

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS
CURSO DE GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS

LUCAS GABRIEL WEGNER PICK

“YOU’RE SEEING YOURSELF”: A QUEER READING OF *BONES AND ALL*

Porto Alegre

2023

LUCAS GABRIEL WEGNER PICK

“YOU’RE SEEING YOURSELF”: A QUEER READING OF *BONES AND ALL*

Monografia apresentada como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Bacharel em Letras – Tradutor Português e Inglês – pelo curso de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Claudio Vescia Zanini

Porto Alegre

2023

*This work is dedicated to all the misfits,
to anyone who has ever felt like
they don't belong.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As my journey as an undergraduate comes to an end, there are many people who have helped, shaped, and accompanied me along the way. To them, I must express my gratitude.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family. Mom and Dad, you two have been my lodestar in all that I do. Thank you for your endless love and encouragement. Thank you for allowing me to grow and expand, and for always believing in me while I did so. Thank you for never trying to change me and for accepting me just as I am. I owe it all to you and I love you.

Grandparents, thank you for always standing by me even when you couldn't see or understand where I was going. Thank you for making it possible for me to be where I am today and for inspiring me with your strength and character.

Daniela and Derles, thank you for being such constants in my life. When I think of family, I also think of you two. Thank you for seeing me and for being my safe space for all these years, in both my happiest and most challenging times.

My time at *Letras* was also marked by the people I met and became close to along the way. Gisele, thank you for being the most amazing sidekick I could've ever asked for. I had the time of my life fighting dragons with you. Adriane, thank you for being my ghostly partner, and for hearing and guiding me throughout my sleepless nights while I was writing. Amanda, Jordy, Demétrius, and Laura, thank you for your friendship and support. I feel so lucky to have all of you with me.

Thank you to all my professors, for passing forward not only your knowledge but also your passion. In particular, I want to thank my advisor, Claudio Zanini. Claudio, I'm certain that my university experience would have been drastically less fun and meaningful had I not met you in those early *Letras* days. Thank you for always believing in me, in my ever changing research ideas, and in this work.

Carolina, you were the first person I met on my first day at UFRGS. Your openness and your loving nature impressed me then, and they still impress me now. Rafael, to know you is to love and feel blessed by your lively and courageous spirit. I want to thank the two of you for finding me in my Biology days, and for staying all this time.

I must also thank all the artists I have ever connected to, as they have also shaped and inspired me deeply. I thank them for showing me the magic and power of creative expression, passion and self-assurance.

Last but never least, I thank myself. For enduring, believing, writing, and loving.

*“Who hasn't ever wondered:
am I a monster or is this what
it means to be a person?”*

Clarice Lispector

RESUMO

Até os Ossos (2022), dirigido por Luca Guadagnino, é um filme de horror-romance que explora temáticas de alteridade e identidade por meio de uma narrativa *coming-of-age* cuja protagonista é uma jovem canibal. O presente trabalho tem como objetivo oferecer uma análise qualitativa quanto ao papel do canibalismo como uma condição inerente na estória e aos diversos aspectos da jornada dos personagens que podem ser lidos como alusões metafóricas a *queerness*. Uma seção de fundamentação teórica (Kubowitz, 2008, 2012; Doty, 1995) precede uma leitura queer abrangente, aplicada com o intuito de apontar e examinar a presença de sentimentos e experiências caracteristicamente queer. A análise é dividida em três seções principais, focando nos personagens canibais mais proeminentes do filme e em seus pontos de conexão a *queerness*, tanto velados quanto explícitos.

Palavras-chave: *Até os Ossos*; Luca Guadagnino; canibalismo; estudos queer; cinema de horror.

ABSTRACT

Luca Guadagnino's *Bones and All* is a 2022 horror-romance film that explores themes of otherness and identity through a coming-of-age narrative that follows a young cannibal protagonist. This work aims to offer a qualitative analysis on the role of cannibalism as an inherent condition in the story, and the many ways in which the film's depictions of outcast, displaced characters can be read as metaphorical representations of queerness. A theoretical background section (Kubowitz, 2008, 2012; Doty, 1995) precedes an overarching queer reading that is employed with the intent of noting and examining the depiction of characteristic queer feelings and experiences. The analysis is divided in three main sections, focusing on the most prominent cannibal characters within the film and their points of connection to queerness, both veiled and explicit.

Keywords: *Bones and All*; Luca Guadagnino; cannibalism; queer studies; horror cinema.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Maren and Kim	17
Figure 2 - Brad and Jake	20
Figure 3 - Sully and Maren	23
Figure 4 - Janelle, infirmed and confined	26
Figure 5 - Lee, Maren, and the “Adam, Eve and Steve” tattoo	31
Figure 6 - Lance and Lee	32
Figure 7 - Final scene	41

INDEX

1. INTRODUCTION.....	9
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	13
3. MAREN.....	16
4. SULLY AND JANELLE.....	22
5. LEE.....	30
6. FINAL THOUGHTS.....	42
REFERENCES.....	44

1. INTRODUCTION

From the opening scene, Luca Guadagnino's 2022 horror-romance film *Bones And All* displays a representation of otherness on screen. The viewer's very first introduction to Maren Yearly, the protagonist, is through a scene in which a classmate invites her to a sleepover, something the character is seemingly not used to as it is implied she does not have many friends at school. Later in the day, when arriving at the girl's house — after sneaking out of her home, by going out the window of her locked bedroom —, Maren stares at the girls inside the house through a side door before going in, in a shot that further suggests both a distance and a contrast between Maren and them. Once inside, we see Maren and one of the girls, Kim, laying on the floor, beneath a glass table, talking to each other and doing their nails. Kim asks about Maren's family life. They share longing stares. Then, gently, Maren moves her lips to the girl's hand and, in a slow move, bites her finger, almost tearing it off.

This is how the film reveals the fact that Maren is a cannibal. Soon after, the viewer also learns that is not her first time acting on that impulse, as her father knows exactly what she had just done when she gets home frantic and covered in blood. He tells her to pack her things, and that they are leaving in three minutes. The two manage to escape, and move out to Maryland. However, not long after, Maren wakes up to find that her father is gone, having left her an envelope of money, a cassette player, some tapes, and her birth certificate.

The film then follows Maren as she sets out on a trip to find her mother, whom she has no memories of and knew nothing about prior to seeing her own birth certificate. However, Maren's journey is not a solitary one, as it does not take long for her to find and be found by others who are like her. She first meets a strange, older cannibal named Sully, who smells her scent, recognizing her condition, and invites her to join him for a meal. After this encounter, Maren leaves Sully behind, only to then meet Lee, the film's second main character.

Lee is a fellow outsider, a literal outlaw, and the two soon find solace in each other. This connection evolves into a romantic relationship, and Lee decides to accompany Maren on her cross-country journey to look for her mother. It is fair to suggest that, superficially, the film focuses on the couple's romance. However, the underlying crux of the narrative is a thorough exploration of how Maren and Lee feel about, deal with, and navigate their shared marginalized existence and condition. By following Maren's journey towards acceptance, adulthood, and her struggles with her own identity, the film aligns itself with the coming of age genre. The narratives that belong to said genre are known to include protagonists who are

in a transitional period, one that comes with some challenges, as Baxter (2013) argues that the main character's arc "is motivated by the desire to become an adult, and this journey toward adulthood quite often entails struggle" (p. 3). This, undoubtedly, can be seen in *Bones and All*.

The condition that these characters navigate through and mature into is, of course, an irrepressible, unwavering hunger for human flesh. Although each character has a unique perception of their cannibalistic ways, there are moments in the narrative in which the act of cannibalism is described as monstrous — much like outside of fiction, as it is a taboo practice in most cultures around the world. Although the film does not simply rely on traditional conventions of gore and shock to tell the story of these characters, there are plenty of horror elements in the narrative.

The horror genre, specifically, has long allowed for fruitful queer readings, as the connections between horror and queerness — both socially and academically — are numerous. An elementary example can be found in regards to the concept of "monsters". The figure of the horror monster is essentially a representation of society's fears and "difference made flesh", according to Cohen (1996). Evidently, said expressions of "difference" and norm-defying existences include queerness. For instance, the vampire, one of literature's most iconic and classic monsters, is a notable example of a figure that has long been a focal point for queer analysis. Seminal works such as Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) are notorious for providing themes, portrayals and subtext that allow for queer interpretations. Reverting back to the topic of cannibalism, it is perhaps noteworthy to point out the clear connections between fictional cannibals and vampires, as the two deal with themes of hunger, desire, blood-lust and, almost always, sexuality.

In recent media, a new wave of stories dealing with cannibalism is noticeable. From 2020 to now, a few notable examples include Chelsea G. Summers' provocative novel *A Certain Hunger* (2020), Showtime's TV series *Yellowjackets* (2021-present), Mimi Cave's thriller film *Fresh* (2022), and, in music, the concept album *Preacher's Daughter* (2022), by Ethel Cain. Additionally, another notorious example is NBC's *Hannibal* (2013-2015), which, although it is older than the works previously mentioned, still maintains a big following years after its last episode aired. All of these works contain representations of cannibalism that vary in tone, thematic approach, and intensity. Some explore the consumption of human flesh from a gastronomical perspective, some from a ritualistic and survival-based standpoint, and others as a purely murderous and traumatic act. However, one thing they all have in common is the broad metaphorical implications that cannibalism can provide, as a thematic topic and a narrative device.

