

The Destructive Queer Body: On *Black Iris* and Legitimizing Queer Identities Through Violence

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Introduction

If the past ten years are any measure, queer representation in film, on television, and in literature has been on the rise. The Internet and social media have been pushing for more optimistic representations of LGBTQ+ couples and individuals: the trope of the happy ending, but with queer characters.¹ Some would argue that this is exactly the type of media representation we need, that there is power in seeing queer characters getting their slice of the heteronormative pie. But in so doing, modern fiction that uses queerness as a focal point for its narrative relegates feelings of shame, rage, and loss to the sidelines. This poses a problem, as it not only diminishes our conception of queerness in an historical context, but it also limits the kinds of stories of and about queer people that are deemed socially acceptable to tell.

Books like Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun* (2014), Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016), or Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* (2016) all depict an LGBTQ+ main character and their journey and struggles, which come off as disingenuous or pandering rather than sites of queer ontological work.² The characters are often at the behest of their sexual orientation, or coming to terms with it; much of the narrative points toward a queer romanticism, more reflective of a sanitized and naïve optimistic queer world than not;³ and the books take up a single position (or sometimes two) regarding their themes and ideas.⁴ A mainstream cultural shift in understanding what queerness has historically been and can be is essential for allowing the possibility of new, diverse stories.

An example of what a murkier queerness looks like can be found in the literature of trans male author Elliot Wake. His four books—*Unteachable* (2013), *Black Iris* (2015), *Cam Girl* (2015), and *Bad Boy* (2016)—are interconnected, their characters and events existing in the same shared universe, though largely standalone in story and scope. Belonging to the recently carved out New Adult literary category, they offer a unique social critique of queerness as understood by mainstream audiences by joining the conversation of queerness being held within academic spaces and jumpstarting one to be held outside of them. These works are able to do what many other LGBTQ+ books are unable to due to their demographic, that is, move past representation as a selling point and treat important political and social overtones with care and delicacy instead of as cudgels to beat the reader with, as can sometimes happen with other stories billed as LGBTQ+ fiction. And Wake demonstrate this most clearly in *Black Iris*.

Black Iris embodies what queer studies scholars Heather Love, Jack Halberstam, and Lee Edelman promote in their work, to explore as genuine on its own terms what queer violence can do and offer for study, and story and character development. In her book *Feeling Backward*, Love understands that “Queerness is structured by [a] central turn, [being] both abject and exalted, a ‘mixture of delicious and freak.’ This contradiction ... appears at the structural level in the gap between mass-mediated images of attractive, well-to-do gays and lesbians and the reality of ongoing violence and inequality” (Heather Love, *Feeling Backward* 2-3). Love argues that modern representations of queerness and the optimism that it attempts to project has colored much of the very real losses and emotional heartbreaks that occurred in the infancy of queer studies and the broader gay movement.⁵ For Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, his understanding of what he calls “shadow feminism” could provide a solution to that problem, by “haunt[ing] the more acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation. Shadow feminisms take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating” (Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 4). This rearticulating of what feminism and queerness can be and have the power to do is significant, as queerness viewed through these lenses allows the murkier aspects of its history to come through in its representation for public consumption. Wake’s work is shadow feminist in that it provides an alternate example of mass media that highlights Love’s “reality of ongoing violence and inequality” (Love 3). Wake’s books ask questions like what is the value of an impolite manifestation of queerness—one premised on violence, deceit, jealousy, or rage? what kinds of messages or morals can be gleaned from representations of queer people in positions of destructive power? *Black Iris* in particular sits with these questions and has its characters work through them in ways that many other books do not.

In *Black Iris*, we follow Laney Keating, a recently graduated high school student, as she concocts a manipulative year-long revenge plot against her high school tormenters, Brandt Zoeller chief among them. Bullied heavily in her senior year for being queer, Laney deals with the stress of this and her mother’s deteriorating bipolar disorder, domestic abuse, and eventual suicide, orchestrated in part by Zoeller switching her medication. Laney’s scheme is against Zoeller and the bullies of her school, but also against the people who ordered Zoeller to bully her. This leads her to befriend Armin and Blythe. Armin is a member of (and revealed to be in charge of) the fraternity that Zoeller wanted to get into—a frat that, for its inauguration of new members, asks them to find and terrorize LGBTQ+ people, specifically gay or bisexual women. Blythe is Armin’s close friend and Laney’s unwitting pawn in the scheme to get revenge on him and Zoeller. As Laney befriends both of them, she begins sleeping with both, and develop feelings for Blythe. The story progresses as the three of them brutalize the various bullies and teachers complicit in or contributing to Laney’s misery in high school. Eventually, Laney reveals her plan

to Blythe and then to Armin, the latter taking the fall for the crimes and disbanding the frat—satisfying Laney’s revenge—and leaving Laney and Blythe free to pursue a romantic relationship. Told out of chronological order for maximum suspense, *Iris* gives readers a less idyllic representation of LGBTQ+ protagonists, and delves into a world that reflects the harsh realities of systemic bullying of LGBTQ+ individuals that circulate in the real world.

In this paper, I analyze the character Laney Keating through four key moments or relationships in the novel: the assault on Zoeller and its immediate aftermath; an analysis of the relationship between Laney, Blythe, and Armin; Laney’s relationship with her mother, as seen in the dinner scene and shortly after; and finally, the Rainbow Alliance rally and a sketching of how she views her sexual identity. First, I analyze the physical violence that she imposes on her enemies as a means of legitimating her identity, and second, I trace how she attempts to break out of a rigid construction of identity and agency. In so doing, I open up conversations regarding popular literature positioning violence as an authentic and effective response to oppression by marginalized people. This analysis of violence as legitimating identity is not a new practice; many scholars of black history and minority groups have discussed it, for example.⁶ But there is, I believe, a distinct lack of conversation in and with regard to popular literature surrounding depictions of violence by LGBTQ+ people and its potential narrative and thematic benefits.

