and knowing that I had found something special and it was finding me right back. Framing the narrative she will tell in this memoir, Gay begins one of the first chapters of *Hunger* by writing:

> The story of my body is not a story of triumph. This is not a weight-loss memoir. There will be no picture of a thin version of me, my slender body emblazoned across this book’s cover, with me standing in one leg of my former, fatter self’s jeans. This is not a book that will offer motivation. I don’t have any powerful insight into what it takes to overcome an unruly body and unruly appetites. Mine is not a success story. Mine is, simply, a true story. (Gay 2017, 4)

This notion of her true story, one that sits in direct opposition to the narratives of thinness as success and value that I had consumed my entire life, was the first time I read something so profoundly true to me, something that, despite being distinct from my life, in many ways was telling my own true story. This feeling was one I would come to recognize again and again in graduate school through the work of women of color feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, María Lugones, Sara Ahmed, and Juana María Rodríguez. This feeling was certainly one of recognition, of connection, of seeing myself emblazoned across their pages. But what was even more particular about these works was their ability to create theory through these experiences
and moments of recognition. These women, from Anzaldúa to Lorde to Gay, not only provided experiences of identification but also created moments of politicized consciousness raising all based in their own embodied realities. In reading their truths, I began to uncover my own.

For queer women of color, identity and subjectivity are complex processes that require a reckoning with the internal and external world and the processes of racialization and sexualization we interact with every day. They require the redefinition of what it means to be a woman, a person of color, a queer person, and all the other predetermined scripts we have been socialized into and often internalized. *Hunger*, like the works of other women of color feminists, invites us to join Roxane Gay in saying: “Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here. See what I hunger for and what my truth has allowed me to create” (Gay 2017, 304). In its critique of cultural discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and body size and powerful personal narrative, Roxane Gay’s *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* evokes a tradition of woman of color feminist life writing that asserts complexity against flattening discourses that position queer, fat, Black women, as abject and one-dimensional.

In Chapter 3, I first analyze the structure and strategies of narration Gay employs throughout *Hunger*, which, rather than using time as its guiding structure, uses the body as an analytic to trace her experiences. This structure, I contend, is a significant intervention that highlights the value of the body as a repository of knowledge and memory (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). In the latter half of Chapter 3, I conduct a close reading of *Hunger* to discuss the particular cultural critiques Gay explores and the politic
she asserts. Through her life writing, Gay asserts her own politic that challenges the internalized logics that underpin her life experiences and provides a framework for identifying the same in our own. *Hunger*, then, functions as a site of recognition and consciousness raising for those who see themselves in her narrative and/or are mobilized by the injustices Gay articulates.

Roxane Gay is an acclaimed author with an impressive archive of work. Her writing takes a variety of forms including fiction, memoir, non-fiction, short story, comic book, anthology, and more. Her books include her debut and recently re-released collection of short stories, *Ayiti* (2011), her novel *An Untamed State* (2014), *New York Times* bestseller *Bad Feminist* (2014), national bestseller *Difficult Women* (2017), and *New York Times* bestseller *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017). In addition to these works, Gay has also written *Black Panther World of Wakanda* (2016) for Marvel and edited anthologies *Not That Bad* (2018) and *The Best American Short Stories* (2018) (Gay 2019c). Gay is also the founder of Tiny Hardcore Press, which she started while an Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). Gay left EIU to become an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Purdue University, a position she left in 2018 stating in a tweet, “I was undercompensated and that wasn’t something I could abide. I know my worth. There is no ill will here. I don’t have a new job lined up” (Bangert 2018). Roxane Gay has since partnered with Medium to create “Gay Magazine” and runs a podcast with professor and award-winning author Tressie McMillan Cottom entitled “Hear to Slay” (Magazine 2019; Gay 2019a). Gay’s extensive body of work and critical acclaim has garnered her a celebrity-like following, as evidenced in her large Twitter following and presence with over 600,000 followers, and
her reputation for her witty tweets and responses, even writing in her Twitter bio “If you clap, I clap back” (Gay 2019b).

Throughout Chapter 3, I write about Gay’s *Hunger: Memoir of (My) Body* (2017), using queer and trans of color scholarship to ground my analysis. *Hunger* was published several years after Gay’s rise to stardom after the release of her book *Bad Feminist* and was a long awaited and delayed book. In an interview at the 2017 National Book Festival, Gay reflects on her reluctance to write this memoir, stating that it took “six months to write *Hunger*, but three years to start writing *Hunger*” (Roxane Gay | Season 1 Episode 6 | Breaking Big | PBS 2018). Gay echoes this throughout her memoir as she writes about *Hunger* being “the most difficult writing experience of [her] life” (Gay 2017, 4).

In *Hunger*, Gay ruminates on her life as a fat person, a victim of childhood sexual assault, a Black, bisexual woman, a writer, and a daughter. Her memoir is not bound to a particular part of her life or series of events but rather explores how her body exists in the world and how her experience of trauma at an early age has impacted her life. Gay writes 88 chapters of a variety of lengths, from one or two sentences to essay-length chapters, and she splits these chapters into six sections. There are no chapter or section titles, chapters are numbered 1-88, and sections are titled using roman numbers: I-VI. Although there is no clear description of the chapters or sections, as I have read and re-read memoir, I have developed my own loose themes for each section: I) framing (my) body II) creating (my) body III) commentary on (my) body IV) modifying (my) body V) relationships with (my) body V) healing with (my) body. In section I, Gay provides context for her approach to her memoir. She writes about what
her body looks like, what it does for her, how she feels about her body and she gestures towards some of the defining moments in her life that she returns to later in the memoir. Section II is the most chronological part of the book. Gay recounts childhood memoires, writes about the boys who raped her as a child, and how she worked to create a larger body for herself in an effort to protect herself. This is the longest section in *Hunger* and spans from Gay’s early childhood through her twenties. Section III focuses on the public spectacle of the fat body, the reality TV shows that are created in an effort to tame the body, the commentary and advice offered by friends, family, and strangers alike, and the shame that gaze induces. In section IV, Gay writes about the ways she has attempted to alter her body: dieting, exercising, clothes and fashion, tattoos and the pain of living in her body when it refuses to be modified to fit into our world. Section V centers Gay’s social relationships and the ways her body informs those relations. She writes about cooking and food as culture, sexuality and dating, gender and visibility, and her life as a public figure. In the final section, VI, Gay describes ways she is both physically, mentally, and socially healing with her body. From experiences with healthcare professionals to looking up her assailant as an adult, Gay explores her process of continual healing. These descriptions and interpretive section titles are my own effort to organize Gay’s memoir as I crafted my analysis, but it is essential to recognize that Gay’s decision to leave the sections and chapters ambiguous is intentional. When asked about the form of the book in an interview with Chelsea Yedinak, Gay states that she was “playing with structure and form and really trying to deconstruct form a lot in the book” (Yedinak 2016, 76–77). I understand this deconstruction of structure and form, along with the vulnerable and complex content
that permeates through the memoir, as a feminist intervention and resistance to the traditional form of memoir that scholars of the genre, like G. Thomas Couser, document (Couser 2012). This intervention mirrors what the women of color feminists who came before Gay implemented through academic texts, anthologies, and poetry in texts like *This Bridge Called My Back* or *Sister Outsider*.