Bones and All, also released in the aforementioned time frame, presents a depiction of cannibalism as a condition that can be read as a metaphor for more than one thing. However, the main interest at hand is its connections to queerness. This work intends to analyze the film through a queer lens, exploring not only the homoerotic text and subtext presented but also the ways in which the characters' condition — as well as their perceptions of it/themselves, their feelings and their experiences — can be interpreted as symbolic, metaphorical depictions that relate and share a connection to queer identity and queer experiences. Unlike most representations of cannibal characters on screen, the issues explored in Guadagnino's film strike one as being much more internal, dealing specially with struggles of identity, acceptance, belonging, and growing up as a marginalized individual.

The film, which is based on a homonymous 2015 novel by author Camille DeAngelis, provides many incisive representations of characters who feel like and are seen as outsiders, literal and/or metaphorical outlaws, marginalized, displaced and overall “othered” are among some of the most noticeable aspects of *Bones and All* that can be read as analogous to characteristic queer experiences. After all, for many queer youth, the feeling of being other in any way is not very distant from the feeling of being queer.

Although Guadagnino's film also presents some explicit representations of both hetero and queer sexuality on screen, the purpose of this queer reading is not to assign specific sexualities to the characters. Overall, the film honors the ambiguity and fluid nature of human sexuality, not bowing to a simple, clear-cut binary view. This approach, of course, is also the reason why it allows for such fruitful discussions and analysis of queerness in the narrative. However, the more explicit depictions will also be touched upon in this work, especially in regards to the character of Lee.

Overall, this paper predominantly focuses on the metaphorical interpretations that the film offers, aiming to answer two main research questions:

- a) What is the role of cannibalism in the narrative?
- b) What aspects of the story can be read as portrayals of queerness, both explicit and metaphorical, on screen?

The analysis is divided in three main sections, each one focusing on one or more significant characters from the film. The first section is focused on Maren, the protagonist, whose struggles regarding her condition and identity are perhaps the most prominent and recurrent aspects analyzed. The following section contains an exploration of two impactful

side characters: Sully and Janelle, Maren's mother. Lastly, a section focused on the character of Lee and the more explicit depictions of queerness in the film, as well as an interpretation of the film's ending. The common thread between all the characters is their connection to Maren, and how her journey and identity is shaped and impacted by each one of them.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The analysis presented in this work is mainly built upon the concept of engaging with a piece of fiction through a queer lens, an academic pursuit commonly referred to as a “queer reading”. Works by authors such as Hanna Kubowitz (2008, 2012) and Alexander Doty (1995) were essential in providing a definition of what a queer reading entails and in guiding me through my analysis. Kubowitz’s *The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies* (2012) provides a much needed deconstruction of the concept of Iser’s *Implied Reader* and explores many inclusionary reading strategies that queer readers can apply in their analyses. Such strategies include “Queer codes, Symbols and Metaphors”, “Allusions to Queer Culture” and “Queer Ambiguity, Obfuscation, and Oscillation” (p. 216), all of which were utilized in my own queer reading of *Bones and All*.

Alexander Doty’s *There’s Something Queer Here*, a chapter of *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993), was also fundamental in my understanding and application of the queer reading practice, as it discusses queer readings of both past and present and the many ways in which they have evolved from, relied on or steered away from the overarching ideas and ever-unfolding developments of queer theory studies. Furthermore, Doty’s study has helped me due to its presentation and recognition of the pursuit as valid and worthwhile, unlike many other academic texts that felt somewhat contemptuous and overly conditional. One notable excerpt that lays the groundwork for the analysis at hand is the following:

Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along. (Doty, 1995, p. 16)

As the present work focuses on discussing, pointing out and analyzing the queer elements present in *Bones and All*, it is imperative to stress what definition of queerness is employed in this particular case. Although the concept of “queer” and “queerness” is naturally hard to define, Kubowitz offers a simple, introductory delineation: “One meaning of queer is considered to be closely linked to sexuality, while the second meaning is taken to signify strangeness, oddity, peculiarity or extra-ordinariness irrespective of sexuality” (Kubowitz, 2008, p. 172). This idea allows for a conception of queerness as not only referring to non-hetero sexuality, but also to a set of social identifiers of people whose experiences differ from cis-hetero normativity. For this specific work, Kubowitz’s definition is one who closely

aligns with my own conception, as I will employ and consider the notion of “queer” as an umbrella term for something/someone that defies hetero-normative expressions of sexuality and/or overall hetero-normative expression of different kinds, which also includes gender presentation, for instance.

Cannibalism, in a way, also fits Kubowitz’s aforementioned second meaning of the term “queer”, as the characters’ cannibalistic condition instills in them an innate sense of otherness and a disconnect from normative ways of living. However, besides the evident notion that it does “signify strangeness, oddity, peculiarity or extra-ordinariness” (Kubowitz, 2008, p. 172), the film’s fictional cannibalism will not be explored as a queer practice in and of itself. Instead, what the analysis at hand aims to focus on is the ways in which the portrayal of the characters’ experiences, feelings, struggles, and identities — that are, of course, directly influenced by their cannibalistic nature — can be read as metaphorical depictions that parallel, connect or relate to characteristically queer cultural experiences and identities. Therefore, the cannibal act is mainly discussed in the context of the various metaphorical implications it holds, such as its propensity to be read as a metaphor for themes of love and desire. In doing so, the analysis naturally connects the cannibal act back to the first meaning of queer as “closely linked to sexuality” that Kubowitz (2008) notes, as the expressions of love and desire in question are mostly non-normative in nature.

In connecting particular aspects of the film to cultural queerness, studies, data and statistics about queer life are included as well. This includes data about homelessness amongst LGBTQ+ youth (Choi *et al.*, 2015, and Cray; Miller; Durso, 2013), discussions concerning the concept of family within the queer community (Hull; Ortyl, 2019 and Weston, 1991), and studies about internalized homophobia (Herek, 2004) and about Psychiatry’s view on homosexuality (Smith, 1998).

Overall, the main work cited is, of course, Luca Guadagnino’s *Bones and All* (2022) itself. Along with citing and mentioning scenes that are shown on screen, I have also heavily relied on the original shooting script by the sole screenwriter of the film, David Kajganich (2022). The screenplay features scenes and dialogue that were cut from the movie and provides extended context on others, which were used to base some of my arguments. However, when mentioned, these excerpts are explicitly marked as being from the screenplay, and not the film. For the sake of convenience, when the screenplay did not differ from the on screen portrayal, bits of dialogue were cited directly from the script instead of from the movie. Additionally, excerpts from interviews given by both creators are also employed in order to

further contextualize some portions of the analysis, as well as a citation from Gavin (2023), who also wrote a queer interpretation of the film.

3. MAREN

On screen, Maren Yearly is first seen sitting at a piano, alone, on the theater stage at her school. A friend, Sherry, then approaches Maren and invites her to a sleepover at her place, as she reminds Maren that she said she wanted to make new friends. Although her overprotective father would not allow Maren to go, Sherry manages to convince her to sneak out while he is asleep. At Maren's house, we see her dad locking her bedroom door from the outside once she has gone to bed, or so he thinks. This is presented as something routinely, since Maren shows no reaction to it.

From the very start of the film, the viewer is introduced to a character who seems quiet and perhaps somewhat displaced. In all of her initial interactions, Maren appears to display a distance from both her friends and her father. Superficially, a sense of otherness can also be noticed from the onset. In the first scene, Maren wears an oversized, run down cardigan that is, as stated by David Kajganich's screenplay, "*big enough to be her father's*", as well as "*no jewelry or makeup*" (2022, p. 3). On the other hand, Sherry offers a stark contrast, as she "*comes in looking more like an American teen in 1988: oversized top, lip gloss, bangs.*" (p. 3). For a movie set in the eighties, Maren's unusual clothes clearly evidence that she does not fit the idea of a stereotypical teenage girl of that time. Maren's otherness is, of course, explored and expanded on as the film progresses, when the viewer learns more about her ominous condition and her perception of it.

After successfully sneaking out and arriving at the sleepover, she and one of the girls, Kim, are seen lying on the floor, underneath a glass coffee table. The scene depicts a moment of connection between the two girls that feels incredibly intimate, as they talk about Maren's family life, with her revealing that she has no memories of her mother and mentioning her father's protectiveness once more. During this interaction, Maren cannot take her eyes off of the girl, leaning closer and closer, and even discreetly sniffing her as they talk.

The scene acts as the first and perhaps most blatant portrayal of homoeroticism in the movie. However, the intense luring and yearning is quickly cut short as Maren bites Kim's finger to the bone, as soon as the girl's hand gets close to her mouth. It is notable to observe that the first instance of cannibalism in *Bones and All* happens right after such a suggestive and queer coded scene. In analyzing the film through a queer lens, this choice feels poignant and significant. Before the viewer recognizes Maren's desire as a hunger for human flesh, her

demeanor can easily be read as pure lust. Therefore, from the onset, one could argue that the film's portrayal of cannibalism is, to some extent, tied to eroticism and sexuality.

