

***Beyond punitive opposition:
cancel culture in relation to queer storytelling***

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Submitted August 2021

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**UNIVERSIDAD
DE GRANADA**

Gemma
Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree
in Women's and Gender Studies



Abstract

Cancelling has become an increasingly resonant word in the past years, and it has adopted particular modes in the field of pop culture and media. This research aims to explore the ways in which cancel culture relates to and with contemporary Western works of visual fiction, by analyzing the cases of the independent feature film *Adam* (2018), by Rhys Ernst, and the third season of mainstream comedy series *Master of None*, titled *Moments in Love* (2021).

Firstly, by the means of a genealogy, I situate cancel culture in a trajectory of kin practices of accountability and punishment. Accompanied by abolitionist thinkers, queer and feminist theory and criminology, I analyze which notions of accountability and justice are encompassed in these cancellation efforts, and how they are related with punitivism, activism and social justice movements. Guided by these main questions, I also inquire around further interrogations that preeminently emerge from this subject matter, such as where does cancel culture happen, who are the agents of cancellation, why do we regard it as a form of culture, what does it mean to cancel work of fictions, and how could we come to regard this phenomenon otherwise. Through a diffractive approach (Barad, 2007) that refuses oppositional readings and argumentations and seeks to staying with the problem/atic, I examine how cancel culture influences practices of queer storytelling as worlding, understood by Donna Haraway (2016) as a form of world-making with.

Through this engagement, I argue that, as a punitive oppositional practice, cancel culture seeks to separate itself from conflict, accountability and relational world-making by trying to make the problem/atic disappear.

Key words: cancel culture, punitivism, queer storytelling, worlding, audiovisual fiction

Abstract

En los últimos años, cancelar se ha convertido en un verbo con creciente resonancia, adoptando modalidades particulares en el campo de los medios y la cultura pop. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo explorar las formas en que la cultura de la cancelación se relaciona con trabajos de ficción audiovisual occidentales contemporáneos, a través de un análisis de los casos de la película independiente *Adam* (2018), del director Rhys Ernst, y la tercera temporada de la serie de comedia *Master of None*, titulada *Moments in Love* (2021).

En primer lugar, a través de un abordaje genealógico, sitúo a la cultura de la cancelación en una trayectoria de prácticas similares con objetivos punitivos. Acompañada por pensadorxs abolicionistas, y teóricxs y criminólogxs feministas y queer, analizo qué nociones de justicia y responsabilidad (accountability) aparecen en las cancelaciones de los casos de estudio, y cómo se relacionan con el punitivismo, el activismo y los movimientos de justicia social. Guiada por estas preguntas centrales, abordo también otros interrogantes que emergen de esta temática, como dónde ocurre la cultura de la cancelación, quiénes son los agentes de cancelación, por qué la consideramos una forma de cultura, qué significa cancelar productos de ficción, y cómo podríamos pensar en este fenómeno de otra manera. A través de un acercamiento difractivo (Barad, 2007) que rechaza lecturas y argumentos confrontativos, y que busca seguir con lo problemático, examino cómo la cultura de la cancelación influencia prácticas de “queer storytelling as worlding”, entendidas por Donna Haraway (2016) como formas de crear mundos con otros.

A través de este enfoque, argumento que, en tanto práctica punitiva, la cultura de la cancelación busca separarse del conflicto y la creación relacional de mundos, intentando hacer que lo problemático desaparezca.

Palabras clave: cultura de la cancelación, punitivismo, queer storytelling, worlding, ficción audiovisual

Acknowledgements / Agradecimientos

I want to start with a heartfelt thank you to Domi Olivieri and Orianna Calderón, for their generous, committed guidance in this process. For having been true, curious thinking companions and giving a deep meaning to the word supervisor. To all the teachers that inspired me, challenged me, encouraged me, and recognized me as a fellow thinker along the two years of this experience.

I want to acknowledge the body that wrote this thesis, my body. I want to acknowledge the people, the spaces and landscapes that held my body during the time I wrote this thesis. The friends that embraced me, fed me, touched me, read me and to me, listened to me, supported me. The sun, the precious sun that gifted me the energy to start and finish this thesis. I want to acknowledge the emotions that my body held while writing this thesis (never because of writing this thesis): the joy, the excitement, the care and the love, but also the anguish, the fear, the pain. I want to acknowledge the tensions in my back and neck and shoulders, relieved sometimes by the generous hands of a friend's massage, by the practice of yoga, or a hot shower. I was able to write this thesis because I was lucky and privileged -I use this word with caution- to resort to all of these.

Gracias a mi tía Alicia, por su amor incondicional que me sostiene todos los días. To my parents, a mis viejxs, Marcela y Alberto. Por siempre creer en mí más que yo, por su apoyo multidimensional e intercontinental. A mi amiga Paw, la fundamental, por caminar conmigo cada paso del camino en los últimos quince años. A mi amiga Pau Turina, hechicera de las palabras, por la ternura y el aguante más genuino en forma de mensajes y escucha siempre en el momento justo.

A la inolvidable banda de Granada, les más intensis y amorosos. A Mariana, mi rumi del amor, por los días y las horas, por haber construido un hogar conmigo. A Cynthia, por el compañerismo múltiple y multiplicado, por las aventuras y los aprendizajes. A Marta, por las charlas infinitas pero sobre todo por entender todo sin palabras. A Kris, por ese corazón de sur que me enseñó tanto, por hacer de ese piso en el Realejo y de toda Andalucía una casa-refugio. A la ciudad de Granada, por su magia infinita e inmediata, por su arte, sus montañas, su gente. To Nin, for their loving generosity and their amazing wisdom. A Pau Satta, mi amicha sudaka, madrina de toda intensidad, por este vínculo de sostén tan fundamental para mí en estos últimos meses.

To the Utrecht beans, the most loving, supportive and caring community I could have ever dreamed of. This city was possible because of you. This city was you. A Andrea, pilar de mi existencia en este norte, por las risas, los chismes, los bailes, la confianza. Por tu amistad, que es todo. A Rita, por la curiosidad, por ser compañera en los movimientos elementales y varias formas del asombro. Por todo el espectro de nuestro vínculo en este tiempo, en tres idiomas y múltiples lenguajes. Obrigada. To my beloved Mahasweta, for the unique loyalty, the care, the walks, and the listening. To Ceci, partner in feminist organization always, for the complicity, the friendship and the trust. To Cat, for the tight hugs filled with love in the middle of eternal afternoons in the library. For turning your home into our safe den for meals, movie screenings and all things communal. To Neila, for teaching me still how to rebel. To Khurram, Moss, Emma, and Constanza, unforgettable co-conspirators in these times.

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Introduction

“Si alguien piensa que por criticar (...) he encontrado mi comodidad se equivoca: escribo porque estoy totalmente incómoda”
(Massacese, 2018, p. 121, 122)

“If anyone thinks that in criticizing (...) I have found comfort, they are wrong: I write because I am totally uncomfortable”
(Massacese, 2018, p.121, 122)

1. the path

The scene is recurrent, yet this one manages to surprise me. One uneventful Wednesday morning during class break, in the beginning of the first semester at Utrecht University, a classmate voices the sentence: “Adrienne Rich is cancelled”. I am taken aback by the phrase; it feels dense and loud like the abrupt impact of a closing door. My body reacts to it like a mirror: something attempts to close, and is met with resistance. The discomfort arises and stays with me for days. It shouldn’t surprise or affect me anymore: cancelling has become an increasingly resonant verb in the past years. It is now common to hear on a regular basis, -in the news, activist spaces, social media, a family dinner or a casual conversation during class break- that some prominent figure, such as a famous rockstar, a corporate CEO, a Hollywood award-winning actor, or even a formerly beloved feminist theorist, has been cancelled. Yet, what exactly this entails seems to be at the same time widely understood and greatly unclear. That which is cancelled should not be seen, or heard or touched anymore: something closes around them, intentionally, uncontestedly. And what affects and discomforts me (still) about cancelling, and motivates me to engage with it, is not this ambiguity, but its expansion and normalization as a set of practices that seem to be influencing the ways in which we relate not only to harmful people in positions of power but to everything: desire, knowledge, art, each other.

Cancel culture, as a complex contemporary phenomenon, has adopted particular and recurrent modes in the field of pop culture and media, where the cancellation of specific works of fiction has resurfaced and reframed debates around censorship, representation and identity politics. Some recent examples of this include the deletion from US-based streaming platforms of cinematic classics such as *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), or specific episodes of popular sitcoms like *The Office* or *Community*, due to being perceived as

reinforcing discursivities of racism, homophobia or sexism. As a feminist, I have personally participated in similar processes of cancellation, and then I have been invited by my compañerxs¹ to collectively reflect upon them. As a journalist and a scholar focused on feminist and LGBTI+ topics and representation, I was moved to inquire about these practices and critically engage with them. As a lifelong fan and recent creator of LGTBI+ audiovisual fictions, I have become particularly curious and concerned about how cancel culture might affect or is affecting the ways in which storytelling from and around LGBTI+ subject positions is being crafted. I consequently came to wonder about the particularities of cancelling a work of fiction. What does it mean to cancel a movie or a tv series? Is it a form of critique? Is it an activist action demanding better LGBTI+ content? Is it an attempt to demand accountability for the reproduction of alleged harmful narratives about LGBTI+ people? What or who exactly is being questioned? The people involved in the creation? And if so, who? Or is it a questioning of a particular imagery and discursivity, or a way of doing or creating, that is no longer deemed acceptable? These added layers of complexity suggest that the topic is one not only possible but worth extensively looking into.

This research then aims to explore the ways in which cancel culture relates to and with contemporary Western works of visual fiction, by analyzing the cases of the independent feature film *Adam* (2018), by Rhys Ernst, and the third season of mainstream comedy series *Master of None*, titled *Moments in Love* (2021). Through this approach, I seek to examine how this phenomenon influences practices of queer storytelling as worlding, understood by Donna Haraway (2016) as a form of world-making with. Furthermore, I aim to analyze which notions of accountability and justice are encompassed in these cancellation efforts, and how they are related with punitivism, activism and social justice movements. Guided by these main questions, I will also inquire around further interrogations that preeminently emerge from this subject matter, such as where does cancel culture happen, who are the agents of cancellation, why do we regard it as a form of culture, and how could we come to regard this phenomenon otherwise.

In the past years, the expansion and consolidation of cancel culture have led to infinite debates on social media and the publication of multiple journalistic analytical pieces, mostly featured in US-based online outlets, but have not yet raised sufficient interest in the academic context, where there has been little to no literature produced on the subject. The limited corpus can be found mostly in the fields of critical, queer and feminist criminology, and published in the recent years, with a prominence of work produced in the Global South.

¹ There is no word in English that could properly translate the ethos of compañerx, especially its specific use in Latin American and, more specifically, Argentinean political organization. Compañerx (the x at the end marks gender neutrality in Spanish) means at the same time comrade, colleague, partner and member of a community. It is an apelative to a shared, common sense of social justice. I will extend on the intricacies of (un)translatability in a later section of this introduction.

Given its enormous relevancy on the contemporary media landscape, it is curious that this topic has not yet led to approaches from pertinent fields like Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Film Studies or other similarly concerned disciplines. Likewise, considering the enmeshment of cancellation efforts with/in feminist and LGBTI+ activism, there is also a notable absence of comprehensive approaches to this phenomenon in Gender Studies and Queer Theory. Nonetheless, there have been selected efforts from feminist and queer thinkers, such as Sarah Schulman (2016) or adrienne maree brown (2020), to address cancel culture, motivated by the concern about an increasing tendency in social interactions of all kinds for what can be understood as forms of cancellations. It is significant to mention that both of these works, so far some of the few in existence that have dealt with the topic of cancel culture extensively and thoroughly, were not born from academic spaces, even though they can be definitely considered forms of knowledge production and inform academic efforts such as this research. While brown focuses on the issue as it takes place in the field of social movements and community organization, Schulman provides a widely comprehensive perspective that goes from the interpersonal to the international. In view of all of this, it becomes not only relevant, but vital, to directly approach the ongoing phenomena of cancel culture from a critical point of view, within academia. This project aspires to make a contribution not only to the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies, in which it is materially situated, but also to open a space and a path for further concern around this relevant and timely matter from diverse fields of study as well as non-academic forms of knowledge-building.

It is fair to argue that such a multi-faceted phenomenon not only would benefit from but also demands a multifocal perspective that refuses one-sided entry points and is committed to staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), or as I propose in the third chapter, to staying with the problem/atic. Situated in the field of Gender Studies, as I already established, I head into this project accompanied by a theoretical framework that draws on queer theory, abolition thinkers, Critical Race theory, feminist criminology, and new materialist thinking. I will engage with content only produced in or translated to English and Spanish² (the two languages I am academically fluent in), aiming to establish a South-North dialogue mostly between the contexts of the United States and Argentina. These function as two ends of a contingent thinking continuum enabled by this research: the first one is the territory where the case studies and a large portion of the theories that I engage with were produced, as well as the ultimate space of legitimacy for cultural creation and knowledge building; the second is the territory that I am from, and where I always think from despite being (dis)located in Europe while writing this, as well as one of the most vital spaces for

² There are only two exceptions for this: Liedke (2021), which is originally in Brazilian portuguese, and Fernández Miguez (2019), which is originally in galego.

critical feminist thinking (specially feminist and queer criminology) and activism. I will equally resort to other non-academic but extremely potent takes on the subject, such as the ones developed by journalists Aja Romano (2020, 2021) and Ligaya Mishan (2021), abolition writer Lola Olufemi (2021), and youtuber ContraPoints (2020). This thinking process is also densely informed and enriched by the people -colleagues, friends and teachers (a distinction that many times happily collapses)- who have been close to me throughout this learning experience (far beyond the linear temporality of the two academic years that the program is meant to last) and generous to talk, debate, discuss and disagree with me on this and other topics.

The combination of multiple strands of thinking with my personal experience -a small act of refusal in the midst of rigid disciplinarity-, also situates this thinking exercise in a path that does not attempt to provide final answers or solutions for the questions or issues it raises. Rather, in terms of methodology, I aim to address the interrogations and intricacies of this topic through a critical theoretical analysis, informed and mobilized by the onto-epistemological notion of diffractive reading proposed by Karen Barad (2007). I strongly believe that such an approach allows me to take into consideration new patterns of thought and analyses created at the intersection of the above-stated theories and thoughts selected to accompany this research. Diffraction offers a key apparatus for this kind of research, since “it is at once a concept, method, and an ethico-political call for engaging with the world differently” (Friedman, 2021, p. 7). According to Barad (2007), a diffractive reading does not read one text or set of ideas against one another, but rather involves “reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge” (p. 30). Such an approach becomes especially relevant for a project that seeks to inquire into cancel culture as a practice which largely relies on a logic of blatant binary opposition. To engage with this phenomena through an already condemnatory perspective, would be to repeat the dynamics that this thinking exercise seeks to put into question. This approach is a commitment to a form of critical thinking that refuses “negation, opposition (and judgment, we might add) as the traditional attributes of critique” (Bunz, Kaiser, & Thiele, 2020, p. 7), and is instead oriented towards what feminist philosopher Kathrin Thiele names as the ethos of diffraction (2014): a political ethical project that complicates Western dualisms which write difference as oppositional, and goes beyond binaries in ‘think-practicing’ concepts differently (Friedman, 2021).

Motivated by this onto-ethico-epistemological position, I will also follow Barad’s elaboration of the performative discursive/material to frame and explore key terms like storytelling or cancelling. Concerned by the overwhelming centrality of representationalism not only in science but in the generalized perception of the world in Western culture, Barad proposes an alternative. Since representationalism presupposes “the ontological distinction

between representations and that which they purport to represent" (Barad, 2003, p. 804), or put more simply between words and things, the author points to an ontological turn towards what they call agential realism. In this realm of relational ontology, "the primary epistemological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather phenomena" (2003, p. 815). Phenomena refers to "the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components'" (p. 815), in which apparently independent and individual objects (what Barad calls *relata*) do not preexist the relations amongst them, but rather become within them. Here, representation as the mediation between words and things becomes impossible. Following this reasoning, the move away from representationalism, "shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality, to matters of practices/doings/actions" (Barad, 2003, p. 802), thus centering on the entanglement of matter and meaning (Barad, 2007). In this choice, I affirm my movement away from binary Western dualisms that have historically opposed nature and culture, thinking and practicing, ideas and materiality, words and things. I will come back to this and explore it further in the articulations of the chapters.

Regarding the selection of case studies, I actively chose two different pieces of audiovisual fiction created and situated in the United States for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am not oblivious to the overwhelming hegemony of US culture, the almost inescapable proliferation and consolidation of its symbols and imag(inari)es, or the monopolistic concentration of their cultural industry. Instead, it is because I acknowledge them as such, that I find them crucial to engage with, along with the narratives they attempt to universalize. Secondly, and crucially, because it allows me to contextualize them in the larger framework of critical and political engagement of the United States, one that includes the project of abolition, as a situated movement that practices justice and accountability differently and critically, beyond the punitive apparatus of the criminal justice system. This perspective will be central in my analysis. Finally, because I could not find any cases of similar cancellations of contemporary audiovisual works of fiction in Argentina (or South America) that would allow a sort of comparative analysis.

Like I hinted at with my opening quote and anecdote, this thinking process starts with and from a deep, embodied sense of discomfort. I arrived here (to Europe, to this program) exhausted, disheartened by activism. Feminist activism, queer activism, human rights activism, all the forms of activism I had passionately engaged with for most of the past decade. I was done with all of it. The movements I considered myself a part of seemed to have fallen into an autophagic spyral of pointing fingers at each other. Every attempt to materialize, to create, was met with meticulous scrutiny and cynical criticism. It could be said the reigning dynamics of those spaces were aligned to what queer and feminist thinker Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick named *paranoid reading* (2003). She coined this term to refer to an

overwhelming tendency in critical studies, and specifically in queer studies, towards an exacerbation of what Paul Ricoeur had called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003): a form of reading that focuses, almost exclusively, in finding and exposing possible articulations of violence or oppression. In this framework, a text could be dismissed for being perceived as not critical enough or for somewhat reproducing instances of oppression. Furthermore, in her view, paranoid reading had become not only the main but also the imperative way to engage in critical thinking. This tendency made it harder to elaborate deep analysis that could "unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p. 124).

Coming back to my experience with activism, these productive habits of suspicion (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003) that we have learned and incorporated to be constantly aware of both the loud and silent operations of systemic oppression, in order to confront them and not reproduce them, have turned against us. We are suspecting each other. And it's not that we shouldn't be, but it's not the only thing we can be. In this sense, Sedgwick's formulation of *paranoid* reading becomes especially accurate. Around the same time in which I started to move away from activist spaces, I encountered again these dynamics of suspicion in the workings of an expanding cancel culture. This built a concrete bridge between the embodied discomfort and uneasiness born in activism and the topic of this research. As chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa said, it might be time to expand our focus from what has been done to us, towards "a more extensive level of agency, one which questions what we're doing to each other" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 244). This work is rooted in a deep, situated concern with how we are treating each other and how we are dealing with difference. It is also, on some level, a concern about language, or better put, a concern that starts with language (as most of my concerns do), its limits and possibilities.

In the first chapter, I attempt to situate and ground the seemingly elusive phenomenon of cancel culture by retracing a possible genealogy through recurrent vocabulary around it. Relying largely on journalistic accounts on the subject from the United States and Argentina, and the few recent academic takes on the matter, I locate calling out, trashing, public shaming, and the Argentinean *escraches* as concept/practices highly associated with cancel culture. Going through them, I analyze which aspects of each function as features of contemporary cancellations. Through this operation, I outline a landscape of cancel culture as an ongoing phenomenon embedded in specific, situated political trajectories and traditions of punishment and accountability.

The second chapter explores in depth the notions of justice and accountability implied in the cancellation of the case studies. An overview of both *Adam* and season 3 of *Master of None*, brings forward how operations of invisibilization and removal become

central to the cancellation dynamics. That which is found problematic must not be seen and must be removed to a position of exteriority, away from the agents of cancellation, thus hinting already to the carceral logics of the criminal justice system. I then argue that this exteriority is enabled and sustained by what Denise Ferreira da Silva (2016, 2018) identifies as the onto-epistemic pillars of the violence of Modern Thought: *separability, sequentiality and determinacy*. I resort to Nin Friedman's (2021) reworking of this triad in the characterization of what they call the *register of carcerality*: a punitive logic in which notions of justice or accountability always point to sites of punishment rather than to forms of healing or reparation. Following this reasoning, I resort to Argentinean critical thinkers Lucas Cuello and Nicolás Desavlo articulation of *punitive thinking* (2018) to explore the transversal, cultural system that has positioned punishment as the most desirable response not only to violence, harm and conflict, but also to difference. Being articulated by this principle, I argue that all accounts of justice and accountability contained in cancellation efforts point to forms of punishment and retaliation. Finally, I retrace how this same logic has limited the articulations of social justice invoked by feminist and LGBTI+ movements within a punitive ethos.

In the third and last chapter, I start with a positioning and an invitation: paraphrasing Donna Haraway's *staying with the trouble* (2016), I formulate a proposal to stay/ing with the problem/atic. In this way, I commit to acknowledge and engage with what is considered problem/atic in the realm of cancel culture, and refuse the exteriority that enables it. After this positioning, I move to explore not only what cancel culture might do to storytelling, but also to what queer storytelling as worlding can do to reframe cancel culture. In order to do so, I firstly point to the politics and temporalities of imagination, as envisioned by the project of abolition. Following Lola Olufemi (2021), I situate imagination not as a site for the abstract or the utopian, but as a potent political tool to envision and enact an otherwise, beyond the limitations of the logics of the state. Affirming a shift from a solely representational approach, I then move on to outlining storytelling as worlding. With Haraway (2016), I mobilize worlding as semiotic/material practices of world-making with, and refuse cancel culture's reduction of storytelling as merely representational. Through worlding, I also complicate the principles of transparency and exteriority that I locate as articulating the representational framing of storytelling in cancellations. Next, accompanied by José Muñoz (1999), val flores (2013) and Teresa de Lauretis (1985), I explore what could constitute queer storytelling or what would entail to queer storytelling. Finally, I abandon the analytical rigidity and experiment with what the poetics of an otherwise point to.

