

**Diffraction Power &
Intra-Active Subjectivity:
A (Re)turn to Queer
Women's Self Writing**

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Submitted on:
**16th of June
2021**

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As a contribution to present and future conceptualizations of power and subjectivity in feminist research and practice, this thesis (re)turns to past accounts of queer women's self-writing. By tracing the formations of subjectivity, the negotiations of power, and the transformations of the self that are evident in Anne Lister's diaries, Gertrude Stein's *Lifting Belly*, and the compilation of essays, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, written by the SAMOIS collective, this thesis proposes a move towards an Agential Realist (re)configuration of power as diffractive and subjectivity as intra-active. In doing so, the aim is to queer and unsettle the western ways of knowing and being that reinforce violent self/other relationality and the hegemonic power dynamics that enact the conditions of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy. In my effort to rework the ways in which power and subjectivity are embedded in the systemic violence perpetuated by the west, I (re)turn to narratives fostered by the desires of western queer women because these narratives have been excluded or intentionally concealed and silenced from the historical discourses that are reflected in our present material and social conditions. It is in these narratives that I locate subjectivity as an intra-active phenomenon that contributes to my theoretical conceptualization of power as a diffractive force that yields patterns through which we may engage our realities more responsibly. Grounded in Michel Foucault's approach to power and Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity, this thesis brings together a formulation of these theories with Karen Barad's concept of *spacetime mattering*. This Baradian concept operates as a framework through which I explore the material, temporal and spatial elements of power and subjectivity in my readings of queer women's self-writing. Therefore, I argue that engaging the discursive alongside the elements of space, time and matter in the construction of power and subjectivity generates an ethico-onto-epistemological practice of knowledge production that opens up possibilities for a more ethical and responsible approach to world-building.

Acknowledgements

To begin, I wish to thank the Gender Studies department at Utrecht University for guiding its students to encounter the process of learning in a manner that is not only critical and insightful, but also attuned to important questions spurred by ethico-onto-epistemological ways of thinking. I also want to thank my fellow colleagues for the discerning and generative classroom discussions and for supportively challenging each other to contend with the intricacies of feminist thought and practice. The determination of this department and its students to carve out a space for feminist knowledge production amongst the increasingly neoliberalized university system demonstrates a great bravery and resiliency that I deeply appreciate and see as a source of inspiration for my future pursuits.

Next, I must acknowledge that the development and completion of this thesis would not have been possible if it weren't for the following teachers who shared essential guidance, meaningful ideas, and enticing thought provocations with me throughout this academic endeavor. First, I wish to thank Dr. Anna Poletti for generously introducing me to the field of Life Writing and sharing your enthusiasm for diary theory and autobiography with me. The insights we crafted during our tutorial together provided the backbone for my second chapter and was instrumental in my engagement with Anne Lister's diaries in my writing. I also wish to thank Dr. Mia You, the second reader of this thesis, for organizing the Gertrude Stein Symposium in 2019, which inspired me to take my wide-eyed fascination with Stein's writing to an academic level, and therefore, helped foster the inspiration for my third chapter. Lastly and most importantly, my deepest gratitude is dedicated to Dr. Kathrin Thiele, my thesis supervisor and primary source of guidance and support throughout this academic experience. From greatly expanding my mental horizon by introducing me to Agential Realism during the rigorous classroom experiences of TCR I & TCR II, to gently teasing out the nuances of diffractive reading with me in our tutorial together, your passion for approaching theory as practice, thinking *with* the trouble, and responsibly attending to the nuances of ethics and critique in your practice of knowledge sharing has been instrumental to my development as a student, writer and thinker. Thank you for the intellectually inspiring and emotionally encouraging thesis meetings, your endearingly supportive email presence, and overall enthusiasm for mentally exploring the many potentialities of responsible world-building. Your enthusiasm is contagious and is thus imprinted into many merry moments written throughout this thesis.

I now wish to share my appreciation for the queer kinship network in my life who has continually shown me love and support in varying degrees throughout this writing journey: Molly McCown, Martina Bovini, Tim Kraushaar, Greta Brinkman, Úna McAuley, Sigrid van der Meer, Josine van Kemenade, and Asja Novak, I cannot adequately express the significance that each of you carry in my life. Thank you all for being my support system and sharing tender moments of connection with me throughout this writing endeavor. I see all of you scattered amongst the quirks and nuances that line the pages of this thesis. A special thanks to Josine for offering your sharp eyes during the (last minute!) final stages of editing and always listening to my long-winded pontifications with interest and patience. Lastly, my greatest gratitude is directed to Asja for (digitally) being by my side in my lowest, darkest moments, for processing the painful complexities of life with me, and for encouraging me to think this thesis out loud with you. The conversations that comprise the past 8 years of our kinship have been revelatory, critically insightful, & life affirming and have very rightfully made deep impressions upon the thoughts and feelings that brought this thesis into being. Thank you for sharing your brilliance with me.

Finally, a big thank you to my mother, Tamra Buchanan, for bringing me into this world and never holding me back from the pursuit of my outlandish dreams. Without your cherished love and support, this thesis would have never come into existence.

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Introduction

“I attempt to inhabit a queer practice, a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world” (Muñoz 121).

“Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world.

We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad 2007, 185).

The sparks that eventually ignited this thesis were generated many moons ago, approximately a decade or so, when I began contending with my strange sense of inhabited difference. This peculiar, ungraspable difference, which I could so strongly feel setting me apart from my family and peers throughout my upbringing in small-town Oklahoma, is something that slowly entered into my consciousness as ‘queerness’ when I entered academia. The university classroom was (and still is) a formative space in which I came into relationship with the thoughts and discourses of queer theorists, feminist academics, and women writers who fostered worlds of belonging with their written words. Despite how this notion of queerness has always felt simultaneously intrinsic to my being and yet also somehow beyond the grasp of my reason, engaging the academic field of queer theory gave me a sense of belonging in my own unknowability. I realized that this slippery, hard to grasp element of my existence was actually a source of power for me, a source of connection that ironically enabled me to see my own sense of self somewhat legibly while being in relation with other queer people and their writing. Significantly, it was in that liminal space of ‘being in relation with queer people’ that I encountered the notion of ‘power’ as this likewise hard-to-grasp concept that permeates our interactions, our conversations, our abilities to touch or be touched by each other: our capacities for action. By being in community with queer people and likewise communing with the words of queer writers, I slowly started to wrap my head around the lofty concept of power that I found myself deeply entrenched in, deeply consumed by and unable to escape. Power therefore became as central to my conscious being as my queerness, both of which comprise the primary tenets of my sense of self and both determine the actions that I feel capable of committing and those that feel out of my reach. If we are to

follow Michel Foucault's theory that power is "a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions" (1982 789), then we may comprehend power as this massively opaque yet formidable force that enables and restricts our capacities for action, for movement, for speech and relationality.

The realization that power determines my ability to take action and thus power permeates nearly every corner of my reality, sparked my persistent and sometimes gnawing fascination with power. This fascination ignited a continual churning of the questions: How do I gain power? How do I lose it? Can I give it away or share it? What avenues of power are available to me and why? The practice of chewing on these difficult questions has slowly and tentatively guided me into my awareness of the dominant, hegemonic structure of power as more broadly taking shape in the form of a matrix of domination defined as White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy.¹ Through the lens of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy, we can learn to see how power is constructed in the systems that uphold and perpetuate privilege and oppression in western societies (hooks 2014, Andersen & Collins 2015). This western construction of power has intricately seeped its way into my internalized sense of self as a subject,² and, thus, it influences how I navigate and negotiate the social and private spheres of my existence. It is my desire to unlearn and reconceptualize this internalized hegemonic construction of power that primarily drives this thesis into existence.

To better understand how power permeates my subjectivity and sense of being in the world, I (re)turn again and again to reading and writing, since these activities contribute quite heavily to how I foster my sense of self and belonging. The practices of reading and writing have always enabled me to encounter the potential for self-transformation: a process of better understanding my own power and how it influences my capacity to be in relation to the material, temporal and sensual realms that I inhabit. As I will argue throughout this thesis, reading and writing are powerful avenues through which we can transform our relationships to power, and by extension, our senses of self as being in relation with the world around us. It is through our engagement with the written word that we may come to inhabit new perspectives of reality that have potentially far-reaching implications on how we navigate our

¹ Coined by bell hooks, this concept demonstrates the interlocking system of power and oppression determined by the intersections of white supremacy, capitalism, heterosexism and patriarchy. Together these systems (among others) comprise the social order of contemporary Western society.

For more, see hooks, b. (2014). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (3rd ed.).

² According to Judith Butler, in the book, *The Psychic Life of Power*, "power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (3).

lives and negotiate the systems of power that insulate us. Power exists in many forms, but specifically, I am interested in the intra-active and diffractive nature of power that I argue may manifest through the method of diffractive reading and writing. Before I offer brief glimpses into the chapters that comprise this thesis, I wish to first enumerate upon the troubling concept of power that this thesis aims to reconceptualize while also sharing the process that is guided by the research questions posed at the end of this introduction.

The primary manifestation of power that I critically interrogate throughout the scope of this thesis relates to the assumption that power is a finite commodity that is obtained through domination, which is a perception of power that has been impressed upon me by living in a capitalist society. Capitalism creates the impression that power is commodified and produced in the form of capital that is attained by participating in a system of exploitation and domination (Bourdieu 1986). Such an understanding of power reinforces the reductionist idea that power is something that a person either has or doesn't have according to financial status or other forms of privilege or oppression. It narrows the conception of power into a binary of the powerful and powerless, which is a limitation that risks dangerous ideological implications. The act of internalizing the limitations of power in this way and therefore navigating daily life with this limited concept of power as a fixed and stable truth, reproduces and reinforces the oppressive power dynamics of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy (hooks 2014, Andersen & Collins 2015). Moving away from reproducing and reinforcing these power dynamics is vital to reducing systemic violence and oppression, which is a move that I aspire to attend to throughout this thesis. Furthermore, this western, capitalist power dynamic (the dynamic of 'power-over') is symptomatic of a longer, historical trajectory of power that can be traced back, in the west, to the domineering, genocidal project of colonialism, which eventually evolved into and coincided with imperialism and now takes form in the economic endeavor of capitalism (hooks 2014, Andersen & Collins 2015). This historical trajectory of power has been resisted, reinforced and replicated in more ways than this thesis can possibly account for. So, I intend to focus primarily on the role that narrative has played in this trajectory's ability to shape the conditions of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy. Narratives function to provide a framework for understanding as they help us make sense of history, literature, movies, etc., (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). The function of narrative even extends into our private and interpersonal realms as creating narratives for our own lives and those around us aids and hinders our abilities to understand our past, present and future as being in relation with one another (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). Throughout this thesis, I wish to attend to the

material, temporal, and sensual implications of narratives as they have tangible impacts on how we navigate systems of power.

To begin teasing out the ways in which narrative functions alongside power, I wish to delineate two types of narrative that I propose in this thesis: conflict-driven and desire-led narratives. I claim that conflict-driven narratives are the dominant, hegemonic form of narrative through which western institutions create frameworks of understanding history, media and other avenues of social meaning making (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). As western scholars, we are in most cases trained to understand history through the wars and conflicts that led to the creation of our nation states. These conflict-driven historical narratives influence the governing of international social orders produced according to the dynamics of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy. In this sense, conflict has been a central organizing principle of global, international and national affairs, but it also drives the narratives of our media on big and small scales (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). We see conflicts dominate our news headlines in big scale media, but also on a smaller scale, one that feels closer to home, conflict-driven narratives are the backbone of popular media such as TV shows, movies, and books, as I will further demonstrate in Chapter 1. Desire-led narratives, on the other hand, have the potential to de-center conflict and instead allow for narratives to be driven by what is usually over-looked or concealed in dominant forms of history and media: the desire of women, specifically queer women or otherwise marginalized people. As the contemporary push for representation of marginalized folks in mainstream media has revealed, dominant forms of history and media have devastatingly excluded the experiences of people who do not (bene)fit from white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (Lorde 2017). This exclusion reinforces the dynamics of privilege and oppression formed under this matrix of domination (Lorde 2017). Therefore, one of my central aims with this thesis is to propose a method of understanding the potential of power's formulation as potentially being enacted in ways that are not constrained by the limitations set by the capitalist concept of 'power-over'. This endeavor requires a (re)turn to the narratives that are excluded from hegemonic systems of power because it is in these excluded, desire-led narratives that we get a glimpse of power happening otherwise; of power being wielded queerly, tenderly, and gently as it glides under the radar of hegemonic conflict-driven narratives of history.

These aforementioned constructions of power and narrative provide a framework for understanding another primary goal of this thesis: to enact a practice of (re)turning to the past as an endeavor to expand our present and future conceptualizations of power. In many ways, I consider the past to be an inherent part of the present in so far as the narratives that

governed past social orders now shape and influence the construction of our present material and social conditions. As such, I have encountered the following authors and texts as a means for accessing over-looked and/or intentionally concealed desire-led narratives of the past: Anne Lister's diaries, *Lifting Belly* by Gertrude Stein & Alice B. Toklas, and *Coming to Power* written by the SAMOIS collective. Written throughout a period of time spanning nearly 200 years, these works depict the self-writing of queer women whose lives were shaped by being in close proximity to western constructions of power. By teasing out the ways this proximity had material, temporal and sensual implications for the writing of these women and the narratives their writing enacted, I hope to attend to the nuances of power at play in these written accounts of the self and the queer desires that move them forward. By (re)turning to these desire-led narratives, I intend to investigate how senses of self and subjectivity may be transformed through the process of reading and writing, as these acts hold the potential for power to be diffractively reconfigured. To demonstrate this endeavor, I will now offer an overview of the chapters that comprise this thesis.

The first chapter of this thesis functions as a methodology chapter in which I propose a method of approaching power as diffractive and subjectivity as intra-active. In this chapter, I argue that engaging diffraction as a method is a move towards an ethico-onto-epistemological form of knowledge production that may open up avenues for understanding power and world-building differently. By grounding this chapter in Karen Barad's theories of Agential Realism, specifically diffraction, intra-action and *spacetime-mattering*, I intend to walk the reader through the relationships between these concepts, processes of reading and writing and the transformation of the self/subjectivity. To begin doing so, I start the chapter by engaging the queer feminist film director, Céline Sciamma's lecture given at the BAFTA Awards in 2019, titled, *Letting Desire Dictate Writing*. In this lecture she proposes an approach to screen writing that centers the desires of marginalized people as a gesture towards restoring the agency of people whose stories have historically been overlooked or intentionally concealed in narratives that are centered around conflict. It is this approach that I extend into my proposal of (re)turning to desire-led narratives. Afterwards, I offer a glossary of terms in which I further define my formulation of narrative and ground my use of power in the theory of Michel Foucault and my use of subjectivity in the theory of Judith Butler. In my final segment of this chapter, I bring together Barad's concepts of diffraction, intra-action and *spacetime-mattering* as the framework through which I engage Foucault's theory of power and Butler's theory of subjectivity in my reading of queer women's life writings.

In Chapter 2, I closely read the diaries of Anne Lister as I begin tracing the material manifestations of power and subjectivity evident in her self writing. The aim of doing so is to explore the ways in which the act of diary writing may lead to a transformation of the self that is captured on the pages of the diary. Because the existence of lesbianism was silenced by the discourses of the English society that Lister lived in during the early 1800s, her diary holds an account of a queer self that was otherwise concealed from social realms. The secrecy with which Lister had to navigate her lesbianism is evidenced by the code, comprised of Ancient Greek and Algebra, that she developed to write about her queer desires; an endeavor that I argue fosters a desire-led narrative. Guided by Judith Butler's line of thought that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999 191), the following question is central to this chapter: what are the implications regarding the stylized act of repeatedly recording, in coded writing, the queerly sexual body in an interior, material space that is also tenuously constituted in time: the diary? By investigating the elements of Lister's life that she repeatedly recorded in her diary, this chapter traces the ways in which Lister negotiated her subjectivity and constructed a sense of self that was silently and secretly formed under the radar of the dominant narratives that constructed the discourses of her time. (Re)turning to Lister's desire-led narrative in this way opens up new possibilities for thinking about power's embeddedness in the materiality of the diary and the impact that material manifestations of power may have on otherwise silenced subjectivities.

Going forward nearly a century, Chapter 3 takes us to the early 20th century period of literary Modernism with a reading of Gertrude Stein's poem, *Lifting Belly*, alongside José Esteban Muñoz's and Elizabeth Freeman's theories of queer temporalities. This chapter explores the relationship between reading and writing and the seemingly naturalized linear temporality that is produced and reinforced by the material conditions of capitalism. By interrogating this relationship, I offer a reading of an intra-active (un)becoming of subjectivity in Stein's work. I (re)turn to the work of Stein because of the "heterosexual assumptions operating to erase the significance of lesbian existence in the creation of modern literature" (Galvin 37). The literary canon often dismisses and conceals the ways in which lesbian writers contributed to and shaped the movement of literary Modernism to this day, therefore, reading for queerness in Stein's poem reveals a desire-led narrative in her writing that demonstrates how lesbian and queer women were instrumental to the Modernist movement. In my reading of *Lifting Belly*, I investigate how Stein queers the temporal situatedness of her readers through the persistent use of the continuous present, which fosters

a queer potential for “new subject-positions and new figurations of personhood” (Freeman 54) to be experienced by the reader. Following this analysis, I utilize Butler’s theory of subjectivity to examine how Stein’s use of repetition contributes to the (un)becoming of an intra-active queer subjectivity that is located in the quotidian content and ambiguous eroticism of *Lifting Belly*. Lastly, I intend to demonstrate how these analyses ultimately contribute to Stein’s defiance of authorial authority, which contributes to a diffraction of the dualities that shape knowledge and power in western society. As such, I argue that Stein’s work contributes to an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to meaning making, knowledge production and world-building that helps reconfigure the heteronormative regimes of history.

The last chapter of this thesis, Chapter 4, brings us to the latter half of the 20th century, a period after the sexual revolution began the long process of normalizing the existence of gay and lesbian discourses in western narratives (SAMOIS). In this chapter, I bring together several essays from Audre Lorde’s collection, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, with selections from *Coming to Power*, a collection of essays written by the SAMOIS collective to be read diffractively alongside Karen Barad’s theory of Agential Realism. The aim of doing so is to once again engage avenues of reading and writing as potential sources of understanding the self and power otherwise, specifically in the context of writing about eroticism and the practice of BDSM (Bondage/Discipline Domination/Submission Sadism/Masochism). I (re)turn to the *Coming to Power* essays, which depict the desires and fantasies of queer and lesbian BDSM practitioners, specifically because of the ways in which BDSM practice was villainized and silenced by gay and lesbian communities who sought acceptance in hegemonic narratives of ‘normalcy’ in North America at the time these essays were written (SAMOIS). Lorde’s essays, on the other hand, offer insight into the significance of writing about what is otherwise silenced as well as the importance of locating the erotic as a source of power for women. By exploring the sensual implications of power that are made apparent by reading these texts together, this chapter offers a final analysis of power as being diffracted along the lines of the Agential Realist conceptualization of *spacetime mattering*. This move towards a diffracted understanding of power ultimately aims to demonstrate how power may be enacted intra-actively as ‘power-with’ instead of ‘power-over’ in the hope of dismantling the oppressive regimes of power in white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

This thesis ends with a personal reflection of how my own sense of self and subjectivity has been transformed through the process of diffractively reading and writing about the presented desire-led narratives of this thesis. By (re)turning to these narratives, I desire to reveal how power is embedded in the material, temporal and sensual elements of

existence in ways that have been over-looked or concealed by dominant conceptualizations of power. To guide me in the exploration of the material, temporal and sensual elements of power as potentially contributing to an intra-actively diffractive conceptualization of power, the following questions provide the backbone to this thesis writing endeavor: Can we employ the theories of Agential Realism alongside theories of power and subjectivity to create an ethico-onto-epistemological form of knowledge production that enables readers and writers to think about power differently? Does a practice of (re)turning to desire-led narratives of the past have the potential to expand our present and future conceptualizations of power? And lastly, what are the implications, if any, on the self/subjectivity when conceptualizing and understanding how power may be enacted in ways that are not constrained by White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy?