Figure 1 - Maren and Kim



Source: (Bones and All, 2022, 6'36'')

In doing so, *Bones and All* aligns itself with some of the aforementioned representations of cannibals and vampires in horror narratives of the past. Although the figure of the vampire carries an array of nuances that differ the creature from fictional cannibals, the two share many thematic points. In many horror works, blood-lust has been read as a powerful metaphor for love, control, and/or sexual desire. In many cases, it can be easily read, also, as a metaphor for queerness. Tringali (2016) writes that the “horror of the vampire is sexual” (p. 1) and that the figure’s “very nature as a monster elicits queer responses” (p. 3). Regarding the vampire “attack” and its cannibalistic nature, Tringali argues that it is also inherently “queer, queerness in this case pertaining to anything regarding gender and sexuality that is non-normative” (p. 1).

One could argue that the sleepover scene sets the tone for how the movie is going to portray the characters’ cannibalistic condition, establishing it as something both uncontrollable and entrancing — a choice that, undoubtedly, allows for readings that connect said condition to non-normative sexualities. The scene’s horror element emerges from the sudden dark turn that the moment between the girls takes, with a gory and graphic depiction of Maren’s slow and acute attack. After chaos and screaming ensues, we see Maren running home, frightened. When Frank, her father, opens the door and notices her blood-covered mouth and clothes, the viewer learns that this is not Maren’s first attack, as he immediately

understands what she had just done. He then orders her to pack up, so that they can be gone before the police get there. From Maren's conversation with Kim, we know that, for some reason, she and her father have had to move a lot. Once more, they must flee. But not before Maren stops in front of a mirror and watches herself, covered in blood, with a stoic expression on her face, in what could be understood as an attempt to come to terms with what she had just done and face the person she is. This moment precedes the film title screen and the opening credits, acting as a highly symbolic representation of one of the movie's main focuses: Maren's self-perception.

A title card then reveals they have moved to Maryland, and a serene scene of Maren waking up in their new place plays out. However, serenity ends when she finds her father's bed not slept in, and an envelope held by a cassette tape on the dining table. Inside of the envelope, there is cash and her birth certificate. She plays the beginning of the tape, and Frank's voice tells her:

You aren't going to see me again. I can't -- help you anymore. I can't do anything else, either: call the cops or whatever somebody might do in my place. So I've gotta leave you to figure it out for yourself. Like your mother did. I'm sorry. You know what I mean now. (Bones and All, 2022, 10'20"-10'50").

Her father's shocking abandonment sets Maren out into a journey of self-discovery, not only because of what he reveals of her past through his recording — such as the fact that Maren's "first time" was when she was three years old — but also because of some groundbreaking information about her mother. The birth certificate reveals her name, Janelle May Kerns, and place of birth, Bagley, Minnesota. Upon learning this, Maren promptly decides to travel in search of Janelle.

By this point, Maren is left to her own devices. As a vulnerable, outcast young person, it is interesting to note that this occurrence mirrors the experience of many queer youth who end up, in some form or another, leaving their homes, losing contact and/or support from their families. The 2014 LGBTQ Homeless Youth Provider Survey demonstrates that sexual and gender minority youth are overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness in the United States, with family rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity being the main cause for their homelessness (Choi *et al.*, 2015). Cray, Miller, and Durso (2013) also estimate that LGBTQ youths make up 20 to 40 percent of the homeless youth population, which is a staggering number considering that LGBTQ youth represented about 7% percent of the population in the country at the time of the study.

Besides the most dire of situations, such as homelessness and parental neglect, it is perhaps interesting to note that the choice of willingly moving away from home in an attempt to find one's own place in the world is also a prevalent, characteristic queer experience. In recognizing the connection between this element of Maren's story and the real life statistics of queer youth, this aspect of the narrative can be understood as one of many experiences and struggles represented in the film that can be associated with characteristic queer experiences, providing a point of connection that queer audiences may recognize, identify with and relate to.

For most of the film, Maren struggles with her identity and her perception of her own cannibalistic condition. By leaving behind the life she had, she is forced to confront and acknowledge what it means to be a young person living as an "eater" and, in doing so, the film showcases her struggle to come to terms with what that existence entails. In a queer reading, Maren's negative feelings towards her identity can be interpreted as an allegory for internalized homophobia, for instance, as Maren's internal struggles parallel the anxieties of many LGBTQ+ youth around the world.

This aspect of Maren's story is exacerbated when she comes in contact with fellow cannibal characters throughout the film. Her encounters with the older cannibal Sully and her eventual meeting with her mother both act as central moments in the film where Maren acknowledges and expresses her troubling feelings regarding her identity (see Section 3). Each of these characters ignite in Maren realizations of what it means to be an individual burdened with the condition of desiring human flesh, and present her different perspectives and ways of dealing with said condition. The scenes in which Maren interacts with these "senior" cannibals show her how older, more experienced people with the same condition as her chose to navigate it — the life they created for themselves because of it, and the paths that she, herself, could end up choosing to take.

One of the most prominent moments that display Maren's discomfort towards her cannibalistic condition is a scene in which she and Lee meet two men at a campsite. It is perhaps safe to assume that, for many queer-lensed viewers, the two can be easily read as a gay couple. On the surface, they are two seemingly outcast men who are traveling together in 1980's rural Missouri, sharing a rather interesting, queer-coded dynamic. This is but a simple observation, as this is their only scene and the details of their relationship are not explored or further explained in the film. However, it is an observation that is difficult to ignore, especially in a queer reading of the film.

Figure 2 - Brad and Jake

Source: Yannis Drakoulidis / Metro Goldwyn Mayer Pictures © 2022 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc.

The two men are fellow cannibals named Jake and Brad. Through a story of how they first met, it is revealed that Brad is not actually an eater by nature, meaning he chose to practice cannibalism when he met Jake. Jake tells that they first met while he was feeding, and Brad approached him as he watched Jake devour a man, in awe. When invited to join him, Brad promptly accepted. After that, Jake started “mentoring” him, which led the two to becoming a traveling duo.

Their story upsets Maren deeply, as she cannot fathom that someone would actually choose this life for themselves. A life that she, herself, is burdened and embarrassed by. Maren is also disturbed by the way the two of them speak of the cannibal act as something pleasurable, a prospect that is fundamentally different from her own experience. Lee, on the other hand, is a lot less shocked to hear their perspectives. As it will be explored later in the work, Lee also plays a big role in presenting Maren with a different approach to life as an eater. Although Lee’s perspective differs from Jake and Brad’s unabashedly hedonistic view, he does possess a level of self-acceptance that Maren does not.

Aside from the story they tell, Jake and Brad also introduce Maren and Lee to a new concept: the act of eating someone fully, bones and all. Jake explains that doing so provides the eater with an euphoric feeling unlike any other. Through descriptions that resemble those of an orgasmic feeling, the film presents yet another connection between the cannibal act and sexuality. In this case, Jake’s experience comes closer to the idea that “feeding” can not only

satiate the eater, but also offer them genuine pleasure. The act that gives the film its name silently lingers on throughout the narrative, being fully realized and presented in the film's final scenes. Therefore, its narrative significance and metaphorical interpretations will be analyzed and explored in Lee's section (see Section 5).

Overall, the scene with Jake and Brad offers the two characters a better understanding of not only themselves and each other, but also of their cannibalistic condition. Maren, especially, is heavily affected by all of her encounters with fellow cannibals throughout the film. As a young person fully going out into the world for the first time in her life, there is a lot she does not know, and the act of meeting characters who have lived with the same condition as her for longer serves as a learning opportunity for her, one that is both helpful and uncomfortable. The two side characters whose impact on the narrative and on Maren are most prominent are, undoubtedly, Sully and Maren's mother, Janelle.

4. SULLY AND JANELLE

Maren, now homeless, meets an unusual character named Sully when she arrives in Frederick, Maryland. In the screenplay, Sully is described as a 60-year-old man wearing “*a fishing vest and chore coat emblazoned with various decorative pins. He has no luggage.*” (Kajganich, 2022, p. 15). After watching Maren from a distance, he approaches her with a strange but striking revelation: “*I smelled you, and you probably smell me now.*” (p. 16). When she motions to get away from him, he incisively asks her: “*When’s the last time you fed?*” (p. 16).

Sully is the first fellow cannibal Maren meets on her journey. Before this encounter, Maren assumed she was the only person in the world with her condition. Sully promptly takes her under his wing for one night, revealing to and sharing with her some of his knowledge and personal rules about life as an eater. Sully’s first lesson is a startling one: eaters can recognize other eaters by scent alone.

Queer people, much like *Bones and All*’s eaters, have developed an array of strategies for identifying other queer people. Be it through clothing or coded language, queer flagging has been a historic practice within queer culture. Besides intentional flagging, a general ability to recognize someone as a queer person is also a shared, prevalent queer experience, one that — although abstract and speculative in nature — could perhaps be summed up by the notorious expression “it takes one to know one”. Therefore, Sully’s revelation to Maren can be easily connected to queerness, as it relates to a prevailing queer practice.