2. epistemological notes on situatedness, translation and identity or sobre algunas formas intraducibles

“home and exile in this context become as inseparable from each other
as writing is from language”
(Trinh T. Minh-ha, 2011, p. 34)

This introduction has stated the what, the how and the why of this thinking process. Now I find it crucial to also assert *where* I write, think and feel *from*. I need to start this research by acknowledging and problematizing my *place* of enunciation. I will do so by briefly but deeply reflecting on what it means to write this thesis here, in the Netherlands, in Northern Europe, so excruciatingly far from the South that constitutes me, a South both literal (being from Argentina) and political (embracing a specific worldview). And what it means to write it in English, a language I have managed to make mine, but that is ultimately an imposition that can be traced back to colonialism and imperialism.

This is the moment, inherent to most feminist academic writing, in which I quote Donna Haraway and her conceptualization of situated knowledges (1988) as central to my epistemological positioning. In her quest for a feminist objectivity, that refuses both complete relativism and the (colonial, androcentric) Western universalizations of positivism, Haraway argues for a form of knowledge building that is situated: always partial, locatable, and embodied (1988). Yet, this eloquent statement needs a bit of unfolding to become actively mobilized. One of my favorite classes of my first year of the Gemma program at the University of Granada was called *Geopolíticas del Conocimiento, Género y Traducción. Del Giro Discursivo al Giro Decolonial*³ and it dealt with the intricacies of translation in the landscape of global feminist academia and the power relations that structure it. There, professor Lola Sánchez -one of the most brilliant and generous teachers I had the pleasure of thinking with in this process- stated, unforgettably, while going through Haraway’s famous text and its translation to Spanish: “situarse no es presentarse”. To situate oneself, in a Harawayan way, is not to introduce oneself. It does not mean to simply enumerate a set of categories that appear to have a clear, uncontested meaning. I could say that I am Argentinean, that i’m sudaka, that i’m Latinx, that i’m able-bodied, that i’m a lesbian and transfeminist, and then expect for readers to understand such enumeration as my epistemological situatedness. But what would those categories mean for a Dutch student that reads this thesis after finding it in the university archive? What would it mean for a fellow

³ Geopolitics of Knowledge, Gender and Translation. From the Discursive Turn to the Decolonial Turn. It feels slightly ironic to translate the title of a class concerned with translatability.

Latin American researcher located in a different part of the Global North? What would it mean for a LGTBI+ activist that came across this work? What would it mean for my mom or my aunt? To build a situated position resorting to identitarian categories, to identity politics, seems to fall back into the trap of universalization that Haraway meant to question. She is actually very clear, though far less quoted, about this in her formulation, especially when it comes to what are perceived as subjugated positions:

One cannot 'be' either a cell or molecule -or a woman, colonized person, laborer, and so on- if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. 'Being' is much more problematic and contingent. Also, one cannot relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement. (Haraway, 1988, p. 585)

Here, Haraway questions a certain essentialism (of "being" as a totalizing and static condition) that is present in all categories, if not situated. No position speaks for itself. And furthermore, no identitarian position is exempt from the responsibility of actualizing it in a specific -partial, locatable, embodied- context. In this sense, appealing to apparently subjugated positions -like lesbian, latinx, or sudaka might be- is not situatedness and is not automatically critical. Subjugated positions are not unproblematic or innocent. I will develop this further.

A lot of Haraway's formation of situatedness has to do with the *where* of knowledge building, the position that defines a point of view (even though she follows to criticize the metaphor of vision). Away from the irresponsible nowhere of relativism and the totalizing everywhere of hegemonic science, Haraway advocates for an intrinsically contingent *right here*, against, once more, any positions understood as crystallized. There is also a temporality implied in this *right here*, and it is a *right now*, thus visibilizing the contingent character of situatedness, even when in the same location. Here, also somewhat common *place* of feminist epistemological articulations in academia, must come in lesbian US author and poet Adrienne Rich, and her also notable concept of politics of location. In her well-known essay *Notes Towards a Politics of Location* (1986), Rich criticizes the fallacious universality of the category of women and reflects upon the particular *places* of enunciation that emerge from specific geopolitical emplacements, and how these can enable or obstruct the building of a political *position*. She critically self-reflects upon her position as a white, Jew, lesbian, feminist and what these markers come to mean in different geographies. Rich, like Haraway, argues against the use of such abstract categories, "severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans" (Rich, 1986, p. 213), to illustrate a personal position or situatedness. In her conceptualization of location, Rich also questions the apparent intemporality of abstract categories, in a way arguing for a similar *right now* to

Haraway's: "'Always' blots out what we really need to know: when, where and under what condition has the statement been true?" (Rich, 1986, p. 214). Coming back to myself and my example of a what I consider not to be a situated positionality: it is radically different to be a sudaka, latinx, transfeminist lesbian in Argentina, that in the south of Spain or in Dutch academia. To give a more illustrated example, the category of sudaka⁴ in particular, adopts a specific place of reappropriation and resistance in the Spanish territory, where it has been used as a xenophobic slur against South American migrants. On the contrary, without context, this word might be rare and meaningless to a Dutch person.

Feminist intersectional author Sara Ahmed has also built on this notion of positionality, from her queer phenomenology approach, adding an extra layer of complexity: it is not only about where I am, but who is around me. The author thus emphasizes "the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others" (2006, p. 5). In this way, she situates herself within a genealogy of feminist and critical race authors that have shaped "a politics of location as a form of situated dwelling" (p. 5). Identitarian positions are also modified depending on the others around us. For example, I have never *felt* less white than in the Netherlands, when surrounded by an overwhelming whiteness.

To situate myself, I also have to address the tension between a here and a there that, at the time of writing this thesis, go across me, transversally. Feminist Vietnamese theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has largely engaged with the intricacies of this dislocation in her work *elsewhere, within here* (2010), paying specific attention to the operations of language and translation in practices of writing and storytelling. In a refusal of abstraction that could be seen as similar to Rich's, Minh-ha states: "Home and language tend to be taken for granted; like Mother or Woman, they are often naturalized and homogenized" (p. 33). To situate myself I need to tell you about my home and my language, to unpack and paint the picture of otherwise meaningless words: Argentina, Spanish. I also need to tell you about my here, and my elsewhere, and all the constant movements, translations, in between. Because, as Rich poses (1986), it becomes crucial to recognize our location, name the ground we are coming from and the conditions we have taken for granted.

Though I have a critical understanding of nation-states and acknowledge their origin in colonial practices of annihilation and occupation, I also affirm my belonging/pertenencia⁵

⁴ My friend and fellow Gemma graduate Paula Satta provides a simple yet thorough characterization of the term sudaka in her thesis for this program. In her words, sudaka points to "a way of writing, speaking, and feeling, specifically from the South American territories" (Satta, 2021, p. 13) that refers to a particular embodiment and subjectivity that, amongst many other things, acknowledges and embraces the individual, collective and communal strategies of resistance and resourcefulness towards survival that result from living in a constant state of precarity, marked by frequent economical crisis.

⁵ In this understanding, belonging/pertenencia means that I surrender myself to this territory. In this inversion, I do not own it, but I own to it.

to a specific territory and landscape, which are inherent and formative to who I am, how I perceive the world and therefore, how I think. I was born and raised in the city of Rosario, the country's third biggest metropoli, built along the coast of the Paraná river. I belong to this space: the proximity to los humedales, its trees, its changing currents (los remansos) and its animals are a part of me. And there is a particular language that surfaces from it. The Spanish language that shapes me is also unique, it evokes the sounds of the landscape: the kilometers of llanura of the Argentinean litoral, the gentle, relentless flow of the immense, brown river. Mi español es rebelde y está lleno de silencios, de esos arrastradas y aspiradas, sílabas superpuestas, sonidos siameses que emparentan yo, con calle y Oshun. Mi español tiene de España solo una cicatriz, el recuerdo constante y encarnado de una imposición colonial. Mi español carga con los fantasmas de las lenguas que borró: unas doce solo en el territorio donde nací, más de quinientas en toda Latinoamérica. Mi español a veces suena a guaraní o quechua, cuando dice palta en vez de aguacate, o choclo en vez de maíz, o cuando dice Paraná, tereré, yará. Mi español a veces es italiano, producto de una herencia menos pesada, y dice birra en vez de cerveza y abre las oraciones con *che*. Mi español tampoco es mío. And no, I will not translate this. Because there is a “beauty that won't travel, that can't be stolen away” (Rich, 1986, p. 223)

To translate comes from the latin word *translatus* (every single word is the result of a translation): ‘carried across’. Translation always implies a movement. Not automatic, not obvious, something needs to be carried. But from where to where? Who does the carrying? Translation is not simply between languages, but of places, landscapes, idiosyncrasies, entire worldviews. I stay in the same place for hours and yet, I am in constant, imperceptible movement. And I carry my language, myself, my home with me. Even when seated for a whole day in a very sleek library space at Utrecht University *-here-*, my feet are always in *-longing for-* the slimy mud of the Paraná river *-there-*. Even when I have been reading texts in academic English for hours *-here-*, my tongue stumbles upon anglosaxon sounds and rests in the tonalities and intonations of my accent *-there-*. Even if I have voluntarily surrendered to English and no longer consciously translate in my head *-here-*, the materiality of the images and the ideas and the connections between them happen in, remit to a different place. *There*. Then, according to Minh-ha, for the migrant or exile, “figuratively but also literally speaking, traveling back and forth between home and abroad becomes a mode of dwelling.” (Minh-ha, 2010, p. 33). Who am I in this liminality? Who do I become? This depiction of positionalities resonates with Rich's politics of location (1986), where identity is not an inherited marker but a politics, constantly articulated and re-articulated in the tensions between here, there and elsewhere: it “lies at the intersection of dwelling and traveling and is a claim of continuity within discontinuity (and vice-versa)” (Minh-ha, 2010, p. 31).

While inhabiting this state of constant displacement, “if it is problematic to be a

stranger, it is even more so to stop being one” (Minh-ha, 2010, p. 34). I want to always remain a stranger to this nation-state, to this continent, to this language, and to academia, as globalized expression of this epistemology. No matter how at ease I seem to be, how comfortable I appear to be with English or the rigid structures of academic writing. Even if I pass as a proper scholar, dear reader, do not be fooled. I write this at the beginning of this thinking process, to remind everyone, including myself, and mostly myself, that none of this is mine. None of it will ever be mine. I have learnt its ways and I choose to briefly abide in it. I have figured out how to make a living out of it. I can temporarily appropriate it. I might even choose to come back, but always already acknowledging and affirming my status of stranger, of foreign.

Following this reasoning, I decided to include quotations from authors that have not been formally translated to English, and to incorporate their words and thoughts in this process by translating them myself. I am aware of the responsibility that comes with that operation, but I also underline the contingent character of all translations, even the ones that are widely circulated and accepted as official. This is a small, local action to counteract the limitations of the geopolitics of translation in which, as Brazilian feminist authors Cláudia de Lima Costa and Sonia Álvarez affirm, the global status of English is impacting, which works are considered citable, which/whose knowledge is allowed to circulate, and thus shaping what counts as knowledge (de Lima Costa & Álvarez, 2014). This is an attempt to allow for feminist concepts to travel across linguistic and institutional contexts “without a visa”, without the permission of the “material apparatus organizing their translation, publication, and circulation” (de Lima Costa & Álvarez, 2014, p. 558).

The multiple layers of translation make me a frequent traveler and face me with a constant exercise in becoming polyglot, transdisciplinary, nomad (de Lima Costa & Álvarez, 2014). In these movements, I hope to listen and learn “how to be silent and to speak again, differently” (Minh-ha, 2010, p. 29).

Finally, I would briefly like to acknowledge that I am highly aware of how many of the key theoretical articulations in this thinking process (like the notions of relationality or the ontological questioning of modernity and its worldviews) are indebted to ancestral wisdom and cosmogonies. Yet, I have the fierce bodily certainty that it is *not my place* to bring them to academia. It is not me who should decide their belonging or not to this colonial institution. I can only account for my conscious participation in these spaces, doing my best to keep its implications present. In this sense, I want to close by saying that at many times I have felt a certain kind of guilt: for choosing a research topic that at times felt abstract, distant, far from any territorial relevance. This introduction, as I stated, aims to be a reminder, for the readers but mostly to myself, that this thinking process is situated; a reminder for how and why this

topic is close to my body, no matter the location of it.

3. on queer/ing

It is common for a proper academic introduction to provide clarification and theoretical background for the key terms the thinking process relies upon. As this thesis starts with a journey through vocabulary, which aims to delineate the phenomenon of cancel culture by engaging with similar concept/practices, it will be mostly through the thinking process, and not a priori, that the characterization of most key terms will take shape. Others, such as *storytelling* and *worlding*, I have already outlined in the previous sections of this introduction. Nonetheless, there is one specific term, present even in the title of this research, that is truly central even on an epistemological level: *queer*. Yet, the definition, uses and intricacies of this word have been in dispute for at least the past forty years, both in academic and activist spaces (parallel or integral to the formation and consolidation of Queer Theory as a field of study, and of LGBTI+ movements as an organized political actor). The term queer, in its current associations with non-normative expressions of sexuality, desire and gender, appeared in the United States as a site of refusal: a critical position that rejected and questioned fixed identitarian markers such as gay or lesbian, and their tendency or willingness to participate in processes of assimilation and or normalization (Sullivan, 2003). Queerness intended to be a liminal space beyond all possible categorizations. And it is precisely this historical embeddedness in the realm of the voluntarily inapprehensible that makes queerness delightfully difficult to explain or define. As stated by Nikki Sullivan, “defining queerness always seems like the most un-queer thing to do” (2003, p. 43). Taking this into consideration, rather than define, I seek to situate queerness, contingently, in this research, and briefly delineate *from where* I mobilize it.

First, I intend to disorient queerness from a closed set of identified and identifyable bodies and subject positions. Here, I will not use it as an umbrella term that homogenizes (Anzaldúa, 1991) queer multitudes (Valencia, 2015), a handy adjective to refer succinctly to all things not cis-straight. Instead, to talk about these groupings, I will use LGBTI+ and, be noted, not the more popular LGBTIQ+, in order to acknowledge and honor the origins of queerness as a line of flight and not another identitarian category to be added to an acronym. I choose the formation LGBTI+ (from many possible enumerations of letters) solely for analytical purposes, but not to assume or suggest that the subject positions included in the acronym are the only relevant ones, or in any way static or cristalized in a way that can not be further problematized or otherwise mobilized.

Secondly, I choose queer as key term not despite but precisely because it is a term embedded in a long trajectory of disputing and disputed meaning. Because it is a polysemous, polymorphic, promiscuous word, willing to intimately engage and become with anyone who wants to take it. Yet, I do not want to resort here to queerness as mere celebration of the opaque, as only a site of rebellion against definitions. Even though I do praise the potentialities of this refusal in an embodied way, I also recognize its limitations in a specific theoretical practice like this one. Going over some takes on queerness from diverse positions within Queer Theory, it is common to find anti-definitions that situate the queer in the realm of complete ungraspability and unlimited potential. For instance, David Ruffolo, in his book *Post-Queer Politics* (2009), and from a Deleuzoguattarian perspective, characterizes his proposal of (post) queer politics as that which ‘imitates nothing, it reproduces nothing, it paints the world its colour, pink on pink, this is its becoming-world’ (Ruffolo, 2009, p. 11).

Similarly, Nikki Sullivan (2003) collects some (anti)definitions of queerness that end up constructing queerness (and Queer Theory) as “a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities” (Sullivan, 2003, pp. 43, 44). Even though this sounds undeniably appealing for those who seek to embody a critical position, Sullivan (2003) points to some objections that I subscribe to: “The refusal to define queer, or at least the ways in which the term is functioning in specific contexts” (p. 47), removes queerness from all material processes of signification, making it an empty signifier that fails to address “how and why particular knowledges, practices, identities, and texts, are validated at the expense of others” (p. 47). The author goes on to quote Steven Seidman, encouraging readers to “seriously think through this question and refrain from simply reiterating enigmatic calls for fluidity, ambiguity, indefinability, and so on” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 47). This falls into the trap of assigning intrinsic, uncontested value to the opaque and the fluid, thus building the notion of queerness on rigid dichotomies and oppositions -against all forms of assimilationism- that paradoxically then make it stable and static. It is crucial to the onto-ethico-epistemological approach of this thesis to (re)situate critique and critical perspectives beyond the solely oppositional. Therefore, in this research, queerness is not a conceptual wildcard that points to that quintessentially resistant, critically superior or the more enlightened than other positions or ways of doing. It is in this sense that queer(ing), in the framework of this thinking process, becomes epistemological: because it does not pretend to epitomize the ultimate criticality, but rather acknowledge the partiality, limitation, fallibility and situatedness of every attempt at questioning.

As a way to surpass this conceptual embroilment, Sullivan proposes “to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity)” (2003, p. 50). So, even

when I use it as an apparent adjective, as in the conceptualization of *queer storytelling* central to this research, I want to evoke a specific doing rather than a being. *Queer(ing)*, in this research, is a material doing in context, embedded in the praxis of thinking through binary op/positions, relationally. This situated use of queer(ing) accords with the onto-ethico-epistemological project of diffraction (Barad, 2007) that guides this thinking process. Queer(ing) here also points to specific refusals. For once, and to further expand its notion beyond an oppositional criticality, it is anti-paranoid, as delineated in the first part of this introduction following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003). Queer(ing) seeks to restore the critical creative politics that the paranoid take tends to suppress, taking risks rather than guarding against them (Puar, 2007). It also refuses the anti-relational queer critique that José Esteban Muñoz widely addresses in his *Queering Utopia* (2009) and that he questions for “its participation in what can only be seen as a binary logic of opposition” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 13). Rather, queer(ing) here seeks new forms of relatedness (O’Rourke & Giffney, 2009) and rare connections, oddkins (Haraway, 2016).

Finally, and in order to make a necessary connection with the previous section of this introduction, queer(ing) here is a disorientation allowed by language and by my position of writing in and for European universities. The conceptualization of queer had its correspondent historical dispute in Latin American activism and academia⁶, and was reshaped as cuir. According to Mexican queer author Sayak Valencia (2015), cuir is an improper phonetical deviation into Spanish from the anglosaxon queer. In some Latin American territories, cuir functions as a defamiliarization of queer, that forces to reorient the gaze towards the South and to the epistemological peripheries. Cuir proposes a movement towards a decolonial (critical and playful) place of enunciation (Valencia, 2015). Even though I acknowledge and admire the potentialities of this reworking of the term, its low frequency of use in Argentina makes it still feel rather foreign and distant from the kind of situated embodiment(s) that I reclaim. Queer(ing) is also a result of my situatedness, as I wouldn’t be able to mobilize this concept similarly in Spanish, not even by the use of cuir.

Chapter 1: genealogies of cancel culture

1.1 situated notes on genealogies

I became a feminist listening and learning from a specific situated tradition of older feminist referent(a)s in Argentina, one that builds on over thirty years of unique forms of plurinational

⁶ For comprehensive takes on this matter, see Rivas (2011) and Lanuza and Carrasco (2015)

organization and activism. I was able to name myself a feminist in a public university, thanks to a generous group of teachers and fellow curious students who, with enormous patience and conviction, crafted programs that visibilized feminist and queer theories and epistemologies. I choose the tracing of a possible genealogy or genealogies of cancel culture as the entry point to the subject matter, amongst numerous possibilities of conceptual framing, first and foremost because I believe it is epistemologically and ethically the most feminist approach. Genealogy was less of a choice for past feminist and queer theorists and activists: it was the only one they had to repair centuries of disappearance and erasure of work, discourses, life trajectories of the othered by the androcentric narrative of hegemonic History.

Genealogy is about tracking steps on well traveled but hard to find roads. As Sara Ahmed (2018) points out, her way of contributing to an intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism in academia is not citing any white men in her work, thus affirming citation as feminist memory. She does so by quoting work that “lays out other paths, paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines, (...) paths might have become fainter from not being traveled upon so we might work harder to find them” (Ahmed, 2018, p. 15). That hard work of finding is also the work of genealogy. To trace genealogies is a deeply political matter (Fernández & Araneta, 2013). Yet, to build a genealogy is not to retrace *the* lost history of something, understood as lineal, closed, unique narration, which would mistakenly mirror the approach of universalist History and academia, but to trace a map that connects the past and the present, creating a dialogue (Mayayo, 2013). It is, for the same reason, not necessarily about a strict attachment to chronology, because that creates the risk of projecting a misleading image of continuity where there are frequent discontinuities and ruptures (Mayayo, 2013). Genealogies are also more than mere contextualizations. They are about recollecting what has been dispersed or what was always dispersed, what seems disconnected, to find a possibility of resonance where there appears to be none, or where the links are diffuse. Genealogies, as a possible expression of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) building, rely on the importance of placing bodies, concepts and practices in their own journey of emergence. This is exactly why I resort to genealogy as an entry point to the subject matter of cancel culture. Because it is not the history of a coherent political movement, but a mapping of apparently disconnected, scattered yet similar practices. I will retrace a kinship of doing through a revision of recurrent vocabulary around cancel culture.

Genealogy is not only about making visible what wasn't, as this does not translate to transparency (Scott, 1991). The increasing visibility of cancel culture as a phenomenon does not make it transparent, or does not reveal the threads that made it possible as we encounter it today. Through this genealogy, I will try to find those threads but also explore

how they became entangled, while also staying with the opacity. Furthermore, the trap of universalisation is one easy to fall into in some analytical efforts, particularly when they approach such an extensive, elusive object like cancel culture. The question of where to start from gains notoriety and a genealogy appears as a strong answer, one that will aid me to progressively characterize a seemingly evasive concept by its complex relation to other situated practices, instead of by mere descriptive oppositions or analogies. This is also intimately related with the firm belief that the where of an event is definitely shaping of the what. Therefore, it becomes fundamental to try to somewhat pinpoint cancel culture to a space of occurrence, and to then retrace before its possible characteristics. This will be the objective of this chapter, to find those possible anchors to territories, bodies, values, political trajectories.

Retracing these genealogies will also allow us to see how this phenomenon has always been somewhat embroiled in movements for social justice, and to question what this means specifically to feminisms and LGBTI+ resistance. Furthermore, it supports why it is important to continuously approach this topic with critical thinking, from a feminist and queer perspective, like the one that guides this research.

