Finding New Ways to See, Finding New Ways to Speak: How Portrait of a Lady on Fire and In the Dream House each challenge the conventions of their respective media to expand possibilities of queer storytelling and address archival silences

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How *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *In the Dream House* each challenge the conventions of their respective media to expand possibilities of queer storytelling and address archival silences

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Introduction

> Adam had one job, really. God said, "See this fuzzy thing? And that scaly thing there, in the water? And these feathery things, flying through the air? I really need you to give them names. I've been making the world for a week and I'm exhausted. Let me know what you decide."
>
> So Adam sat there. What a puzzler, right? It's obvious to us now, that that is a squirrel and that is a fish and that is a bird, but how was Adam supposed to know that? He wasn't just newly born, he was newly created; he didn't have years of live experience to support this creative enterprise, or anyone to teach him about it. When I think about him, just sitting there with his brand-new fist under his brand-new chin, looking vaguely perturbed and puzzled and anxious, I feel a lot of sympathy. *Putting language to something for which you have no language is no easy feat.*
>
> *("Dream House* as Naming the Animals", *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado, p.134, emphasis mine).

At first glance, the above cited chapter might bear no relation to the central story of *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado's 2019 memoir about being stuck in a relationship with an emotionally abusive woman. However, with the context of the preceding chapters, this chapter actually gets to the heart of what Machado is attempting to do with the book – and to the heart of a problem queer writers often face. These are problems of vocabulary, (in)visibility and archive. How to tell a story within a medium that has excluded voices like yours? I want to look at how two contemporary queer texts answer these and similar questions.

The other text, besides *In the Dream House*, is Céline Sciamma's film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*). Apart from both being works by lesbian or queer women released in 2019, the works seem to have little in common. One is a historical drama about a short-lived but intense romance between two 18th century women, the other is a literary memoir about the author's experiences with domestic abuse. However, I argue that both take a self-reflexive approach to their respective mediums, in a way that cannot be separated from their status as queer and feminist texts. By this, I mean that both (partially) revolve about questions of *how* to tell a story about queer women's experiences within that

specific medium. These texts are about carving out a place in a medium and an archive that has historically tried to exclude and erase the voices and stories of queer women. I will be devoting a chapter to each case study. While there will be some slight nuances in the research questions in order to accommodate the specific form and topics the case studies cover, the overarching questions for both chapters boil down to:

- In what way does the text reflect on and/or challenge certain conventions of the medium?
- In what way does the text negate the under- and misrepresentation of queer women and their relationships within the medium?
- What aspect of archival erasure does this text address, and does it do so implicitly or explicitly?
- How do the mediumreflexive elements connect to the themes of queerness and erasure?

Questions of how to represent marginalized experiences are not limited to LGBTQIA+ creators and stories. Yet, representing queerness is bound up with such questions in a unique way: “queering” has become a verb for a reason. Queer, especially within the context of art and/or academia, does not only indicate a LGBTQIA+ identity,[1] but “implies a broad critique of normativity along many different axes of identity, community, and power (…) a continuing and capacious challenge to normativity, without ever displacing the lives of actually existing LGBT people” (Morris and Rawson, “Queer Archives/Archival Queers”, 74). The texts I have chosen are queer in both the sense of questioning normativity and in the sense of examining queer women’s lives, either through memoir or fiction. This questioning of normativity also implies a critique of traditional literary or cinematic conventions. How to make space for people and voices that are often under- or misrepresented, in a medium for which most storytelling techniques have been developed without their stories or experiences in mind?

I do not mean to imply there is one "queer" or "female" experience. One of the sources I use in the chapter about *In the Dream House* is an analysis of one of Machado’s earlier works, the short story "The Husband Stitch". Mary Angeline Hood, a scholar specialized in Latin American literature and horror, claims that the story examines the ways in which knowledge based on the female experience can challenge common epistemological

[1] I will alternate between the LGBT/LGBT+ and LGBTQIA+ acronym. I prefer the latter in this context because, even though it is a small detail, inclusivity seems vital in a thesis that is in part about the erasure of queer identities. Yet, for the sake of clarity and brevity I will sometimes use the former (for example, in the case of composite words).

assumptions. In a footnote, she mentions that while she writes about female experience, this "might easily be interchanged with "queer experience" as far as its opposition to patriarchal norms" (Hood 1002). This use of "female" or "queer" experience as a term, should not be taken to mean all queer lives and/or women's lives can be "collapse[d] (…) into one official experience" but instead "represents any type of identity or perspective that goes against the cisgender, heterosexual male experience" (Hood 1002). It is in this sense that I also mean to discuss "queer experience" or "queer lives" in the upcoming chapters.

While "queering" can refer to a "queer reading" within academic analysis, it can also describe a tendency within queer art and media itself. This refers to texts that (overtly or subtly) question and/or subvert the expectations of their respective medium or genre. I have picked contemporary case studies, but that does not mean there is no precedent for this type of "queering" of narrative conventions. An example that comes up in several of my sources is Cheryl Dunye's excellent 1996 faux-documentary *The Watermelon Woman*. For the movie, an entire archive was created documenting the life of (fictional) African-American actress Fae Richards. It was so convincing that Dunye had to put up a disclaimer at the end revealing that the Fae Richards story was fiction, and stating: "Sometimes you have to create your own history." Not every example has to be so explicit in its play with conventions, though. More common are books and movies that challenge assumptions about both genre or medium boundaries and queer people in a more subtle way. For example, creators might rewrite established genres to tell queer stories, or reclaim certain stereotypical characters or narratives. Think of the Wachowski sisters queering the neo-noir film (and reclaiming the already queer, but often highly problematic, lesbian pulp novel) in *Bound* (1996). Another example is Jewelle Gomez rewriting vampire mythology through the lens of queer and Black feminist ideas about community with her novel *The Gilda Stories* (1991).

In the Dream House falls more into the explicitly metatextual category, while *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* fits in more with the latter examples. Before I discuss them, I want to quickly mention other contemporary texts that address similar issues through self-reflexive storytelling and/or formal invention. These are queer texts and/or creators that might benefit from an analysis with similar frameworks to the ones I will use in the following two chapters. I have chosen to not discuss them in-depth for a variety of reasons: because I have not yet gotten around to watching or reading them myself, or because they are in a medium I am less familiar with and thus less able to comment on. There are also a few that I would have loved to discuss, but felt it was beyond the scope of this thesis to do so. Lastly, some simply do not have all the elements I wanted to discuss to the same degree (formal invention, repurposing or

questioning tropes/stereotypes, a relatively wide audience reach). Yet, the ones they do have are handled in an interesting or unique enough way to merit attention.

I will discuss the queer "romance of the archive" in the final section of chapter one. Today, it can be found in the form of Jordy Rosenberg's metatextual historical fiction novel *Confessions of the Fox* (2018). The newer, bolder version of "queering genre tropes" might be found in something like *Fire Island* (dir. Andrew Ahn, 2022). Ahn's film is a romantic comedy that tells a story about queer Asian-American men – while also being a riff on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.[2] A TV show I considered including but decided was beyond the scope of this thesis is *Black Sails* (2014-2017). At first, this gritty-adult take on *Treasure Island* characters appears to add little to the historical action drama subgenre. However, as the series develops, both it and its central characters turn out a lot queerer than expected. This focus on several queer characters and other marginalized figures cannot be separated from how the show reflects on themes of history and storytelling. It often addresses historiographical writing as subjective and narrative, and prone to excluding groups and stories that challenge the status quo.

Outside of the medium of film, TV or literature, we can find examples from stand-up comedy, video games, or music. In her successful special *Nanette,* comedian Hannah Gadsby deliberately deconstructs the standard set-up of comedy shows in order to question who gets to laugh and who gets to be laughed at. A variety of queer creators have taken negative stereotypes in order to subvert them into a source of empowerment. The visual novel/indie game *We Know the Devil* does this with tropes that equate queerness with monstrosity and evil (specifically in a Christian context). The story takes inspiration from both coming of age stories and psychological horror, and follows three closeted queer teens during a religious summer camp.[3] Many examples of this can be found in music. Perfume Genius' angry, defiant 2014 album *Too Bright* challenges stereotypes like the effeminate, "threating" gay man ("Queen") or the gay best friend ("Fool") by reshaping them from the singer's own perspective. More recent examples include Shamir's 2022 album *Heterosexuality,* or *Flamboyant* (2019) and *My Agenda* (2020) by Dorian Electra.

In the Dream House and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* are some of the most recent, well-known and well-received examples of queer texts that address the limits and opportunities of

[2] For more information on how *Fire Island* takes inspiration from *Pride and Prejudice*, see: Martinelli, "*Fire Island* is a surprisingly faithful Jane Austen Adaptation (Albeit With More Poppers)."
[3] For an analysis of the game's trans themes from the personal perspective of a transgender writer, see: Unkle, "*We Know The Devil* Taught Me to Be Proud."

their medium. The attention and space offered to openly LGBTQIA+ creators and stories has been slowly but significantly increasing over the past few decades. This is especially notable in the case of *Portrait*, which was successful with both critics and audiences. *In the Dream House* was published by an independent publisher, but won multiple awards in both queer literature and nonfiction categories. It also got enough critical praise and audience attention for *Literary Hub*'s review aggregator, *Bookmarked,* to announce it the best-reviewed nonfiction title of 2019[4]. This increase in opportunity and platform allows creators certain freedoms, but also comes with its own challenges: is it possible to question and subvert normativity while becoming more mainstream? This makes challenging and reshaping established storytelling conventions, as well as ideas of what stories can be told and who gets to tell them, all the more relevant.

My case studies have different ways of working with or against the conventions of their respective medium. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is the more conventional text of the two. The story follows a fairly familiar trajectory for LGBTQIA+ romance dramas, especially historical ones. It uses continuity editing and its cinematography and sparse, diegetic soundtrack are all employed to draw the audience into the film. Yet, the film simultaneously seeks to revise other conventions. While the film has been lauded for centering "the female gaze", little has been said about how it does this and what kind of meaning this conveys. I want to rectify this with my own analysis. *In the Dream House*, by contrast, is far from conventional. It consists of ultra-short chapters that jump back and forth between different times. The chapters are named after a wide array of genres, literary conventions or pop culture references. Many chapters use second-person narration, rather than the first-person narration expected from autobiographical writing. All of this makes for an at times disorienting reading experience that requires the reader to pay close attention. I want to look at how these elements help to relay the experiences Machado is trying to communicate.

One of the thing the two texts have in common, is that both text address the problem of the archive (either implicitly or explicitly). In recent decades, the neutrality of the archive has become highly suspect. In "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines," Marlene Manoff, Associate Head and Collection Manager of MIT Humanities Library, writes

> The suspicion of archives is especially strong in some disciplines. In women's studies, for example, a considerable amount of scholarship has been devoted to redressing the limits of the official record. One way of defining women's studies

[4] See: *Book Marks* "The Best Reviewed Books of 2019."

> might be as a project to write women back into the historical record—to fill the gaps and correct the omissions in the archive. Similarly, the new field of postcolonial studies is highly suspicious of the colonial record and could be defined, in part, as an attempt to locate the voices of the silenced native within the literature produced by colonial powers. In both fields, scholars focus on the absences and the distortions of the archive, as well as new contributions by contemporary women and postcolonial writers. (Manoff 15)

While Manoff does not mention queer studies, her description applies there equally. *Portrait* can be described as a fictionalized version of the desire and need to "write women back into the historical record". The film provides a space not just for the history of queer love, but also for that of female solidarity, of abortion, and of female artists. It posits art as a possible witness to people and events that historiography might have suppressed, and as a way to combat gaps left in official historical record. *Portrait* is mostly related to the archive by implication, through its exploration of whose lives and which events are and are not preserved within historiographical traditions. *In the Dream House* is explicitly about archival silence or erasure. Machado situates herself within archival discourse, pointing to the lack of an established archive as both the greatest problem with – and the main reason for – writing down her experiences. Lacking an established archive to help her contextualize experiences, Machado instead creates her own, built out of other archives. She uses a wide range of intertextual reference to frame her memories and thoughts from a variety of angles. With this memoir, Machado challenges her readers to consider which stories are left untold, even in the present day.

For both chapters, my readings are heavily based in queer and feminist literary or film criticism. In both chapters, I also use writing on the archive and specifically archival gaps, even if this is more central to the second chapter. In both chapters, close readings are central to my analysis. These will have a basis in the methods of narratological analysis.[5]

In the first chapter of this thesis, I analyze *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. I start out by looking at the way the film constructs its own version of the (female) gaze, one that counters an unequal subject-object dynamic often found in theories of the (male) gaze in visual art and cinema. Rather than focusing on Laura Mulvey's foundational essay, my main source for this will be Teresa de Lauretis' concept of the lesbian coupled subject, as well as Karen Hollinger's response to de Lauretis. I connect this to the film's thematic exploration of the

[5] See: Bal, *Narratology* (2009), Verstraten, *Handboek Filmnarratologie* (2008).

importance of looking and seeing, which then connects to the final topic of the chapter: the way the film brings to the forefront the marginalized history of queer women, female artists and abortion. For this, I will use writings from feminist art historians, as well as an essay by Linda Garber on the act of reclaiming history in lesbian historical fiction.

The second chapter focuses on Machado's *In the Dream House*. I start out by looking at ideas about the queer memoir as archival object. I will start my analysis of the book by looking at its unusual choice of narration and the kind of dynamic this potentially creates with the reader, using an article on second-person narrators and reader involvement by Jarmila Mildorf as my starting point. After that, I look at the way Machado employs intertextuality to create a shared vocabulary that bridges the gap between her experiences and that which her audience knows and understands. This I relate to her goal to commit to the archive something that has often been under- and misrepresented. To discuss the possibilities of thinking of the archive as potentially containing more than factual knowledge, I will use Ann Cvetkovich's writings on the (queer) archive of feelings. I end my thesis with a short conclusion where I reflect on the benefits of reading these two very different texts side by side, and what relevance this thesis might have in a larger context.

Both case studies I have chosen break down established medium conventions, but they use the pieces to construct their own unique narrative voice and vision. In the following chapters, I hope to provide an insight into the way these contemporary queer texts do not just draw attention to marginalized stories, but find new ways of telling them.

Chapter 1

Portrait of a Lady on Fire

French director Céline Sciamma has described her much lauded 2019 film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as "a manifesto on the female gaze." While this has been mentioned and complimented often in discussions and reviews of the film, there are few in-depth analyses of how it achieves this, or why this matters to its story. What does it actually mean to tell a story through the construction of a female gaze (and a queer female gaze at that)?

Portrait follows a painter, Marianne, as she takes on an assignment to paint another young woman, Héloïse. The catch is that she will have to do it in secret, since the portrait is meant for Héloïse's future husband and Héloïse objects to the marriage. Marianne and Héloïse become so close that Marianne cannot bear the betrayal any longer, and reveals the real reasons for her stay to the other woman. Shortly after, she destroys her first version of the portrait. Héloïse stops her mother from dismissing Marianne by deciding to pose for her. As they work together, a short but intense romance blooms between Marianne and Héloïse. While they have to part ways, their influence on each other's lives remains felt throughout the years.

What makes the film interesting for this thesis, is that at first glance, it might appear quite conventional. It was a huge success with critics and reached a wide audience. It uses continuity editing and other techniques that are mostly in service of keeping the viewer immersed in the diegesis of the film. Yet, the film finds ways to repurpose these techniques to create a way of visual storytelling that negates the negative implications usually associated with them, like an objectifying look at the female characters or an unequal power dynamic that takes agency away from the love interest.

I will start this chapter by giving a short overview of theories on the gaze in cinema and a short summary of some of my most important sources. After that, I will look into some theories of the face in cinema, and the way the film plays with the expectations surrounding representation of faces. The section after that will be focused on how the film rethinks the artist-muse dynamic. Following that, there is a section on the Héloïse portrait, and how the process of its creation is related to the development and depiction of the central romance. In the final section before this chapter's conclusion, I discuss the film's ideas of art as a potential historiographical or archival tool. While this is reflected through the art of painting on the level of narrative, the film's own representation of a queer women, female artists and abortion, shows this theme to also apply to cinema as an artform.

1.1 Overview of Relevant Theories on the Gendered Gaze in Cinema

Within film theory, it is impossible to discuss the (gendered) gaze without mentioning Laura Mulvey's cornerstone text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", first published in 1975. Mulvey used psychoanalysis to point out the gendered ways in which classical Hollywood cinema constructs ways of looking (between characters, from the point of view of the camera and, perhaps most importantly, the ways in which the audience is "told" to *look with* or *look at* characters through these means). Vital to Mulvey's theory is Freud's concept of scopophilia, the idea that there is a pleasure in looking itself. The insight that has arguably been most influential in nearly all discussions of the gendered gaze in art and specifically film (both in- and outside academic circles), is Mulvey's statement that the man is constructed as the (active) "bearer of the look", while the woman is there to be a passive image, defined by a "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 33). Intertwined with this is the way the male protagonist is offered up as a point of narcissistic identification for the audience, while the woman is there foremost as a spectacle: "...her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative" (Mulvey 33). From Mulvey's explicitly Freudian standpoint, woman-as-image combines pleasure and "unpleasure", connoting both to-be-looked-at-ness and "the threat of castration" (35). Classic Hollywood cinema tends to deal with this in one of two ways: through fetishism or voyeurism. The former leans into the aforementioned anti-narrative element of woman-as-image, stopping any momentum in order to ogle the female star and thus allowing the audience to do the same. Voyeurism has a clear narrative component, one that Mulvey describes as having "association with sadism" (35). This indicates the judgment and (often) punishment and/or forgiveness of the female character.

Of course, almost fifty years have passed since "Visual Pleasure" was first published. The concept of the "male gaze" has even found its way into more mainstream vocabulary within pop culture discussions, albeit in a somewhat simplified form: the term mostly tends to refer to the sexualization and objectification of women, and, to a lesser degree, the centrality of male protagonists. Within academic circles, Mulvey's article has garnered not just praise but also criticisms, re-evaluations and additions. Some of the most influential criticisms of or additions to "Visual Pleasure" have centered around the possibility of a female and/or queer

gaze, and questions of how factors such as race play into these dynamics of looking[6]. Mulvey's use of Freudian psychoanalysis has also come under scrutiny, as well as her characterization of spectatorship as passive.[7] Yet, English scholar Clifford T. Manlove, in compiling several of these critiques and writing his own, sums up the insight that has stayed important for most analyses of the constructed gaze when he remarks: "[Mulvey's] thesis – *that the pleasure found in one person gazing at another can be used for power* – has the potential for broad application despite the steady criticism and revision by many of her colleagues in feminist and film studies" (Manlove 103, emphasis mine). I argue that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* uses the gaze to address and even fix power imbalances, rather than reinforce them.

