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Narrating Queer Identity in Xochitl Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming*

ABSTRACT
The following study introduces an exploration of queer narrative identity as depicted in selected characters in recently popularized Caribbean American fiction. A close examination of Xochitl Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming* allows for an analysis of the challenges faced and the contested spaces traversed by queer literary characters, within a transcultural context, subsequently foregrounding a nuanced understanding of queer identity and relations of power. Through a selective reading of Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming* the literary representation of queer identity is placed under an intersectional lens and examined against a backdrop of postcolonial US Caribbean communities in New York. Stereotypical representations of Latin machismo, intergenerational conflict, intense familial relationships and a closeted behavioral model regarding queerness are some of the main factors that emphasize immigrant vulnerability and affect identity negotiation.

KEYWORDS
Latin American studies; transculturality; narrative identity

1. Queer identity in contemporary Caribbean American fiction

The LGBTIQ+ community has long been enmeshed in contexts of severe marginalization, historical misrepresentation, physical and psychological vulnerability. Within today's whirlwind of literary production, LGBTQ+ portrayals seem to have found fertile ground to illuminate the nuanced experiences of queer identity and to encroach the previously selective silence that encumbered queer discourse. The following study introduces an exploration of queer narrative identity and a struggle of identity negotiation set against a backdrop of patriarchal stereotypical notions embedded in US Caribbean communities. A close examination of male queer literary characters of Latin American origin brings forth a nuanced understanding of queer identity in relation to power exchanges, patriarchal modes of oppression, performativity and certain fantasies

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of an American "good life"[1]. The main fictional characters discussed are the female protagonist, the protagonist's queer brother and their relational others. His closeted sexual identity appears to gradually hinder and affect several aspects of the character's personal, social and political life. My analysis, thus, revolves primarily around a queer Latin man's character, in recently popularized, female-authored Latin American fiction. Character analysis in this paper is purposefully conducted in a manner that highlights within-group tensions in contemporary Caribbean American communities. Through a selective reading of Xochitl Gonzalez's *Olga Dies Dreaming* the literary representation of queer identity is placed under an intersectional lens and examined against the backdrop of tensions within US Caribbean postcolonial communities in twenty-first century New York. Persisting stereotypical representations of Latin machismo, intergenerational conflict, familial relationships and a closeted behavioral model regarding queerness are some of the main factors that emphasize immigrant vulnerability and affect identity negotiation.

2. The Caribbean imaginary, colonial legacy and sexuality

The intersecting influences of colonial histories, racial visions, sexuality, and identity formation has long been a crucial and recurring theme in the Caribbean imaginary. In order to fully grasp the Caribbean region's complexity and fraught histories it is important to understand how colonial ideals and mindsets, transferred and imposed upon the colonized, continue to shape and affect identity formation in contemporary contexts.

Roderick Ferguson in his book on sexual difference in America, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004), offers a framework that explores the intertwining relationship between colonialism and sexuality. In diaspora communities, this entanglement points to legacies of colonialism which perpetuate racial standards whilst linking racialized visions to heteronormative standards, imposed upon the colonized by Western traditions. Ferguson contends that colonial regimes imposed harsh sexual norms on colonized peoples. When looking at queerness in the Caribbean diaspora, I argue that colonial histories and rigid heteronormative ideas continue to inform subjects in communities, creating unresolved within-group tensions. Ferguson's framework highlights that within Caribbean communities being queer is considered an "aberration", a sort of deviant behavior. This fact suggests that residual colonial mindsets which view heterosexuality as racialized, gendered, and tied to colonial constructions

[1] In Lauren Berlant's seminal work, *Cruel Optimism (2011)* the concept of the "good life" offers an important interpretation of how aspirations and neo-capitalist impressions of a fulfilled life affect and hinder individuals' well-being and social lives.