A symbolic reading of Sully’s solitary life can also point the viewer to some more queer interpretations of the film. A fellow misfit, Sully showcases the loneliness that comes with living life on the outskirts of society, in a world that supposedly has no place for you in it. As an older man, this sense of loneliness and non-belonging can also be understood as an allegory when interpreted through a queer lens, given the fact that older queer people can grow distant from and feel invisible to the younger parcel of the queer community as they age. Additionally, Sully believes that it is best to stay clear of other eaters, secluding himself from any sense of community. However, in Maren, he appears to have found someone he can genuinely help and, consequently, refrain himself from such a solitary existence.

Figure 3 - Sully and Maren



Source: *Bones and All*, 2022, 24'43".

One reading that can be made in regards to Sully's desired role in Maren's life is that he wishes to be a sort of surrogate father to her. In taking Maren off the streets and into someplace safe, mentoring her, and even feeding and “drying off” with her — an act that is later revealed to be deeply intimate, and a first for him —, Sully somewhat fulfills a role of caretaker and father figure, even if just for one day. Unlike Frank, Maren's biological father, Sully is able to offer her understanding and acceptance of her condition, as he has lived through life as a young eater and knows all of its struggles. Frank, a non-eater, suppresses and attempts to control Maren's desires, an approach that profoundly impacts Maren self-perception and is arguably one of the root causes of her internal conflicts.

Sully, on the other hand, tries to guide and advise her. In explaining his personal rules to Maren, he also offers her a glimpse into one possible future for her. Although Sully's approach, mannerisms, and demeanor are unconventional and appear confusing and daunting to Maren, there is a connection to be made between his pursuit and the concept of chosen family. In a fundamental study titled *Families We Choose* (1991), Kath Weston explores the many forms in which lesbians and gay men have redefined the concept of “family” by going beyond the normative definition that pertains to biological relatives only. Instead, queer people's chosen families consist of other queer folks, or queer allies, who provide the understanding, connection, and communion that blood relatives perhaps could not or would not offer them.

Troubling family relations are a major theme in *Bones and All*, as the three main cannibal characters — Maren, Lee, and Sully — are all depicted as having had either

unstable, difficult, or abusive family lives. In the specific case of Sully, given that he is also the oldest one out of the three, and in view of his implied lifelong loneliness, the “chosen family” interpretation appears to be a natural and realistic one. Hull and Ortyl note that:

Chosen family may be an especially important resource for older LGBT people as the aging process brings increased needs for practical and social forms of support in the face of health concerns, loss of partners, and other developments common later in the life course. However, the aging process may place limits on older LGBT people’s ability to form and maintain chosen families. (Hull; Ortyl, 2019, p. 32)

Sully is visibly heartbroken when Maren runs away after feeding with him, a reaction that perhaps further supports this idea of him desperately desiring to share his life with another eater, maybe for the first time ever, and losing that chance when Maren eventually rejects him and continues on her journey by herself.

Before leaving him behind, Maren also learns that Sully’s *modus operandi* includes the choice of actively refraining from murder in order to feed, and instead supposedly only eating people who are already deceased or about to die. The house he takes Maren to is that of an elderly lady who is in her last hours of life. However, his way of living, of trying to soften the act of consuming human flesh, is not enough to alleviate Maren’s moral crisis. Being in a state of unacceptance and aversion to her own condition, not even Sully’s approach seems correct to her. Sully explains that their cannibalistic condition is something that “*has got to be fed*” and that as she grows older she will have to do it more and more. He then offers her some advice: “*if the circumstances are safe and good, then eat. It’ll last you a while, maybe keep you from doing something you’d regret more.*” (Kajganich, 2022, p. 21), Maren seems to accept the advice and, in the next morning, she feeds with him. Maren’s reaction and response to Sully’s way of life implies that, to her, the desire and urge to feed on human flesh is enough to warrant a deep self-aversion, meaning it goes beyond just the act of having to murder people for it. However, Sully somewhat enlightens her to the fact that this is simply their nature, it is an innate and uncontrollable part of who they are as people.

This certainly points us back to the idea of identity, as this desire is, above all else, an unchangeable, essential part of who Maren is as a person. An exploration of her non-normative existence and her perception of it is arguably the heart of the narrative, and the depiction of a young character learning how to navigate life as a non-normative being is what gives the film its coming-of-age quality. Guadagnino and Kajganich’s choice of telling this story by focusing on an exploration of the protagonist’s struggles and anxieties regarding her identity and life as an othered individual stands out in a queer reading, given that it is not far

fetches to connect the idea of non-normative desires and identities to the idea of queerness. It is also interesting to note that Luca Guadagnino is known for portraying and exploring queerness in many of his other films, most notably in 2017's gay romance *Call Me by Your Name* and in his 2018 remake of Argento's *Suspiria*, which features a vast array of lesbian undertones.

Maren's negative self-perception is further explored as the film progresses, most notably in her interactions with Lee and Janelle. One notable depiction of self-aversion can be found in the idea of the eater as a monster. In dealing with a work of horror fiction, the concept of a "monster" also presents fruitful connections to queerness, as the monstrification of queer bodies has been thoroughly explored in the horror genre. In *Monsters in the Closet* (1997), Harry M. Benshoff offers a simple yet insightful connection between monstrous figures in horror and homosexual people by noting that "monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexual" (p. 2).

It is perhaps essential to clarify that an analysis of fictional cannibalism as a metaphor for queerness should not lead way to the reductive and simplistic assumption that the film and the present work are equating cannibalism with non-normative sexualities and gender identities. As stated in a previous essay of mine,

As a condition that has direct, harmful consequences on the lives of others, the act of being a cannibal is unquestionably not comparable to the act of being an LGBTQ+ individual. However, it does not mean that there are no people who might treat the two as equally monstrous, both historically and in current times. (Pick, 2023, p. 69)

The concept of the eater as a monster is directly introduced in the film by Maren's mother, Janelle. When meeting her estranged grandmother, Maren learns that Janelle voluntarily checked herself into an infirmary in Minnesota. Maren and Lee head there and she manages to, finally, find and meet her. The woman that Maren encounters doesn't smile or speak at all, and her forearms "*end in stumps, long healed*" (Kajganich, 2022, p. 77). At the sight of her mother's weakened state and brutal self-harm, Maren realizes what she had already suspected to be true: Janelle is also an eater.

Figure 4 - Janelle, infirmed and confined



Source: *Bones and All*, 2022, 82'.

It is interesting to note that the suggestion that cannibalism is an inherited condition allows for an array of metaphorical interpretations, other than a queer one. In an alternative reading, one could argue that it points the viewer to themes of addiction or generational trauma, for instance. Regardless, the overall interaction between mother and daughter offers some of the most poignant and heartbreaking queer moments in the film. Maren starts off by introducing herself to Janelle, who does not respond and offers her a stifled reaction. A nurse explains that this is due to the medication, and then hands Maren a letter that Janelle wrote to her daughter fifteen years before, for her to read if she were to ever find and come to visit her. The letter mainly explains Janelle's reasoning for leaving Maren and Frank behind. In it, she explains that she promised to never hurt either of them, but since there was no way for her to be sure that that would not happen, she chose to be institutionalized.

On top of this confession, both the rest of the letter and Janelle's mutilated body also reveal her deep self-aversion. Her character can easily be read as the embodiment of repression and self-hate, as her story depicts the immense toll that a negative self-perception can take on a person. Janelle's incisive view of hers and her daughter's marginalized identity as something monstrous, both incapable and undeserving of love, undoubtedly parallels the negative perception that queer people can develop towards themselves. Internalized homophobia can be characterized by "an intrapsychic conflict between experiences of same sex affection or desire" (Herek, 2004) and occurs, of course, when queer folks internalize society's negative view of them. By portraying the eaters as fulfilling a similar role in society and garnering feelings of self-aversion that share similarities with the experience of queer

people in the real world, *Bones and All* provides yet another point of connection for queer audiences.

The scene's climax happens when Janelle's words reveal:

All I ever wanted in this world was love. I tried, believed, but we can't have it as we are. All we can have is a little space, with bars or a door that locks. I'm sorry for that, Little Yearly. For all the things I didn't do for you and for the one thing I still can. The world of love wants no monsters in it. So let me help you out of it. (*Bones and All*, 2022, 82'-83')

As soon as Janelle's voiceover reads out the letter's last passage, Maren is attacked by her own mother. She manages to escape, physically unscathed but emotionally wrecked. Having lived life as an eater and suffering immensely from it, Janelle developed the belief that the best gift that she can offer her daughter is death. To her, death represents freedom — freedom from a world that holds no space for people like them. The pain, repression, and self-aversion she feels have led her to this belief, and the attempt to kill Maren is, to Janelle, her way of protecting or, perhaps, saving her daughter. As horrifying as the scene is, Janelle's attack can be read as an act of love. A twisted one, certainly, but one that is, in her eyes, rooted in love nonetheless.