There are a few more articles I want to highlight for the purposes of this chapter before I begin my analysis. One of the more recent examples is an article by documentary director and cinematographer Zoe Dirse from 2013. Her aim is to shed light on "[w]hat happens when the bearer of the look is female and the object is female?" (Dirse 18). Sometimes, her recounting of Mulvey's theories can come across a bit confusing or simplified, specifically her explanation of the gaze of the camera as being coded male because usually, a man is doing the filming. This leaves out the importance of the actual visual language of the film itself. Codes and conventions are influenced by tradition, which is partially influenced by who is allowed to create what we see. However, this is a complex dynamic that cannot be reduced to who is behind the camera, even if that is a part of it. At the same time, it is enough of a part to merit mention, specifically in the context of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Not just because it is a hugely successful film about queer women directed by an openly lesbian director, but also because themes of (in)visibility and questions of who gets to have a (political or artistic) voice, are at the heart of the film. Dirse also mentions that historically, female cinematographers as well as directors have been underrepresented (17) and thus unable to influence the techniques that make up the visual language of contemporary cinema. She touches on how the "old boys club" of cinema is often white and upper- or middle-class, meaning that anyone outside of those categories "must either persevere in the face of rejection, abuse, and intolerance or search out like-minded directors and producers in order to

[6] For examples, see: Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing"; Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?"; Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle"; Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*; hooks, *Black Looks*; Russell, "Race and the Dominant Gaze"; Mayne, "Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship."

[7] For examples, see: Buscombe, Gledhill, Lovell, and Williams, "Statement: Psychoanalysis and Film"; Heath, "Difference"; Lurie, "The Construction of the 'Castrated' Woman in Psychoanalysis and Cinema", Stacey; *Star Gazing*.

progress in their field (…) Once women or members of other groups enter the equation, then there needs to be a shift in the gaze to reflect their point of view" (Dirse 19). Who gets to make the art, or as Dirse puts it, "take control of their art" (Dirse 27), also changes what can be said through that art.

A similar statement on the importance of who gets to speak through art, can be found in art historian Kobena Mercer's 1991 essay "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." Near the end of the essay, he turns his attention to the work of Black, gay artists, who "are producing exciting and important work not because they happen to be black lesbians and gay men but because they have made cultural and political choices out of their experiences of marginality that situate them at the interface between different traditions" (Mercer 204). This is why it is important for marginalized groups to have access to means of representation and creation. This element of identity and enunciation among marginalized communities can also complicate the subject-object dynamic associated with the gaze. As Mercer summarizes one of his main statements early on in the essay: "The question of enunciation — who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share communicate? — implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference" (Mercer 181).

Mercer's essay is a partial revision of his earlier writing on Robert Mapplethorpe's series of nude photographs of Black men. Mercer initially emphasized the objectifying nature of these photographs based in particular on the racialized power difference between a famous white photographer and mostly unknown Black models. Mercer does not necessarily disagree with his previous arguments pertaining to this or the existence of racist tropes within the photographs, but he has "changed [his] mind, or rather (…) still can't make up [his] mind about Mapplethorpe" (Mercer 169). This rethinking has to do with the politics of enunciation and a more equal relationship between artist and model that creates a possible reversibility or reciprocity of the gaze. Mercer contends that, while it is impossible (and undesirable) to return to Romantic notions of the author as central to the artwork and its meaning, it is still relevant to consider the identity of the artist. Because of Mapplethorpe's identity as a gay man creating homoerotic art, there is an element of reversibility to the gaze: "The gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object" (Mercer 182). There is a degree of mutual identification and reciprocity at play here (Mercer 184).

Both the idea of art as an important tool of self-expression for marginalized people, and the idea that there can be a reversibility to the gaze between queer artists and their muses, return in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Yet, it is essential to note that Mercer writes about race and interracial dynamics as much as he writes about sexuality. This complication does not factor into *Portrait* the same way since both protagonists are white, though the fact they are women also changes the way they are (culturally) considered in relation to looking and being looked at. Still, the reversibility of the (queer) gaze that Mercer explores so well is incredibly valuable for my analysis.

Someone who focuses on dynamics of the gaze between queer women rather than men, is feminist and queer theory professor Teresa de Lauretis. In her essay "Film and the Visible" de Lauretis discusses the possibility of a lesbian gaze in relation to lesbian representation in cinema. For her, avant-garde lesbian films can offer female viewers an alternative spectatorial position. These films create " a new position of seeing in the movies, a new place of the look: the place of a woman who desires another woman (…) a place where the equivalence of look and desire-which sustains spectatorial pleasure and the very power of cinema in constructing and orienting the viewer's identification-is invested in two women" (de Lauretis 227). Based on writing by Sue-Ellen Case, professor of theatre studies and feminist theory, de Lauretis contends that these films create a coupled subject position the women inhabit together. This in turn creates a similar coupled subject position for the female spectator, regardless of sexuality.

De Lauretis only sees this possibility in avant-garde films (her own case study is Sheila McLaughlin's film *She Must Be Seeing Things*), since mainstream lesbian films often merely "[cast] two women in (…) the standard frame of the hetero romance, repackaged as a commodity purportedly produced for lesbians" (de Lauretis 256), thus cleansing these stories of true disruptive or subversive potential. This argument is contested by literature professor Karen Hollinger. Hollinger argues that, while they can contain tired or damaging tropes, "the continued popularity and proliferation of mainstream lesbian films suggests that they should not so easily be dismissed as distorted counterparts of truly subversive avant-garde lesbian representations" (Hollinger 13). Rather than delineating a clear break between the two, she sees more space for overlap and continuity. Sadly, she does not go into detail on which films achieve this and how. Could *Portrait*, which has gotten a lot of mainstream attention, be an example?

These are the texts and frameworks that will inform my reading of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*'s conception of the gaze. Psychoanalysis has become less popular in recent years, and

I myself do not share the Freudian vocabulary of Mulvey's original text. However, her distinction between active and passive roles, between those who can look and those who are "merely" there to be looked at, plays an inescapable role in most readings of the gaze[8]. For me, the relevance here lies mostly in analyzing power dynamics and questions of agency. The gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is one that allows itself to be met by those who look back. It is one of connection and equality, rather than hierarchy and power. I will now discuss how *Portrait* establishes itself as being (in part) about the gaze through the ways it introduces both of its main characters, Marianne and Héloïse.

1.2 Looking at the Face

In this subchapter, I want to discuss two scenes from early in the film. These are the two scenes that introduce our main characters. These scenes already contain vital clues about what the film has to say about looking as a theme, and how it positions the gaze of the viewer. Two elements in particular are significant to my analysis: the use of close-ups and the meaning that the face has been given in cinema. This section's central question could be formulated as: in what ways do their introductions provide the viewer with access to the main character's face, and how does this relate to the kind of gaze the film is trying to construct for both characters and the audience?

The representation of the face in cinema is central to this analysis, as it is both originator and favored object of the gaze. The close-up often plays a vital role in the way a film constructs its ways of looking. As a tool for glancing at characters, it allows us to observe a character's face or body in ways that we would not be able to in real life. The close-up is also the foremost tool that a filmmaker has to show us which character is actively looking: a shot of a face might allow us to observe someone intimately, but also functions as a way to signal that that person is looking. Of course, the close-up (whether of a face or not) then might be used to tell us what said character is looking at, perhaps directing us to look "through their eyes." To dive into this further, and specifically in order to relate it to *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, I will be using film and gender studies scholar Mary Ann Doane's text "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," as well as online pop culture journalist Raymond de Luca's

[8] Not just after, but also before Mulvey. John Berger introduced the term "male gaze" in 1972 TV documentary on the gaze in painting, *Ways of Seeing,* and accompanying book of essays with the same title. Here is a quote from the book that also feels particularly relevant to the gendered gaze in cinema: "One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 47).

article on the motif of facelessness in *Portrait*, written for the online film journal *Bright Lights*. I will relate this to some theories and concepts surrounding the gendered gaze that I discussed in 1.1.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire opens with what looks like a white screen, but quickly turns out to be a blank canvas or paper as a hand appears in the frame to start sketching. This is followed by a cut to another white paper, another hand. We cannot yet see what is being drawn, only the beginning of an outline. It is not until a similar pattern of shots has been repeated a few times that we see the first faces in the film. The faces do not belong to a main character, but to various young women taking art lessons from Marianne. They are introduced in medium close ups or the occasional two shot, rather than by way of an establishing shot showing us the entire classroom at once. Another noteworthy element is that the emphasis lies not on how we can observe them, but on the fact that they are clearly looking at something or someone. This way, the beginning of the movie immediately draws our attention to the process of looking attentively – specifically as something done by women. The students do not get individualized by way of names or characterization, but just by the way the camera takes its time to introduce each of them. Marianne is the last character in the scene that we actually get to see, though she is introduced before that, by way of her voice. We hear her instructing the students to *really look* at her (the contours of her face, the way she holds her hands…) in order to draw her. So when the camera finally reveals her, seated centrally in front of a background of neutrally colored sheets, shown in medium long shot, we are tempted – or challenged? - to do the same. The gaze we are asked to align ourselves with, is that of the curious young artists. Marianne is not cut up into parts by an objectifying camera, but instead we are guided by her own instructions to pay attention to the various parts and details that make her, asking a question that will return throughout the film: can one truly capture a person through their visual appearance? Before it even starts to set up the main story, the film has already quietly introduced us to some of its main themes.

The opening scene gives us our first hint of the main story and of some other themes when Marianne interrupts her own instructions to ask her students the question: “Who put that painting there?” We cannot see the painting yet, we first see the students respond and then cut back to Marianne while she reprimands the student who took the painting out of storage. We are a little closer to Marianne, but still can see most of her body. Attention is on her face, however, where the neutral, composed expression has changed in subtle but notable ways to hint at her emotional response to the painting. The camera then cuts to two of the students, asking her if she painted it – we can see the painting behind them but cannot make out what it

depicts yet, since it is out of focus. When Marianne admits to painting it, the students turn to look at the painting, which is when it also comes into focus for the viewer. It depicts a young woman on a beach, the hem of her long dress catching fire. We zoom in on it before cutting back to Marianne, in medium shot this time. Another zoom-in turns the shot almost into a medium close-up, while she answers the student who asked her what the painting's title is (it is, of course, the same as that of the film). For a few seconds, the camera stays focused on Marianne's face, showing us both her subtle but emotional response and revealing that the main story takes place in an earlier timeline, one shown to us through Marianne's memories.

At first glance, Marianne's introduction seems to play right into notions of woman-as-image, since her audience and that of the film are invited to look at her. However, this is a very specific situation of conscious looking: the young women are only looking at her in order to learn how to look with the gaze of an (aspiring) artist. Not only that, the power dynamics of the one who looks and the one who is looked at are immediately inverted, as Marianne is the one who is in control for the entirety of the scene. She commands the gaze of the onlookers, not for erotic reasons, but for artistic ones, and for the film's purposes for narrative and thematical ones as well. In this particular scene, the viewer might be invited to adopt the gaze of the students rather than that of Marianne, however, this also means they need to listen to Marianne's instructions. We might even say she is "directing" the gaze, immediately letting us know that *Portrait* is not just the result of a woman director taking control of her art (as Zoe Dirse put it), but also a film about that very idea. This applies not just to the woman as artist, but to the woman who is made into an image as well. In this scene, Marianne inhabits both roles, like Héloïse will later on in the film (albeit in a different way).

Apart from having her voice guide us through the scene, Marianne's perspective is also centered by the subtly increasing focus on her facial expressions. Actual close-ups - other than medium ones – are rare in the film, though the cuts to Marianne's face do get a little closer over the course of her introduction. Access to the face is considered integral to getting an understanding of movie characters. Mary Ann Doane, in her analysis of the cinematic close-up, writes about why the human face is one of its favorite topics (something that could also be said, of course, of portraiture): "Almost all theories of the face come to terms in some way with [the] opposition between surface and depth, exteriority and interiority (…). Hence are born all the metaphors of textuality, of the face as book, of reading and legibility. The face is the intensification of a locus of signification" (Doane 96). This scene seems play into that, but the camera's distance does challenge the viewer to pay attention to what they can actually see in Marianne's face, rather than tell them outright. It also

emphasizes Marianne's agency and control through her instructions to the class.

The relative lack of close-ups in the film might be partially explained by how they have been associated with autonomy, rather than seen as an integral part of the narrative. In "Visual Pleasure", Mulvey writes that they can be used to cut up women whose bodies are put on display, as an erotic object for both the audience and the (male) characters (Mulvey 33). According to her: "[c]onventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance), or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen." (Mulvey 33-34). Doane both acknowledges and complicates this notion of the autonomous close-up, though hers is an analysis of the close-up and the pleasures it provides in general, not one focused on eroticization of female characters. On the perceived disconnection from the narrative that the close-up is associated with, she has this to say: "Any viewer is invited to examine its gigantic detail, its contingencies, its idiosyncrasies. The close-up is always, at some level, an autonomous entity, a fragment, a "for-itself,"" (Doane 90). Yet, she argues against the notion that the close-up is a complete "pausing" of the narrative. Doane's own close-readings of several movie scenes highlight the way close-ups are almost always significant visual storytelling devices, often paired with shots of a character looking. However, rather than declaring the close-up as only narrative in function, Doane concludes that the narrative and autonomous properties of the close-up are not mutually exclusive: "I would agree that there is always a residue of separability, an uncontainable excess, attached to the close-up" (Doane 104-5). The lack of close-ups in *Portrait* seems to emphasize the narrative function of the shots, particularly those of faces, over the autonomous one. Marianne's introduction lets the viewer's eyes linger on her face, but it is in the context of both her being in control of the scene (teaching her students – and the audience? – how to pay attention). It is also a way to show her focalization is central to the film, since the choice to let the final shots of the scene linger on her face indicate her memories as the framework for the film's main story.

The opening scene invites us to try and read Marianne's face. By contrast, the audience is barred from seeing Héloïse's face for an unusually large portion of her introduction. This starts even before she properly appears in the film. When Marianne arrives at the house, the portrait attempted by the former artist is still in the guest room. The space where the face should be, is completely blank, as Héloïse refused to let the (male) painter see it. Héloïse herself is not introduced until almost twenty minutes into the film, when Marianne is to meet her for their first walk together. Héloïse has not been allowed outside unsupervised

since her sister, who was meant to be married off before her, either fell or jumped from the cliffs outside their home. We follow Marianne as she walks down the stairs and catches her first few glimpses of Héloïse, who is obscured from her and our vision by a dark shadows and a hooded cloak. The camera moves in a much shakier manner than before, as if we are walking with Marianne. We cut between shots of her trying to get a better look, and her view: Héloïse, head and shoulders covered by the cloak. As she walks outside, the light enables us to make her out a bit better, though her actual features are still obscured by her clothes. This is frustrating, not just because often, main characters are introduced by allowing the audience access to their face/emotions immediately, but also because Héloïse's face is central to the story. It is, after all, Marianne's sole reason for coming to the island. During the walk Héloïse's hood slowly drops, revealing first her blonde hair and then her neck. After that, Héloïse starts running, allowing us to see her more fully but still only from behind, as she moves away from us/Marianne/the camera. We get some profile shots of Marianne as she also breaks into a run, panicking because Héloïse is dashing towards the cliffs where her sister most likely committed suicide. However, she stops in front of the cliffs, allowing the camera to come closer again, but still we do not get more intimate than a medium close-up. It is this moment that Héloïse finally turns to us, so Marianne (and the audience) can see her face for the first time. All in all, it takes almost a minute from the first glimpse of Héloïse beneath the stairs, until we see her face.

This deliberate withholding of Héloïse's face is in line with DeLuca's reading of the film. Apart from Doane's assertion that access to a characters face makes it easier to "read" them, the face and specifically the close-up of the face is also instrumental to the construction of the gaze on a narrative level. It shows us who is looking at who, who is being looked at by who. *Portrait* is keenly interested by questioning and blurring these distinctions. One of the ways it confuses our expectations, is that our access to the face is repeatedly obstructed, as De Luca points out in his article "Portrait Without a Face". Extreme close-ups, especially of faces, are rare in the film. After a Doane-esque comment about how "[t]his disavowal of face is a particularly transgressive one because so much of film history has pivoted on the opening up of the human face; physiognomy quickly became synonymous with cinema," DeLuca observes: "What's striking about Sciamma's latest film, which puts such a narrative emphasis on capturing faces, is its relative lack of close-ups (…) Sciamma seems to be asking is it possible to get close without a close-up?" The film instead favors medium close-ups and two-shots. Deluca argues that this grants the heroines a degree of privacy from not just the prying eyes of characters like Héloïse's mother, but of those of the audience, as well. We expect to

see Héloïse not just because she is the second main character, but also because she is a female romantic interest – in many ways the ideal object of the gaze. All of this is underlined by the knowledge that Héloïse's face is also an important plot point – as Marianne needs to see her face in order to paint her, putting more emphasis on the reveal. This build-up runs the risk of emphasizing the idea of a woman as a spectacle to be gazed at (Mulvey 33), by building up the excitement and expectation for the reveal of her face. The movie avoids this by consciously employing these tactics as a way to reflect on the dynamics of looking. The scene frustrates our access to Heloise's face, until she herself reveals it to Marianne, and by extension, us. This places a distinct emphasis on her agency and her control over her own image, rather than the control of the all-seeing eye of the camera. It is also a scene that establishes her gaze as potentially on equal footing with Marianne's, even though we might expect the scene to foreground the latter's curiosity, as it is closer to our own. Héloïse's first scene sets up what will be subversive aspect of both the romance and the artist-muse relationship central to the film by already hinting at "the element of mutual identification" (Mercer 184) that will inform both. From early on, the gaze is subtly hinted at as being reversible: we do not truly get to look at Héloïse until she is ready to "meet our gaze".