Chapter One:

Diffractive Methodologies: Tracing the Transformation of the Self in Desire-led Narratives

As stated in the introduction, this thesis aims to follow desire-led narratives of the past to better understand our present and future conceptualizations of power. The inspiration to follow the impact of desire's role in narrative production was initially sparked while watching a video of Céline Sciamma's lecture given at the BAFTA Awards in 2019, titled, *Letting Desire Dictate Writing*.¹ In this lecture, the queer and feminist film director reflects on narrative production in her work and proposes a move away from writing conflict-driven narratives because

lack of conflict doesn't mean lack of tension. Lack of conflict doesn't mean lack of eroticism. Lack of conflict actually means new rhythm because of a dialogue not built on bargaining. Lack of conflict actually means new power dynamics that allow surprises and new suspense. (21:10-21:20)

By turning away from the practice of centering conflict in her screenplays, Sciamma demonstrates how letting desire dictate the screen writing process opens up the potential for conveying tensions, rhythms and power dynamics that are different than those presented in conflict-driven narrative structures. She states that in film school, "we learn screen writing as an art of conflict" (17:02-17:05), which is an art of writing conventional narrative structures as centered around the conflicts that protagonists encounter in the pursuit of desire. These conflicts are considered to drive plots forward in a clear and linear fashion. Yet, Sciamma makes clear that for the stories of marginalized people, a different approach to narrative construction is necessary because of the reductive ways in which conventional media emphasizes the oppressive conflicts that create conditions of marginalization instead of depicting the complex intricacies of marginalized people's lives. Therefore, shifting the focus away from conflict and towards desire brings forth avenues for oppressed people to share their own stories and emphasize what is most important to their own senses of self.

¹ Sciamma, Céline. "Letting Desire Dictate Writing." BAFTA Awards, London. 2019. [Link to video.](#)

In writing her latest film, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Sciamma iterated that her “desire was to break the narrative of conflict” (18:40-18:48) and instead explore what comes forth when narratives are led by desire. This film, a fictional period piece set in 18th century France, depicts the development of an unlikely love affair between two female characters. Evading the obstacles typical to the period that these characters could have faced in the pursuit of their ‘forbidden’ desires for one another, this film instead unfolds around the experience of their desires being fulfilled and enacted on the character’s own terms. Such de-centering of conflict and re-centering of desire in this film opens up the possibility to encounter power dynamics that are not determined by the struggles of conflict and are instead negotiated otherwise. By letting the narrative be led by desire, Sciamma offers her viewers a rare journey into a tender, queer love story that carefully reveals how the characters shape and are shaped by their desires instead of the constraints of socially inflicted conflict. Because, as Sciamma enumerates, French women in the 18th century rarely had the opportunity to fully choose the circumstances of their own lives, telling stories about their desires offers insight into their senses of self and subjectivity that would otherwise be overlooked (16:12-17:10). Subsequently, Sciamma argues that “women have been objectified by fiction and by patriarchy throughout history, so giving them back their subject status, their subjectivity, is giving them back their desires” (15:55-16:10). The objectification of women in fiction, and on a broader level, in patriarchal society at large, has often been contingent upon denying women access to the means of creating our own narratives. This objectification, as Sciamma also argues, is undermined by centering the desires of women in narrative production because, as I intend to demonstrate throughout this thesis, desire is a central element of the composition of subjectivity. Following the conceptualization of desire put forth by feminist scholar, Teresa de Lauretis, this thesis operates with the understanding that “desire is configured in phantasms of unity *and* of division: it is articulated in the word that creates symbolic space, self-representation, projects, theory, politics” (De Lauretis 229). Desire then is articulated in the nuances that foster the self as it manifests on a manifold of levels². So, by exploring this relationship between subjectivity and desire in her screen writing process, Sciamma crafts a narrative method for telling the stories of queer women that evades reducing them to their circumstances and the conflicts they encounter. In doing so, her method of fostering desire-led narratives has the capacity to enact different ways of

² For more on the complexities of desire and subjectivity see: De Lauretis, Teresa, “The Intractability of Desire”. *Figures of Resistance : Essays in Feminist Theory*. University of Illinois Press, 2007.

depicting and constructing the rhythms, tensions, power dynamics and relational entanglements that compose a story. This method creates the potential for audiences to understand their worlds differently because narratives and “stories do things: they produce realities” as feminist researchers Mona Livholts and Maria Tamboukou argue in their elaboration of discourse and narrative construction (45).

By (re)turning to desire-led narratives in knowledge production, my thesis aims to foster an ethical approach to world-building by responsibly attending to the ways in which marginalized people, specifically queer women, construct our own senses of self in autobiographical writing. Through this investigation of the self, I hope to trace how power and desire intra-actively shape the process of subject formation in a potentially transformative manner that reflects what I will call a ‘diffraction of power’ (more on this in what follows). To demonstrate my methodological approach to these aims, I want to now offer a glossary of the key terms that shape the theoretical frameworks that this thesis operates under, specifically Michel Foucault and Judith Butler’s approaches to power and subjectivity alongside Karen Barad’s Agential Realist accounts of diffraction, intra-action and *spacetime mattering*. After defining the significant elements of these theories, I will then weave these concepts together in order to illustrate how my methodological approach to ethico-onto-epistemological world-building pertains to the desire-led narratives of the queer women’s autobiographical writings that this thesis engages in the chapters to come.

A Glossary of Terms

Because this thesis engages various theoretical perspectives, in what follows I wish to first specify the central concepts of this thesis in a glossary format. Afterwards, I then further detail how the defined concepts come together to form the basis of my methodological approach in this thesis.

Power

Power is a pervasive influencer of our thoughts and actions on a multitude of levels. French critical theorist, Michel Foucault, reflected on the culmination of his various theoretical investigations related to power in his essay, “The Subject and Power”. In this work, Foucault examines, as he himself states, “the different modes by which, in our culture,

human beings are made subjects” (777). Such an examination offers an analysis of how the “subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others” (Foucault 778) as a result of interacting with the power relations imposed on the subject through the navigation of institutions of power, such as the government, the health care system, the family, etc. One’s participation or lack of participation in such institutions of power determines the extent to which the subject is individualized and divided from others or not. Additionally, Foucault explores how the societal relations of power surrounding subjects are internalized in a sense that lends to divisions of the subjects within themselves. As such, he illustrates how we, in the west, tend to internalize views of ourselves in a dichotomous fashion as either sane or mad, criminal or “good”, healthy or sick, etc. Furthermore, Foucault explains that power is

“a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions” (789).

Accepting the notion of power as consisting of a set of actions upon other actions creates space for us to grasp the complex discernment that “power exists only when it is put into action” (Foucault 788). As such, as Foucault continues, “the exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (Foucault 788). In this sense, Foucault’s approach to power echoes sentiments of how the internalization of the power structures that we wade through as we navigate our lives determines the doors we open and the doors we understand as closed to us, in a metaphorical sense. It is this pervasive, internalized sense of power that modifies the actions we feel capable of committing, determines the actions we act upon others, and the actions we accept and receive. These actions relate to the divisions that construct the concept of the subject. These divisions may be further understood as the differences between people (gay/straight, white/of color, poor/rich, etc.) that contribute to the social hierarchies implicit in White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy³. This systemic form of domination and control contributes to the concept of power-over, which divides people from each other on

³ Coined by bell hooks, this concept demonstrates the interlocking system of power and oppression determined by the intersections of white supremacy, capitalism, heterosexism and patriarchy. Together these systems (among others) comprise the social order of contemporary Western society. For more, see hooks, b. (2014). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (3rd ed.).

the basis of difference⁴. It is these iterations of power that I wish to re-think as ‘power-with’⁵ by reformulating power as diffractive together with Karen Barad’s theories of Agential Realism for reasons that are explicated later on in this chapter and throughout this thesis.

The Self and Subjectivity

In a philosophical context, subjectivity can be broadly understood as the condition of being a subject, which is “an individual who possesses conscious experiences, such as perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires” (Solomon 900). Adjacent to subject is the concept of the self, which is “conceived to be a subject of consciousness, a being capable of thought and experience and able to engage in deliberative action” (Lowe). In other words, the self is constructed by an individual’s experience of subjectivity. While many philosophical and theoretical renditions of the self/subject/subjectivity exist, this thesis mainly operates with the theories of subjectivity proposed by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Specifically, this thesis investigates the relationship between power and subjectivity. In Butler’s discussion of Foucault, she asserts that power is “*forming* the subject as well as providing the very condition of its existence” (Butler 1997 2). And as such, she claims that the subject must be understood as an *effect* of the subjection to the institutional forces of power that a person must negotiate: “power not only *acts on* a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being” (Butler 1997 11). By understanding subjectivity as being intricately intertwined with and constituted by power, this thesis aims in its reading of three desire-led narratives to trace a transformation of the self that may potentially take place through an engagement with an Agential Realist formulation of power.

Narratives

I turn to the role of narratives in my research with the understanding that stories and narratives play a big role in how we as subjects foster meaning, and they guide us as we construct our realities and world-build. In the text, *Discourse and Narrative Methods*:

⁴ For more on how difference contributes to the colonial social order: Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Woman, Native, Other : Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1989.

⁵ “a cooperative mode of distributing power differently on simultaneous levels of reality, potentially following feminist visions of a model of ‘power-with’ rather than ‘power-over’” (Bauer 176).

Theoretical Departures, Analytical Strategies and Situated Writings, Livholts and Tamboukou explain that “human beings are inherently storytellers and it is through the activity of narration that we create meaning in our lives” (37). The definition of a narrative is wide and varied and encompasses many approaches⁶, but in the scope of this thesis, Maria Tamboukou’s Foucauldian theorization of narratives is central. Because narratives shape the production of meaning, Tamboukou highlights how narratives function as “a mode of knowledge. Narratives in this light define the possibilities of knowledge, and hence action in any given society” (Livholts and Tamboukou 41). Action is predicated upon the knowledge that such an action is possible, so returning to Foucault’s concept of power as a “set of actions upon other actions” (789), the link between narratives (as modes of knowledge) and power (as enabling or prohibiting of action) is established. Furthermore, Tamboukou clarifies that narratives are “productive; not just as power/knowledge effects, but as constituting realities and indeed the subject” (Livholts and Tamboukou 40). Functioning as the framework through which subjects understand and perceive reality, narratives have the power to shape the perceived limits and potential expansions of reality; therefore, also shaping the possibilities for subject formation itself. As such, this thesis aims to demonstrate how the entanglement of power and narratives create the meanings that inform how subjectivities come into being. Specifically, I am interested in the exploration of desire-led narratives found in the autobiographical writings of queer women because these narratives have often been over-looked or intentionally concealed in the western canon of knowledge production, which this thesis intends to demonstrate. For the context of this academic project, the phrase ‘desire-led narratives’ is deployed to describe the narratives that are derived from the personal stories and autobiographical accounts of the lives of queer women because accounts of their desires unfold in the narratives produced in their writings. By tracing the conditions of possibility for the emergence of these desire-led narratives as well as analyzing the effects of power that these narratives produce, this thesis investigates the link between narratives and the transformation of the self that results from autobiographical writings.

Diffraction

⁶ For more on the socio-linguistic, psychoanalytic, Cartesian, Spinozist, Deleuzian, and Foucauldian approaches to narrative, see Livholts, Mona, and Tamboukou, Maria., *Discourse and Narrative Methods: Theoretical Departures, Analytical Strategies and Situated Writings*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015.

As a central concept in Karen Barad's Agential Realism, diffraction provides a conceptual lens through which we, as knowledge producers, may engage more responsibly with matters of difference and power. Present in both classical and quantum physics, diffraction has various manifestations in the physical, material world but also in the metaphysical realm. A physical diffraction pattern can be seen in the ripples of water resulting from a stone skipped across a pond or, most notably, a diffraction can be detected in the interference patterns produced in the two-slit experiment (Barad 2007 77-79). Diffraction can commonly be understood as waves (water, light, sound, etc.) breaking open and dispersing in many directions when these waves are confronted with an obstacle (skipping stone) or opening (slit). The patterns produced by the dispersal of waves into many directions is a diffraction pattern, which maps "where the *effects* of differences appear" (Barad 2007 72). Diffraction demonstrates how matter comes to matter differently as it is dispersed into different directions. Staying attuned to these differences is at the heart of the New Materialist formulation of diffraction that has been adopted into a metaphysical, ethical⁷ approach to knowledge production and world building by feminist and interdisciplinary scholars. Diffraction as a theoretical tool was first introduced in Donna Haraway's book, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse*TM (1997), in which she writes that "diffraction is a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings" (273). Subsequently, Karen Barad builds onto this theoretical adoption of diffraction in the second chapter of their seminal text, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), when they write that diffraction is an "apt metaphor for describing the methodological approach that I use of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (71). Mapping the effects of differences dispersed throughout diffraction patterns is a practice that translates into a methodological and theoretical tool for attending to matters of meaningfulness and our own embeddedness in the meanings we produce. Importantly, we, as researchers, are *of* the diffraction patterns produced by our interventions in knowledge production, which becomes evident when we "understand diffraction patterns--as patterns that make a difference--to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world" (Barad 2007 72). Approaching our conceptualization of the world through the lens of

⁷ For more on the ethics of diffraction see: Kathrin Thiele's 2014 article, *Ethos of Diffraction: New Paradigms for a (Post)humanist Ethics*. Printed in *Parallax*, 20:3, 202-216.

diffraction enables a move away from ‘objective’ and ‘determinate’ forms of knowledge production “in order to produce a new way of thinking about the nature of difference, and of space, time, matter, causality, and agency among other important variables” (Barad 2007 73). In this sense, diffraction is more than a metaphor or a scientific phenomenon, it is also an approach to meaning-making, world-building and knowledge-producing that queers⁸ and unsettles the logics of western ontologies and epistemologies. In doing so, diffraction serves as the lens through I reconceptualize Foucault’s theory of power and Butler’s theory of subjectivity. By reformulating power and subjectivity as diffractive, I hope to demonstrate a responsible engagement with the patterns of power that permeate subjectivity.

*Intra-action*⁹

Initially proposed as a neologism by Karen Barad in the article, *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* (2003), intra-action “represents a profound conceptual shift” away from the “classical ontological condition of exteriority between observer and observed” (815) as well as other conditions of classical ontology and epistemology. In contrast to intra-action, “interaction” presumes the components of existence to be independent entities that relate to each other as ontologically and epistemologically separate agencies. Intra-action, on the other hand, signifies “*the mutual constitution of objects and agencies of observation within phenomena* (Barad 2007 197). This shift towards intra-action signals a move away from conceptualizing matter as independent objects with inherent properties and boundaries to instead embrace matter as phenomena that are “*the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’*” (Barad 2003 815). This means that I, as an observer, am not separate from the components or objects of my observation, rather I am intra-actively entangled with and shaped by the objects that I observe just as the objects may be shaped by my observation, for example. Significantly, separate individual agencies do not precede their interactions as independent hierarchized entities, rather they exist in a co-constitutive manner through their intra-active entanglements. In this sense, *intra-actions constitute a reworking of the traditional notion of causality*” (Barad 2003 815) because they shift the normative boundaries of cause and effect, which provide the premise of interaction. Instead, intra-action reveals how components, entities,

⁸ For more on the queering potential of diffraction see: Karen Barad’s 2011 article, *Nature’s Queer Performativity*. Printed in Duke University Press: *Qui Parle* 19:2

⁹ For a clear and concise 3-minute explanation and well thought out example of Intra-action, please watch: [ThreeMinuteTheory: Intra-Action Video](#)

agencies, objects, subjects, etc., co-constitute one another and enact “a local resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy. In other words, *relata* do not preexist relations; rather, *relata*- within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions” (Barad 2003 815). What Barad is claiming here is that reality is comprised of an inherently indeterminant state of existence and matter comes to matter through acts of relationality not determinacy. These acts of relationality are intra-actions that have the ability to reveal how matter gains meaning by emerging *within* relationships *not* outside of them. Throughout this thesis, I primarily turn to intra-action as a lens through which I analyze subjectivity because, as I hope to demonstrate in my later chapters, adopting a theory of intra-active subjectivity contributes to a diffractive conceptualization of power.

Spacetime mattering:

This imploded phrase of space, time, and matter “refers to the entangled nature of what are generally taken to be separate features” (Barad 2011 156). This notion of *spacetime mattering* can be understood as a sense of reality that is constituted by an intra-active coming together of space, time and matter. Instead of thinking about space, time, and matter as separate entities, Barad insists that an “ethics of entanglement entails possibilities and obligations for reworking the material effects of the past and the future. There can never be absolute redemption, but spacetime matter *can* be productively reconfigured, reworking (im)possibilities in the process” (2011 150). By engaging our realities as entangled phenomena of space, time and matter, Barad is offering an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to conceptualizing and configuring the potential possibilities of reality that are otherwise limited by thinking of space, time, and matter as separate entities. Significantly, Barad offers insight into the “ways of responsibly imagining and intervening in the configuration of power, that is, intra-actively reconfiguring spacetime matter” (2007 246). As such, locating power’s formation in the intra-active reconfiguration of *spacetime mattering* structures the chapters in this thesis and serves as a framework through which I approach theorizing a diffraction of power.

The Intra-active Entanglement of Narratives and Subjectivity: Contributions to a Diffraction of Power

Now that I have introduced the primary concepts that shape the trajectory of this thesis, I now want to further detail how all of these different aspects work together in view of

my reading methodology in the coming chapters. My overall aim with this thesis is to (re)turn to the desire-led narratives found in the autobiographical writings of queer women, specifically Anne Lister, Gertrude Stein & Alice B. Toklas, and the lesbian BDSM practitioners that comprise the SAMOIS collective, with the goal of locating how power and subjectivity come forth in their writing. I am drawn to the writing of these women because of the ways in which they are all simultaneously privileged by their whiteness and/or class status while also being oppressed because of their queerness. As such, I wish to trace these nuances of their privilege and oppression as I tease out the conditions of their subject formation. Such an endeavor aids in my elucidation of how an analysis of the temporal, material and spatial elements of their writing allows the transformations in their senses of self to become evident. These transformations, as I hope to properly demonstrate throughout my chapters, are intricately entwined with an intra-active subjectivity and diffraction of power. So, to clarify why I turn to an analysis of the temporal, material and spatial elements of their writing as instrumental to tracing the transformations of the self, intra-active subjectivity and diffraction of power, I will now offer an in-depth theoretical exploration of how these concepts come together and why they matter.

This thesis is grounded in an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to theory as method, which is why I turn to the process of reworking of ways of knowing and being in the world. This turn is inspired by my ambition to reformulate accounts of power and subjectivity along the lines of Agential Realism. In my effort to reconceptualize power as diffractive and, by extension, subjectivity as intra-active, I turn to Karen Barad's theory of Agential Realism, which proposes a move away from thinking about ontology (the theory of being), epistemology (the theory of knowing) and ethics as separate entities. By engaging these matters as intertwining and entangled phenomena, Barad fosters an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to knowledge production that I wish to adopt in my reconceptualization of power and subjectivity (Barad 2007 185) because doing so opens up new ways of responsibly thinking and being in the world. I am drawn to this approach to knowledge production because it is, as Barad argues, "*of the Western canon while at the same time continuously and rigorously undoing what is said to ground its very foundations*" (Barad and Gandorfer 2020 14). While this thesis is firmly rooted within two main forms of western knowledge production: reading and writing, the turn towards an ethico-onto-epistemology enables me as a researcher to move beyond the conceptual limitations incurred by western ways of knowing and being. These limitations take the form of, for example, categorical

approaches to causality, dualistic frameworks of understanding, and the assumption of an individualistic separability between human and non-human agencies. Each of these limitations gets explored and expanded in the chapters that follow. In doing so, I gesture towards approaching these causal relations differently (which calls for a reworking of dualisms such as subject-object, self-other, and so on) by engaging the material and metaphysical elements of existence as co-constitutive phenomena not separate, dichotomous entities. This move highlights the dangerously reductive impact of Cartesian Dualism¹⁰ on the contemporary construction of subjectivity by pointing out the pervasive tendency of “the self in positioning itself against the other, constituting the other as negativity, lack, foreignness, sets up an impenetrable barrier between self and other in an attempt to establish and maintain its hegemony” (Barad 2007 170). The tendency of the self to position itself against the other as separate, hierarchized entities is instrumental to the deployment and maintenance of power formed under the conditions of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Conceptualizing the self-other binary in this way contributes to the dynamic of ‘power-over’, which is a power dynamic that underpins much of the violence that is systemically perpetuated by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. To attend to this violence responsibly in the chapters of my thesis, I aim to rethink power along the lines of Agential Realism because this realm of theory provides me with a conceptual shift away from these violent dynamics. To begin demonstrating this potential shift in power, I must first enumerate upon the intra-active nature of subjectivity. In their discussion of Agential Realism with Adam Kleinman, Barad insists that subjects do not merely pre-exist as entities or agents who act upon each other in a dichotomous fashion, rather Barad explains that individuals “materialize in intra-action” (Kleinman 76). Unlike interaction, in which individuals interact with one another while maintaining independence as entities that are separate from each other, intra-action reveals how an individual “only exists within phenomena (particular materialized/materializing relations) in their ongoing iteratively intra-active reconfiguring” (Kleinman 77). What this means is that individuals, as subjects, only come into existence through acts of relationality

¹⁰ Seventeenth Century French philosopher, René Descartes formulated the concept of Cartesianism Dualism, the theory of the mind—body divide. Descartes “held that there are two worlds, one of mental objects and one of material things, including animals and human bodies” (Gordon 1). This dualism was instrumental to the development of dualistic ways of thinking in western philosophy and society. For more, see Baker, Gordon, et al. *Descartes' Dualism*, Taylor & Francis Group, 1995

rather than as separate entities who define themselves through the divisive barrier of difference from the other. For Barad, the materialization of the subject through the process of intra-action thereby reworks

this alleged conflict into an understanding of difference not as an absolute boundary between object and subject, here and there, now and then, this and that, but rather as the effects of enacted cuts in a radical reworking of cause/effect. (Barad 2007 174)

By reworking cause/effect in this way, Barad offers an alternative to the conceptualization of difference and thus revises how the divisions of power operate. Usually dependent on the self/other binary, the normative notion of difference is a key factor in the dynamic of power-over because this form of difference is a mechanism for identifying “otherness”. However, by enacting agential cuts, the normative notion of difference is transformed. Barad further explains these notions of enacted cuts as the process by which “intra-actions enact agential cuts, which do not produce absolute separations, but rather cut together-apart (one move)” (Barad 2007 168). This move of cutting-together-apart transforms the binary division through which we separate the notion of self and other by revealing how we are simultaneously separate and linked to one another. Intra-action, in this sense, promotes a worldview in which matter comes to matter differently: as entangled co-constitutive phenomena that come into existence through acts of relationality not as separate pre-existing entities that act upon each other. By adopting the framework of the self-other and human-matter as mutually co-constitutive phenomena that materialize in intra-activity, Barad is gesturing towards a radical reworking of cause/effect that enables subjectivity and power to be conceived of in a diffractive manner.