The idea of cannibalism as a metaphor for love naturally manifests itself here. Previously, the cannibal act was presented as a possible allegory for desire, but in this scene, *Bones and All* directly presents the material for love as an alternative. In a film that is titled after the act of consuming someone fully, the love metaphor holds profound and intense symbolic value. As it arises in a romance-filled story, this interpretation appears as a fundamental part of the narrative, one that goes beyond just the scene between Maren and her mother. There is also a connection to be made between this interpretation of Janelle's attack and another piece of dialogue from earlier in the film. In the campsite scene, while talking to Lee, Jake ominously tells him: "*maybe love will set you free*" (Kajganich, 2022, p. 57). Considering Lee's ending, it is a chilling connection. This idea of the cannibal act as an act of love comes up again in the final moments of the film, therefore it will be discussed in further detail later in this work (see Section 5).

After the fateful encounter at the infirmary, Maren and Lee have a heated discussion about what just happened. Maren feels betrayed by her mother, and wonders how different her life would have been had her mother stayed to raise and guide her. Lee offers a different perspective, pointing out the things that could have gone wrong in that case instead. Maren, however, is not open to hearing his perspective. On top of being attacked by her own mother,

she is still grappling with the moral implications of a recent murder that she and Lee committed earlier in the film. She lashes out at Lee, who then tells her:

You're pissed off, and you're scared, and you feel alone, and you don't know what to do with it all, it's fine. If you wanna go at yourself with that, I can't stop you. But don't come at me. [...] I think you got used to being locked up and invisible and alone, and now you're out in the world and you're seeing yourself for the first time, and that's freaking you out. But you know what? It's fucking me up, too, okay? I feel like I'm seeing myself too. That's how this works! (Bones and All, 2022, 84'39-85'05")

In response, Maren questions what Lee means by “this”. He says, “*This. Whatever this is.*”. “This”, of course, means the life they lead, but additionally, it refers to their relationship. Once more, the idea of love manifests itself. A “love” that is once again not explicitly called by its name, as even the screenplay states: “*Maren is surprised by this outpouring. But he didn't say the word “love,” and that must mean something.*” (Kajganich, 2022, p. 81). One possible reading that Lee’s inability to call “it” by its name provides is concerning the fact that so much of these characters' lives remains unnamed, unspoken. In this scene, the word “love” is not used, as Lee either avoids using it or simply does not recognize the possibility of love for people like them. If the latter were the case, it is a belief that clearly parallels Janelle’s limiting idea and Sully’s lonely existence and that, in a way, could be understood as a sort of unwritten rule for them. “Love” is almost like uncharted territory for eaters.

Most notably, the word “cannibalism” is not once used in the film. They are not called “cannibals”, they are “eaters” — an original nomenclature that further detaches them from our preconceived idea of what cannibalism is and subverts the representation of cannibals in cinema that the average viewer is used to seeing. In a queer reading, it is possible to relate this aspect of the film to the experience that many queer people have with their own identities. This type of euphemism can be used as a way of protecting themselves from prejudice, or as an “invisibilizing” tactic used by family members who are either unaccepting or just in denial of a loved one’s queerness. For many queer folks, some aspects of their identity and their life are also left unnamed and unspoken. Additionally, in this scene, Lee’s response spells out the idea that the experience of being fully seen and understood for the first time by someone else can indeed be uncomfortable, especially if you’re not at a point of accepting yourself fully. This, of course, applies perfectly to Maren’s situation.

As with Sully, Maren’s encounter with her mother also offers her a view into what her future could possibly look like. Lee also makes note of this, by telling her: “*We don't have many options, Maren. Either you eat, you off yourself, or you lock yourself up like her in*

there. What's it gonna be?" (Bones and All, 2022, 85'). The scene is a turning point for Maren, in more ways than one. It ends with Maren deciding that she is not going to end up like her mother – a decision that could have served as a rare moment of self-acceptance for her. However, she is still clouded by the moral dilemmas that her condition entails, and instead of leaning into her nature like Lee suggests and dealing with the uncomfortable feelings that arise from it, she chooses to run away from him.

Once she leaves Lee behind, a ghost from her past suddenly returns to find her when she is on her own again. It is Sully, who reveals to have been following her since Bagley, where her mother was. Maren visibly starts to feel exponentially more uneasy as their awkward reunion progresses. Sully explains his reasoning for following her:

SULLY: I liked our talk. I don't see people much. I know what I told you when we met, but it's a hard and lonely road for us. There ain't no sense making it any lonelier if you don't have to.

MAREN: I'm a girl.

SULLY: My daughter's age, if I had one.

MAREN: Is that what this is?

(Kajganich, 2022, p. 85)

In this scene, the aforementioned idea of Sully wanting to develop a familial relationship with Maren is presented. However, his approach is also somewhat predatory, which allows for a different interpretation of his intentions. Maren rejects him, telling him that whatever he feels for her is not mutual and that she simply does not trust him. He does not take this well, he insults her and leaves in his van. This interaction ends up having a major impact on the fate of these characters later on in the film.

After some time on her own, Maren then decides to look for Lee. She manages to find him in Kentucky, and they resume their relationship. As the only person she has ever felt a true, meaningful connection to, the character of Lee plays an essential role in the film and is perhaps the character whose queerness is depicted more explicitly on screen than any of the others.

5. LEE

As a character, Lee perfectly embodies marginality. He is a drifter, a literal outlaw. His cannibalistic nature, as well as his tumultuous family life, has led him to a life of being on the margins of society as a displaced and othered individual. In contrast with Maren, Lee exudes a sort of acceptance and self-assurance of his identity and personal journey that is unique and compelling to watch. Although, of course, he also struggles deeply with who he is as a person — something that the film only explicitly reveals in its third act.

It does not take long for Maren and Lee to form a strong connection. They first meet at a grocery store, and their initial point of connection is not based on the fact they share the same condition, unlike the encounter she had with Sully, for instance. Maren is introduced to Lee as he, a total stranger, defends her from a man who is bothering her. This sets the tone for their relationship to come, as it establishes from the beginning that Maren's interest in Lee comes from a genuine, earnest place. Of course, as the film continues and their relationship evolves into a romantic one, the fact that they are both cannibals and share a troubled past with their families allows them to find comfort in one another as they attempt to navigate life together as two young, vulnerable eaters. Lee's role in Maren's journey is a powerful one. Beyond just accompanying her on the road, he also allows her space to really look into herself, challenging and encouraging her to deal with all that afflicts her. Maren is a person in need of guidance, and Lee is able to offer her a version of that. On top of it, he is also able to show her that she is deserving of love, and she ends up doing the same for him. In their union, they are able to create a safe space for one another in a world that seemingly has no place for people like them.

Lee also stands out as the most outwardly queer character in the film, as there are plenty of instances where his connections to queerness are shown on screen. One notable example is in regards to his appearance and clothing choices. The majority of the clothes he wears are presumably ones taken from his victims, both male and female. Lee dresses androgynously, donning a tight floral women's blouse in many of the film's scenes. In a scene where he takes Maren to his aunt's house and encounters his sister, Kayla, he is wearing a fringed, patterned western jacket. As she is leaving, Kayla tells him: "*You look like a fucking faggot in that shirt.*" (Bones and All, 2022, 48'05"). This is the only depiction of active homophobia and slur usage on the film, making it an even more noteworthy moment in a work with so many queer undertones and allusions to queer life.

A notable aspect of this interaction between Lee and Kayla is the fact that, after she leaves, Lee takes the jacket off. This moment could be read as Lee being insulted with the suggestion that his choice of clothing points to queerness. However, in a following scene, in the car with Maren, Lee is seen donning that same western jacket. With this, one could argue that Lee's decision to remove it earlier is influenced by Kayla's hurtful prejudice against him, and that, with her remark, he does not feel comfortable expressing himself through clothing around her. However, when he is out in the world — and, especially, when he is alone with Maren — he is once again comfortable with dressing how he wants to dress. This can also be read as a characteristic queer experience, as many queer people have to “adjust” themselves to their surroundings as a way to protect themselves from prejudice.

Another crucial yet minute detail that points the more attentive viewer to a more explicit delineation of Lee's queer sexuality is the fact that he has a tattoo that reads “Adam, Eve and Steve”. This is, of course, a subversive reinterpretation of the infamous homophobic expression “*God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve*”, commonly used by bigoted English-speaking Christians to “justify” their disapproval of same-sex relationships by referencing the biblical story of creation. With a statement as such tattooed on his body, it is safe to assume that this is Lee's way of expressing his bisexuality. In a film that honors ambiguous and unlabeled representations of sexualities and identities, it feels like a special, notable choice.

Figure 5 - Lee, Maren, and the “Adam, Eve and Steve” tattoo



Source: Bones and All, 2022, 111'.