This scene does not only form a contrast with Marianne's introduction, but also with the film's final scene, which depicts the last time Marianne sees Héloïse. We learn this moment took place several years after the main events of the film. Marianne is attending a concert and notices Héloïse in the audience. Héloïse does not notice her. Instead, the final moments consist of one extended take where the camera slowly zooms in on Héloïse's face as she responds to the music. The music is a performance of Vivaldi's "Summer" – a piece that Héloïse got to know when Marianne played a short fragment for her on harpsichord, when the two were just getting to know each other. The scene allows the viewer to observe Héloïse's highly emotional response in detail. For Deluca, "[t]he viewer is given access into Héloïse's interior world without invitation" in these final moments (Deluca, "Portrait Without a Face"). I am less inclined to read this final moment of (unreciprocated) gazing in that way. Had this been one of the film's earliest scenes, there would have been a larger sense of voyeuristic looking. However, the film only lets Marianne and the audience look at Héloïse like after spending the majority of the film making both work at learning how to really "see" her. This includes learning to put Héloïse's own subjectivity before their image of her. How the film does this, will be covered in the third and fourth section of this chapter. For now, I want to note that this informs how we look at Héloïse in this final scene. We can read her face, but know that this is a limited way of accessing her interiority. We know enough about her to

imagine what creates the many emotions she displays, but are also aware that we cannot be entirely sure. Due to the different expressions we can distinguish, we only really know she is having a complex and very emotional reaction. However, it is not obvious how much of her response is to the memory of Marianne, and how much to the music itself, or if the two overlap completely. We can guess, but we cannot know, in part because unlike in her first scene, Héloïse will not meet our gaze.

From their introductions onward, these characters, on a visual level, already challenge conventions that dictate how cinema looks (or lets us look) at women, queer women in particular. Shots that might seem a mere invitation for the viewer's gaze actually serve to communicate something about how the dynamic between the leads is developing. We are not guided merely by the camera, but by our knowledge of the characters and how they each have a gaze of their own.

1.3 The Muse Looks Back

One motive that runs through the movie, is that the one who is gazed at, will gaze back. We see this in the opening scene, where Marianne instructs her students who study her. It is also hinted at right after Héloïse's introduction, which I discussed above. When the women return to the house after their first walk together, Héloïse asks Marianne if she can borrow a book. Marianne says yes, and passes Héloïse in order to walk to her room. From that moment on, the camera follows Marianne in a way similar to how it first followed Héloïse. Arguably, the film has temporarily switched who is focalizing in this scene. This does not last long though, as the camera keeps following Marianne into her room, where Héloïse stops and waits in the doorway. These hints at playing with who is subject or object of the gaze, are no coincidence. It is a theme that the movie makes explicit in one of its most analyzed scenes. Because it is one that is often singled out in analyses already, I will not attempt a close-reading. Instead I will discuss it shortly as a starting point for this section, since I believe it to introduce one of the film's most central statements. Then I will look at how it is discussed in other readings, and how it is echoed in the film's own subversive exploration of the artist-muse dynamic.

The scene in question is one of several scenes in the film where Héloïse poses for Marianne. The latter remarks that she cannot seem to get Héloïse to smile. The following exchange leads Marianne to describing all the small details – micro-expressions, tics, unconscious habits – that she has noticed in Héloïse that allow Marianne to interpret her feelings. Her observations allow her to "read the textuality" of not just the face, but body and

gesture as well. “You know everything,” replies Héloïse. Marianne admits she could never take her place, implying she could not stand similar close observation. It is at this precise moment that the film explicitly reverses conventional ideas about both the artist-muse dynamic and the gaze: Héloïse responds to Marianne by saying that "their places are exactly the same". Instead of immediately explaining this to Marianne, she opts to show her, telling her to come over to her. When Marianne stands next to Héloïse, Héloïse asks her: “When you look at me, who am I looking at?” after which she proceeds to share her own observations of Marianne in a very similar way. Both of them are looked at by, but also looking at, the other. This moment is a turning point in both the romantic and artistic relationship between the women, exactly because the dynamic between them becomes more equal. Marianne’s gaze is no longer privileged: she has to work with Héloïse rather than observe her without her knowledge. De Luca writes: “Héloïse inverts the power dynamics of portraiture. The model, refusing “still life,” starts instructing the painter (…) and, in turn, onscreen; she curates her own image” (De Luca "Portrait Without a Face"). This is also what makes the film’s treatment of the gaze stand out. As De Luca points out, rather than providing a looking subject with an object to be looked at: “permission must be granted by the spectated before any sort of spectatorial identification can occur. The relationship between the looker and the looked-at should be one of mutual consent” (De Luca "Portrait Without a Face").

Similar readings of the scene can be found in two of my main sources for this part of the chapter. These are two essays on *Portrait*, one by Benjamin Eldon Stevens, specialized in classical and reception studies, the other by art historian Madeleine Pelling. Stevens, more concerned with the film’s interaction with myth and literature than with visual arts, mentions the scene only shortly – but also describes it as “articulat[ing] the possibility of [an] emotionally charged role-reversal” (Stevens 52). This role-reversal would be that of the artist and the muse, which is central to Stevens interpretation of the film as (among other things) a rewriting of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, a recurring intertextual reference within the film. I will come back to this topic after discussing Pelling’s reading of the "our places are the same"-scene. Pelling discusses the scene much more in-depth, as her analysis of the film revolves around its relation to art history. She writes that, rather than privileging Marianne’s “painterly” gaze:

> Marianne’s eye is met with a ferocious reciprocity (…) The result is an onscreen articulation of a new two-way channel between representer and represented, in which the women’s reciprocal gaze is made visible on film via a sequence of frames that give equal weight to the dialogic perspectives.

> Poised, or rather posed, on the edge of artistic creation, Héloïse directs Marianne's Orphic gaze to claim autonomy over both her visibility and her replication. (Pelling 7)

In the scene described above, the importance of equal power dynamics and consent are established in a way that is explicitly relevant to the artistic relationship between the two women, but by implication also lays the groundwork for their romance.

Another way the film signals its interest in exploring the artist-muse dynamic is by explicitly invoking the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. This myth functions as a parallel for the love story of Marianne and Héloïse. While there are recurring references, the most explicit and important – as highlighted by the cinematography, length and place of the scene in the movie (Stevens 49) – is the one that actually includes the story itself. It is a scene about an hour into the movie. In it, Héloïse, Marianne and Sophie – a young housemaid who becomes a friend to both women – are gathered late at night. Héloïse is reading the story of Orpheus and Eurydice out loud, and the three women comment on it, each sharing their own interpretations of the ending. Sophie condemns Orpheus's choice to look back as a foolish and inexplicable action. Marianne contends that perhaps Orpheus purposefully "doesn't make the lover's choice, but the poet's." She means that by looking back at Eurydice and ensuring she is taken back to Hades, Orpheus chooses to preserve the memory of her in his mind and his art, even if it means losing her as his love. Héloïse at first suggests Orpheus simply can't resist the urge to look because he is in love. Eventually, however, she ends up suggesting the most thematically resonant interpretation of the film – that perhaps Eurydice had a much more active role: "Perhaps she was the one who said: 'Turn around'." This interpretation of Eurydice parallels the way Héloïse asserts herself as a fellow looking and loving subject, rather than an object of either the gaze or of desire. This parallel is underlined in the final moment the two women share together, when Marianne is leaving while Héloïse is being fitted for her wedding dress. Héloïse follows Marianne, asking her to turn around and look at her one last time. As Stevens notes, while the most obvious subversion lies in the way the movie presents a version of the Orpheus and Eurydice tale where both lovers are women, but the most crucial change is rather that of agency (Stevens 53).

As conventionally portrayed, the artist-muse dynamic might almost be a blueprint for the dynamics of the gaze as they are usually understood. A muse is often depicted as a beautiful young woman, who is both object of the artistic gaze and the romantic and sexual desire of the artist. The artist looks at her in order to immortalize her in paintings that other people will look at. This applies to cinematic depictions of such relationships, but does not

seem far removed from how they (until recently) have often been portrayed, even in historiographical accounts. A (female) muse can be little more than a footnote in the story of a canonized male artist. Recent decades have seen growing criticisms and revisions of this line of thinking, of which *Portrait* is an example. Its most obvious change to this dynamic might be the change of gender for the artist, but Stevens is right that agency is the one that really sets its treatment of the topic apart.

Kobena Mercer was motivated to reconsider his thoughts on Mapplethorpe because "[t]he gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object" (Mercer 182). Even though the art Marianne (or, for that matter, Sciamma) makes is quite far removed from Mapplethorpe's provocative erotic art photography, the depiction of the artist-muse dynamic still seems built around similar ideas of this "element of mutual identification between artist and models" (Mercer 184). Throughout the text, Mercer refers to this quality as a "mutuality", "reversibility" or "reciprocity" of the gaze. The portrait Marianne works on is in no way a "homoerotic representation", but it does grow from their romantic relationship. This does mean the process, if not the art work, is at least tinged with queerness in a way that can indeed be said to dissolve the "associative opposition" of the gaze that might exist if Marianne were a male artist. This is underlined by the way the film's visual storytelling and dialogue ("When you look at me, who am I looking at?") refuse to uphold this opposition or to place one character's perspective below the other's. This queerness creates tension between the creation and the explicit goal of the portrait itself. The portrait is arguably meant to be an ultimate object of the male gaze: its intended audience is a man who will gaze upon it in order to accept Héloïse as a suitable wife.

In the next subchapter, I will pay more attention to the creation of this portrait. I will contrast the portrait Marianne makes initially (and then destroys) with the final one. The final portrait is a result of Marianne and Héloïse having a much more equal relationship, not just as lovers but as collaborators. This intermingling and interdependence of those two dynamics also shows how the themes of artistic vision and the desiring queer/female gaze are connected in the film.

1.4 Painting the Portrait

I will now look at the creation and destruction of the first portrait Marianne makes of Héloïse, and then the more collaborative process by which the two women work on the final version. I

do this in order to show how this aspect of the film brings together the different elements of queerness, the (female) gaze, and artistic expression. In the film, women's interaction with art provides a catalyst for this intermingling of viewpoints that allows their personal relationships to develop. Pelling describes this as "Sciamma draw[ing] viewers' attention to the construction of images, and the feminist and queer possibilities in deconstructing and reassembling them (…) Sciamma directs repeatedly the viewer's gaze between living subject and painted surface, connecting and conflating artistic vision with desirous looking" (Pelling 3). The depiction of the painting process is an example of this, one that aligns well with a reading of Marianne and Heloise as a coupled lesbian subject as conceived by Teresa de Lauretis. I will also use Karen Hollinger's response to de Lauretis' use of the concept to argue that *Portrait'*s more mainstream status works in its favor.

The first version of the portrait is the result of an unequal dynamic, as Héloïse is still unaware of Marianne's true reasons for spending time with her. Their relationship is not explicitly romantic at this point, but the women have grown close enough for Marianne to feel guilty about deceiving Héloïse. This is why she asks Héloïse's mother permission to reveal the portrait to Héloïse before anyone else sees it. Marianne then confesses the true reasons for her stay to Héloïse, on the beach where they have spent a lot of time together. That scene ends with the camera lingering on Héloïse, shivering after a swim, saying to Marianne: "It explains your looks." The next scene opens with a sudden cut to Héloïse's face – but it is the painted version. The camera stays on the painting for a moment, giving us a chance to study it. The next shot shows Héloïse doing exactly this: the camera is focused on her face, bent slightly towards the painting, which we can no longer see. Her gaze on the painting is what is central to both this shot and this moment in the narrative.

The camera stays on her as she rights herself and takes a few steps back. We cut to Marianne, who asks her: "You are saying nothing?" Héloïse (off-screen) stays quiet for a few more moments, then replies: "That's me?". Marianne, clearly taken aback, confirms this and goes to stand next to Héloïse to join her in inspecting the painting. The camera still cuts between them however, showing them in separate shots during this conversation. Héloïse asks, "Is that how you see me?". Marianne, starting to get defensive, explains to Héloïse about the rules and conventions that govern her art. The camera cuts between them while they argue, but also takes time to once again rest on the way they are looking at the painting during their discussion. This conversation ends with Héloïse concluding: "The fact that it isn't close to me, I understand. But I find it sad that it isn't close to you." Marianne, growing notably

more upset, says: “How do you know it isn't close to me? I didn't know you were an art critic.” Héloïse replies: “I didn’t know you were a painter,” and leaves the room.

We see Marianne in medium shot now, more distant than before, while we see Héloïse (out of focus) walk away. Even though Marianne is partially turned away from the camera, we can see she seems very close to tears. Suddenly she turns more towards the camera, though looking at the (off-screen) painting rather than straight at us. We see her take a few steps towards the painting, after which we get a close-up of it for long enough to see Marianne's hand enter the frame, holding a cloth. The last shot of the scene is of a very emotional Marianne wiping at her work. The next scene will reveal that Marianne has wiped away the face in the portrait. Héloïse’s mother is angry and disappointed by Marianne’s destruction of her promised work and does not accept her explanation that she was not satisfied with the result. Héloïse stops her mother from sending Marianne away, by saying that she is willing to pose for her. Her mother agrees to this, provided the women finish the painting in the five days that she will be away from the house.

Like the scene where Héloïse rejects the portrait, the scene in which she and Marianne declare the final version finished, is preceded by a scene on the beach. This time, it is a teary farewell (or at least, the teary acknowledgment of a looming farewell), since Marianne comes to tell Héloïse that her mother has sent word that she will be arriving home soon. The next scene then starts with both women entering the room with the painting. Héloïse sits down to pose for the last time, while Marianne goes to stand behind the easel – but then she tells Héloïse: “Come here. With me.” The camera stays on Marianne, but we can hear Héloïse’s footsteps as she comes closer and finally joins Marianne in the shot. This scene is a two-shot, making it markedly different to the scene with the first portrait. That scene underlined the way their views of the painting clashed by having the camera cut between them rather than having their conversation take place in a shared shot. This time, we watch both of them as they regard the portrait in silence, until Héloïse asks: “How do we know if it's finished?” and Marianne replies “at one point, we stop.” This is followed by a close-up of the painting, showing the dress and neck. One hand, holding a paint brush, delivers the final few touches. The camera slowly pans up to reveal the “new” face, with the paint brush delivering the final few licks of paint to the ear. The scene ends by returning to the two-shot of Marianne and Héloïse, as they declare the painting finished.

Apart from being concerned with the gaze, the scenes also center the idea of art as a form of personal expression. The latter comes forward clearly in Héloïse’s low opinion of the first portrait, as she declares it shows no truth of either her or Marianne. The former, we can

see in (among other things) how the visual language of the scenes often focuses on responses and reactions to both the painting and what is being said about it. We are constantly watching as characters view the painting and listen to each other, trying to gauge their emotional response as they express them on a more intellectual level. It is also viewing the portrait through new eyes, coupled with her sense of having betrayed Héloïse, that lead Marianne to purposefully ruin the portrait. Notably, she destroys the face and the eyes/gaze completely, as if she can no longer bear to see this not-Héloïse looking back at her. The final portrait, rather than one painted in secret, is the result of a collaboration based on mutual agreement and respect. Marianne does not only paint Héloïse, but also takes her input seriously. Héloïse agrees to pose for Marianne because Marianne is truly willing to see her, not just watch her. It is this newfound equal footing as much as their "sexual same-ness" that liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object" (Mercer 182). The gaze of both artist and muse become one, though complementing each other rather than completely overlapping.

In "Film and the Visible" de Lauretis argues that avant-garde lesbian films can create a situation where two women (the lesbian couple) inhabit a subject-position together, making them a coupled rather than a split subject (de Lauretis 225). This for her, is key to what sets these films apart from more mainstream efforts of lesbian representation. Those "may provide sympathetic accounts, "positive images," of those subjects without necessarily producing new ways of seeing or a new inscription of the social subject in representation" (De Lauretis 224). De Lauretis offers her case study, Sheila McLaughlin's film *She Must Be Seeing Things*, as an example of how avant-garde cinema shows us actual alternatives. Through her analysis of this film, de Lauretis means to show "how a film's work with and against narrative codes and conventional forms of enunciation and address may produce modes of representing that effectively alter the standard frame of reference and visibility, the conditions of the visible, what can be seen and represented" (de Lauretis 224). These are films "that represent the problem of representation", rather than merely "represent[ing] lesbians" (224).

In her analysis, de Lauretis writes that *She Must Be Seeing Things* "constructs for both spectators and filmmakers a new position of seeing in the movies, a new place of the look: the place of a woman who desires another woman (…) a place where the equivalence of look and desire which sustains spectatorial pleasure and the very power of cinema in constructing and orienting the viewer's identification — is invested in two women" (de Lauretis 227). A film like *She Must Be Seeing Things* succeeds at this because it "both addresses and questions spectatorial desire by disallowing a univocal spectatorial identification with any one character

or role or object-choice" (de Lauretis 263). Instead, it creates a shared subject-position for its leading characters, one that is also open to the viewer. This is why "[W]ithin the radical difference that de Lauretis attributes to lesbian representation she locates a site of real liberation for all female subjects, regardless of their sexual identity" (Hollinger 11).

While Karen Hollinger agrees with de Lauretis in her analysis of the coupled subject in lesbian cinema, she strongly doubts that this is limited to avant-garde films. She fears that dismissing the mainstream films in favor of more explicitly subversive avant-garde cinema fails to acknowledge how the popularity of these films indicates they have a lot to offer to female viewers, regardless of sexuality (Hollinger 13). Hollinger instead agrees with the idea that lesbian representations in and off themselves often challenge patriarchal and heterosexist beliefs, as they show female independence from men and present alternatives to social norms, as well as undermining rigid binary categories (Hollinger 11).

Portrait of a Lady on Fire could be one of those mainstream films that challenge the strict distinction de Lauretis makes. The problem of representation is something that is present throughout the film. The question of whether or not you can truly capture a person, see them and make them be seen, through artistic representation, is central to the development of the Héloïse portrait. This thread is taken up by the film on a formal level in how it is searching for a way to represent a desiring look between two women without falling into the trap of an objectifying or confining gaze. It does this by making room for the subjective perspective of both characters. The film encourages the viewer to adopt those different gazes as well, first alternately and then simultaneously. In the scenes described in this section, as well as the one before it, the different perspectives are given equal weight both in terms of dialogue and who the camera pays attention to. What might set *Portrait* apart from the shared lesbian subject position as described by De Lauretis and Hollinger, is that this shared subject position for Héloïse and Marianne does not mean their perspectives merge to become one and the same. Rather, their perspectives challenge as well as support each other, allowing them to evolve together. I think this enriches the concept of the coupled subject, as it allows for more agency to be acknowledged in separate characters. Sharing a subject position becomes a process that needs both parties to make an effort to understand the other, in a way that is represented by the film itself on a narrative and visual level. It is also less reminiscent of so-called "positive" stereotypes that presume the lack of gendered power imbalances inherently equate to a more harmonic relationship. The harmful sides of such stereotypes will come up in chapter 2.

