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How Queerness Shapes Lived Experiences: A Comparison between Gabby Rivera's *Juliet*

Takes a Breath* and Aida Salazar's *The Moon Within

“Queer” functions as an umbrella word that can be used to describe a diversity of individuals whose sexual orientation and gender identity and/or expression operate outside of heteronormativity—that is, the sexual and gender norms that govern white, middle-class, North American communities. Consequently, it is crucial to note that the “queer experience” is not fixed and universal. Thus, children must be exposed to queer literature and fiction, providing them “insights into the lived realities of diverse individual characters” (Mallan 163) and individuals in the real world: “From a queer perspective, however, the most successful fiction for children makes visible the processes that seek to enforce heteronormative categories and binaries and those that foreground subjectivity as multifaceted and shifting” (Mallan 163). Aida Salazar's *The Moon Within* and Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* to illustrate how the two female protagonists, Celi Rivera and Juliet Palante, come to terms with queerness and what it means to be a good ally of marginalized communities (LGBTQ+ community and women of colour). While both Celi and Juliet's experiences are shaped by the intersections of their gender and race, Juliet's experiences are centred around her identity as a Puerto Rican lesbian; her journey towards feminism and activism is shaped by external social, political, and economic influences. Juliet's journey reflects a sense of self-awareness that comes from challenging her mother's homophobia, Harlowe Brisbane's white fragility and saviour complex (ultimately resulting in

Juliet finding her voice as a woman of colour), and the support from the various women in her life (Kira, Maxine, Zaira, Ava, and Titi Penny). By contrast, Celi's understanding of queerness is less self-focused. It centers around her response to Marco's transition into gender-fluidity, limited by her self-centeredness and inability to distinguish sex and gender as separate, non-correlating entities.