

Maia McDonald

Cultural Critics on Looking and Living

Prof. Ben Ratliff

27 March 2023

The Lostness in Being Found, the Freedom of Being Lost

Queer is a verb, a direct action. To queer and to be queer is a direct, intentional act. It is continuous, non-ceasing, and non-linear. José Estaban Muñoz said, “We are not yet queer,” presenting queerness as an intangible, yet worthy objective. My *Queer Aesthetics* professor read this quote aloud. They held a soft and neutral disposition. But at this moment, they embodied a Southern televangelist: composed yet authoritative, impassioned, and compelling. I felt both shocked and intrigued by what the quote presented. Despite being in a queer studies course, I thought I knew everything about queerness. After all we experienced, how could we queer people “not yet” be queer? Were the battles we’d faced as a community meaningless?

I remembered my teenage self, exhausted from years of attempting to outrun herself. Sexuality is neither forged nor realized in a single night. I spent countless nights scanning blogs and websites attempting to understand the repressed part of myself. “Lesbian” was the monster beneath my bed; illicit, explicit, and demonic. Lesbianism was only a depraved lust for innocent women or a cheap party trick to impress the ravenous desires of men. Lesbians were the physical embodiment of barren womanhood left unfertilized by a man’s attention.

Lesbianism crept at the edges of my life for the majority of my teenage years until it finally consumed me at 16. Love rendered me unable to outrun the truth. I sought a personal form of “exposure therapy” by only consuming lesbian music, movies, and television. *Carmilla*, a lesbian web series on YouTube, premiered in 2014. The series adopted Sheridan Le Fanu’s

1872 novel *Carmilla*. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is a predatory vampire who seduces innocent, virginal young women. 1872 *Carmilla* symbolizes Victorian fears, a sexually deviant, Eastern-European woman defiling the "angel of the house." Jordan Hall and Ellen Simpson's *Carmilla* presented lesbianism as mundane fact of life, unimportant in the face of mortality, love, and the supernatural. Lesbian protagonists Laura and Carmilla never once grappled with shame, homophobia, or "coming out." *Carmilla* (2014) allowed me to lose myself in the world of online lesbians. I had long feared being swept up in the undercurrent of lesbianism, never resurfacing from debauchery, sin, and lasciviousness. Instead, the undercurrent guided me to a sapphic Atlantis that kissed my hand as it promised me something fantastic. Fear kept me from the histories of lesbian ancestors and the rich sense of community other young lesbians forged through their Tumblr blogs, Twitter group chats, and Instagram pages.

Amongst the community of other lesbian digital natives, I reached the highest level of my being. There were not many queer people in my sub-rural town of McDonough, Georgia — much fewer lesbians my age. My lesbian community and identity were primarily internet entities. Fragments of these entities existed offline but never in totality. Communal contributions were commenting on Twitter threads discussing the existence of non-binary lesbians and trading the lesbian master doc back and forth — a once holy, now shunned PDF. Online interactions were egotistical battles for internet clout and fuel for our teenage superiority complexes. Lesbian cyberspace was the once arable ground where the sapling of my identity could be fertilized by diverse and rich discourse and history. Here, I found the strength and nourishment needed for self-acceptance and existence in the face of isolation and deprivation offline. Hayley Kiyoko's *Expectations* (2018) was the soundtrack to scenes in high school hallways where cross necklaces accessorized Trump shirts. *But I'm a Cheerleader* was my *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. But as

a moved out of this space of learning into a place of false knowledge, my calcification. Curiosity and learning stopped. Acceptance led me to joy. Joy gave me comfort. But it was comfort that left me complacent.

Online lesbian community served its place in my life. But by the end of high school, digital spaces fit like baby clothes — ill-fitting and threadbare. College in New York's Lower East Side offered me something I unknowingly yet desperately needed: an offline lesbian community. My lesbian becoming is incomplete without in-person experiences. Lesbian identity carved itself out of dark bars with jukeboxes and hidden entrances; book clubs sharing and discussing banned books and survival literature; coalitions that met in church basements, rented warehouses, and living room parlors; passed notes; written letters; posters on lampposts; personal ads in newspapers; concert halls; protests; club dance floors; dungeons; and prisons. The tangible spatiality present in shared conversations over coffee or movies watched on a new friend's couch turned my previously one-dimensional understanding of identity into a multi-faceted, multidimensional one. I learned this in the very same *Queer Aesthetics* class, but Muñoz's quote radicalized me towards truly understanding.

The physical presence of my lesbian siblings humbled and enlightened me. Once, I saw myself as above others, lost in the falsified safety that online discourse granted me. My girlfriend and my best friend both entered my life when my contentment fossilized. My shared knowledge guided their lesbian becomings. Their journeys have been short, yet they already understand concepts that took me years to grasp. They navigate the gray space between gender and sexuality smoothly. Having spent the majority of their journeys offline, they have forged a nourishing community. Initially, watching their quick progress made me shameful. But then, I felt pride.

The three of us are seeking one goal: the ideal of queerness Muñoz clearly defined. Settling into the identities of queerness and lesbianism prevents me from progressing forward. Seeking may be progressional, but there is no completion of that progress that can be accomplished by an individual.

Seeing sexuality as a mode of being confronted me with many emotions: sadness, intrigue, joy, and — finally — relief. Relief because I could finally be free to experience life, love, community, and identity without the burden of remaining unchanged. I belong to a collective who are perpetually becoming, undoing, re-writing, and unlearning in our progression toward queerness. I am free to be lost in the unknown and the yet-to-be of lesbianism.