**Writing on the Body and of the Body**

Memoirs often include two timelines in their narrative, one of the past self and one of the present self—the older, wiser voice that clarifies and provides context (Birkerts 2008, 6). In his book *The Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts explains that it is the bridging of these two timelines that gives memoir its distinct perspective. Gay employs this strategy throughout *Hunger*, including narrative from her perspective as a child or young adult and then writing commentary from her current perspective using phrases like “I know, now, that I was wrong” (Gay 2017, 47). Similarly, queer fat studies scholar Elena Levy-Navarro writes about the need to queer fat history through a reworking of straight temporal logics of history. In *Fattening Queer History*, Levy-Navarro tells us that “A fat history needs to queer that modern temporal relationship between the past and the present by allowing the past to speak to the present” (Levy-Navarro 2009, 21). Bridging queer theory’s conceptualization of queer time and the fat histories creatives write about, Levy-Navarro tells us that “Our fat histories need to occupy times that go athwart of or across the linear time of cause and effect that is currently used to oppress us” and make themselves visible against the normalizing

---

1 Logan Neser, a fellow graduate student in my program, very insightfully pointed out that this structure may also be a strategic choice to require the reader to engage with the book fully, without preconception, deter the use of sections of the memoir out of context, and perhaps even make it more difficult for scholars (like me) to write about particular aspects of the book.
erasure of straight temporal logics, a task we can see memoir is particularly equipped to handle (Levy-Navarro 2009, 19). Through its unique approach to recounting Gay’s life, *Hunger* effectively rejects those organizing logics that render fat histories illegible.

In *Hunger*, however, Gay complicates these temporal logics even further by centering the body as the organizing structure of the memoir. This organizing structure appears even in the title of the book, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. As the title alludes, *Hunger* is not just about interiority, as memoirs often are. Instead, it is about both Gay’s interiority and the material of her body—about what her body can tell us about her interiority. Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* is critical because it reminds us that our bodies carry and produce meaning. *Hunger* centers the knowledge our bodies create and explores how our understanding of self is entangled in our embodiment. In doing this, Gay not only rejects the linear chronology that is understood to structure our lives but also asserts the memory of the body and the material. For Gay, the body, her body, serves as an epistemology. It is a legitimate, intimate, and critical source of knowledge upon which she calls to understand herself.

Gay’s approach to the body as knowledge is akin to Black lesbian feminist poet and scholar Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of the erotic. As Lorde describes, the erotic is far more than the sexual; it is an empowering, embodied knowledge that allows us as women to situate ourselves in the world (Lorde 2007, 57). I understand the use of the body as the structuring logic of *Hunger* as deploying the power of the erotic. Lorde’s theory, then, provides necessary context to Gay’s choice of form. The literary critic of memoir that considers a structure most closely resembling what Gay does in *Hunger*, Birkerts, still maintains a dichotomy between mind and body, focusing on the rejection
of the linearity of time but still maintaining that making sense of time, memory, and the self, remains a project of the mind (Birkerts 2008). Rather than analyzing this structure through the lens of genre, I find that employing Black and Women of Color feminist theory as a lens of analysis provides a more specific and apt analysis of Hunger.

Considering Black and Women of Color feminist theory, and Lorde in particular, as a foundational element of Hunger, I turn again to Lorde who writes, “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde 2007, 38). Just as Lorde asserts, Hunger insists on the body, on what can be felt, as the avenue to what can be known, healed, free.

Black queer and trans scholars, like C. Riley Snorton and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, theorize about materiality and Black subjectivity, expanding upon the work of Black feminists like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Patricia Hill Collins. These scholars contend that Black subjectivity cannot be understood without an attention to the material. The experiences of Black subjects are shaped by access or lack thereof to material, by their bodies being treated as material, by what they create from the material that they can access; these experiences in turn craft their subjectivity. C. Riley Snorton reminds us of how the Black body has been reduced to and used as raw material (and the possibilities Black people created out of it) (Snorton 2017). Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley and Vanessa Agard-Jones make explicit the need to root our understanding of Black subjectivity, particularly for Black queer subjects, in the material and to not lose sight of that in the face of white queer theory that is less attentive to the material (Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley 2008; Agard-Jones 2012). Materiality is ever-present
across generations of Black and Black queer subjects, documenting what is undocumented through Eurocentric epistemologies that submerge the histories that craft Black subjectivity.

Gay’s tracing of her experiences through her body rather than tracing her body through experiences quite explicitly situates her memoir as an exploration of embodied knowledge. Rather than write in any chronological way, Gay structures her memoir through experiences of the body, moving around in time and space, sometimes spending entire chapters on bodies that are not her own as she writes, but still always rooted firmly in the material. This focus on the materiality of her body positions the body as a repository for affect and memory, marked by the fat, bruises, manipulations, and scars that bear witness to Gay’s life. As she writes, “In too many ways, the past is still with me. The past is written on my body. I carry it every single day” (Gay 2017, 41).

Although Gay writes that her “…life is split in two, cleaved not so neatly. There is the before and the after. Before I gained weight. After I gained weight. Before I was raped. After I was raped,” her memoir is not organized in that way (Gay 2017, 14). Rather, Gay presents her narrative primarily in the after and tells it through the ebbs and flows of her embodiment.

Throughout her memoir, Gay writes about the ways her body is marked by inhospitable environments. She writes:

My thighs have been bruised, more often than not, for the past twenty-four years. I cram my body into seats that are not meant to accommodate me, and an hour or two or more later, when I stand up and the blood rushes, the pain is intense. Sometimes, I’ll roll over in bed and wince and then remember, yes, I sat in a chair with arms. Other times, I catch a brief glance of myself in the mirror, maybe while wrapping a towel around my body, and I see the pattern of bruising inching from my waist down to my
midthigh. I see how physical spaces punish me for my unruly body. (Gay 2017, 202)

These material markers of strain on her body, bruising, blood rushing, and pain, are the ephemera that linger after experiences where her body does not fit within the confines of our social space, physical manifestations of both the physical and psycho-social incompatibility. Her body tells her story.

Vanessa Agard-Jones theorizes on the ephemeral knowledge of the material and the use of the material as evidence of queerness in “What the Sands Remember” by presenting the sands of the Caribbean, of Martinique in particular, as carrying both material and metaphysical queer meaning and history. In Agard-Jones’ theorization of the regionally specific queer experience in Martinique, sand is a material representation of what José Esteban Muñoz theorizes as ephemera, “the traces left behind from queer relations” (Agard-Jones 2012, 328). Agard-Jones challenges the narrative of queer invisibility that dominates the region by positing sand as bearing witness to the queerness of the region, as the ephemera, the queer evidence, that documents queer life. In a similar way, Gay’s descriptions of what is done to and made of her body materializes her theory of self. She writes, for instance, “People step on my feet. They brush and bump against me. They run straight into me. I am highly visible, but I am regularly treated like I am invisible. My body receives no respect or consideration or care in public spaces. My body is treated like a public space” (Gay 2017, 208). In this quote, Gay describes how people interact physically with her to make visible the meaning others make of her body. The ephemera, the knowledge and documentation of these social relations, then, can be understood as those bruises and scars that are left
behind. They assert her existence and experience of the world against the ways in which she is made or treated as invisible.