My critique of an optimistic representation of queerness might call to mind José Muñoz’s responsive argument in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. In this work, he advocates for a re-alignment with “political idealism,” a “queer utopianism that highlights a renewed investment in social theory [...] My investment in utopia and hope is my response to queer thinking that embraces a politics of the here and now that is underlined by what I consider to be today’s hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda” (José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 10). For Muñoz, the contemporary academic attitude toward queerness is one that fatally embraces ideas of the now and romanticizes negativity. His big move is to advocate for a hope for the future, a hope that recognizes both the history of queerness and a natural progression from it, the work to get there itself an accomplishment of visibility. Muñoz’s turn to “hope and utopia is a challenge to theoretical insights that have been stunted by the lull of presentness and various romances of negativity and have thus become routine and resoundingly anticritical. This antiutopian theoretical faltering is often nothing more than rote invocation of poststructuralist pieties [...] Antiutopianism in queer studies [...] has led many scholars to an impasse wherein they cannot see futurity for the life of them” (12).

It is important that he make this move as a response to an overzealous devotion to queer shame, anger, dystopia, and violence. But for queer readers, who themselves are potentially without hope in their own lives, accounts of queer shame, anger, dystopia, and especially

violence in history and in fiction may hold just as much if not more emotional weight. Muñoz's offering hope to readers and queer people may be useful in some respects, but there is also a potential good to come out of seeing lived reality reflected in stories. And, per Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, intellectual and cultural work of influence and progress in examining the different ways that reality could have played out if we had been smarter, faster, stronger, had caught our oppressors off guard may yield a desired feeling of validation in a queer reader. Edelman deploys queerness and queer theory as ideas that "accept" and "embrace" negativity (Lee Edelman, *No Future* 4). Wake's books do the type of work that Edelman pushes for, but in a kind of double move, they also suggest a queer utopia and a hope for the future—one that Muñoz would smile at—that is birthed from this violence. I argue that queer anger and shame are themselves valid forms of expression that exist in relation to and among other perhaps more positivist notions of queerness; like Muñoz, I want to push for a queer hope, but bridge that hope with Edelman's notion of the queer past and present of negation, sorrow, and loss.

I understand queer as Edelman does, as that which "names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (Edelman 3). That is, queerness exists in and operates on the world in a way that cannot be touched or infected by heteronormativity as a political and social thought process. For Edelman, "queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to [a place of dissociation from a heteronormative social order], accepting its figural status as resistance to the visibility of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure." Thus, queerness in this context, as it is understood by Laney in *Black Iris*, can be articulated through actions outside of a social order, violent actions, and thoughts aligned to that end: negativity, pessimism, emotional manipulation. *Black Iris* also understands queer in its broad catch-all identitarian meaning—to be outside a cisgender heterosexual ontological framework; in its political meaning—acting as a direct calling back to a history of violence, oppression and political activism; and finally in its specific identity, divorced from lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or asexual—queer as belonging to itself. Queerness attempts to capture a broad understanding of human sexuality, one that a heteronormative social order cannot. Both the attempt to do so and the recognition that it may only be possible through a violent and messy re-rendering of current identity are the actions and puzzles at the heart of *Black Iris*.

Laney Keating's violent actions generate a kind of gleeful catharsis for me as a queer reader. What she does to her enemies, the ruthless lengths she goes to legitimize herself and her sexual and social identities. Hers is a ruthlessness that, per Judith Butler and Heather Love, allows a writing into fiction the very real historical and present violence against and by queer people. There is a satisfaction I get when reading how Laney attacks and beats up Zoeller, one that is

always bound up and in close conflict with the more natural reaction of horror at what this person is doing. This paradoxical series of reactions is mirrored in the book itself—it invites the reader to sit with these gross displays of violence as sites of confirmation and urges us to feel that conflict; Laney’s actions are brutal, her justification is petty at best, and other characters, like her brother and Armin, call her out on her behavior. Yet Laney’s careful plotting, her manipulation of her friends Blythe and Armin, are actions that are legitimized by the narrative and do produce results. This story shows how powerful queer people can be—the bad that this connotes as well as the good—that we can be multi-faceted, that we can have anger in us. As such, this treatment of queerness—one that anticipates and encourages internal and external conflict—is for me a more accurate representation of how queer people move through the world. We are not a constant, monolithic staple of non-heteronormative culture. We are people, individuals, myriad and shifting in personality, beliefs, and moods.

The point that queer people have agency may be obvious—we have just as much ability to be ruthless, cruel, violent, as any other person. That *Black Iris* premises itself on this point merely proves how far society is from recognizing it as a simple fact; à la Love and Halberstam, it proves how society continuously attempts to smother queer representation and history in empty platitudes and niceties, relegating the darker, bleaker aspects of queerness to the area of shame.⁷ As Love states, “These texts [that premise themselves on shame, rage, etc.] do have a lot to tell us, though; they describe what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it” (Love 4). *Black Iris* rightfully embodies this notion: Laney’s identity throughout her story is disqualified, her living with injury is how the book begins, and by the end she is not “fixed”. The changes that Laney’s character undergoes are ones that bring her closer, not further away from, violence and bleak thoughts, and their justifications.

Thus, *Iris*’s narrative and resulting power demonstrates on a darker level Judith Butler’s argument that fantasy as a medium is able to rearticulate what is possible and how characters change:

Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to *challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality*. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; *it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.*” (Judith Butler, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” 28-29, emphasis mine)

Though discussed here in a broad and optimistic sense, fantasy can also work to move a dark possibility closer to reality, which is especially resonant in terms of the effects fiction has on readers. Being validated on the page, if only in identity, is extremely powerful; allowing a potential readership, tired of understanding ourselves as being on the fringes of a social hierarchy, to get a brief glimpse of a world where we and our identities not only matter but are seen as belonging to characters who have as many varying shades of morality as straight characters, is crucial if we are to build a diverse tapestry of representation. Because discussions centering queer people occur almost exclusively under the aegis of naïve, smothering optimism, capitalism, or nascent corporate feminism, and in the end merely reinscribes heteronormative stereotypes of queer people, the queer as “not straight”. These frameworks do not and are not designed to care for the individual, the deviant, the queer *as queer*. Doing so requires a broadening of what the queer character is able to do, how they are seen, and what they represent for queer readers.