1.2 a (possible) genealogy of cancel culture: traveling through vocabulary

Having stated that it would be contradictory to my onto-epistemological approach to affirm I can access or reproduce *the* history of cancel culture, my proposed tracing of the genealogy of the concept is clearly partial to the framing I have chosen for this research, which is around content produced in English and Spanish, specifically in the United States and Argentina. An exploration of productions centered on the topic reveals a notable shortage of pieces coming from academic settings, with a slightly increasing number of spread appearances in the year 2020 (Clark, 2020; Velasco, 2020). Meanwhile, journalistic approaches have been much more prolific: in the US alone, hundreds of pieces on cancel culture have been published since 2017, particularly in online news outlets. This notable difference in occurrence could be primarily associated with a proximity of the phenomenon to online media for two reasons. Firstly, a certain vicinity in the space of the digital, which I will discuss further in this chapter. Secondly, the fact that events around cancel culture, as a perceived contemporary ongoing phenomenon, are undeniably relevant to online media in terms of newsworthiness. But, furthermore, online media has functioned not only as a sphere of surrounding conversations or thinking on cancel culture, but also as a site for many stances of cancellation, including one particularly relevant to this research, as was the

piece on Aziz Ansari⁷, creator of the series *Master of None*. Some authors have also considered online media a key actor in the fueling and consolidation of cancel culture as a worldwide phenomenon in a globalized world (Romano, 2020; Nwanevu, 2019). On the other hand, academia, even when apparently spatially close to the phenomenon⁸, has not been as keen or compelled to produce knowledge on this matter, and even less from a critical perspective. There is an abundance of journalistic material on the subject, many times focusing on controversy around specific cases or on the overall pertinence of canceling as a political strategy. For this section I will center on the articles that provide an attempt to reconstruct a path of emergence, to embed cancel culture in a specific tradition or set of practices that could help make sense of the phenomenon as it manifests today. Thus, I will largely resort to the work of US-based journalist Aja Romano, who has been a culture reporter for the site Vox since 2016 and who specializes in internet culture and communities. In 2020 and 2021, they published two extensive and related pieces retracing the arising, consolidation and transformation of cancel culture, which were a central source to this genealogy. I will also frequently turn to another of the few articles on a history of cancel culture, written by Ligaya Mishan, a Filipino-US columnist for the New York Times.

Going over these considerations of cancel culture, a few elements emerge distinctively. The main one might be the overwhelming ambivalence around it: what exactly it consists of, which type of people or actions are susceptible or deserving of a cancellation, and what are its ultimate goals. In other words, the fact that the term has been “shambolically applied to incidents both online and off that range from vigilante justice to hostile debate to stalking, intimidation and harassment” (Mishan, 2020). Some consider that this amorphousness could be dangerous (Mishan, 2020). Then, when trying to define it, narrow it down somehow, the phenomenon gets compared, put in reference to others that are apparently similar, often previous. In these accounts, the semiotic spectrum of cancellation becomes rapidly flooded with notions of calling-out, boycotting, trashing, public/online shaming, wokeness, even blacklisting, trolling, backlash and doxxing. This forms a conceptual enmeshment that brings more opacity to the limits and specificities of cancelling as a concept/practice. As I said, I will try to stay with this opacity, in terms of Glissant (1997), as a case against totality and reduction in reaching a characterization (to avoid the always reductionist notion of definition). In this sense, opacity is understood as “not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity.

⁷ The original piece is, in July 2022, still accessible at <https://babe.net/2018/01/13/aziz-ansari-28355> (Way, 2019).

⁸ In the US context specifically, college campuses have been one of the main scenarios of cancellations, and academics have shown concern around it through online individual pieces (McWhorter, 2020) or collective efforts, like the notorious *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate* (Harper's Magazine, 2020) published on Harper's Magazine in 2020, signed by over 150 academics and intellectuals.

(...) To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components” (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). In this genealogy, I will not try to uncover the nature or irreducible truth of cancel culture, but rather pay attention to the texture of the waves and try to find patterns (see also Barad, 2007). Because, even if cancelling as such might seem a very recent notion, many times associated with millennial culture (ContraPoints, 2020), it can and should be understood in relation to other similar practices that have existed for several decades.

Another factor to consider into the ambiguity of cancelling is the mentioned fact that it can mean something very different for a diversity of subject positions and political territories; that it indeed means something different across time and space. Mieke Bal (2002) widely engaged with these intricacies in terms of *travelling concepts*: those that cannot be contained in univocal terms but are dynamic in themselves, those that do not mean the same thing for everyone. This calls for acknowledging the inescapable limitations but also the potential of interrogating something through its representations. That said, this genealogy is also an attempt to outline how a word travelled into a concept, a practice or set of practices, and a culture, and what all of these *do*. In this sense, I will speak of cancelling as concept/practices in the realm of the discursive/material, following Karen Barad’s (2003, 2007) formulation that I outlined in the introduction. They propose agential realism, as an alternative, relational ontology, whose basic unit is not independent, separated objects but phenomena (inseparable, agentially intra-acting components). In this realm, separation of words and things, or ideas and practices, is not possible. Thus, theories or concepts are never pure ideas existing in the abstraction of representation, but always material and mattering practices themselves (Barad, 2007). Any concept always contains a specific, contingent doing.

The origin of cancel culture as a phenomena, and therefore as a concept/practice, is also uncertain. First of all, a distinction should be made between cancelling as a concept/practice and the posterior appearance of a culture around it. The occurrence, development and consolidation of this transition seems even more vague in the articles here cited, but nonetheless considerably relevant. Some of the journalistic work done around the matter have made efforts to locate the first instances in which the term cancelling was used. In line with the interests of this research, many of these materials track down this emergence to stances of popular culture. Aja Romano (2020) points to the 1991 film *New Jack City*, in which a character phrases the sentence “Cancel that bitch. I’ll buy another one” to reference his girlfriend who is breaking up with him. Later, the rapper 50 Cent reprised Nino’s line in his 2005 hit *Hustler’s Ambition*, and Lil Wayne did the same in 2010 in *I’m Single* (Mishan, 2020). Afterwards, Romano affirms, the term got “its first big boost into the zeitgeist” (2020) after the airing of an episode of VH1’s reality show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York* in

December 2014, in which a cast member tells his love interest “you’re canceled” during a fight. It seems risky to unequivocally connect all these examples considering the time gaps between them, apart from the fact that they all seem to employ the verb cancelling as a form of personal, definitive refusal towards a significant other, a one on one rupture with no collective dimension. Even though these proto usages don’t yet portray the organized “imperative to revoke allegiance” (Mishan, 2020) that would soon after characterize the concept/practice, a certain will of immediate and complete exteriority of the other from one’s life does resemble the outlines of contemporary cancellations, which I will outline throughout this chapter.

It is outstanding that most recounts of cancel culture (Romano, 2020; Mishan, 2020; Clark, 2020; ContraPoints, 2020; Cuello & Disalvo, 2020), categorically situate its origin in what is known as *Black Twitter*. This is a “meta-network of culturally connected communities online” (Clark, 2015), a specific site within the popular social media platform consisting of threads, hashtags, images and public debates launched and sustained by users of the black community (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020). There, users started to employ the verb cancelling as a form of reaction to someone doing something they disapproved of, either jokingly or seriously (Romano, 2020). This was also inserted in a particular Black vernacular tradition, in which cancelling becomes related to the idea of *woke*, a political rhetoric (Romano, 2020) which “invokes a spirit of vigilance to see the world as it really is” (Mishan, 2020) but later came to be associated with progressive, left-wing ideologies. Apart from this agreement on location, the timeline of emergence is disparate. Romano (2020) affirms that cancelling as a tendency began to spread from Black Twitter throughout 2015, while Mishan (2020) points to the attempt to cancel the Comedy Central show *The Colbert Report* in 2014, after an apparently racist joke made online, as “perhaps the earliest instance of cancel culture to include the term” (Mishan, 2020). Yet, Clark (2020) speaks of 2013’s “Black Twitter’s summer of accountability” in which users, through hashtag-driven discussion of prominent racist incidents, as well as cases “in which ordinary people are caught on tape attempting to police and harass Black folk (#BBQBecky, #PoolPatrolPaula), push the ever-present issue of everyday racism to the top of the news media’s agenda” (Clark, 2020, p. 90). It could be stated then that, after an uncertain emergence somewhere in the mid-2010’s, the notion of cancelling became mainstream, in a very globalized manner, alongside high-profile, highly-mediatized movements like the US-originated, online-born, hashtag-bound #MeToo⁹, towards 2017 and 2018 (Romano, 2020). Similarly, 2015’s Ni Una Menos slogan in

⁹ It is noteworthy that, long before hashtags and mainstream attention, the Me Too movement was originally created in 2007 by a black US-based woman, Tarana Burke, as a project to support victims of sexual assault and harassment. This is inscribed in a long trajectory of black women in the United States who organized to confront sexual and racially-motivated violence, that goes back to the 1940s and names like Recy Taylor and Rosa Parks (for more, see McGuire, 2018).

Argentina's women's rights movement, was also online-born around a hashtag. It is in this sense that cancel culture becomes somewhat inseparable from social justice movements, including feminism, racial justice, and LGBTI+ liberation. A first glimpse of an always-already-implicatedness that demands to constantly revision and question cancelling as a practice of our own, from positionalities within these movements.

It is noteworthy that many or most attempts to ground cancel culture in some genealogy of concept/practices have referred at some point of their argument to a battery of diverse past traditions of scapegoating and social punishment. The mentioning of phenomenons like the late twentieth century Chinese *renrou sousuo* or the Ancient Greek rite of *pharmakós* (Mishan, 2020), points to a assumedly blurry but nonetheless relevant history of diverse human practices of public penalties, exposure and, most resonantly, expulsion of an offender from its community. On a different note, comparisons to totalitarian, authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, forms of state-sanctioned (or state-sponsored) persecutions, including the blacklisting of McCarthyism, have also been numerous evoked, and thoroughly recapitulated by Nwanevu (2019) and Mishan (2020). These appear mostly in pieces that try to completely dismiss and condemn cancel culture, many times but not always coming from conservative point of views. In this way, critics attempt to pinpoint cancel culture into "an alarming lineage of severe intolerance, cruel persecution, official condemnation, and vindictive upheavals" (Nwanevu, 2019) and therefore annul any possible further, complicating conversation around it. This becomes, contrary to the purpose of this chapter, an effort to decontextualize. Thus, to challenge these attempted connections is to resituate cancel culture in a genealogy of contested, transforming significations. At the same time, and as I anticipated earlier, there are some overlapping practices that are very frequently mentioned by authors when trying to characterize cancelling, the most resonant being calling-out, boycotting, thrashing and public/online shaming. Cancelling thus appears to be a shapeshifting phenomenon, that sometimes adopts a form, and sometimes an entirely different one. A situated overview of some of these allegedly similar practices will enable an outlining of cancel culture with its own, specific contours, without being an exact analog to any of them, but a unique weave formed by some of its threads.

1.2.1 (not exactly) CALLING OUT

One of the most prominent practices that appears tightly close to cancelling is calling out, both as synonym and immediate precedent: cancel culture frequently is defined as "formerly known as" (ContraPoints, 2020; Mishan, 2020) or even "also known as" call-out culture (Nwanevu, 2019; Ross, 2019). Many of the articles here cited (Romano, 2020), and the

informants of those articles, use both terms interchangeably. Even the Wikipedia entrance of cancel culture is the result of a merge with the one on call out culture that preexisted. In a way, the two refer to the practice of publicly exposing the wrongdoings of a person or institution, with the intent of bringing awareness to these actions. As to differences, or transformation of one into the other, again the record is not unanimous. On one hand, Romano (2020) situates call-out culture within contemporary internet culture:

Call-out culture predates cancel culture as a concept, with online roots in early 2010s Tumblr fandom callout blogs, like *Your Fave is Problematic*, and spreading from there. Call-out culture is a term that arose within fandom, and the approach has been used by fans of all kinds to deploy criticism of pop culture or public figures.

According to this recount, the main difference between cancelling and calling out, is that cancelling is integrated into a Black vernacular tradition and vocabulary that traces back to the boycott as black political strategy of resistance, which I will address next. On the other hand, Clark (2020), reclaims the callout as “originally a practice of Black women ‘signifyin’ that “may involve *reading* another individual—giving them a dressing down that uses colorful and descriptive language and an incisive ability to articulate appraisal of another’s character” (p. 89)¹⁰. The author then traces a direct line of evolution from reading to calling out to cancelling, baring no substantial distinctions between them, thus also situating cancelling into that same Black vernacular tradition, the one of Black Twitter, in which cancel culture was allegedly born. Similarly, Ross (2019) speaks of her experiences with call-outs in the 1970s as a young black feminist activist, in which she would call out white women on their lack of understanding of intersectionality and white supremacy. Calling out belongs as well to a genealogy of activism, a practice of publicly pointing out mistakes, omissions or even forms of aggressions in assemblies, demonstrations and other stances.

One possible relevant distinguishing factor between the two, is that there is a turning side to calling out: calling in, which “means to be gently led to understand your error” (Bromwich & Yar, 2019). Call outs are more into affirming conflict. “Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect”, defines Ross (2019). It is more pedagogical and less into the possible humiliation that is involved in calling out. On the other hand, so far there seems to be no flip to cancelling.

¹⁰ Emphasis is mine.

1.2.2 (not exactly) BOYCOTTING

Another recurrent cited analog/precedent of cancel culture is boycotting. As with calling out, many authors have affirmed a synonymy or direct conceptual and political continuity between cancelling and boycotting (Akers, 2020; Liedke, 2021; Clark, 2020). Once more, here is suggested a straight, specific connection between US-based Black resistance and cancel culture, even stating that the latter “arose within Black culture and appears to channel Black empowerment movements dating as far back as the civil rights boycotts of the 1950s and '60s” (Romano, 2020). Yet, there are some relevant differences and discontinuities to underline between the two. First of all, boycotts, in the historical situatedness of the civil rights movement, were “community led and highly organised affairs in which there was a common, shared objective. That objective was often discussed at length and there was a strategy in place. It was a means to an end, not an end in itself” (Medium, 2020). With cancel culture, the expeditious, fast-paced, online-based dynamics of it, give room to at least question if these efforts could be always framed as “highly organised” and/or “community led” in similar terms. Secondly, the main target of boycotts have historically been business or brands (or similar institutions), while the target of contemporary cancelling is very often individual people. Black scholar Charity Hudley, as cited by Romano (2020), simply “likened the act of canceling someone to a boycott, but of a person rather than a business”, as if this transposition was immediate and obvious. But what emerges from such a statement, and begins to delineate what to me is most relevant about this tension, is that people can be equally consumed, or that one can have the same kind of relationship to a person as to a brand, product or business. Far and disengaged from its original setting of the civil rights movement, the part of cancelling which resembles boycotting, that being the refusal to consume or participate as a tool for action, points now to the features of late capitalism. “Cancel’ is a consumerist verb, almost always involving a commodity or transaction. Readers cancel magazine subscriptions; studio heads cancel TV shows; bank tellers cancel checks to show that they’ve been exhausted of value” (Mishan, 2020). In this sense, the appearance of the vocable “cancel”, in this genealogy of alleged similar or analog practices, becomes descriptive and characterizing of the phenomenon in ways that ground it in its wider yet specific context of emergence: neoliberalism in general -an overall social, political, cultural and economical system in which citizenship and democracy are mainly about being consumerism- and hegemonic corporate social media in particular.

It’s interesting to see how some of the authors who firmly defend cancelling as a tool of political action towards social justice - all of them US based-, refer to this consumer-based aspect as its core strength, the main form of agency of the otherwise disempowered. For

example, Clark (2020) affirms that “canceling’ is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money” (Clark, 2020). Similarly, Hudley affirms that cancelling as boycotting (or viceversa) “promotes the idea that Black people should be empowered to reject pop culture that spreads harmful ideas. ‘If you don’t have the ability to stop something through political means, what you can do is refuse to participate” (Romano, 2020). Though of course the relation between consumerism and political agency is very relevant in current times, and therefore a very valid tool for action, the overemphasis here implied tends to underestimate the potential of the subjects it seeks to empower by affirming it is “the only thing” they could do. It reduces all politics to the market, completely avowing neoliberalism. Here, cancelling adopts the form of refusal, withdrawal. A disinvestment (Bromwich, 2018), to build on the market vocabulary. Sometimes, this means to unfollow on social media, to stop listening to an artist on Spotify, an individual refusal to continue to participate in a specific person's platform of influence. Sometimes, it is expected that a massive removal of support will lead to fully *deplatform* a person, that is, to effectively remove them from a social media space and therefore to shrink their scope of action. In this sense, “cancelling, as a phenomenon, is aligned with the neoliberal mindset in which we live, where we guide our choices by the mentality of consumption and substitution” (Liedke, 2021)¹¹

1.2.3 (not exactly) THRASHING

Though less prevalent in recounts of cancel culture, it becomes relevant to also incorporate the notion of thrashing in this genealogy. Mostly because it illuminates a facet of cancel culture that is seldom considered in most analyses of the phenomenon: the fact that cancellations do not always target people in positions of power, and are enacted by people in positions of disadvantage, but that many times they occur amongst peers and members of the same community.

Youtuber ContraPoints (2020) actually defines cancelling as “online shaming, vilifying and ostracizing a prominent member of a community by other members of that community” (ContraPoints, 2020). Although I will address both the online and the shaming later, I would like to underline the rest of her characterization, which refers to the judgment of character (villyfing), the isolation and the lack of evident or institutionalized power disbalance between the agents (despite this prominence factor). These kinds of practices are part of what has

¹¹ Translation is mine.

also been called trashing, as outlined by Jo Freeman in her 1971 essay, in which she narrates being expelled from a space of feminist activism in the late sixties by fellow militants:

It is not disagreement; it is not conflict; it is not opposition. These are perfectly ordinary phenomena which, when engaged in mutually, honestly, and not excessively, are necessary to keep an organism or organization healthy and active. Trashing is a particularly vicious form of character assassination. (Freeman, 1971)

The lack of a space for conflict and disagreement (and eventual reparation) suggest that what is at stake here is not a difference of opinion, but rather a somewhat irreconcilable divergence in values, which makes the trashed/cancelled person absolutely incompatible with the group of belonging. "In effect, what is attacked is not one's actions, or one's ideas, but one's self" (Freeman, 1971). The line between what a person does and what a person is collapses, and forecloses any scenario of learning and change. ContraPoints, when enumerating the tropes of cancel culture¹², refers to this collapse as essentialism (ContraPoints, 2020).

Indeed, cancel culture has been known to adopt the very same shape of trashing. The most outstanding example of this has been the cancellations between highschool classmates, which spread in the midst of the upheaval of cancel culture, and were recounted and problematized by Bromwich and Yar (2019) in the US context and Faur (2019) and Brawer and Lerner (2018) in Argentina. Here, teenagers cancel each other after one did or said something deemed offensive or abusive by their peers. They get cut off from their groups of friends, ignored by their communities and blocked in social media (Bromwich & Yar, 2019). Even though the ostracizing happens both on and offline, one of the teenagers that testimonies in an article affirms that social media existence has brought past mistakes "into a place where people can take something you did back then and make it who you are now" (Bromwich & Yar, 2019).

There is a second feature of trashing that is also very present in cancel culture, and is what ContraPoints (2020) refers to as trope number six, the transitive character of cancellation. This is basically a guilt by association situation, in which if a person defends a cancelled person or refuses to participate in the cancellation, they become cancelled too. "You are isolated from your friends as they become convinced that their association with you is similarly inimical to the Movement and to themselves. Any support of you will taint them"

¹² In her comprehensive 2020 video on the matter, youtuber ContraPoints (whose name is Natalie Wynn), characterizes cancel culture by locating its seven tropes: presumption of guilt, abstraction, essentialism, pseudo moralism/pseudo intellectualism, no forgiveness, transitive property and dualism/binarism.

(Freeman, 1971). The same dynamics are recalled by some of the teenagers that narrate being cancelled (Bromwich & Yar, 2019).

The horizontalization of the phenomenon, that some regard as a shift in scale propiciated by the internet (Herzog, 2019), is key to outline the possible power dynamics and structures shaping cancel culture: “This isn’t just happening to public figures; it’s happening everywhere that social media exists, and you no longer have to be powerful, or even notable, to get canceled” (Herzog, 2019).

1.2.4 (not exactly) PUBLIC SHAMING

Though in the next section I will further complicate the notion of the public contained in cancel culture, the idea of public shaming has mostly come to mean, in the midst of cancel culture, of online occurrence. Some have used shaming as analogous to cancelling (Mishan, 2020) or calling-out (Ross, 2019), thus building on the conceptual enmeshment. Yet, Mishan (2020) embeds cancel culture in a long historical tradition of forms of public shaming and public punishment, that also interacts intimately with the notions of guilt and spectacularity. For example, some ancient rituals of public punishment, like the Greek *pharmakós* which included for the offender to be “beaten and promenaded in the streets before being exiled” (Mishan, 2020) constituted simultaneous “diversion and atonement”, a way for a group to label a member of the community as evil and cast that evil out. That is also related to the practice of scapegoating: the public sanctioning of one (or various people), “whether guilty or not of a particular offense” (Mishan, 2020), to wash away a collective sense of guilt as complicit to a societal system (Mishan, 2020).

As Ronson (2015) recapitulates, penalties as spectacle -those carefully questioned by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1977)-, as forms of government-mandated punishment were abandoned with Enlightenment and the rise of democracy (Ronson, 2015). There was apparently no longer a need for exemplary condemnation, as citizens were expected to be attuned to the collective moral compass. In relation to these, the necessary publicity of cancelling as a form of expulsion through shaming, “is something of a historical regression” (Ronson, 2015), an attempt to restore some form of consensus in communally agreed-upon moral standards of behavior. “The act of shaming draws a neat line between good and bad, us and them” (Mishan, 2020), which resonates with a certain ethos of cancel culture of proving that you are on the right side of things by participating in the cancellation of the wrongdoer.

It is then also interesting to think of the (public) shaming aspect of cancel culture in relation to the notion of guilt not only as a personal feeling of failure to comply with moral

standards of conduct, but also as a verdict ensued by state-sanctioned processes of justice. According to Mishan, in contemporary cancel culture, a double failure is in place: “you can’t trust others to follow their conscience or even have one, and you’ve lost faith in the ability or desire of institutions to uphold what is good” (Mishan, 2020). Then, cancelling becomes the only right one left to do as a citizen to pursue justice. “Guilt guides conduct even in the absence of social sanctions, when nobody knows you’ve done anything wrong; shame ‘requires an audience’, a social network, to force you to change” (Mishan, 2020). From a feminist perspective, Sara Ahmed (2004) conceptualized shame as an affect that appears before others: “To be witnessed in one’s failure is to be ashamed” (Ahmed, 2004). Shame becomes a fault of the self, while guilt comes from a failure in one’s actions¹³. In this sense, shaming becomes intertwined with the modus operandi of trashing, which judges character and not specific actions.