Instead of assuming power as operating within the binary of ‘those with power’ vs ‘those without power’, Barad’s Agential Realism, in continuation of Foucault’s thinking on power, offers insight into how power may be conceived as being diffracted and therefore dispersed through entangled intra-active phenomena. While writing about the political possibilities of intra-active material reconfigurations in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Barad emphasizes that

intra-actions have the potential to do more than participate in the constitution of the geometries of power; they open up possibilities for changes in its topology and

dynamics, and as such, interventions in the manifold possibilities made available reconfigure both what will be and what will be possible. (246)

Here, Barad is arguing that the intra-active reconfiguration of power opens up a possibility not only for a change in power dynamics but also an intervention in and reconfiguration of what is understood to be possible. Opening up the possibilities of power in this way creates space for engaging the potential of power to be enacted differently than the oppressive dynamic of “power-over”, which is a move that can be better understood by now approaching the material, temporal and spatial elements of power. In their seminal text, Barad offers insight into the “ways of responsibly imagining and intervening in the configuration of power, that is, intra-actively reconfiguring spacetime” (2007 246). As such, locating power’s formation in the intra-active reconfiguration of *spacetime* structures the chapters in this thesis. By focusing each chapter on one of these phenomena: materiality (Chapter Two), temporality (Chapter Three) and the sensual element of spatiality (Chapter Four), my thesis aims to reveal, in an Agential Realist manner, what it looks like to reconfigure power in the realm of *spacetime* as a gesture towards conceptualizing a diffraction of power. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how power may be enacted in ways that move beyond reproducing the violent power dynamics put forth by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. In this endeavor, I turn to the concept of the diffraction while following Barad’s assertion that diffraction, as a theoretical/methodological approach has the “potential to materialize remarkably insightful and productive patterns that dynamically shift, not over time, but in the making of *spacetime*” (Kleinman 80). To illustrate this diffraction of power, I intend to trace the remarkably insightful and productive patterns of power that come forth by engaging desire-led narratives as intra-active entanglements in the realm of *spacetime*. As such, it is my hope to illustrate how locating power as manifesting through the dynamic, productive patterns of diffraction enables us, as researchers, to attend more responsibly to power's potential.

Conclusion

In each of my following chapters I (re)turn to the desire-led narratives found in the autobiographical writing of queer women because, as established by Sciamma at the start of this chapter, women and marginalized people have been historically objectified in the production of hegemonic narratives. To move away from this persistent objectification, centering the desire of marginalized folks in knowledge production is vital for a practice of

responsibly attending to otherwise silenced or excluded subjectivities. As I aspire to demonstrate throughout this thesis, (re)turning to desire-led narratives is an implementation of an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to knowledge production because, as Barad writes, “that which is excluded in the enactment of knowledge-discourse-power practices plays a constitutive role in the production of phenomena—exclusions matter both to bodies that come to matter and those excluded from mattering” (2017 57). By investigating the narratives of Anne Lister, Gertrude Stein & Alice B. Toklas, and the lesbian BDSM practitioners that comprise the SAMOIS collective, my aim is to critically intervene in the normative modes of narrative production and world-building that overlook how these exclusions matter. In doing so, this thesis enacts an Agential Realist paradigm of knowledge production, which highlights how “seeing and thinking diffractively therefore implies a self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world” (Geerts and van der Tuin 175).

Chapter Two:

The Diary as a Material Manifestation of Subject Formation

To begin my investigation into the diffractive elements of power that are unearthed by engaging written desire-led narratives, I turn to the diary. The diary, comprised of an individual's written accounts of quotidian life, is a site of the self in which one's negotiations with power, desire and materiality play out in an intra-active manner. In the book, "Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries", Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff write in the introduction, that "diarists lay bare power relations, use their writing to transform themselves and their culture, and shape their diaries to express the variety of women's experience" (8). These authors expand upon the ways in which diaries, specifically the diaries of women or otherwise marginalized people, create space for diarists to explore a sense of self that is counter to the roles prescribed for them by authoritative social standards, which enables what I argue is the potential for an intra-active transformation of the self (8). A prime example of this transformative self-exploration is documented on the pages of Anne Lister's diary, which provides a detailed account of queer/lesbian desire in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Born into the landed gentry of England, Lister's class privilege intersected with her oppression as a queer woman in curiously nuanced ways that I hope to attend to throughout this chapter. Lister frequently wrote of her queer desires and experiences in a secret code in her diary and the care with which she repeatedly recorded these prohibited experiences is indicative of the diary's significance in the creation of her sense of self. If we are to follow Judith Butler's line of thought that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999 191), then what are the implications regarding the acts of repeatedly recording the queerly sexual body in an interior, material space that is also tenuously constituted in time – the diary? And how does this stylized repetition of acts produced in writing contribute to an identity that has no social recognition? Lastly, what role does diary writing play in the formation and transformation of diary writers' senses of self and subjectivity? These are some of the questions that guide me in this chapter as I explore the role of power in the diary as a material space in which the subject negotiates desire. To begin, I introduce Anne Lister and the role

the diary has played in her life as well as the life the diaries have taken on after her death. Then, I turn to the work of diary theorist, Phillip Lejeune, to contextualize the history of the diary and to better understand how the diary is tenuously constituted in time. Following these analyses, I wish to read Lister's diaries alongside the theories of power and subjectivity put forth by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler because these theorists offer insight into how western societies shape the forms of power and subjectivity that pertain to the social and material conditions of Anne Lister's life in nineteenth century Europe. In doing so, I intend to dissect and trace the ways in which the diary is a site of the self that may be considered the material manifestation of subject formation. Ultimately, my aim with reading Lister's diaries together with queer theorists is to demonstrate the intra-active nature of the self, the diary and queer desire as a gesture towards understanding power differently.

The Diaries of Anne Lister

Living from 1791 until 1849, Anne Lister traversed unusual ground for women of her time in Halifax, West Yorkshire, England. She inherited and skillfully managed her own estate, travelled widely across the European continent and consistently pursued female lovers. Donning a curiously androgynous attire of black clothing during most occasions, she sought after a 'masculine' and rather rigorous education in the classics, science and math. A strikingly energetic and inquisitive person, Lister enjoyed climbing mountains in the Pyrenees and dissecting human extremities under the tutelage of Georges Cuvier (Steidle 266). Her charm, intellect and curiosity enabled her to explore otherwise uncharted territories for her contemporaries, but her story, in all its fascination, would have been swallowed by the dark depths of history and forgotten had she not produced such a prolific and detailed diary. Estimated to be 7,700-pages spanning over 5 million words,¹¹ her diary is an intricate record of time, weather, food, social customs and commentary, and travel. Surprisingly, a sizable portion of this diary is written in a code comprised of Ancient Greek and Algebra. In the coded sections, Lister writes in great detail about her body, her love affairs with women and her otherwise socially unacceptable desires and thoughts. She considered the coded segments¹² of her diary to be her "*peculiar hand-writing (what I call crypt hand)*"

¹¹ <https://wyascatablogue.wordpress.com/exhibitions/anne-lister/anne-lister-diary-transcription-project/>

¹² "Italics have been used throughout the text to distinguish the 'crypthand' passages from the ones written in 'plainhand'" (Whitbread 25).

(Whitbread 235) and it is through the use of her ‘crypt hand’ that she expresses the parts of herself that were otherwise forbidden by her social customs. She exclaims: “*what a comfort [are] my journals, how I can write in crypt all as it really is & throw it off my mind & console myself— thank God for it.*” (Steidele 94). This statement reveals how Lister utilizes her ‘crypt hand’ to release from her mind the desires, sentiments and experiences as they really were and thus, she feels consoled by expressing what she otherwise had to keep silent or concealed. It is in these coded sections that we see Lister earnestly exploring her inner realm in a space that is free from the fear of discovery. Significantly, this space provides a rare glimpse into the negotiation of her queer desires and a formation of the self that is uncensored by the conservative social standards of the English gentry.

The survival of Anne Lister’s diaries throughout the nearly 200 years since they were written is a rather remarkable feat. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, her diaries were discovered by her distant relative, John Lister, as he sifted through old documents of previous generations of his family. He had inherited Shibden Hall, the estate that Anne Lister had also inherited and managed, and found that Anne Lister’s diaries were “a treasure trove of local history” (Steidele 10). He then published 121 extracts of her diary in the *Halifax Guardian* between the years of 1887 and 1892 to showcase what life in Halifax was like nearly 50 years previously (Steidele 10). Soon after, he asked a fellow antiquarian friend to help him decipher the coded segments of her diaries and upon cracking the code, they were both astonished to find “an intimate account of homosexual practices among Miss Lister and her many ‘friends’” (Steidele 11). Despite being an antiquarian, his friend found the diaries’ queer content to be unsavory and urged John Lister to immediately burn the diaries in their entirety. Luckily, Lister did not follow his friend’s advice and instead hid the diaries behind a wall panel in Anne Lister’s former bedroom. He hid them in such a way to ensure that later owners of Shibden Hall would find their existence, which proved to be a successful endeavor.

After John Lister’s death, Shibden Hall was turned into a museum and Anne Lister’s diaries were then re-discovered and kept safe in the archives of Halifax’s library. They have since been engaged by various researchers throughout the last century. While the early researchers refused to acknowledge the homosexuality depicted in the coded sections, it was Helena Whitbread and Jill Liddington who began publishing uncensored transcriptions of Lister’s diaries in the 1980s. Written between the years of 1806 and 1840, Lister’s diaries extensively capture the minute details of her life with an incredible consistency and precision.

According to the Anne Lister Diary Transcription Project, a full transcription of her diaries exists only for the years of 1806-1818.¹³ The majority of her diaries, primarily written during the years 1818-1840, is still being transcribed by numerous researchers and volunteers. So, for the scale of this thesis project, I rely heavily on written accounts of Lister's diary created by her primary biographers, Helena Whitbread, Jill Liddington, Anne Choma and Angela Steidele. I have chosen a volume of excerpts from Lister's diaries that were transcribed and published by Helena Whitbread for my close reading of Lister's self-writing. Titled *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, this compilation of selected excerpts is concentrated on the years 1816-24 because this period is what Whitbread claims is "the most emotionally dramatic period of her [Lister's] life" (Whitbread xxiii). With the intention of analyzing how Lister captured her emotional turbulence within the pages of her diary, I hope that the following close reading will allow for Lister's sense of self, created in her writing, to unfold. The importance of this engagement with Lister's emotional landscape is made apparent by the rarity of autobiographical accounts of lesbian desire in the western world during Lister's lifetime. As made evident by the suggestion that the diaries be burned because of their queer content, we can deduce that other accounts of queerness from this time/place were intentionally concealed, therefore, contributing to the 'no-lesbian-before-1900-myth'" (Liddington xvi). Because of their rarity, Lister's diaries are considered to be the "veritable Rossetta Stone of lesbian life'" (Liddington xv) in the English language. For this reason, I argue that the content of Lister's diaries fosters a desire-led narrative in which queer desire unfolds and gets explored despite societal constraints on such desires. This desire-led narrative, at the time it was written, flew under the radar of hegemonic narratives that sought to conceal and erase the existence of lesbianism. By doing so, it offers us a unique glimpse of how queer women wielded their power and shaped their senses of self outside of the limited social narratives that were prescribed to them. By engaging these diaries in my research, I hope to demonstrate how (re)turning to desire-led narratives such as Lister's may open up avenues for understanding power and subject formation in a different manner.

The Diary: A Site of the Self that is Tenuously Constituted in Time

¹³ <https://wyascatablogue.wordpress.com/exhibitions/anne-lister/anne-lister-reading-annes-diaries/>

As a queer person whose life has been greatly impacted by reading the diaries of Anne Lister, I am compelled to explore the intricacies of this impact by teasing out the roles of the diary in subject formation. To begin my analysis, I turn to Lister's diary to find accounts of what purpose diary writing played in her life. Throughout the selected segments of her diary in Whitbread's edition, there are numerous instances in which Lister writes of writing in her diary as a tool for emotional relief. For example, in May of 1824, Lister was contemplating her emotional hardships when she wrote that she "sat down to my journal...I am writing at this moment & in the last 2 ½ hours, I have gradually written myself from moody melancholy to contented cheerfulness...What a comfort is this journal. I tell myself to myself & throw the burden on my book & feel relieved" (Whitbread 371-2). Through the act of writing in her diary, Lister is able to lift her mood from melancholy to cheerfulness, therefore, indicating how the act of (diary) writing has potentially transformative purposes. Used as a tool for emotional relief, Lister's diary captures the words that transform her state of mind as she details the emotional process that she is going through. By throwing the burdens of her heavy self-realizations onto the pages of the diary, Lister processes her inner life and expresses her most vulnerable self on the pages of her journal. Although it is common to come across phrases such as, "a thousand moody reflections occurred, but again, writing has done me good..." (Whitbread 223), while reading Lister's diaries, this is not the only purpose behind her writing. She also writes in effort to document her life as a record for reflection. As noted throughout her journals, she spent a lot of time creating indexes of her own diary writing that she continually returned to for practical information as well as self-reflection. For example, on Friday June 18th, 1824, she was reflecting on her numerous romantic liaisons with women when she wrote:

Looking over volumes 2, 3, 4, & 5 as far as p.111 of my Journal...I read over attentively, exclaiming to myself, 'Oh, women, women!'...the account, too, as merely noted in the index, of Miss Browne, amuses me. I am always taken up with some girl or other. When shall I amend? Yet my taste improves...I could trace much inconsistency & selfishness noted down against M—. (Whitbread 373)

M— is shorthand for Mariana, one of Lister's most prominent and long-term lovers. In this passage, like many others, Lister returns to her diary to trace the notes she has made of her lovers as a source of self-reflection. She is amused by her past accounts, contemplates her habits when she asks, 'when shall I amend?', and concludes that her taste in partners is

improving, a conclusion reached by engaging the past accounts of her romance with Mariana. She uses her index to guide her self-reflective journey into her diary, which indicates how her diary is a tool not only for self-expression and emotional transformation, but also a tool for reflective self-analysis. The contents of Lister's index indicate the subjects and topics that she continually returned to and repeatedly wrote about in her diary. By capturing these repetitions in her index, Lister offers insight into the matters of personal reflection that mostly occupied her mind. By exploring what Lister valued enough to add to her index, we can locate a potential site of the self that gets established through repetition. When thought along the lines of Butler's argument that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999 191), the repetitions captured in the interior space of the journal's index demonstrate a formation of the self that is also tenuously consisted in time. By repeatedly exploring her own repetitions in the index, Lister is engaging in a form of reflection that signals the development of her sense of self. To get a better understanding of how this repetition of the self is instituted in an interior space that is tenuously constituted in time – the diary – I now turn to Diary Theory as a guide in my exploration of the temporal elements of the diary in relation to Lister's sense of self.

The pioneer of Diary Theory, Phillip Lejeune, has traced the origins of the diary back to the acts of counting and managing material and social matters in the rise of Western civilizations. In a collection of his selected works titled, *On Diary*, he claims that "the diary, like writing itself, was born of the needs of commerce and administration" (51). He begins his analysis of the history of the diary by recalling the practice of "collective journals" that were kept and subsequently lost on fragile media during Antiquity and the Middle Ages (52). These journals were a community affair that recorded "the births, marriages and deaths" of community members (52). Stone tablets then became the primary record keeping media in Europe until the 1500s, when paper "revolutionized the system of ordinary writing in administration, commerce, and academia" (57). For example, paper was fundamental to the 'Venetian accounting' system that gave rise to the expansion of "Italian capitalism beginning in the fifteenth century" (57). Here Lejeune draws a parallel between the ascent of commerce/capitalism and the advent of the journal/diary as a material means of accounting. He claims that "to keep an account means that you can write and that you own something: it is a way of exercising a modicum of power, however limited" (51). Inherent in the diary's origins is, as Lejeune argues, a mechanism of power that is linked to ownership, commerce, and the advent of capitalism in western civilization. After the material basis of the diary was

formed under the needs for accounting and managing goods, the diary later developed a personal purpose as it began to serve the function of being a space in which individuals can document their experiences within the framework of western time. Lejeune writes:

The practice of keeping a personal journal emerged in Europe between the late Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, at the same time as the mechanical clock was being developed, on the one hand, and in conjunction with the appearance of the annual calendar and the datebook on the other. (58)

What is important here is that Lejeune makes note of the link between the rise in time-oriented technology and the practice of keeping a diary. Therefore, he demonstrates how diaries materially capture the ways in which individuals track and measure their lives in accordance with the western societal influence of time under capitalism. This relationship between time and the diary is illustrated rather clearly in Lister's diaries as she is known for being fastidious in her habit of recording time in her diary. In the book, *Gentleman Jack: A Biography of Anne Lister, Regency Landowner, Seducer and Secret Diarist*, one of Lister's biographers, Angela Steidele notes that "her daily notes on the weather, including exact temperatures, could be used to draw up climate graphs for Yorkshire. Thanks to her marked need to measure the time, many of her days can be reconstructed down to fifteen-minute intervals" (78). Lister took note of the time for the start of nearly every meal that she ate, the time she went to sleep and woke up, and how long almost any task took her to complete. From reading, to playing the flute to mending clothing, she kept track of how long these tasks lasted. She also noted the duration length of her daily walks, travel between destinations, conversations, and sessions of sexual intimacy. She was persistent in her use of the diary to track and measure her life according to the framework of western clock-time. Additionally, her documentation of time in relation to the weather, for example, illustrates how the diary, as a method of record keeping, contributes to the accounting and managing of records used to produce western forms of knowledge, such as climate graphs. Furthermore, Lister wrote in her diary: "Alas! My watch stood again at 11. Je ne sais quoi faire! To be without a well-going watch is terrible to me, who measures all by time" (Ingham 62). In this passage, we get a glimpse of how dearly Lister is attached to her watch as it is the prevailing method of measuring and structuring her life. As evidenced by her phrase in French, without her watch, she doesn't know what to do because this attachment to her record of time is a defining feature of her sense of self. This habit of measuring, keeping track, and recording time in her

diary creates an account of herself that can be seen with Lejeune as situated within the mechanism of power that is linked to ownership, commerce, and the rise of industrialism in western civilization.

The obsession with time and the source of industrial commerce –money–, were prominent aspects of Lister’s character, which is made evident by one of her biographers, Jill Liddington, who wrote of Lister’s early days of diary writing in which “Lister’s almost obsessive precision about money and time is already starkly evident” (12). In addition, Liddington writes that Lister dearly held onto:

the profoundly conservative social views of other local traditionalist Tory landowners. Like so many of them, she was keen to run her 400-acre estate effectively, by keeping her tenants subservient and by exploiting the industrial opportunities developing in nearby Halifax. (xiv)

Lister often wrote in her diaries about the exploitative ventures she pursued as a landowner and industrialist entrepreneur. She employed abusive child-labor practices in her coal mines, bullied her tenants into voting for Tory politics against their best interest, and strived to gain status in the male-dominated, conservative Tory landowning elite (Liddington xiv). While she was certainly brazen in her pursuit of lesbianism, she was even more bold and relentless in her pursuit of exploit driven profit as an industrialist landowner. Her relationship to timeliness and record keeping was essential to her ability to create a legible sense of status in this realm. Through the acts of tracking and managing her material, temporal, and financial matters on the pages of the diary, the diary becomes an instrument of power that Lister utilized to gain social and material status. Time plays a key role in this mechanism of power that Lister exercised, which exemplifies the interrelation between the diary, temporality, and power. By returning to the Butler-inspired idea that the self emerges through a stylized repetition of (written) acts that are instituted in an interior space that is tenuously constituted in time – the diary, my aim is to establish Lister’s diary as a site of subject formation that is fostered through the repetitions that comprise the index and is shaped by the diary’s temporal implications. Locating Lister’s diary as a site of subject formation in this way serves the purpose of providing grounds upon which I can further investigate Lister’s development of her sense of self as it has been constructed in her diary. To do so, I now turn to a passage from Butler’s book, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, in which she writes about analyzing subjectivity as “always double, tracing the conditions of subject formation

and tracing the turn against those conditions for the subject—and its perspective—to emerge” (29). Thus far, I have traced a few conditions of Lister’s subject formation in her diary via a location of the self found in the repetitions of the index and the implications of power derived from its temporal situatedness, so now I wish to offer an analysis of how the diary provides a space in which Lister’s queer self emerges as she negotiates a turn against the conditions and institutional forces that shaped her subject formation in what follows.