In *Hunger*, Roxane Gay writes about how her body is gendered (or not) in a way that echoes Black and Black trans studies. C. Riley Snorton builds on Hortense Spillers’ theorization of captive flesh and the ungendering of Black women to argue that our current system of sex and gender is born out of the context of chattel slavery and the Black flesh it produced. Within this sex/gender system, Blackness is rendered illegible and mutable: queer. When Gay writes “My fat body empowers people to erase my gender. I am a woman, but they do not see me as a woman,” she adds a dimension to the ungendering of Black women’s bodies (Gay 2017, 256). Through her own experiences living in her body, Gay tells us how this ungendering shows up in her interactions. If we follow Spillers and Snorton, it may be that the ungendering and excess ascribed to Gay’s body as a young Black girl is part of the complex racialized and gendered logics that emboldened those boys to assault her. Gay gestures towards this theorization when she recounts her rape in *Hunger*. As she writes about the boys who assaulted her, she says, “I wasn’t a girl to them. I was a thing, flesh and girl bones with which they could amuse themselves [emphasis added]” (Gay 2017, 42). As Gay describes, perceiving her as “flesh and girl bones,” Gay is denied humanity and refused agency. Her body is no longer her own but rather becomes flesh to be manipulated.

The manipulation of bodies rendered flesh appears in Snorton’s theorization of the ways Black people have been rendered “raw material” in the construction of the modern world, what modernity comes to be defined against. In that process, Black people found ways to use the material of their bodies to create new possibilities for
themselves, finding escape and performing freedom through the material of their bodies. In this context, Gay sought to protect herself from the dehumanization she experienced, finding potential through her flesh, building upon it to create what felt like escape but arriving still at an embodiment marked by excess. After her assault, Gay searches for a way to heal. She writes:

> What I did know was food, so I ate because I understood that I could take up more space. I could become more solid, stronger, safer. I understood, from the way I saw people stare at fat people, from the way I stared at fat people, that too much weight was undesirable. If I was undesirable, I could keep more hurt away. (Gay 2017, 15)

Gay understood fatness as inherently undesirable, a product of the culture she was raised in that taught her that to be fat was to be deviant, to be less. At twelve years old, her body was something she could control, something she could change to avoid the kind of suffering she was afraid to feel again. Describing this experience further, Gay writes about the body she now inhabits, focusing again on the flesh and material of her body:

> This is the body I made. I am corpulent—rolls of brown flesh, arms and thighs and belly. The fat eventually had nowhere to go, so it created its own paths around my body. I am riven with stretch marks, pockets of cellulite on my massive thighs. The fat created a new body, one that shamed me but one that made me feel safe, and more than anything, I desperately needed to feel safe. I needed to feel like a fortress, impermeable. I did not want anything or anyone to touch. (Gay 2017, 16)

In a similar fashion as the bruises and pain that serve as ephemeral traces of her body’s incongruence with the world around her, Gay’s fat, stretch marks, and cellulite are physical markers of her childhood abuse. They carry the knowledge of her past while simultaneously being subject to racialized histories of fatness. Despite her best efforts to protect herself through the manipulation of her body, Gay’s fat body continued to be marked by racialized and gendered discourses that cause her harm.
Explaining the societal view of the fat body, Gay writes, “The obese body is the expression of excess, decadence, and weakness. The obese body is a site of massive infection. It is a losing battleground in a war between willpower and food and metabolism in which you are the ultimate loser” (Gay 2017, 122). In her book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia*, Sabrina Strings writes about the development of fatphobia out of both the denigration and subjugation of black women’s bodies and the policing of racial and gendered boundaries for white women. Thinness as the ideal aesthetic for women formed in the eighteenth century through the intersection of “religious revivals, the expansion of racial theorizing” and an influx in immigration from migrants “feared to be part-Negroid” (Strings 2019, 122). As Strings documents, enforcing thin ideals on white women served as a way to mark white women as racially superior to the excessive, gluttonous, racial Other. Black women’s bodies, rendered flesh as Spillers and Snorton describe, “became legible, a form of ‘text’ from which racial superiority and inferiority were read” (Strings 2019, 67). Biopolitical tools that created a normalized and ideal weight were targeted towards white women who held the responsibility of propagating the superiority of the white race and maintained the oppression of Black women and racial Others through an association with laziness, gluttony, irrationality and “an unbridled desire to meet the demands of the flesh at the expense of cultivating higher pursuits” (Strings 2019, 84). For Strings, fatness and fatphobia are intrinsically racialized cultural constructions.

The racialized and gendered elements of fatness are visible in tropes historically assigned to Black women. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, the images of the mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and Jezebel demonstrate the “four prevailing interpretations
of Black womanhood [that] form a nexus of elite white male interpretations of Black female sexuality and fertility” (Collins 2000, 84). These images are in conversation with the history that Strings writes about and police racial and gendered boundaries along with fatphobia. As Collins describes, the “mammy” image is represented as “overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features—in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for white men” (Collins 2000, 84). Fatness, in this context, is deployed to mark a lack of sexual desirability for white men, in particular, further defining and maintaining racial boundaries. As Collins writes, these images serve as “ideological justifications” for racial, gendered, and economic oppression (Collins 2000, 84). In Hunger, Gay illustrates, through the story of her body and her perception that fatness would be the key to safety from men, how racialized and gendered logics that underpin fatphobia persist today and continue to mark her body and bodies like hers.

(My) Body, her Body, the Body

Thinking back to the title of Gay’s memoir, Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body, I recognize Gay’s use of the parenthesis surrounding “My” as indexing her relationship to her body and how she attends to her body within the particular form of her memoir. As I mentioned earlier, Gay’s memoir follows the narratives of her body, and at times, narratives of bodies not her own. It is in these chapters where Gay steps back from the material of her body and towards the material of the bodies of others that I begin to understand at least one of the purposes of this parenthetical. In the second chapter of Hunger, Gay writes:

This is a memoir of (my) body because, more often than not, stories of bodies like mine are ignored or dismissed or derided. People see bodies like mine and make their assumptions. They think they know the why of my body. They do not. This is not a story of triumph, but this is a story that demands to be told and deserves to be heard. (Gay 2017, 5)
In this excerpt, Gay tells us about how her body and its story is taken from her, the ways her body “is treated like a public space” (Gay 2017, 208). For Gay, her body often is not her own, the “my” or her own claim of her body is an afterthought, nonessential information in the sentences that construct her story. The parenthesis in the title gesture towards the conditional nature of her possession over her own body but, unlike grammatically correct uses of the parenthesis, when the “my” is removed, the sentence is no longer complete. Although her body is taken from her, the story of her body is incomplete without recognizing her agency, her desire, her hunger.