1.3 on grounding the ubiquitous: the where and whose of cancel culture

Two inescapable questions emerge when trying to ground the seemingly ubiquitous notion of cancel culture into a genealogy: *where* does this phenomenon take place and *whose* culture is it, if we regard it as such? I believe that an attempt to answer (provisionally) the second one with some of the characteristics that arose from the journey across the kin vocabulary of cancellation, could guide us to shed some light upon the first one. First of all, while examining numerous pieces around cancel culture, a certain consensus seems to emanate around where this practice mostly occurs, or which is its prime domain of appearance: the internet. More specifically, what gets vastly referred to as social media -but refers to a specific group of corporate digital spaces such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and others- and online media. Second, it could be argued that cancelling has been regarded as a culture in the sense that it evokes or necessitates a set of rules and values shared by a community: in this case, the vast, seemingly inapprehensible internet community. The fact that it apparently started within Black culture in Twitter, as a sort of inside joke that rested upon a tradition of vernacular language, could support this statement. Cancelling has been further defined as necessarily the result of the “collective reasoning of culturally aligned online crowds” (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, as cited in Clark, 2020). This affirmation could be based on the fact that, in cancellations, there have to be commonly agreed standards of what is right and wrong, to therefore judge someone’s actions or character as incompatible

¹³ This is inserted in a larger theoretical discussion about morality that has concerned philosophers for centuries and that surpasses the scope of this research. For an extended overview of the subject matter of shame, guilt and punishment, addressing the Kantian perspective, see Sussman (2008).

or oppositional to those standards, that are no less than a moral ground. It could be tempting to affirm that the cultural part of the cancelling practices is then some form of internet culture. But there is no homogenous internet morality, proven by the fact that people get cancelled online across ideologies, identities and subject positions. So, what is cultural about this phenomenon or how can it become cultural? What fundamental value is commonly shared that could encompass and be contained in such a wide, fluctuating phenomenon? Again, I cannot here engage fully with a concept so widely and historically contested like culture. For analytical purposes, I am here understanding culture in very schematic terms, as a set of patterns of behaviors, ideas, and values acquired, transmitted and shared by a group of people in a particular time and place.

A key point around this is outlined by Argentinean queer activists and theorists Nicolás Cuello and Lucas Disalvo (2020): the fact that most modern nation-states have, since the seventies, actualized its processes of disciplination and social classification of problematic subjects. This created new “modalities of disperse control, facilitated by the access to technology” (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020)¹⁴, considering technology in a foucauldian sense that includes those of knowledge-power. Through these silent operations, punitivism is no longer just a formal, institutional, state-sanctioned regime of discipline and punishment (by the works of law and criminal justice), but a *cultural system* that critical criminology has named *punitive thinking*¹⁵: “a kind of desire for surveillance, control and sanction over difference, that expresses and internalizes in subjects, foreclosing the ability to imagine any other form or conflict resolution” (Cuello & Disalvo 2020) and that allows us “to be seen as morally correct and to build a sense of belonging from that” (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020).

Cuello, for example, affirms that cancel culture got “popular” during the first months of lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, when virtuality became “the only remaining public space” (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020). While he does not provide any examples to sustain why he perceives that “the problematic uses of cancel culture have intensified exponentially” (2020) during this time, what interests me here is the undoubted portrayal of virtuality as public space. A brief exploration of this could allow us to scrutinize who can access the *where* of cancel culture, who can participate in it, and therefore the power relations and structures that sustain it. The notions of the public, and its intimate relation to democracy and citizenship, have been a consistent concern in Western philosophical thinking, that could be dated as far back as Ancient Greek. In addition, Communication and Media studies have also been sustainedly analyzing how the emergence of new forms of media has influenced or reshaped the idea of the public sphere. Although it very much surpasses the purpose of this research

¹⁴ All translations of this source are mine.

¹⁵ Razón punitiva in the original in Spanish, as further theorized by Cuello & Disalvo (2018). This concept will be addressed centrally in chapter 2.

to reconstruct such a conceptual journey, I would like to bring forward a few considerations around this, that could help further characterize cancel culture.

Black US-based scholar Meredith Clark (2020), for instance, resorts to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (1962) and the feminist turn on it made by Nancy Fraser (1990) to critically engage with the denomination of cancel *culture* as such. To the author, what is considered public discourse -meaning produced in the public sphere- is actually the realm of the elites, and that this “bourgeois public was never *the* public” (Fraser, 1990, p. 61)¹⁶. Then, the “networked framing” in which marginalized groups engage through “broadcast-style social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube” to collectively discuss and morally evaluate the experiences of an offending party (Clark, 2020), that is, cancelling, does not belong to this sphere. Rather, it belongs to a genealogy of Black discursive accountability praxis like calling out or reading, built within Black counterpublics. The framing of “these unruly discourses as ‘cancel culture’” (Clark, 2020, p. 89) was then an undue appropriation and misconstruction of the privileged that created the illusion of a Habermasian public sphere for open conversation, “where a multiplicity of discursive publics are equally empowered to engage in debate and the free expression of ideas” (Clark, 2020, p. 89), thus erasing or hiding the power structures at place. She instead argues that this is “an age in which there is no longer a dominant public sphere, but a fractal sequence of counterspheres and oppositional publics” (Clark, 2020, p. 89), or what Fraser referred to as “a host of competing counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). While this is indeed a very pertinent point, Clark overemphasizes “the impact social media connectivity has for shifting the power dynamics of the public sphere in the digital age” (Clark, 2020, p. 91). She does so solely by situating these overtly emancipatory cancelling practices outside of *the* public sphere and of the cancel *culture*, regarding them as “coalitions of the Othered equipped to execute a responsive strategy for immediately identifying harms and demanding consequences” (Clark, 2020, p. 91). Yet, she fails to address a key factor that challenges the aptness of characterizing such social media communities as a clear example of what Fraser considered *subaltern counterpublics*: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). She fails to ask the questions: “Who owns Internet platforms? Who owns social media?” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 58), that is, to actually question the material, economical grounds of cancel culture’s arena: some of the biggest profit-making corporations of today. Mishan (2020), instead, engages fully with these aspect, providing a crucial perspective into these considerations:

¹⁶ Emphasis in the original.

Twitter, cancel culture's main arena, is not the digital equivalent of the public square, however touted as such. We think of it as an open space because we pay no admission, forgetting that it's a commercial enterprise, committed to herding us in. We are customers but also uncredited workers, doing the free labor of making the platform more valuable.

British Media and Communications scholar Christian Fuchs (2014), from a perspective of critical political economy, largely engages with the question of social media as public sphere, enumerating the antagonisms at place when trying to create networks of activism and social justice while under corporate ownership and state control "that limits, feudalises and colonizes these public spheres" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 89). This factor makes it even harder to think of social media as ultimate subaltern counterpublics.

While I will neither engage in a longstanding theoretical-political discussion on the limits of social media as a tool for social justice -which in a way speaks to Fraser's concern about the limits of democracy in late capitalism (1990)- the purpose of this brief journey was to pinpoint more anchors around cancel culture. Re-situating the phenomenon in the intricate, contradictory dynamics of social media and its corporate grounds, allows us to give shape to the unique form of the public that is at the same time crucial to its modus operandi, as I began to outline when going over the public/online shaming aspect of these practices.

It would be important to then consider the public space of cancel culture, in the scope of this research, neither a wholly emancipatory global counterpublic of and for the disempowered or a mere reproduction of neoliberal market-oriented logics, but a contested, changing political arena where specific power relations and therefore economic interests are not only present but structural.

1.4 notes from the South: the escrache as a specific Argentinean background

In addition to these possible retracings of the concept of cancelling, all situated in the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of the Global North, I am epistemologically compelled to also bring forward the Argentinean notion of *escrache*, for its significances and history undeniably shape the way I relate to this topic and therefore how I walk into this research. This is a final attempt to ground the phenomenon of cancel culture before going into an analytical phase. I will do so to underline how these apparently volatile, world-encompassing phenomena, adopt particular and situated patterns in different territories and cultural landscapes, that will be fundamental to take into account when trying to critically think about

them.

Even though the vocabulary of cancellation seems to be largely prevalent in different latitudes (as I developed throughout this chapter), in Argentina it becomes enmeshed and many times synonymized with yet another concept/practice: *escrachar* (verb), the action that results in *escrache* (noun). This word comes from *lunfardo*, a form of speech and dialect that emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, amongst the working class of the city of Buenos Aires. The etymology of the vocable is contested. However, for this contextualization I choose the one retraced by Argentinean human rights researchers Antares Dadiuk & Carolina Julia Torres (2019), as their theoretical concern anchors the *escrache* in the sense of political tool of direct action, which becomes relevant to the field of cancel culture. According to their recount, the word *escrachar* is thought to come originally from the genovese (Italian dialect) *scraccá*, which simultaneously means to expectorate and to attack someone. Its first connotations in *lunfardo*, disseminated through tango, referred to the latter, a notion of a confrontation, mostly physical but also verbal (Dadiuk & Torres, 2019).

The *escrache* as a form of social protest (Dadiuk & Torres, 2019) appeared in the nineties in Argentina, at the heart of human rights organizations¹⁷:

The *escraches* became social protests created as a response to State's impunity towards crimes committed during the last civilian-military dictatorship in Argentina. The protests were held outside the places of residence or work of genocides. With these acts, a form of 'social conviction' was expected, given that there was no legal conviction from the State. It was an attempt to visibilize victimizers. (p. 514)¹⁸

Enacted first and foremost by H.I.J.O.S.¹⁹, one of the biggest and most important associations of its kind to this day, *escraches* sought to counteract the effect of a set of laws passed between 1986 and 1990 in Argentina, known as Laws of Forgiveness but renamed by activists as Laws of Impunity. These governmental decisions²⁰ wanted to limit or impede

¹⁷ In Argentina, Human Rights organizations are understood primarily as the ones who fight for Memoria, Verdad y Justicia (Memory, Truth and Justice) towards the crimes committed in the latest civilian-military dictatorship in Argentina, which lasted from 1976 to 1983. Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo are the most well-known of them.

¹⁸ All translations of this source are mine.

¹⁹ Acronym for Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, against Forgetting and Silence). Founded in november of 1995, with chapters all around the country, it's constituted by family and friends of victims of forced disappearance (an estimated 30000 people) during the dictatorship.

²⁰ Ley de Punto Final (Law of Full Stop), passed in 1986 during the democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín, granted that people involved in the dictatorship crimes could not be prosecuted if not taken to court in the sixty days after the passing of the bill, creating a short-notice statute of limitations for these complex forms of criminality. Ley de Obediencia Debida (Law of Due Obedience), passed in 1987 by the same government, sought to forgive members of the military forces for the crimes they had allegedly committed as part of their duty to obey commands from higher ranks. These were

the possibilities of criminally prosecuting those directly or indirectly involved in the kidnapping, illegal captivity, torture, murder, forced exile, disappearance and appropriation of newborns of thousand of Argentineans. Escrachas were then created not only in the face of the total impossibility of formal justice towards a specific set of serious crimes in Argentina, but also in a context of disengagement and retreat of social movements in the country and the region (Dadiuk & Torres, 2019). They emerged within a changing political landscape, in which new political actors and new forms of protest were recalibrating the forms of participation and resistance.

H.I.J.O.S. has been cited to describe the practice of *escrache* as “to put in evidence, to reveal in public, to show the face of a person who pretends to go unnoticed” (BBC News, 2013)²¹. In the face of impunity, they refused to let the genocides live not only uncondemned but also enjoying the freedom of anonymity. According to Argentinean sociologist Nazareno Bravo (2012), the demonstrations included constant chantings and sometimes performances (musical or theatrical), to firmly oppose and contrast the state-allowed silencing of the horrors committed by these genocides. In this sense, the *escrachas* were an affirmation of political participation through innovative forms of direct action (Bravo, 2012). They also crafted a particular grammar of justice, in which they enacted an alternative notion of justice (social conviction) that at the same time sought to attract formal state-sanctioned justice (Bravo, 2012). In this way, the dialogue with the State was ever-present, as *escrachas* visibilized the crimes of the genocides while they pointed to the impunity and complicity of the state apparatus. Thus, they refuse any association with vigilante methods or the idea of “taking justice into one’s hands”.

Even though the Laws of Impunity were overturned in 2003, which led to the prosecution and conviction of many genocides, *escrachas* were and still are a common form of protest in the context of the pursue of *Memoria, Verdad y Justicia*. For instance, to protest the granting of privileges like home arrest or outside visitations to convicted genocides (Pagina12, 2017; PolíticaArgentina, 2016). At the same time, and as with cancel culture, this practice was eventually appropriated by multiple political actors, outside and beyond its original purpose. Yet, the most notable turn in the conception of *escrache* happened around 2017 and 2018 from within the feminist movements, with a shift towards the online (with few occurrences closer to the traditional dynamics of the practice) as main site of appearance. It is important to contextualize that this happened in the midst of the exponential growth of the visibility of feminism across Argentinean society. In this sense, 2015 is widely considered an inflection point, for it was the year of the first *Ni Una Menos* marches and demonstrations: in

reinforced by direct indults conceded to genocides by the neoliberal government of Carlos Menem between 1989 and 1990, through presidential decrees that liberated over one thousand possible accused people from any instance of trial.

²¹ The translation is mine.

June 3rd, thousands of women congregated on the streets around the country to protest yet another femicide²², this time of Chiara Páez (Menéndez, 2021). This became the foundational stone for what became a new, massive, phenomenon in the Argentinean political landscape (Menéndez, 2021), that would only expand transversally the social thread.

In this context, a wave of online public denouncements was unleashed. This included organized, collective narratives of violence or abuse from men in positions of power, supported by simultaneous or immediate judicial actions against the alleged aggressors. But also a massive amount of *escraches* against all sorts of male wrongdoers (classmates, family members, co-workers) spread like rapidfire through corporate social media like Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Some of these ended up with the women involved being judicially accused of defamation and enduring trials from their alleged aggressors. These practices were largely addressed, interchangeably, as both cancellations and/or *escraches*, building a synomity between them despite outstanding differences. I would argue that these specific forms of so-called *escraches* have more in common with cancel culture, and the kin practices around it, than with the historically situated tool of direct action I have described in this section. For once, the targets were no longer genocides or even people from the political arena or in specific positions of power within institutions. Most notably, they mostly occurred online and not as part of a collective, public, organized action, but a personal decision, supported by a political climate. They seem to share one key, common feature with traditional *escraches*: the objective of bringing social condemnation in the absence or impossibility of criminal prosecutions. Yet, in many ways, these cancellations regarded as *escraches*, did not point to the absence of justice but rather completely disregarded any involvement of the State or criminal justice, because of considering them inherently patriarchal institutions. So here, unlike original *escraches*, the idea of an autonomous, socially-sanctioned form of justice (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020) becomes resonant.

Differently from what happened and is happening around cancel culture globally, the proliferation of *escraches*/cancellations in Argentina unleashed a much rapid, comprehensive (self)critical review of the practice, from academic, journalistic and activist spaces. At the very peak of the wave and the brightest burning of the feminist fire, efforts appeared and multiplied to pause and reflect on current practices and approaches, adopting a position of self-revision. Already in 2019, many feminist journalists, scholars and activists, published online pieces that seeked to critically reflect on these practices, such as Arduino (2018), Faur (2019), or Cholakian Herrera (2019). From then on, multiple journalistic pieces with questioning stances on *escraches* (and cancel culture) have been consistently

²² According to Observatorio Lucía Pérez, as to June 2022, there was one femicide every 35 hours in Argentina.

appearing on mainstream media outlets, such as Huarte (2020), Schejtman (2020) or Cuello and Disalvo (2020), along with academic articles, like Menéndez (2021), most of which inform this research. Many of these revolve around what became one of the most pressing and prompt complications of the boom of *escraches* in 2018: a proliferation of accusations amongst teenagers, who used social media accounts to platform *escraches* against their own peers. Other authors (Pecheny, Zaidan & Lucaccini, 2019; Pérez & Radi, 2020; Nogueira Martins, 2021) point to a wider concern, which aligns with the pursue of this thesis, around the inherently punitive ethos of these practices. Specifically, how grassroots, LGBTI+ and feminist movements have constructed some of their demands and discourses around claims for punishment. This will be further explored in chapter 2.

1.5 characterizing through and with the opacities

Throughout this genealogy, I have brought forward some definitions of cancel culture while trying to make sense of its relation to other practices. Yet, as I stated at the beginning of the chapter, the objective of this journey was not to arrive at a closed definition, but to grasp some recurring features along the way that could help me outline a characterization. Cancel culture is built upon: the refusal to consume, participate or engage, in the context of neoliberalism (boycotting); the practice of publicly exposing (public shaming) the wrongdoings of a person or institution, with the intent of bringing awareness to these actions (calling out), that may result in its expulsion from a specific space of community; the possibility of occurrence amongst peers and members of the same community (trashing); and a disregard for formal justice mechanisms (*escrache*). Rejection, exposition, and expulsion emerge as distinctive patterns in the realm of cancellations. These notions give us a clue for an analytical path to follow into chapter 2.

As part of the project of staying with the opacity, I also fully reject the merely oppositional approach that is present or structural to many of the articles I have cited along the way, which enter the topic asking if cancel culture is either “the custom a radical form of citizen justice or merely a handmaiden to capitalism” (Mishan, 2020), either “mob mentality, or a long overdue way of speaking truth to power” (Romano, 2020).

There is a crucial element that I have intentionally left out or not entirely engaged with up to now, and that might be “the core concern of cancel culture — accountability” (Romano, 2021). This is frequently brought up in the definitions provided by the authors here cited, that even go as simply as depicting cancelling as “digital discursive accountability praxis” (Clark, 2020, p. 88). Whether the cancelling is aimed at people of positions of power or peers, whether it is highly publicized and mediatized or it happens at a small community

level, whether it is condemning a serious crime or a problematic behavior, whether it pursues a parallel criminal conviction or an apology, whether it results on an institutional change or a personal shaming and ostracizing, what lies at the bottom of all of these notions is accountability. But what exactly does that mean?

By now, we could partially affirm that cancel culture can be characterized as a set of discursive/material practices that, resting upon a particular set of shared values, seek to hold someone or something accountable for a form of perceived wrongdoing. Cancel culture is also an ongoing contemporary phenomenon embedded in specific political trajectories and traditions of punishment and accountability.

The necessary following questions lead us right into chapter 2, in which, through the analyses of the case studies, I will try to explore what notions of accountability are implied in the cancellations efforts, how do these relate to the pursuit of justice and social justice, and mostly, why is there such a blatant need for holding each other accountable.

Chapter 2. accountability and justice with/in cancel culture: outlining punitive thinking

The previous chapter attended to a possible characterization of cancel culture, of cancelling as praxis, by the means of a journey through recurrent vocabulary around it. Along this journey, I explored what parts and tonalities of calling out, boycotting, thrashing, public shaming, and escraches function as background and features of contemporary cancellations. This allowed me to outline a landscape of cancel culture as an ongoing phenomenon embedded in specific, situated political trajectories and traditions of punishment and accountability. On a similar note, I also suggested that this is precisely what might be cultural about it: its enmeshment with/in punitive thinking, an all-encompassing value system that sees punishment and the criminal justice system as the “the default avenue for addressing social problems” (Aviram, 2020). Here, and once again while attempting to stay with the opacity and ambiguity around the matter, I will further examine the notions of accountability and justice implied in particular cancellation efforts, how these are localized with/in punitive thinking, and briefly delve into how this framing contours the

relationship between intended processes of social justice (specifically from LGBTI+ and feminist positions) and the criminal justice system. I will do so by creating a theoretical dialogue between abolitionist and abolition-informed theorists from the United States and Southern feminist criminologists and queer thinkers from Argentina, thus picking up a connection already drafted in chapter 1 when bringing the practice of *escrache* into the vocabulary of cancel culture.

In this chapter, I will explore these enquiries by working closely with the case studies of the indie feature-film *Adam* (2018), and the third season of mainstream Netflix series *Master of None* (2021). The first one will allow us to analyze the particularities of a cancellation that focuses on a specific content and not a person or group of persons. The second one will let us examine what can occur when a fiction outlives the cancellation of one of its creators. Both of these will help us further outline the phenomenon of cancel culture, by also dealing specifically with the questions of who are the agents of cancellations and what a cancellation might imply in different contexts.

Going into this effort, a first few, immediate questions arise: who is accountable for a work of fiction? How do you ask accountability to a movie or a tv show? What happens when a narrative piece is involved in the process of cancelling a person, as a sort of collateral implication?

2.1 the case studies: calling for in-visibility

2.1.1 *Adam*

Adam is a comedy feature film around queer topics and a coming-of-age narrative, directed by Rhys Ernst. In an interesting attempt to “reverse the trans deception trope” (Erbland, 2019), *Adam*’s main plot affirms: “Shy and nerdy teenager Adam spends his last high school summer in NYC with his older sister, who is part of the local lesbian and trans activist scene. Adam meets and develops a crush on a lesbian girl, Gillian, at an LGBTQ+ party. Gillian assumes that he is a trans man, and Adam confirms the lie, running with the deception in order to win her affection” (IMDB).