Hollinger assigns the lesbian look a "radical potential [that] involves not only reciprocity but also an association between female subjectivity and agency and a refutation of

an all-encompassing natural male-female opposition as the defining principle of subject formation" (Hollinger 12). As discussed both in this subchapter and the previous one, *Portrait* goes to great lengths to emphasize the importance of the agency and subjectivity of its central characters. This is especially clear in the case of Héloïse, who is framed and written in a way that challenges preconceived notions about both the female muse and the female love interest. However, it is also relevant to the character of Marianne, who manages to have success as an artist despite all the limitations put upon her as a woman, something I will pay more attention to in the final subchapter. This interest in representing female agency and subjectivity goes beyond the film's two leads, however. It also applies to several small moments that allow Sophie to assert her own perspective. We see this in the scene where the women discuss the "Orpheus and Eurydice"-myth (described in 1.3). There is also a subplot that follows Sophie getting an abortion, as well as a few small moments where the camera pays attention to her own artwork (in the form of cross-stitching). I will discuss both (especially the abortion subplot) in more depth in the next subchapter.

Hollinger has another reason for defending mainstream lesbian films: "Lesbian filmmakers need, however, to be given the opportunity to express through the medium of the popular as well as the avant-garde film a variety of lesbian experiences" (Hollinger 11). To quote Kobena Mercer again: "The question of enunciation (…) implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference" (Mercer 181). Questions of who gets to speak/create should be considered in analyzing art. Sciamma – an openly lesbian woman – having the chances to release a film to such critical acclaim and mainstream success is significant on its own already. Hollinger herself contends that the mainstream cinema can be just as rich in opportunities for representations of lesbian subjectivity as avant-garde films, because "[i]n the mainstream (…) context, in fact, this representation of a desiring lesbian subjectivity has the potential to offer an even stronger challenge to the conventional structures of film viewing" (Hollinger 12). We can also see here an echo of Zoe Dirse's assertion of what happens when marginalized groups gain more creative control in an industry (previously) dominated by a network of upper middle-class white men that is based on an "old boys club" mentality. Inclusion of previously the previously excluded requires " a shift in the gaze to reflect their point of view" (Dirse 19). While this is not a direct cause-effect dynamic, mainstream opportunities for marginalized creators do open up more possibilities for the expression of a greater variety of voices and ideas, while also communicating those ideas to a wider audience. Taking *Portrait* as an example, Sciamma's revisioning of the gaze in popular cinematic

storytelling was informed by her own identity as a queer woman wanting to tell stories about queer women. Changing established conventions requires such new perspectives.

Dirse concludes her essay on the role of female directors and cinematographers by stating that she believes "It is crucial for women to take control of their art (and, in my case, of the cinematic images that show the world who we are) in order to subvert patriarchal assumptions concerning gender" (Dirse 27). Céline Sciamma indeed takes charge of images that "show the world" who (queer) women are, but also tells a story that is in part about this process. We see both Marianne and Héloïse grow because of their romance, but also by how they assert themselves within the artistic process. This functions not just as a reflection of the way the film handles looking, but also points to one of its other themes. While there are now slowly coming more opportunities for creators from previously excluded and ignored groups to create art and find an audience, this of course does not mean that these groups did not express themselves before. People of all backgrounds have always tried to take control of their narratives and their art, even if they were forced to do it from the margins of history. It is these marginalized lives and experiences that Sciamma is particularly interested in. Madeline Pelling asserts that by "bring[ing] into focus a generative dialogue between art and lived, specifically lesbian, experience (…) [Sciamma] asserts the potential of cinema as a productively queer and art historiographical tool" (Pelling 1). This will be the main focus of the last section of this chapter.

1.5 Hidden Histories

Apart from raising questions about the construction of the gaze in film and painting, *Portrait* also reflects on art and storytelling in relation to history. Specifically, it works as a reminder that art can erase, but also bear witness to, marginalized histories. It can capture those people who and the topics which more official records (whether contemporary or historiographical) might look away from. In the film, paintings and drawings are able to represent and contain such lives either implicitly or explicitly. *Portrait* itself replicates this by shining a light on forgotten or ignored histories through the medium of cinema. Specifically, the film address the potential role of art in rectifying the erasure of queer love, female artists, and abortion as a historical fact. In this section, I look at how it does this. I start by looking at the film's representation of female artists by looking at the portrayal of Marianne. After this, I will analyze two scenes regarding the abortion subplot surrounding Sophie, followed by a short discussion of the role art plays in Sophie's characterization outside of this storyline. As a final

topic, I will discuss the film's approach to lesbian history through the lens of gender theorist Linda Garber's essay "Claiming Lesbian History: The Romance Between Fact and Fiction."

Céline Sciamma and cinematographer Claire Mathon have mentioned they took inspiration from female eighteenth-century artists like Marie Louise Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard and Marie-Guillemine Benoist[9]. The lives and work of these women are also what inspired the background of Marianne as a character. While the film clearly shows it was possible for women to live as artists, it also shows why so few of them have gained the historical acclaim of their male contemporaries. This has also been a topic of great interest within the field of feminist art history: "[T]wentieth-century art historians have sources enough to show that women artists have always existed, yet they ignore them." (Parker and Pollock 6). In the film, Marianne mentions the stricter rules for women, and how she sometimes has to turn in works under the name of her father – also an established artist – in order to have it shown in galleries. Having to rely on such (patriarchal) family connections was far from unusual for female artists of the time (Parker and Pollock 20). Despite Marianne's talent and dedication, her opportunities are limited at every turn – and she is a relatively privileged woman. The film reminds us that just because female artists were less likely to be recorded in art history, this does not mean they were not part of it. Similarly, the fact that women were so often cut off from the ability to pursue art as a career, does not mean they simply did not engage with art or that it had no role in their lives. In addition to professional female artists, there were the amateurs and hobbyists, the muses (who the film posits as collaborators), and of course: interpreters and admirers of all art forms. *Portrait* imagines how such a life could have been for a female artist, reminding us that that

> women in art do have a history, but a different one from the accepted norm, because of their particular relation to official structures and male-dominated modes of art production. For women artists have not acted outside cultural history, as many commentators seem to believe, but rather have been compelled to act within it from a place other than that occupied by men." (Parker and Pollock 13-14)

The fact that they were not always as visible, stems not from their nonexistence, but from specific choices made by art critics and historians about who did or did not deserve more than a mere glance.

Another "hidden history" that the movie draws attention to, is that of abortion. An

9 McNab, "*Portrait Of A Lady On Fire* director Céline Sciamma: "Cinema is a very misogynistic world.""

important part of the narrative that brings not only Marianne and Héloïse, but also them and Sophie closer together, is the subplot where the three women help Sophie end an unwanted pregnancy. When excessive movement and herbal remedies fail, they decide to go see a local medicine woman who can perform an abortion. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Sciamma explained that this element of the film was inspired by Annie Ernaux's autobiographical novel *L'Événement*[10]. The book is based on the illegal abortion Ernaux had in 1963: "In it, she mourns the lack of great works of art that affirm or even depict her experience. "I do not believe there exists a 'Workshop of the Backstreet Abortionist' in any museum in the world," she writes" (Syme "*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is more than a Manifesto on the Female Gaze"). It is this line that stuck with Sciamma, and this sentiment that we see reflected in the decision to include Sophie's storyline. The abortion scene itself is portrayed with a mixture of warmth and matter-of-factness. It takes place in a room lit mostly by a fireplace, the lighting – dimly lit backgrounds without too many colors or props, natural-looking light that focuses on the characters. This painterly visual framing is reminiscent of other indoor scenes, specifically the scenes in the kitchen or other moments of domestic work. This seems to equate the two, rather than placing emphasis on the abortion scene as something abnormal.

The scene plays out in a patient, mostly understated manner. Before the actual abortion takes place, some time is spent on one of the girls in the house helping Sophie undress, while another helps the abortionist as she disinfects her hands and prepares. Sophie has to lie down on a bed, where a few very young children are playing. As the abortionist starts her work, we view the scene from the side, seeing both women in profile. This is similar to the point of view of both Marianne and Héloïse, who are still in the room and watching from a distance. Marianne ends up turning her gaze away, but Héloïse notices and encourages her to 'look,' which she does. As Pelling puts it: "The film asks us to bear witness to such histories" (Pelling, 8). After that, the camera cuts to a view they cannot see, but that is still important: a medium close-up of Sophie's face as the abortion nears its end. We see her pained expression. A baby rolls over to lie next to her. Off-screen, the medicine woman tells her "There, it's over." Sophie looks at the baby, which is putting a tiny hand on hers, and starts to cry.

While the decision to include the children in the scene might seem a bit sentimental, it underlines that the caring for children (like the abortionist does) or being affectionate towards them (like Sophie is here) is not, and has never been, something that is mutually exclusive

[10] In 2021, a film adaptation of *L'Événement*, directed by Audrey Diwan, was released.

with the option of abortion. As mentioned, the visual language of the film does not portray the moment in a different light from other details of day-to-day life. That, combined with the characters' acceptance of the necessity of the abortion, shows that the film refuses to judge Sophie for this decision. To reduce this to an activist or political statement (even though it is, of course, also that) seems to undercut or simplify the presentation in some ways. The film does not judge Sophie, but it does not go out of its way to assert the moral good of abortion either. Instead, it presents the perhaps even more radical idea that it cannot be reduced to a moral question at all. It simply is a fact of life that has always existed and will always exist as long as pregnancies exist, whether it is illegal or not, socially acceptable or not – it simply has been and will be needed.[11]

The scene that follows both clarifies why Héloïse was so intent on Marianne not looking away, and brings to mind even stronger the Ernaux quote cited as an inspiration by Sciamma. Back at home, Héloïse initiates a recreation of the scene, with her posing as the abortionist. It is she who asks Sophie if she feels well enough to get up, who gets the matrass for her to lie on, and tells Marianne to "get her things". When the preparations are done, we cut to some moments later: a close-up of the figures Marianne is painting on a dark piece of wood. We can only see dark outlines and the broad strokes of color that Marianne has started to apply, but it is clear it is a representation of the scene Héloïse and Sophie are (re)creating in front of her, itself a reflection of the scene Héloïse and Marianne witnessed earlier that day. Pelling, in discussing this particular scene, has this to say: "Taking place at night and lit only by the crackling fire with painterly chiaroscuro, the scene is largely silent as questions of women's autonomy in bodily and artistic reproduction, and the generative nature of cinema in replicating an image within an image, are brought to the fore" (Pelling 9). We see the way the movie is about art and its qualities both as something that "sees" by pinning down a moment of history that might be swept away in official accounts. This, of course, does not extend to just painting. Although painting and writing are what we have from these historical periods themselves, cinema can give its own contemporary twist on the principle by re-imagining and recreating particular underrepresented stories. At its heart, the film is about making a place for these forgotten (hi)stories: those of queer love, of female artists, of female solidarity, and the right to bodily autonomy.

11 While I was writing the first draft of this chapter, horrifying anti-abortion laws are being passed in several American states. As I work on the final version, the American Supreme Court has overturned the protections of abortion offered by the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling. All this painfully reinforces how rare and important it is to have the matter-of-fact, unusually calm and unjudgmental representation of abortion we see here.

Marianne, Héloïse and Sophie are all characterized in part through their engagement with art and how this relates to their point of view in the world. I have discussed in-depth how Héloïse's agency is communicated through her interpretation of "Orpheus and Eurydice" and her artistic collaboration with Marianne. Creativity and self-expression are also part of the way that Sophie is characterized as a person in her own right, rather than only being tied to the main narrative by the abortion subplot. She interacts with the main themes by sharing her own responses during the reading scene, even though the film never adopts her subjective experience like it does with the two leads. There are also two moments in the film where the camera lingers on her own art project, a small piece of embroidery based on a bouquet of flowers. Parker and Pollock remark on the condescension that met most art deemed "feminine", both for its forms (like needle-work) as its topics, with one critic they quote specifically mentioning flower-painting as an example of "female taste" as opposed to "male genius" (13). They themselves praise the work of Mary Cassat for depicting such "feminine domestic activities" with much more nuance: "Cassatt manipulated space and compositional structure to endow what women did in the home with respect and seriousness, while at the same time being able to make us recognize the limitations resulting from the confinement of bourgeois women in the domestic sphere alone" (Parker and Pollock 41). It is easy to dismiss forms of creative expression such as embroidery as something women merely turned to since they were not given access to "real" artistic means. While it is important to recognize the limitations put on women's ability to make art, it is also past time to re-evaluate the artistry ascribed to these more "domestic" art forms. By letting Sophie's needlework quietly take its place as one of multiple ways of creative expression, *Portrait* echoes this idea.

Coming back to the Parker and Pollock-quote, It is worth noting here that Sophie is not bourgeois in the slightest. She is the maid of Héloïse and her mother. Throughout the film, Héloïse's mother is representative of the norms of the outside world. She is protective of her daughter, but also wants her to accept that she needs to get married. In the absence of Héloïse's mother, the three remaining women lose their most important connection to the rules and norms of regular society. The film visually indicates that Marianne and Héloïse threat Sophie as someone closer to a friend and equal than a servant: "Through a series of painterly tableaux in which the women work at the kitchen table, craft and search for plants amongst the dunes, the film makes visible the collapse of hierarchy as their rank and experiences outside of their immediate surroundings fall away" (Pelling 5). The camera giving attention to Sophie's embroidery in the same way it does so-called highbrow art (represented by painting), emphasizes this equality as much as the scenes of Marianne and

Héloïse helping out with domestic tasks like cooking. This can be explained by the film's emphasis on the value of solidarity between women who exist outside social norms. Considering Marianne's memory is the narrative framing for the majority of the story is also representative of how she remembers her time there. However, that does not change that the portrayal of class difference is a simplified one. Class hierarchies almost effortlessly evaporate: Pelling is right to describe the sense we get of this "narrow world" (mostly just the three woman inhabiting the house and immediate surroundings) as "largely without historical or material context" (Pelling 5). She seems to consider this a positive or neutral depiction. However, no person or place ever truly exists outside either material or historical context. For the romance between Marianne and Héloïse, this context is constantly present on the margins of the film in the form of Héloïse's future marriage, as well as Marianne's inevitable return to her normal life. There is no real equivalence of this acknowledgment for the class dynamics. A secluded, idyllic place that seems almost cut off from the rest world, can be a powerful narrative setting (as it is here). Yet, it also comes at the cost of exploring the theme of class through Sophie to the degree that the movie explores the limitations put on Héloïse and Marianne. It appears even a film like *Portrait* has histories it overlooks.

The second time we watch Sophie work, the flowers themselves are already wilting. It is her dedication and craft that keep them alive, at least in the form of an image. This relationship of art to hidden histories as well as personal meaning and memory comes to the fore most clearly in a scene near the end of the film. It takes place right after the portrait has been finished. Marianne and Héloïse are lying in bed, covered only in sheets, while Marianne is working on a miniature version of the portrait to keep for herself. Héloïse remarks that Marianne will be able to reproduce that portrait infinitely, until one day "You'll see her when you think of me." This seems to be a wistful rather than a critical remark, though, especially since she follows it with "I have no image of you." Marianne then asks Héloïse: "Do you want an image of me?". When she asks which image, Héloïse indicates she would like one of Marianne as she is right in that moment. Marianne then asks for the book Héloïse is currently reading (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and a page number. On the page Héloïse picks (28) is enough of a blank space that Marianne can create a small, secret nude portrait of herself. The scene "present[s] the small, private and peripheral space of the book as a receptive location for the rendering of [Marianne's] own image and, with it, her dual identity as both artist and queer woman" (Pelling 10).

Marianne's self-portrait comes to represent the hidden histories of women loving women in one of the last scenes of the film. The scene finds Marianne in an art gallery, where

one of her paintings is shown under her father's name. First, Marianne has a conversation with one of the many male visitors, admitting the painting – depicting Orpheus and Eurydice! – is hers. Then, the film cuts to a new shot of Marianne. We can see she is still in the gallery, the other visitors once again out of focus. She is reading a catalog, and we can see that there has to be something that catches her attention. The camera follows Marianne as she makes her way through the crowd. When we cut to the painting she is walking towards, at first it is obscured by the heads of other visitors. When these move, we can see that the painting is an new portrait of Héloïse, made by another artist. She is a few years older and has a young child by her side. We cut back to Marianne as she just looks at the painting, then back again to a close-up of Héloïse's painted face. The camera slowly pans down to the child – and to the book that Héloïse is holding. Anyone who is paying very close attention can probably make out the page number that is just visible from where Héloïse is holding her fingers between the pages, but it is not the main focus of the shot yet. This changes after another shot of Marianne's increasingly emotional expression, when we finally get an extreme close up that shows us it is page 28: the one with the nude self portrait of Marianne. We once more see Marianne's face, as she seemingly chokes back bittersweet tears, and starts to smile.

Here, within the seemingly heteronormative depiction of a nobleman's wife and their child, Héloïse has hidden a secret meaning: a reference to her love and attraction for another woman. Not only that, it is also a communication to Marianne – someone she likely knew might very well be in the same place as the portrait someday – that their relationship does still matter to her. It also functions as a reminder that, while Héloïse has once again been made into the "object" of a painting, this does not erase her subjectivity. She still exerts her own influence on the work's meaning: the muse retains her agency, even if the world might not acknowledge it. Pelling writes:

> The film returns again to its recurring interest in images within the cinematic frame. The painting, itself portrayed within the boundaries of the film, contains inside it another, queer artwork to which only Héloïse, Marianne and the filmic viewer are privy, hidden within the heteronormative and patriarchal image of a progenitive wife." (Pelling 12)

The image of herself that Marianne gifted to Héloïse is now not just hidden away in the copy of *Metamorphoses*, but also in this painting, as a private message communicated between the two women. Because Marianne knows how to decode the message Héloïse left her, she can find the queer meaning hidden underneath the veneer of heteronormativity of the gallery portrait.

Portrait's approach to representing the historical lives of queer women exhibits many of the qualities Linda Garber ascribes to lesbian historical fiction. Garber starts her article on the topic by saying that "[l]esbian history has always been a self-aware field of historiographical creation as much as historical discovery" (Garber 129). By this, she means a creative or imaginative element that stems from various obstacles lesbian history – or queer history in general – faces: "The historical records, if they exist at all, frustrate as often as they inform. Spotty, written by men, open to multiple interpretations—traces of a recognizably lesbian past run aground on the rocky shoals of the history of sexuality itself" (Garber 129). She also discusses how academic research runs into the issue of whether or not it is correct to use modern labels of sexuality on people that existed before those identities were constructed, and points out that novelists tend to be less constrained by such concerns. Since positive depictions of queer people have often been excluded or even violently erased from official accounts of history, Garber contends there is always a blurring of fact and fiction in LGBTQIA+ historical writing. The combination of a "yearning for lesbian history and the difficulty of finding it" (Garber 130) partially explains the appeal of lesbian historical novels. Garber writes that these novels can be based on extensive research, or on mere hints and crumbs within historical records. The gaps are as important as the facts: "The only way for modern lesbians to assemble a complete picture of our past has been to search out the fragments and inventively fill in the blanks" (Garber 134).