The public spectacle of Gay’s body, and of the fat body, is elaborated throughout section III of *Hunger*. In this section, Gay spends 12 chapters writing about the fat body as a matter of public debate. She writes first about the ways her body becomes a problem her family needs to fix and then moves outwards towards cultural critic, spending several chapters on reality TV shows, weight loss programs, celebrities, and other musings on the discourse surrounding the “obesity epidemic”. In one of these chapters, Gay writes:

> When you’re overweight, your body becomes a matter of public record in many respects. Your body is constantly and prominently on display. People project assumed narratives onto your body and are not at all interested in the truth of your body, whatever that truth might be… This commentary is often couched as concern, as people only having your best interests at heart. They forget that you are a person. You are your body, nothing more, and your body should damn well become less. (Gay 2017, 120–21)

Gay’s observations here about her body and the fat body as public record, as dehumanized, excessive, and on display provides further detail on the parenthetical “my” and extends the use of her body as material onto other bodies similar to hers. Here, Gay traces public reactions and commentary of bodies denied agency and
provides essential context to her own story. For Gay, especially as a writer who specializes in cultural commentary, it is not possible to fully tell her story without revealing the discourses that shape her experiences. The story of her body is her own, but it is not just hers. By tracing the material of her fat body, she also tells the story of other bodies like hers, ones that are bound up in the same discourses of thinness and health that dehumanize Gay. The commentary people make about her body that she mentions are “couched as concern” echo Sonya Renee Taylor’s sentiments in *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*. Discussing the ways strangers pathologize and make comments about the health of fat people on the internet, Taylor writes:

> Given that we can make no accurate assessment of any individual’s health based simply on their weight (or photo on social media), it is evident that such behavior is not really about the person’s health but more likely about the ways in which we expect other bodies to conform to our standards and beliefs about what a body should or should not look like. (Taylor 2018, 21)

For Taylor, the public commentary on the fat body is about disciplining the excess of the fat body, it is a reflection of a culture that requires bodies to submit to standardization. In a Foucauldian sense, shaming becomes a biopolitical tool to create standardized, docile bodies (Foucault 2003). This becomes all the more evident in media portrayals of fat bodies, as Gay comments in section III of *Hunger*.

> Expanding on her critique of reality TV shows that aim to “fix” fat bodies, Gay, analyzing *My 600-lb Life*, writes “this show loves to gratuitously display the fat body, all the excess, the mounds of flesh. The surgeries are graphic, and we see insides, globules of fat being shoved aside by medical instruments, as the obese body is medically brought to heel” (Gay 2017, 133). Notably, Gay is not saying that this
gratuitous display brings healing but rather brings the body to heel, brings the body under control. Health is not the aim of these reality shows that want to lessen the excess of the fat body. Writing about another one of these reality TV shows, *The Biggest Loser*, Gay notes, “This is a show about unruly bodies that must be disciplined by any means necessary, so that through that discipline, the obese might become more acceptable members of society” (Gay 2017, 128). It may seem unnecessary to spend so much time, an entire section of her memoir, shifting from an account of her body to a cultural critique of TV shows and weight loss programs, but comments like this one about the need for “unruly bodies” to become “more acceptable members of society” reveal so much about what it means to exist in Gay’s body and how these cultural logics shape her life. Sonya Renee Taylor writes:

> Living in a female body, a Black body, an aging body, a fat body, a body with mental illness is to awaken daily to a planet that expects a certain set of apologies to already live on our tongues. There is a level of “not enough” or “too much” sewn into these strands of difference. (Taylor 2018, 11)

Taylor, like Gay, makes explicit the ways meaning is mapped onto bodies and how that meaning tells us how to value ourselves and others. In structuring *Hunger* as an exploration of body, Gay centers her embodiment, her body as a site of knowledge and meaning making, her body as a standpoint from which to understand the logics of the world around her, and bodies like hers as shaped and impacted by these logics.

“Mine is, simply, a true story”

**Being Gay and/or Being gay**

Throughout her memoir, Gay complicates the one-dimensional narratives circulated about what it means to live in a body like hers, what it means to exist as a fat, Black, queer, woman. By writing about her life, she refuses the flattening of it and allows
for contradiction and complexity. Gay’s memoir exemplifies what Avery Gordon calls “complex personhood” as Gay writes her narrative and highlights, using her present timeline’s self-reflective capabilities, the ways she is “beset by contradiction, and recognizing and misrecognizing” herself (Gordon 2008, 4).

Although, today, Gay considers herself bisexual and is engaged to a woman, when she was in her twenties, many years after suffering the sexual trauma that changes her life, Roxane Gay first came out to her family as gay. Her journey to identification and recognition was a long one that is complicated by her childhood sexual trauma, her relationship to her family, and her misconceptions about what it means to be gay. Reflecting on this experience she writes:

Saying I was gay wasn’t true, but it wasn’t a lie. I was and am attracted to women. I find them rather intriguing. At the time, I didn’t know I could be attracted to both women and men and be part of this world. And, in those early days, I enjoyed dating women and having sex with them, but also, I was terrified of men. The truth is always messy. I wanted to do everything in my power to remove the possibility of being with men from my life. I failed at that, but I told myself I could be gay and I wouldn’t be hurt ever again. I needed to never be hurt again. (Gay 2017, 236–37)

In this quote we can see how Gay’s coming out narrative disrupts Eurocentric notions of what it means to come out. In Hunger, “gay” is no longer a stable identity category and “coming out” does not necessarily tell an absolute truth about the self. Rather, “gay” becomes a complex space of identification and “disidentification” (Muñoz 1999). In this excerpt, Gay allows herself to sit in this contested space with her desires and her traumas and comes to an identification that is wrought with contradiction and exactly right for her in that moment.

I first turn to Ann Cvetkovich’s formulation of sexual trauma and queerness in An Archive of Feelings to explore the implications of Gay’s account of her initial lesbian
identification. As Cvetkovich details, the cultural discourse that links lesbianism and sexual trauma, which suggests that sexual trauma causes lesbianism, often leads to an overcorrection, a distancing of women’s accounts of sexual trauma from their lesbian experience and identity. Cvetkovich argues that the adamant separation of queerness and sexual trauma comes from the implicit association of queerness as the negative outcome of sexual trauma (Cvetkovich 2003, 91). Her formulation, instead, urges us to consider how queerness can be a positive and welcome result of sexual trauma. To view queerness through this lens, then, attends to the therapeutic process that may be involved in coming to queerness. Cvetkovich writes:

As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the welcome effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer. I introduce the word queer to suggest the unpredictable connections between sexual abuse and its effects, to name a connection while refusing determination or causality. Queerness militates against the neatness of a heterosexual/homosexual binarism that might, for instance, indicate that a change of object choice could heal the trauma of sexual abuse. (Cvetkovich 2003, 90)

For Cvetkovich, lesbian cultural production is a medium through which a deep and complex reckoning with trauma takes place, one that allows for the often-messy relationship between sexual trauma and queerness and that refuses the pathologizing narrative that usually accompanies it, particularly for lesbians. As she writes, queerness refuses the binary logic that underpins the pathologizing view that a women’s brokenness from sexual trauma causes her lesbianism. In this way, I view Hunger as asserting a similar kind of queer politic as the lesbian public culture that Cvetkovich analyzes, one that rejects a fixed, linear logic of healing.