The case of *Adam* encompasses some particularities, as it can be considered a rather small, indie (independent) film, judging by its budget and its reach, that nonetheless prompted a rather large and organized cancellation effort. The movie was premiered in the prestigious Sundance Film Festival on January 25th, 2019, screened in other high-profile events like the LGBTQIA+ film festival Outfest, and later narrowly distributed in US theaters during the summer of 2019. It is currently available via pay-per-view on platforms like

Amazon, Hulu and Apple TV, with geolocal restrictions to specific countries, which make it hard to access for wide audiences. Yet, *Adam* was being cancelled on mainstream corporate social media (Twitter, Tumblr and Youtube) way before it was even available for larger audiences, since it is based on a 2014 novel by cis-lesbian author Ariel Schrag, who also scripted the film. Given the main plot and other specific events that take place in the novel, some people were strongly against the making and release of the movie, which led them to organize actions in this direction. There was an ongoing hashtag on Twitter calling to #BoycottAdam and multiple Change.org campaigns to prevent the movie from its theatrical release in August 2019. It is noteworthy how, in this particular scenario, the cancellation clearly takes the shape (and name) of boycotting, of a refusal with the intention of limiting access, or shrinking the scope of circulation. Another collective action was to massively trash the movie by the means of online ratings. *Adam* still, as of July 2022, holds blatantly poor scores in most popular, US-based movie-rating sites. However, there's a considerable difference in the score given by the critics and by the audiences, when discernable: 3.8/10 in iMDB (only users), 2.1/5 in Letterboxd (only users), 17/100% by users and 74/100% by critics in Rotten Tomatoes, and 1.3/100 by users versus 64/100 in Metacritic. Similarly, some media reviews, including those by specialized LGBTI+ outlets and by LGBTI+ identified critics, were mostly favorable and, at the same time, critical of the cancellations around it (Gregory, 2019; Keating, 2019). Some others were in line with the cancellators' point of view (Riedel, 2019; Complex, 2019). By pointing this out I do not mean to legitimize critics' voices in disregard of audiences, but to point out who the agents of cancellation appear to be in this case: internet users, mostly LGBTI+ identified (either because they explicitly state it on the reviews, or because it can be assumed by the way they position themselves towards the matter, using phrases like "our representation", "our lives" when talking about LGBTI+ issues). The fact that *Adam* is trans director Rhys Ernt's first feature film, or that the majority of the cast and crew (and characters) are trans and LGBTI+ people, does not seem to be a considerable positive factor to the cancelators. Therefore, an automatic alliance is not at play here, nor a call for a nuanced position, based on identity politics.

The motivation of the cancellation, in this case, is that in the opinion of the cancellators, *Adam* entails problematic (iMDB, Letterboxd) content, specifically for the representation of the LGBTI+ community. Some of the narrative events that they find to be problematic, amongst others, are: the fact that it's a supposedly LGBTI+ film (made by a trans director) that centers on a cis-straight-white boy (Letterboxd, iMDB); that it is a "story of a cis male appropriating a trans male identity", according to user Sally Jean Black, a featured "popular review" on Letterboxd; that it portrays a relationship between Gillian, an older girl (in her college years) and an underage boy, *Adam* (in his last high-school summer); that it suggests that trans men are not real men because only when Gillian finds out *Adam* is

a cis person she questions her lesbianism and wonders about a bisexual position instead; even that it depicts sexual abuse, since Gillian was not aware of *Adam*'s actual identity and therefore she could not fully consent to having sex with him.

What to me seems most notable here is that there seems to be an implicit consensus of what problematic content is, even though many users point out very different aspects of the movie. But even more so is the fact that the idea of problematic becomes synonymous with something harmful or potentially harmful, and therefore irrevocably bad. It seems to operate in a reversible way too: because something is found to be "bad representation", it becomes potentially harmful, and therefore problematic. I will come back to this in chapter 3, where the notion of the problem/atic takes a central role. Nonetheless, it is worthy to here bring queer author and historian Sarah Schulman's take on conflict and its relation with the phenomenon of overstating harm. In her book *Conflict is not abuse. Overstating harm, community responsibility and the duty of repair* (2017), Schulman critically and comprehensively engages with what she perceives as an overwhelming tendency, from the interpersonal to the international scope, to respond to early stages of conflict and disagreements with escalation. This builds a pattern that, instead of reaching for resolution, tends to overstate harm and find abuse where there was conflict and disagreement.

I won't analyze the arguments for or against the movie, as it is not the purpose of this research, and maybe even contrary to the purpose of this research, to assess any positions of right or wrong. Rather, I will try to further characterize the idea of accountability encompassed in the cancellation by enquiring about how it is enforced. What can be made of this act of cancellation? What does it intend to be? Is it a form of critique? Is it an attempt to bring some form of justice against the reproduction of alleged harmful narratives about LGBTI+ people? Is it a means to an end - an activist action demanding better LGBTI+ content - or an end in itself? One could argue that it's all and none at the same time; yet, in any case, it seems to imply a fierce effort to prevent or reduce access to a particular content that is considered problematic to and for a specific group of people. In the case of *Adam*, what we can affirm is that the cancelling clearly intends for the object or subject of cancellation (a film) to cease its circulation, to limit its existence. To make it in-visible, which in the case of a movie around LGBTI+ topics seems particularly negating, considering both the centrality of visibility in the cinematic arts and the long-lasting relation between queer activism and the notion of visibility. "This movie should have never existed", states a review (IMDB). Accountability here takes a very clear form: a derision, a call for disappearance (brown, 2020).

2.1.2 *Master of None, Season 3*

The second case study chosen for this research, season 3 of mainstream Netflix production *Master of None* (2021), also presents some particularities. Most notably, because the show itself was not cancelled, but its star and creator, comedian Aziz Ansari. In January of 2018, a peak moment for public denouncements against men in power and the #MeToo movement, a woman accused him of sexual misbehavior during a date, through an article on the site *babe.net* (Way, 2018). Ansari issued a statement briefly after the publication of the piece, alleging that he had misread the situation and apologizing for the wrongdoings against her. Nonetheless, the allegations against him were automatically portrayed by the media as an act of cancellation (Framke, 2018). In this case, there was no organized, lasting boycotting action or an explicit, delineated demand for accountability, such as: he should be criminally prosecuted, he should no longer be allowed to perform publicly or create any content. Yet, there was no doubt that he was now a cancelled individual, and what the consequences of that were or should be. It somehow had become implicit that cancelled subjects should retreat from their positions of power and from the public scene all together, calling back the notion of deplatforming. The subject should not be seen anymore. In this sense, it resonates with the cancellation of *Adam*, which had a similar, but entirely more precise, contoured goal, or notion of accountability for a considered problematic content: it should be made in-visible.

This takes place as if the mere exposure of the wrongdoing brought immediate, automatic, socially agreed upon, life-altering consequences on the alleged perpetrator, without any further required actions from the cancellation agents. This is in line with a frequent characterization of cancellations as an irreversible sentence, as if they were indeed criminal sentences. The similarities to the scope of criminal justice multiply. Positions that seek to characterize cancellations as illegitimate forms of mob or vigilante justice, usually through conservative media, have referred to these cancellations as career ending or life ruining (Romano, 2020). Yet, as was pointed out by many of the journalistic stances on the subject, this is rarely the case (Romano, 2020, 2021; Herzog, 2019): many famously cancelled subjects, such as J.K. Rowling (author of the Harry Potter saga), did not effectively or completely lost “their status and their livelihoods” (Romano, 2020) and, in some cases, the controversy around them has even increased their visibility and success (as was also the case of Rowling and her latest, post-cancellation book, becoming a best-seller). In most cases, there is a temporary retreat followed by a return to their main public activity, as it was the case with comedian Louis C.K, a very recurrent reference in journalistic recounts of the Ansari case and its aftermath (Framke, 2018; Orbey, 2019; Silman, 2018). As soon as October of the same year of the publication of Babe’s article, Ansari was back on New York City comedy venues trying new materials. Almost a year later after the accusations, in the beginning of 2019 he made an official return to the stages with a US national tour named *The Road to Nowhere*, soon followed by a Netflix special called *Right Now*. In both, he

addressed “the question of cultural forgiveness” (Silman, 2019) and the idea that we are all flawed people who make mistakes, and even went over some highly resonating cases of sexual abuse allegations like the ones of rapper R. Kelly or Michael Jackson.

Cancelling here collapses distinctions between means and end, becoming both at the same time. And it invites a very pertinent, open-ended question: is accountability the objective of a cancellation, or cancellation is a form of accountability in itself? If in many cases there are no further material consequences for cancelled public figures, therefore one could say that the act of being accountable is the process of cancellation itself: that moment of public accusation, the proliferation of articles scrutinizing their conduct and character, being publicly tagged as cancelled, having to publicly address the wrongdoing.

This case also serves well to reflect upon the key role that online media outlets, as suggested at the beginning of chapter one, have played in the consolidation of cancel culture and its enmeshment with the #MeToo movement in the United States. In October 2017, the prestigious New York Times published a comprehensive investigation that reported the decades of alleged abuse by producer Harvey Weinstein. This became the stepping stone for the rise of the Time’s Up movement/organization in Hollywood, in which high profile female figures stood up for the rights of women in the world’s most prominent film and entertainment industry. The Golden Globes Awards ceremony of January 2018 was one of the crucial scenarios for this activist stance, in which many female celebrities wore black and/or Time’s up pins as a coordinated protest. That night, Aziz Ansari won the category Best Actor – Television Series Musical or Comedy, and wore one of the named pins, stating his allegiance and solidarity to the movement. Just a week after, babe.net made public the article in which journalist Katie Way reported on the accusations against Ansari, through the testimony of a woman whose identity was protected by using the name Grace. As the piece went viral, it also unleashed a number of subsequent articles that debated the case as “a crucial divide in the #MeToo reckoning” (Framke, 2018), for some understood that the allegations portrayed a “bad date” rather than events of sexual misconduct, while others found ordinary yet scarily familiar sexist behaviour (North, 2018). Many, while pointing out to the ongoing social need of telling stories like Grace’s, criticized the reporting on it (Framke, 2018; Filipovic, 2018; Escobedo Sheperd, 2018), by affirming that the news site approached the subject and encouraged her to go public (and not the other way around). They also pointed out that babe.net did not build a pattern of misbehavior around Ansari by finding other possible examples of his conduct. Therefore, they left Grace “open to further attacks” (Escobedo Sheperd, 2018) and to the endless scrutinizing over her actions during the date with the comedian, which indeed occurred around US media. Here, the critics suggested that the exposé lacked any journalistic or investigative purpose, and rested on a socially relevant topic with momentum to gain readers traction, thus also creating fertile ground for detractors

of the #MeToo movement. This case also draws critical attention to the appropriateness of media outlets, as businesses led by the urgency of following the vertiginous informational agenda, to function as legitimate platforms for these kinds of allegations. As Argentinean author Catalina Trebisacce affirms, “legitimacy and urgency are never a good pair” (Trebisacce, 2018): the urgency to take action comes in the way of a proper articulation of a project of accountability, leaving it diffuse, volatile and inconsequential.

The particularities of this cancellation allowed for Ansari’s show *Master of None* to never be cancelled. In May 2021, it premiered its third season called *Master of None presents: Seasons in Love*. There, the previous focus on the character of Dev (Ansari), a mid-tier actor navigating love and work in New York City, moves completely to one of the supporting characters, Dev’s lesbian best friend Denise (Lena Waithe) and her wife Alicia (Naomi Ackie). Along the course of five episodes, season 3 portrays the journey of the relationship between two LGTBI+ black women, from domestic bliss in the quiet countryside to the struggle of attempting to have a child via artificial insemination. Through a very clear aesthetic and tonal reference, Ansari reimagines Ingmar Bergman’s classic *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973) in a black lesbian couple (LeGardye, 2021). The result is very potent, visually-compelling, original imageries of queer possibility. The whole season is co-written by Ansari and Lena Waithe (they had collectively won an Emmy award for the script of season 2’s episode *Thanksgiving*), and directed by Ansari. Yet, he is barely on screen, appearing very briefly in one episode. By remaining in-visible, even when heavily present off-screen, Ansari manages to clear the show of any possible references to his misconduct and allows the story to take center. Invisibility as accountability remains present, but it doesn’t extend to content.

To end this section, I wanna allow a moment of speculation, the one that motivated me to choose this as a case study in this research. If *Master of None* had been cancelled along with Ansari (as was the case of other cancelled comedians like Louis C.K and Roseanne Barr and their respective tv shows), what would it have meant for these images of queerness to have never existed? This chapter has been surreptitiously guided by the interrogation of what cancel culture does or might do to queer content. I argue that cancellations like these, explicitly in the case of *Adam* and diffusively or speculatively in the case of *Master of None*, by the means of in-visibility as main form of accountability, limit the circulation of LGTBI+ imaginaries, thus shrinking the potential of queer possibilities. Now, the question is in place of what exactly accountability and justice might imply in these scenarios, and what or who is the subject of those intended processes of accountability.

2.2. accountability: removal and consequence

Going over these cases, again there seems to be a salient opacity around the notions of accountability implied in the cancellation efforts. The concept of accountability in itself, as defined for example by the Merriam Webster dictionary, seems rather simple: “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions” (Merriam-Webster). Yet, it leaves vast room for variant interpretations. How do you invite or oblige a person to accept responsibility? What does this mean exactly? Is a public statement with an apology and a promise to revise one's actions further, as the one issued by Ansari after the accusations, an example of this? Black abolition thinkers, which I will come back to at the end of this chapter, frame accountability in a much clearer way. Connie Burke (black abolitionist and addresser of abuse in LGBTI+ communities) thinks of it as an “internal resource for recognizing and redressing the harms we have caused to ourselves and others” (Kaba, Rice & Sultan, 2020). In this mindset, accountability is not a one-time event, but an active process, “an ongoing, minute-by-minute choice” (Kaba, Rice and Sultan, 2020). And very central to this concept is the fact that attempting to hold someone accountable is never a guarantee (Johnson, 2016) that they will be. Thus, accountability can never be actually or fully enforced, or obliged as the dictionary suggested, but merely asked, suggested and guided. If accountability is a process of the subjects within themselves, how is it possible to affirm that someone is being held accountable through a specific praxis, such as cancelling? Furthermore, if accountability is a process exclusive of subjects, how do you hold a movie or a tv show accountable? These questions suggest that, in the domain of cancel culture, accountability has come to mean something else, beyond the notion of personal responsibility, that at first sight remains blurry, shifting and ungraspable. Once again, I will not go against this opacity and rather intend to outline a characterization through and with it, without a closing need for a new definition.

What stands out in both case studies, though notably different in their objects and modes of cancellation, is the idea of accountability as both consequence and removal. Accountability becomes the direct, expected repercussion that comes after harmdoing, such as sexual misbehavior (Ansari) or bad representation of the LGBTI+ community (Adam). At the same time, it refers to a form of removal, an extraction of the harm-doers to a position of exteriority: an exile, isolation, expulsion, disappearance, invisibility (a movie should not be seen, this public figure should retreat from public status). I will here explore how both these aspects help shape accountability as a form of punishment, and further situate cancel culture with/in the logics of punitive thinking.

Fellow GEMMA scholar and friend Nin Friedman, in their thesis for this same program, provides what I find to be a brilliant theorization of the notions of justice and accountability present in 2020's social protests for racial justice and against police brutality in

the US, in a way that highly resonates with and informs this research. They explore this by firstly unfolding the concept of Modern Grammar. By the means of genealogy, they retrace the history of policing in the United States and situate the contemporary understandings of justice -inextricable to the criminal justice system- as a direct result and constant actualizer of the colonial project of occupation and extermination started by Europe in 1492, and perpetuated until the present by the technologies of modern thought (Friedman, 2021). The Modern Grammar refers to the complex script that contains “the onto-epistemic grammar of modernity” (Friedman, 2021, p. 24) and delimits justice always already within what Friedman refers to as the register of carcerality. In this framework, justice and accountability become shaped by the carceral logic, thus referring solely to “the punishment of the harm-doer rather than the healing of the person or community harmed” (Friedman, 2021, p. 32). Thinking with Denise Ferreira da Silva, one of the technologies they identify as maintaining the violence of such thought is the triad of separability, sequentiality, and determinacy. In her theorizations, Brazilian theorist and artist Ferreria da Silva identifies these three concepts as the onto-epistemic pillars sustaining Modern Thought, the project of modernity, a universalist worldview informed and supported by the program of the main thinkers of modernity, like Kant and Hegel (Ferreira da Silva, 2016, 2018). This enables “the modern text’s scientific imaging of The World as an ordered whole composed of separate parts” (Ferreira da Silva, 2016, pp. 57,58), and therefore a construction of difference and the other based on violence. I will expand on this later in the chapter. But firstly, I will pick up on Friedman’s path and mobilize part of this triad as a way to further characterize the notion of accountability contained or suggested by the cancellation efforts here cited. In the same movement, I will situate it as part of what I will outline in this chapter as punitive thinking, but that it greatly resonates with the carceral logic portrayed by Friedman (2021). The reason I chose not to stay with the latter is because I understand that cancel culture entails a very particular phenomenon, in the sense that it does not specifically or directly dialogue with the criminal justice system as institution, and yet it recalls and summons it constantly by replicating and evoking its structural punitive logics. As we have seen, cancellations do not usually contain a call or constitute a basis for criminal prosecution. Nonetheless, as I will unravel next, they incorporate the same notions of accountability and justice that structure the criminal justice system. Though I discern that the vocabulary of carcerality expands beyond the material walls of prisons and refers to the mentioned wider logic, I also fear that it could confine the significant. Instead, the punitive invites to look at the larger spectrum of punishment as the primary, main response to harm and conflict. Furthermore, in the scope of Friedman’s research, which is entirely focused on the US context, I believe that the carceral there compellingly evokes the specific landscape which contains 25% of the imprisoned population

in the world (Spade, 2018).

2.2.1 consequence: on sequentiality and determinacy

The foremost shared characteristic of the notions of accountability implied in the case studies is that the call or demand for accountability comes after the visualization of wrongdoing: as consequence. Romano (2020) refers to the possibility of reframing cancel culture as “consequence culture”. I argue that this logic is enabled and structured by two of the pillars of what, as I have anticipated, Ferreira Da Silva names the Modern Thought (2016), sequentiality and determinacy. Outlining punitive justice within the register of Modern Grammar, Friedman (2021) reads these two pillars in a dual, mutually determined operation: “with regards to justice, determinacy ‘presupposes’ the outcome of justice through a writing of causality, or sequentiality” (Friedman, 2021, p. 26). Justice is what must occur, what is presupposed to come after, as the result of injustice, of harm-doing, of violence. Justice is then only possible following this logic, “justice is therefore always too late” (Friedman, 2021, p. 26) and always a response, not a resolution. This reasoning is also present in demands for accountability contained in the cited cancellations: it is the assumed consequence of harmdoing, it is what must come after sexual misbehavior or the choice to make a movie that allegedly promotes stigmatization of LGBTI+ subjects. Harm must first occur in order to call for accountability, which comes as expected response. The principle of sequentiality is rigidly in place. At the same time, I argue that determinacy, in close reciprocal relation to sequentiality, is what allows for cancel culture’s accountability to sometimes appear as implicit, as in the case of Ansari. The fact that it is an assumed and presupposed consequence brings forward and makes visible the underlying code of punitive thinking that structures it from the shadows, without any need to manifest or actualize it into clear demands. This shows that, in cancel culture, what is always already expected after harmdoing is accountability-as consequence-as punishment.

At this point, an already suggested interrogation comes in again unavoidable: is the equation here in place harm-doing, then cancellation, then accountability as punishment? Or rather harm-doing, then cancellation as accountability as punishment? This engages directly with a frequent question around cancel culture (Romano, 2020), which was already suggested earlier in this chapter: is it a means to an end, or an end in itself? I believe that in both possible scenarios, the matter of relevance is what that end foreshadows, what horizon does it point to, what it presupposes. Sequentiality, as an ontological organizing pillar of punitive justice, comes in to allow movement in only one direction; it orients the equation to one sole, definitive end: accountability as punishment. Thus, no matter in which place of the

equation, cancelling always leads to punishment. The notion of end here comes to mean not only objective but also termination, reinforcing the false idea of cancellation-accountability-punishment as a form of resolution.

2.2.2 removal: on exteriority, separability and response-ability

In the sense that it singularizes a structural issue (of sexual misconduct and of LGBTI+ discrimination and stigmatization in the case studies) and it trusts that the removal of harmful individuals will address or solve the issue, the logics of cancel culture resemble those of the register of carcerality that shape this punitive justice (Friedman, 2021), understood as that which “places blame on an individual person and not a systemic problem” (Kaba 2020, p. 20, as cited in Friedman, 2021, p. 35). Following this thinking, the problematic gets removed from the problem/s, in the hope that this will in some way reduce the size and weight of the problem. By replicating carceral logics of social isolation, the seek for removal becomes a form of punishment. As we saw in both case studies, there was a demand or expectation for exteriority of that or who was considered problematic or harmful. But where (or upon whom) exactly falls the line that delimits this exteriority, and what stays inside (or outside)? Bringing back the notion of in-visibility crucial to these cancellations, I would argue that the determining factor is the range of vision: accountability as removal is completed once the subject or object of cancellation cannot be seen anymore. In the case of criminal justice, that is easily and largely accomplished by the technology of prison: the bad citizens become invisible to the good citizens, thus the good citizens feel safe. But in cancel culture, the exteriority suggested is not exactly or entirely from the social as a whole (though it might be the intention), as happens with actual confinement in a prison, but from the self who cancels, a self defined by range of vision. If I cannot see it, then this problem is over. Unfollow, unsubscribe, block. Cancel.

This logic of exteriority and removal is sustained and possibilitated by what Ferreira Da Silva calls separability, as the ontological organizing principle of the world since the post-Enlightment era (2016). Structural to the epistemological and ethical project of Modern Thought or the Understanding (2016), this notion:

considers the social as a whole constituted of formally separate parts. Each of these parts constitutes a social form, as well as geographically-historically separate units, and, as such, stands differentially before the ethical notion of humanity, which is identified with the particularities of white European collectives. (p. 63)

As Friedman summarizes, this translates into a conception of “physical space as separate (here vs. there), time as separate (past vs. present vs. future), and individuals as separate (us vs. them, self vs. other)” (2021, p. 27). This last, according to Da Silva, gives place to cultural difference as moral discourse, posing “a fundamental separation between human collectives, in terms of nationality, ethnicity and social (gender, sexual, racial) identity” (Ferreira da Silva, 2016, p. 63). Separability is then what organizes our current understanding of difference. This logic is also what allows us to recur to removal (of the harmful other/s) as a strategy for pretended accountability, resolution of conflict or repair of damage. It is noteworthy that these ontological separations arrange binary, oppositional dyads. Queer abolitionist author and community facilitator adrienne maree brown, who deals extensively with the issue of interpersonal cancellations in her book *We Will not Cancel Us* (2020), shares this concern when pointing out that the underlying logic of removal at the center of cancel culture is: “The bad things in the world cannot change, we must disappear the bad until there is only good left” (brown, 2020, p. 35). Yet, she affirms that this is a deceiving dynamic which actually hides the fact that “we can only handle binary thinking: good/bad, innocent/guilty, angel/abuser, black/white, etc” (brown, 2020, p. 35). This binary configuration, central to the onto-epistemological project of Modern Thought, has been widely criticized by authors like feminist theorist Kathrin Thiele. Thinking with others like Karen Barad, Vicky Kirby and Denise Ferreira Da Silva, she proposes to envision difference differently (Thiele, 2014, p. 203), through patterns of relationality that move beyond these oppositional dyads inherited from dialectical Western Thought, which position difference as “always only happening between two and as a movement of separation and categorization” (Thiele, 2014, p. 204). This binary rigidity is structural to the “moral superiority and outsider position” (Drucker, 2015, as cited in Bunz, Kaiser, & Thiele, 2020, p. 7) that seems to inform cancel culture.