of "civilization" continue to exist in Caribbean's postcolonial landscapes. Hence, as Gonzalez's narrative suggests, queerness often remains hidden or suppressed.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) expands the understanding of queerness by addressing the epistemological structures that form how sexuality is understood, viewed and performed. Sedgwick examines the binaries of "out" and "closeted". She argues that the closet is not merely a spatial or temporal condition but a sort of a central mechanism through which sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is constructed and regulated. Transporting this thought in a Caribbean context, this theory proves to be particularly pertinent. Even in postcolonial contexts heteronormativity is deeply embedded in Caribbean societies and continues to perpetuate the closet as a defining feature of queer identity. Through an examination of male Caribbean American hidden sexuality I will proceed to further explore how the concept of the "closeted" and not sexually liberated man hinders multiple aspects of his life and severely affects his well-being. As Gonzalez's narrative evolves it is emphasized that queerness is often obscured, both publicly and privately, due to colonial stereotypes, patriarchal oppression and societal repression.

The concept of hidden queerness is crucial for understanding how queer Caribbean individuals, especially male ones in this narrative, internalize their non-normative sexual identities when repressed. Drawing on the work of MacAdams, I explore how individuals construct meaning and try to make sense of their lives through the stories they tell about themselves. In the case of queer Caribbean identity, the narrative is often painted with denial, ambivalence, fragmented storytelling and distortion of linear spatio-temporal structure. The central character tries to negotiate his sexuality with tumultuous and non-accepting environments. The trauma of the closet and the ongoing cultural repression of queerness, shapes how the individual develops a sense of self, often through fragmented or repressed narratives.

A critical examination of Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" is significantly tied to the context of traumatized subjectivities in the novel. Berlant (2011) contends that "cruel optimism" refers to the attachment to unattainable or harmful objects of desire – goals that, even though they are ultimately unattainable, continue to shape the way people invest in certain individualistic aims.

This concept aligns with the experiences of individuals who face repression or confinement in US contexts. The pursuit of an authentic, flourishing identity through a pursuit of upward mobility, goods, or social recognition may often lead to disillusionment and hinder self-growth. In the novel, the male main character embodies the struggle of "cruel optimism", as he chases the elusive dream of individual flourishing, social acceptance and ascension in the political sphere yet the more he keeps his sexual identity covert the more he is traumatized and confined. The character's development evolves from a position in the closet

to a position of agency, imbued with acceptance and courage. However, in the process of disclosing his authentic self to his relational others, personal liberation at times leads to unattainable goals, ultimately resulting in the reinforcement of an identity caught in-between the closet and a striving for fulfillment.

The aforementioned theoretical frameworks of Ferguson (2004), Sedgwick (1990), MacAdams (2018), and Berlant (2011), inform my exploration of Gonzalez's novel with regard to navigation and expressing queer identity within a Caribbean American diasporic context. This paper will delve into how queer individuals in the US Caribbean, through a journey from repression to personal agency are able to address their past traumatic memories and reach toward self-fulfilling and authentic personal development.

3. Narrative development and queer identity

The novel offers a conjunction of different facets of the immigrant lived experience. It simultaneously addresses Puerto-Ricanness in New York, gentrification, remnants of colonialism, machismo, relationality, and queerness. Gonzalez employs a third person narrator and shifts narrative points of view. Linear narration is often intercepted by shorter or lengthier flashback narrations. A non-linear structure – marked by interjecting flashbacks – disrupts a traditional, linear progression of storytelling. This narrative mode creates spacio-temporal fluidity, where the past and present are in constant dialogue and the reader is transposed to a fragmented sequence of spatial and temporal grounds. The narration goes back and forth between chronological time and subjective time, allowing for a deeper exploration of characters' experiences, struggle with past trauma and fluctuating internal states. This narrative technique evokes a sense of fragmentation or even disorientation, which mirrors the psychological complexity of the characters; who in this particular case grapple with external critical conditions of their surroundings that deeply affect their inner psychological state.