The Necessity of Violence

Laney’s revenge scheme hinges on doing physical and emotional harm to her enemies. She inflicts violence against the bodies of those who wronged her, everything from electrocution of one of the secondary bullies to beating Brandt Zoeller up with a metal baseball bat. She stops just short of killing him outright, and not for lack of trying. The plan itself stems from how Laney understands desire and her own body. Her concept of the body is premised on violence, on an undoing of herself, and this mixes with her idea of desire as well. Throughout the book, we see how she regards her body as something almost separate from herself, a thing built for destruction: “My body felt like a heap of cheap plastic and glass, and I wanted to drop it off the highest point I could get to on oxy and X. Split every bad atom inside me. Get this wrongness out” (Leah Raeder, *Black Iris* 7). Dissociation becomes her ally, especially in sexual episodes: “What happened to my flesh took eons to reach my brain. However solid I seemed, inside I was vast spaces of dark energy and vacuum” (15). This directly calls to mind Butler’s idea of the body as having or being premised on a “public dimension;” the body is always and already defined by the gaze of others, and only after this recognition can the body be reclaimed as an autonomous thing (Butler, “Violence” 26). For the most part, the public dimension was all Laney knew throughout her senior year of high school, thanks to constant bullying for being queer; now it resonates with her in executing her revenge scheme as something that she can use to her advantage. Laney’s attitude toward the body in particular echoes Love’s understanding of backwardness as it relates to queer people: “Accounts of queer life as backward are ideological, however backwardness has the status of a lived reality in gay and lesbian life. Not only do many queers, as I suggest, feel backward, but backwardness has been taken up as a key feature of queer culture... in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusal to grow up, in exploration of haunting and memory, and in

stubborn attachments to lost objects” (Love 6-7). Laney is likewise holding onto that backwardness, using it to fuel her journey forward as the ontological premise with which other people associate her.

When she executes the first phase of her plan, Laney makes sure to disguise herself and Armin as members of Zoeller’s rival school, Kenosha Tech, painting their faces with Kenosha’s colors so as not to be identified by him and to not get in trouble later. Here, Laney manipulates how others see her, how Zoeller sees her. This is freeing, no doubt, after having spent a year under his and the other bullies’ torment, of having to be seen by them as they saw her. As she barks derogatory insults at Zoeller, the disguise allows her to reflect on her own identity, attempting to separate this act from herself as she has many other acts to or by her person: “‘Little alpha wolf is bold.’ Z ignored Armin and turned with me. ‘She doesn’t even carry a weapon.’ ‘Shut the fuck up, faggot.’ The word passed my lips like a blade, slicing me on the way out. Laney Keating would never call anyone a fag. Laney Keating was terrified she was one, so Kenosha Tech [Girl] had to say it. ‘Get on your knees’” (Raeder 187). Even here, with victory around and because of her, she cannot stop herself from using that word that had done so much damage to her.

Laney is one to use the social norms of language, identity, and character, to her advantage against those who perpetuate them. In this sense, she articulates Butler’s analysis of the use of social norms by the marginalized, but Laney’s violent actions also put the violence in the hands of the oppressed. Butler notes that “Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization. What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as ‘unreal’? *Does violence effect that unreality?*” (Butler, “Violence” 33, my emphasis). Laney’s character arc through the book answers this last question with a resounding yes. As I expand on in my conclusion, her endorsing violent retribution for those who fail to see the human as belonging to those different than themselves, and acting specifically against assumed normative behavior, proves to be a success.

For Laney as for Butler, violence is premised on pitting the real against the unreal, against the possible. “If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated” (Butler, “Violence” 33) This is the mindset that the bullies and Laney’s high school have towards her, seeing her as an aberration—a legible aberration to a degree, one that has enough life in it for Zoeller to manipulate and infect—but one that is distinctly less than human. In pushing against this, Laney not only critically incorporates social norms (much to her chagrin) but is also perpetrating violence. Butler’s conception of violence and the marginalized is flipped—from the perspective of violence as used by her bullies and tormentors, Laney’s actions should not injure

or negate Zoeller since her life is already negated, and yet it does. She is the vehicle for Butler's "insurrection at the level of ontology," her violence a means of "a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?" (Butler "Violence" 33). Laney's stance is powerful because she is not advocating violence for violence's sake; she is recognizing how violence can be used to press forward a rearticulation of the human. It is a powerful move because of how ugly it is, how it demands we recognize the nasty side of what we are capable of in pushing all sides of the gender/sexual identity conflict to a potential breaking point so that change is forced to come about.

Her actual assault on Zoeller acts as a climax despite coming in halfway through the book both chronologically and structurally, and per that function Laney's revenge comes to fruition. The violence Laney inflicts on Zoeller's body is real and graphic, but not indulgent. This makes the climax that much more intense; the cathartic nature of Laney's revenge resonates as the violence is as real as possible. Without apology, she genuinely invokes Love's idea of "backwardness," the idea of queer behavior being slave to a melancholic or savage tradition. For a long time, these elements defined the status, practices, and worldviews of the queer identity and LGBTQ+ population; in our modern and more progressive era we might want to push against or erase them. But as Love points out—and *Iris* backs her point up in its depiction of Laney's violent revenge spree—these more negative elements are part of queer history and part of our modern queer culture, and it is worth acknowledging that. This is a compelling move to make, invoking shame and loss as agent-making tactics on our own, much to the chagrin of those who insist that there is no such thing as queer agency, that we cannot live beside or outside a heteronormative, cowed ontology. Laney has lived the reality Love discusses, of "backwardness," and her frustration at not being able to invoke it on her own terms, as she wants, undergirds her revenge scheme, before finally being released with her violent assault of Zoeller. "I swung right through the cloud of my breath and connected full force with Zoeller's throwing shoulder. It sounded and felt like hitting a side of beef. He didn't scream, but an animal sound tore from his diaphragm. He fell forward, balancing on one palm, and I swung again at the same shoulder, overhand. This time something cracked and he collapsed to his elbow, coughing, and looked up at me" (Raeder 188-89). For Laney, violence is mixed with pleasure, her calculated persona and plan dropping as she relishes the damage to Zoeller's body.