While Garber's own case studies include heavily metafictional texts (like Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*), she also includes more conventional ones. Reminiscent of Hollinger's hesitation at dividing lesbian cinema into (subversive) avant-garde and (normative) mainstream films, Garber questions the usefulness of the opposition between postmodern and realist lesbian historical fiction. Both are "less interested in finding the truth than in questioning 'whose truth gets told' " (Garber 135), even if the former tends to engage with these themes more explicitly than the latter. As a result, Garber argues that "the dichotomy of postmodern versus realist lesbian historical fiction is an unproductive one. Readers and writers know that the lesbian historical novel is a flight of fancy, whether or not its historiographical mechanisms are laid bare" (Garber 137). The texts Garber discusses tend to make very explicit the interplay between contemporary queer culture and its search for a past and the actual past that may or may not have been. This can mean that researching the historical archive plays a central role in the story, or it can mean that the present meets the past in the form of fantastical interventions (like ghosts or time travel). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* does not include a character analogue for modern day queer women, but it is still an

example of the type of historical fiction Garber analyzes. We know the film is fiction. Yet, we are also aware it is possible for queer romances like this to have existed throughout history. That we do not always have evidence of them does not indicate there are no such histories to begin with. Through its exploration of this hidden history and several others, *Portrait* posits that historiography is one form of representation of many, and therefore is subject to similar limitations as any form. Like Garber argues of lesbian historical fiction, the film presents the question of "whose truth gets told" (135) in accepted versions of history. *Portrait* puts up artistic and fictional representation as something that does not have to be the opposite of historiographical evidence. Instead, it can be used to fill in the archival gaps that historiography has to contend with. This statement comes through in the role art – especially painting – plays in the narrative, but also in the way Sciamma formally subverts expectations of cinematic storytelling. By having the traditional visual medium of painting in conversation with the modern visual medium of film, perhaps *Portrait* has found its own way to represent the meeting of past and present after all.

Chapter Summary and Conclusion

I started out by stating that *Portrait* has been lauded for its construction of a "female gaze", but that I think there are not enough in-depth analysis of what this means for either the film or gaze theory. I wanted to look at what kind of gaze it constructs and what this communicates to the audience. I argue the film posits that the gaze does not have to rely on a subject-object relationship. Instead, the film constructs a gaze that springs from two subjects exchanging looks, with both their subject-positions becoming available to the audience. From that, I moved on to the reflections the film has to offer on historiography and art's potential role in making up for archival gaps. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* purposefully centers the kind of stories and people that have often been excluded and erased from historical record. While art can be an accomplice in this, the film shows it can also be a potential remedy. It is a reminder that these (hi)stories cannot be erased completely. Like the page number 28 in the last painting we see in *Portrait*, they might be hidden in plain sight. You just have to learn where – and *how* – to look.

Chapter 2

In the Dream House

Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* confronts the gaps of history and vocabulary that come not just with oppression, but with the taboos that might exist within an oppressed group itself. Recounting the time she spent in a relationship with an emotionally and psychologically abusive woman, Machado searches for a way to tell her story even though it does not line up with dominant narratives about either abuse or queer/lesbian relationships. The book is divided into five parts, each chronicling a different stadium of the relationship. The "Dream House" from the title is a reference to the actual house where Machado's partner lived, which becomes a metaphorical representation of the relationship. The book's short chapters are each titled "Dream House as […]", filling in the blank with different tropes, genres, stories, etc. By presenting her experiences to the reader through all these different lenses, Machado tries to find a common vocabulary for something that is (due to its taboo nature, its link to trauma, and the lack of an "archive") seemingly unrepresentable. In this way, *Dream House* is as much a story about abuse as it is one about the possibilities and limitations of storytelling and language. My main goal within this chapter is to analyze the ways in which *In the Dream House* uses unconventional narration and intertextuality to engage with – and perhaps overcome – such gaps in archives and (cultural, social) vocabularies.

In the Dream House is an important work of recent queer literature, both because of the topic it addresses as well as the innovative form in which it does so. Apart from writing on queer archives and queer memoir, I will use sources relevant to specific histories or genres when an example requires it. To start, I will elaborate on the relationship between queer theory/history and the archive, as well as some writing on queer memoir in relation to this topic. These will form a theoretical backbone for most of this chapter. I will then take a look at one of the book's most unconventional features: it's use of second-person narration and the kind of relationship this creates with the reader. Then, I will discuss the major role intertextuality plays in *In the Dream House*. For the final subchapter before the conclusion, I will use Faye Chisholm's Guenther's concept of Text-as-Record to argue in favor of *Dream House*'s own archival value.

2.1 The Archive and Queer Memoir

While a broad, simplified definition of the archive (as a repository or collection of artifacts and/or documents) might be a good starting point, the actual meaning of the archive as a concept is subject to much debate. Different disciplines apply different theories and different nuances to their notion of what the archive is and how it works. In "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines", Marlene Manoff, Associate Head and Collection Manager of MIT Humanities Library, collects several influential insights on the topic. I will quickly repeat a few main ones here. Manoff discusses Derrida and how "[his] work has contributed to scholarly recognition of the contingent nature of the archive – the way it is shaped by social, political, and technological forces. If the archive cannot or does not accommodate a particular kind of information or mode of scholarship, then it is effectively excluded from the historical record" (Manoff 12). She also mentions Foucault's understanding of the archive as "what he calls "the system of discursivity" that establishes the possibility of what can be said" (Manoff 18) and mentions his relevance to the scholarly awareness of "the relationship between information gathering and political power" (Manoff 15).

Both of these insights are essential to critiques that challenge the presumed objectivity of the archive, as "[m]any researchers also have made the case that archives are not neutral or innocent" (Manoff 14), since "[w]hatever the archive contains is already a reconstruction" (Manoff 14). This also raises "questions about the truth claims of archival material" (Manoff 14). Rather than render archival efforts useless, such questions provide new approaches towards them. Manoff gives women's studies and postcolonial studies as examples of disciplines where "[t]he suspicion of archives is especially strong" (Manoff 15). Both fields of study attempt to write marginalized groups "back into the historical record—to fill the gaps and correct the omissions in the archive" (Manoff 15). Another such field of study would of course be queer studies. Queer history would be an example of a gap within historical record, as would the recognition of abuse victims. It is at the intersection of those archival gaps that *In the Dream House* can be placed, as I will show in this chapter.

In the prologue to *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado explicitly situates herself within larger conversations surrounding queer history and representation, specifically a conversation surrounding archive and evidence. She writes about the concept of archival silences: "sometimes stories are destroyed, and sometimes they are never uttered in the first place; either way something very large is irrevocably missing from our collective histories (…) What is placed in and left out of the archive is a political act, dictated by the archivist and

the political context in which she lives" (Machado 4). Machado does not just have to contend with those difficulties regarding queer history, but with the archival gaps surrounding abuse as well: "The abused woman has certainly been around as long as human beings have been capable of psychological manipulation and interpersonal violence, but as a generally understood concept it – and she – did not exist until about fifty years ago. The conversation about domestic abuse within queer communities is even newer, and more shadowed" (Machado 5). It is this cultural conversation or archive that Machado wants to add her story to, something which she explicitly names an archival effort: "I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and that it can look something like this. I speak into the silence" (Machado 5).

As can be gleaned from Manoff's text, this idea of archival silence is a recurring theme within studies of the archive, especially from the point of view of the Humanities. Machado herself cites or mentions several scholars in her introduction. Especially relevant to the themes she addresses (and is quoted in later chapters as well) is queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. The quote is an abbreviated version from a passage from Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, which I have instead quoted in full here for its relevance to the themes I will address throughout this chapter:

> Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. Historically, evidence of queerness has been used to penalize and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts. When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present, who will labor to invalidate the historical fact of queer lives—present, past, and future. (Munoz, 92)[12].

Machado elaborates: "What gets left behind? Gaps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence" (Machado 4-5). It is this type of silence that, with her memoir, she attempts to break. Because Machado places her own work so specifically within this archival tradition I will use writing on queer memoir and the archive as an overarching theoretical framework throughout this chapter. While some specific close-readings might require other analytical tools or theories as well, this idea of the memoir's archival function will be what ties these separate elements together. Specifically, I want to look at *In the Dream House* through the lens of what Ann Cvetkovich, an English Literature scholar specialized in

[12] Epub edition.

Gender Studies, calls an "archive of feelings". I will also look at how its ways of creating meaning and affect compare to strategies in queer memoirs analyzed by literature scholars Faye Chisholm Guenther and Meghan C. Fox. After explaining these three concepts and their relevance to this chapter, I will analyze several notable fragments and chapters from Machado's memoir.

Ann Cvetkovich has written about the archive of feelings multiple times, most notable in her book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* (2003), and in her essay "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture" (2002), elements of which would make it into the final chapter of *Archive*. Cvetkovich pays attention to the role of affect within the archive. This prioritizing of affective power over factual information is not just a response to the "archival silences" in queer history, but also of particular relevance to queer archives, which have to "preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling" (Cvetkovich, "Archives", 110). Topics like love, sexuality, identity and activism are difficult to turn into conventional archives. That is not even counting the aforementioned struggles with erasure and destruction such archival efforts face. This "traumatic loss of history" (Cvetkovich 110) is something that these archives have to address next to the other traumas that come with archives that have to grapple with oppression and discrimination. In order to capture personal and emotional lives as well as larger historical movements and events, the role of affect cannot be overstated. This means that documents and objects can be relevant not for the information they contain, but because of the responses they create in the audience. The attention to affect also attempts to convey elusive yet essential elements of the documented lives that cannot be understood through factual report alone. Cvetkovich's writing is relevant to this chapter mainly because of her insistence on the value of "archives of emotion and trauma" (Cvetkovich 110), which provides a valuable lens through which to read Machado's memoir. Apart from that, there is also a smaller element of Cvetkovich' larger argument: her attention to the role of (reworking) pop culture within queer cultural works with an archival impulse.

Intertextuality plays a large part in what Meghan C. Fox calls "Metamodernist Memoirs." As the name implies, the type of intertextuality central to these texts does not so much concern pop culture but the modernist literary canon. Fox takes the term "metamodernism" from English Literature scholars David James and Urmila Seshagiri, who locate in contemporary literary novels certain efforts to "reassess and remobilize narratives of modernism" (qtd in Fox 513). This includes the use of modernist aesthetics as well as explicit references to books or authors. However, Fox argues that James and Seshagiri make a mistake

in only focusing on the novel. She wants to remedy this by showing the usefulness of analyzing contemporary memoir through this "metamodernist" lens, specifically by analyzing Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*. While *In The Dream House* does not draw on modernism primarily, there are a lot of similarities between its use of intertextuality and the way Bechdel combines different types of "archives" (in her case, modernist and familial – Fox 514-15). Both writers draws on familiar stories, tropes and genres in a way that "queers their narratives" (Fox 514) and each woman "uses fiction to communicate the veracity of her own experience more fully (…) meld[ing] fact and fiction to reveal rather than conceal" (Fox 515). Cvetkovich, too, has written about *Fun Home,* calling it an example of an archive of feelings because of the way Bechdel incorporates, through her drawings, an archive of documents and objects that matter "not merely for the information they contain but because they are memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past" (Cvetkovich "Drawing the Archive" 120). While *In the Dream House* and *Fun Home* are very different in both subject matter and form, these analyses still provide a good comparison for their in-depth look at how creative autobiography can allow authors to confront difficult and even taboo topics through intertextuality. Both *Dream House* and *Fun Home* rework existing canonical texts and wider generic tropes to create a vocabulary for something that they have been taught to be silent about.

In "Archives, Creative Memoirs, and Queer Counterpublic Histories: The Case for the Text-as-Record" Faye Chisholm Guenther makes the case for the (queer) creative memoir as literary archive. She uses the term 'creative memoir' because "it indicates how these literary texts move outside the traditional boundaries of memoir, blur the borders between fiction and non-fiction, and experiment with the role of the author as a character within the text" (Guenther 76). Her main argument is that these types of memoirs "function as archival records by making material experiences and material relations of counterpublic culture visible and traceable, through representations of queer space" (Guenther 76). She names these kinds of records "text-as-record" to emphasize their constructed, personal nature. The three memoirs she discusses – Eileen Myles' *Inferno (A Poet's Novel),* Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, and David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* – all record life in New York based queer spaces that have since disappeared due to the AIDS crisis and gentrification. Machado's memoir covers a very different topic – most notably, one that is very clearly situated in intimate and private, personal spaces rather than public ones. Yet there is enough overlap for Guenther's analysis to be useful here, in order to look at divergences as well as similarities. And there are similarities: the emphasis on

affect and experimentation with the autobiographical form, but perhaps most notably, the acknowledgment of the value of the memoirs as records. Machado explicitly tells the reader she "speak[s] into the silence" of the archive (Machado 5). Similarly, Guenther declares that "the authors of the creative memoirs understood themselves to be keeping records and leaving traces behind through their writing. They viewed their personal documentation of experience as creative and part of their self-definition" (Guenther 82).

Together, these texts provide me with tools and concepts surrounding queer archives and creative memoir. These will form the basic framework for me to analyze how *In the Dream House* "speak[s] into the silence".

2.2 The Use of Second-person Narration

One of the most surprising narrative techniques employed in *In the Dream House* is the use of second-person narration (where the protagonist is referred to as "you"). This is unusual even for novels, but especially for autobiography or memoir. It is not the case for every single chapter, but it is for the majority of them.

The book starts out using the first person narration that we are used to when reading memoirs. The first real chapter, "Dream House as Not a Metaphor" also addresses a "you", but is still clearly narrated by an "I" (Machado). This makes this "you" different from the one we find throughout most of the book. "Not a Metaphor" opens with the lines: "I daresay you have heard of the dream house? It is, as you know, a real place" (Machado 9). After a description of the house, it is revealed that this chapter's narratee is not the protagonist but the reader: "I bring this up because it is important to remember that the Dream House is real. It is as real as the book you are holding in your hands, though significantly less terrifying" (Machado 9). After that, "Dream House as Picaresque" describes Machado's own living situation before the relationship. "Dream House as Perpetual Motion Machine" relates a childhood memory. The chapter starts out with first-person narration, but addresses a "you" once again in the final lines. This reads more as an ambiguous "you", however, as the narration shifts from a use of "us/ours" to "you": "And the same way the dandelion's destruction tells us about ourselves, so does our own destruction: our bodies are ecosystems (…) If you could harness that energy – that constant, roving hunger – you could do wonders with it" (Machado 13).

There is a clear shift in the following chapter, which is underlined by its title: "Dream House as Exercise in Point of View." Once again, the narrating "I" addresses a "you", but *this*

"you" is neither generalized nor the reader. It is instead a version of the author-narrator herself: "You were not always a You. I was whole (…) and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved: a neat lop that took first person – that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer – away from second, who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog" (Machado 14). The "I" disappears from the page for most chapters after this one. While the set-up in this chapter leaves the "I" implied as a narrator, the second-person narration is central to the majority of the book. It is not until the fifth and final (and shortest) part of the book that the first-person narration takes over again in the majority of chapters.

Unlike second-person narration, addressing the reader in memoir is far from unusual. Guenther mentions it while discussing the "creative memoirs" by queer authors, when she talks about how all three writers whose work she analyses "engage the readers directly" (Guenther 85). Eileen Myles' *Inferno* does this "as if in animated conversation" (85), while in Samual R. Delany's *Times Square* "the reader is addressed directly as if we are (…) right beside the narrator, in medias res, on the street" (85-86). Meanwhile, David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* employs a direct address which "carries more heightened emotional tones of anger and grief. In a moment of hopelessness and despair, Wojnarowicz expresses a sense of being betrayed by the reader of his creative memoir, as though he feels he has become an object of the voyeurism through his narrative of dying" (Guenther 86). The author actively "intervenes in the reader's ability to relate passively to his descriptions of the AIDS epidemic and other forms of suffering and injustice. In the midst of anger he urges political action and social protest" (86). While the reader-narratee in the first chapter of *In the Dream House* might function in a similar way to these examples, the "you" addressed in the majority of the book is something different altogether. Instead, this "you", as well as the rarer "I", in *Dream House* exemplifies the way memoirists can "create themselves as characters in the non-fiction of their texts" (Guenther 86). Machado does this to a more extreme degree than the authors Guenther discusses, since she creates not just one character-version of herself, but (at least) two. The book appears as a conversation between this first and second person point of view, the former both telling the story of and addressing the latter. That does not mean the reader is not addressed in a meaningful way by this use of second-person narration. The *Washington Post* book review draws attention to the complex, layered nature of the narration:

> To understand how *In the Dream House* lures the reader along Machado's trajectory from falling in love to reeling with horror, consider its perspectives. The "I" who narrates *In the Dream House* is writing from the present day,

> when she is safe, cherished and married to another woman. But this "I" is a center that could not hold under the pressure of abnegation her first girlfriend forced upon her slowly, in escalating stages, while they attended graduate school. So Machado's perspective shatters into a self-reflexive "you" through which readers haunt the humiliation of her besieged past self, compelled by direct address to understand how they, too, might fall prey to such degradation. (Kristen Millares Young, November 5, 2019)

Young indicates both the relation to the reader and the way the narration represents Machado's trauma. The exact addressee of (literary) second-person narration is often difficult to pinpoint, as well as its actual effect on the reader. Most of the writing on second-person narration focuses on its use in fiction. Cultural theorist and narratologist Jarmilla Mildorf writes that while "[l]iterary second-person narration is said to involve readers in a special way by at least temporarily implicating them in the fictional storyworld" (Mildorf 145), a lot of academic writing makes the mistake of not considering fully the way the second-person is part of a larger linguistic whole. Her own hypothesis is that it is "its occurrence in and its interplay with a given discourse context" (Mildorf 146) that determines what kind of involvement second-person narration encourages and to what degree. She continues to argue that there are different kinds of involvement that second-person narration encourages, depending on linguistic and semiotic context. This leads her to distinguish between two types: aesthetic-reflexive involvement and affective-emotional involvement. The former "denotes a more intellectual response to, and pleasure taken from, the (often postmodern) playfulness of you-narration, whereas the latter is close to what is otherwise labelled as 'empathy'" (Mildorf 148). She also argues that the aesthetic-reflexive involvement is more related to the communicative aspect of second-person narration, while with the affective-emotional kind, the immersive aspect is more important.