The narrative focuses greatly on Olga Acevedo, the female protagonist, yet for the purpose of this study my focus shifts to Prieto Acevedo, Olga's brother and prominent character in the novel. Prieto is portrayed as a benevolent Brooklyn congressman who tries to do justice to his home country, Puerto Rico, all while being a closeted gay man. Through flashback narrations of his life's trajectory, it appears that the character grapples with stereotypical representations of machismo, believing his queerness to be unaccepted by his immigrant family and community. Caribbean diasporic communities, according to Ferguson's critique in Aberrations in Black (2004), maintain residual Western stereotypes of patriarchy and heteronormativity, many of which were imposed by European colonisers to the colonized Caribbean people. According to such by-products of colonialism, being heterosexual, and especially a womanizer in the case of men, coincides with colonial constructions of "civilization" and links heterosexuality

to dominance, power and authority in the public sphere. Prieto initially presents himself as a family man and politician while keeping his gay identity a secret. Being a Democrat in the borough of Brooklyn, Prieto struggles to uphold his appointed status as the "Latino Obama" (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 144), an identity marker by which he is essentially conditioned. From early on in the novel, when the narrative point of view first changes from Olga's to Prieto's story, it is notable that Prieto as a newly elected congressman wanted the people of South Brooklyn to "feel good for voting him" and strived to carry the political "mantle" from the immigrant generation before him (p. 35). However, as he stressfully maintains two households in the present moment the narrative foreshadows his living a double life, one as a heterosexual young politician and one as a closeted queer man. The transposition of narrative between past and present time underscores a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty, as the reader gets a grasp of the male character's pressure to balance two different identities. Moreover, flashback narration and disruption of linearity allow for a thematic exploration of memory, trauma, and identity formation, reflecting Prieto's ambivalence and shame as he presumes that his queerness would never be accepted by his relational others. Revealing his authentic self would result in losing ground with his Caribbean community, his family and his Caribbean American voters.

Queerness and its representation in popular culture has been affected by colonial histories, constraints on sexual identity and social exclusion. In Latin American fiction, due to religious beliefs and Catholic influences queer identity has been downplayed or inexplicitly mentioned. During the Latin American literary boom (1960s–1970s), which was predominated by authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes, queerness was at times present in narrative but not explicitly acknowledged, often reflected in "forbidden" sexual desire or fluid sexual identity which remained unaddressed. In the past few decades, however, Latin American fiction, film and television have progressed to embrace more overt representations of queerness. This is followed by works produced by the Afro-Latinx community which represent the struggles of queer people of color alongside racial stereotypes, colonial legacies and within-group communal tensions. Some Afro-Latinx works are "Mujer Negra" by Luz Méndez, "Queer and Black in Latin America" by José Esteban Muñoz (1999) and Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004).

As queer theorists have observed, "queer" serves as an umbrella term for diverse sexual groups that do not fit into heterosexual or cisgender categories (Shah, 2023). These groups that divert from heteronormative representations tend to be minoritized socially. Nevertheless, theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Lauren Berlant (2011), Judith Butler (2006) and Roderick Ferguson (2004), offer a thorough examination of the social construction of sexual identities and behaviors in gay and lesbian studies. Judith Butler's work has been

highly influential in Caribbean queer theory. Her writings particularly in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* has opened up a pathway for Caribbean scholars to challenge normative ideas about gender and sexuality. Her critique on performativity has been integrated in discussions on how Caribbean identities are performed within colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial contexts. Ferguson (2004), in specific, moves on to examine how racial identity, queerness, and colonial histories intersect. Ferguson (2004) suggests the concept of a "queer of color critique", which primarily focuses on how queer people of color navigate their lives under the remnants of colonial legacies, especially underscoring the remaining colonial impact of a Western heteronormative mindset enforced upon the colonized (pp. 3–6). In Gonzalez's novel, male queer characters occupy a liminal position within Caribbean communities. The protagonist struggles with external heteronormative gender ideas, many of which align with stereotypes of Latin machismo and being a "womanizer". Ferguson argues that colonialism did not only enforce racial hierarchies but also sexual ones, through mindsets and agendas against homosexuality. As the narrative takes place in 21st century Brooklyn and Puerto Rico it can be suggested that colonial ideas regarding heteronormativity are residual and still impactful.