In her memoir, Gay makes no effort to distance her understanding of her queerness from her experience of childhood sexual abuse. In fact, Gay makes a point to
write about how the trajectory of her queerness was linked to her rape. When she initially came out as “gay,” despite knowing she experienced attraction to men, Gay writes about how, for her, being a lesbian was as much about being with women as it was about being distanced from men. In her twenties, when she first starts dating women, she also takes up various other nonnormative sexual practices. She writes, for instance, of learning of the BDSM community:

In IRC chat rooms, I talked to people in the BDSM community, and I learned about safe, sane, and consensual sexual encounters, where power was exchanged, but you could have a safe word to make things stop when you wanted them to stop. I learned that there were people who would take the right kind of no as no, and that was powerful, intoxicating. I wanted to know so much more about safe ways to say no. (Gay 2017, 91–92)

Here, the language of BDSM, much like her initial decision to date women, becomes a way for her to assert control over her body and her safety. In this excerpt, Gay recognizes the healing potential of BDSM in its communicative exchanges of power. As Gay reflects on her queerness, she draws a connection between her trauma, her queerness, and what Cvetkovich refers to as the “sibling perversions” of queerness, in Gay’s case BDSM (Cvetkovich 2003, 89). These connections are ones that most accounts of trauma would avoid or refuse because the non-normativity of these sexual practices further distances the victim from a normative path of healing and performance of subjectivity. In Hunger, however, Gay allows these complexities to exist fully and, much like Cvetkovich, deploys them as a mode for her own healing. Of course, as Gay recognizes and recounts in her memoir, being solely with women could not actually protect her from harm. With this recognition, Gay invokes a queer politic that rejects the binary logic that would place lesbianism as either the consequence of sexual assault or the solution to further violence. If the conventional, medical, pathological, path to
healing, as I will return to in the conclusion, entails returning to a normative, heterosexual, able-bodied destination, then Gay writes a different methodology for queer healing, one that allows for queerness to appear in all of its fluidity and messiness.

The fluidity of Gay’s gay and then bisexual identity also provides an intimate look at what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification” (Muñoz 1999). As Muñoz describes, identification is a complex process, especially for queers of color who are marginalized at multiple axis. Identification, for these subjects, can mean assimilating to dominant ideology, resisting it entirely, or disidentifying. Muñoz writes that “disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999, 11). Notably, this tactic of self-making is one critical to queer of color critique, a field of study that has its roots in Black and women of color feminist theory (Ferguson 2003). As an integral component of queer of color critique, disidentification serves as a tool for political, theoretical, self, and utopic projects. Disidentification allows subjects who don’t fit into “any one discourse of minority subjectivity,” queers of color in particular, to imagine and construct “an expansive queer life-world” by using the codes of dominant ideology as “raw material” in this construction (Muñoz 1999, 31–34).

When Gay came out as gay, the language of identification available to her was incompatible with her subjectivity. Gay, as a Black, fat, Haitian woman and victim of sexual violence, exists outside the dominant imprint, as Muñoz would say, of a gay subject (Muñoz 2009). As a victim of sexual abuse, one still struggling with the pain of this trauma, a process I will revisit later on, desire was never meant to be within reach. Dominant categories of sexual identity could not provide access to a clear truth so
disidentifying with the term “gay,” molding it into something resembling her own desire, allowed for a space to further develop her own subjectivity. In this process of disidentification, Gay reveals how LGBTQ identity categories are fluid and self-defined and how the process of coming out is not always the revelation of some grand Truth about the self. Rather, Gay constructs herself and her identity using the tools, information, and language she has available to her.

Just as, for a variety of reasons, gay identity was an imperfect fit for Gay and coming out was not the perceived confession of her deepest self, claiming a gay identity and “coming out” is not necessarily the desired progression of identity for queer people in the Caribbean and Latin America. In his book *Tropics of Desire*, José Quiroga reminds us that U.S. American and European projects of imperialism and globalization have created and maintained conditions that both silence and erase the queerness of the region. In an attempt to situate themselves as modern nations, Caribbean and Latin American countries often double-down on colonizer imposed, heteronormative and patriarchal ideals in their nation building projects, masking, but not removing, queer desire in the region. Queer subjects exist, then, as “open secrets,” to be decoded, submerged from public record through nationalistic projects and their own rejection of Eurocentric LGBTQ labels, ones that would require a loud and proud identification and make them visible to the global North (Quiroga 2000). In today’s climate of shameless...

---

2 For more on this and decoding queerness in Latin America and the Caribbean see Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s *Thieving Sugar and Ezili’s Mirrors*, Gloria Wekker’s *The Politics of Passion*, David Murray’s *Flaming Souls*, Rosamnd S. King’s *Island Bodies*, Jafari S. Allen’s *¡Venceremos?*, Marcia Ochoa’s *Queen for a Day*, and Lionel Cantú’s *The Sexuality of Migration*. 
“pinkwashing”\textsuperscript{3}, the perception of the Caribbean and Latin America as hostile spaces for LGBTQ people reinforces racist tropes about the region as backwards, underdeveloped, and in need of intervention, tropes that harken back to the race science that defined modernity against the Black body (Snorton 2017; Strings 2019). These histories provide context to the stereotypes that mark Caribbean and Latin American diasporic communities in the United States, stereotypes that cast these communities as especially averse to queer desire. The simplistic and racist narratives that paint Haiti, in particular, as backwards and incapable of development are, as Haitian scholar Gina Ulysse writes, “actually reproductions of narratives and stereotypes dating back to the nineteenth century, when, in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, the new free black republic that ended slavery and disrupted the order of things in the world became a geopolitical pariah and our humanity was disavowed” (Ulysse 2015, 61). As Ulysse recognizes, these tropes are deeply entangled with globalization and the anti-blackness that is foundational to our modern world. As a second-generation immigrant, born in the United States to Haitian-born parents, Gay is socialized in the context of these histories of U.S. imperialism and racism. Despite being raised by Haitian parents and living as a Haitian American, she is not immune to the messaging about Haiti and the Caribbean that surrounds her, especially in the white towns and boarding school where she grew up.