Coded Subjectivity: The Diary Evades Authority as the Queer Self Emerges

While the diary’s origins are rooted in the westernized mechanism of time that is linked to ownership, commerce, and the advent of capitalism, the diary simultaneously holds the potential to evade the authority that is derived from institutional forces. In the introduction of *On Diary*, the book’s editor, Julie Rak, explores the “unfolding of time in life, and of time in ‘diary time’ which can address the past, but which is most concerned with making sense of the present as it accumulates each day” (24). In addition, she writes, “the diary has the future as its ultimate addressee” (24). And this is so, because if a diary is read, it is always read after it was initially written, and it is therefore always read *in the future*. This nuanced relationship with time signals the entanglement of the past, present, and future written into the rhythms of the diary. These rhythms generate a complexity that evades the linear demands of time under capitalism and demonstrates that “if anything, diaries evade authority” (19). By evading the authority derived from the linear demands of time in this way, the diary’s tenuous relationship to time opens up the possibility for writers to foster a sense of self that is counter to the chrononormative¹⁴ construction of subjectivity. This potential evasion of temporal authority is just one way in which the diary creates space for a written counter-tradition of subjectivity to emerge. This form of subjectivity can be further understood in the longer passage that follows in which Rak turns to Foucault in order to exemplify the diary’s relation to confession and authority:

Where Foucault would probably have seen the transgressive tendency of diaries to be a counter-discourse or counter-memory practiced by individuals who had been taught

¹⁴ Operating under a framework of linear time, chrononormativity is “the use of time to organize individual bodies toward maximum productivity” and “is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (Freeman 3).

by their societies to confess and therefore be a subject, for Lejeune these “confessions” can form a counter-tradition of subjectivity which influences the development of private life, but is not completely subsumed by the training of the proper self practiced by institutions. This kind of confession, after all, has a passionate address, which is to oneself or is part of the process of self-formation. But diary writing still holds itself away from the world of print. The confession is to the future or to the beloved page, but not—and this is important—to any authority. (19)

Though it is imbedded in institutions of commerce and accounting under capitalism, the diary also fosters a space in which the diarist can confess a counter-tradition of subjectivity that is somewhat evasive of the institutions that Foucault claims constitute the discourse in which subjects emerge. Since the diary is not subject to the discursive demands of the world of print, which can be understood as the institutions that comprise the literary world of publishing, it is a unique space in which the self may be formed outside of the dominant narratives of written subjectivity. By confessing the self to oneself or to the pages of the diary instead of to an institutional authority, diary writers establish for themselves a material space in which their senses of self may be created differently. By turning to the coded sections of Anne Lister’s diary, we can see more clearly how the diary creates space for this counter-tradition of subjectivity to emerge. In these sections, what Lister explores is a self that is prohibited from expression in the socially conservative milieu of her social and institutional relations. The culture that constructed Lister’s world in the first half of nineteenth century England, was dominated by religious mores that deemed speaking or writing about the body or sexuality as taboo. According to Lejeune’s reading of diaries written by young women during same period of time in which Lister lived and wrote her diaries, the body and sexuality were absent from the written accounts of the self produced by these young western women. Lejeune clarifies, “these diaries, in which sometimes the writer declares that she will ‘confide everything to her little notebook,’ appear to be extremely self-censored. All that pertains to the body, to sexuality, remains outside the scope of the diary” (132). This example shows how pervasively the conservative social standards regarding women’s bodies and sexuality were internalized by diary writers during Lister’s lifetime. On the contrary, Lister did not evade writing about her body or sexuality, in fact, she fastidiously recorded her bodily functions, her illnesses and mostly, her sexual experiences in the coded sections of her diary. By turning to what Lister wrote in her ‘crypthand’, we can see how the content she repeatedly

records in these sections foster a legible sense of Lister's queer self to emerge. Steidele further illustrates this point:

Every entry in Anne Lister's diaries begins with whether and with whom and how often she had sex the previous evening, and whether it was repeated during the night or in the morning. She routinely noted the number and quality of her orgasms and those of her partners. If she woke up alone, she made a note of whether she had masturbated. (10-11)

While her diary records many elements of her life, Lister's focus on sex and the body is remarkably telling because of how devoutly these topics were prohibited from the discourses of her time. By continually returning to the body, to sex, to orgasm, Lister writes herself into a subject that had little legibility outside of her bed and diary. She creates her own language and use of symbols to depict her sexual encounters with her lovers and her own solo-sexual acts for a lack of language otherwise. For example, every diary entry began with a symbol, such as "the 'X's with which Anne recorded her masturbation in her diaries" (Steidele 74). This X is thought to "echo the abbreviation for 'kiss'. She also used the word to mean an orgasm with a partner" (Steidele 74). Lister repeatedly uses the word kiss to indicate orgasm, which is depicted in the following coded segments of her diary from September 19, 1818. There, she wrote: "*Tried for a kiss a considerable time last night but Isabella was as dry as a stick & I could not succeed. At least she had not one & I felt very little indeed*" (Whitbread 79). Additionally, on September 18, 1823, she wrote: "*We drew close together, made love & had one of the most delightfully long, tender kisses we have ever had*" (Whitbread 317). And lastly, on December 12, 1817, she writes: "*I took off my pelisse and drawers, got into bed & had a very good kiss, she showing all due inclination & in less than seven minutes the door was unbolted & we were all right again*" (Whitbread 36). These different segments depict an unsuccessful attempt at orgasm, a rather intimate and tender illustration of orgasmic lovemaking, and a rather quick sexual escapade. Offered here is a tiny fraction of the multitude of diary entries depicting Lister's use of the word kiss to indicate orgasm. Illustrated in these segments is the rise of her own language that she used to constitute a counter-tradition of subjectivity: writing into legibility a queerly sexual subject whose bodily desires and actions were censored from the dominant discourses and narratives produced by the institutional authorities of Lister's lifetime. It is because Lister recorded these sexual encounters with such consistent repetition that we, the readers of her diary, come to

understand the extent to which she concerned her sexuality with her sense of self. Her code demonstrates an interior space in which Lister uses her crypt hand as a stylized act of writing her queer self into legibility via repetition, thus illustrating the relationship between Lister's coded writing and her subject formation as a queer woman who had little social or institutional legibility. Lister fosters a queer subjectivity in her diary that is evasive of the authoritative heteronormative demands of the institutional forces that dominated during Lister's lifetime. I wish to propose that the queer subjectivity expressed in Lister's coded segments be understood as the primary impetus behind the creation of her desire-led narrative. By (re)turning to and exploring the desire-led narrative in which Lister's queer self emerges, I hope to unearth the intricacies of how power and subjectivity may be wielded and negotiated differently than what is most prominently depicted by heteronormative narratives of history. To get a better sense of how power unfolded for Lister in her diary, I now turn to the work of Michel Foucault.

Lister's Coded Writing: A Shelter for Power

According to Foucault, a person's sense of self or subjectivity is determined by an individual's various relations with institutions of power and the discourses that are produced by these institutions. In his essay, "The Subject and Power", Foucault claims that power is not merely a matter of struggle between those with power and those without power, such as elite versus poor classes, rather power takes on a pervasive and intricate form that is not something that can be tangibly held onto or released. Foucault writes that power "is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions...it is...always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions" (789). He explains that power is a productive force that, in the west, manifests through institutions such as religion, education, medicine, law etc. These institutions create power structures that determine the actions that individuals are permitted or forbidden to enact. Those who are sanctioned by institutions are therefore more capable of action, and may take action that potentially hinders or enables the actions of those who are institutionally disadvantaged, such as criminals, queer folks, people of color, etc. In this sense, Foucault analyzes the "form of power which makes an individual into a subject" (781) as he argues that subjectivity is determined by one's institutional relations and that power moves through individuals via relationality. Furthermore, an individual's relation to

institutions is exhibited through the use of discourse. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault then also writes that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (101). Thus, the language used in discourse aids in the construction of ‘truths’ and norms that play a central role in the regulatory function of power. These norms, such as the standards of compulsory heterosexuality, create linguistic legibility for identification to take place in subject formation, which enables one’s relation to institutions of power to manifest. For example, under the regime of compulsory heterosexuality in nineteenth century England, the existence of lesbianism was concealed and denied, therefore erasing linguistic legibility for queer women and thus denying them access to institutional power and security, such as marriage to each other. Furthermore, in her article, *Anne Lister’s Construction of Lesbian Identity*, Anna Clark explains, in line with Foucault’s genealogy, that Anne Lister did not have access to linguistic legibility for her lesbianism because “nineteenth century women, it was thought, could not even conceive of sexual desire for each other, having no words for such feelings... Women, therefore, could not develop a lesbian identity because no such notion existed in their culture” (23-24). This passage shows how compulsory heterosexuality operates by erasing the words that confirm the existence of desires, acts and identities that exist outside of heteronormative legibility. This erasure creates a rather nuanced method of navigating survival for people who have queer desires. Additionally, Clark further explains how the judicial system of England in 1811 dismissed accusations of homosexual acts between two female schoolteachers “because the judges believed such behavior was impossible between women” (24). This example demonstrates the intricate relationship between discourse and institutions and makes evident how the factual silence surrounding lesbian sexuality coincided with the institutional denial of lesbian sex acts as impossible between women. Yet, without a discourse making lesbianism legible and therefore punishable by law, the silence and secrecy surrounding lesbianism also creates a shelter for its existence. This shelter provided women such as Anne Lister with the opportunity to take advantage of the Foucauldian ‘relatively obscure areas of tolerance’ that come about when there is a lack of language to describe acts and desires that would otherwise be deemed illegal and thus punishable (as was the case for queer men of the time). In Lister’s case, this obscure area of tolerance took the form of romantic friendship between women, which allowed young girls and unmarried women to develop intimate relationships with their female friends that

consisted of spending a lot of time together, passionate letter writing, sharing the same bed to sleep in, and expressing physical affection for each other, but was considered to be devoid of sexual intimacy. The infamous Ladies of Llangollen¹⁵ exemplify this dynamic, as Steidele writes, since “they styled their insubordinate love as an ideal romantic friendship deeper, freer and thus nobler than any heterosexual marriage” (Steidele 184). Not only was romantic friendship between women possible and tolerated, but it was also sometimes considered to be more “pure” and “godly” than heterosexual marriage so long as it was believed that sexual intimacy did not exist between these women. To dive a little deeper into the impact of romantic friendship on Anne Lister, I turn to her written account of meeting the Ladies of Llangollen. In the summer of 1822, Lister travelled with her aunt to meet these ladies at their estate, Plâs Newydd, in Wales because, as she wrote in plain hand in her diary, she was “very interested about these 2 ladies very much. There is something in their story & in all I have heard about them here that, added to other circumstances, makes a deep impression” (Whitbread 219). In their story, Lister found that her own desire to settle down with a female partner was being enacted by these two women who had successfully managed to live together in their own estate without repercussion due to the guise of romantic friendship. Because this segment of her diary entry was written in plain hand, the concealed nature of her interest in these two women becomes apparent when we turn to what she wrote in her crypt hand. In her crypt hand, Lister wrote to her lover:

Tell me if you think their regard has always been platonic & if you ever believed pure friendship could be so exalted. If you do, I shall think there are brighter amongst mortals than I ever believed there were. '... I cannot help thinking that surely it was not platonic. Heaven forgive me, but I look within myself & doubt. (Whitbread 229)

Here Lister is questioning the purely platonic nature of the romantic friendship between The Ladies of Llangollen. She clearly suspects that during their “*feverish dream called youth*” (Whitbread 229) these two women were likely lovers. In her plain hand, Lister had vaguely expressed that she was interested in these women because they made a ‘deep impression’, but

¹⁵ Irishwomen Eleanor Butler (1739–1828) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755–1831) fled together from Ireland to Wales so that they could live together under the guise of romantic friendship. “The Ladies of Llangollen carefully constructed, and tried hard to control, the “public myth of themselves” against “insinuations of sexual impropriety.” Domesticity was the solution. The two women transformed their “low-roofed Cot,” as Wordsworth described it, into a “heavily ornamented, artfully contrived spectacle, a *cottage ornée*” that became a pilgrimage site, even after the Ladies had passed away” (Wills). [Link to online article](#)

this diary entry evades any plausible hint of Lister's interest in the possible queerness of the Ladies of Llangollen. Only in her crypt hand/code do we see Lister earnestly express the true reason behind her interest in these women: her feeling that their same-sex love was of a sexual nature rather than only platonic. The contrast between Lister's use of plain hand and crypt handwriting demonstrates how she utilized this guise of romantic friendship as an 'obscure area of tolerance' while pursuing her lovers, but she also understood its limits. She knew that her desires and sexual inclinations had to be silenced and concealed via code, but that she could use this silence also as a shield in order to safely express herself. This code provided a 'shield of silence' that was curiously negotiated by Lister as she sought after a legible sense of self by writing about her body, queer desires, and sexuality in the coded segments of her diary as well as in coded letters to her lovers. She shared the key to the code with her most trusted lovers so they could write encrypted letters to each other without the threat of their queer desires and sexual acts being revealed. The code enabled these women to take advantage of Foucault's claim that 'silence and secrecy are a shelter for power' because the code prevented outsiders from detecting the sexual nature of Lister's "romantic friendships" and therefore created a protective shield for queer desires to be acted upon. Returning to the Foucauldian notion of power as 'a set of actions upon other actions', writing in code is an action that paved the way for these women to foster elements of queerness in their relationships and to potentially act upon their queer desires. This use of the code therefore exemplifies how power may be wielded queerly between women who had little social legibility or status in the conservative milieu of England in the early nineteenth century. Considering Butler's claim that "the subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency" (1997 11), then we can further understand the code not only as an exercise in power, but also as the linguistic occasion in which Lister achieved and reproduced written intelligibility for herself in her diaries and for herself in relation to her lovers. Understanding these elements of power and subjectivity as interwoven into the fabric of Lister's diary writing further situates the diary as a site of the self in which desire, power and queerness are negotiated in an interior, material space. Having located the diary as a site of subject formation in these ways, I now wish to explore the material implications of the diary in effort to illustrate the diary as a material manifestation of the self in my final analysis for this chapter.

The Diary as a Material Manifestation of the Self

While Foucault and Butler primarily situate power in relation to institutions, discourses, and linguistic occasions, it is important to consider the role of power in materiality so that the nuances of power may be understood more fully. To do so, I wish to build upon Karen Barad's Agential Realism, which offers insight into the "ways of responsibly imagining and intervening in the configuration of power, that is, intra-actively reconfiguring spacetimematter" (2007 246). To illustrate how power may be (re)configured in a responsible and diffractive manner, the concepts of intra-action and *spacetimemattering* are relevant. Thus far, I have demonstrated the tenuous relationship between time and power in the diary, so to further think along the conceptual lines of *spacetimemattering*, I wish to explore the diary as a material space in which the diarist intra-actively engages a transformation of the self. In the book, *Discourse and Narrative Methods*, feminist narratologist, Maria Tamboukou, explores how "matter itself has literally left its traces on the body of diaries, as binding and collage techniques, ink and colour inscriptions and drawings, or even memorabilia adhered to its pages" (151), while she argues that the "diary is therefore not simply a collection of memories or thoughts, a text or an image but a living body, an assemblage of space/time/matter components that keep making connections with the body of the diarist as well as that of its multiple readers" (152). Here Tamboukou bridges the connection between the body of the diary and the diarist's and/or reader's body as a gesture towards illustrating the intra-active relationship between the diarist/reader and the elements of *spacetimemattering* that are woven into the fabric of the diary's existence. To dive a bit deeper into the intra-active connection between the body of the diarist and the materiality of the diary, I turn to New Materialist theory as it offers "new ways of thinking about living matter" (Coole and Frost 24). Specifically, I wish to engage the New Materialist understanding of the object. In the article, *Objects and Things*, Gillian Whitlock explores how "everyday objects in particular can become part of our inner lives" (34). By breaking down the western tradition of assuming a natural order of things, which considers people and objects as separate entities, we can move beyond the idea of the object as being a merely dehumanized commodity. Rather, I hope my reading of Anne Lister's self-writing has shown how the diary as an object plays a central role in the inner life of the diarist in so far as "the category 'object' does not neatly divide the animate from the inanimate, the material from the immaterial, or the human from the non-human" (Whitlock 35). With this logic, we can see that the diary is intertwined with the diarist. Moving beyond the binary separations of humans as separate from the material world, it may become possible to conceptualize matter

differently and thus engage an understanding of objects (diary) and humans (Anne Lister) as co-constitutive. By adopting such a conceptualization, the ways in which the existence of humans is informed by objects and the existence of objects are likewise informed by humans becomes apparent. Humans and objects are not inherently separate entities. Rather Anne Lister and her diary intra-act with/in each other in a co-constitutive fashion that reveals how the diary is instrumental to Lister's sense of self. This intra-active entanglement of Lister with her diary thus locates the diary as a material manifestation of Lister's subject formation. To further illustrate what this material manifestation of the self may look like, I (re)turn to an example from the past so as to better understand and demonstrate my present conceptualization of the diary's material implications on the writer's sense of self.

The role of the diary is significant in the lives of women who have had little opportunity to establish their own narratives in public discourses and thus relied on the diary to create legible senses of self. In the text, "Invented Lives: Textuality and Power in Early Women's Diaries" Judy Simons considers the diary to be "emblematic of the female private life", which "amply illustrates the subversive potential of a woman's diary in a patriarchal world, and the complex interconnection between text, gender, and power relations" (252) that unfold in the object of the diary. To substantiate these claims, Simmons offers the example of the famous English diarist, Samuel Pepys and his wife, Elizabeth, who both lived during the seventeenth century. From an excerpt of Samuel's diary, we learn that Elizabeth had secretly kept a diary detailing her loneliness and dissatisfaction with her unpleasant life. Upon, discovering his wife's diary, Samuel was outraged to the point of violently destroying the diary against the will of his wife. This destructive gesture pronounces how Samuel found "the diary as threatening [which] indicates the authoritative status of the written word as well as its disruptive possibilities" (Simons 253). In seventeenth century England, the patriarchal norms of the time, found a woman's attempt to create her own sense of self outside of her relationship to her husband, family or church to be threatening and potentially disruptive of the stability of societal norms. Simons further clarifies this notion when she writes that Samuel's "destruction of his wife's personal papers effectively denies the woman access to both expression and power, and the right to any identity apart from the one which he, as her husband, was content to allow to her (253). This passage illustrates how the diary has the potential to give its writer's access to an identity or subjectivity that is otherwise not allowed or silenced. Furthermore, Simons notes that "the violence of Elizabeth Pepys' reaction to the rape and pillage of her diary similarly suggests the value of the papers as an extension of self, the physical violation equivalent to an assault on her person" (Simons 253). This

conceptualization of the diary as an extension of the self highlights how the diary serves the function of an object that blurs the line between human and non-human; an object that holds the material manifestation of a diary writer's sense of self. The subversive impact of Elizabeth Pepys' diary as threatening to the social order further demonstrates the material implications of the diary as a powerful site of the self. The destruction of her diary suggests how the desires and inner lives of women have been violently excluded from dominant discourses and narratives of history. By (re)turning to the diaries of (queer) women, I hope to have shown the importance of engaging desire-led narratives in the exploration of how power operates when it is not privileged by the power dynamics of hegemonic forces such as institutions and dominant discourses. Locating power in the temporal and material elements of the diary contributes to a diffractive understanding of power that formulates power's presence as simultaneously inhabiting and also expanding beyond the discursive realm. To complexify power in this way is the first step towards explicating a diffraction of power that will be further explored in the chapters that follow.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which the diary offers a space for subjects who are otherwise silenced and repressed in social realms to give an account of their own desires and senses of self. Anne Lister established her sense of self through writing in the absence of any social legibility for her queerness. This lack of lesbian legibility in the institutions and discourses of Lister's era provided a shield for her queerness to exist in the Foucauldian 'obscure area tolerance' as she utilized the guise of romantic friendship as a cover for her romantic liaisons with women. However, she understood the limits of this obscure area of tolerance, so she created her crypt hand code to conceal her written accounts of her body, her queer desires, and her lesbian pursuits. This code was a source of power for Lister that flew under the radar of the conservative social ideals that dominated Lister's life. She curiously negotiated this power in her diary as it is a space for her to exercise the power she was denied access to in the public sphere via code while concurrently using the mechanism of time/ownership that is embedded in the diary as source of power that she exercised as a landowning member of the Tory elite. The financial independence afforded to her by her inheritance of land shows how she was simultaneously securely tied to the mechanisms of power that are created and sustained through the same institutions that silenced and oppressed her queerness. This nuanced account of Lister's power is teased out in the intricacies of her

writing. By tracing a few of these intricacies, I hope to have revealed that the diary is not only a tool for emotional transformation and self-reflection but is also a site of the self in which power and subjectivity come forth as Lister negotiates her desires and fosters an account of herself in writing. Considering the relationship between power and subject formation that I have illustrated with Foucault and Butler, the diary, as a site of the self, is, by extension, also a material space in which subjectivity manifests through the pen of the diarist. This is seen most clearly in my close reading of how Lister's sense of self unfolded on the pages of a diary that is tenuously constituted in time. Echoing Butler, I wish to conclude that the legibility of Lister's queer desires was instituted in an interior space through a stylized repetition of writing in code. The repetitions prominent in her diary indicate the significance of the diary in her subject formation. By continually returning to the body in writing and creating her crypt hand code to safely explore a queer subjectivity that was otherwise silenced, Lister's diaries demonstrate the material manifestation of subject formation. Furthermore, exploring the elements of *spacetime mattering* embedded in the diary reveals an intra-active transformation of the self that offers an Agential Realist account of subject formation. Locating the diary as a material and temporal space in which subjectivity and power are deployed is a gesture towards a diffractive understanding of power that I will further explore and explicate in the chapters that follow. As such, I hope to have made clear that power exists within and beyond the discursive realm as it also inhabits the space of the diary, mechanisms of time, and the materiality of pen and paper.