Sedgwick underscores that the term "queer" can mean something *different*. Such difference lies in the fact that the term may refer to an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made . . . to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 7). The term emerges as a polysemous rather than a monolithic one. According to Sedgwick (1994), queer opens up to outward "dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all" and relate to other identity-constituting factors. The insofar fraught term "queer" "deepens and shifts" and extends to encompass further dimensions of diversity (p. 8). Drawing from Sedgwick's conceptualization, I argue that the term and its constituents suggest a spectrum outlook, revealing queer not as a static categorization but as a more fluid iteration; a spectrum that we can understand as inclusive and expansive. In the novel, Prieto's diversity – which includes non-heteronormative aspects of his personality – is something which he hesitates to embrace. His political and social status enmesh and interfere with his personal one. The congressman keeps his queerness covert from all his family, even from his sister Olga with whom he shares a deeper bond, and from his immigrant community which he represents and stands for in the political field. Although Prieto holds a certain level of privilege, the way his narrative evolves, be it from his or third parties' perspective, suggests an analysis from an intersectional perspective.

Kimberle Crenshaw in her seminal work "Mapping the Margins" (1991) introduces intersectionality as an approach which attends to the overlapping categories of race and gender and how they affect identity construction, often

leading to marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Crenshaw's intersectionality attends to within-group tensions and intragroup differences. Her concept has expanded over the years and currently encompasses multiple intersecting categories. Olena Hankivsky (2014) has expanded on the term, underscoring that intersectionality "promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations", such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, migration status and others, and that these interactions "occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power" (p. 2). Different social locations interact and interplay with queerness in Prieto's narrative, leading to a complicated positioning and identity development. The novel's closeted politician and family man has created a personal myth around his name and societal status while keeping aspects of his personality hidden. For him lying has evolved into "a survival tactic he mastered" accompanied by a "sense of shame", guilt and cowardice (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 89–91). Prieto is a man of color from a Puerto Rican diasporic background who has lived through the struggles of his working class family and has had stereotypes of machismo imprinted on him. As a colored man in NYC trying to make political difference for his home country and not wishing to displease his family nor his Puerto Rican community, Prieto believes that his queerness would be associated with a social, political and personal stigma. Labeled as the "Latino Obama" and employing a "linguistic mezcla" in his public speaking Prieto manages through his narrative process to stir attention to "all facets of himself at once" (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 144). He accommodates everyone's needs and expectations, but purposefully hides his sexuality from the public. Halfway through the novel at a high-end charity event he gracefully makes conversation with the wealthy crowd of Manhattan. Prieto casually resolves to code-switching alternating between Spanish, Spanish slang and English in order to address his predicted voters, be they Puerto Rican, Afro Latin, or Upper East Siders. Nonetheless, through distinct narrative slips it becomes evident that Prieto has never outwardly disclosed his real private life or sexuality. Narrative slips include mentions that "no man can be all things at once" (p. 144) Olga's admittance that she "long suspected that Prieto was gay" and he would rather die than "embrace an identity so 'alternative'" (p. 111). Olga's narrated thoughts offer missing and invaluable fractals of her brother's identity construction. The latter suggests a negation of any "alternative" status that deviates from heterosexual norms and progressively spirals into a self-circumscribed lived experience that hints at an experience of oppression.

Residual stereotypes of machismo are voiced in the novel through intercepting narrative flashbacks. The family's mother, a political activist who is portrayed as an imposing but physically absent figure, intervenes in the narrative through letters she sends to her children from afar. The italicized letters range from 1990 to the narrative present of 2017 and chronicle Olga and Prieto's mother's prescriptions

on how to live their lives. Among the mother's pressures on Prieto's maintaining an activist political stand in favor of Puerto Rico, it is mentioned that "as a young bachelor . . . un muchacho tan guapo como tu" it would be best that he "take a wife" (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 85–86). Indirectly, the mother dictates that her son become a revolutionary, "manly" leading figure with a strong woman by his side to further aid his personal and political cause, leaving no room for diversions. The mother's rigid and prescriptive voice has a strong impact on Prieto's identity formation through the years and prompts his closeted behavior. The son has in essence constructed his externally perceived identity and his heterosexual façade in a continuous attempt to earn his mother's acceptance and approval. This stance is further instilled by his family's heteronormative expectations that being a Latino man coincides with being strictly heterosexual. Feelings of confusion and pressure envelope the son, whose storytelling demonstrates a degree of vulnerability.