Yet, this logic is present not only in cancellation efforts, but also in other common practices in activist spaces. For example, it is rather usual for feminist and/or LGBTI+ spaces to put in place politics of “cis-men free”, which means that those identified, or identifiable, as cis men, can not access or attend specific events or locations. This is an attempt to create what is called a safe space, meaning a place or a situation in which certain subject positions (such as women or LGBTI+ people) can feel reassured by the absence of violence or conflict (Shelly, 2018). Yet, this has raised some suspicion or questioning from people who attend, attended or intend to attend these spaces, such as trans author Brook Shelly (2018), who argues that this ends up replicating a policing of identities that feels closer to harm than safety. Furthermore, she affirms that when these kinds of policies are understood in such identitarian terms, they attach behaviors to specific bodies or subject positions, and thus essentializes identities, while failing to actually address harmful, violent or toxic behaviors

within these spaces. By situating the “bad people” outside my space of existence, a double operation of exteriorization occurs, as I also affirm myself as exterior from that or those which are considered bad, harmful, problematic. This attitude can be read as embedded in what Vicky Kirby, also from a perspective of relationality, situates as a “political legacy of reading difference as negation”, which “finds its essential identity in an ‘outside’, a ‘not this’, an absence” (Kirby, 2018, p. 127). The binary logic outlines a simultaneous double-sided judgment: if I put the bad outside, and I am inside, then I am good, thus the moral superiority and outsider(/insider) position. The outcome of this is not only a moral characterization of the self in binary opposition to an/other, but an exemption, a release from engaging with the resolution of the problem. I argue that, in this sense, cancel culture (either as accountability praxis or as tool towards accountability) upholds a refusal: by trying to make the problem/atic disappear, it calls for a complete disengagement from systemic issues. In this way, the agents of cancellation refuse to see themselves as part of the problem/atic and therefore disregard any responsibility for “alternative worldly enactments” (Thiele, 2014, p. 202). Going back to the case of *Adam*, for example, the sentencing of the movie as wrong or harmful, situates the agents of cancellation as the holders to what’s right and good (for the LGBTI+ community as a whole), but at the same time exempts them from actually articulating it or actualizing it. This operation is both at the basis of punitive thinking and of cancel culture.

Finally, this takes me back to the beginning of this section, and the basic, dictionary-dictated concept of accountability as “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions”, being in clear tension with abolitionist understanding of it as internal resource for taking responsibility in the face of harmdoing. The operation of removal and exteriority implied in cancel culture’s notion of accountability as punishment also does something crucial to the conception of responsibility there suggested. Accountability is understood as punishment when, within the logic of removal and exteriority, suggests that the one who has to account for their actions is always the other, exterior, not the self. It emplaces the I or we who are demanding accountability as above the possibility of causing harm, above any horizon of responsibility. On the other hand, from a position of abolition, the very notion of accountability contains the notion that “none of us is above causing harm” (Kaba, Rice & Sultan, 2020). Then, as stated, accountability can never be imposed completely. If it is enforced, then it is punishment.

In the same way that “none of us is above causing harm” (Kaba, Rice & Sultan, 2020), none of us is above or outside punitive thinking. This positions everyone in front of their responsibility to account for harm-doing, but also to their responsibility of demanding punishment for harm-doing. By not noticing and questioning the principled logic of punitive thinking, we are allowing, calling for punishment upon everyone, including ourselves.

2.2.3 outlining punitive thinking

I have been mobilizing the notion of punitive thinking across this chapter and the previous one, without having engaged with it at large. I have introduced it in chapter one by suggesting it might be what is cultural about cancel culture: the systematic tendency to bring “surveillance, control and sanction over difference” (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020) and to recur to punishment as “the default avenue for addressing social problems” (Aviram, 2020). Then I put it to work closely with Friedman’s register of carcerality, thus bringing it closer to an onto-ethico-epistemological framework that criticizes the appeal to the criminal justice system as the primary, main response to harm, violence and conflict. In this section, I will explore it further and outline its centrality for this thinking process, by examining how punitivism has historically been related to ideas of social justice invoked by social movements, specifically LGBTI+ and/or feminist activisms, that could further characterize the dynamics of cancel culture at large, and the ones present in the case studies specifically.

This concept is borrowed and actualized from that of *razón punitiva*, coined and largely addressed by Argentinean theorists Nicolás Cuello and Lucas Disalvo. In their book, *Críticas sexuales a la razón punitiva. Insumos para seguir imaginando una vida junt*s* (2018), they compile and translate a selection of articles that pose critical perspectives to this cultural logic in which punishment and retaliation have become modes of subjectivity.

My take on the term chooses to translate it (and therefore actualizes it) into punitive thinking for two concrete reasons. In the first place, because it allows a double play between noun and verb, a dynamic action. Firstly, it contrasts *la razón*, which in Spanish refers to the imagery of Enlightenment, of knowledge within the framework of Modern Thought that Ferreira Da Silva (2016) criticizes extensively -along with its pillars of separability, sequentiality and determinacy-; and that I, following Friedman (2021), identified as structuring the punitivist ethos of accountability in cancel culture. Secondly, because, calling in again feminist theorist Kathrin Thiele, “thinking is an active force with-in-of this world” (2014, p. 202). Subscribing to what they name the ethos of diffraction, an onto-ethico-epistemological project that refuses reading difference through the Western oppositional binaries (Thiele, 2014; Friedman, 2021), and which has been quietly guiding this research, I take the invitation to affirming a form of “thought-practice in which concepts are not abstraction from the world, but an active force of this world” (Thiele, 2014, p. 202). Departing from this framing, punitive thinking then is, as I will unfold next, not only a system, but always a doing, that thus allows space to imagining otherwise, to think/practice differently (Thiele, 2014). To bring this into the very naming of the concept, I not only refuse

any binary structural configuration, but I also again insist in drawing characterizations that refuse closed definitions, understood as delimitation, closure, ending.

Cuello and Disalvo's (2018) starting point to put together the book and extensively address this issue is a deep concern with the emergence, consolidation and naturalization of the symbolic functioning of criminal sanction "as cultural logic to represent, resolve and communicate conflicts, both in the institutional spaces that we inhabit and our own sexual communities" (Cuello & Disalvo, 2018, p. 17). They write from with/in these communities, of sexual and bodily dissidence that they are preoccupied with. It is in this way that the critique they build and bring to the book is sexual. As the title of the volume itself proposes, it is an invitation, an urge, to keep imagining a life together. A life in which political articulation to dismantle systemic oppressions is still possible. They write from the ground, from the grassroots, from the spaces that have endured and still endure continuous violence, spaces of resistance, struggle and the search for liberation. It is a similar concern than the one leading adrienne maree brown to address cancel culture within black activist communities in her work: "I have felt a punitive tendency root and flourish within our movements. I have felt us losing our capacity to distinguish between comrade and opponent, losing our capacity to generate belonging" (brown, 2020, p. 3).

Cuello and Disalvo (2018) borrow -or take- punitive thinking from critical criminology studies, where it is understood as "every form of government that imposes order through the industrial production of cultures of control, institutional criminalization and mass incarceration" (p. 3). They situate this as the result of an ongoing process started in the seventies by most modern nation-states, where rigid processes of disciplination started to disperse into new modalities of control, facilitated by the access to technology (Cuello & Disalvo, 2020). These mechanisms and its changes were largely addressed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1977) and reimagined, through the notion of technosexualities, by Paul Preciado in *Testo Yonqui* (2008). Similarly, Cuello and Disalvo's actualization of the concept moves it beyond the institutional, the formal and the scope of the state: punitive thinking then is not only the forms of governance, but also the mutually-enforced cultures of control they produce and its mechanisms of perpetual reproduction. In a similar way, punitive thinking builds on and expands the rhetoric of the carceral (as mobilized by Friedman, for example), which refers to the recourse of the criminal justice system and other forms of state-sanctioned punishment, and invokes "a whole cultural system that is expressed and internalized into subjects, forcefully closing down the ability to imagine any other relationship to the world" (Cuello & Disalvo, 2018, pp. 13, 14). In the logic of punitive thinking, the threads of punishment, isolation, and fear are not just the presupposed response to scenes of harm, violence and conflict, but the very cement

of the social (Cuello & Disalvo, 2018). Punitive thinking is the principle from which we experience each other:

Punitivism is, therefore, a way of imagining the world without excesses, that seeks to be real through compulsive moderation. This is also expressed in ourselves under the shape, remote or renewed, of a sentimental attachment for the language of punishment, snitching, persecution, censorship, discipline and humiliation. (p. 15)

Here, the excesses become everything perceived to be wrong or bad, even a certain vocabulary. It cannot coexist with the right and good, it needs to be cut off and put away. Also, by speaking of “ourselves” they position themselves, and everyone else in positions of sexual criticality or dissidence (the ones they invite to keep imagining a life together), as always already within punitive thinking. They reject the principle of separability and exteriority. Going deeper into a characterization of punitive thinking, it becomes clearer how cancel culture as a phenomenon is informed and structured by this logic. The journey through the vocabulary surrounding cancellations in chapter 1, allowed us to unveil this language of punishment that Cuello and Disalvo refer to, by delving for example into the workings of calling out, thrashing, and shaming. The logic of removal and exteriority inherent to cancel culture, distinctively present in both case studies and outlined in the previous section, resonate with this “world without excesses”, in which the good, the better, the just, will emerge as consequence of the erasure of the bad, the harmful, the problematic. Once again, separability appears as an organizing pillar of punitive thinking. When this separability, as principle for perceiving difference and for experiencing each other, operates in terms of identity, as we saw in the example of the cis-men free policies, what is at place is a recourse to identikit as measure of truth, which positions identity as a variable that is demanded and needs to be proven compulsively. Something similar can be appreciated in the case of *Adam*, where much of the cancellation discourse happened in terms of identitarian positions (by tagging the film as transphobic, lesbophobic, etc).

Another remarkable and related aspect of the characterization of punitive thinking, in relation to the cancellations of the case studies, is the preventive moral based “in the stigmatization of conflict and risk”, and the “simplification of violence and suffering as univocal expressions not to be interpellated or complexified by their historical root” (Cuello & Disalvo, 2018, p. 16). While reviewing the case of *Adam*, I briefly pointed out how the collapse between the problematic and the harmful, dissolved the possibility of conflict. To sentence a specific representation as transphobic, for example, and avow for its disappearance, evokes a historical wound in the involved communities (Cuello & Disalvo, 2018), the ongoing stigma and violence of transphobia. It also allows little space for a

conversation about what transphobic actually means or entails in that specific context, therefore simplifying, and I would add universalizing, violence and suffering as univocal expressions. When addressing the trashing that the movie was facing before its release, director Rhys Ernst stated: "It is a weird time to take a creative risk, certainly as a trans filmmaker. I think there's a war on nuance right now" (Reynolds, 2019). It is interesting that he brings forward that the existence of (creative) risk and nuance were key parts of the issue the cancellators found. In the register of punitive thinking, and of cancel culture as a very specific expression of it, punishment and retaliation become modes of subjectivity that find the possibility of discomfort, complexity, and difference (Cuello & Disalvo, 2018) not only undesirable but unacceptable. Once again bringing Sarah Schulman's (2017) concern about the conflation between conflict and abuse, where could have been disagreement about what good or bad representation of LGBTI+ individuals might entail, what transphobic behavior might mean for different individuals, there was a call for the punitive apparatus in the form of cancellation, of invisibilization.

As noted, I chose this specific reworking of the concept because it is crafted from within LGBTI+ and critical subject positions, from an activist perspective that is troubled by the assimilation of punitivist practices to engage with each-other, and a commitment to "think-practice differently" (Thiele, 2014, p. 202). It is from this inside position, that wishes to stay inside and close to the problem/atic, that I want to further analyze the advance of punitive thinking within social movements and activism, as well as the crossover of social justice and criminal justice. In this journey, I intend to critically address the aspect of cancel culture as intended tool for social justice.

2.3 social justice and criminal justice: an unintended merge

Thus far, the notion of justice has appeared close to that of accountability, within the register of punitive thinking, in which it is inherently associated with the administration of punishment for the harmdoing. Before moving into perspectives that think/practice justice differently (Friedman, 2021) and give us clues towards imagining otherwise in chapter 3, I want to address a notable apparition of the concept of justice in relation to cancel culture: its characterization as a tool for social justice. Going back to the journalistic recounts of the phenomenon that informed chapter 1, we can find this very prominently. For example, Romano (2020) opens his article by saying that cancel culture is an "important tool of social justice — a way of combatting, through collective action, some of the huge power imbalances that often exist between public figures with far-reaching platforms and audiences, and the people and communities their words and actions may harm" (Romano,

2020). In chapter 1, through the means of a genealogy, I largely established that cancel culture emerged and expanded enmeshed with activist practices and social movements like feminism, racial justice, and LGBTI+ rights, and that came into the mainstream associated with online, hashtag-oriented expressions of those movements, like #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter in the US context, and #NiUnaMenos in Argentina. If cancel culture is then always already implicated in attempted quests for social justice, it could then be assumed that a larger goal of specific acts of cancellation is to address bigger, pressing issues, like normalised sexual misbehavior (or even sexism as a whole) or stigmatization of LGBTI+ people (or straight-cis-sexism or heteronormativity as a whole) in the case studies. Yet, in the previous sections, we saw how, as a phenomenon structured by punitive thinking, cancel culture replicates dynamics of the criminal justice system by individualizing the problem/atic, demanding accountability as punishment, and failing to address the systemic issues. In this context, it becomes necessary to then ask what is encompassed in the notion of justice associated with social justice, and explore how this might orient cancel culture.

I will center on feminist and LGBTI+ positions, because they are the ones that appear to mobilize the cancellations in the case studies, and also because they are the ones I personally inhabit. The infatuation of these social movements with punitive thinking has been the focus of critical analysis by many authors in different latitudes. As stated, this is one of the guiding concerns in Cuello and Disalvo's volume on the matter, whose first section is titled Legislative frames of sexopunitive thinking. There, from queer perspectives, authors like Dean Spade, Naa Hammond, Yasmin Niar and Jason Lydon, question the fixation of LGBTI+ movements on achieving hate crime laws in the US context, as a form of counteracting the violence and discrimination suffered by these communities. As they state, "hate crime legislation is a part of the bigger promise of punitive systems to keep us safe and solve our conflicts" (Spade, 2018). Furthermore, Nair (2018) points out that the framing of hate crime gives room to assume that systemic acts of violence are the mere consequence of hateful individuals, and does not address the structural conditions that allow and perpetuate prejudice and discrimination. Again, the pillar of separability that configures punitive thinking appeals to the exteriority of "the bad ones" as response, but not resolution, to conflict and harm. Finally, they underline that the amplification of the punitive apparatus of the state only serves to increase the risk of criminalization of those in vulnerable positions that these laws were supposed to protect, as is the case of poor, racialized LGBTI+ individuals (Niar, Spade, 2018).

Similarly, in Argentina (and also in the larger context of Latin America), the struggle to establish femicide as a typified crime was one of the pillars and bigger achievements of the movement in the last decade (Trebisacce, 2018). Nonetheless, feminist critical criminologists like Ileana Arduino (2018), quickly warned of the dangers of assuming that new offenses or

larger sentences, or any punitive-oriented mechanisms, did not serve to prevent further violence against women, and instead legitimized and enlarged the patriarchal justice system that has historically stigmatized and failed women (Arduino, 2018). On a smaller scale, something akin happened with the criminal typification of travesticide, which was demanded and achieved in 2018, in the case of the murder of renowned travesti activist Diana Sacayán. Queer Argentinean criminologists Moria Pérez and Blas Radi (2020), critically analyze this case and provide a larger panorama of the reasons of this ongoing and improbable alliance between LGBTI+ movements and state criminal policies. They affirm that, in the context of modern democratic Western nation-states, and its universalist European frameworks, politics has been largely understood in terms of attaining rights, and thus accessing citizenship (Pérez & Radi, 2020). In order to access rights, in order to be citizens, subjects must be clearly identified by the inherent system of inclusion and exclusion that is the law. Rights thus become attached to identities, and legitimacy of existence becomes dependent on legal recognition. It is in this context of possibilities that, since at least the 1980s (Spade, 2009), women's rights movements and LGBTI+ movements, amongst others, have formulated their demands to the state: as identity-driven strategies for social change through inclusion and rights. This mirage of inclusion (Pérez & Radi, 2020) translates into demands to the state in terms of criminal policies: the protection of certain identities can only be achieved through their inclusion in the criminal legislation, thus the appeal to hate crimes, femicide or travesticide. The result of this is to reduce rights to punitivist outcomes. There can be a map drawn (without scenes of causality but of mutual determination and reproduction) between the identity-based core of the legislative system, the individualization of structural and collective issues that operates through criminal justice, the rights-oriented root of social movements and the entrenchment of punitive thinking within them.

This coupling between social movements and punitive thinking has received specific denominations from critical perspectives that seek to oppose or dismantle them, as is the case of carceral feminism or *feminismo punitivo*. This last translation and mobilization of the concept in Spanish, similar to the one operated in this research that seeks to build on the carceral vocabulary towards that of the punitive, is largely attributed to Argentinean criminologist Agustina Iglesias Skulj (Iglesias Skulj, 2013; Fernández Míguez, 2019). *Feminismo punitivo* refers to liberal, white, rights-oriented feminism, which subscribes and relies on the state punitive apparatus as a way to address violence and injustice against women. (Iglesias Skulj, 2013; Fernández Míguez, 2019). Though I agree that these groups have historically and consistently articulated their demands around a punitive ethos, I fear that in the specific case of the authors here cited, the characterization could function as yet another operation of exteriority. Sheila Fernández Míguez, for example, is a white scholar

from Northern Spain, who does not acknowledge her own situatedness in a context close, if not within, this white, liberal, rights-oriented, privileged feminism that she criticizes. As I have been suggesting, a critical perspective on any form of punitive thinking demands a position that acknowledges the structural, transversal presence of this logic in our cultures and therefore in ourselves. In this sense, and as it has been outlined throughout this thesis, black feminists, through and with the project of abolition, have traced a long history thinking and practice justice differently; in a manner that includes the constant revision of one's own practices in order to recognize and transform the ones that reproduce punitive thinking. Locating the problem/atic as always outside, always foreign to our spaces and behaviors, is part of the logic of exteriorization that is at the core of the punishment-led perspectives: it individualizes the phenomenon in some bad feminists, just as criminal justice culture individualizes structural inequalities and violences to bad people. It implies that assuming a critical perspective provides automatic indemnity from engaging in any form of punitive thinking. This is an epistemological trap, and an ethical farce, that is largely in the way of the possibility of imagining otherwise.

On a more general level, this phenomenon has also been addressed as progressive punitivism, as outlined by criminologist Hasham Aviram (2019) to think about the US context, and actualised by Pérez and Radi (2020) as gender punitivism to enquire the punitive tendencies in Argentinean LGBTI+ movements. Progressive punitivism refers to an “academic and popular logic that wields the classic weapons of punitive law –shaming, stigmatization, harsh punishment, and denial of rehabilitation– in the service of promoting social equality” (Perez and Radi, 2020, p. 528). They identify it as operating both within the criminal justice system and the realm of social media and public opinion, thus bringing it closer to the where of cancel culture outlined in chapter 1. Furthermore, they characterize it as “focusing on identity and group politics as an epistemological resource for identifying perpetrators” (Aviram, 2019, p. 3), which resonates once more with the logic of exteriority and separability that operate in punitive thinking, and in the case studies. Again, while I find this characterization very appropriate to analyze the phenomenon of social movements such as feminism or LGBTI+ activism invoking punishment as a catalyst for social change, I have objections. I find that the progressive adjectivation holds a possibility of crystallizing the association between punitive efforts and a vague political ideological position (what “the left” or “progressive thinking” entails varies immensely from context to context). Even more so, I think it avowes the conservative and fascist appropriation of the rhetoric of cancel culture, to position themselves as victims of what they identify as progressive, woke discourse or political correctness (Romano, 2021). Also, this oppositional framing of cancel culture in terms of belonging to specific ethico-political ideological positions, only serves to strengthen the binary logics of the punitive thinking itself, which one could suspect is always

conservative: not in the sense that it aligns with a particular ethico-political or even partisan values, but that it seeks or allows to preserve the present structures of power.

2.4 towards imagining otherwise

Throughout this section, I have unfolded how punitive thinking functions as a transversal, cultural system that has positioned punishment as the most desirable response not only to violence, harm and conflict, but also to difference; it organizes how we experience each other around suspicion and punitive tendencies. This omnipresent logic also reaches and traverses social movements, and how they have framed and continue to frame their demands in ways that appeal to or replicate the mechanisms of the criminal justice system. In this scenario, all accounts of accountability and justice, including those of social justice, refer prominently to scenes of punishment and retaliation. Cancel culture, as a phenomenon that emerged and consolidated in close relation to some of these intended processes of social justice, and that relies on exteriority as organizing principle, is shaped by punitive thinking. Through a recount of the case studies, we saw how the notions of accountability and justice there implied relied heavily on operations of removal and invisibilization. Then, even when understood as a legitimate and necessary tool towards overdue processes of accountability and social justice, cancel culture is structured by a punitive ethos.

As I move forward to chapter 3, I will resort to perspectives of imaginig otherwise to alternatively envision queer content in relation to cancel culture. Since the project of this thesis is to explore the relation between queer storytelling and cancel culture, the primary guiding question has always been: what does cancel culture do to queer storytelling? The use of case studies was a first attempt to delineate what might be the (always already material/semiotic) consequences of a cancellation to works of fiction, but mostly, to the potential imaginaries they might create in terms of LGBTI+ politics, possibilities, existences. In this chapter, I have explored how punitive thinking shapes cancel culture and situates it in a realm of intended processes of social justice that have come to perpetuate the logics of the criminal justice system. Instead of closing arguments, to me this opens a new path, that of course starts with a twist on the question: what if, instead, I ask what queer storytelling does or might do to cancel culture?

By abandoning a perspective of representation and moving into the vocabulary of storytelling, I will explore the potentialities that it creates for imagining otherwise, for worlding otherwise. What would happen if the focus was centered on disputing senses apart from or on top of disputing rights, with care of not reproducing the limitations of solely dialoguing with the scope of the state.