The influence of these tropes that cast Caribbean people as backwards and homophobic becomes apparent in \textit{Hunger} when Gay writes about the relationship

\textsuperscript{3} In “Rethinking Homonationalism” (2013), Jasbir Puar describes pinkwashing, in relation to Israel’s occupation of Palestine, as “Israel’s promotion of a LGBTQ-friendly image to reframe the occupation of Palestine in terms of civilizational narratives measured by (sexual) modernity” (Puar 2013, 337).
between her coming out process and her perceptions of her own immigrant family. Gay explains that her decision to come out as gay served as an attempt to create distance between herself and her immigrant parents who she believed would reject her and her queerness. Struggling to heal from the trauma of her childhood and still hiding that trauma from her family, Gay writes:

I didn’t know what to tell them. I couldn’t say, “I am completely broken down and losing my mind because something terrible happened to me,” though that was the truth. I thought about their faith and their culture. I told them the one thing that I thought might finally sever the bond between us. It’s not that I didn’t want my parents in my life, but I did not know how to be broken and be the daughter they thought they knew. I blurted out, “I’m gay.” This too shames me, not my queerness, but how little faith I put in them and how warped my understanding of queerness was. (Gay 2017, 236)

In this excerpt, Gay struggles with her own motives for coming out. Gay’s perception of her parents is rooted in assumptions about their faith and culture, she assumes that they will reject her and is then confronted with the reality of their love and support—the “little faith” she had of them (Gay 2017, 236). Gay writes that she believed and internalized a narrative about her parents that is rooted in these racist notions that paint the Caribbean and Caribbean immigrants as innately and exhaustively homophobic. In her book *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in the Caribbean*, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley highlights the coded same-sex eroticism in Caribbean women’s writings. Through close readings of these writings, Tinsley reveals that, in contrast to perceptions that the region is particularly homophobic or that queer desire does not exist in the Caribbean, queer desire pervades the region (Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley 2010). In Gay’s parents’ acceptance and her mother’s assertion that she “knew,” we see a glimpse of this culture of submerged, coded queer desire (Gay 2017, 237). There is power in Gay sharing her story of Haitian immigrant parents who love her and “welcome
the women [she] love[s] in their home” (Gay 2017, 237). In these short anecdotes, she challenges centuries of imperialism while speaking to the realities of socialization and assimilation in which children of immigrants internalize the stereotypes and assumptions made of their own communities.

On being the Good daughter: Reconciling with respectability

The adjective “good” appears 126 times in Hunger (Gay 2017). Throughout Hunger we read about good news, good memories, good food. Gay is, and sometimes is not, a good daughter, a good Catholic daughter, a good Haitian daughter, a good student. In Gay’s life, there are good boys who grow into good men who are actually not so good at all but certainly say and are told so. Again, and again, Gay returns to this good/bad dichotomy. As a rhetorical strategy, this choice of adjective gestures toward the logics of childhood, the kind of simplistic, either-or logics that lead to choices that in hindsight, with time, experience, and perhaps the writing of this memoir, Gay can understand as misguided. There is something profound in the simplicity of being “good,” a fairly nondescript choice of adjective and one which Gay provides very little elaboration. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, her message actually becomes quite clear. The broadness and generality of this repeated adjective strikes me as a deliberate choice, one that illustrates how pervasive discourses are that qualify who is, and is not, a deserving, valuable subject, how easily these discourses are taken up, even by children, and how seamlessly they inform what and who we value, ourselves included. Here, I return again to the insight of Audre Lorde, who in her essay “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” writes:

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/ subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/ inferior. In a society where the good is
defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. (Lorde 2007, 114)

*Hunger* illustrates just how this simplistic opposition, this devaluing, impacts her understanding of self as a child of immigrants and informed how she processed and responded to her rape.

The good/bad framework Gay clings to throughout *Hunger* is all too familiar to those of us who are impacted by migration, particularly in a U.S. American context. The “good” immigrant is an often-evoked figure by immigrant rights activists who seek to justify the value of particular immigrants who aspire to and attempt to approximate normative citizenship. Writing about the figure of the “illegal alien,” Lisa Marie Cacho reminds us that “In the era of American neoliberalism, social value and moral behavior are interpreted through and evaluated on economic terms” (Cacho 2012, 19). Cacho goes on to consider how this plays out in the valuing of the productive, economic capacity of immigrants as rationale for their deservingness of citizenship. This framework may also be recognizable to many Black Americans within “the politics of respectability” or “respectability politics,” a politic that requires marginalized individuals to perform the heteronormative, white, Christian values of the nation as a strategy to attain inclusion, belonging, citizenship (Higginbotham 1994, 187; Cacho 2012, 5). In *Hunger*, Gay’s reference to being a “good girl” folds in all of these messages about how to achieve personhood, how to be a deserving subject. Snorton, Spillers, and Taylor all in varying ways remind us that to be Black, to be a Black woman, to be Other, is to exist outside of conceptions of the human, how, then, does a young Black, Haitian, girl seek to create herself?
One of the few times Gay provides a description for what she means by “good” is in her description of what it means to be a Haitian daughter. For Gay, being a Haitian daughter came with its set of expectations, ones informed by culture, history, and the gaze of the global North. Addressing what it means to her to be Haitian American, Gay writes:

The only way I know of moving through the world is as a Haitian American, a Haitian daughter. A Haitian daughter is a good girl. She is respectful, studious, hardworking. She never forgets the importance of her heritage. We are part of the first free black nation in the Western Hemisphere, my brothers and I were often told. No matter how far we have fallen, when it matters most, we rise. Haitians love the food from our island, but they judge gluttony. I suspect this rises out of the poverty for which Haiti is too often and too narrowly known. (Gay 2017, 55)

In this excerpt, Gay’s connection to her Haitian identity becomes clear and we see that characterization of the “good” girl, to which she is particularly attached, appear again. Importantly, in this paragraph, Gay reveals the ways being Haitian, particularly for her outside of Haiti, necessitates a response to the one-dimensional narrative about Haiti’s poverty espoused in the global North. Moreover, the circulation of a one-dimensional narrative is prevalent within Haiti as well. Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes of the pitfalls of the opposite narrative to that of Haiti as an impoverished nation: Haitian exceptionalism. For Trouillot, to insist on Haiti’s exceptionalism, its uniqueness, its resilience, obscures both the specificity of Haiti’s socio-political context and the ways it circulates within a global context (Trouillot 1990). In this excerpt, Gay reflects on the two sides to the narratives about Haiti: a country marked by its resilience and exceptionalism and an impoverished nation. For Gay, to be Haitian American, then, is to portray a positive image of Haiti and its people, to fulfill the duties of a Haitian daughter
as a “good girl,” and to always be conscious of the simplistic Haitian narrative that circulates around her.

After Gay is raped by several boys in the woods, she could no longer fit herself into the implicit rulebook of goodness she had internalized, shaped through racialized, gendered, and sexualized messages about how to achieve value as a Black, Haitian American girl. When Gay recalls her experience of sexual abuse as a child, she writes, “I was disgusting because I had allowed disgusting things to be done to me. I was not a girl. I was less than human. I was no longer a good girl and I was going to hell.” (Gay 2017, 46). She goes on in a later chapter, writing that she “became less and less the good girl [she] had been” from this experience (Gay 2017, 51). At twelve, Gay feels that her victimization is a reflection of her value, her own goodness rather than that of the boys who abused her or the society that allows it. The use of “good” here is both heartbreaking and telling. As a child, she thinks in these binaries. For her, there is good and there is bad, no in between. The reader, though, is meant to understand that it is not Gay who was at fault, not Gay’s goodness that should be in question but rather the boys who abused her. Now, Gay’s use of “good” becomes clearer: a composite of the racialized, gendered messages that we receive, even in childhood, that tell us how to behave, how to be, in order to be valuable, deserving.