4. Vulnerability and the narrative of the "good life"

Prieto's silenced personal account when Olga narrates illuminates a level of vulnerability and a possibility for social exclusion and personal confinement. From an intersectionality perspective, inequities result from multiple intersecting factors that condition one's lived experience (Hankivsky, 2014). Placing an intersectional lens on Prieto's personal narrative and Olga's narration of Prieto reveals underlying power relations. These relations are unveiled in the sphere of the personal, the domestic and the social. The multiple, intersecting social locations in Prieto's life condition him to live a fabricated, closeted life, one that disempowers his personhood and proposes a fabricated semblance of an American narrative of the "good life". Lauren Berlant (2011) explains the good life as a fantasy "by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something'" (p. 2). This might include reciprocity in couples, a happy family life, upward mobility and professional goals. The fantasy is subsequently linked to the self-coined term "cruel optimism", a relation that occurs when objects of desire or optimism serve as an "obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Relations "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). According to philosophy theorist Ruti (2018), Berlant's cruel optimism names "the gist of the American dream: the hope that hard work - effort, striving, diligence, and doggedness - will be rewarded" (p. xxxvi). American fantasies of a better future often generate negative feelings in the individual and deter one's development. They are also greatly based on individuation. In Berlant's theorization, individuation is intertwined with what the American way of life and society deem as a successful personal development. This relies heavily on notions of individualism, personal flourishing, upward mobility and the accumulation of goods, approximating the American Dream fantasy. Maintaining a way of life that is based on individuation

entails a constant striving for personal success which simultaneously hinders self-growth. That is how optimistic life goals lead to "cruelty" in Berlant's concept, suggesting that the pursuit of such individualistic ideals actually hinders personal flourishing.

Prieto experiences "cruelty" since he has seemingly reached the American "good life" prototype, by being elected as congressman, having formed a family and ascended socially. He has outwardly established an identity as a respected politician with an activistic scope, a valued family member and a beloved father. His objects of desire and optimistic goals seem to have been attained. Yet he remains discontent, confined and oppressed. In the novel, character's goals and achievements are tied to optimistic relations which are based, however, on ideals of individual fulfillment, social ascension, and ultimately linked with "cruelty". On an external, sociopolitical level the character falls victim to the "complex issue of systemic oppression" since if he is outed as a Latino gay man he will lose the support of the "macho Hispanic community" and wind up politically disempowered (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 95–96). Conversely, if not elected, he will not be able to assist in the prosperity of his community. On a personal level, having "his most private life becoming public paralyzed him with fear", dreading his family's rejection (pp. 95–96). The character experiences perplexity and ambivalence, causal feelings of "cruel", optimistic relations that impede his identity evolution. The "good life" fantasy that the character has been striving for most of his life is a fabricated and nebulous one; additionally, it functions as a major deterrence to his self-growth and well-being.

5. Sustained notions of Queerness and narrative identity

Prieto's personal account of an internalized life story constitutes his narrative identity; an identity impacted by his hidden queerness and social pretense resulting in a deeply conflicted construction contoured with ambivalence about his future. From a psychological standpoint, McAdams (2008) underlines that within the cluster of personal narratives and life stories narrative identity refers to "an individual's internalized, evolving and integrative story of the self" (p. 7). It involves the integration of "the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Within this realm, "personality shows its most important and intricate relations to culture and society" mindfully proposing that "the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity" (McAdams, 2008, pp. 242–243). As personal storytelling develops it becomes evident that Prieto's communal surroundings (that of his Puerto Rican peers and family and his Brooklyn constituents) shape important aspects of his character development. His political life, social standing and personal life are affected by a lack of mothering and the confinements of a sexuality kept hidden from his family and peers.