Note that Zoeller is not screaming. The assault is not a victory in the sense of the villain admitting defeat and the hero delivering a triumphant knockout blow. Laney's pleasure is wrought with darkness, pain, guilt, and Zoeller knows it. "I stared rapturously at my handiwork. ... Z peered up at me through a bruised eye. 'Didn't work,' he said haltingly. 'Did it?' I stepped closer. 'You're still. Hollow'" (190). Hollow, perhaps because, as her mother learned the hard way, becoming a full human against and outside a presumed ontological default cannot happen

in the context and world of the default; even beating up the embodiment of that default is not enough for Laney. So, she does the next best thing, opting to kill her oppressor, pulling out a handgun and aiming it at him. Here, her conception of the body becomes detached from personhood, seeing Zoeller as only “the body laid on the ground before me like an offering. My prize. My prey.” This divorce of personhood and bodily autonomy is amplified by Laney’s cold remark to Zoeller: “you taught me how to let go” (191). Laney, now recognizing just how much agency she has, even cut off from institutional normalcy, is prepared to exercise that power in the most immediate and permanent way possible.

Queerness, and the desires that are mapped onto or branch from it, for Love “is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss [...] The association between love’s failures and homosexuality is [...] a historical reality, one that has profound effects for contemporary queer subjects” (Love 21). Laney’s sexuality, her love for Blyth and Armin, her relation to her mother, is marked—indeed premised upon—failure. Her failure and her entire personhood are shunted to the side by her school and the world at large, brushed away in favor of the modern understanding of gay pride and representation, one that she does not fit into; Laney notes, for example, that “No one flirted with the creepy dyke” (Raeder 202). For Love, “The politics of optimism diminishes the suffering of queer historical subjects; at the same time, it blinds us to the continuities between past and present” (Love 29). This is one of the reasons *Black Iris* is so powerful, because it forces the reader to orient themselves with a person struggling with that suffering, and it digs into what the optimistic understanding of queerness is hiding: a violence and a darkness that are rarely talked about today. *Black Iris* forces open a conversation about violence and its effects, grounded in the 21st century, intertextually as well as metatextually, with Laney wanting to murder Zoeller—open him up, as it were, to a conversation about queerness and agency in the most literal way possible.

Her murder of Zoeller does not happen—Armin stops her—but her violence lingers, her intent of death conceptualized as a beautiful action: “When a hollow-point impacts a target, something beautiful happens. The tip splits into petals that peel back from the center and it becomes a metal flower. It was almost lovely, the thought of filling Z’s body with a garden of them” (Raeder 226). Beauty becomes entwined with violence, which is a notion that helps to shape Laney’s ideas and views of what she has done. While she has not metaphorically severed the binds keeping her from reaching an ontological independence *vis à vis* heteronormativity, she has wounded it enough to satiate her bloodlust. And there is a lot of blood.

My hoodie was soaked with blood straight through to the shirt beneath. I didn’t notice till we were in the car and Blythe touched me and her hand came away red. Surreal, that this stuff that had been inside Z’s body now belonged to me. I sat with her in the backseat,

restless, feeding on her energy. ... I took Blythe's hand, chained my fingers with hers. I needed to touch someone. I needed to expel this wildness inside me. Every time I'd hit his body it had felt like fucking him. Like being inside him, torching his nerves, igniting his blood, making him feel exactly how alive he was by destroying him one piece at a time. Violence is a violation of the body. I had violated him. (227)

Here, Laney's conception of the body is of a physical object, calling to mind Butler's conception of the body. "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. ... Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own" (Butler, "Violence" 26). We can see how Laney has, first, embraced that risk—she has become the instrument of violence—and second, how she has robbed Zoeller of the ability to lay claim to his own body, a revenge so sweet because it strips him of the ability to do what Laney has always struggled to do: claim her own body on her own terms. Her possession of him, "this [blood] that had been inside Z's body now belonged to me," is Butler's idea of the body's "invariably public dimension" made manifest. Blood binds, it courses. But in doing these things it also signifies agency and personhood on its own. In the quote above where Laney meditates over what she has done to Zoeller, she tries desperately to hold onto her conception of him as a person, to not let her imprint on him subsume her idea of him completely. For all that she had boasted before of him being not even human or barely human, we find that now in her shock and in her angst, the repeated use of the he/him pronoun is almost a kind of mantra for her—"being inside *him*, torching *his* nerves, igniting *his* blood, making *him* feel" (Raeder 229, my emphasis)—so that she does not lose her own thread of humanity within herself.

Blood continues to hold Laney, Armin, and Blythe together, the blood of Zoeller, which they wash off each other once back at the apartment. This allows desire to creep into the edges of Laney's thoughts before consuming them completely:

[Armin] washed my body and [Blythe] washed my face. Oh, the symbolism. How fucking literary. I wished I were filthy everywhere so I could feel their hands all over me, so I could be touched again and again, cleansed of my sins, stained with new ones. His hand stroking my belly drove me crazy. When Blythe finished she eyed me a moment, then grabbed the discarded hoodie and bloodied her fingertips and smeared them over my mouth.

Violence is not championed or celebrated as a victory here either. The tension between the three characters is palpable, and their working through it by having sex, a coupling of violence and

desire, is emblematic of how both transcend the body so much so that one must do anything and all one can to hold onto the body as a means of expressing identity.