The portrayal of Lee's apparent bisexuality is made even more explicit in the scenes that take place at a carnival, the events of which start when Lee and Maren are together on a ferris wheel and she tells him she is hungry. We then watch as Lee observes a man who works at a ball toss booth at the carnival. Lee approaches the booth and talks to the worker — who remains unnamed in the film but whose actor is credited as Lance in some publications (for convenience sake, this is the name I will be using to refer to “Booth Man”). When questioned about Maren, he tells Lance that she is just a friend and proceeds to flirt with him. They end up agreeing to meet up after Lance's shift is over.

The viewer easily recognizes Lee's motive: he is trying to lure the man to a reclusive spot to then kill and eat him. However, when they meet by an isolated cornfield later in the night, the encounter takes an outwardly sexual turn. What could have been a quick and easy kill for Lee actually ends up playing out as a full-fledged hookup between him and Lance, as Lee kisses him and they have sex. It is only after Lance climaxes that Lee takes his life, and then Maren joins him to feed. Predatory motive and eventual murder aside, what stands out most in the scene is the fact that Lee actually engages in a sexual act with Lance, and takes pleasure in it. To Lee, Lance is both prey and a sexual partner. This undoubtedly points the viewer to Lee's queerness, as it is understood that he did not have to actually go through with the sex in order to get what he initially wanted from Lance, yet he chose to do so regardless.

Figure 6 - Lance and Lee



Source: *Bones and All*, 2022, 67'32".

It is also interesting to note that the interaction as a whole depicts a prominent practice between gay men of the time: cruising. The film is set in the eighties, a time when most queer people had no choice but to hide their sexuality and act in secretive, cautious ways. For that reason, the act of cruising became a staple in the gay community as it allowed queer people to “plan sexual encounters without attracting the attention of people who may wish to report them to the authorities, or inflict harm” (Dunbar, 2020). Cruising takes place in public yet secluded places and is known to usually lead to “one-off, anonymous encounters” (Dunbar, 2020). Therefore, Lee and Lance’s scene at the cornfield is a very straightforward representation of this well-known practice within the queer community.

The murder and feeding is later followed by a shocking revelation, when Maren and Lee find out that Lance had a family. A heteronormative family, that is, he had a wife and children. It is that discovery that leads them to start to worry about the consequences of what they had just done. In the eighties, the disappearance of a gay man could easily be dismissed and ignored by police as, at the time, the LGBTQ+ community was going through the horrors of the AIDS epidemic. In a queer reading of a film set in the eighties, it is perhaps imperative to note this major moment in queer history. Although *Bones and All* does not directly reference the epidemic, a subtle commentary on it can be noticed in a scene such as this one. At a time when queer people were dying by the thousands and the government was not doing anything to stop it, this realization by Maren and Lee feels poignant.

Although the film’s queer analogies do not provide material for substantial interpretations concerning AIDS — unlike many other queer-coded horror fiction works made and/or set in the eighties, such as *The Hunger*, *American Horror Story: NYC*, *It Follows*, and *L.A. AIDS Jabber* —, there is still a lingering connection to be made when thinking about *Bones and All*’s cannibals as marginalized individuals on the outskirts of society. In particular, it is interesting to note how the scene with Lance highlights the view of queer people as being somewhat “disposable” in the eyes of society, due to the depiction of Maren and Lee’s worried reaction to the fact that Lance actually had a heteronormative life at home. A “family man” would have people looking for him, his disappearance would not be easily ignored. This, of course, can be read as a denouncement of how the deaths of queer people are treated, investigated and viewed differently than the deaths of cis-heteronormative people in society, especially considering the time period in which the film is set in. Another major consequence of the murder is the fact that Maren goes through a moral crisis when finding out that Lance had children and a “normal life”, unlike her and Lee. This distinction and desire of leading a “traditional” life is also brought up again later in the film.

Once again, I believe it to be important to make the disclaimer that these observations regarding the queerness in *Bones and All* are not presented in this work with the intent to clearly define any of the characters' sexualities. As stated before, despite more explicit depictions of what could be read as Lee's bisexuality, the film values and honors a sort of ambiguity, fluidity and unlabeled idea of sexuality. This is arguably a queer sentiment in and of itself, but regardless of that, making clear delineations is not what this work or the film aim to do. In an interview, when asked about the implications of the interaction between Lee and Lance, Luca Guadagnino stated: "*Let's leave it in the eyes of the beholder. Everything we do is ambiguous and cannot be nailed down and narrowed down to one thing.*" (Guadagnino, 2022).

Guadagnino's statement and overall approach to the portrayal of sexuality in *Bones and All* is precisely one of the main reasons why the film allows for such fruitful queer interpretations of many aspects of the narrative. The choice of centering the film around a relationship between a man and a woman also stands out as a conscious, insightful choice. If the film's protagonists had been explicitly gay or bisexual, or if Maren and Lee had been a same-sex couple, the story would shift drastically and the queerness portrayed would have probably played out in a much more controversial, questionable manner. The peculiar subtlety of Guadagnino's portrayal of characters who are struggling with their identity and searching for their place in the world would most likely be lost to the average viewer, and the film could have been reduced to the trope of "monstrous queers", as accusations of a negative portrayal of queerness, one that equates it with a murderous condition, surely would have arisen. This is also noted by Gavin (2023) in their own queer reading of the film:

If Maren and Lee were the same sex, the symbolism would only alienate the queer community further, regressing to the stereotype of queerness being animalistic and something that is psychologically adverse as opposed to intrinsically natural. As a modernizing and transformative technique, making a straight couple innately hungry for human flesh points to queerness—the isolation it causes for queer people—without enforcing the outright canon that cannibalism is synonymous with queerness. If it were to be portrayed that way, the stereotype of queerness as savagery would be harmful to the very community it is striving to lend an ironic lens to. (Gavin, 2023)

Queer audiences are able to see themselves in Maren and Lee, just as they are. To put it simply, although they are a heterosexual couple, their relationship is anything but heteronormative. Their struggles are also easily recognizable, relatable and embraced by queer viewers. A film that happens to tell a story of romance between a man and a woman can still include and allow for an exploration of queerness on screen, as demonstrated by *Bones*

and All and many films that came before it. Hollywood's Hays Code era films are also a prime example of such inherently queer yet veiled depictions. Either by choice or by necessity, subtle, allegorical representations of queerness are just as noteworthy as clear, explicit ones.

Of course, the characters' genders are also directly influenced by the fact that the film is based on a homonymous novel by Camille DeAngelis, in which Maren and Lee are written as a heterosexual couple. The novel, however, is not a subject of interest in the analysis at hand. A sole focus on the film version of *Bones and All* is due to the fact that Kajganich and Guadagnino's version of the story has significantly more queer sentiments than DeAngelis'. Although personal identities of the authors are not an essential factor in employing a queer reading of a work, it is interesting to note that both the director and the screenwriter have spoken and been asked about how their own queerness might have influenced these changes from the source text and the metaphorical implications of the film. Kajganich, especially, when questioned about these changes in an interview for ScreenRant, stated:

There are all kinds of moments of where one has to decide, as a steward of an adaptation like this, if one is going to try to code one's own experience into the narrative. I really resisted that as much as I possibly could, though I understood the book when I read it from the point of view of a person who grew up queer in a very rural part of the country, and felt a constant level of anxiety and danger. (Kajganich in *Writer David Kajganich Interview: Bones & All*, 2022)

Although the screenwriter expresses his concern with keeping Maren's coming of age journey as close to the source text as possible, especially commenting on the fact that it mainly tells the story of a teenage girl, it is clear that some of his personal points of connection to the story made their way into the screenplay and, consequently, the film. Lee, especially, stands out as a character whose on screen depiction differs most from the novel. Timothée Chalamet, who also is credited as a producer, in both his performance and characterization as Lee, portrays the character as much more sensitive and androgynous than DeAngelis' original representation. Although the film allows for much stronger and unique interpretations regarding queerness in numerous aspects when compared to the novel, it must be noted that Kajganich was able to successfully keep the central metaphor of cannibalism open to more than just one interpretation.

Besides being mainly categorized as a horror, romance and coming-of-age film, *Bones and All* also falls under the umbrella of a road movie, as Maren and Lee travel through the United States' Midwest for most of the film. The depiction of the rural Midwest, through

states such as Ohio, Minnesota and Nebraska, also stands out in a queer reading. Set in Ronald Reagan's America, at a time when prejudice against queer people was rampant, the portrayal of Maren and Lee's journey taking place in rural states where conservatism is prevalent adds yet another layer of otherness to the characters.

With their condition, Maren and Lee would have felt and been seen as outsiders anywhere. However, in a setting such as this one, this is even more prominent. At some points in the film, and in extended scenes that are only present in Kajganich's script, there are subtle depictions of some of the conservative, exclusionary views of that era. This is mainly shown on scenes where the TV or the radio are playing. At one point in Kajganich's screenplay, Lee and Maren even discuss religion and the hypocrisy of Christian "forgiveness" while hearing a preacher man on the radio (Kajganich, 2022, p. 41-42), in a moment that further exposes their alienation from that area of the country. Given that "irrational prejudice against homosexuality has been a feature of Judeo-Christian culture for millenia, waning and waxing in intensity" (Smith, 1988, p. 61), a connection between this sentiment and queerness is evidently present.