The character's storytelling is infused with conflicting emotions, traumatic memories from a motherless past and a lack of acceptance from his relational others. His outward facade is antithetic to his true personality, something which consequently generates an inner struggle. It can also be deduced that all the basic aspects of his life are externally regulated (by his family and his intimate surroundings) and construed in heteronormative terms. Prieto is labeled as the "king of the Castle" in family spaces. The reference constitutes a chapter title and a prominent excerpt in the novel. It emphasizes the family's view of Prieto as a heterosexual man, a valued figure and a leader. It also encloses a hint of irony. The Puerto Rican family stereotypically identifies him in heteronormative terms. Yet that occurs due to Prieto's own facade and silence. In the *Epistemology of the Closet* Sedgwick (1990) underscores the performative aspects of texts with regard to themes of sexuality adding that "closetedness itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (p. 3). Followingly, the fact that "silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge" (p. 4). Silence and ignorance acquire potency in the narrative and fuel an endless cycle of pretense. Prieto behaves "like a robot playing the part of himself" (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 112). Retrospectively his "identity was completely enmeshed with the appearance of perfection" and despite that "people weren't outwardly homophobic the description of the perfect Latino man did not include the word 'gay'". Prieto's "need to be liked was compounded by his palpable fear of disappointing people: their family, their mother, his constituents" (p. 112). Feelings of fear, therefore, endorse his secretive attitude. When the "king returned to his castle" - a metaphor, meaning that he came home to his peers - he made "everyone feel special" and "seduce[d] attention from a crowd" (p. 112). The use of the metaphor implies a valued status that is anchored on appraisal, responsibility and the expectations of others. The brother's inclination to please and serve reveals that his notion of belonging is heavily dependent on acceptance by his relational others. Acceptance and access are causally related in this context. Losing both would result in a crisis of identity, which the character purposefully evades.

6. Agency and constraints: beyond silence

The narrative gradually reveals that suppression and hiding of sexuality foreclose any chances of identity evolution and personal growth. In order to achieve higher levels of personal well-being and self-development, individuals need to acquire agency, something which in the case studied surfaces through storytelling. Acceptance from others constitutes a vital element of the character's identity development. What emerges as equally crucial, however, is Prieto's self-acceptance. From a pragmatic standpoint, a revelation of his queerness to

the public might oscillate his political standing resulting in him losing caliber in the political terrain. A strong and stable political position is needed in order for him to exert influence in Puerto Rico's affairs. Openness regarding sexuality may cause a scandal which would subsequently lead to deprivation of power. Sedgwick (1994) argues that ignorance or pretense of ignorance can potentially generate complexity with regard to instances of political struggle. Reification of ignorance appears corollary to danger and might be labeled as a "force" placed "in a demonized space on a never quite explicit ethical schema" (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 124). The convoluted spheres, of the individual's most private, personal sphere and the sphere of the political, open up to an iteration of the stance that "the personal is political". As Berlant (2019) emphasizes in *Reading Sedgwick* "contemporary state not only enjoys but explicitly promotes discrimination", proportionately dismantling civil rights (p. 4).

Reflections in the novel correspond to pertinent and sustained suppression of non-heteronormative individuals. Feigned ignorance, patriarchal claims and insidious political threats regarding the revelation of Prieto's sexuality devolve into a life narrative of vulnerability, in which Prieto is labeled "the local hero, the straight man" and "the compromised, closeted homosexual" and progressively loses more of his agency (Gonzalez, 2023, p. 96). To acquire agency and self-assertion the character needs to resolve to an open declaration of his true sexuality through a confessional narrative. Prieto, from his narrative point of view, remembers "the nights when he was allowed to be completely whole, nights before anyone knew who he was" (p. 98). His former anonymity had provided him with a sense of wholeness and he presently recognizes that he harbors a need to be relieved of the multiple burdens he carries, including his responsibility towards others, his own self shaming and his search for approval. Having confronted his mother after years of absence, he is left to grapple with his authentic self. Prieto offers flashback reflections of his life within the years when speaking to his young daughter and forms a confessional narrative filled with conflicting emotions and a state of fragility. He admits to always wanting to fit in and being afraid of being ridiculed if his true identity was exposed. Finally, in a brave attempt to overcome his self-confinement and shame he openly articulates his queerness to his daughter and the public sphere of Brooklyn's Sunset Park.