Although Gay believed that she was no longer “good” after her experience of sexual abuse, she felt that she needed to keep up the appearance of being a good girl. Early on in Hunger as Gay recounts the sexual trauma she experienced as a child, Gay writes, “When it was all over, I pushed my bike home and I pretended to be the daughter my parents knew, the good girl, the straight-A student. I don’t know how I hid
what happened, but I knew how to be a good girl…” (Gay 2017, 44). In her childhood attempt to prove her own worth, to become the respectable and deserving citizen, she remained silent about her rape. Collapsing all of the ways in which she was socialized into the simple good/bad framework, Gay challenges the reader to identify their own value system and how those values were shaped.

The significance of the generalized “good” in Hunger becomes all the more apparent when Gay refers to her abusers using the adjective. In response to her parents fear of her desire to go to New York University due to the danger of the city, Gay writes, “…I knew where danger really lurked—in the woods behind well-manicured exclusive suburban neighborhoods, at the hands of good boys from good families” (Gay 2017, 86). Gay’s depiction of “good” boys and families speaks to Cacho’s description of neoliberal social and moral value as dependent on economic value. The juxtaposition between the violence, abuse, the bad of the boys and Gay’s use of “good boys,” “good families,” and the implied “good” neighborhood, serves to make the ways proximity to wealth, whiteness, and heterosexuality mark these people as socially and morally superior, regardless of their actual behavior. As Gay continues to integrate these critiques about the racist, sexist, classist value systems ingrained in her as a child, she articulates a politic that disrupts logics of respectability in favor of an approach that allows her to be a full subject, without the concession of any part of her.

By the final chapter of Hunger, Gay has elucidated the good/bad framework she was so influenced by as a child and has developed her vehement critique that considers this framework to be deeply entangled with her trauma. As she focuses on what healing looks like to her in this chapter, being “good” takes on a new meaning. Gay writes, “I
was a mess and then I grew up and away from that terrible day and became a different kind of mess—a woman doing the best she can to love well and be loved well, to live well and be human and good" (Gay 2017, 302) In this final chapter, Gay describes her healing through the reclamation of her humanness, her goodness, and her messiness. In this new context, “good” is characterized by Gay’s own humanity rather than in opposition to her being. Hunger offers Gay’s narrative as both critique of the structures of power that produced her trauma and as a refusal to be excluded from personhood, messiness and all.

**Toward Futures of Hunger and Healing**

Throughout Hunger, Gay makes visible, challenges, and works to heal from false dichotomies that value Eurocentric epistemological frameworks of citizenship. As Roxane Gay narrates her journey of healing from her childhood rape, she subverts the broken/ fixed dichotomy of survivorhood. Gay gestures to this even in her preference of label, writing that she prefers the label victim to survivor precisely because the label of survivor, to her, indicates some kind of unscarred, triumphant endpoint (Gay 2017, 20–21). In this section, I at times refer to “survivorhood” rather than victimhood, despite Gay’s preference, because I am situating my analysis of Gay’s memoir within Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s critique of “survivorhood” and the “survivor-industrial complex” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 229). This is not to minimize Gay’s decision to use the term victim to describe her experience but rather to connect her experience, and her decision, to Piepzna-Samarasinha’s analysis. Piepzna-Samarasinha describes themselves as “a queer disabled femme writer, organizer, performance artist and educator of Burgher/Tamil Sri Lankan and Irish/Roma ascent” and has written, in addition to the book of essays I cite in this section, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability*
Justice, their own memoir Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home (“About Leah” 2020). Piepzna-Samarasinha’s background makes them particularly attune to what it means to write a memoir as a victim or survivor of childhood sexual abuse, making their critiques of the framework of survivorhood particularly relevant to Roxane Gay’s Hunger.

In their book Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes that the broken/ cured binary of survivorhood “stops us from being able to imagine survivor futures where we are thriving but not cured” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 232). For Piepzna-Samarasinha, this dichotomy creates the unachievable, yet highly visible, “good” survivor who has overcome their abuse and is cured of all lasting affects while casting all others as the invisible “bad” survivors who are still broken. In the final chapter of Hunger, Gay reflects on her own experience with healing from her assault. Refusing to fold herself into either one of these predetermined narratives, Gay writes:

I am as healed as I am ever going to be. I have accepted that I will never be the girl I could have been if, if, if. I am still haunted. I still have flashbacks that are triggered by the most unexpected things. I don’t like being touched by people with whom I do not share specific kinds of intimacy. I am suspicious of groups of men, particularly when I am alone. I have nightmares, though with far less frequency. I will never forgive the boys who raped me and I am a thousand percent comfortable with that because forgiving them will not free me from anything. I don’t know if I am happy, but I can see and feel that happiness is well within my reach.

But.

I am not the same scared girl that I was. I have let the right ones in. I have found my voice. (Gay 2017, 302–3)

In this quote, Gay writes about healing outside of the “mythic ‘cured place’” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 231). She writes about the ways that her assault still haunts her and
impacts her daily life. She is not healed in any absolute sense but is living and surviving in imperfect ways every day. Gay’s account of her own healing echoes what Piepzna-Samarasinha says about survivor narratives, that they are about “all our stories of every moment we survive…all the homemade ways we make it” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 167).

As Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, this dichotomy of survivorhood refuses the complexity with which both Gay and Piepzna-Samarasinha describe their experience of healing and is rooted in ableism. In their book Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice, Piepzna-Samarasinha narrates a patronizing experience they had with a therapist whose approach to healing from childhood sexual abuse was squarely within this broken/cured binary (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 226). As Piepzna-Samarasinha describes, this framework of survivorhood “has deep roots in ableist ideas that when there’s something wrong, there’s either cured or broken and nothing in between, and certainly nothing valuable in inhabiting a bodymind that’s disabled in any way” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 226). Much like Gay, Piepzna-Samarasinha frames their experience of childhood sexual abuse as something that they do not resolve, pack up, and leave behind, but as an experience that has deeply altered who they are and that they will likely never fully move on from. This connection between the dichotomy of survivorhood and ableism opens another line of analysis, one in which those “futures where we are thriving” that Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about are already existing within these complex narratives of victimization and survival (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 232).
*Hunger* is a project of memory, it explores what Gay’s memories mean to her, how she experiences and explains them now, and, importantly, how they appear on and through her body. This process of writing and remembering abuse counters what Piepzna-Samarasinha describes as the “traditional ideas of survivorhood” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 234). Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

> Traditional ideas of survivorhood think of “remembering” as a time-limited process that happens upon recovery of abuse memories and then is over. But in another survivor universe, we are continually expanding—we are always remembering and remembering again, and thinking about what our wounding means. We are mining our survivor experiences for knowledge.

(Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 234)

In *Hunger*, Gay writes this expanding universe. Her memoir is her own universe of knowledge, desire, contradiction, and healing born of this experience of victimization, one that is still very much integral to her understanding of self. What Piepzna-Samarasinha refers to as “mining our survivor experiences for knowledge” describes the embodied knowledge I posit Gay is exploring through this memoir of her body (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 234). In *Hunger*, Gay reveals and refuses the dichotomies that have shaped her hunger, her unfulfilled desires, and, in doing so, finds ways to live and thrive in her body.