The aesthetic-reflexive mode of involvement deliberately plays with the expectations set up by the communicative aspect of second-person narration. Mildorf explains that "you" in everyday conversational usage almost always has a clear referent, or is used as a generic you, the difference between which can often easily be distinguished by the listener. However, "[i]n literary *you*-narration, the referent of *you* need not be clear at all, and it is safe to assume that authors experimenting with this form deliberately play with the potential ambiguity of *you*" (Mildorf 149, emphasis original). Where Mildorf distances herself from previous writing on the role of communicative processing in second-person literary narration, is that she grants a greater degree of active awareness to the reader in this process:

> I would contest Bortolussi and Dixon's claim that 'communicative processing is central to processing narrative' (p.72) or at least to the generalization that this should be the case for each and every reader to the same degree. After all, is it not equally possible to assume that (some) readers might be aware of the fact that, in reading fiction, the text at hand is different from, say, the stories told in conversational storytelling and even more so from other discursive genres used in face-to-face communication (see Mildorf, 2014)? (Mildorf 150)

She argues that this awareness is exactly what allows literary texts to play with that ambiguity by encouraging the reader to adopt shifting positions. As an example, she analyzes the opening subchapters of her case study, Mohsin Hamid's 2013 novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. While the novel's title and second-person narration are clear references to self-help books, Mildorf argues readers know they are not the addressee the way they would be in that genre, because they know they are reading an imitation. Yet, the opening of the book keeps shifting the likelihood of whether the "you" refers to the protagonist, addresses the reader, or if there is another implied addressee altogether:

> Look, unless you're writing one, a self-help book is an oxymoron. You read a self-help book so someone who isn't yourself can help you, that someone being the author (…) This book is a self-help book. Its objective, as it says on the cover, is to show you how to get filthy rich in rising Asia. And to do that, it has to find you, huddled, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother's cot one cold, dewy morning. (qtd in Mildorf, 150).

The opening lines might still appear to address the reader, but increased diegetic detail makes that less and less likely. Instead, "[t]he 'you' at the beginning of Hamid's novel reminds one of generalized or generic you, which (…) presents an event or a situation the way everyone or no-one in particular could experience it (Zobel, 2014)" (Mildorf 152). This also creates a more conversational tone of writing. Mildorf argues that this unstable nature of the 'you' in the text is a strength rather than a weakness. She explains that "…it is the potential pleasure readers derive from (…) identifying the multiple positions they are assigned by means of 'address' in Hamid's novel (…) that contributes to what I call *aesthetic-reflexive involvement*" (Mildorf 153, emphasis original).

Her other category, affective-emotional involvement, refers to the possibility of the second-person narration to immerse the reader in the world of the protagonist. Here, there is less room for ambiguity: it is often clear that the "you" is the protagonist. The situations the "you" finds themselves in are too specific to be ascribed to the reader. This is where the

importance of linguistic context comes in for Mildorf. She elaborates by turning again to Hamid's novel. This time she analyzes an excerpt from the ending, where the 'you' is referring to the (dying) protagonist: "Until one day you wake up in a hospital bed, attached to interfaces electrical, gaseous, and liquid (…) and you are ready, ready to die well, ready to die like a man, like a woman, like a human, for despite all else you have loved" (qtd in Mildorf, 154). Mildorf argues readers "may become emotionally involved because the very idea of dying may get to them (…) Linguistically, readers' *affective-emotional involvement* at this point may well be triggered by the repetition of the verb 'die' (…) and the 'brain, which will soon cease to function' " (Mildorf 155, emphasis original). Based on research and her own analysis, she concludes that "emotional responses to you-narration (…) may well be responses to the linguistic environment of you as much as to the second-person pronoun itself" (Mildorf 155). She does not clearly specify what makes this type of involvement with second-person narration differ from, say, emotional response to reading a first-person narrative. I would argue that while Mildorf is right in her assessment that there are different types of involvement that writing on second-person narration conflate too often, they are not as easily distinguished as she makes it appear. Or rather, they can influence and strengthen each other, even if at first glance it might seem like the post-modern playfulness of aesthetic-reflexive involvement and the immersive nature of affective-emotional involvement are at odds with each other. I hope to show this in my analysis of the use of second-person narration in *In the Dream House.*

In her conclusion, Mildorf adds the caveat that second-person narration might make readers feel alienated rather than involved due to the uncommon nature of second-person narration. For the reader of *In the Dream House*, the second-person narration might come as a (confusing) surprise or even a shock, because it is something so completely unexpected in a memoir. I would argue that this strangeness works in the book's favor. The unusual nature of the narration might make the reader feel alienated, but, paradoxically, also encourages them to identify with the "you". This interplay between alienation and identification fits with Machado's description "of having first person cleaved from second", of addressing a past version of herself that she both does and does not recognize as *her*. While the "you" featured in most of the book is the protagonist/Machado and not the reader, the fact that the first chapter does address the reader as "you" is a reminder that the reader *could* be the addressee. By underlining these multiple possibilities of "you", the narration makes use of both the ambiguous and specific qualities of this mode of direct address. Aesthetic-reflexive

involvement and affective-emotional involvement seem to interlock here more than in the examples Mildorf gives.

While second-person narration might be unusual for memoir, it is not unheard of in other forms of writing (outside of the novel). Two *Dream House* chapters are named after genres for which second-person narration is actually the expected convention: self-help and choose-your-own adventure. "Dream House as Choose-Your-Own-Adventure" is a seemingly straightforward adaptation of the format that features the second-person narration. "Dream House as Self Help Bestseller" plays with expectations set by both the genre reference as well as the memoir's own established conventions, by being one of the chapters that does not feature second-person narration at all.

The seemingly straightforward adaptation of the choose-your-own-adventure format is complicated by various factors. The chapter takes up several pages but each of these contain only a line or a short paragraph, at the end of which the reader is directed to another page. Of course, finding these conventions in a literary memoir actually makes for a reading experience that is anything but straightforward. To start, this format again heightens the ambiguity of the you-narration. Encouraging the reader to make choices about how said story continues emphasizes the reader's status as potential addressee, even if the story is not actually about them. Of course, the freedom to decide the way the story progresses in choose-your-own-adventure books is mostly illusionary, due to the limited number of options as well as the fact that each possible development has been planned in advance. The shortness of the *Dream House* chapter increases these qualities, but not to its detriment. On the contrary: this paradoxical element of choose-your-own-adventure books and -games allows the chapter to address the complex nature of agency in abusive relationships. I will now show this in my analysis of the chapter.

One of the ways it addresses this theme is by making the choices feel even more limited than the chapter's genre or length imply, by adding repetition. The scene that is (most likely) the second-to-last that the reader encounters, is an exact copy of the scene that opens the chapter. In this scene, the protagonist wakes up feeling calm and happy and is immediately confronted by her angry and accusatory partner: "When you turn over, she is staring at you (…). You don't remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly. 'You were moving al night,' she says. 'Your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake.' " (Machado 162/175). The only difference is that the second version changes one of the options and page directions. The first two options for both scenes lead to pages that describe further scenes of verbal abuse by the partner and the increasing self-doubt felt by the protagonist. The

final option for the first version is: “If you tell her to calm down, go to page 166.” This directs the reader to a page that says: “Are you kidding? You’d never do this. Don’t try to convince any of these people that you’d stand up for yourself for one second. Get out of here” (Machado 166). The only direction given is for the page that starts the next chapter.

The repeated version of the opening scene ends with another option: one where the protagonist gets up and immediately leaves in her car. This leads to the chapter’s “true” final page (though 166 is also a final page of sorts), which reads: “That’s not how it happened, but that’s okay. We can pretend. I’ll give it to you, just this once” (Machado 176). Both “satisfying” endings, where the protagonist either stands up for herself or leaves her toxic situation, are called out for being fake. Meanwhile, the only alternative would be to return to the opening scene again and again, without real reprieve. The Choose-Your-Own-Adventure format is used to address themes of agency. It contrasts the feeling of the reader (who might think they have more options, or might believe they would, in a similar situation, know when to leave) with those of the protagonist, who feels like she cannot change her situation at all.

The ambiguity of the “you” in this specific chapter is underlined by the way that some pages clearly seem to address Machado the protagonist, or even Machado the writer. The line “Don’t try to convince any of these people that you’d stand up for yourself for one second” (Machado 166) makes the most sense if it is read as a message from Machado, the (implied) narrating “I” we see a few times in the novel, criticizing herself for writing down a lie, with “these people” being the readers. At the same time, if one reads through the book in linear fashion, there are three pages that seem to address the reader. If you follow the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure style directions, these pages would end up getting skipped. Two of the pages take up an admonishing tone, one that mirrors the inner monologue of the protagonist throughout the chapter. The first reads: “Here you are; a page where you shouldn’t be. It is impossible to find your way here naturally, you can only do so by cheating. Does that make you feel good, that you cheated to get here? What kind of person are you? Are you a monster? You might be a monster” (Machado 165) before directing the reader to the next chapter. The third seems to accuse readers less of cheating and more of harboring false hopes: “Did you think that by flipping through this chapter linearly you’d find some relief? Don’t you get it? All of this shit already happened and you can’t make it not happen, no matter what you do” (170). This page redirects the reader back to the middle of the chapter, keeping them trapped within its (unchanging) cycle. It is the second of these pages that breaks with the hopeless tone of the chapter a little bit, at least for the reader – though that comes at the cost of narrator

putting herself down (again): “You shouldn’t be on this page (…) You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You’re smarter than me” (Machado 167).

Through the way it engages with themes of agency and its blurring of protagonist and reader, this chapter reinforces the idea that the second-person narration puts the reader in the shoes of a victim of emotional abuse, even though it is clearly telling Machado’s own story. We can see the way Mildorf’s two categories of involvement overlap here. On one hand, the ambiguous, layered nature of the you-narration is emphasized. At first the second-person narration encourage a more aesthetic-reflexive mode of engagement due to the play with form, address and genre. Yet, the affective and emotional qualities still are central to the role since the reader is asked to imagine themselves in the place of the protagonist. The way the reader is affected by the text and the way they relate (on an emotional level) to the protagonist is heightened rather than barred by the interplay between disconnect and immersion that the second-person narration encourages.

If the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure chapter seems (at surface level) to fit with its referenced format, “Dream House as Self-Help Best Seller” goes in a very different direction. In a twist on expectations set both by the referenced genre and *In the Dream House* itself, is one of the few chapters with first-person narration. As this “I”, Machado tells about finding writing and statistics about lesbian abuse. She details how her first response was one of shock and disbelief:

> It was a terrible thing to discover that I was common (…) because I wanted to believe that my love was unique and my pain was unique, as all of us do (…). But then I opened book after book about lesbian abuse and saw pseudonymed women regurgitating everything that had happened to me. There is a pie chart that encompasses those years of my life. A pie chart! (Machado 232)

The shocked disbelief that this information is out there makes place for a wish that this knowledge was more common, most importantly: that it was something Machado herself had possessed when she was younger. There might not have been as much information then, but there was some. Then again, she muses, there was no one to tell here since she knew so few fellow queer people. This leads her to imagine herself taking on that role in someone else’s life, “…I invite young queers over for tea and cheese platters and advice, and I will be able to tell them: you can be hurt by someone who looks just like you” (Machado 232). This chapter showcases both the way the book’s narration as well as the chapter titles play with reader’s expectations, encouraging them to think about the interaction between title and content. Because the book has employed second-person narration for most chapters, and because self-

help literature usually addresses the reader, it seems the obvious choice for this particular chapter. What does the choice for first-person narration tell us instead? And in what way can the chapter be read as a self-help book?

The easy answer is that Machado discusses an episode from her recovery, and chapters that take place (long) after the Dream House relationship often use first person-narration. However, I would argue that avoiding the "obvious" choice of making "Self-help" one of the chapters with second-person narration, makes the question of the chapter's relation to the genre more complex. What themes or topics does it address that make this genre an appropriate way to frame what the chapter tells us? The chapter starts out with the narrator helping herself through the discovery and acceptance of the shared nature of her experiences. Second, as she puts it, she wants to provide "advice" to people who could end up in similar situations, in order to let them know that this is neither impossible nor shameful. There is a link to be made here to the reasons for writing the book that Machado states in the introduction. There, she says: "I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon" (Machado 5). In this chapter, she ends her imagined advice with the words: "Even if the dominant culture considers you an anomaly, that doesn't mean you can't be common, common as fucking dirt" (Machado 232). Similarly, her desire to be there to tell this story to someone who needs it, echoes the dedication that opens *In the Dream House*: "If you need this book, it is for you." The chapter emphasizes the book as an attempt to reach out and create recognition, community and solidarity in place of the isolation that Machado endured during and after her abusive relationship.

As I have established, for the majority of the book, it is clear by way of context that "you" refers to the protagonist (Machado), not the reader. Yet, a few rare chapters do directly address the reader. These reminders that the reader could be the one addressed as "you" ensure that this possibility is still implicitly present in the other chapters. As a result, readers are constantly encouraged to question their own relationship to the book and the circumstances described within it. Have they ever been in a similar situation? Could they be? Would they act or feel any different? This way of narrating that both does and does not address the reader has the potential to draw them in deeper, but also to alienate them due to the unusual form. This dual nature of the reader's (in)ability to relate to the protagonist mirrors the feelings Machado describes through her distinction of first- and second-person. The use of second-person narration might at first seem to mostly reflect Machado's sense of being alienated from her (former) self, or a way to distance herself from this elaborate

recounting of painful memories. Yet, I would contend that at the same time, it can also be read as an act of compassion from the narrator (the present self, "I"), to the protagonist (a past self, or a present self that is stuck in the past, "you"). As Machado explicitly sets out to tell other (potential) victims they are not alone, so does addressing an isolated, lonely "you" seem less alone, seen in a more understanding light by both her future-present self and the reader.

In outlining the archive of feelings, Ann Cvetkovich emphasizes the need for queer archives to "assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect" (Cvetkovich "Archives" 110). As a result, archival efforts need to consider a broader range of potential objects to include compared to more conventional archives. They need to capture emotions and experiences. In memoir, similar effects can be achieved by blurring the line between the author-protagonist and the reader. In the previous pages I have shown that while the reader-you and protagonist-you from *In the Dream House* are, on the level of context and knowledge, often clearly distinguished, this is not the case on the level of reader experience. Machado has created an unusual affective relationship between book and reader that makes accessible emotions and experiences that are usually private or even considered taboo. These feelings and experiences are part of what Machado "enter[s] into the archive."

2.3 Intertextuality

In many ways, *In the Dream House* is about the question of how you can tell your story when you have no previous examples, no "archive", to refer to. One way in which the book addresses this is through its use of intertextuality, which I will explore by first discussing a few different forms that intertextual references take within *In the Dream House*. In the final part of this subchapter, I will deepen this analysis by paying special attention to the way Machado positions her book within larger discourses about queer representation.

2.3.1: Different Types of Intertextual References

Genres as a Narrative Frame

The chapter titles immediately reveal the way Machado uses intertextuality to (re)frame her own story by adopting a wide range of genres. While each title follows the same formula, the exact nature of the intertextual reference and its relation to the content vary greatly. Some chapters describe Machado's personal life, mostly her memories of the abusive relationship.

Here, the titles function as a type of commentary: they are a way to recontextualize those memories (for example: “Dream House as Musical”, discussed below). Other chapters take the opposite route and mention the Dream House narrative barely or not at all. They are closer to short musings or essays on the topic the title alludes to (like “Dream House as Queer Villainy” discussed in 2.3.2). Here, the reader must use the book as a way to (re)frame said topic or genre, rather than the other way around. As mentioned before, Megan C. Fox’s discussion of *Fun Home* focuses on that memoir’s references to modernist literature, while Machado takes inspiration from a much broader archive. Yet, both use those references for similar purposes. Like Bechdel, Machado uses her various references as “a lens through which [she] frames her personal narrative” (Fox 514) and to “interrogate queer subjectivity” (Fox 515). We can see this in the way that, in many chapters, references to tropes or genres are used as metaphors and to draw emotional parallels. Two examples of this particular use of intertextuality are “Dream House as Haunted Mansion” and “Dream House as Musical”.

“Haunted Mansion” starts by asking what it means for a place to be haunted, and concludes it has to be steeped in tragedy: “Death, at the very least, but so many terrible things can precede death, and it stands to reason that some of them might accomplish something similar” (Machado 127). The comparison is then made more clear by a return to the main narrative: “You spend so much time trembling between the walls of the Dream House, obsessively attuned to the position of her body relative to yours…” (Machado 127). Yet, casting herself in the role of the haunted person, afraid to turn a corner lest something terrible happen behind it, is not the only move Machado makes here. The other meaning she ascribes to hauntings is “that metaphors abound; that space exists in four dimensions, that if you return somewhere often enough it becomes infused with your energy” (Machado 127). Considering the Dream House as a haunted house also leads her to the realization that she is “this house’s ghost (…) the one wandering from room to room with no purpose (…) After all, you don’t need to die to leave a mark of psychic pain. If anyone is living in the Dream House now, they might be seeing an echo of you” (Machado 127). The use of tropes and imagery from haunted house stories underlines to feelings of fear, unsafety and sadness, specifically in relation to a certain (living) space.

“Dream House as Musical” is less straightforward, using a more ironic approach to the title. It starts with the line “You do not realize how much you sing until she tells you to stop singing” (Machado 105) Instead of being filled with songs, the chapter describes how the protagonist is suppressing her urge to sing, and loses the joy she found in singing. A deeper connection can be made as well: in musicals, songs function as emotional and/or creative

expression. Stopping the protagonist in a musical from singing, is akin to taking away their ability to express themselves.

Reference as a Retelling

While a lot of chapters are named after fairly broad references, like genres, there are some that contain more specific ones. An example is "Dream House as Bluebeard", referring to the fairy tale of the same title. The most famous version of that French folktale follows a young woman who marries a nobleman. The nobleman gives her the keys to all the rooms of his house, telling her that she can open any door she wants except one. When the young wife breaks the rule and opens the door, she discovers the murdered corpses of his previous wives, whose fate the protagonist only narrowly escapes herself.