Prieto's storytelling gradually evolves from one of concealment, shame and silence to one imbued with an explicit sexual orientation, courage, and a total re-signification of his identity. His narrative transforms from one that devolves in silence and struggle to a narrative of reconstruction and acceptance. The character manages to reconstitute his identity by forming a storied account of his life that, eventually, integrates aspects of himself which were formerly hidden, denied and harmful to his psychological state. While documenting his life story, he grapples with what McAdams refers to as "a conflict between . . . agency and communion"

(McAdams, 2006, p. 244). Agency refers to "the tendency to expand, defend, or express the self" and "communion refers to joining the self with others in bonds of love, friendship, and community" (p. 244). McAdams underscores "the difficulty narrators express in simultaneously fulfilling their strong needs for both personal agency (power) and communion (love)" (p. 244). The acceptance Prieto receives from his daughter fuels his self-determination and assertion to publicly come out to his community. Prieto declares in an open speech directed to his Brooklyn community that he is a gay man who has struggled to hide his true identity and silence that part of himself out of fear (Gonzalez, 2023, pp. 106–109). He poignantly underlines that multiple American voices were silenced over the years and more so of the city's working class people of color. After having secured a truthful relationship with his daughter on an intimate level, who seems to wholeheartedly accept him (p. 105), he proceeds to regain his agency in the public terrain, as he faces his fellow Puerto Ricans, and Brooklynites (pp. 107–110).

Prieto could no longer address issues of the queer Latinx community and his constituents from his place in the closet. The novel's character situates himself among the silenced and oppressed groups of the immigrant American context and through the process of storytelling manages to outwardly expose intimate aspects of his identity that go beyond heteronormative terms. His commentary provides insight on persisting inequities that revolve around the intersections of race, ethnicity and class in the contemporary American cultural milieu. The character's storytelling is evolving into one that is imbued with higher levels of sincerity, self-development and emotional growth since by the end of the novel he narrates from a position of truthfulness and acceptance.

7. Concluding remarks

The novel sheds light to the multiple, conflicting aspects that are associated with queerness and immigrant lived experience within a contemporary metropolitan US context. Representations of the LGBTQ+ community are linked to complexity, vulnerability, identity formation and struggle with external recognition and acceptance. Instances of a lack of representation, misrepresentation, and closeted behaviors regarding sexuality are unearthed through a process of personal storytelling in Gonzalez's novel. Personal storytelling is emphasized as a major process for the development of the self and is linked to a larger cultural space which holds expectations from the individual. Storied accounts of the self, set in realistic and contemporary temporal and spatial contexts, highlight persisting heteronormative claims that associate queerness with vulnerability, shame, fear and impossible expectations. These occasions stir up a necessity for engaging with the affective consequences of social exclusion, stigmatization, confusion and non-belonging. The writer portrays themes of hidden queerness correlated with fear of exclusion,

familial and social rejection while touching upon the overarching matter of the coming out story and the liberating dimensions it opens up to. Narrative, therefore, serves as a significant resource in the sociocultural terrain, by unearthing the complex relation of queer immigrant experience to power and the looming consequences of coming out in the sphere of the political. The novel gives voice to non-heteronormative identities that claim their place in a Latin American context and simultaneously grapple with making better sense of their lives. The exploration of the queer Latin American protagonist's tumultuous life story provides insight on current LGBTQ+ representations in US popularized fiction and reaches beyond the enclave of purely dichotomous structures.

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