Drawing a connection between *Hunger* and disability justice provides insight into Gay’s theorization of healing not only because Piepzna-Samarasinha’s particular interventions form a victim/survivor centered framework for reading *Hunger* but also because Gay herself begins to draw this connection in one of her final chapters. Gay writes, “I don’t know if fat is a disability, but my size certainly compromises my ability to be in certain spaces” (Gay 2017, 297). A disability justice framework, one that makes visible the broken/cured binary, reveals a key intervention in *Hunger*: there is, in fact,
much to be gained and known in and through queer fat, Black, and disabled bodies. The disabling affects and effects of living in a society averse to fat bodies informs Gay’s feminism and as she describes, makes her more empathetic of how other people’s bodies move through the world (Gay 2017, 297). Here, we are brought back to Gay’s focus on the material of her body, the way her body exists in the world. Again, it is through an attention to the experience and memory of the body that knowledge about the self and about the world emerges. In *Hunger*, Gay not only mines her experience of victimization for knowledge, as Piepzna-Samarasinha calls for, but mines her body for knowledge, for her truth.

Futures where victims and survivors, and Black women, and queer people, and immigrants, and fat bodies thrive without being cured of their non-normativity exist in the here and now, in *Hunger, Dirty River*, and in all the other narratives of “the homemade ways we make it” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 167). Just as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha refuses to be cured or fixed if it “means being bleached of memory, untaught by what I have learned through this miracle of surviving,” Gay writes to have us “See what [she] hunger[s] for and what [her] truth has allowed [her] to create” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 239; Gay 2017, 304). *Hunger*, what a queer Black woman choose to create and share with us, is a glimpse at a beautifully complex, contradictory, queer, disabled, fat, Black migrant future of the right now.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUDING IN THE BEGINNING

In an attempt to play with form, as Hernández and Gay do, I conclude by returning to the opening of this thesis. The epigraph to Chapter 1 contained two quotes: the first by the late Toni Morrison and the second by the late Audre Lorde. In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Morrison states: “Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (Morrison 1993). It may seem odd for me to begin a thesis about memoir, about women’s truths, with Morrison’s call to “make up a story,” especially when memoirs, and women’s truths, are so often disparaged with the very assertion that they are made-up stories. However, I interpret Morrison’s call as a push to re-imagine and redefine the real—a call to which these memoirs, I believe, have certainly responded.

As Morrison writes in her essay “Sites of Memory,” imagination, fiction, and memory are necessarily entangled. It is “a kind of literary archaeology,” she writes, to excavate and imagine the unwritten interiorities of Black and otherwise marginalized people (Morrison 1995, 92). For marginalized people, whose stories and histories are not written, whose knowledge is denied, whose personhood is rejected, narrative both necessitates imagination and creates the self. Our truths are products of imagination because they are not and cannot be documented or told through Eurocentric modes of knowing. To write our narratives is to document, against all impossibility, our subjectivities, our truths, our selves.

Morrison’s words speak to the powerful self-making project that writing one’s narrative entails and, through their rearrangement and redefinition of form, time, memory, knowledge, and truth, Daisy Hernández and Roxane Gay do just that. In A
*A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, Hernández redefines genealogies of knowledge, tracing her memory through thread to form the fabric of herself. In the beginning pages of her memoir, Hernández brings the fluidity of memory into view. She writes of a memory of her kindergarten teacher and pauses her story to address details she misremembered when she originally wrote the memory. She writes that “there are, however, missteps in memory, places where emotion has distorted people, sights, even cuerpos [bodies],” but does not alter the telling of that memory (Hernández 2014, 4). In that scene, Hernández continues to write her kindergarten teacher as she remembers her rather than how she was. Commenting on this moment in the memoir in an interview, Hernández states:

I think every memoirist has that moment when they realize that their memory is flawed, in a very visceral way…you realize that you are so attached to the memory, it’s not only a memory. But I was so attached to the way I thought about my kindergarten teacher, how she looked—her physical embodiment…for me, in terms of sculpting the memories…essays and memoir allow you to do that, take a step back to speak directly to the reader, you know? And to acknowledge: I’m making some choices here as a writer. I could have gone back and made her androgynous person be part of the narrative but that wasn’t how I remembered it and it was not part of the fabric of how I went forward in my life thinking about her… ("Our Shared Language," an Interview with Daisy Hernandez 2015)

In this interview, Hernández’s remarks about memory echo Morrison’s call to “make up a story.” For Hernández, it is her mis-recollection, the ways her memory fails her, that creates the most real, if imagined, narrative of herself. What matters is not what was documented in the photographs she found, but rather how that fallible memory, that imagined truth, shaped her sense of self. Writing a memoir necessitated making up her story about herself, creating it, and, in turn, creating herself as she knows herself. *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* and *Hunger* both serve to produce these narratives of the
self while also, as the second epigraph suggests, address the very conditions that create a need for these narratives in the first place.

The second epigraph is a quote from Audre Lorde’s essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”. She writes:

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? (Lorde 2007, 41)

The questions Lorde raises in this quote are foundational to the memoirs I have analyzed in this thesis. As Hernández and Gay write their narratives, they bring into view the daily aggressions that shape their lives. Whether it is the linguistic and epistemic violence that Hernández struggles through or the racist, sexist, and fatphobic policing of Gay’s body, these memoirs refuse to remain silent. The thrust of Lorde’s essay, that, as she famously writes, “your silence will not protect you,” forms the urgency of both the writing of memoir by QWOC, and of this thesis (Lorde 2007, 41). I understand A Cup of Water Under My Bed and Hunger as answers to Lorde’s questions, as a transformation of silence into language, and a push toward action.

These memoirs, I believe, bring to view the “tyrannies [we] swallow day by day’ and this thesis is just the beginning of a larger conversation about the significance of QWOC memoirs and life-writing. Daisy Hernández and Roxane Gay are just two of many queer women of color writing about their lives, and just two of the many narratives worth learning from. Queer women of color are writing their narratives every day. Whether it is through memoirs, blogs, podcasts, diaries, films, poetry, fiction, or any number of other present and future mediums, our narratives are powerful sources of knowledge that provide insight into the social workings of our worlds and write our very selves into existence. Our memories, in all their imperfection, create our truths.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andreina Elena Fernandez was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela in 1995 to parents María Antonietta Diaz and Jorge Enrique Fernandez. In 1997, Andreina immigrated to Weston, Florida with her parents and brother, also Jorge Enrique Fernandez. Andreina graduated from Cypress Bay High School in 2013 and moved to Gainesville, Florida in the summer of that year to begin her bachelor’s degree. During her undergraduate program, Andreina dedicated herself to social justice education, serving as a Director for Gatorship, a student-run social justice retreat program. In 2017, Andreina graduated from the University of Florida with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology, a Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics, and a minor in Disabilities in Society. Upon graduating, she spent a year working for the University of Florida’s Disability Resource Center before beginning her master’s degree in 2018. In December 2019, Andreina completed a Graduate Certificate in Latin American Studies and she graduated with her Master of Arts in Women’s Studies in May 2020.