"Dream House as Bluebeard" starts with the line "Bluebeard's greatest lie was that there was only one rule" (Machado 59) and goes on to posit that said rule (to not unlock one particular door) was merely a test. Had the wife passed that test "there would have been some other request, a little stranger, a little stranger…" (Machado 59). Machado paints a gruesome picture where the story's protagonist is trapped in a situation that escalates in small steps, where she lets small insults slide while they grow bigger and bigger. Eventually, she "sat there and watched him spinning around the body of wife Number Four, its decaying head flopping backwards on a hinge of flesh" (Machado 59-60). The story of a woman escaping horrors becomes the story of someone trapped within them: a story about how a person can have their boundaries breached slowly over time until they do not guard them at all anymore. The closing lines of this chapter are also the final ones of *In the Dream House*'s first section. They give an idea of why someone might put up with mistreatment for (what appears to be) love: "This is how you are toughened, the newest wife reasoned. This is where the tenacity of love is practiced (…) you are being tested and are passing the test, sweet girl, sweet self, look how good you are; look how loyal; look how loved" (Machado 60). I intend to read this chapter as an example of a (queer) feminist fairy tale retelling.

Fairy tale retellings are a beloved subgenre for both feminist (Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*) and queer (Emma Donaghue's *Kissing the Witch*) writers. Machado is no stranger to this, often using motifs from myth, fairy tale or urban legend in her own short stories. An example of this is "The Husband Stitch", a story from her 2017 collection *Her Body and Other Parties.* Analyzing that particular story, Latin American scholar Mary Angeline Hood writes that it "uses urban legends to demonstrate the epistemological value of

storytelling in female experience and day-to-day survival" (Hood 989). In the story, the main character (re)tells urban legends in order to draw her own lessons from them, often related to gendered relationship dynamics and social norms. For Hood, Machado's writing shows how storytelling is central to a feminist epistemology in order to pass on emotional and experiential knowledge, which contemporary society regards as lesser as it is not based in science. In a footnote, Hood mentions that while she writes about "female experience", this "might easily be interchanged with "queer experience" as far as its opposition to patriarchal norms" (Hood 1002). She explains she chose to focus on the former within the scope of her paper, but that it is not meant as a generalization of the lives and experiences of actual people. Rather, it points to the presentation a form of "counter discourse" (Hood 989) that pass on certain types of knowledge based in lived experience instead of science. In the case of "The Husband Stitch," this knowledge relates to the dangers faced by a woman in a misogynistic world. *In the Dream House,* instead, focuses on how Machado has navigated the world as a queer woman who is also an abuse victim of another queer woman.

About the retellings Machado includes in "The Husband Stitch", Hood writes "These stories pass along the experiential knowledge gleaned from a woman's experience in a violent world in hopes of keeping other women safe and protecting them from danger" (Hood 992). Machado states in the introduction and in multiple chapters that she wrote *In the Dream House* with the intent to share her experiences and knowledge as a queer woman and domestic abuse victim. Taken as a standalone story, Machado's "Bluebeard" could almost fit in with the stories in "The Husband Stitch", which are macabre tales about unequal romantic and sexual relationships between men and women. Both contain gruesome retellings of tales and legends that could be seen as straightforward cautionary tales where women either die or barely escape certain death. Yet, the retellings also function as reinterpretations that muddle such simple readings of their originals. At first glance, the original "Bluebeard" can be seen as a story about curiosity almost killing the wife. Machado's alternative ending to the fairytale points to how the original folk tale could actually be read as the curiosity being her (literal) key to survival: the wife finding out about the fate of her predecessors saves her from ending up like them. Meanwhile, Machado's own version sees her obeying her husband and getting trapped in a terrifying situation. It paints a grim picture of the way toxic relationship can escalate.

"Dream House as Bluebeard" is very explicitly about domestic abuse, but where does the queer aspect come into it? The retelling itself is not explicitly queer. However, the most important factor the "Husband Stitch" tales and "Dream House as Bluebeard" have in

common is that they are *not* stand-alone stories. The tales in "The Husband Stitch" are mise-en-abymes for the main narrative (itself a folktale retelling). "Bluebeard" gains its meaning in large part through how it relates to *In the Dream House* as a whole. We know Machado is (re)telling this tale in the context of her own story, which is what gives the chapter more layers of meaning. The queer aspects of the *Dream House* narrative are not as explicit in the "Bluebeard" chapter, but they are always present in the reader's mind. This is what lends more meaning to the seemingly throwaway line where Machado criticizes the way some scholars take Bluebeards blue beard as an indication of a supernatural nature: "easier to accept than being brought to heel by a simple man. But isn't that the joke? He can be simple, and he doesn't have to be a man" (Machado 59). Looking at this chapter with a framework like the one Hood uses, it might tell us something about how women in relationships with women can face the same dangers as women in relationships with men. It also reminds us that there is no blueprint for what an abuser looks like – at most, there is a stereotype. This already makes it difficult for victims of male abusers to be believed – people often hate to think such a terrible thing of a normal, even likeable – "simple" – man. This difficulty increases for queer women abused by female partners, since they fit this conventional understanding of abuse even less. This will not just make it more difficult for them to find support, but also to recognize the warning signs to conceive of their situation as abusive.

Machado Investigating Her Own Relationship to Pop Culture

Pop culture often is an important part of an "archive of feelings" because in both "objects are not inherently meaningful, but are made so through their significance to an audience" (Cvetkovich, *Archive,* 188). This quality of pop culture is displayed in several chapters where Machado discusses Hollywood films and popular TV shows. Often, these gain a new layer of (personal) meaning when looked at through the lens of Machado's own story, and by putting them in the context of her memoir, these personal connections become available to her audience, as well.

"Dream House as 9 Thornton Square" is about the 1944 George Cukor film *Gaslight* (a remake of a film from 1940, itself an adaptation of a play). The film is widely known for inspiring the name of a specific abuse tactic where the abuser purposefully makes the victim question their sanity. At the end of the chapter, Machado points out that many people who have not seen the movie (but have heard of it), misunderstand the husband's motivations. Rather than manipulating and tormenting his wife for the sake of it, he needs her distracted

while he searches the house for missing jewels. His motivations "are aggravatingly practical – driven by greed, augmented by a desire for control, shot through with a cat's instinct for toying with its prey. A reminder, perhaps, that abusers do not need be, and rarely are, cackling maniacs. They just need to want something, and not care how they get it" (Machado 94). Like with the "Bluebeard"-chapter, the frustrations with misconceptions about a fictional character refer to frustrations with popular misconceptions about the nature of abuse and abusers. Specifically, both chapters point to the dangers of underestimating the degree of banality that can be present in abusive relationships. Bluebeard can be just a simple man. The husband from *Gaslight* does not need to hate his wife, he just needs to see her as a means to an end rather than a person. The focus in *Gaslight* is not on physical violence, but psychological and emotional torment. Abusive behaviors and tactics that are not physical, are more normalized, and can be much easier to excuse – therefore making it harder to recognize how harmful they are. This means victims of emotional abuse especially have trouble having their experiences acknowledged as abuse at all, something Machado brings up throughout the book.

Unlike with her discussion of *Gaslight*, Machado refrains from active commentary in the chapter "Dream House as Five Lights." The title is a reference to the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Chain of Command, Part II", the plot of which is described in the chapter. In the episode, Captain Picard gets captured and tortured, with the intent of breaking his will and sanity. This is done by promising him relief from the pain if he admits to seeing five lights while being shown only four. At first glance, "Five Lights" seems not so much a reflection on the episode, but a straightforward recap of it. The chapter resonates with the other chapters *if* and *how* the reader lets it. Machado lets the scenes she describes speak for themselves. Their relevance shines through in both her selection and her description. She ends the chapter with Picard's troubled admission that he was going to say he saw five lights, and " '…more than that, I believed that I could see five lights.' His gaze rests, lost, in the middle distance" (Machado 156). There is no need to have seen the show itself for this to be effective (I have not). The chapter gets its meaning within the larger context of *In the Dream House*, not within the original context. The new context is specifically that of the third section from *In the Dream House*, which details some of the worst periods of the relationship. Without having to state it clearly, the mere inclusion of the episode summary in this context implies the ways it might have resonated with Machado's own experiences.

Providing new contexts for well-known stories allows for new ways of documenting various aspects of (queer) life, both good and bad. Cvetkovich writes: "[T]he queer dimensions of popular culture's presence in the archive are unpredictable because they are so

often not intrinsic to the object. As well, the powerful presence of popular culture in the archive of lesbian feelings offers models for the necessarily queer process of documenting forms of trauma" (188). Machado uses examples from pop culture to relate a new story to her audience. This not only provides Machado with a vocabulary to communicate experiences, but also makes *In the Dream House* a meditation on our relationship to pop culture and storytelling. The intertextual references provide Machado and her readers new ways to look at her experiences – but at the same time, Machado is also very aware of how her own experiences can be a type of interpretative framework. The intertextual references transform her personal story in different ways each new chapter, but her story also transforms those original texts through this interaction. By incorporating them in her own story, Machado makes them part of her own archive of feelings.

Intratextuality

Lastly, there are also chapters that mostly gain meaning through intra- rather than intertextual references. Whereas intertextuality refers to the way one text references other texts, intratextuality describes the references within a single text. In *In the Dream House*, three separate chapters are titled "Dream House as Deja Vu" – a title that makes more sense when you encounter it again (and again). This reveals that the chapters echo each other, having a very similar structure, with the contents growing from lovely too painful over the course of the book. The first describes an overwhelming, joyous feeling of being in love and feeling loved: "She loves you. She sees your subtle, ineffable qualities (…) Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the luckiest person in the whole world," (Machado 29). The second shows growing feelings of doubt: "She says she loves you. She says she sees your subtle, ineffable qualities. (…) Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the most scrutinized person in the world" (Machado 98). The final "Déjà Vu" reflects distrust and fear: "She says she loves you, sometimes. She sees your qualities and you should be ashamed of them (…) Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like she's determining the best way to take you apart" (Machado 181). The way these chapters build on each other reflect how the same relationship might gradually grow into something hurtful and destructive, that might feel completely unrecognizable yet familiar. This also underlines why someone might not realize they are in an abusive relationship until it is too late, and how someone's abuse and affection might form echoes of each other.

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While this is far from an exhaustive overview, it provides a solid insight into the varied and complex ways *In the Dream House* uses intertextual references. In her discussion of *Fun Home*, Megan C. Fox references T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in order to explain that "the literary canon is not an ossified collection of texts but a living body of literature that is constantly reshaped by the production of new literary texts. These new texts draw on and respond to the texts that came before them and likewise inflect these older texts with new meaning. *The intertextual relationship extends in both directions"* (Fox 512-13, emphasis mine). Machado enters into conversation with genre conventions and pre-existing texts in a way that interweaves them with the larger story of queerness and emotional abuse. She uses those texts as a prism through which to view her own story in different light throughout the different chapters, but at the same time, this new context refractures and reshapes the possible meanings of those earlier texts.

2.3.2 Reflections on Queer Representation

Another function of intertextuality is that it allows Machado to explicitly place her book within larger conversations. A couple of chapters also explicitly or implicitly raise questions about queer representation in pop culture. The chapter "Dream House as Queer Villainy" addresses the ambiguous relationship many queer readers/viewers have to queer(-coded) villains, and questions of how to tell challenging queer stories without dredging up said stereotypes. The chapter does not explicitly state its relationship to the main narrative of *In the Dream House*, but sees Machado reflect on the trope of the title. It is for the reader to make the connection to other chapters. I will use the villainy-chapter as my point of departure for a discussion of themes addressed in other chapters, after which I will return to "Queer Villainy" to take a deeper look at its inter- and *intra*textual meanings.

Machado opens the chapter by explaining her own complicated feelings about the trope: "I think a lot about queer villains, the problem and pleasure and audacity of them. I know I should have a very specific political response to them" (Machado 46). She gives some examples from Disney cartoons (like Ursula or Maleficent), contemporary TV (*Downton Abbey*) and classical Hollywood (*All About Eve,* Hitchcock's adaptation of *Rebecca*). The response she "knows she should have" is one of offense and anger, indignance. However: "[W]hile I recognize the problem intellectually (…) I cannot help but love these queer

villains" (Machado 46). This chapter's explicit intertextual references are the (mostly film) examples Machado mentions. Yet, by association it also calls back to a much larger conversation within both academic and fandom spaces. Reflections on queer villainy are all part of an ongoing discourse, as recounted by English scholar Koeun Kim in the essay "Queer-coded Villains (And Why You Should Care). The "problem" that Machado realizes on an intellectual level is "the system of coding, the way queerness and villainy become a shorthand for each other" (Machado 46). Similarly, Koeun Kim explains that "[t]he problem with queer coding villains is that it not only associates queer people with negative views about their intentions, but it quantifies stereotypical behavior with sexuality, and ties in gender deviance with evil" (Kim 162). This particular problem can persist with evil characters who are confirmed rather than coded queer.

At the same time, there is that ambivalence. Queer theory has a history of reading such characters "against the grain", finding ways to celebrate as well as critique them. They have also been long-standing fan favorites, especially (though not exclusively) among queer audiences. Writing about queercoded Disney villains, Mark Helmsing, a social scientist specializing in the history of education, explains their appeal to queer viewers – which lies mostly in their outsider status and a cynical attitude towards (hetero)normativity. These villains do not fit in with the fairy tale logic of their own universes: "the Disney diva villains queerly disrupt the normal order of things in the Disney universe. They teach us the limits of Disney's stifling social logic by unveiling the mechanisms by which these 'evil' characters are forced to survive in a world of social inflexibility" (Helmsing 67). They often do not conform to social norms because they are disillusioned with them.

Helmsing ascribes these villains the role of a teacher not just for showing this, but for finding fun in pointing it out: "Part of the transgressive queerness in Disney's diva villains comes through a hallmark of diva pedagogy: teaching us to be sassy. Through sarcasm, a diva (and queer) can cut through artifice, phoniness, and insincerity, by turning insincerity back upon itself and amplifying it through a cutting remark" (Helmsing 67). These villains are finding ways to thrive in a world that has no place for them, making "a queerly happy life out of dejection and abandonment" (Helmsing 68). They command their lives and the screen until they make "a grand exit" (Helmsing 70) at the very end. While "a straight reading of these endings suggests strong moral lessons are transmitted to viewers: evil never wins, good always prevails, and happiness comes to those who are virtuous and worthy" (Helmsing 70), queer readings offer an alternative. Rather than simply signaling the inevitable defeat of evil, the demise of these villains is read as "a recognition of how the straight world has failed to

allow the villains to live and co-exist (…) Disney diva villains refuse to acquiesce in the face of contempt or disgust from the straight world" (70). In such a reading, they are not truly defeated because they "refuse to apologize, neither recanting their actions nor rescinding their lessons to viewers" (Helmsing 71).

These elements, especially that of survival as an outsider, all play a part in Machado's appreciation of this type of queercoded villain. She explains that, in spite of her better judgment, she loves all the characters she mentioned "for all of their aesthetic lushness and theatrical glee, their fabulousness, their ruthlessness, their *power*. They're always by far the most interesting characters on the screen. After all, they live in a world that hates them (…) They've survived" (Machado 46, emphasis original). There is a power in relating to a villain character, even if it is unintentional. Machado confronts these complicated feelings towards problematic mainstream depictions, rather than ignoring them. This is also one of the creative strategies that Ann Cvetkovich outlines when she shows how lesbian artists might repurpose the archive of popular culture. One of her examples from "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings" is the Canadian documentary *Forbidden Love,* a Canadian film that "uses lesbian pulp fiction as an organizing visual motif in order to explore pre-Stonewall lesbian culture (…) combin[ing] talking heads testimony with shots of the novels' lurid covers, interspersing four scenes that narrate a fictional coming-out story and romance in the melodramatic idiom of the pulps" (Cvetkovich 117).

What makes this documentary relevant here, despite its different medium, is that it acknowledges the sensationalist and homophobic nature of these pulp novels, but is more interested in exploring "the significance of the pulp novels in [lesbian interviewee's] lived experience" (Cvetkovich 119). Though deeply flawed and often even harmful representation, the pulps were one of the few bits of pop culture that made lesbian sexuality visible for quite some time. Like the queer villains, they have still gained significance among queer audiences. The film honors this by not just criticizing these narratives, but transforming them through its fictional components: four short stories that use pulp imagery and conventions, but end happily rather than deadly. Cvetkovich also mentions the work by theater group Five Lesbian Brothers, who "draw on an archive that includes stereotypical images of lesbians from classic melodramatic films (…) Mainstream representations that leave lesbians sad, lonely, or dead have become part of the archive of lesbian culture, a repository drawn on and transformed" (Cvetkovich 116).

Machado similarly transforms the stories familiar stories she invokes, by showing the readers how they are reshaped in light of the new context she puts them in. The closest

Machado comes to making the connection “Dream House as Queer Villainy” to the larger personal narrative of *In the Dream House,* is when, later in the chapter, she discusses Alain Guiraudi’s thriller drama *Stranger by the Lake*. Machado writes about the film in order to show the advantage of putting a queer villain in a cast of multiple queer characters. The 2013 French film follows a protagonist who starts an affair with a mysterious man he knows to be a murderer: “Franck’s decision to stay with the handsome, magnetic murderer is only a few notches exaggerated from a pretty relatable problem: an inability to find logical footing when you’re being knocked around by waves of lust, love, loneliness” (Machado, 46-7). While this clearly hints at the most obvious connection to Machado’s own story, it is not the most important. Machado uses her discussion of queer and queer-coded villains as a jumping-off point for a more difficult conversation. On one hand, there is the struggle to get out from under the shadow of negative stereotypes. On the other hand, there is the need for negative experiences to be represented. The lack of such stories and the cultural baggage that comes with them are part of what makes it difficult for people like Machado to share their story. This is one of the ways in which course-correction can be counterproductive: it can become severely limiting by applying a higher moral standards to a minority group. Cvetkovich criticizes this “assumption that lesbian culture should provide positive images” (Cvetkovich 116). An example of this can be seen when queer characters are no longer are depicted as metaphor for wickedness, but instead become “icons of conformity and docility” (Machado 47), shorn of any rough edges.

This “cultural politics of positive images” (Cvetkovich, “Archive”, 120) also seems to be what Machado discusses in the footnotes to the villainy chapter (even though she does not use that term). In the footnotes, Machado acknowledges that such a cultural politics comes from an understandable and often necessary place – the fight for rights, equality and survival. Yet, it comes with a cost: “the trope of the saintly and all-sacrificing minority is one that follows us on the heels of unadulterated hatred, and is just as dangerous (though for different reasons)” (Machado 47). What some of those dangers are, is alluded to in the other footnote, when Machado notes that “It is not (…) an accident that people struggle to conceive of queer women as capable of sexual assault or domestic abuse” (Machado 47). This concern with the harmful sides of the pressure to provide positive images is one that reverberates throughout the book, putting this chapter in an intra-textual relationship with others that are not at all focused on representation in fiction. Most obvious are chapters like “Dream House as Fantasy” (not to be confused with the genre, which comes up in an earlier chapter as “Dream House as High Fantasy”), “Dream House as Ambiguity” and “Dream House as

Equivocation."