Nevertheless, the most prominent aspect of Lee's character arc is the same as Maren's, it is the crux of *Bones and All's* narrative conflict after all: the issue of identity. As stated previously, Lee experiences his own cannibalistic nature differently than Maren. Because he has been living on his own and consciously feeding for longer than she has, he has had time to come to terms with all that his identity entails and has found ways of coping with the harsher aspects of his nature. He recognizes that this is not a choice, it is simply based on survival, and tells her: "*We gotta do this! We have to do it.*" (Bones and All, 2022, 71'18"). When Maren raises questions about the damage they cause in people's lives, what this means for their future and for how they view themselves, Lee simply responds: "*How dare you make this harder?*" (Bones and All, 2022, 71'40"). Therefore, Lee's acceptance is also presented as an avoidant dismissal of his own negative feelings towards himself. He does understand and has felt before what Maren is feeling now. However, because their condition is inherent – just as queerness is inherent – he knows that wishing their nature was any different would not do them any good. In fact, fighting against it is what could get them in a situation such as the one Maren's mother was in — he eventually mentions this very belief to Maren in the scene after she leaves the infirmary.

Despite his self-assured attitude, Lee does carry his own share of trauma. In the third act of the film, when he and Maren reunite after parting their ways for a while, Lee finally opens up to her completely. In a scene where the two are sitting at a hilltop overlooking the

skies of Nebraska, they reminisce on their journey together up until that point. A few scenes earlier, Maren had spoken to Kayla, Lee's sister, who finally tells Maren what she knows about what had happened between Lee and his father — a traumatic aspect of Lee's life that he was withholding from her throughout the film. When Maren brings this up to Lee, he finally tells her the whole story. Lee reveals that after hitting his sister, his father went on to attack him. With his teeth. The implications of Maren's mother and Lee's father both being fellow cannibals are broad and complex, so much so that perhaps only a deeper, more focused analysis could begin to cover this aspect of the film's lore. Regardless, what stands out in the queer reading at hand is Maren's reaction to the fact that Lee killed and ate his father. The revelation is promptly followed by an intimate, intense embrace between the two. Then, amidst tears, Lee asks Maren: "*You don't think I'm a bad person?*", to which she answers: "*All I think is that I love you.*" (Bones and All, 2022, 108'45").

The interaction spells out Lee's desire to be loved and accepted as well. Although covert for most of the film, this fear of being "wrong" and simply "bad" plagues him deeply. This sentiment is a characteristic queer one, as the desire to not be seen as bad or evil is a historically common and prevalent feeling for members of the LGBTQ+ community. This is especially the case for queer people with a religious background or a traumatic, abusive past with family. In Maren, Lee finds someone who not only accepts him, but also does not judge what he has done. It is, essentially, a portrayal of true unconditional love. A love that is all-accepting, all-consuming — one that, unfortunately, was not afforded to the characters by their family members. In recognizing and expressing this love for Lee, Maren is able to let go of her own issues and doubts, as she sees herself in Lee's struggles as well. From this point on, they are able to stop running from who they are. Maren had to learn that meeting her mother did not give her the exact answers she had been looking for, though it offered her a whole new perspective, and Lee now learns that he is able to be loved and accepted fully. Janelle was wrong, the world of love does have a place for people like them.

The idea of the cannibal act as an act of love — previously mentioned in regards to Janelle's attack — briefly appears once again in this scene, when Maren reassures Lee that she probably would have done the same if she were in his situation and, most importantly, that she recognizes that he did what he had to in order to protect his family. Therefore, in her eyes, as well as being an act of self-defense, Lee killing his father was an act of love, one that made sure that he would not hurt Lee and his sister any longer. It is only after this vulnerable moment, and the recognition of a boundless connection built on understanding and support

between the two, that Maren and Lee are finally able to plan for and feel hopeful about their future.

The notion of a chosen family comes up again, as Maren and Lee, besides being just a romantic couple, essentially establish themselves as a safe haven for one another. The scene in question then concludes with the promise of a new beginning for them:

MAREN: Where do we go now?

LEE: We can go anywhere. Anywhere.

MAREN: Let's drive back, until the truck gives out someplace, and then we'll just -- stay. Get a place. Jobs. Like people do.

LEE: (charmed) You want to be people? Let's be people.

MAREN: Yeah. Let's be them for a while.

(Kajganich, 2022, p. 99-100)

The two then move into an apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In the film, the details of how they came to achieve their new life are left ambiguous, however, deleted scenes from the screenplay reveal that they killed a transfer student named Harmony and have essentially taken over her life. Maren is then able to get a job at a bookstore, attend university in the place of Harmony, and she and Lee live in the girl's university apartment as if it were theirs. There are scenes showing Maren thriving in this new setting, finally indulging in one of her passions — literature — and the two are shown living a tranquil, domestic life together. Their otherness no longer defines them at this point, they have achieved a life as close to normalcy as they can, fulfilling Maren's wish of being able to live "like people do".

Their peace does not last long, though. One day, Maren arrives at the apartment and does not hear from Lee when she calls for him. She notices that the door is unlocked and that the blinds have been pulled down. She also sees a familiar bag atop the bed. Then, she is attacked by Sully. He has managed to find her, once again, and is now clamping her mouth with his hand. He pulls Maren to the bed, and gets on top of her. With a knife pointing at her, they begin to talk.

SULLY: Ever since I drove away from you up in Minnesota, nothing's felt right.

MAREN: What does that mean?

He looks away from her as if he can't quite bear to have her eyes on him as he says:

SULLY: It means -- It means unfinished business.

MAREN: That guy Lee-- We're together now, Sully.

Sully can't keep the rage out of his voice when he says:

SULLY: That's not the business I'm talking about.

(Kajganich, 2022, p. 108)

Sully then reveals that his issue with Maren is due to the fact that she knows too much about him, as he has never shared so much of his life with anyone else before her and is now scared of being, essentially, outed. While Sully is still talking, Maren sees Lee arriving. Lee instantly understands the situation, and stealthily moves towards them with a wrathful expression on his face. He then comes up from behind Sully, and slams a plastic bag over his head, yanking it around his throat. Sully, while suffocating, struggles and tries to fight them off. During this, he manages to jab his knife at Lee, hitting him under his collarbone.

Maren is then able to get Sully's knife by biting his hand and stabs him in the chest multiple times. As Sully is weakening, the two carry him over to the bathtub. He finally stops breathing once Maren inserts her hand into his open chest wound. Maren and Lee are panting, though Lee is in a much more dire state than her. She gets up from the tub and heads back to the living room, towards Sully's bag. From it, she pulls out the long rope that he weaves with all of his victims' hair and notices his latest addition was a bright yellow-blond piece. It is Kayla's.

Lee, struggling, makes his way to the living room. While Maren is grappling with the discovery of Kayla's death, Lee leans over a wall and slides down to the floor, leaving a trail of blood behind him. She then goes to him, rope in hand, and notices his wound. Sully hit his lung, he is dying. Lee sees his sister's hair and the realization hits him: "*He got Kayla*" (Bones and All, 2022, 121'12"). Maren is more focused on taking care of him, and says they cannot handle this by themselves, they need to go to the hospital. Lee dismisses this, and instead goes back to his previous frame of thought, asking her if he really is a bad person. She denies it, again. However, he cannot help it, that heartbreaking idea is still ingrained in him as he believes all of this must be his fault. He failed to protect his little sister, and he let his guard down, he is now about to die and leave Maren on her own again.

As Maren is crying, grieving the inevitable loss of the person she cares about most, Lee reveals his final wish.

I want you to eat me. [...]

I want you to feed. [...]

I want you to do it, Maren. Bones and all. It's beautiful. It's the easiest thing, Maren, love. Just love me and eat. (Bones and All, 2022, 121'39"-122'09")

She initially refuses. They hold each other and kiss as Lee's life wanes away. Maren then moves her head towards his wounds and the camera remains focused on Lee's face as Maren is down on him. While this happens, the film's original song (*You Made It Feel Like Home*, by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, plays. The viewer does not hear Lee, but he is

shown with his mouth open, appearing to be both screaming in pain and grinning in awe. Maren fulfills his wish and consumes her lover entirely.

This film's ending now explicitly presents the act of cannibalism as a metaphor for love. Their all-encompassing, all-consuming love is now literal. In being devoured, Lee now becomes part of Maren forever. The two become one. Consuming someone, bones and all, can now also be understood as the act of loving someone completely. Additionally, it is an act of indulgence. As Jake and Brad mention earlier in the film, it is pleasurable to the point of euphoria. In eating Lee, Maren is not only fulfilling his wish and becoming one with him, but also fully giving into her nature. This is the last frontier for eaters, and the final step of her journey into accepting who she is. Beyond just surviving, she is now indulging.

Lee's wish can also be read as his last gift for her. By offering his body for her to feed on, he is also offering her the ultimate liberation. Her journey of acceptance is now complete. The ending not only concludes the arc of Maren's journey, but it also feels like a well-rounded full circle moment for the character who the viewer first sees practicing cannibalism in that one fateful sleepover scene. At that point, Maren unconsciously acted on her hunger and desire, and faced severe consequences for it. Now, she is willing to indulge. She is allowed and free to do so. The act now unites her with her lover, and with the concept of love and acceptance itself — she has now found her place in the world of love.