Chapter 3: staying with the problem/atic: queer storytelling as worlding (otherwise)

“Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced”
(Baldwin, 1964)

3.1 staying with the problem/atic

The title of this section and of this chapter opens a path leading with a robust onto-epistemological positionality, one that is at the same time the loudest invitation in this research, as well as its core ethical concern. In paraphrasing the title of Donna Haraway’s notable *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), I not only invoke her and her work as one of the main thinking companions of this process, but I also affirm myself and the following theoretical considerations in a specific position that I will extensively develop along this chapter: the commitment to acknowledge and engage, from a relational standpoint, with what is considered problem/atic in the realm of cancel culture. To question, refuse and ultimately disarm the position of exteriority that, as I explored in chapter 2, is central to the dynamics of cancellation and the punitive thinking that informs it.

Haraway opens her book by defining trouble as a vocable deriving from a “thirteenth-century French verb meaning ‘to stir up,’ ‘to make cloudy,’ ‘to disturb’” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). Something troubling is then something hard to grasp, to pinpoint, something that becomes disturbing by being disturbed. Haraway employs this term to talk about the troubles of the current planetary conditions, and she immediately states that “the task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). What is to be done²³ about trouble, the troubling is to articulate response from a radically relational perspective, forming oddkins. This association of trouble and response is key and becomes somewhat indissoluble in her project. Differently, what occurs with the notion of problem and its derived problematic, as used in the practices of cancel culture, is a curious (yet not naive) operation. While the *problem* as noun is easily and frequently associated with the verb to solve, the adjective *problematic*, when it enters the realm of cancellations, becomes strangely isolated from any semantics of resolution. As defined by the Merriam

²³ This question echoes, as many other ideas in this research, from my friend Nin Friedman’s thesis, which inspired and informed a great part of the articulations of chapter 2 and will come back in this one.

Webster dictionary, problematic means “difficult to solve or decide; not definite or settled -uncertain-; open to question or debate -questionable-; expressing or supporting a possibility” (Merriam Webster). Yet, as we saw while overviewing the case of the feature film *Adam*, the use of problematic associated with cancellations does not evoke these significations, but instead becomes synonymous with harmful. In the case of *Adam*, the agents of cancellation regarded the film as problematic for many diverse reasons, but most of them referred to events that could be potentially read as transphobic or lesbophobic, and therefore harmful for those subject positions. Resourcing once more to journalistic accounts around the expanded universe of cancel culture, some critical think pieces, mostly written by academics, were published in online outlets to question this use of the word problematic back in 2014 and 2015. According to Weinman (2015), the term, with these specific meanings, had a notable increase in use in internet discourse from 2012 to 2015, mostly around issues of cultural representation. Most of these accounts agree that the term was primarily used in academic jargon in the United States, where it conserved its dictionary-stated meanings -something that poses a problem-, and that then gained radically different significations while spreading through internet discourse. There is also some consensus that the employment of the word problematic expanded to avoid the direct use of more specific words like racist, sexist, or transphobic, while at the same time suggesting, implying a connection to these bigger, structural problems. Swenson (2016) affirms that in this way the critics create a distance between themselves and the argument by situating the problem in the text, intrinsically, and exempting themselves from actually engaging with it: “Calling a text problematic erases the ways in which it interacts with readers’ own politics and experiences to produce its ‘problem.’” (Swenson, 2016). It implies an active retreat of the critic. Again, a position of exteriority. Paradoxically, to call something problematic functions as a refusal to engage with the actual problem, a way out of addressing the problem. Another article conveniently defines problematic as “an umbrella term meaning anything that is part of the problem, not part of the solution” (Weinman, 2015), which is particularly vague, when a more literal, or dictionary-informed (or pre-internet) approximation to the term would clearly understand the word problematic as something that is inherently part of a problem. The illusion of this use of problematic, as well as other dynamics of cancellation relying on the principle of separability and exteriority, is that pointing out a problem automatically awards oneself a place in part of the solution. In chapter 2, when first pointing out the complexities of equating problematic and harmful around the cancellation of the movie *Adam*, I resorted to Sarah Schulman and her concerns around the tendency to overstating harm (2016). Nonetheless, I think that what is in place is an understatement of harm, of how and why something or someone was harmful to a specific person or a group, that would therefore allow further questions as to how to prevent it, how to repair it. But “the

word problematic functions not as an opening into deeper questions, but as a buzzy shortcut.” (Swenson, 2016).

This use of the word problematic, with its inherent elusiveness, ultimately became a key word in the realm of cancel culture: to regard something or someone as problematic is the first step, if not the only, to avow for a cancellation. Because, as I have just pointed, problematic never means just that. It becomes a phantom signifier that allows the agents of cancellation to show that they are aware of a problem, that they acknowledge it and condemn it (by sole recognition) without ever needing to actually participate in any form of resolution. Bringing back the discursivities of punitive thinking, to regard something as problematic becomes judgment as (the only) response. And in this matter, I will have to disagree with Haraway or at least suggest an expansion in her articulation of what is to be done in the face of troubling times, of structural problems such as racism, sexism, transphobia. We not only need to “to stir up potent response to devastating events” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1), but to articulate, create, imagine resolution for these events.

My aim here is to resituate the problem/atic as something that needs to be addressed instead of dismissed. My commitment and invitation to stay with the problem/atic is actually one to reclaim the problem/atic as something difficult, uncertain, questionable, and to embrace it. It is a choice of position, one that is close, very close, rubbing against the problem/atic, with/in it. I use the dash/ to make the problem in problem/atic always visible, operational, inescapable. To conjure the phantom (of systemic oppression and the ways in which we reproduce it), make it fleshy again, even if it is scary to face, because it is scary to face. The project of this chapter, and of this thesis, is one of radical engagement with what is uncomfortable, complex, sensitive. Cancel culture certainly welcomes all of those adjectives, and many more. I first started this research by exploring the ambivalence surrounding the conceptualization of cancel culture and cancellation, and so far I have been attempting to ground it, make it corpulent. Because it could be stated that cancel culture is indeed problem/atic, both in the internet-bred connotation of potentially harmful, and in the dictionary-informed notion of “difficult to solve, not definite or settled, open to question or debate”, and, most interestingly “expressing or supporting a possibility”. This research is an experiment in exploring those possibilities, what can appear when we actually engage with a problem/atic phenomena like cancel culture, when we stay with the problem/atic.

Here, staying with the problem/atic is not only a refusal of the oppressive, destructive conditions of the present, but also, and mostly, refusing that punitive binary opposition is the only way to go about it. The underlying questions leading this last chapter are: in the face of a complex phenomena like cancel culture, which is structured by and is structuring of punitive thinking, what is to be done? Following Haraway, how to articulate relational forms of resolution that escape the mere (punitive) oppositional, that commit to addressing

problems from a position of radical interiority (Kirby, 2018) rather than elusive exteriority? I will suggest that queer storytelling, as practices of worlding, are a potent strategy for building an otherwise. To begin this journey of the shaping of these practices, I will position the politics and temporalities of imagination as key starting point.

3.2 temporalities and politics of imagination

“whisper only one promise, to remain steadfast in the belief that this cannot be all there is”
(Olufemi, 2021, p. 12)

Chapter 2 ended with a semblance: a movement towards imagining otherwise (Olufemi, 2021), for think/practicing justice and accountability differently (Friedman, 2021), beyond the logics of punitive thinking that organize cancel culture. I want to pick up those motions and expand them, specifically the notion of imagination as a potent tool to think/practice not only accountability, but difference differently (Thiele, 2014). Now that we are here, staying with the problem/atic, acknowledging it and willing to engage with it, what is to be done? Let's imagine for a bit.

One of the main motions towards imagining otherwise is the ethico-political project of abolition. As British abolitionist Lola Olufemi affirms in her most recent book *Experiments in imagining otherwise* (2021), whose title inspired and informed part of the title of this chapter, “abolition as we know it now, developed through the black feminist tradition, owes everything to imaginative potential” (Olufemi, 2021). Rooted in the US, abolition is understood by Angela Davis, one of the movement's most prominent figures, as the ethical and political project of reenvisioning justice and accountability beyond the current criminal justice system, which is understood as a continuity of the racial violence that originated with slavery (DemocracyNow!, 2020). Abolition is “a generative praxis and a creative modality that by way of rejection affirms other worlds” (Friedman, 2021, p. 44). This movement aims for transformative justice, a form of justice not bound by punitivism, and rather grounded on political, communal commitment to healing (Kaba, 2020: 20). In this framework, the approach to justice and accountability goes deeply into the circumstances which promoted harmful behavior (Friedman, 2021), instead of stopping at the blaming and punishment of individuals. Abolition could then be briefly defined as not about reforming the current conditions of existence, of oppression (of brutal racial violence and the criminal justice system), but imagining and enacting another set of conditions all together. According to Davis, abolition relies on care, creativity and imagination to (re/en)vision (DemocracyNow!,

2020) justice, accountability and, furthermore, the possibilities of co-existence beyond punitive thinking. Nin Friedman (2021), in the abolitionist project that I believe their thesis to be, concretely wonders about the material effects of imagination and yearning, while attempting to address a frequent critique on abolitionist projects like abolishing the police: being too unrealistic, “too reliant on the abstract imaginary” (Friedman, 2021, p. 53), since “imagining a world without police seems impossible!” (Prevas, 2020, as cited in Friedman, 2021, p. 53). They then locate a *carceral imagination* (2021) in the one that delimits possibilities for justice and accountability to the punitive apparatus, which cannot even imagine a world without police. On the other hand, they refer to *abolitionist imagination* as the one that allows to envision beyond the criminal justice system and its conditions of reproduction, and towards a horizon of liberation. An imagination that, following adrienne maree brown in Friedman’s work, allows to disrupt “the single white male hetero narrative” so as to become “one of the spoils of colonialism (brown, 2017, p. 90).

Crucially, abolition is not only about enunciating those other possibilities, or pointing towards a horizon in an unreachable distance, and then resting on the comfort of having articulated a way out. Because, as Olufemi affirms by quoting Ruth Wilson Gilmore, abolition is about “presence, not absence” (Olufemi, 2020). Abolition is about enacting the otherwise, about, for example, rehearsing different forms of accountability with/in communities, as abolitionist facilitators like adrienne maree brown and Mariane Kaba do and recount in their work, where they commit to think up “imaginative ways to prevent and deal with harm—ways that don’t exacerbate it” (Kaba, Rice & Sultan, 2020). Thus, “this ‘newness’, or the demand for something else, can never fully be realised exclusively in the realm of the discursive, it exists in other registers: it can be felt, heard, touched, tasted” (Olufemi, 2021, p. 34). Here, imagination becomes always already discursive/material, it operates on the onto-epistemological level. According to Olufemi, imagination “not only creates liberatory drives; it sustains, justifies and legitimises them. It undoes entire epistemes and clears a space for us to create something new” (Olufemi, 2021, p. 34). In the project of abolition, imagination functions as conjuring. It invokes an otherwise to the present, and in the summoning, the possibility becomes actualized, materialized. In this way, imagination defies the linearity of time and the mirage of horizon-distance by collapsing future and present. These operations are also sustained by the pillars of Modern Thought, separability, sequentiality and determinacy, as outlined by Ferreira da Silva (2016, 2018) and mobilized by Friedman (2021), that I addressed largely in chapter 2.

A great part of the political potential of imagination, as I intend to mobilize it in this research, relies on this provocation to the ontology of linear temporalities. Similarly, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, in his prominent work *Cruising Utopia* (2009), affirms that queerness is always an ideality, a not-yet-here. Yet, he finds enactments of this futurity in

specific “sites of embodied and performed queer politics“ (p. 49). The utopian becomes actualized by concrete practices that enable “a future in the present” (p. 49), in which “certain performances of queer citizenship contain (...) an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 49). Muñoz’s project is one against the anti-utopian and anti-relational ethos that he was perceiving as predominant in the works of contemporary LGBTI+ theorists, whom he observes to be lacking imagination. Resonating profoundly with the abolitionist project, queerness, and queer imagination, become a situated form of refusal that this present and its possibilities of existence but also of resistance, dictated by parameters of the (heterosexual and punitive) Nation-state, are all there is, as insinuated by Olufemi in the quote that opens this section. Like abolition, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). I will come back to and expand these potentialities of queerness later in the chapter.

This onto-epistemological approach to temporalities also aligns with Haraway’s invitation to staying with the trouble and this research’s provocation to staying with the problem/atic. Haraway actually begins her book rejecting the reigning temporal narrative of the Anthropocene: that in which the present is a fading interstice between an edenic past and apocalyptic future (Haraway, 2016). Staying with the trouble and with the problem/atic, is a “serious and lively” (p. 1) commitment with the present, with the belief that this here and now is susceptible to be transformed here and now, through the potentials of political imagination. The here explored temporalities and politics of imagination, open a space to go beyond the “onto-epistemic pillars separating past from present from future, or an understanding of time predicated on the logics of sequentiality and separability” (Friedman, 2021, pp. 36, 37). Therefore, imagination becomes a crucial tool to surpass the pillars of Modern Thought (Ferreira da Silva, 2016) that also sustain punitive thinking, that inform cancel culture. Imagination is a potent device to think/practice differently.

In chapter 2, I also outlined how social movements, in the context of modern democratic Western nation-states, have framed and continue to frame their demands in terms of rights and inclusion, following the aspiration of citizenship (Pérez & Radi, 2020). Furthermore, I traced how this pattern of possibility has led women’s and LGBTI+ rights movements to assimilate with punitive thinking and aspire to punitive responses like expanding hate crime legislation or the incorporation of specific identities into criminal law as form of protection (like the case of femicidio and travesticidio in Argentina). My proposal is that, as informed by abolition and queerness, imagination provides a way to resist and organize beyond the limits allowed by the Nation-states and therefore, by the punitive apparatus: disputing not only rights but also senses, in the realm of the discursive-material.

Here, I choose to talk about senses and not meanings precisely because of the world shaping capacities of the discursive-material. I reckon that, at least in the English language, meanings are had, there is a relation of possession implied between elements, as if significations were the secured, individual private property of signifiers. Differently, senses are made, built, and then always refer to the process of construction. There is where I want to intervene, to slip through the gaps of signification and build otherwise. That is the ultimate agitation of this chapter: to build senses in common beyond common sense, the common sense of punitive thinking, of replicating patterns of exclusion and harm.

In her project, Lola Olufemi directly takes on the matter of the limitations of possibility of the Nation-state by questioning “how do ‘rights’ fail us and what would happen if instead, we supported each other’s claims to a liveable life? What does a ‘claim’ do that a right cannot?” (Olufemi, 2021, p. 67). She mobilizes language in a way that to me is always discursive/material, that is understood as a political tool for actualizing other presents in the present, as world-shaping. For her, a claim, a discursive construction, can intervene in (re)defining the contours of the world in a way that rights cannot:

Do not underestimate its relationship to the material. If we take imaginative potential seriously, we can properly articulate a politics committed to the expulsion of misery, a politics that is not ‘politics’, a schema that refuses persuasion, compromise, sacrifice, the trap of practicality. Repeat after me: Our freedom is not a policy popularity competition. (Olufemi, 2021, p. 34)

Like Muñoz, she refuses the practicality, the pragmatism of the kind of politics in which liberation becomes reduced to rights and policies. She further asserts that the language we use “brings place and space into existence” (p. 43), and builds a structure that turns the “horizon (that point where potentiality meets the substance of our reality) into a mirage” (p. 43). Imagination is as a site for disputing what could be, for reshaping that horizon, for escaping “the linguistic loop” (p. 56) of repetition that the Nation-state and the vocabulary of rights confine us to; the loop that only allows us to think about accountability and justice through punitive thinking, to the vocabulary of punishment. What could be then becomes a myriad of “political, social and cultural demands, strategic aims, revolutionary longings. As such, it resists singular definition” (p. 35). Imagination is the site of the multiple. She then invokes an imagination that she recognizes as abolitionist but also as feminist, in that challenges hegemonic notions of what is permissible under current conditions (Olufemi, 2021, p. 202). It is noteworthy that feminism appears here as a political motion towards total transformation of the current conditions of existence. Feminist and abolitionist imagination become the space in which, by conjuring the seemingly impossible, what is possible is

contested, way beyond the narrow hallways of the Nation-state.

Having explored the political potentialities of imagination, I want to move forward into a key aspect of this research: proposing storytelling, and specifically queer storytelling, as an enactment of this kind of imagination, one that does the work of conjuring, that opens up possibilities of resistance beyond the limitations of punitive thinking, that defies the linearity of time by actualizing a relational future in the present; that is worlding.

3.3 storytelling as worlding

Representation is a word, a concept, that has been marauding this research, hovering about waiting to make an appearance, to take center stage. Representation is a concept that has been hovering around me since I was a teenage lesbian spending summer nights scavenging the internet for stories of girls who kissed girls. I grew up with that motion, between two attracting poles forming a dyad: an absence of representation, and a quest for identification. These notions have been and still are central to stances of cultural and media analysis, either from academic or cultural criticism positions. Furthermore, this dyad is also at the core of cancel culture, given one of the most recurrent preoccupations of the phenomenon here addressed are those situated on the spectrum popular culture, such as tv shows, movies and so-called celebrities.

While going about the specificities of the case studies, matters of representation and identification surfaced explicitly and centrally in the case of *Adam* and secondarily in the case of *Master of None*. In the first one, the fact that the representation of the trans community offered in the film (and the book it is based on) was found *problematic*, was the main motive for the organized efforts of cancellation. In the latter, it was suggested that season 3 presented potentialities of representation for queer black women, despite the cancellation and *problematic* behavior of its creator.

The conceptualization of representation could be and has been infinitely complexified through decades of theoretical work from numerous fields. For example, greatly legitimized and circulated authors like Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu have proposed, from different perspectives, key articulations of representation as the ways in which “images relate to individuals’ sense of identity and subjectivity” (Coleman, 2014, p. 8), while considering the influence of institutions and complex and changing power relations. Feminists have also largely relied and complicated this notion, dealing specifically with the complexities representation of gender. Put it overtly simplistic ways, representationalism has been a very recurrent way in which “feminist theory has tracked the relationships between the body and images” (Coleman, 2014, p. 5), specifically between the embodiments of women and the

images of it. At the same time, it has been largely contested. As Barad states when framing their own critique of it, “representationalism has received significant challenge from feminists, poststructuralists, postcolonial critics, and queer theorists. The names of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are frequently associated with such questioning” (Barad, 2003, p. 804). In most of these recounts, representation has not been strictly a question of correspondence between bodies and images, but has taken into account the power structures that produce the subjects. Though, as I have stated previously and will develop further, this thinking process intends to move from a solely representational approach, following Barad, I will for now resort to the concept of representation in very schematic terms to illustrate its workings in the realm of cancel culture. Here, we can contingently consider representation as the production of images that provide ground for identification, either of what one already is or what one could (desire to) be. The idea of “seeing oneself on the screen” is widely repeated when debating the importance of representation, especially for positions that are not white-cis-male-straight-abled and therefore have been historically erased from mainstream narratives or reduced to stereotypes. Similarly, the phrase “you cannot be what you cannot see” has been broadly replicated in the past years -it can be found titling Ted Talks, inspirational books and think pieces- while rooting for the proliferation of more and better representation of these erased or tokenized subjects. I have advocated and believed in these for most of my life. The fact that I keep writing about it means I very much still do. And it is because I care about this, probably more than anything else, that I need to complicate it, question it and remix it; to compost it, to speak with Haraway once more (2016). When I propose to go beyond the representational, I do not mean a complete abandonment but a building upon it: an expansion that recognizes the ongoing need for the proliferation of images of the non-normative, of an otherwise, while at the same time proposing a radical engagement and entanglement with their processes of production and signification, with storytelling.

3.3.1 storytelling beyond transparency and exteriority

In the section, I will argue that, in the cancellation of the case studies, what prevails is a notion of storytelling that reduces it to the representational. Furthermore, I will outline how this understanding of (storytelling as representation) is structured by logics of transparency and exteriority, which allows agents of cancellation to sustain an outsider position and refuse any responsibility to participate in processes of world-shaping otherwise. I will briefly expose the limits of this solely representational approach and how the vocabulary of storytelling as worlding can open up a path that radically changes how we relate to cultural products and, ultimately, to each other.

When critically engaging with the representational, it is imperative to firstly acknowledge its most prominent, inherent limitation: the degree of homogenization that is implied in any effort of representation (Arnés, 2016) and how that relates with possibilities of identification. While this is a structural characteristic of the act of representing, it is poorly recognized by many who analyze or criticize processes of representation as happening in movies and tv shows. If we go back to the case of *Adam*, agents of cancellation affirmed the movie was problematic because it provided a bad representation of the trans community (or that the movie was bad because it provided problematic representations of the trans community). This can be interpreted as in that they did not see themselves in the images of trans-masculinity, of queerness, that the film proposed. Identification was not possible, therefore representation failed: it was bad, poorly executed. Even when every representation is limited by definition, there remains an expectation for it to be total. This also suggests a certain reckoning of truth, of singularity beneath it: there is one way of properly representing transness, the one the cancellators could identify with. Here, the notion of “seeing oneself” becomes particularly troubling, as the metaphor of the mirror becomes literal. Representation is reduced to a device of replication of what already exists -in this, case of the experience and image of trans-masculinity and of queerness, understood as singular-, instead of as a possibilitator of multiple existences, multiple imag(inari)es. I identify this as the demand for *transparency* operating centrally in the conception of representation that organizes cancel culture around storytelling; that which equates and shrinks storytelling to the solely representational. Following the vocabulary of optics, Karen Barad bases their conceptualization of *diffraction* precisely departing from the concern of the overwhelming representational belief that structures most approaches to discursive practices: a mirroring power of discourse to represent preexisting phenomena (Barad, 2003). They then propose to move from the representational to the performative, from the “approach that gets caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection” (Barad, 2003, p. 802) towards the physics of *diffraction*.

Here, I resort to the onto-ethico-epistemological theoretical perspective of relationalities that I also signaled to at the end of chapter 2 as a clue for imagining otherwise. There, I already pointed to Thiele’s (2014) mobilization of Barad’s conceptual apparatus towards an *ethos of diffraction*, which refuses to envision difference from within the binary oppositional dualities of Modern Thought (Ferreira da Silva, 2016). Here, the diffractive approach as methodology guiding this research surfaces in the form of an ongoing commitment to reading difference differently. Both Barad and Thiele resort to Haraway’s take on diffraction:

Diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do.

Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear” (Haraway, 1992, p. 300).

The production of the same displaced, replication and reflection all resonate with the mirroring expectation of representation, ruled by the principle of transparency. In the case of *Adam*, a diffractive approach wouldn't be concerned with stating that the movie presents bad representation because it is inaccurate (in that it does not enable identification, in that it *differs* from what is considered true and real), but instead with exploring the ways in which these differences are produced and reproduced in the practice of storytelling. Around the case of season 3 of *Master of None*, we can instead wonder: what do these rare, images of as sort of bourgeois black lesbian domesticity do? Do they seek to represent any preexisting realities, or rather possibilite new forms of existence for black lesbians? How are differences here produced and reproduced?

Furthermore, Barad proposes a counter-ontology against transparency of Newtonian physics and Cartesian epistemology, the same transparency that organizes the representational, and allows to shift the focus from questions of correspondence between representations and reality (between the images of transness or queerness proposed by a movie like *Adam*, and the embodiments of transness or queerness the agents of cancellation identify with and perceive as true), to “matters of practices/doings/actions” (Barad, 2003, p. 802). The relational storytelling as worlding that I am delineating here aligns with the latter: a noun that is also a verb, an ensemble of world-making practices, a constant doing.

Finally, José Esteban Muñoz's invitation towards *disidentification* becomes too a potent tool against the trap of transparency implied in representation. For the author, to disidentify “is to read oneself and one's own narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 13). Again, the case of *Adam* presents an interesting scenario for this particular concept. By reversing the trans deception trope, and centering a cis-boy who is attempting to perform trans-masculinity, cis-masculinity retreats from the normative and enters the realm of exceptionality. In this movement, it could be argued that director Rhys Ernst enables a stage for disidentification, in which he disidentifies with a world, the world of cis-normativity, and performs a new one (Muñoz, 1999). This crucial switch glitches the possibility of immediate and linear identification expected by the agents of cancellation. Here, “the worldmaking power of disidentificatory performance” (Muñoz, 1999, p. ix) materializes, along and through the worlding potential of storytelling. Also, like I hinted at earlier, season 3 of *Master of None* proposes a visual juxtaposition of black lesbians and a scenario of heteronormativity and

domesticity (one that is also inserted in the visualities of intimacy of Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage*), that complicates any immediate process of identification.

Furthermore, the dyad of representation/identification, and the solely representational approach as I have been outlining it, rely largely on the notions of separability and exteriority that have been key in this research. In Chapter 2, I explored how the conceptions of accountability and justice implied in the cancellation efforts of *Adam* and *Master of None*, suggested removal (of the harmful other/s, of the problematic out of the problem) as a response to conflict or repair of damage: the movie should not be seen, the creator should retreat from the public. Here I argue that the same assumption of exteriority that allows agents of cancellation to *separate* themselves from the harmful or the problem/atic in order to invoke a cancellation as judgment (as consequence for the harmdoing), the same that structures punitive thinking, is also the one that allows them to *separate* from processes of storytelling. It is not central but noteworthy to add that this notion of the representational is also built on sequentiality -another of the pillars of Modern Thought according to Ferreira Da Silva (2016, 2018)-, in the sense that it is expected to reproduce preexisting phenomena. As Barad questions, this supposes that something first came into existence and then discourse was built around it. In the case of *Adam*, this means, once more, that there is a reality of trans experience that needs to be replicated in storytelling, understood solely as processes of representation. In this line, trans director Lyle Kash questions, in a piece defending Rhys Ernst, *Adam*, and his own creative practice, the implication of representational expectations that results in "that 'what comes before' dictates the stories we tell in the future, the lives we live instead?" (Kash, 2019). This framework presupposes a solely representational understanding of storytelling, in which there is a distinct line that detaches the processes of storytelling -whether we call it writing, filmmaking-, and the images produced -a movie, a tv show-, from the agents of cancellation, which by now and following this logic, we can start to regard as audiences. Also in Chapter 2, I outlined the operations of separability and sequentiality that allow the agents of cancellation not only to outline a moral characterization of the self in binary opposition to an/other, but to exempt and release themselves from engaging with the resolution of the problem, from the responsibility of "alternative worldly enactments" (Thiele, 2014, p. 202). It could be argued that these alternative worldly enactments include think/practicing accountability differently, and participating in processes of storytelling as worlding. Rather, through refusal, the agents of cancellation position themselves as passive spectators and renounce agency. By detaching from the contents (or content creation), the agents of cancellation negate their own implications in the storytelling and their possibility to participate in this world-shaping.

Storytelling as worlding, as I intend to mobilize in this research, is built on a different ontology that is not representational but relational, as outlined by Haraway and Barad.

Firstly, for Haraway, the notion of worlding blends the material and the semiotic in the practices of world-making. In this way, storytelling is not just a concept in the realm of the semiotic, of the representational, but an always relational, always material think-practice of world-building.

Central, ubiquitous to Haraway's conceptualization of worlding is the notion of sf - "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far" (Haraway, 2016, p. 2), as method, practice and process of becoming-with: "sf is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come" (Haraway, 201, p. 31). Here, storytelling as worlding is an enactment of the imagination as proposed at the beginning of this chapter: a building of another world with/in this world, in which another here and now becomes actualized here and now. Storytelling as worlding becomes a potent tool for imaginatively intervening in the present, beyond the limitations of the "possible" allowed by the state or the mirroring restrictions of the solely representational. Storytelling as worlding is not restricted to the individual, organized process of telling a story according to a specific format, it is the wider world-building that occurs with others. To ground this once again on the case studies, storytelling as worlding is not Rhys Ernst directing *Adam*, or Aziz Ansari directing season 3 *Master of None*, it is not any unique or closed signification, but all the possible worlds that become potential in the proliferation of these images; in the contact with everyone who does not refuse to participate in the storytelling. Haraway proposes the notion of sympoiesis to refer to these implicated processes of always making-with: "Nothing makes itself; (...) That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company" (Haraway, 2016, p. 58). By pointing to the multiplicity, storytelling as worlding disallows any binary oppositional approach of in/accurate, or good/bad representation. Storytelling as worlding refuses the notion of a world to mirror properly, and is always creating new possible worlds. Furthermore, Haraway affirms that through sympoiesis, "Barad's agential realism and intra-action become common sense" (Haraway, 2016, p. 34) or, more accordingly to the ethos of this research, this reframing of storytelling as worlding-with through sympoiesis, allows to build senses in common beyond common sense. From this relational approach, the will for exteriority intrinsic to cancel culture is not only impossible but "no longer pertinent to the planetary conditions we live in today" (Bunz, Kaiser, & Thiele, 2020, p. 15). Following this argument, staying with the problem/atic is no longer an invitation, but a onto-ethico-epistemological imperative.

3.4. the queer(ing)

Leading towards the end of this chapter, a final yet central concept remains latent: the queerness of it all. Or better so, the queering of it all. In the introduction, I have positioned my understanding and intended mobilization of the term throughout this research. One that distances queerness from any rigid identity politics, from the universe of the LGBTI+ and its assimilations with the Nation-state and the realm of rights and citizenship. One that insists on the movement of it, the motion and the defiance of it, the doing of it. Following Muñoz once again, queerness becomes a site for a great refusal (1999). This last section seeks to outline what queer storytelling or what queering storytelling can do. And, specifically in relation to cancel culture, how it could articulate a form of relational worlding that refuses and immobilizes the oppositional punitive logics of cancellations.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, the work that opened and inspired this chapter, Donna Haraway asserts the imperative to story otherwise as a key part of the project of staying with the trouble. The “need to change the story, to learn somehow to narrate—to think—outside the prick tale of Humans in History” (Haraway, 2016, p. 40), beyond the Anthropocene. To me, it is very interesting how here she puts together narration and thinking, in a way that mutually informs how she conceives both terms. Here, for Haraway, thinking “is not a process for evaluating information and argument, for being right or wrong, for judging oneself or others to be in truth or error” (Haraway, 2016, p. 36). Thinking, storying, gain distance from binary oppositions or judgment, and get closer to practices of symposis, of relational making-with. She further states: “Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we must change the story” (Haraway, 2016, p. 40). Following this reasoning, I argue that queer storytelling is, firstly, one that enacts a form of think/practicing differently, relationally towards an otherwise.

This also means that changing the narrative of the present, of (cis-hetero)normativity, of punitive thinking and cancel culture, is more than about what kind LGBTI+ content is made and by whom, but about what we collectively, relationally do with those images. If we acknowledge ourselves as agents of storytelling as worlding, it becomes crucial to think what we allow those images to do.

Here, queer storytelling contains motions and activations from different authors and different latitudes, but with an ethico-epistemological great refusal in common. Queer storytelling is blatantly against transparency and, closely related, against any form of complete legibility. In this sense, it allows or invites a process of disidentification as hermeneutics, as outlined by Muñoz (1999), where senses are never encapsulated and waiting to be read univocally by an ideal static subject, but always in the making, relationally. Where cross-identifications are allowed and expected, in a way that resembles the kind of

making oddkin that Haraway considers central to storying otherwise, to staying with the trouble.

From Argentina, val flores extensively explores the notion of cuir writing or, even more, cuir language. She proposes the notion of *interruqcion*, an interruption, a glitch in the systematicity and stability of language, one that is already interrupted by a q where a p should be, maybe like queerness disrupting grammar. She defines the *interruqcion* (2013) as:

not a cut that separates and closes, thus reaffirming a system of belongings and closures (...) (specificity is another form of property). The *interruqcion* enables a fracture in which territorial allocations (politics separated from aesthetics separated from erotics) become soft, happily imprecise and flaky, and you can start playing with them, interchanging them, overlapping them and equalizing them in a collage of variable depths. (p. 16)

I am here interested in the notion of specificity as a form of property. If we apply this to think about the rigid legibility expected by identity politics in films like *Adam*, again, this supposes a unique image of trans-masculinity, of queerness, that is the property and the cancellators. Other possible readings are not allowed to play with these images, to remix them, to build other images, other ontologies of queerness from them.

At this point, it becomes once again possible and operational to consider agents of cancellation, as they have appeared in this research around the case studies and the proposed research object, as audiences. Even though I acknowledge that this concept has been disputed and mobilized by decades of Cultural, Media and Film Studies, I here want to engage with it in rather schematic terms. If we begin by considering solely the realm of the representational -which, as we saw, agents of cancellation affirm by the ways in which they engage with stories-, we can here consider audiences as the specific, contingent collectivity that is formed around the encounter with a story. Also, in this framework (of cancellations of the representational), audiences are clearly separated (exterior) to the story and not expected (or willing) to actively participate in the process of storytelling. This is crucial if we think what kind of audience queer storytelling builds. Or, rather, what role this notion of audience has in the queer(ing) of storytelling. If we situate queer storytelling as worlding, as relational world making, the position of audience cannot be shaped by the principles of separability and exteriority that structure punitive cancel culture; it cannot refuse the responsibility to participate in the process of making-with. I resort to the notion of audience then, to refer to the contingent collectivity that appears to be in a position of exteriority and passiveness in relation to the storytelling, and that the queering of it will reach out to

re-position as always already with/in it. The notion of audience here becomes the departure point of a crucial, ontological shift, between the representational and the worlding. It becomes the site of moving away from the op/position of cancellation, and towards the relational queer world-building.

To explore this even further, and outline what to me becomes the central characteristic of queer storytelling (as worlding), I will resort to the elaborations around audiences as proposed by feminist cinema theory. In her essay *Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema* (1985), Teresa de Lauretis' overviews how feminist cinema theory in the seventies and eighties had prominently focused either on the content, the images of women and cinematic representation, or on the cinematic apparatus, the process of filmmaking. These efforts seeked to outline what constituted women's cinema or feminist cinema. This framework, largely based on psychoanalytical approaches, seldom considered audiences. And when it did, it was largely focused on processes of identification (or the impossibility of it), like the well-known conceptualizations of Laura Mulvey about visual pleasure (1975) and how female audiences were forced to identify with a male gaze. As also critically pointed by Muñoz, this supposes a rather passive notion of (female) audience that has no agency in the process of signification (1999). For De Lauretis, trying to establish or recognize a feminist or female aesthetic, or a specific language (formal, stylistic or thematic markers) that could unequivocally point to a specifically female filmmaking, is to generalize and universalize women as Woman. Similarly to Flores, De Lauretis is refusing to locate a *specificity* of women's cinema and to consider the topic in terms of address -"who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom" (De Lauretis, 1985, p. 164). This resembles and supports my approach to queer storytelling beyond a matter of a LGBTI+ specificity that codes and affirms property over signifiers and signification, disrupting the blatant separation between creator, story and audience. Instead, De Lauretis is interested in articulating "the conditions and forms of vision for another social subject" (De Lauretis, 1985, p. 162). Working with Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision, De Lauretis is interested in *cinematic processes that allow and oblige spectators to see difference differently*, and therefore to challenge and collapse the stability of known social subjects -such as Woman- and creative multiple ones. She sees this clearly in Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), in which a myriad of different women (from different positions regarding race, class, sexuality and political alignment) dispute forms of feminist interventions in a science-fictional space-time in which a socialist revolution took place in the United States. The cinematic contraptions at place -"its barely coherent narrative, its quick-paced shots and sound montage, the counterpoint of image and word, the diversity of voices and languages, and the self-conscious science-fictional frame of the story" (De Lauretis, 1985, p. 165)- disarrange and elicit processes of direct, univocal identification.

According to De Lauretis, this creates an spectator whose place is the contradiction, the facing of the contradictions and tensions within itself (1985). *Born in Flames* does not permit the female spectator to identify with the film as Woman, but to acknowledge the complexities and differences within women. The dyad of representation/identification is purposefully unsettled.

I will borrow DeLauretis' reasoning and make it central to my arrangement of queer storytelling as worlding. Actualizing her conceptualization, I mobilize it to articulate queer storytelling a form of relational worlding that *allows and obliges processes of seeing difference differently*. This resonates with many of the characteristics that I have been outlining along this chapter: insofar as it destabilizes processes of direct identification (and therefore of possibilities of direct representation), it aligns with Muñoz's disidentification (1999), as well as with the queering as refusal of transparency and legibility. Furthermore, it's also in line with Barad's diffractive approach, in that it underlines and highlights the processes of production of differences instead of differences as static places for identification.

Queer storytelling as worlding thus articulates a mood of reception, through "the being singular plural of queerness" (Muñoz, 1999, pp. 14, 15), that possibilitates a new sense of the social: one that is relational, rebellious against constant neoliberal attempts for individualization, categorization and identification. Queer storytelling relies on opacity, ambiguity and the excess, a surplus that complicates legibility and stands against the tyranny of absolute meanings and the functional complicity of stable categories (Flores, 2013). It is not then, following both De Lauretis and Muñoz, about a specific form or content. Or rather, is about an entanglement of form, content and engagement that allows and obliges *processes of seeing difference differently*. Queer storytelling does not pre-exist in any absolute or pure configuration, but it becomes in this relationality, in this intra-action between agential components.

To close this section, I want to point towards sites where these enactments of queer storytelling as worlding can be found. They happen to be very close to where we have been looking at. Previously in this chapter I quoted trans director Lyle Nash, making a statement in favor of *Adam*, Rhys Ernst and his own filmmaking practices. In 2021, Nash released his debut feature-film titled *Death and Bowling*, which was executive produced by Ernst. The film accomplishes something remarkable: it is greatly trans but not about transness. I would argue is a film about grief, community, death and desire, while in relation to the trans experience. Most interestingly, the film makes almost no assertions about which performers or characters are trans, thus not only allowing but pushing the audiences to see difference differently: identification (of the self or the other/s) is not possible in the face of the abundance of images of queerness, that are also in constant movement, rejecting compartmentalization. It could also be argued that even *Adam* holds less intense

provocations in this direction, like the mentioned premise of inversion of the trans deception trope, which on itself suggests a disorientation of identification and opens a path to see where and how differences appear. As I have suggested, some images of season 3 of *Master of None* could also arise a confusion in direct identification, by framing black lesbian love in the genealogy of decadent heteronormative domesticity inaugurated by Bergman's *Scenes of a Marriage*. There is something about these images that creates a displacement, that evokes at the same time a sense of disruption (like occupying a place you are not supposed to be in) and refusal. It is unclear, opaque, if audiences are invited to feel the aspiration to become this couple, or to question this couple; or both or none.

3.5 the otherwise

The otherwise requires a commitment to not knowing. Are you ready for that?
(Olufemi, 2021, p. 17)

To close this chapter, and while I approach the closing of this research, I want to make a brief comment on the otherwise, resorting less to the demands and roundabouts of academic writing and more to the poetic possibilities of storytelling. I want to shallowly delve into why I choose this specific word and how it contains many of the resonances of the queer and the worlding that I have outlined throughout this final section. The otherwise provides a momentary retreat from the vocabulary of differentiation, it becomes literally a form to talk about difference differently. The otherwise points to another version of the here and now, one that can also take place here and now. The otherwise thus becomes a refusal of linear temporalities and spatialities. The otherwise brings the horizon closer, up to touch and play with. The otherwise could mean, playing with grammar and the role of wise as a suffix, in the direction of the other: the otherwise signals to the relational. The otherwise is not definitive or definable, is not singular, "it is a posture, the layered echoes of a gesture" (Olufemi, 2021, p. 3). The otherwise is always in the making. The otherwise is "not that thing that is obscured and needs to be unobscured. Not a smudge, or an absence, or an entity to be owned or conquered" (p. 7). The otherwise resists transparency and complete legibility. The otherwise is a provocation, an invitation to staying with the problem/atic. The otherwise is a belief that there are other possibilities of co-existence.

Ending remarks

This thinking process started with a metaphor -a cancellation as a door closing- and an embodied reaction -a discomfort brought by that closing. To conclude means rather literally to close (its etymology points to the latin *concludere* - to shut), and, as I have attempted to sustain along this research, I have no interest in any form of knowledge building that seeks to seclude or exclude. So, instead of formulating summarizing conclusions, I will here rehearse a reflective exercise on the journey of this thesis, and strive to open yet another path.

My friend Rita, one of my favorite thinking companions, recently told me about a question she encountered during her bachelor Artistic Studies: when does a performance end? She came to the affirmation that performances have no end, but an ending (she actually said it in Portuguese, which resembles Spanish: *não tem um fim, mas um final*). These two words (in English, Portuguese and Spanish) seem to collapse into each other, equating meaning. Yet, in her elaboration, the end marks a definitive closure, irreversible, that can not imagine an afterwards. A performance stops existing completely after the lights go out and the audience leaves the venue. Meanwhile, an ending suggests just a point in time, the one that divides the present of the performance and all the resonances it will echo after the formal end. This conversation unexpectedly gave me the vocabulary to title this section. As it has been clear throughout this thinking process, I pay special attention to the words I think with. These ruminations then do not seek to be final or closing, but simply mark a point in time (and space, in the unavoidable sequentiality that such a written document structures), in which this research starts another journey of resonance beyond my present intervention.

The departure point for this thinking process, long before the first words of this text were written, was an embodied uneasiness. Born from a personal frustration with feminist and LGBTI+ activism, I developed a concern about how we are treating each other and experiencing difference. In cancel culture, I saw a very specific actualization of this paranoid (Sedgwick, 2003) perception in relation to works of fiction, such as the ones that became the case studies of this thesis. As a feminist, a researcher and a creator of LGBTI+ content, I felt the compelling need to address this issue extensively and thus make a critical contribution (from academia but hopefully not limited to academia) to the current lack of material on the topic.

From the opening scene of cancel culture as a closing phenomena, I committed to an epistemological and methodological project of opening, of refusing oppositional argumentations, of avoiding blatant definitions, of diffractively reading and writing through the intricacies and crossroads of cancel culture. This choice did not come without

complications and was definitely the greatest challenge of this process. But, for the same reason, it was what made it an actual learning process of thinking with others (a multitude of authors from diverse disciplines and latitudes, and otherwise thinkers like friends or youtubers or journalists) and not of mere production and reproduction of text. This was a project of staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), of staying with the problem/atic, of actively engaging with a complex, ongoing and hard to grasp phenomena. On a similar note, this thesis affirmed a critical perspective that did not assume a position of moral superiority or exteriority from the problem it dealt with; but that rather acknowledged the partial, situated and fallible quality of any critical position. I insisted on a form of criticality that did not replicate the dismissive and punitive principles of cancel culture, and that was instead mobilized by a sense of curiosity.

Guided by my research questions, as well as further interrogations that arised in the process, I was able to establish a variety of relations between cancel culture and the case studies as examples of contemporary queer storytelling in visual fictions. I situated cancel culture in a specific genealogy of kin practices of accountability and punishment. I located connections between the cancellation of works of fiction and the punitive logics that structure the criminal justice system. I proposed imagination and queer storytelling as political sites that could enable ways to relate with fictions, but also to each other, otherwise. I crafted a formulation of queer storytelling that escapes the representational and aligns with the ethico-epistemological project of diffraction.

Even more so, I would like to think that this and other conceptualizations here crafted have the potential to surpass this thinking process and inform new reflections and creations in other academic fields, as well as other forms of knowledge building. For once, I am personally curious to think about how this notion of queer storytelling, as a form of relational worlding that allows and obliges processes of seeing difference differently, can be actualized to think about queer horror films. This concept could be embedded in a long tradition within and beyond Film Studies that have considered the specific potentialities of non-canonical genres like horror, fantasy or science-fiction as disruptive sites of enactment of queerness. Queer storytelling, as articulated here, could serve as an interesting tool to think about some of the contemporary work of horror that, particularly in Latin America, is offering some of the most potent imag(inari)es of queer and feminist resistance. Furthermore, I imagine it can also be mobilized in the literary field. Again, my personal interest leads me to wonder about what this conceptualization of queer storytelling could contribute to think about, for example, enactments of queernes and decoloniality in contemporary Argentiennan fictions by female and LGBTI+ authors. As well as informing new readerships, I consider that any of these early interrogations could be developed into a personal following project of research.

I want to invite readers to keep thinking about cancel culture, as an ongoing, ever-changing phenomena that offers numerous possibilities of inquiry. I encourage others to take over the formulations of this thinking process (and of everything that informed it) and go further, threading new, unexpected patterns. To locate, acknowledge and critique the punitive, dismissive dynamics that structure not only cancellation, but our own engagement with the world and each other. In the face of urgent planetary conditions, this commitment to staying with the problem/atic could be a way to keep imagining a life together.

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