The graphic threesome is intense in both its language its context. Through it we see an undoing of identity for Laney conveyed through description of an undoing of the body. Pleasure, violence, desire, and identity are all mixed up in this scene. Obviously, the context of the episode is grotesque—the three having just come back from beating up and nearly killing an unarmed man—and that grotesqueness is mingled with desire in such a way as to render selfhood moot. “Identity was irrelevant. Feeling was everything. [...] Our bodies blurred into one animal” (231). For Laney, sex is something she uses to both remain whole and lose herself, a way for the three of them to cope with their physically violent actions while also doing a similar physical act that for them is on the cusp of violence: “Blythe seized my face and we kissed again, brutish and raw. I bit her lip so hard it bled, hers and Zoeller’s mixing in my mouth. ... We were feral and we wanted to ravish each other” (230). This violence springs off of that just done to Zoeller, and since Laney is still enraptured by it psychically, the shock manifests itself through more physical action. Laney’s description of her and Armin finishing is rooted in violence and unbecoming too: “Ours was bestial, graceless. The crudeness of boy and girl. It twisted through every cell in me like some paranormal transformation, a monster briefly emerging, pushing from behind my face, shredding the inside of my skin. My blood boiled and every bone snapped and nothing was left of the girl whose skin I had worn” (232). Pleasure is depicted here as a literal destruction of the body. Laney’s identity as a person is called into question; she describes the feeling of “a monster briefly emerging,” her assumed identity so easily able to crumble as she gets closer and closer with these two people. Per Butler, this physical violence entwined with pleasure leads to an undoing of the self for Laney. “One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage for a while, but despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel” (Butler, “Violence” 23-24).

Her relationship with Armin and Blythe reinforces the idea of fluidity in identity and behavior, and exemplifies sexuality and desire as being unbound by societal orientation labels. The sexual interactions that these three characters have with one another and what Laney thinks about when interacting with them calls to mind the idea that desire has no limits, or as she says “desire mixed with memory” (Raeder 81). Her lamentation about leaving Blythe after this night comes from a genuine place of wanting to cultivate and be in this love with her: “Days upon days that I wouldn’t spend with her, mocking our professors and the bad books they taught, reading each other’s writing and getting high off it, getting drunk and dancing like lovers at Umbra” (233-34). These wants are not of Blythe’s body but of her, as a person, and they are perhaps alien to Laney after focusing so long on violating and damaging Zoeller’s body.

Laney's understanding of love and falling in love is right in line with her boundary-less worldview, but is also premised on a destruction of the self:

Falling for someone is like pulling a loose thread. It happens stitch by stitch. You feel whole most of the time even while the seams pop, the knots loosen, everything that holds you together coming undone. It feels incredible, this opening of yourself to the world. Not like the unraveling it is. Only afterward do you glance down at the tangle of string around your feet that used to be a person who was whole and self-contained and realize that love is not a thing that we create. It's an undoing. (99)

Violence is entwined within this conception of desire too, an unspooling thread of a person who carries thoughts of undoing inside them. This reflects Butler, how "those who live outside the conjugal frame or maintain modes of social organization for sexuality that are neither monogamous nor quasi-marital are more and more considered unreal..." (Butler, "Beside Oneself" 26). It makes sense then that the love Laney experiences for both Blythe and Armin is considered an undoing, as their love is explicitly "less 'true'... The derealization of this domain of human intimacy and sociality works by denying reality and truth to the relations as issues" (26-27). Laney's love, though real, is not one that can be contained by labels; to do so would cheapen the reason behind her love and the substance of what it contains. This is in line with Amber Ault's analysis in her essay "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure." Ault sums up Laney's desire to not be reduced to a binary mode of understanding nicely, pointing out how "bi women refuse to locate themselves on either side of the hetero/homo divide, expressing commitments, instead, to a sexual ideology they believe capable of undermining egregious hierarchical systems of sexual difference" (Amber Ault, "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women." 450). Because when trying to figure out one's sexual identity, even schools of thought that attempt to address the abnormal and champion it will soon become familiar and normal themselves. It makes sense that Laney resists even progressive attempts to define what she is, as these labels focus more on the physical body than on where Laney locates her desire and her love, in the mind.

Breaking Institutional Confinement

While *Iris* explores a queerness that is legitimated in physical violence, it also pushes for an examination of queerness as an identity of desire, and how desire and queerness are kept separate by societal institutions. I explored an aspect of that relationship in the sexual episode above, but there are three other episodes in the book that examine Laney's desire and her relationships to social institutions and thoughts in more ontologically grounded ways. In the section below, I begin by examining her relationship with her mother Caitlin. This relationship is

important in illustrating Caitlin's understanding of divergence from social norms versus Laney's, and also how they understand the norms against which they are rebelling. The relationship also explores how these differing stances on normalcy—both against it as an institutional concept but seeking to go about resistance in radically different ways—can be harmful to each other, and how Laney and her mother influence one another through a familial legacy. Second, I look at the most reified debate between divergence and normalcy in Laney's relationship and resistance to her high school as an institutional monolith, how the school uses a mainstream understanding of diversity as a weapon against diversity itself, and how Laney's resistance to it is a critique of an institutional tolerance and the harm that such tolerance can bring to marginalized people. Finally, I analyze Laney's "coming out" speech at the tail end of the novel. This speech encapsulates a lot of the ideas about desire, identity, and individuality in ways that are emotionally cathartic and so it is worth exploring on its own.

Laney's family must contend with her manipulative and bipolar mother, Caitlin, who ends up committing suicide, thanks in part to Laney and Zoeller switching her medication but also as a violent solution to society insisting that she must be conditioned to be normal through medication, much to her annoyance, anger, and fear. Caitlin is an obstacle for the main character to overcome psychologically but is also something of an ally, affirming many of Laney's own attitudes towards her school and echoing much of what she has to say about herself. When Laney is diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, we see Caitlin rise to her defense, saying that "I believe my daughter has teenage hormones" and when the doctor lists off her symptoms, all her mom has to say is "You described being a teenager. Being a teenager is not a personality disorder" (Raeder 107). With this action, Caitlin takes a Foucaultian stance against the medical industrial complex,⁸ later saying to Laney's father that "I can't be angry anymore, or I'm having an 'episode.' I can't be sad or everyone hides the sharp utensils and shoelaces. I can't be fucking human. I have to act 'normal' or you'll have me committed" (116). The violence that her mother displays is in response to how society is telling her to act and what constitutes the human, much in the same way that Laney's own revenge spree later on in the book is responding to her high school's attempt to negate her sexuality and complexity.