Figure 7 - Final scene



Source: Bones and All, 2022, 124'25''44''.

The highly symbolic and cathartic feeding is then followed by the very last scene of the film: a zooming-in shot of Maren and Lee undressed, embracing each other, atop the hills of Nebraska under a pink and purple hued sunset sky. Though it is a memory, a flashback, it is also dream-like in nature. In the screenplay, Kajganich beautifully describes it as such:

Is this a memory? A fantasy? Are [we] in Maren's head? Lee's? None of that is something we can know. All we have is what we see, and what we see is youth, freedom, beauty, and, most of all, love. The country belongs to them here, not the reverse. There is no abandonment, no shame, and no harm. Not anymore. They are welcome here. They can stay. (Kajganich, 2022, p. 113)

Despite ending in a graphic and daunting way, Maren and Lee's story also concludes in a hopeful, validating note with the scene in question. In a queer reading, Guadagnino's portrayal of their existence as not only valid, but also beautiful is noteworthy and incredibly special. Despite all their struggles and limitations, the film found a way to validate and honor Maren and Lee's love. For queer audiences who resonated with the characters' feelings and experiences, the final message of the film is a comforting and simple one: there is a place in the world for you. The horrors that non-normative existences entail are not what defines us. They do not erase us, nor deny us the possibility of finding beauty, love, peace, and freedom — in the world, in each other, and in ourselves.

6. FINAL THOUGHTS

Overall, through a queer reading of *Bones and All*, one is able to find various points of connection between the film and queerness. The portrayal of experiences or feelings of the characters that relate to those of queer individuals in our own society and an exploration of themes such as identity, otherness, and acceptance are amongst the various aspects of the narrative that allow for queer interpretations.

As it is presented in *Bones and All*, the cannibal act allows for multiple metaphorical interpretations, most notably regarding desire and love. In both cases, the expressions of said themes are not normative, which further points the viewer to queer interpretations. One of my initial research questions was concerning the role of cannibalism in the narrative, and what I was able to find through my analysis was that, besides imbuing the film with an array of possible metaphors of the cannibal act itself, the theme of cannibalism is employed primarily as a conduit for an exploration of otherness. In my reading, I found that the issue of self-perception, identity and acceptance is what drives the protagonist's journey and grants the film a coming-of-age quality. This is because Guadagnino and Kajganich appear to be more focused on cannibalism as a condition that shapes and impacts the characters' identity rather than on the act of consuming human flesh itself.

Furthermore, regarding the film's fictional cannibalism, another aspect that stood out in my queer reading was its depiction not as a psychopathological issue, but as an inherent condition that displaces the characters in society and establishes them as non-normative, outcast people. Much like the eaters' hunger for human flesh, queerness is also natural and inherent, and has historically been labeled, trialed and misrepresented as a disease of the mind and soul. Jaime Smith (1988) states that, in 1968, the American Psychiatric Association (A.P.A.) specified homosexuality as psychopathological, and, in 1977, the World Health Organization "continued to do so" (p. 59). Smith also notes that although the A.P.A. no longer considered homosexuality itself as a mental disorder in 1980, "this official view is not unanimous and a significant number of psychiatrists in North America and elsewhere remain convinced of the inherent psychopathology of homosexuality" (Smith, 1998, p. 59).

The depiction of cannibalism in horror fiction, although often allowing for multiple metaphorical readings, is not usually presented as to elicit empathy, compassion and relatability in viewers. Cannibals are usually cold-blooded killers, villainous, savages and/or inherently evil. The viewer's expectations of what the portrayal of cannibalism on screen

looks like are subverted as *Bones and All* manages to subtly deconstruct the idea of its queer-coded eaters as unredeemable monsters. By the end, the film's own suggestion of monstrosity and the impossibility of love for othered individuals — introduced by the character of Janelle — is refuted, as the two main characters learn that they are worthy, capable and deserving of love. Despite their otherness, the world's perception of them, and their own negative self-perception, Maren and Lee manage to find their place in the world, where they are free to love and be loved; to accept one another and to accept themselves. The sentiment of the film's final scene is supported by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross' original song, which plays as Maren and Lee become one:

And I will haunt these hills forever
 Without a reason to believe
 When I can feel you beating inside of me
 I have everything I need

In a world that isn't ours
 In a place we shouldn't be
 For a minute
 Just a minute
 We made it feel like home
 (Reznor; Ross, 2022)

Although their “place” and “home” was eventually challenged, and Lee succumbed to his wounds, their romance lives on, inside. They found love, despite Maren's mother proclaiming that would never be a possibility for her daughter. They found a home, despite their fathers' previous abandonment and the utter loneliness they once were made to accept as their inescapable fate.

The queerness of these characters, be it metaphorical, explicit, sexual, or cultural, is validated and embraced. Their existence might be painful, confusing, and daunting at times, but it is also beautiful, romantic and, above all else, valid. In the Southern setting they find themselves in, where any deviation from the norm is frowned upon, challenged and suppressed, they exist and persist. Just as queer people always have, and always will.

REFERENCES

BAXTER, Kent. On 'coming of age'. In: BAXTER, Kent (Ed.). **Critical Insights: Coming of Age**. Ipswich: Salem Press, 2012, p. 1-15.

BENSHOFF, Harry M. **Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the horror film**. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

BONES and All. Director: Luca Guadagnino. Producers: Luca Guadagnino; Theresa Park; Marco Morabito; David Kajganich; Francesco Melzi d'Eril; Lorenzo Mieli; Gabriele Moratti; Peter Spears; Timothée Chalamet. Starring: Taylor Russell; Timothée Chalamet; Mark Rylance, and others. Screenplay: David Kajganich. Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, 2022. (130 min.)

CHOI *et al.* **Serving Our Youth 2015: The Needs and Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth Experiencing Homelessness**. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund, 2015. Available at: <<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Serving-Our-Youth-Update-Jun-2015.pdf>>.

COHEN, Jeffrey Jerome. **Monster Theory: Reading Culture**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

CRAY, Andrew; MILLER, Katie; DURSO, Laura E. **Seeking Shelter: The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth**. Washington: Center for American Progress, 2013.

DEANGELIS, Camille. **Bones & All**. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015.

DOTY, Alexander. **Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

DUNBAR, Chris. Cruising. **Birmingham LGBT**. Birmingham, 21 jul. 2020. Available at: <<https://blgbt.org/cruising/>>

GAVIN, Ty. **Finger-Lickin' Good? The coding of queerness as cannibalism in "Bones and All"**. The Berkeley Beacon, April 5, 2023 . Available at: <<https://berkeleybeacon.com/finger-lickin-good-the-coding-of-queerness-as-cannibalism-in-bones-and-all/>>

GUADAGNINO, Luca. Luca Guadagnino: "Queerbaiting? What is that? ". [Interviewed by D. Greenwood]. **i-D**, online publication, November, 2022. Available at:

<<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/y3pkbw/luca-guadagnino-interview-bones-and-all-challengers>>

HEREK, Gregory M. Beyond “Homophobia”: Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century. In: **Sexuality Research & Social Policy**, v. 1, n. 2, 2004.

HULL, Kathleen E.; ORTYL, Timothy A. Conventional and Cutting-Edge: Definitions of Family in LGBT Communities. In: **Sexuality Research and Social Policy**, n. 16, 2019, p. 31-43.

KAJGANICH, David. **Bones and All Shooting Script**. 2022. Available at <<https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Bones-And-All-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>>

KAJGANICH, David. Writer David Kajganich Interview: Bones & All. [Interviewed by Tatiana Hullender]. **ScreenRant**, online publication, November 18, 2022. Available at: <<https://screenrant.com/bones-and-all-writer-david-kajganich-interview/>>

KUBOWITZ, Hanna. The Queerness of Noel Coward's Cycle of One-Act Plays Tonight at 8.30. In: REDLING, Ellen; SCHNIERER, Peter Paul (eds.). **Non-Standard Forms of Contemporary Drama and Theatre**. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008, p. 171-90.

KUBOWITZ, Hanna. The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies Or: Obituary for the Implied Reader. In: **Style**, Vol. 46, No. 2. State College: Penn State University Press, 2012.

PICK, Lucas G. W. Otherness and Metaphorical Queerness: Notes on Guadagnino’s Bones and All. In: **Revista Letrar**, ano 2, n. 3, 2023, p. 68-71.

REZNOR, Trent; ROSS, Atticus. **(You Made It Feel Like) Home**. Los Angeles: The Null Corporation, 2022. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plSbcQggqSQ>>.

SMITH, Jaime. Psychopathology, Homosexuality, and Homophobia. In: **Journal of Homosexuality**, v. 15, n. 1-2, 1988, p. 59-73.

TRINGALI, William A. Not Just Dead, But Gay! Queerness and the Vampire. In: **BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects**, Item 138. Bridgewater: Bridgewater State University Virtual Commons, 2016. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/138>

WESTON, Kath. **Families We Choose**: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.