Chapter Three:

The Queer (Un)Becoming of Intra-active Subjectivity in Stein's *Lifting Belly*

To continue my investigation into the diffractive elements of power that are unearthed by engaging written desire-led narratives, I now turn to the work of Gertrude Stein and her life partner/editor, Alice B. Toklas. Specifically, I will explore the erotic love poem, *Lifting Belly*, written by Stein for Toklas during the years of 1915-1917 on the Spanish island, Mallorca (Mark xii). Similar to the diaries of Anne Lister, this poem contains quotidian content, the potential reading of a coded lesbian language that is interwoven into the text, and a continual return to the queer erotics of writing. Both of these collections of writing, Lister's diaries and Stein's poem, demonstrate a use of language that depicts queerness in ways that flew under the radar of the dominant discourses of the time these works were written. These two women enact a form of writing about their inner selves that fosters a desire-led narrative that was excluded from social legibility, which is demonstrated by the myths of 'no lesbians before 1900' (in Lister's case) and 'no lesbians in the modernist literature movement' (in Stein's case). In her book, *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*, Mary E. Galvin writes in this context of the "heterosexist assumptions operating to erase the significance of lesbian existence in the creation of modern literature" (37). However, Stein's life was instrumental to the formation of the modernist movement in Europe, and she was a leading figure in modernist literature even though the queerness of her work was not starkly evident to the heterosexist eye. While earnestly writing about her romantic love with Toklas in *Lifting Belly*, Stein depicts their queerness in a fashion that is opaque, ambiguous, slippery and difficult to pin down; hard to determine upon first glance. As such, Stein's poem relates to José Esteban Muñoz's claim that queerness is "hard to catch--it is supposed to slip through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us" (81). Being slippery and evasive of detection has been, in many ways, a survival mechanism for queer people throughout the heteronormative regimes of history. In his seminal book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz writes of how normative historical "archives is a fiction. Nobody knows that better than queers—people who have had to cope with the fiction of a socially prescribed straightness. Queers make up genealogies and worlds" (121). Being rendered invisible or nonexistent by the straight world has forced queers to cultivate our own worlds, our own genealogies, and our own narratives. As such, this thesis intends to lay bare how queers foster our own realms of existence by engaging

desire-led narratives with the purpose of opening up the possibilities for us to understand power and subjectivity in a manner that is different than the parameters set by the 'straight world'. In doing so, I intend to offer an analysis of the diffractive potential of meaning making and knowledge production that I locate in Stein's, *Lifting Belly*, a "fifty-page love lyric composed mostly of one-line tributes to 'lifting belly'" (Mark xviii). To begin, I turn to Muñoz's claim that "queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time" (Muñoz 25). This quote guides me to explore how *Lifting Belly* queers the temporal situatedness of its readers through the persistent use of the continuous present, thus fostering a queer potential for "new subject-positions and new figurations of personhood" (Freeman 54) to be experienced by the reader. Then I return to Butler's theory of subjectivity to examine how Stein's use of repetition contributes to the (un)becoming of an intra-active queer subjectivity that is located in the quotidian content and ambiguous eroticism of *Lifting Belly*. Lastly, I intend to demonstrate how these analyses ultimately contribute to Stein's defiance of authorial authority, which lends to a diffraction of the dualities that shape knowledge and power in western society. In doing so, I argue that Stein's work contributes to an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to meaning making, knowledge production and world-building that help reconfigure the heteronormative regimes of history.

Queering Time, Refuting Grammar: Stein's Queering of Subjectivity

Born in the United States, less than a decade after the end of the American Civil War in 1874, Stein was raised in an affluent family of second-generation European immigrants (Daniel 13). Apparently, as Daniel explains in her book titled, *Gertrude Stein*, "it was selling Union uniforms during the Civil War that had turned her father's family from pedlars into wealthy manufacturers who owned a flourishing wholesale business" (Daniel 13). The wealth that generated and sustained Stein's material world was a result of profit made from war, thus locating Stein as a beneficiary of the early material conditions of capitalism formed in relation to war manufacturing. Despite being materially advantaged by this upbringing, I wish to argue that it also informed Stein's resistance to patriarchal ways of being. In her poem, "Patriarchal Poetry," we see how "Stein's ongoing interrogation of the relationship between language and identity and language and power" (Neel 1) is central to her work. In this poem, she writes: "Patriarchal Poetry is the same as Patriotic poetry is the same as patriarchal poetry is the same as Patriotic poetry is the same as patriarchal poetry is the same." (Dickie 37). By

drawing this link between patriotism and patriarchy, Stein is demonstrating the ways in which the language that gives voice to a patriotic devotion to the nation resonates with the voice of patriarchy. Though she benefitted from her family's material engagement with patriotism, that did not prevent her from writing with a critical awareness of the forces of power that shaped her material conditions. Rather, her closeness to the center of western capitalism may have informed her resistance to dominant ways of being and thinking. This resistance is exhibited by how her writing enacts "modes of subjectivity beyond the horizon of Western patriarchal logic" (Neel 1). An exploration of the ways in which these modes of subjectivity come to fruition in Stein's work constitutes the backbone of this chapter. To begin this exploration, I will now engage the grammatical and temporal elements of *Lifting Belly*.

The patriarchal logic that pervades western modes of subjectivity is characterized by categorical approaches to language that are instituted through a rigid utilization of grammar. Galvin enumerates upon this point by writing that "Patriarchal language, and by extension heterocentric thinking, depend on a categorical approach toward identity" (43). This categorical approach is cemented by the use of grammar and punctuation as they both have a directive purpose in writing. The use of noun-verb phrase, for example, serves the function of reinforcing the categories of subject, object and verb as inherently separate entities that come into relationship with one another through their grammatical structuring. Stein found the normative usage of grammar to be uninteresting¹⁶ as it was too directive and thus limiting of a potential multiplicity of meanings, which Stein favored as a 'democratic' method of writing. Before the connotation of democracy was shaped by the politics of the late 20th century, Stein thought of democracy as an opening of the possibilities of language brought forth through playing with words and a refusal to emulate the standard criteria of grammar, sentence structure, and noun-verb phrasing. Galvin writes that "Stein's 'democracy' translates into our grappling with the nonhierarchical, the nonpatriarchal with new ways of thinking that embrace multiplicity" (39). This multiplicity has a queering potential in *Lifting Belly* that is exhibited by Stein's refusal of the directive, categorical nature of patriarchal language, which narrowly constructs identity (and by extension, subjectivity) through the normative uses of grammar and punctuation. The multiplicity of meanings that she can imbue

¹⁶ Stein "directly associated interestingness with the likelihood of being mistaken: language is interesting if it is likely to be misrecognized, read as error, or read in error; inversely, language is uninteresting when it attempts the direct transmission of unambiguous fact" (Lorange 95).

into a single word creates a slippery, hard to pin down nature to the meanings that constitute her word usage, which lends to a queering of meaning production. In Stein's work, it is clear that "by eschewing grammatical structuring, with its privileging of the noun-verb phrase and its insistence on temporal closure, Stein was extending this democratic attitude toward language itself" (Galvin 39). Queering patriarchal language and resisting its temporal closures is evident in the continual 'continuous present' tense that comprises the majority of *Lifting Belly*:

"Lifting belly is so near.
Lifting belly is so dear.
Lifting belly all around.
Lifting belly makes a sound.
Keep still.
Lifting belly is gratifying." (Stein 1989 13-14)

The phrase "Lifting belly is..." provides the spine of the text as it is consistently repeated on nearly every page. By continually returning to what lifting belly is, Stein holds the text in the continuous present tense¹⁷ with very few exceptions. She doesn't follow the progressive narrative construction of a past, present and future depicted through normative grammar structures and conflict-driven plots. Rather she lets her desire to please and be pleased by lifting belly be the driving factor of the text. She asks us, her readers, to 'keep still', to be held in the present without moving into the past or future. We are encouraged to remain still as lifting belly is 'so near', 'so dear', 'all around', 'makes a sound' and ultimately, 'is gratifying' to us in the current moment. By continually holding us in the present with her resistance to the grammar structures that uphold linear constructions of time and progressive narratives, Stein demonstrates how "Queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time" (Muñoz 25). She enacts a queer modality of temporal continuity that interrogates the privileging of linearity in western forms of meaning making. In doing so, she endorses Muñoz's "fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics. Queerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (25).

¹⁷ Many Stein scholars have written on Stein's use of the continuous present. For more, see: Merrill, Cynthia.

"Mirrored Image: Gertrude Stein and Autobiography." *Pacific Coast Philology*, 1985.

The greater openness of the world that comes forth through an enactment of queer horizontal temporality (in writing) is illustrated by Stein's move away from the categorical narrowness of patriarchal logic. This logic, as a primary tenant of western ways of knowing and being, is akin to the concept of chrononormativity, which is explored in Elizabeth Freeman's book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. In this text, Freeman examines "the reification of both space and time that began with industrial capitalism" (7) with the aim of thinking "against the dominant arrangement of time and history" (xi). In doing so, she proposes the use of the concept chrononormativity, which highlights how capitalism constructs "the use of time to organize individual bodies towards maximum productivity" as well as maintains a "mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (Freeman 3). These institutional forces are bolstered by the use of calendars, schedules, time zones and clocks/watches that produce the hidden rhythms that comprise a seemingly natural temporal experience. These rhythms of time are internalized as somatic facts by those who benefit from them and orient bodies towards maximum productivity. Though Stein's family was likely a beneficiary and proponent of the use of chrononormative orientations of bodies and spaces in time, as evidenced by their role in manufacturing, Stein, on the other hand, felt that

a prolonged present is a natural composition in the world...I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was simple it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was done like that, I did not myself although naturally to me it was natural. (Stein, 1926)

These are the words that Stein spoke in 1926 during a lecture titled, "Composition as Explanation". The prolonged present tense that Stein imbues with a quality of 'naturalness' renders the hidden rhythms of chrononormativity as displaced within her work and the minds of her readers. The prolonged or continuous present disrupts the linearity of time as the past and future become irrelevant to the persistent presence of what *Lifting Belly* is. Stein effectively "strips the text of any temporal reference to anything else" (Galvin 44). As readers, we become absorbed in the continuity of continually returning to what *lifting belly* is, and therefore we lose sight of the "linguistic structures on which our thinking usually depends" (Galvin 44). In this sense, Stein's writing feels unfamiliar and sometimes even frustrating to a reader who is "thwarted in her attempt to determine the author's intent" (Galvin 44). This frustration has the potential to lead to the realization of "the role that

linguistic structures usually play in our creation of ‘meaning’” (Galvin 44). As I read *Lifting Belly*, I also found this frustration was very present for me. Though I am entranced by Stein’s ability to morph multiple meanings into her words through the use of repetition and resistance to normative grammar usage, I am also frustrated by the feeling of being somewhat confined within the present moment. This feeling makes me realize how much I actually crave for a directive construction of meaning that can move me forward in the text. I want to climb the ladder of linearity as it is the narrative structure that feels the most familiar and coherent to me. However, with persisting in the present tense, Stein queers this desire for linearity through the refusal of writing a familiar construction of coherency into her work, thus forcing her readers to grapple with how meaning may be composed otherwise. Galvin’s text adds to this point as she argues that “when the text frustrates our attempts to formulate a coherency of significance, we are made aware of the extent to which our ‘consciousness’ as it is socially constructed through language, depends on the concepts of meaning and identity to hold it together” (44). This ‘consciousness’ that Galvin refers to is indeed socially constructed through the use of ‘patriarchal’ language, and by extension heteronormative thinking; both of which hold together the supposed coherency of meaning and identity that Stein resists emulating in most of her work. This resistance likewise extends into the realm of linear temporality, which she disrupts and queers with her use of the continual present tense. This move enables her readers to contend with their own temporal situatedness, which therefore offers the potential for her readers to confront Freeman’s claim that “outside of a capitalist and heterosexist economy, though, time can be described as the potential for a domain of nonwork dedicated to the production of new subject-positions and new figurations of personhood” (54) that are inspired by inhabiting the realm of queer temporality. Though Stein’s familial situatedness is firmly rooted in the early production of industrial capitalism, her work, on the other hand, fosters a queer domain in which her readers may encounter ‘the production of new subject-positions and new figurations of personhood’. Ironically, it is Stein’s class privilege as a member of the bourgeoisie that afforded her the time necessary to write and therefore play with temporality and democratic constructions of meaning in her work. By virtue of the inheritance of her father’s capital made from manufacturing war goods, Stein was able to occupy the domain of nonwork. By inhabiting this privileged domain, she had the time to cultivate “queer temporalities, visible in the forms of interruptions...[which] are points of resistance to this temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present and futures” (xxii). The other possibilities of living that are unearthed by inhabiting indeterminately past, present

and futures in writing offer a gesture of distance away from the demands of straight time that construct the limits of our perceptions. While reading her work will not physically remove her readers from the capitalist and heterosexist economy, it may offer glimpses of a potential queering of subject formation as well as the chance “to see queerness as horizon [which] is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted and stepped out of” (Muñoz 32). The frustration that we may encounter while reading Stein, is an interruption, a stepping out of the rhythms of chrononormative straight time. In this sense, Stein’s *Lifting Belly* demonstrates how engagement with written texts that refuse to emulate the linear elements of straight time has the potential to shift our sense of reality as it is chrononormatively situated within our internalized perceptions of temporality. Such a perceived shift in our temporality creates space for us, as readers, to potentially reconceptualize the limits of our own subjectivities differently. As such, reading *Lifting Belly* may offer glimpses of new figurations of personhood that queer chrononormatively situated subjectivities. To build upon this point and dive a bit deeper into how reading *Lifting Belly* may further queer subject formation, I now wish to return again to Butler’s theory of subjectivity as another lens through which we can further contend with the intricacies of subject formation while reading *Lifting Belly*.

Lifting Belly’s Repetitive (Un)Becoming: The Intra-action of the Erotic and the Writer

Stein’s consistent and persistent repetition of what *Lifting Belly* is throughout the poem can be thought of as a tool for constituting a site of a queer (un)becoming of the self. By (re)turning yet again to Butler’s claim that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1999 191), I wish to consider *Lifting Belly* as text and a site of the self that is tenuously constituted outside of straight time, instituted in the interior space of an erotic poem through a stylized repetition of the many manifestations of what *Lifting Belly* is. Thinking of *Lifting Belly* (as a text and a concept related to the self) in this way opens up the possibility to consider Stein’s work as a practice of self-writing that is also a method of (un)becoming. By turning again and again to the various modalities of *Lifting Belly*, Stein effectively challenges the limits and constraints of any singular self-definition, therefore signaling a resistance to becoming clear and a refusal to becoming fixed and legible. As such, she depicts a version of (un)becoming that is written about by queer theorists, such as Butler. In the introduction to the book, *Queer Times, Queer*

Becomings, the authors write that “becoming is figured not so much as a narrative of self-development, a bildungsroman, but embraced as a constant challenge to the limits, norms, and constraints on intelligibility that hem in and define a subject” (10). Stein’s refusal of the grammatical and temporal elements of writing that direct the reader’s mind to formulating a sense of coherence demonstrates how she constantly challenges the ‘limits, norms, and constraints on intelligibility’ that define and fix the subject as legible. In addition to this resistance to legibility, Stein’s use of repetition throughout *Lifting Belly* of *Lifting Belly* disrupts any singular definition of *Lifting Belly*, therefore using repetition as a tool to queer the self and demonstrate the (un)becoming of subjectivity. So, to properly situate and locate the (un)becoming of subjectivity in *Lifting Belly*, I now wish to explore the quotidian content of the poem, the ambiguously erotic implications of Stein’s writing and the blending of the self with the act of writing that comes forth while reading this erotic poem.

I begin with an analysis of the quotidian content of the poem because (re)turning to the idea of the material world as inherently participating in the composition of the self lends to an intra-active understanding of subject formation that I find to be significant. To illustrate this significance, I come back to New Materialism as it exemplifies how

materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation. (Coole and Frost 9)

These authors locate materiality as residing in matter, but also in self-transformation. These modes of self-transformation inspired by the active materiality of our everyday lives is evident in the quotidian content that Stein continually returns to as an element of *Lifting Belly*. The objects that get used and overlooked in our daily lives such as our beds, linens, cooking oil, etc., come to the foreground in *Lifting Belly*.

Lifting belly is in bed.

And the bed has been made comfortable.

Lifting belly knows this.

Spain and torn.

Whistling.

Can she whistle to me.

Lifting belly in a flash.

You know the word.

Strawberries grown in Perpignan are not particularly good.

There are inferior kinds.

Kind are a kind.

Lifting belly is sugar. (Stein 1989 59)

Throughout the text, Stein interweaves the mundane rhythms of daily life that are shaped by conversations about the quality of strawberries, observing the comfort of a bed or simply whistling to another as time passes. The material world creates an impression on Stein's work that indicates how much she was attached to her surroundings and the material conditions that composed them. Her writing bridges the human/object dichotomy as she states that Lifting Belly 'who knows the bed is comfortable' is also 'sugar'. She blends a knowing subject, a discerning Lifting Belly, with an object that is very commonplace in western culture: sugar. This blending of a subject with an object resonates with the claim that "Queer subjects are not only performatively reworking themselves, but also simultaneously reformulating the property, attribute, qualities, or actions that surround them, for the essence of the performative....is the interplay between text and context, subject and environment, language and meaning" (McCallum and Mikko 12). *Lifting Belly* exemplifies this interplay between the subject and environment as Stein formulates her text as interlaced with the context of her daily ways of living and therefore offers a reformulation of 'the property, attribute, qualities, or actions that surround' her as she infuses these matters into Lifting Belly's unfixed definition. By continually repeating Lifting Belly as that which either is a material object or is in relation to material objects queers the interplay between language and meaning as the subject of Lifting Belly continually takes on new meanings and attributes with every repetition. As such, Stein, and by extension, Lifting Belly perform a queer subjectivity that extends beyond the fixed definition of the human into an incorporation of the self with the living matter of quotidian life. This example illustrates an intra-active reconfiguration of personhood and objecthood that queers definitional fixity and causal boundaries. I will further expound upon this queering of definitional fixity and causal boundaries later on in this chapter, but before I do, I wish to further substantiate my exploration of Stein's intra-active reconfigurations by now engaging the (un)becoming of subjectivity that resides in the ambiguously erotic implications of the poem.