And yet, in a seeming critique of Foucault not taking his philosophy far enough, Caitlin's violence and abuse extend to her family: a need to control her daughter, treating her husband horribly, knowing that he would only blame her bipolar disorder. "[Mom] had affairs that Dad accepted in his quiet, resigned way as 'the Illness.' As if it excused everything. The Illness made her unable to resist impulses. The Illness was the bitch, not Caitlin" (208). The relationship between Laney and her mother is rife with emotional and domestic abuse. We get a clear sense of this when the family of four have dinner, the conversation bouncing from why Laney got

suspended at school, to her sexuality, and her mother's reaction to the animosity between her and Laney:

"You don't deserve to know what's going on. ... You're never here when I need you. You spend all your good days with other people. You only spend the bad ones with us. ... Did you ever realize that not taking your meds is selfish, Mom? That they're not just for you, but for us? So you can act halfway human when you decide to actually grace us with your company? ... And don't even talk about melodrama... You're the biggest drama whore in this house. You never let anyone else feel bad. It's always you, you, you."

This piqued her at last. "Oh, is that it? Angry that mommy dearest is hogging the spotlight? Did you think sticking your face between a girl's legs was going to shock and awe me?"

"I'm not doing this for attention. I hate what I am." (209)

These are typical domestic and emotional abuse tactics, of course, and they also speak to how hypocritical and selective Caitlin is in her moves against a systemic oppression. But later on, after the argument becomes heated, Caitlin confesses to Laney in confidence that she does not want to take pills because they "make me feel dead inside" (214). And Laney's reaction to her mother's confession and reminiscing is telling: "This was like some biblical moment when the scales fell from my eyes. I stopped seeing the Gorgon and saw a human being in pain." Because despite all the differences between them, the pain is the same. "'I've tried so many ways to be normal. I just want to be myself for a little while.' Something tiny and sharp cracked in my chest. We are the same, I thought. I could have said those words." Caitlin, like Laney, is not doing what she does for attention; she hates what she is and she hates what society says she should be. Laney, in her earlier outburst self-hatred, understood that, and Caitlin recognized it too; because the institution and its norms—be it a school or the medical industrial complex—are all strong, their gravity so intense, to resist takes so much strength that there is not enough left for a proper rearticulation into a coherent something else. No wonder there has been so much negativity in queer history and in the present—through sheer exhaustion we have been left with few alternatives.

Like Caitlin, Laney is fearful of losing the battle to the heteronormative societal institution and exhausted by it. As Love notes, "Those who would risk taking on the name queer are subject to a double imperative: they must face backward toward a difficult past, and simultaneously forward, toward 'urgent and expanding political purposes' ...Turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present" (Love 18-19). This could be in part why Laney is so hesitant to identify with a specific identity category—it is risky for her to take on the lesbian or bisexual identity because, in her world, those categories are not safe spaces but sites of stress,

and of a hopefulness that she sees as short-sighted or arrogant. Per Love, Laney's continued refusal to take the labels that others prescribe for her is born out of a fear of losing her past, of relegating it to the past when in reality she is still constantly fighting for an identity on her own terms.

Laney's school provides a good example of the present practice of ignoring past harm and a gleeful erasure of queerness and its violent history. The school's pep rally scene looks at how safe spaces attempt to contort identity labels into rigid and categorical cells for people. Per philosopher Anna Carastathis, the Rainbow Alliance itself marks the school's attempt "to subordinate one or more aspects of our identities to that which a monocular analysis privileges as significant. But in so doing, we are foreclosing a potential coalition with those who share the repressed or excluded identities—*not to mention betraying the possibility of a coalition among all parts of ourselves.*" (Anna Carastathis, "Identity Categories as Potential Coalitions" 942, my emphasis). Our identities, the pieces of ourselves that make us who we are, are all equally important; without any one of those pieces we would be different, and so to push some of those pieces of ourselves down in order to emphasize others does our own identities as a whole a disservice.

As mentioned previously, Wake, through Laney, deploys what Halberstam terms a "shadow feminism," feminism that interrogates the more mainstream progressive feminism that advocates for empowerment through positivity and community (Halberstam 4). The announcement by the Rainbow Alliance group is helmed by the very bullies that torment Laney daily, and Laney's point of view of the speech itself has overtones of many queer kids' high school experience: "You could tell what kind of message [this] was when Christina Aguilera's 'Beautiful' started playing. The lights dimmed, a golden cone spotlighting Luke and company." (Raeder 200). This is a mockery of solidarity, Luke's words promising to protect gay kids and to stop bullying by having queer kids register for the Alliance, dripping of irony for Laney. As she points out to the assembled students, "This doesn't 'protect' anyone. This registry is a hit list. It puts targets on people's backs. And you idiots made a bully your poster boy. ... You don't really give a shit when bad stuff happens to people like me. You only care about *looking* tolerant. Buying a cookie, signing a petition. You pretend to care while you laugh behind my back" (203). Laney critiques systemized tolerance, activism that has lost the weight of activism by being indoctrinated into a corporate and academic environment.

Laney's outburst—and the situation to which she's responding—echoes Halberstam's criticism of institutions presenting a set response to shifting and malleable problems like bullying, hate-speech, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ young people. As Halberstam says

The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production ... terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. (Halberstam 4)

The Rainbow Alliance is being used by Laney's bullies to essentially paint targets on the backs of LGBTQ+ individuals by having them join and thus outing them. In this act, we see how rigidly the Alliance's thinking is, and that is not an accident. It stems from a fear the school has towards Laney and those like her—her identity is multi-faceted, and attempts to pigeonhole her into an identity group are fruitless because Laney is facing that self-coalition head on, recognizing herself as not belonging to any one identity group. To quote Madhavi Menon from the end of her book *Indifference to Difference*, "Even as politics might base itself in ontological absolutes, the lived reality of our lives is that we are not ontologically grounded. Such a lack of grounding repeatedly, universally, undermines the attempt to forge an ontology out of a particular" (Madhavi Menon, *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* 126). *Iris* makes the normally serious group of solidarity and community out to be a sham—the training and learning that it fosters has failed and been turned into a sick joke by those looking to do Laney psychological harm, emphasizing the disparity between the academic institutions and the non-conforming students who dwell within them, and echoing Caitlin's own battle with her husband and the normalizing of medication within the medical industrial complex.