"Fantasy" reflects on the dangers of idealizing relationships between women. Machado starts by calling fantasy "the defining cliché of female queerness" (Machado 109). She continues: "To find love, desire, everyday joy without men's accompanying bullshit is a pretty decent working definition of paradise. The literature of queer domestic abuse is lousy with references to this punctured dream" (Machado 109). "Ambiguity" looks at social and legal definitions of sexuality and where lesbians fit into this – often, they simply do not fit, it turns out. Throughout history, there are examples of how "[t]his confusion has taken many forms, including the flat-out denial that sex between women is even possible (…) But this inability to conceive of lesbians has darker iterations too" (Machado 135). She gives several historical examples of murder, violence or abuse between women lovers, and the inability of journalism and law to properly parse out stories of abuse that did not fit with conventional narratives.[13]

Lastly, "Equivocation" looks at the way the queer community has struggled to acknowledge abuse and support victims: "the desire to save face, to present a narrative of uniform morality, can defeat every other interest" (Machado 198). This has resulted in a history of denying the possibility of abuse between queer women, linking abuse to masculinity and male privilege, claiming "[w]omen who were *women* did not abuse their girlfriends, proper lesbians would never do such a thing" (Machado 199). This conversation decenters victims and has led to cases like the example Machado closes on. In an early lesbian abuse case, the one lesbian juror struggled to declare the defendant guilty, not because she was sure of her innocence but because "she hadn't 'wanted to convict a [queer] sister' as though the abused girlfriend was not herself a fellow queer woman" (Machado 200).

The obstacles Machado found in writing her story do not just come from outside oppression and erasure, but also from dismissal by feminist and queer communities. As seen in Machado's examples, there have been multiple, complicated reasons for this. It could be explained away by an understanding of womanhood that does not include the capacity for abuse. It could be suppressed out of fear of conjuring up old stigmas that link queerness to depravity or violence. But regardless of how understandable (if wrongheaded) or inexcusable

[13] Examples of this can still be found in alarmingly great numbers to this day. Many legal definitions of rape, for example, are either gender-specific or penis-centric. This is used to downplay trauma of victims rape by cisgender women, and also has been weaponized to paint transgender women as inherently predatory. An example is current English law, which makes a distinction between "sexual assault by penetration'" and "rape" (which can only refer to penetration with a penis). The former is considered as serious a crime as rape in terms of legal consequences, but the distinction still upholds stigma's as the ones mentioned here. See Stevens, "Does the Legal Definition of Rape Need Updating?" for a more elaborate discussion of the distinction.

one might find any such motivation, in the end, such acts of dismissal can only ever have destructive effects – both on the individual victims they isolate and the community they ostensibly aim to protect.

Reading "Dream House as Queer Villainy" in light of these chapters, rather than just its intertextual references, greatly deepens its meaning. "Queer Villainy" becomes a reflection on so much more than the titular trope alone. Machado's argument that "queer villains become much more interesting among *other* gay characters, both within a specific project or universe and the zeitgeist at large" (Machado 47, emphasis original) is not merely one about preference or pleasure. She explains: "[B]y expanding representation we give queers the space to be – as characters, as real people – human beings (…) We deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity" (Machado 47). It is vital for victims of all kinds of abuse to be able to be acknowledged, which cannot be done without recognizing the existence (and humanity) of those who could do harm. To have one's humanity acknowledged is an empty gesture when it is contingent on good behavior: "[Q]ueers, real-life ones, do not deserve representation, protection, and rights because they are morally pure or upright as people. They deserve them because they are human beings" (Machado 47).

By including essayistic chapters like this, Machado adds many layers to her memoir. It is an explanation of the kind of history of painful representation she has to work both *with* and *against* while sharing her story. It is also a personal reflection on how various types of representation have impacted her. Lastly, like I said at the start of this section: it is also part of a larger conversation about that representation, as well as a call to keep the conversation going, because "[I]t sounds terrible but it is, in fact, freeing: the idea that *queer* does not equal good or pure or right. It is simply a state of being – one subject to politics, to its own social forces, to larger narratives, to moral complexities of every kind" (Machado 48, emphasis original).

2.4 Text-as-record and Ephemera

Cvetkovich's emphasis on affect and the emotions provoked by and contained within archives make her frame a more obvious one for *In the Dream House* compared to something like Faye Chisholm Guenther's idea of the queer creative memoir as "text-as-record". Guenther's argument for the text-as-record qualities of these memoirs is mostly concerned with public space: an acknowledgment of the way these writers have captured places and events important

(yet often lost) to LGBTQ+ history. She looks at texts that document "queer spaces as physical environments, relational practices, and queer imaginaries to call attention to the material experiences and material relations of counterpublic culture they document" (Guenther 79). Even though her focus seems very different on the surface (material queer spaces rather than interior lives), I think her analysis of the memoirs provides a useful way to think of the archival value of a memoir like *In the Dream House*. The difference between Guenther's emphasis on preserving the once-material and my emphasis on preserving the immaterial can in part be bridged by combining Guenther's text-as-record with Cvetkovich's archive of feelings. This is what I will show in this final section of the chapter before its conclusion.

In the Dream House concerns itself neither with public nor counterpublic spaces or happenings. It's concerns are, instead, all of a "private" nature. It's central metaphor is that of the most private space imaginable: the house. As the first chapter reminds us, this house is not merely a metaphor: it was based on a very real place where many of the recounted (traumatic) memories take place. The topic of romantic and sexual relationships is also one considered part of the private space. As a result, this also goes for any form of abuse that goes on in such relationships – especially emotional abuse. What could be more personal, more private, than emotion? As one of the shortest chapters, "Dream House as Epiphany" tells us: "Most types of domestic abuse are completely legal" (Machado 112). Unlike other forms of abuse, the often invisible nature of emotional and psychological abuse places it firmly outside of the space of the law. Though, as the existence of those illegal/recognized forms of abuse as well as Cvetkovich's "Archives of feelings" should teach us, the private and public space cannot be separated so neatly. This is where it might be useful to combine Guenther's "text-as-record" with Cvetkovich's archives. A memoir like Machado's functions as a record that shows not all forms of abuse are covered by distinctions of legality, and that to frame those forms as purely private condemns them to the margins, making it difficult for victims to speak out and find support and safety. This goes double for queer victims, whose lives and relationships already struggle with erasure to begin with.

While not quite fitting the type of "record" Guenther describes, *In the Dream House* is concerned with what is or is not considered evidence. This is already mentioned in the prologue, but occurs again as a main concern in the chapter "Dream House as Proof". Machado writes: "I think a lot about what evidence, had it been measured or recorded or kept, would help make my case. Not in a court of law, exactly, because there are many things that happen to us that are beyond the purview of even a perfectly executed legal system. But the

court of other people, the court of the body, the court of queer history" (Machado 225). Like the prologue, "Proof" in part builds upon a citation from the fourth chapter of Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia,* specifically the part about the complex relationship of queerness to evidence. Here in particular, Machado uses the following quote to discuss the concept of ephemera:

> The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor (…) Ephemeral evidence is rarely obvious because it is needed to stand against the harsh lights of mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the fact (Muñoz 92).

The idea of ephemera or trace occurs again and again within queer archival theory. It is especially relevant to the archive of feelings, because it "resist[s] documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or too *ephemeral* to leave records" (Cvetkovich "Archive" 112, emphasis mine). Cvetkovich also notes the "ephemeral" nature of archives (among which she counts those of sexuality and trauma – both highly relevant to Machado's memoir) that contains "individual and collective life experiences, political events, and informal social activities" (Cvetkovich *Archives* 107). Despite her emphasis on the material and physical realities (even if they are in the past) of the places "recorded" in the texts she analyzes, Guenther also acknowledges the importance of "the use of ephemeral evidence" by the authors, who place an emphasis on "in their creative memoirs on articulating experiences that appear ephemeral and quotidian" (Guenther 85). After all, the past places she brings back to the present through their role in the texts she studies, are meaningful to queer history through the – at the time – seemingly "ephemeral and quotidian" events that took place there.

Can such experiences on their own be a record? The *Dream House* Machado is committing to the archive is, of course, not the actual house. It is important to know – as the first chapter reminds us – that there was a real space tied to these experiences. But unlike Guenther, it is not the physical space that Machado is concerned with. Instead, she wonders how to convince a court "of other people, of the body, of queer history" of the legitimacy of her traumatic experience, even if it has left no physical evidence. She tries to imagine what material, "objective" representations of these ephemeral experiences might look like:

> The recorded sound waves of her speech on one axis and a precise measurement of the flood of adrenaline and cortisol in my body on the other. Witness statements from the strangers who anxiously looked at us sideways in public

> places (…) a wire looped through my hair, ready to record her hiss (…) None of these things exist. You have no reason to believe me. (Machado 225)

Central to this chapter (and a recurring theme throughout *In the Dream House*) are questions like "What is the value of proof? What does it mean for something to be true?" (Machado 226). Questions of whether or not something needs to have a physical, prove-able existence to be "real" or "believable" might seem like vague philosophical musings. By putting them into this context, Machado reminds us that the way we think about these topics has a material impact. Treating them as mere thought experiments devalues this, is what Machado seems to hint at when she ends the chapter by saying: "If a tree falls in the woods and pins a wood thrush to the earth, and she shrieks and shrieks but no one hears her, did she make a sound? Did she suffer? Who's to say?" (Machado 226).

In the Dream House is not a text-as-record in the way Guenther conceives of the term: something that, through described experience, captures and keeps "lost" spaces and events. They may not be material spaces any longer, but they used to be. What Machado records is explicitly personal, often immaterial – ephemeral. The above example shows how some important experiences of persons and communities need to be represented by an archive that, as Cvetkovich puts it, produces both knowledge and feeling. While Machado might be relating a private story, by sharing it she puts the idea of the private and personal into perspective. Abuse is not just a personal problem – it, and the ways in which we can and cannot talk about it are cultural and social issues. Creative memoir can then also be a way of sharing and recording immaterial as well as material histories, in order to include that which eludes more physical, "factual" archives. Without an understanding of these personal, individual experiences, it is impossible to see the larger picture or change the cultural conversations about emotional abuse and abuse within queer relationships.

Chapter Summary and Conclusion

I set out with the goal of analyzing the ways in which Machado uses intertextuality and second-person narration to communicate something she found she had no words for. I argued Machado makes the strangeness of second-person work in her favor. The reader might feel drawn in at some times, but estranged during others due to not being used to this form. This mirrors the way Machado describes her experience of both recognizing her "Dream House"-self as herself and not, at the same time. I spend the majority of the chapter looking at the complex ways in which Machado employs a variety of intertextual references in order to gain

understanding of her own experiences, and to better communicate those experiences to the reader. In doing this, she often challenges her readers to think about the exact connections those references have to the larger story she tries to tell. Machado not only enters her own story into the archive of queerness and abuse (which she found so lacking), she also creates her own affective archive out of a wide tapestry of texts. Through its complex use of both narration and intertextuality, *In the Dream House* offers up new ways to rethink how queerness and abuse are represented in fiction, nonfiction, and in everyday life alike.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, I want to offer a short reflection on what the benefits of reading these two very different queer texts side by side have been, as well as reflect on both chapters separately. After that, I will end my thesis with a few thoughts on the possible social relevance of the topic.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire and *In the Dream House* are different mediums and genres, and cover very different topics. Despite – or likely because of – those differences, there are benefits to looking at them in a similar context. This way, it is made clear that the "queering" of artistic conventions can take many forms, yet there will often be some similarities. In this case, the most important one is that *Portrait* and *Dream House* both challenge established medium and genre conventions, in order to do justice to stories about queer lives that are confined to the margins of either historical record or contemporary discourse. As I have shown in the chapters and will reiterate in my reflections below, both *Portrait* and *Dream House* challenge not only the limits of their respective medium, but that of the theories I tried to apply to them.

The most notable contrast between the two may be that between *Portrait's* rather romantic – even romanticized – depiction of female queerness, and *Dream House*'s confrontation with the stark reality of domestic abuse between queer women. Does that put the former in line with the "cultural politics of positive images" (to use Cvetkovich's description) that the latter so deftly criticizes? I would argue that this is not (necessarily) so. Both types of representation have their place. It seems more appropriate to ask what kinds of meaning the artistic choice for one or the other brings to the text, but that is its own essay topic. The danger lies not so much in the existence of romanticized portrayals, but in championing this kind of positive representation over any other. It is especially harmful when depictions of queerness are held to a higher moral standard than portrayals of cis- and heteronormativity.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire was my first case study for this thesis. I argue that it shows that while cinematic storytelling has to rely on looking, this does not have to mean a reliance on power imbalances. By giving equal weight to realizing the subject-position of both main characters, the film eliminates the unequal subject-object dynamic associated with the gaze (and in particular the desiring gaze). While in many ways this fits with writing on the queer gaze as reversible, reciprocal or even shared, it also departs from it. Sciamma deliberately set out to construct a queer female gaze, putting her work in conversation with both cinematic

conventions and film theory. I cannot know for certain which where intentional influences and which were not. That is not my intention, either. I have been more interested in what looking at the film through established theoretical frameworks surrounding the gendered cinematic gaze – and vice versa – can tell us about both. For example, I do not think it is necessary to adopt Mulvey's deeply Freudian language while looking at *Portrait,* (though others might still attempt that). Yet, it still feels impossible to discuss the concept of the gendered gaze without referring to her definition of power imbalances in looking – especially since those power imbalances are exactly what the film tries to deconstruct. De Lauretis' concept of a shared gaze or coupled lesbian subject-position is extremely useful to describe where the film's portrayal of Marianne's and Héloïse's dynamic ends up. However, it falls short of acknowledging the film's investment in still letting them have their own gaze while meeting the other woman's. *Portrait* is also an example that counters De Lauretis' strict division between avant-garde and mainstream lesbian representation. I hope to have shown this critique is not a way to disprove the usefulness of these concepts, but a way to enrich them as much as they can enrich our understanding of the film.

With *In the Dream House*, my second case study, Carmen Maria Machado explicitly places herself within an archive – or rather, the emptiness where a specific archive ought to be. I showed that, on two levels, *Dream House* fits with what Ann Cvetkovich described as "an archive of feelings", an attempt to preserve and communicate parts of life that cannot be captured by factual information alone (something Cvetkovich describes as particularly relevant for LGBT+ related archival efforts). By using intertextual references that resonate with her personal experiences, Machado assembles her own "archive of feelings." However, it is also part of a larger "archive of feelings" as a whole text. I mean this in the sense that both the intertextuality and the narration are employed in order to communicate exactly the kind of material Cvetkovich considers the object of such an archive: complex emotions, memories, lived experience, trauma. Combining a variety of theoretical frameworks is appropriate for a memoir as reliant on intertextual references as *Dream House*, but the benefits of a diverse theoretical frame go beyond doing justice to the variety of Machado's inspirations. Most significantly, by combining Cvetkovich's concept with Faye Chisholm Guenther's ideas on the queer memoir as text-as-record, I hoped to provide insight into how thinking of memoirs like Machado's as text-as-record might be a start in conceiving of better ways to acknowledge the experience of people who have been through forms of abuse that are technically legal, or in other ways failed by the legal system.

For the final part of this conclusion, I want to offer up a few reflections on the social-political context that I have been writing this thesis in, which made me go back and forth on the relevance and importance of such a project. Various developments in the past few years have made the progress achieved by and for LGBTQIA+ communities seem increasingly fragile. Eastern- and Central European countries have seen a rise in anti-LGBT legislation, and all over the continent, prominent conservative politicians are pushing anti-LGBT talking points.[14] Plans for LGBT+-education aimed at younger children often face backlash based on undeserved presumptions.[15] However, this has gotten worse the past few months, as this year has seen an alarming increase in attempts paints such efforts as predatory "grooming" in what sounds like an attempt to recycle an Anita Bryant-esque "Save Our Children" rhetoric.[16] Misinformation and fearmongering about transgender people in particular has been normalized for the sake of "debate",[17] with very real consequences[18]. I find that in times like this, it can become tempting to understate the importance of art and entertainment, and the analysis thereof as fanciful luxuries rather than necessities. While the other extreme is also a risk (overstate their importance, because they seem something one might have more control over than, say, international politics), I personally struggle more with the former. It seemed appropriate to end this thesis on the note that I myself landed on with regards to this issue, and how it relates to the texts and themes I have analyzed here.

At their best, works like *In the Dream House* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* remind us of not just the importance of art and storytelling, but of critical analysis – as they themselves engage in the analysis of their own medium in order to push it in new directions. Representation of queer lives and experiences, have a social function far beyond representation or visibility for its own sake or pleasure – which also applies to giving such works of film and literature (especially by queer creators) their due critical attention. There is

[14] See Weslaw. "The Worrying Regression of LGBT Rights In Eastern Europe."
[15] Examples of these assumptions would be: queerness being more inherently sexual and thus inappropriate, or framing erasure of identities outside a binary, cisgender and straight norm as neutral, while inclusive education is seen as politically correct indoctrination. An example of this happening recently was earlier this year, when the Dutch COC's plans for LGBT+-inclusive education aimed at elementary school children faced criticisms of that nature, especially from conservative Christian and right-wing parties and news sites.
[16] For a discussion on this topic, I recommend the episode "The moral panic behind 'groomers' is an attack on marginalized people" from the podcast *There Are No Girls on the Internet.* The episode focuses on the American context, however, similar language is spreading fast. Even more alarmingly, it has become a justification for aggressive threats against, for example, family friendly drag events in both the US and UK (see Kelleher "Drag queen's story hour for kids hit by 'aggressive' far-right protesters"; Chudy " Council cancels kid-friendly drag events 'without discussion' after brutish anti-LGBTQ+ protests.").
[17] See Butler, "Why is the Idea of Gender Provoking Backlash the World Over?" for a short but sharp analysis of the backlash to gender theory and transgender rights.
[18] See Mollman, Marianne. "Anti-Trans Rhetoric is Fueling a Pandemic of Violence."

and always will be a need for counternarratives that resist and challenge normativity, but especially now. Sharing each other's art and stories can also strengthen queer community. This is something desperately needed in a time that sees the rise of a conservative politics that would prefer every queer person desperate and isolated. While they might not provide easy answers, works like *Portrait* and *Dream House* can help us ask the right questions. Perhaps more importantly, by providing a look into our (hidden) histories or difficult present-day realities through their perspectives, artists like Sciamma and Machado also remind us that we are not – and never have been – all alone.

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