Though I am tempted to read *Lifting Belly* solely as a long love letter written in an erotic lesbian code to Stein's life partner, Alice B. Toklas, I find it to be more prudent to instead engage the queerness that underlies the ambiguity of Stein's writing. Many scholars

have explored the notion that Stein's work consistently involves "encoding a taboo lesbian desire in the most common, seemingly innocuous words" (Frost 28). In my research, I have read numerous close readings of *Lifting Billy*, in which scholars have read lesbian insights into Stein's use of words, such as "cow" (Lorange 196-197) or "custard" (Murphy 397). While I enjoyed reading these insights, I found it difficult to consider them as much more than a projection of contemporary notions of lesbianism onto words that entail a potential multiplicity of meanings. It is important to note that Stein never "came out" as a lesbian and also that she had a "tendency to elude definite identifications" (Lorange 204). To interpret her texts as purely a matter of erotically encoded lesbian desire risks a reductionist approach to reading her work. To approach her work through the lens of queer (un)becoming, however, may open up poignant possibilities for noticing the nuances of Stein's ambiguously erotic writing. This queer process of (un)becoming as proposed by Butler, "opens up the space to think queer becoming as unbecoming, as a question of the lack of fit, the difficulties of interpretation, the moments of textual resistance or of unintelligibility" (McCallum and Mikko 10). Considering the plethora of instances of textual resistance or of unintelligibility in Stein's work within *Lifting Belly* and elsewhere, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which her writing brings forth a queer (un)becoming of subjectivity through the repetitive use of words that cause her readers to extend and reconsider the limits of the definitional fixity of eroticism and lesbian subjectivity. In this way, Stein highlights the 'lack of fit and the difficulties of interpretation' that are essential to the process of queer (un)becoming. Considering queerness as that which cannot be pinned down, that which evades the normative constructs of meaning production by being slippery and ungraspable is a good starting point for assessing Stein's writing. I wish to emphasize that a "word or category is queered when it slips away from past definitional fixity" (Lorange 195). Bearing in mind the ways in which Stein evokes multiple meanings from a single word through uses of non-normative grammar constructions as well as her use of repetition makes tangible how she continually queers the definitional fixity of words or categories in her work and in doing so, she reconfigures how her readers encounter the erotic underpinnings of *Lifting Belly*. Scattered throughout the text there are moments of an explicit eroticism seen in passages like the following:

Kiss my lips. She did.

Kiss my lips again she did.

Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did (Stein 1989 20)

The use of the pronoun 'she' makes no effort to hide a potential reading of lesbianism in *Lifting Belly*, if the reader assumes Stein as the speaker or narrator of the text. However, these moments of explicit sexual reference get quickly overlooked and swept away by passages like the following:

I say lifting belly and then I say lifting belly and Caesars. I say lifting belly gently and Caesars gently. I say lifting belly again and Caesars again. I say lifting belly and I say Caesars and I say lifting belly Caesars and cow come out. I say lifting belly and Caesars and cow come out.

Can you read my print.
Lifting belly say can you see the Caesars. I can see what I kiss.
Of course you can.
Lifting belly high.
That is what I adore always more and more.
Come out cow.
Little connections.
Yes oh yes cow come out.
Lifting belly unerringly.
A wonderful book. (Stein 1989 33)

While there isn't an explicitly sexual reference in this passage, it is rife with a sexual energy that comes forth through the senses and sensations that the words inspire with their phonetic sounds. In my initial reading of this excerpt, I found myself drawn to the beginning of this this segment, which breaks the poetic format with a block of text. This text, waxing and waning in tempo, ushers forth a feeling of building towards climax. This is felt in the ways that Stein's use of Caesars draws up a phonetic connotation of seizures and thus produces an image of a body shaking and quivering in anticipation of a cow coming out. With this cow coming out, I imagine a loud, guttural sound being released, akin to the sound of "mooring". Such a release harkens the sensation of an orgasm that brings this block of text or sex act to an end. The way the text breaks the poetic form by filling the lines of the page entirely, spilling outside the textual format that precedes and follows it, gives the text a sensation of excess that is contained within 4 lines; a moment of sexual build up and release that fills a moment to the brim of sensation before tapering away back to life as usual. Here Stein

infuses her text with the sense and sensation of a powerful eroticism without using a single explicit sexual reference. Instead, her repetitive use of cow, Caesar and Lifting Belly locates an eroticism within the tempo, rhythm and phonetic connotations that are deployed through repetition. This eroticism extends beyond any fixed, explicit definition of sex or the erotic and in doing so, Stein is queering the parameters of eroticism. While I am certainly not the first person to read that “cows seem to be synonymous with orgasms” (Mark xx) or to think of Caesar along the lines of “cease her, seize her, sees her, and finally as seizure” (Mark xxxii), I do find the interweaving of a reference to a book and print to be of interest. Immediately after the block text ends, the question ‘can you read my text’ is asked and begins what feels like a postcoital conversation between two lovers. After the question is posed, the conversation turns to an affectionate and loving scene that then seamlessly returns again to ‘a wonderful book’. In this textual interweaving of words that connote sensual sensation with print and book, I locate a blending of the erotic with the textual. To add to this, in her book, *How Reading is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein*, Astrid Lorange writes that Stein’s writing “labor becomes an indistinct blur of writing and lovemaking. In other words, ...Stein’s writing is bound to the act of giving sexual pleasure, and her sexuality is bound to the act of composition” (197). This bind between Stein’s source of pleasure and her act of composition demonstrates an intra-active relationship between Stein’s erotic life and her texts as they co-constitute one another in the creation of *Lifting Belly*. This blurring of the distinction between writing and sexual pleasure invites the reader to participate in the intimately queer experience of participating in Stein’s erotic pleasure while reading. Thus, Stein’s *Lifting Belly* might not merely be encoded with lesbian eroticism, rather it is indeed a queering, a blurring, a blending of the distinction between writing and erotic sensation as separate. Her writing doesn’t merely depict queerness to be decoded by eager readers, rather, “the ambiguity of Stein’s work makes a designation of queerness impossible: this is what is thoroughly queer about Stein” (Lorange 195). Stein enacts a queer modality through her writing, which utilizes ambiguity to undermine the heteronormative logic that pervades binaries such as lesbian/heterosexual, written word/lovemaking, subject/object, etc. This queer modality moves beyond the claim that “Stein invented a witty code that played upon the details of her sexual and domestic self. In such a private autobiographical style she can tell everything” (Fifer 47). As evidenced by the explicit eroticism depicted in the previously referenced ‘Kiss my lips. She did’ excerpt from *Lifting Belly*, Stein does not appear to be encoding her queerness in a private autobiographical style, rather she uses language to foster an unbecoming of lesbian subjectivity as that which is fixed between two women and instead

extends her sexual orientation beyond the limits of her relationship with Toklas by inviting her readers into her erotic act of composition. In the text, “Lifting Bellies, Filling Petunias, and Making Meanings through the Trans-Poetic” Susan Holbrook further expands this point by stating that “What I read in the puzzling iterations, indeterminacies, and incongruent registers of speech is a kind of textual meddling that functions as critique by making visible the "cultural limits" of lesbian subjectivity (Holbrook 757). By meddling with language in such a fashion that makes visible the cultural limits of lesbian subjectivity and pushes past those limits, Stein’s *Lifting Belly* is an (un)becoming of lesbian subjectivity that is made most evident in its “spectres of discontinuity and incoherence” (Butler 1999 23) that constitute the (un)becoming of legible subjectivity. This (un)becoming is an undoing of the social legibility and coherence that constitutes subjects as fixed and stable. Stein’s writing, on the other hand, invokes a subjectivity that is intra-active with notions of writer, lover, text, quotidian objects and more. This intra-active subject cannot be pinned down or clearly defined in a singular sense because it co-constitutes itself with, for example, its quotidian surroundings and sexual pleasure. To demonstrate how Stein further contributes to an intra-active subjectivity, I now move onto further analyzing Stein’s blending of self, writing and lovemaking that defies authorial authority and reconfigures the causal relationship between author, editor and reader.

Stein’s Diffraction of Dichotomies Fostered by Displacing Authorial Authority

While it is quite clear to scholars that the phrase ‘lifting belly’ depicts “lovemaking” (Mark xxx), Stein’s repetitive use of these words causes the reader to extend and reconsider the limits of the definition of ‘lovemaking’.

Lifting belly the best and only seat.

Lifting belly the reminder of present duties.

Lifting belly the charm.

Lifting belly is easy to me.

Lifting belly naturally.

Of course you lift belly naturally.

I lift belly naturally together.

Lifting belly answers.

Can you think for me.

I can.

Lifting belly endears me.

Lifting belly cleanly. With a wood fire. With a good fire. (Stein 1989 43-44)

Stein's 'lifting belly' is depicted as an object, 'the best and only seat', as an action that is 'easy to me', and, lastly, as a speaking subject who 'answers'. Stein attributes multiple modes of existence onto lifting belly. She births anew, again and again, the concept of lovemaking as subject, object, action, and more. Stein does not allow her lovemaking to be pinned down and defined by a single act. Rather, she extends this notion of lifting belly to encapsulate many forms of subject-/objecthood, multiple sensations, and various modalities. She produces intentional 'difficulties of interpretation' that signal the (un)becoming of any discernable notion of lovemaking. In this sense, *Lifting Belly* queers the notion of lovemaking as it queers the parameters of sense and sensation produced through writing. Stein continues,

Lifting belly pencils me.

And pens.

Lifting belly and the intention.

I particularly like what I know.

Lifting belly sublimely (Stein 1989 30).

Stein directly alludes to how one cannot know *Lifting Belly* fully; she 'likes what she knows' but doesn't claim to know *Lifting Belly* entirely. This again indicates the queer nature of *Lifting Belly*, of lovemaking that cannot be fixed or bound by a singular definition of sex – lesbian or otherwise – and, thus, it cannot be fully understood and slips through the fingers of those who would use the comprehension unjustly. This unknowability is a resistance to being pinned down and is a matter of queerness at play. She plays with the ambiguity, the unknowability of queerness through her resistance to determinacy. She is not speaking from a place of fixed authority as the author who imposes meaning onto the reader, rather she plays with indeterminacy in such a way that invites us readers into her work to create our own meanings, to find our own senses and follow our own sensations in a non-directive manner. As readers, we shape our own understanding of *Lifting Belly* just as *Lifting Belly* shapes Stein. She refuses to be the authority of *Lifting Belly*'s definition because she understands

that she too is defined by *Lifting Belly* in a process of what I consider to be symbiotic writing. Stein claims that *Lifting Belly* “pencils me”, it draws her in pencil and defines her in ink as it also “pens” her. Here, we see the boundaries between author and writing becoming blurred as the reader may now consider both to be a manifestation of *Lifting Belly*, the act of lovemaking that intra-acts with the author, the reader and the act of composition. Stein is written by her lovemaking, she is penciled and penned by *Lifting Belly* as she writes *Lifting Belly*. By queering notions of authorial subject, object and action, Stein in this reading then displaces herself as the authoritative writer of the text by attributing the notion of *Lifting Belly* as author, as the subject who pencils her and writes her into this poem. She enacts written modes of queering definitional fixity (and by extension, subjectivity) by evading the western patriarchal logic that demands determinate meanings and clearly categorical ways of situating the writer, text and reader as separate entities. As such, Stein defies authorial authority in *Lifting Belly*. In western modes of knowledge production based in reading and writing, the author of a text is considered to have the ‘god-like’ authority to be directive in meaning production. Through the (chrono)normative use of grammar and narrative, the author is supposed to impart the meaning of the text onto the reader in a clear and coherent fashion. In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha explains in this regard that “literature remains completely dominated by the sovereignty of the author” (29). This sovereignty is curated by the idea that the author is a singular person who objectively portrays universal truths via writing a book that is “perceived as an isolated materialization of something that precedes and exceeds it” (Minh-ha 29). In this sense, Minh-ha explicates how authors are considered to be separate from their creations, which stand alone as entities removed from the realities of their creators. This separation between text and author serves to reinforce the notion that “the writer is necessarily either God or Priest” (Minh-ha 29) who exists above and beyond the text. This separation resonates with Cartesian Dualism, which formulates the binary separation between the mind and the body/material world, which produces a logic that has dangerously extended into the self/other binary. However, moving beyond this binary and dualistic ways of thinking through a conceptual deployment of intra-action is evident in the ways in which Stein inserts herself on a textual level in her work. She doesn’t assume a singular authoritative voice, rather she allows repetition to guide the autobiographical content of the work. By looking at what she repeats, we can see Stein’s sense of self is interwoven between the lines of her texts. For example

Lifting belly is a language. It says island. Island a

strata. Lifting belly is a repetition.

Lifting belly means me (Stein 1989 17)

By stating that Lifting belly is a language, a repetition, it is “me”, Stein enables Lifting belly to speak as a subject with language: Lifting Belly is Stein and she is Lifting belly. Through an examination of all the variations of what “Lifting Belly is...” we can see the many sides of Stein. She is not above or somehow removed from her work; she is inside the work inviting the reader to join her in the act of meaning production. She writes what she knows and what she knows is shaped by her life and the people who were in it. Significantly, she is shaped by her relationship with Alice B. Toklas. In the introduction of *Lifting Belly*, editor, Rebecca Mark, made note of how the relationship between Stein and Toklas shaped the production of this poem. She explains that Stein would write at night and then,

“In the morning, while Gertrude slept, Alice picked up these pages and typed them. Later, when Gertrude arose, they compared the manuscript pages and the typed version. Alice questioned. Gertrude clarified and the work emerged. With Alice, to Alice, for Alice with Gertrude, by Alice to Gertrude, for Alice, Gertrude wrote *Lifting Belly*” (Mark xvii).

This passage demonstrates the ways in which *Lifting Belly* is a text that was inherently shaped by the quotidian rhythms of Stein and Toklas’ relationship. It is a text birthed through their dynamic, it incorporates their love as it transcends the singular god-like author and instead brings the reader into their relationship. As readers, we encounter a dialogue between indistinct voices that continually engage the repeatedly redefined subject of Lifting belly. By refusing grammatical temporal closures such as quotation marks, “Stein makes the reader a participant in the conversation rather than an eavesdropper” (Galvin 48). Doing so, therefore, contributes to a modernist polyvocality:

“Sing.

Do you hear.

Yes I hear.

Lifting belly is amiss.

This is not the way.

I see.

Lifting belly is alright.

It is a name.

Yes, it’s a name.

We were right.

So you weren't pleased.

I see that we are pleased" (Stein 1989 5).

Insinuated in these lines is a series of questions and answers bouncing between undetermined speakers. However, the lack of quotation marks and question marks eschews our understanding of what is being asked and answered and by whom. This ambiguous phrasing creates space for readers to interpret our own sense of meaning in this text as participants in this ambiguous dialogue. We are not directed to ascertain definite meanings, rather we are given the opportunity to participate in this dialogue by swimming in a sea of many potential significations and fostering our own interpretations. Stein transfers her authority as the author, the god-like creator of meaning, onto the reader who takes up the authority of meaning interpretation while reading her work. This shift in authority, therefore, disrupts the normative dynamic between author and reader and unsettles the causal boundaries that permeate western forms of producing knowledge and meaning. When we consider the disruption of this dynamic on a larger scale, it has the potential to really reconfigure the implicit hierarchies embedded in western forms of knowledge production. By removing the producers of knowledge, the writers of books, from their god-like pedestal, we may therefore be able to relate to knowledge and power differently. Encouraging readers to ascertain our own meanings is a move akin to duplicating the keys to knowledge production and dispersing them from the hands of the few god-like authors into the hands of many, various readers who have the potential power to shift the narrative of meaning production. Such a process begins with knocking the author off the god-like pedestal by acknowledging the situatedness and intra-active interconnectedness of the author and how these factors contribute to knowledge production. By disrupting the author/reader binary in this way, Stein offers an intra-active dissolution of the boundaries between author/text, writing/love-making, etc., that contributes to a queering of causality and a diffraction of the dichotomies that uphold the problematics of western ways of knowing and being. This notion of diffracting dichotomies that I am proposing be read in Stein's work takes place in a manner that reflects how light is diffracted when shone through a pinhole containing a thin rod or rectangular blade in its center. Metaphorically, we can think of this rod or blade as the disruption of authorial authority evident in Stein's work. By shining through the pinhole containing an object-impetus for diffraction (in this case: a disruption of normative authorial causality), the nature of light changes and breaks out of the binary of light/dark to reveal how it is that light appears within shadows and how shadows appear through light and how "light appears within the darkness within the light within...." and so on (Barad 2007 170). Understanding how the diffraction of

light troubles the binary of light/dark, allows for what Barad claims is an “imagining [of] light to behave as a fluid which upon encountering an obstacle breaks up and moves outwards in different directions” (2007 171). I wish to think of knowledge and power as a fluid that disperses in many directions after encountering a disruption in the dichotomies imposed by authorial authority. Similar to how the binary of light/dark breaks open to reveal a pattern of light appearing within the darkness within the light and so on, I wish to think of the dichotomy of author/reader as similarly breaking open to reveal a diffraction of meaning production. The meanings that are crafted in written form by the author break open and disperse in many directions as readers foster their own senses of meaning. This creates a pattern of a multiplicity of meanings that are unearthed by Stein’s approach to authorial reconfiguration. Instead of writers directly imposing their meanings through the patriarchal logic that pervades normative categorical approaches to grammatical structuring and the chrononormative temporal referencing that freezes and fixes subjects (and objects) as coherent and legible, Stein’s approach to writing offers a diffractive conceptualization of meaning and knowledge production that moves beyond these limitations. In doing so, Stein’s work “queers the familiar sense of causality and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism” (Kleinman 77). This queering of the individualization process undermines the notion of the author as a singular god-like creator by revealing how authors are intra-actively embedded in their work. Instead of relying on and accepting the causal notion that the author and the text and the reader as all separate entities, Stein unsettles these boundaries to reveal how reading and writing may foster diffractive conceptualizations of knowledge and power. This move contributes to an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to world-building that this thesis intends to demonstrate.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the diffractive potential of reading and writing that is imbued into writing by Stein in her practice of composition. By exploring how Stein unsettles patriarchal logic by refusing to emulate normative constructions of grammar in her work, this chapter engages how this form of resistance contributes to a queering of temporality. Stein holds her readers still through the consistent use of the continuous present tense in *Lifting Belly*, therefore queering the temporal perceptions fostered by her writing. As such, Stein opens up the potential for her readers to engage a perceived disruption of the

chrononormative construction of linear time that resonates with Muñoz's theory of how "queerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (25). In this way, Stein is gesturing towards queer modes of subjectivity that exist beyond the horizon of Western patriarchal logic. To further understand these queer modes of subjectivity, I offer a conceptualization of the intra-active nature of subjectivity that is revealed through all of the various things that 'Lifting belly is...': object, subject, action, etc. In the repetitions that comprise *Lifting Belly*, Stein's subjectivity is wrapped up in all the various intra-active elements of what she claims *Lifting Belly* to be. She therefore extends the limits of her subjectivity into an incorporation of the self with the living matter of quotidian life. This example illustrates an intra-active reconfiguration of personhood and objecthood that queers definitional fixity and causal boundaries and ultimately resonates with Barad's concept of *spacetime mattering*. She extends this gesture into the blending of her erotic life with her act of composition that contributes to an (un)becoming of queer subjectivity in *Lifting Belly*. And lastly, I argue that Stein's work fosters an intra-active configuration of the writer, the text, and the reader as co-constitutive entanglements. This move enables what I call a diffraction of the dualities that permeate western ways of knowing and being, which ultimately leads to an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to world-building that is located in the diffraction of knowledge and power.

Chapter Four:

Diffracting Power in BDSM: Transformations of an Intra-active Self

In my final investigation into the diffractive elements of power that are unearthed by engaging written desire-led narratives, I turn to an analysis of how power operates in written accounts of BDSM practice. I will explore several definitions of power that I intend to complicate and further understand by reading together the essays of feminist poet, essayist and theorist, Audre Lorde and the essays of the SAMOIS collective, a lesbian, feminist BDSM collective active during the late 1970s and early 1980s and based in San Francisco in the United States (SAMOIS). In this reading, I hope to highlight how we can conceptualize patterns of power in a diffractive manner in order to further demonstrate the transformation of the self that I locate in autobiographical writings of queer women. To begin my final investigation, I wish to emphasize the importance of considering the material conditions of capitalism as instrumental in our conception of difference along the lines of class, race, gender, age, and so on. As Lorde makes clear in her collection of essays titled *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, the differences we experience in relation to the norm, a mythical norm, that is usually in the west defined as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure” (Lorde 96) are inherent influencers of contemporary power dynamics related to privilege and oppression. Lorde writes that “it is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside in this society” (96), which indicates how one’s position in relation to the norm influences the privileges and oppressions that one experiences. This norm is produced and reinforced by the material conditions that comprise the systems of profit perpetuated by capitalism. Throughout her poetic and theoretical work, Lorde writes of women who are marginalized as other than the norm and who are forced to confront the reality that by living within “structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive” (10). Therefore, what I wish to demonstrate in this chapter, by reading Lorde together with the SAMOIS collective, is how power operates outside of this norm. I will do this by exploring how feelings and desires related to oppression and difference may be not only linked to marginalization but may also become a source of power in a system that is designed to dehumanize all that does not fit the norm.

Lorde explains that power under capitalism operates according to a privileging of the feelings, desires, and experiences of those who fit the norm at the cost of erasing, destroying and invalidating those feelings, desires, and experiences of people who do not fit this norm.