As Carastathis notes, "for many of us, identity-based groups are not experienced as 'homes' but as 'barred rooms'" (Carastathis 945). This stems from the fact that modern identity politics hinges on sameness, on "You seek[ing] those things from identity groups where others 'like you' invite you in, share and affirm your experiences, and offer their analyses, insights, coping strategies, and support" (944-45). And while that can certainly be helpful, for many queer people that starting point runs up directly against the fact that people are themselves never singular, but rather built around multiple categorizations and experiences, none of which can be accurately represented by a singular catch-all group, even if such a group seeks in its foundation to include as many people as possible ("LGBTQIA+," for example). Laney, then, embodies what Menon pushes for in her reconceptualization of identity, that is, a "Universalism [that] militates against an identity politics in which inhabiting a particularity defines our place in the world" (Menon 126). Laney shuns the school's and "politics' desire to be absolute," instead "[fracturing] the notion that particularity can be the basis of a nation-state or even just of a state of being."

This multi-axis understanding of identity is beautifully articulated by Laney. Her confession to her friend Josh explains her position well:

“I’m not gay,” I said. “I wish I was.”

“Why?”

I flipped over, air puffing out of me. “I wish there was one word for what I am. That would be so much easier. People would still hate me, but at least I could say, ‘You hate me because I’m gay,’ not, ‘You hate me because I’m a five on the Kinsey scale, and sometimes I fuck guys but I’ve only fallen in love with girls.’ ... If I was gay,” I told the ceiling, “I wouldn’t need an asterisk beside my name. I could stop worrying if the girl I like will bounce when she finds out I also like dick. I could have a coming-out party without people thinking I just want attention. I wouldn’t have to explain that I fall in love with minds, not genders or body parts. People wouldn’t say I’m ‘just a slut’ or ‘faking it’ or ‘undecided’ or ‘confused.’ I’m not confused. I don’t categorize people by who I’m allowed to like and who I’m allowed to love. Love doesn’t fit into boxes like that. It’s blurry, slippery, quantum. It’s only limited by our perceptions and before we slap a label on it and cram it into some category, everything is possible. (Raeder 329)

This speech, coming in at the tail end of the novel, encapsulates how Laney sees the world, but it also acts as an emotional climax for the audience. Throughout the book, the pressure has been building between Laney, her mother Caitlin, even Blythe, and the various institutions and the people who fall into line with those institutions such as Zoeller and Armin. And this is when it gets broken down and summarized in such an emotionally powerful moment. When I read this for the first time, I was crying, because this put into simple prose the complex emotional and in some ways paradoxical relationship queer people have to love, desire, and outward identity. Because it *is* messy, slippery, quantum. And to see a character articulate that without the need of academic buzzwords or a feminist criticism textbook, to have it be understood not just as something in the theoretical realm but as something real and impactful and personable—proving Menon’s point in a meta sense—is refreshing and powerful.⁹

While it might be tempting to reduce Laney’s articulation of her identity to a simple erasure in favor of the vacuous label of “human”—something that Josh does right after this confession—I think it is more accurate to suggest that this speech—an example of the overall point of the book in microcosm—provides a less romanticized account of how queer people move through the world, under constant pressure to belong, and a more genuine understanding of how people relate to love. Some of us *do* fall in love with minds, not genders; some of us *do* wish to belong to something. As the loneliness of realizing that one’s sexual orientation does not have as much clout or impact on the world or in conversation as one might wish becomes more

burdensome, the temptation to assimilate is sympathetic. To quote Menon: “Identity [as we use it today] is the demand made by power—tell us who you are so we can tell you what you can do. And by complying with that demand, by parsing endlessly the particulars that make our identity different from one another’s, we are slotting into a power structure, not dismantling it” (Menon 2). What Laney is pushing so violently against, though obviously on a less abstract level, is Menon’s fear of modern identity politics, where labels eclipse the people to which they’re ascribed.

Yet Laney paradoxically *understands* the desire to embrace labels, to have a script to go by, because that *is* easier than moving through it all without some sort of guide. As Laney laments, she “wouldn’t need an asterisk beside [her] name” if she could just pick a label and stick to it. These desires and wants, paradoxical and contradictory though they may seem on the outside, are within us at the same time, often not in conflict with one another but side by side. Which is why Laney Keating’s character is so rich—she captures multiples sides of the person-identity-public conflict in ways that complement and inform her personhood rather than render her ill-defined.

Laney’s journey through the book also symbolizes what many LGBTQ+ teenagers and young adults experience, how we are unsure of what to label ourselves and thus find the labels and boxes other people put us into limiting. Laney’s viewpoint of recognizing love as “blurry, slippery, quantum” is one that has been championed by feminist theorists, most especially Menon, who proposes, similar to Carastathis’ identity coalitions idea, the concept of universalism not as a means to erase or dampen specific identities but rather to dismiss entirely the need for additive action, that is, to do away with the need to constantly center a nebulous identity onto a person that may in fact restrict that person’s perpetual social movement. In her proposed solution, “Differences will continue to exist but will lose their power to define” because “None of us is ever reducible to any one of our selves, and each of us stretches against identitarian constraints all the time” (Menon 13, 16). This can be done, she reasons, through recognizing that desire as an impetus for action does not itself recognize these identitarian borders. “The job of a universal indifference is to uncouple desire from the clutches of the law of particularity because desire universally exceeds the particular even as it is marked by it” (17). Desire is not able to be contained by identity labels, and Laney, *à la* universal indifference, recognizes this important fact. This is a bold move, both in the world of the book but also for the book itself, existing as it does within a continuity of Young/New Adult LGBTQ+ literature that more often than not attempts to represent any one of those letters as solid and fixed; a push against another institution.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I brought up José Muñoz and his pushing for a more positive and hopeful depiction of LGBTQ+ people both in fiction and in how we discuss real people belonging to that rough community. While much of my paper seems to be positioned as diametrically opposed to this idea, I stress that Muñoz's argument is absolutely critical and important. Instigating a violent present does not help us if it is not working towards something wherein such action is no longer necessary. And it is worth noting that *Black Iris* does not shy away from embracing this argument too, particularly in its ending. Laney's violent actions do produce results, and they are results that feed into Muñoz's notion of queer futurity and ideality. The concluding chapters of the book depict Laney not only standing by her actions of violent retribution but pressing forward with them, turning her vendetta into a multi-person group. Her rationale is telling:

What, you thought all that stuff with Armin and Donnie would change the core of me? That I'd realize this cycle of hurting and revenge has to end, that I should be the bigger person, let the buck stop with me? Fuck forgiveness. That's what they want me to do. Make it easy for them. Clear their consciences. Let them get away with what they've done. The powerful. The strong. The privileged. Not a fucking chance. (Raeder 364-65)

Forgiveness is seen as something to avoid, since the utopia that forgiveness would bring about would be one that does not have room for Laney and, by extension, for the queer people who do not fall into the normalizing view of queerness. Her utopia is not built on forgiveness but on explicit recognition of identity and of justice towards that identity. The work *Iris* does in breaking open understandings of queerness is important and done without sacrificing the narrative or the emotional pull of the story.