However, according to Lorde, those who are marginalized by the norm still have power despite the clear obstacles this power faces in the context of normative society. By turning to the desires and feelings of those who do not benefit from the norm, how do we begin to access an understanding of power that may help us conceptualize our realities differently? To begin answering this question, I will locate several sites of power throughout this chapter. The first site resides in the transformative process of writing about the fears, desires and feelings that have been silenced by normativity. This endeavor taps into a nuanced understanding of power that will carry my analysis into an intersectional framework of privilege and oppression. From there, I will return to Michel Foucault's theory of power and subjectivity as it relates to the differences perpetuated by dynamics of privilege and oppression. I then wish to extend the limitations posed in Foucault's theory of power to incorporate Karen Barad's theory of Agential Realism, specifically the concepts of intra-action, diffraction and *spacetime mattering*. To demonstrate this reworking of Foucault's theory of power and subjectivity through the lenses provided by Agential Realism, I offer several close readings from Audre Lorde's aforementioned collection of essays and essays from the book *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, written by the SAMOIS collective. By exploring a reading of these essays together, I locate the erotic and BDSM practices as sites of power. Understood as "the infliction of physical and/or psychological pain [that] inheres through a power differential created by dominance and submission" (Deckha 130), BDSM creates a sensual space in which power dynamics play out in a consensually non-normative manner. Engaging BDSM as a space for power to be played with differently brings me to the last element of *spacetime mattering* to be investigated in this thesis: space. Situating BDSM as a space in which power manifests differently aids in my rethinking power along the Agential Realist account of *spacetime mattering* and its diffractive implications. As such, I hope to illustrate the transformative potential of a diffraction of power as it relates to the transformation of the self depicted in written accounts of queer women's BDSM practices. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate how this diffraction of power relates to a shift in subject formation that reorients our relationships to hegemonic forms of power and opens up the potential for us to exist in relationality differently.

Writing the Erotic: SAMOIS Chronicles BDSM Power Play

The book, *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, is comprised of a series of essays pertaining to lesbian S/M practice and fantasy. These essays were written by lesbian/queer women who practice BDSM and were compiled and edited by the SAMOIS collective. These essays were some of the first written accounts to illustrate the ways in which power, intimacy, and fantasy intertwine in the practice of BDSM, specifically queer/lesbian S/M. During the time *Coming to Power* was written, lesbianism had already become a legible social identity in the west. Unlike in the eras in which Anne Lister and Gertrude Stein were writing, the SAMOIS collective had language and social avenues through which lesbianism could be openly discussed, written about, and acted upon. However, the silence and secrecy that once surrounded lesbianism in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century had shifted to the realm of BDSM practice. The significance of these writings is made apparent by the fear and shame that surrounded BDSM practice during the period, specifically in the lesbian-feminist community of San Francisco. In the introduction to the volume, which is aptly titled “What We Fear We Try to Keep Contained”, the authors had collectively agreed to write that “few of us have been able to admit to anyone our interest in S/M” because the “social and political costs run very high” (7) for being outed as a practitioner of BDSM at that time. These high costs resulted, as the introduction also explicates, in silence and secrecy surrounding desires for and participation in BDSM. Conflated with assault, rape, incest and other forms of violent taboo, BDSM was a politically fraught and polarizing topic for many generations¹⁸ and is still met with skepticism in contemporary western societies. However, the healing and empowering elements of BDSM practice inspired the creation of this compilation of essays despite the potential repercussions for bringing these matters to light. To highlight the significance of SAMOIS writing about BDSM while it was so heavily shunned, I will turn to Lorde’s essay (which the title of her collection of essays comes from), “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, to explore the significance of putting silenced desires into language. According to Lorde, the driving force behind silence is fear as we are socialized to hide and conceal what scares us. However, Lorde emphasizes that “your silence will not protect you” (2) as she advocates for “the transformation of silence into language and action as an act of self-revelation” (3). By claiming what scares us through language and action, we are able to recognize that this act is actually a source of strength and empowerment. This source of

¹⁸ For more on the polarizing politics of BDSM see Gayle Rubin’s essay “The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M” in *Coming to Power*, p.194.

strength is derived from the perspective that is gained by exploring and reworking our fears through language via writing, speaking or action. Lorde asks that we attend to the responsibility to ourselves and to other women/marginalized people to share and bring to light what has been silenced through fear, especially as these fears may relate to oppression. Furthermore, she advocates that each of us “share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us” (4). By participating in the transformation of silence into language, we have the opportunity to engage and reclaim the power of language as we uncover the fears and desires that have otherwise been silenced. Such a reclaiming has a self-revelatory element that I believe aids in the transformation of the self and is a vital component of reworking how power operates in our lives. By actively participating in this transformation of silence into language, this revelatory transformation of the self materializes in the collection of essays, *Coming to Power*. These essays are self-reflective, self-revelatory accounts of fears and desires that had previously been concealed by silence and secrecy. To enter the text now more explicitly, I turn to the essay, “If I Ask You to Tie Me Up, Will You Still Want to Love Me?”, because the author, Juicy Lucy, writes with the intention of lifting the fog that surrounded lesbian S/M practice. As a woman who was abused and battered by the hands of heterosexist patriarchy, BDSM for Lucy became a site in which she could “release and transform the pain and fear of those experiences” (30). She explains that the transformative aspects of BDSM practice for her are centered around the negotiation of consent, which allowed her practice of S/M to be “very cathartic and healing” (35). Because of her history of abuse “power and cruelty have so often gone hand in hand in my life and I feared that in myself, feared my own power and taking it so openly” (36). This fear in her own power became a site for transformation as Lucy learned how to reclaim and exercise her own power through the role of sadism in the domain of S/M. This domain is typically characterized by an exchange of power between two consenting adults in which “the exchange is: sadist/top/dominant/sender flowing into masochist/bottom/passive/receiver” (31). This flow of “power and erotic exchange always flows full circle” (31) as it breaks the dynamic of one person having power-over another person. In contrast to the dynamic of one person having power-over someone else, the power flow in S/M is a circular and fluid exchange. This form of consensual power exchange is a paramount aspect of BDSM, which highlights how power has the potential to happen differently than it does in the power-over dynamic that is characteristic of normative power dynamics under white supremacist capitalist

heteropatriarchy. Lucy writes of these power-imbalances as being frozen into a duality and in contrast to this she claims that

“power is in its nature a flowing of energy, an exchange. Sometimes we give and sometimes receive, but the energy, the power, always flows. Patriarchy and heterosexuality attempt to freeze power, to make one side always dominant and one side always passive” (32).

The frozen dualism of power as being solely enacted in either dominant or passive ways is a form of power that I wish to complicate and rework through these readings. Essential to this reworking is the practice of *consent*, a concept and dimension of BDSM practices which I will demonstrate further on in this chapter. Before doing so, however, I wish to explore other elements and theories of power as they will inform our understanding of how power may be conceptualized in a diffractive manner in the context of *Coming to Power*.

Intersectional Nuances of Privilege, Oppression and Power

In my aim to illustrate the intricacies of power and how it operates, I now bring an analysis of Lorde’s writing on power in relation to privilege and oppression together with Foucault and Barad’s writings on power. In doing so, I hope to make clear the framework that supports my reformulation of power as diffractive that comes towards the end of this chapter. To begin, it is important to take note of how power operates in the intricacies of privilege and oppression because power is not merely something the privileged have and the oppressed are lacking, rather power is a complex concept that permeates this binary to reveal itself in a multitude of ways. It is likewise significant to acknowledge that people are not bound to being either privileged or oppressed, but more often than not, we are a combination of the two. For example, we may be privileged by our whiteness/light skin tone but oppressed by our gender and sexuality, which lends to a nuanced understanding of privilege and oppression. In the essay, “Age, Race, Class and Sex”, Lorde explains how she is “constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live” (102). We are all situated differently according to social divisions created by signifiers such as age, race, class, sex, and so on, but if we focus solely on one of these aspects while denying the others, this not only undermines our complexities, but can be a

limitation in our relationship to power as it fragments our relationships with ourselves and to each other. For example, Lorde writes about white women who focus their energies on their oppression as women while ignoring how they are privileged by their whiteness, therefore, perpetuating white supremacy. This dynamic creates a “pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (Lorde 96). This assumed homogeneity has dangerous implications in so far as it greatly limits the connections that can be formed across people who are different from each other. These limitations are created because ignoring privilege perpetuates oppressive power dynamics and affirms capitalist driven hierarchies of privilege and oppression. Lorde writes that “institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people” (95). These surplus people face dehumanization as their differences are ignored by their oppressors for the sake of maintaining profit driven power dynamics under capitalism. However, accepting and acknowledging the nuanced differences in our privilege and oppression creates a potential for “the ability of all women to identify and develop definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference” (Lorde 105). For example, when white women realize that their fight to be equal with white men perpetuates the ways in which white supremacy renders people of color as dehumanized/surplus people then white women can potentially reconfigure their relationship to white supremacy in such a way that creates a new pattern of relating across difference. Such a pattern may be understood as an intersectional¹⁹ lens of power. This intersectional pattern of relating is an essential aspect of developing new definitions of power that may undermine the limitations put forth by the dualistic dynamics of privilege and oppression under capitalism. This becomes more evident as we analyze power as that which plays a central role in the divisions of difference that create social hierarchy. To refresh our understanding of how we internalize and actualize these divisions, I now return to Foucault’s essay, “The Subject and Power”, which I wrote about in the methodology chapter of this thesis. As such, I wish to reiterate how it is that the “subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others” (Foucault 778) as a result of interacting with the power relations imposed on the subject through the navigation of institutions of power, such as the government, the health care system, the family, etc. One’s

¹⁹ For a succinct video explanation of intersectionality watch [this video](#) commissioned by Professor Peter Hopkins at Newcastle University and funded by Newcastle University’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Fund and animated by Stacy Bias

participation or lack of participation in such institutions of power determines the extent to which the subject is individualized and divided from others or not. Additionally, Foucault explores how the societal relations of power surrounding subjects are internalized in a sense that lends to divisions of the subjects within themselves. As such, he illustrates how we, in the west, tend to internalize views of ourselves in a dichotomous fashion as either sane or mad, criminal or law abiding, healthy or sick, etc. It is this pervasive, internalized sense of power that modifies the actions we feel capable of committing, determines the actions we act upon others, and the actions we accept and receive. These actions relate to the divisions that construct the concept of the subject on internal and external levels and thus provide the starting point for the power dynamics of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy to be enacted. These oppressive power dynamics are substantiated by Barad's observation of the pervasive tendency of "the self in positioning itself against the other, constituting the other as negativity, lack, foreignness, sets up an impenetrable barrier between self and other in an attempt to establish and maintain its hegemony" (Barad 2007 170). It is this tendency that permeates the dynamics of privilege and oppression that Lorde writes about as creating differences between people. It is important to recognize how these differences need to be attended to because, as Lorde previously stated, when we ignore these differences, it reinforces oppressive power dynamics. However, when we recognize these differences and understand the ways in which we tend to be simultaneously privileged and oppressed and thus divided within ourselves in the Foucauldian sense and divided amongst each other through the 'impenetrable barrier between self and other', then we may come to grasp the complexities of power more fully. In doing so, I hope that our relationships to power may begin to shift in such a way that reflects the Baradian concept of intra-action. Adopting the concept of intra-action in our narrative constructions of world-building demonstrates how the materialization of the subject through the process of intra-action thereby reworks

this alleged conflict into an understanding of difference not as an absolute boundary between object and subject, here and there, now and then, this and that, but rather as the effects of enacted cuts in a radical reworking of cause/effect. (Barad 2007 174)

Barad further explains these notions of enacted cuts as the process by which "intra-actions enact agential cuts, which do not produce absolute separations, but rather cut together-apart" (one move) (Barad 2007 168). This move of cutting-together-apart transforms the binary division through which we separate the notion of self and other by virtue of revealing how we

are simultaneously separate and linked to one another. This highlights how intra-action “queers the familiar sense of causality and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism” (Kleinman 77). This queering of the individualization process undermines the metaphysical process by which the self is divided in the way Foucault has explained it. Turning to Barad, it becomes apparent how the internalized division of the self and the division of the self from others gets entangled in the process of intra-action. This shift in causality creates a pattern for relating differently across differences, thus resonating with an intersectional approach to power that is attuned to difference while simultaneously aware of the intersections that permeate our differences. It is this nuanced understanding of power in relation to difference, privilege and oppression that guides me as I consider the diffractive potentialities of power. Before I get to an analysis of these potentialities, I wish to locate an empowering sense of power in the depths of eroticism because doing so creates space for power to be envisioned and recognized beyond the scope of what I have presented thus far.

BDSM as Erotic: A Site of Power

While I have demonstrated how power may constrain or forbid action on the basis of difference and oppression, it is likewise important to analyze the productively empowering forces of power as also contributing to the patterns of power that permeate our existence. In her landmark essay, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Audre Lorde details the ways in which the erotic is a site of power. She explains how, in western society, patriarchy operates in such a way that forces women to distrust or repress their erotic desires and intuition as a method of oppression. She explains how this oppression for women “has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society” (53). This neglect of the erotic for women reflects an internalized closing of the doors that surround erotic intuition and desires. Such closing of these doors is instrumental in the subject formation of womanhood under patriarchy. Lorde further elaborates on how it is that women have been taught to “distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (53) because doing so acts in the service of men/patriarchal subjects, who access female eroticism to the extent that it satisfies their own, male/patriarchal desires while diminishing the depth and power that lay dormant in the site of female erotic desire. As such, tapping into the nonrational knowledges that lace erotic desire is a powerful endeavor against

the constraints of patriarchy. For Lorde, the erotic extends beyond sexual pleasure as it encapsulates a certain sense of connection that she details in the following statement,

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (56)

As the passage shows, Lorde makes the link between power and the erotic clear as she claims that power is generated through the process of deeply sharing pursuits with other people. Such a shared practice has the potential to lessen the threat of difference and therefore rework the power dynamics that difference may influence, such as the differential power dynamics of class, race, gender, etc. With this understanding in mind, I wish to extend this notion of the erotic to the practice of BDSM as it often requires a deep pursuit of pleasure and pain between two or more people. This mutual pursuit in the context of BDSM comes to fruition in the playing out and manipulation of power dynamics. These dynamics are often determined according to certain roles that are performed and consented to being enacted between those involved in a BDSM scene. I find BDSM to be a significant site of power because of its erotic and intimate elements but also because of how power is consented to and played with in a manner that is somewhat reflective of the power dynamics that pervade the structures that constitute western society. In the article, *Exploring Intimate Power Dynamics*, Robin Bauer reflects on information gathered during interviews with BDSM participants. According to Bauer, “my interview partners rejected the practice of simply acting out their social positions in play. BDSM to them precisely offered an opportunity to consciously reflect on their own embedding in power structures” (177). With this in mind, I understand BDSM as a site in which the erotic is exercised between two or more people in such a way that allows for an exploration of power dynamics that somehow exceeds or modifies the constraints of societally prescribed power positions. For example, in the framework of the normative power relations that uphold capitalist structures, the ones who have power typically maintain that power over others through force, coercion and even violence for the sake of maintaining a system of profit and capital production. This notion of having power over someone is reworked in a BDSM scene in so far as “tops and bottoms use a cooperative mode of distributing power differently on simultaneous levels of reality, potentially following

feminist visions of a model of ‘power-with’ rather than ‘power-over’” (Bauer 176). This notion of having power-with someone instead of having power-over someone is illustrated through the negotiation of consent. Typically, in a BDSM scene, the top is the person exercising power through the consensual infliction of violence, be it physical or psychological, onto the bottom, the person receiving the violence. What differs in this scenario from the normative exercise of power under capitalism is that the person performing the role of the bottom actually obtains most of the power in the situation by virtue of the consent process. According to Bauer, BDSM play is empowering to bottoms because “all parties started out with a degree of negotiating agency, and through the element of consent the bottoms did not give up their control on an underlying level but, granted the tops their position of power” (175). Here it becomes apparent how consent is key in flipping the script of how power operates in the normative, capitalist driven sense. In BDSM, power is not bound to the confines of active/passive, perpetrator/victim, etc, rather the people who exercise power are granted the opportunity to do so by the people who wish to be dominated, the bottoms. It is the bottoms who determine what kind of power the top has and to what extent they can exercise that power, unlike how power is forcibly and coercively obtained by power holders under capitalism. In this sense, the negotiation of consent in BDSM practice reworks the dualistic dynamic of one person having power-over someone else, which reveals how power may operate in a fluid exchange of energy that can be dispersed in a diffractive manner. To demonstrate what this diffractive power exchange looks like, I now turn to several readings from *Coming to Power*.

Intra-active Queer Desire and Subjectivity

Turning to Agential Realism, we can better grasp a diffraction of power that comes forth through intra-active engagements. Such an engagement can be seen in the queer interplay of bodies, desire and erotic sensation in the essay, “Reasons”, written by Barbara Rose. In this short, 2-page essay depicting a queer sexual encounter, Rose guides the reader into her physical and emotional enmeshment with her lover when she writes that “she can take my breath away with a look, a word, an unexpected touch. Her mouth sucking my fingers sends moans to my lips—I become my fingers, my fingers are my cunt, her mouth my own” (14). Here we are presented with the fusion of fingers and mouths entangled in the movements of sucking, caressing, and moaning. Sexual pleasure leads these lovers into a

blurring of the physical division of these two people as separate entities. A look from her lover has the power to control breath, a primary signifier of life in the human body. Intertwined with her own breathing, her lover's look illustrates how the vehicle of Rose's existence is driven by the eyes of her lover. Her lover's mouth creates sensation in Rose's fingers that travels through her body to be exhaled as a moan between her lips. These lovers are, in a Baradian sense, intra-actively resonating with each other as they encounter the melding of mouths, the fusion of bodies, and the blending of self/lover. Rose demonstrates how the divisions between fingers/cunts/mouths/lovers all merge into a frenzy of sensation and pleasure. Furthermore, we get a glimpse of how the impulse of desire, when followed, potentially allows us to tap into other selves when Rose writes that "I can be her slave, her servant, her teacher, her mother—I can be anything, anyone. I am my own lover. She is part of me, and I am part of her...it is my desire which directs us, my desire which she shares" (14). Desire leads these lovers outside of themselves, into each other and beyond the roles they normally occupy. Here we see how Rose's desire allows her to be anything or anyone. Returning to Foucault's theory of power, which lends to an internalized division of the self according to one's relation to institutions of power, I wish to demonstrate how Rose's desire and erotic sensation have the ability to rework Foucault's theory of power along the lines of Agential Realism. As her essay explicates, Rose is led by her desire to embody her lover as well as the subject positions of her lover's mother, teacher, slave, servant, or anything she chooses. The roles that she feels capable of fulfilling are varied and entail a multiplicity of power dynamics with her lover and herself. She is not bound to imagining herself according to the Foucauldian limitations placed on her by institutions, rather this sexual encounter becomes a site of exploring, playing with and reworking her relationship to power and subjectivity. In this sense, these lovers are engaging in an intra-active blurring of subjective divisions, which reveals how agential cuts have the capacity to bring multiple subjectivities together. Led by desire, the lovers are queering the individualization process by reveling in an entanglement of bodies, sensation and senses of self. This intra-active entanglement thus undermines the metaphysical process by which the self is divided according to Foucault and creates a potential for power to be enacted differently. Lastly, Rose is basking in pleasure when she writes that "I am drunk on the sensations I am experiencing. There is no today or yesterday or tomorrow. There is only now, my body ready to explode with pleasure" (15). This sexual encounter, a site of erotic power play, not only creates space for a shifting of self and subjectivity, but also becomes a site in which the experience of time is suspended. Rose is so consumed by desire and pleasure that her relationship to herself, to her lover and to time

shifts to reveal a renewed relationship with *spacetime mattering*, a concept I will now further explore in relation to power and diffraction in what follows.

The Powerful Erotics of *Spacetime mattering*

To demonstrate how a realm constituted by a deconstructed coming together of space, time, and matter can be realized, I turn to an essay titled “The Seduction of Earth and Rain”, in which the author Holly Drew explores a return to nature that is akin to Barad’s notion of ‘re-turning as in turning it over and over again’. In this fantasy fueled account of a passionate sexual encounter with/in nature, we see how the power dynamics played with in this sensual scene reconfigure the Enlightenment era dualism of humans as separate from the state of nature. While recounting the ways in which being raised in a city separated the author from nature and instilled within her a sense of nature as unclean, she refutes this internalized dualism when she exclaims “no!—not unclean, *not* unclean, *not* separate, how was it that I was raised to worship such dualities? Welcome the soil now, welcome the sticky moisture slicking my thighs, as my lover welcomes the red tracks down her back, welcomes that intense knowledge that there is no split, no duality” (133). Here we see how the author is reconfiguring the dualism of human matter as separate from the ‘unclean’ space of nature when she claims that there is no split, no duality. This recognition is an example of the author’s exploration of the realm of *spacetime mattering* as she acknowledges that she too is intertwined with the earth, which resonates with the intra-active interconnectivity that characterizes the realm of *spacetime mattering*. She welcomes the earth to join her in the process of making love as an intra-active reconfiguration of humans in relation to nature. Furthermore, she relates this reconfiguration to the roles that are played out within the scenes. She illustrates that

in our play we bring on the roles, Rain the mistress over passive, servile Earth, only that we may know afresh that pain and pleasure, give and take, submission and dominance are so intertwined that they can never be separate, and so we who play with the roles find that duality is a convenient illusion, realizing all is one (133).

By dissolving the illusion of dualities to instead realize that all is “one”, this author is indicating the intra-active interconnectedness that is space, time and matter in the realm of

spacetime mattering. This realization comes forth as the dualities of pain/pleasure, give/take, and submission/dominance are reworked in this context of sexual power play. By contending with the non-fixed nature of power play within BDSM dynamics, the author realizes the intra-active interconnectedness of the earth, rain and human sensuality when she writes,

“So close these women are to the ebb and flow, the dominance and submission acted out in this ecology. The two roles overlap, intermix—and all at once I see—that there is no grass without rain, no rain without the moisture drawn from plants and waters by the day’s heat. This most basic of cycles, this most perfect powerplay, gentle, generous, yet unyielding” (131).

Re-turning to the dynamics of nature to re-realize the possibilities of power dynamics between humans is here demonstrated by nature’s perfect powerplay. Instead of maintaining that power dynamics are fixed according to the dualism of those with power and those without power, Drew instead offers insight into how power dynamics can flow in a gentle, consensual, non-hierarchical manner. By exploring power in relation to the dynamics put forth in the realm of *spacetime mattering* in this way, Drew is gesturing towards a diffraction of power which engages a fluid flow of power exchanges that intra-act between lovers, space, time and matter. As such, I am gesturing towards diffraction as producing the patterns of power that happen otherwise to what society has taught us to consider as fixed, separate and stable. Humans are not separate from nature and power is not fixed as a dualism; rather intra-action permeates these matters to reveal a reality that is diffractive. As such, this essay shows us that a (re)turn to the erotic nature of nature demonstrates a reconfiguration of not only *spacetime mattering* but also power dynamics, therefore highlighting how locating power in the erotic creates space for power to be diffractively enacted. To further clarify what this diffraction of power looks like, I will finally offer my primary analysis of a diffraction of power in the next segment.

Transformation of the Self as a Diffraction of Power

Because power is, as Bauer argues in line with Foucault, “productive in terms of generating specific forms of subjectivities and practices” (Bauer 177), analyzing the multiplicity of ways in which subject formation potentially shifts in BDSM practice is of importance. While addressing how BDSM practice lends to a practitioner’s reorientation with power as taking the shape of power-with instead of power-over someone, Bauer claims that

through BDSM practice, “the potentials for questioning hegemonic meanings arise, such as an acknowledgment of the human condition as a state of interdependency rather than autonomy” (186). By creating the potential for us to understand our relationship to hegemonic power differently, the negotiation of consent in BDSM power dynamics plays a key role in the acknowledgment of the human condition as a state of interdependency rather than individual autonomy. In this sense, it becomes apparent how subjectivity forms differently in BDSM than in the normative world. Instead of one’s subjectivity being limited according to a single side of a strict, rigid binary, the practice of BDSM allows a fluid dynamic of subjectivity to take place and enables the exchange of power to play out in fluidly non-normative ways. Instead of relying solely on Foucault’s notion that power is a set of actions upon other actions that lead to the internalized and externalized divisions of subject formation, we can instead understand power as operating through the processes of intra-action in a BDSM scene. This intra-active process reminds us that we are not merely entities that act upon each other in a normally causal sense, rather our subject formation exists within phenomena comprised of relational entanglements. Intra-active processes disrupt the causal sense of power utilized by Foucault by showing how actions and relationalities can be entangled and inter-dependent rather than only acted upon each other. This entangling of relationality allows for us to pursue our material worlds through non-normative means such as BDSM and creates space for intra-active reconfigurations of subjectivity. Bauer adds that BDSM is a potentially transformative process that has often “resulted in shiftings or changes within the individuals which enabled them to relate differently to their social contexts” (187). This shifting within the individual echoes sentiments of how our internalized divisions of self may shift through the transformative process of negotiating consent in a BDSM scene. To demonstrate this shift, I turn to the essay titled “On the Beam”, in which the writer, Solo Weaves, gives an account of a woman’s transformative experience during a BDSM scene from an omniscient third-person point of view. The essay starts in the midst of a scene in which the unnamed protagonist was receiving masochistic pain/pleasure while “riding the crystal cutting edge of passion as it sliced through her tensions, she watched the brilliant unfolding that was herself” (17). She was in a sincere exploration of her depth and complexity as she collided against “a fortress around her most vulnerable core” (17). This fortress was a wall, a “point at which her unfolding stopped. What caused her need for protection was long forgotten, smoothed over by habit” (17). Formed by a protective habit, this wall persisted to mentally exist for the protagonist as she experienced a series of pain/pleasure inducing actions. This wall was not unfamiliar to her, “except this time she saw

and felt her inner wall as her own power turned back on herself. She was stunned. She had not expected to feel this part of herself. A buzz of excitement rippled through her body. Something new was happening” (18). This buzz of excitement was alight as the infliction of pain from her partner steadily increased with various mechanisms and methods of sadistic power play. The blows from the whips cracked harder and faster as the protagonist became “so aware of her vulnerability, so biting aware. No shadows here, no explaining away. Glaring light on this living sculpture of her desires. Face to face” (19). This vulnerability stayed with her as the tension between pain and pleasure increased to painstakingly high levels of stimulation and sensation as her partner continually and willfully administered climactic gestures of consensual violence. At the apex of this scene, the protagonist

grabbed tight onto the trust between herself and this good woman lover of hers, sucked in a lungful of air, and let herself fly kicking and screaming breast first into her granite. She felt it give way. Again and again she let the blows from her lover send her crashing into the rock. Each hit made her stronger. Tensions she didn't know she had let go as her wall yielded and crumbled. Skin boundaries melted into air. Pure sensation now. (20)

After this climax, the two lovers metaphorically melted into each other while embracing and gently reflecting with each other about the scene. During this reflection session, the protagonist exclaimed that she “knew that the next time the struggle wouldn't be there. The next time it would be pure pleasure” (20) because she penetrated the fortress that surrounded her most vulnerable core. This indicates the element of transformation the protagonist experienced in the BDSM scene. This transformation began during the protagonist's confrontation with the wall, which can be interpreted as the ‘impenetrable barrier’ or division within the self that was a deeply internalized and familiar part of the protagonist's psyche. This wall protected her most vulnerable core, her sense of self, that she was shielding and protecting with this psychological wall. However, it was through the confrontation with pain and pleasure in this scene that the protagonist was able to shift the fixity of the wall and the barrier that it created around the depth of her erotic power, which echoes sentiments of Lorde's uses of the erotic. Thus, if I may dare to read the scene with Lorde, the protagonist was able to tap into “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (Lorde 56) and as such, she accessed a powerful transformation by breaking down the wall that prevented her from accessing the erotic power that lay in her most vulnerable

core. This tapping into the power of the erotic lends to our understanding of how it is that power can be re-realized through the erotic experience of BDSM. Because consent was negotiated between the lovers in this essay, power was played with in a diffracted sense. Through the power play, a Baradian diffraction process becomes apparent while the protagonist is enfolding within herself, and upon a confrontation with this enfolding process, she manages to use her power to shift the barriers in her way. By intra-acting with her partner in this BDSM scene, the protagonist accessed a sense of power that opened the closed doors around her vulnerability and thus transformed the power patterns that determined her emotional limitations. Such a transformation creates the potential for multiplicity in our approaches to subject formation in relation to our internalized senses of power thus demonstrating a transformation of the self in the wake of patterns produced by a diffraction of power.

Conclusion

I hope that these close readings have demonstrated this final gesture into the theoretical configuration of a diffraction of power. Similar to the diffraction of light, the notion of diffraction according to the lens of Agential Realism put forth by Barad, is a reconfiguration of *spacetime mattering*. This reconfiguration takes place in a manner that reflects how light is diffracted when shone through a pinhole containing a thin rod or rectangular blade in its center. By shining through the pinhole containing an object-impetus for diffraction, the nature of light changes and breaks out of the binary of light/dark to reveal how it is that light appears within shadows and how shadows appear through light and how “light appears within the darkness within the light within....” and so on (Barad 170). Understanding how the diffraction of light troubles the binary of light/dark, allows for what Barad claims is an “imagining [of] light to behave as a fluid which upon encountering an obstacle breaks up and moves outwards in different directions” (171). This process of moving outwards in different directions creates a potential for patterning. According to Barad, “diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling” (168). Barad is pointing towards an understanding of material realities as having the potential to diffract into multiplicity, a continuous and varied formulation of patterning and repatterning that perpetually complicates fixed notions of realities as stable and true. To understand power through the lens of diffraction, I now return

to the metaphor of the doors that we navigate as open or closed according to our internalized sense of power. If we internalize the division of the subject according to the binary of sane/mad, for example, then that division influences the doors that we perceive as open and closed for us. This division is internalized but is also actualized through Foucault's notion of power as a set of actions upon other actions, which we can re-realize through Barad's process of intra-action. The intra-active process, when applied to Foucault's notion of power, has the potential to further destabilize pervasive binaries such as sane/mad and the barriers that come along with them. As we turn to the perspective of intra-action and thus swim in the metaphysical sea of mutual entanglements, we might even gain the possibility to enact agential cuts that allow for a diffraction of the power that permeates our sense of self as the subject. Through this perceptual diffraction of power, we may see how power bends, like light, around the objects in its way, thus potentially sliding under, above, through or around the closed doors in the frames that are created by systems of power. In this sense, power confronts and potentially folds into itself as the divisions the doors create, shift through the process of coming-together-apart and thus produce a multiplicity of patterns of power. I think of these doors and their frames as symbolizing the divisions/barriers that we internalize in relation to our subjectivity. If we allow for these divisions to shift through diffraction, we may then be able to shift the senses we have of our own subjectivities as they relate to power. As such, the diffraction of power has the metaphysical ability to reconfigure power as "re-turning as in turning it over and over again – iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (spacetime-matterings), new diffraction patterns" (Barad 2007 168). In these new diffraction patterns, our relationships to power potentially become anew. Power's capacity to function as a totalizing determinant of possibilities, as doors open and closed, as subjectivities fixed and stable, can be reconfigured through a metaphysical engagement with the diffraction patterns created in the realms of *spacetime-mattering*. By diffracting the way power operates, we unravel our material realities and the ways in which power is embedded in them.

Lastly, I hope that the close readings that I have offered throughout this chapter have illustrated how conceptualizing power in this way, helps to attend to the limitations of normative concepts of power which reinforce violent self/other relationality and the hegemonic power dynamics that enact the conditions of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy. As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, these limitations primarily concern the dualistic framing of power as stable and frozen according to a dynamic of power-

over rather than power-with. To unravel this framework, a nuanced understanding of privilege and oppression is required that reveals how an intersectional approach to acknowledging difference has the potential to create new patterns of relating across these differences. These new patterns of relating can be further recognized and realized by indulging the intra-active elements of relationality, especially as they pertain to the queer desires that manifest in the practice of BDSM. By following the impulse of our queer desires, we may shift our sense of subjectivity through non-normative powerplays. Such a shift in subjectivity has the potential to transform our relationships to difference as we engage the relational entanglements of intra-activity in the realms of *spacetime mattering*. This engagement resonates with a diffraction of power as that which creates patterns of relationality that enable us to reconfigure our senses of self in such a way that potentially undermines the perpetuation of hegemonic forms of power under capitalism.

Conclusion

In many ways, writing this thesis has been for me an act of self writing. I see myself embedded in every argument, firmly rooted in my use of language, and reflected in the writings I have chosen to read closely. I am drawn to Anne Lister, Gertrude Stein & Alice B. Toklas and the writers of the SAMOIS collective because the desires that led their pens and unearthed their revelatory accounts of the self resonate with the desires that have driven me to pursue this writing project. These are the desires to live queerly; to wield power gently and bravely while living in the midst of a world dominated by systems of violence and oppression. In the stories of these queer women of the past, there are words, phrases and insights that echo throughout the deepest chambers of my own sense of self. By tracing the ways in which these women imprinted their desires to live queerly into their self writings, I have likewise come to better understand how I too have turned to writing, to language, to crafting words together with the aim of fostering my own sense of self. In a reality in which I feel so utterly queer, so unknowable and opaque (even to myself), becoming intimate with the words of these women has enabled me to see and engage parts of myself that were previously unexamined and unknown to me. In this endeavor of reading and writing, I have been transformed by what these writers conveyed with their pens and typewriters. By engaging their processes of subject formation and exploring their negotiations with time, materiality, power and the queerness of their desires, I have likewise come to better understand the queer, temporal, and material elements of my existence differently. By deconstructing the elements of *spacetime mattering* in my own relationship to power, I now experience power not as this lofty, abstract, untouchable concept but as this tangible force that shapes my material, spatial and temporal realms. I see power as producing the potential for every step that I take, word that I speak, and action that I endeavor to pursue. I no longer think of power as the scraps of privilege that are thrown down to me from those far-away entities on top of the societal hierarchy, rather I sense that power, while it is certainly mediated by the social and institutional forces in my life, also comes from within. It is found in the pages of my diary, the space in which I negotiate my desires with the social forces that I wade through in my everyday life. It is embedded in the ways in which I navigate time and orient my body towards or away from the productive demands of neoliberal/chrononormative temporal schemas. It permeates the spaces that I share with other people and shapes the intra-active potentialities that exist between me and the people and objects that I encounter. It is indeed

pervasive and all encompassing, but also subtle, slight and resting in the quotidian mundanities of day-to-day life. Power may be wielded gently, queerly and tenderly through avenues of consent, mutual awareness and intra-active engagement. Power has the diffractive potential to shape the patterns of our reality differently so long as we see the slits that it shines through, see the stone that produces power's ripples throughout the water, see the intervention of the material world into the patterns of power that resonate within and around each of us. Power permeates and ripples through everything and coming to better know the diffractive potential of power in this way has transformed how I navigate my existence. It is my greatest hope, dear reader, that you too have been transformed in your thinking of power and that you may also encounter your material, spatial and temporal realms with a fresh approach to the many potentialities of power's diffractive patterns.

Now, I (re)turn to the questions that have guided me in my exploration of the material, temporal and sensual elements of power as contributing to an intra-actively diffractive conceptualization of power: Can we employ the theories of Agential Realism alongside theories of power and subjectivity to create an ethico-onto-epistemological form of knowledge production that enables readers and writers to think about power differently? Does a practice of (re)turning to desire-led narratives of the past have the potential to expand our present and future conceptualizations of power? And lastly, what are the implications, if any, on the self/subjectivity when conceptualizing and understanding how power may be enacted in ways that are not constrained by White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy?

In my endeavor to answer and provide justice to these questions, I began my methodology chapter by being inspired by Céline Sciamma's lecture given at the BAFTA Awards in 2019, titled, *Letting Desire Dictate Writing*. In this lecture she proposes an approach to screen writing that centers the desires of marginalized people as a gesture towards 'giving them back their subjectivity' after they have long been objectified by the narratives put forth by patriarchy. It was this gesture that I extended into my proposal of (re)turning to desire-led narratives of queer women's self-writings from the past. My aim here was to explore senses of self that have long been overlooked in effort to find ways of living and being that have flown below the radar of hegemonic historical narratives. By (re)turning to the desires of these women and the stories that unfolded around these desires, I have attempted to trace the ways in which desire, power and subjectivity are embedded intra-actively and diffractively in the material, temporal and spatial elements of self writing. To do

so, I grounded this thesis in Michel Foucault's theory of power, Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity, and Karen Barad's Agential Realist accounts of diffraction, intra-action and *spacetime-mattering*. By structuring my chapters around the materiality of Anne Lister's diary, the queering of temporality in Gertrude Stein's *Lifting Belly* and the space of consensual BDSM power play in *Coming to Power*, I hope to have demonstrated power's potential for "re-turning as in turning over and over again – iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new... (spacetime-matterings), new diffraction patterns" (Barad 2007 168). By exploring power's role in the realm of *spacetime-mattering*, this thesis illustrates how subjectivity intra-acts with the spatial, temporal and material elements of existence and in doing so, the potential for a diffraction of power arises.

I began this exploration of power in my second chapter by engaging how Anne Lister frequently wrote of her queer desires and experiences in a secret code in her diary. I argued that the care with which she repeatedly recorded these prohibited experiences is indicative of the diary's significance in the creation of her sense of self. As such, I proposed that we follow Judith Butler's line of thought that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999 191), by asking what are the implications regarding the acts of repeatedly recording the queerly sexual body in an interior, material space that is also tenuously constituted in time – the diary? And how does this stylized repetition of acts produced in writing contribute to an identity that has no social recognition? Lastly, what role does diary writing play in the formation and transformation of diary writers' senses of self and subjectivity? These are some of the questions that guided me in this chapter as I explored the role of power in the diary as a material space in which the subject negotiates desire. I began by introducing Anne Lister and the role the diary has played in her life as well as the life the diaries have taken on after her death. Then, I turned to the work of diary theorist, Phillip Lejeune, to contextualize the history of the diary and to better understand how the diary is tenuously constituted in time. Following these analyses, I read Lister's diaries alongside the theories of power and subjectivity put forth by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler because these theorists offer insight into how western societies shape the forms of power and subjectivity that pertain to the social and material conditions of Anne Lister's life in nineteenth century Europe. In doing so, I dissected and traced the ways in which the diary is a site of the self that may be considered the material manifestation of subject formation. Ultimately, my aim with reading Lister's diaries together with queer theorists was to demonstrate the intra-active nature of the

self, the diary and queer desire as a gesture towards starting to understand power diffractively.

Afterwards, in my third chapter, I offered an analysis of the diffractive potential of meaning making and knowledge production that I located in Stein's, *Lifting Belly*, a "fifty-page love lyric composed mostly of one-line tributes to 'lifting belly'" (Mark xviii). As such, I turned to Muñoz's claim that "queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time" (Muñoz 25). This quote guided me as I explored how *Lifting Belly* queers the temporal situatedness of its readers through the persistent use of the continuous present, thus fostering a queer potential for "new subject-positions and new figurations of personhood" (Freeman 54) to be experienced by the reader. Then I returned to Butler's theory of subjectivity to examine how Stein's use of repetition contributes to the (un)becoming of an intra-active queer subjectivity that is located in the quotidian content and ambiguous eroticism of *Lifting Belly*. Lastly, I demonstrated how these analyses ultimately contribute to Stein's defiance of authorial authority, which leads to a diffraction of the dualities that shape knowledge and power in western society. In doing so, I argued that Stein's work contributes to an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to meaning making, knowledge production and world-building that is rooted a diffraction of power.

And lastly, in my fourth chapter, I located several sites of power with the aim of offering my final and most in-depth theoretical reconfiguration of power as diffractive. The first site resides in the transformative process of writing about the fears, desires and feelings that have been silenced by normativity. This endeavor tapped into a nuanced understanding of power that carried my analysis into an intersectional framework of privilege and oppression. From there, I returned to Michel Foucault's theory of power and subjectivity as it relates to the differences perpetuated by dynamics of privilege and oppression. I then extended the limitations posed in Foucault's theory of power to incorporate Karen Barad's theory of Agential Realism, specifically the concepts of intra-action, diffraction and *spacetime-mattering*. To demonstrate this reworking of Foucault's theory of power and subjectivity through the lenses provided by Agential Realism, I offered several close readings from Audre Lorde's collection of essays, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, together with essays from the book *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, written by the SAMOIS collective. By exploring a reading of these essays together, I located the erotic and BDSM practices as sites of power. In doing so, I argued that BDSM creates a sensual

space in which power dynamics play out in a consensually non-normative manner. Engaging BDSM as a space for power to be played with diffractively brought me to the last element of *spacetime mattering* to be investigated in this thesis: space. Situating BDSM as a space in which power manifests differently aided in my re-thinking power along the Agential Realist account of *spacetime mattering* and its diffractive implications. As such, I illustrated the transformative potential of a diffraction of power as it relates to the transformation of the self depicted in written accounts of queer women's BDSM practices. Specifically, I demonstrated how this diffraction of power relates to a shift in subject formation that potentially reorients our relationships to hegemonic forms of power and opens up the potential for us to exist in relationality differently.

In conclusion, this thesis practices an ethico-onto-epistemological approach to knowledge production by critically engaging western forms of knowledge production: reading and writing, as sites in which we can resist reproducing the problematics of western ways of knowing and being. This is done with the aspiration of contributing an Agential Realist account of power and subjectivity to the field of feminist research. As such, my primary aim with writing this thesis is to responsibly attend to how it is that we, as researchers, can wield our power queerly, bravely and tenderly while world-building and producing knowledge amongst an increasingly neoliberalized university system.

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