Though the topic of queer violence has been discussed at length here with regard to a theoretical re-thinking of the problem, I think it is valuable to acknowledge that other authors have recognized the problem of shaming shame and shunning violence as meaningful vehicles of asserting identity on different scales and on multiple axes of identity and representation.¹⁰ While Wake is not the first author to attempt to break open an institutional understanding of queerness as being passive, his characters are some of the more well-rounded and complex examples of doing so. Laney Keating constantly leaps off the page with her narration and in her actions. She is less a symbol of feminist or queer optimism and instead a more historically grounded depiction of a person struggling with queer identity internally, coming into conflict with herself about who she is. And that gives her a relatability that is hard to find in many other protagonists.

There is a maturity to Wake's writing that is noticeably absent in many other books geared towards a young adult or LGBTQ+ audience. Wake's books are balanced solidly on the line between being academic treatises and works of fiction with feminist theory plugged into them. The book deploys a feminism that, per Halberstam, Love, Edelman, et al., embraces the darkness, the messiness of queer action and history, and one that looks at the cobwebs not as evidence of some relational problem for an optimistic feminism to take care of, but as worthy of exploration in their own right. *Black Iris* invokes the dark past of queer relationships and associations with the heteronormative system, casting that darkness in a story-worthy way rather than shying away from it.

Notes

¹ See the early 2016 Internet “Bury Your Gays” campaign that criticized the constant killing off of queer characters on television, advocating instead for shows like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* in positive depictions of queer characters.

² *I’ll Give You the Sun*, for example, has the exploration that gay teenage boy Noah does regarding his sexuality is well-written but does not offer nearly the punch it should because any pondering over whether he is gay or perhaps another non-hetero orientation is limited, and ultimately moot as his orientation in the end is set in stone as homosexual. This is not a bad thing, but it leaves potential readers with the sense that exploration and complicated and contradictory desires are themselves detours on a path of simple binaries.

³ *Juliet Takes a Breath* does have a Latina main character and explores her intersections of race, womanhood, and feminism, but the feminism explored in the novel is very White thanks to the main character’s move to Portland, Oregon, and though the main character does criticize this (as does the narrative itself), with one of the central themes of the book being not to accept blindly new ways of thinking, in the end the feminism that Juliet leaves with is one based on and around a distinctly non-nuanced understanding of intersectional conversation and history.

⁴ *If I Was Your Girl* understands transgender identity, for example, as a single monolithic thing, the main character’s friends and family accepting of her identity from the outset; her struggles fall into standard Young Adult fiction tropes instead of existing in dialogue with transgender politics or identity.

⁵ For an example of such a past, I would point to Jean Genet’s work, specifically *Querelle*, which highlights the at-the-time relatively unexplored subject of the male as viewable object. Genet and his work offers first a proto-queer-representation template, a working through of how dark homoeroticism can be, and second, patriarchal and misogynistic imagery turned queer, exploring how these elements intertwine and how this reflects a fluid sexuality that heteronormativity attempts to divide in two. Genet, like Elliot Wake, opens up a conversation about gay identity and what constitutes valid or respectful depictions of that identity at a time fraught with harmful and dismissive assumptions about gay men and by extension queer people.

See Elizabeth Stephen “Disseminating Phallic Masculinity: Seminal Fluidity in Genet’s Fiction” (2004) for an extended look at Genet’s work through a queer and historical lens.

⁶ See, for example, Gatchet and Cloud “David, Goliath, and the Black Panthers: The Paradox of the Oppressed Militant in the Rhetoric of Self-Defense” (2012) for an extended look at violence as identity-legitimizing with regard to race.

⁷ This is a crucial move too when put next to the fact that straight characters have been able to explore these darker behaviors and worldviews throughout literary history—from *Wuthering Heights* to *Gone Girl*, depictions of non-queer protagonists as engaging in negativity and shame are typical.

⁸ Caitlin could be seen to embody much of Foucault’s own ideas about the social construction of disease, specifically mental illness. In his work, notably in *Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault argued that the scale by which we measure normality and abnormality is a socially constructed one, not one naturally given or objective, and moreover that the body itself is constructed through political and social positions, discourse, and through the “clinical gaze” of the medical profession. Caitlin’s want to overthrow or at the least challenge traditional power structures is Foucault’s philosophy made manifest, adding another dimension and voice to Wake’s book and his cast of characters.

See Peter Conrad and Kristin Barker “The Social Construction of Illness: Key Insights and Policy Implications” (2010) for a detailed look at the medical industrial complex and how it impacts social constructions of disability and mental illness.

⁹ Equally impactful is the fact that Wake himself wrote this speech as a catharsis. In his acknowledgements section, he notes that:

I am who I am. It’s taken me three decades to reach a state of okayness with [my identity]. It shouldn’t take anyone that long, and that’s part of why I wrote this book. I hope *Black Iris*...shows the fluidity and quantumness of human sexuality. I hope it speaks to others who know what it’s like to not fit the default template. And I hope it lets the bastards who’ve made me feel subhuman for the way I was born know: You haven’t silenced me. You haven’t won. My head is bloody, but unbowed. (Raeder 370)

¹⁰ See, for example Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects*, Kerry Kletter’s *The First Time She Drowned*, and Roxane Gay’s *Difficult Women* anthology.

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