

After Sex?

ON  
WRITING

SINCE

QUEER  
THEORY

JANET HALLEY & ANDREW PARKER, EDITORS

*After Sex?*



EDITED BY MICHÈLE AINA BARALE, JONATHAN GOLDBERG,  
MICHAEL MOON, AND EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK



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QUEER THEORY

*Edited by Janet Halley & Andrew Parker*

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## Introduction

JANET HALLEY AND ANDREW PARKER

WHAT HAS QUEER THEORY become now that it has a past? What, if anything, does it not include within its purview? Does “sexuality” comprise its inside? If so, then does queer theory have an outside? Bringing together the work of both younger and more established scholars, primarily in the field of literary studies, *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory* explores these and related questions by asking its contributors to reflect on, among other things, what in their work *isn't* queer.<sup>1</sup>

We didn't know what to expect when, in the earliest stages of this project, we posed these questions to potential contributors. Though we couldn't predict what they'd make of it, we had a variety of reasons for asking them in these terms. In the first place, we'd been hearing from some quarters that queer theory, if not already passé, was rapidly approaching its expiration date, and we wanted to learn from others whether or how this rumor might be true.<sup>2</sup> We knew, of course, that the activist energies that helped to fuel queer academic work in the United States had declined sharply since the early 1990s, when the books that would



become foundational for queer theory began to appear.<sup>3</sup> With *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology of the Closet* now past their age of majority, it didn't entirely surprise us that a recent issue of a journal could ask, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" — with "now" an obviously pointed way to announce a departure from earlier habits of thought.<sup>4</sup> But the authors around whom queer theory first crystallized seem to have spent the past decade distancing themselves from *their* previous work: in recent years, for example, Judith Butler began writing about justice and human rights, Michael Warner about sermons and secularism, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick about Melanie Klein and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> In what sense, we wondered, are these writers' current interests commensurate with their earlier (or concurrent) work on sexuality — if, indeed, they are? Does the very distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual matter to queer thinking, and if so, when, where, and how? Can work be regarded as queer if it's not explicitly "about" sexuality? Does finding oneself "after" queer theory differ — in terms of desire, location, temporality, loyalty, antagonism, comradeship, or competence — from finding oneself "after" a traditional academic discipline, critical race theory, a religious orientation, a political conviction, feminism, lesbian and gay studies . . . ?

We posed these questions to potential contributors whose previous work on queer subjects suggested that they might have something especially pertinent to say in response — either because the focus of their work has changed over the course of their careers, or because it hasn't; either because their work revolves around sexual and nonsexual topics alike, or because it retains queerness as its single or predominant object or lens. Since younger scholars are "after" queer theory in yet another sense, we wondered, too, what they might tell us about inheriting a canon of queer texts and preoccupations at a moment so different from that of the early 1990s. Finally, and in order to delimit even further the range of responses, we first directed these questions for the most part to people in the fields we know best — literary and legal studies. We envisioned, at any rate, a collection consisting of many short pieces (suitable for reading on the subway, say, or in the john), focused reflections on the trajectory of each contributor's work and its relation to queer theory, rather than extended analyses. We hoped that these would be "personal" statements whose purpose, for once, would be to tell rather than show.

Though the essays included here are terrific by any standard of measurement, they are also less than fully representative of the range of current queer work even within the fields we specifically targeted. We note, most obviously, the scarcity of contributions from people working in film and cultural studies and on non-Anglophone literatures, as well as the near-total absence of essays from people working principally in law. We regret the resulting gaps, of course, though we knew from the start we wouldn't be able to incorporate everything we wanted, even in this expanded edition. One thing we learned, or so we think we did, is that queer theory in the law schools has nothing like the *éclat* it still enjoys in literary study. Most of the people we took to be doing queer work in law didn't warm to our invitation at all, and when they did, our question about being "after" didn't resonate with their sense of how queerness came to matter in their work (if, that is, it has mattered at all). We see in this nonresponse the effects of a great many causes. To name a few: the simple temporal lag of the law schools (queer theory started earlier and elsewhere); the failure of queer theory to engage the critical tradition in legal studies (and its resulting failure to grok the critique of rights); hostility in centrist legal studies both to the a-rationalist traditions of thought that have provided so much to queer theory, and to theoretical approaches more generally that do not quickly produce a "policy recommendation"; the plentitude of legal problems that have nothing to do with (are "after"?) sex; and the usual politics of law-as-praxis versus humanities-as-theory, with all the angst of unrequited love it has produced on both sides of the divide.<sup>6</sup> We remain disappointed with this outcome.

The noes we received from people in literature were revealing in other ways. Some declined given the press of their existing commitments (what comes "after sex" may turn out to be administration). Others replied — also unsurprisingly — that they had already said everything they wanted on this subject, while a few others regretted having so much to say that our page limit would have been a vexation. What was more surprising to one of us, if anticipated by the other, was that several people responded to our invitation not so much by declining it as by *refusing* it. Some expressed their continuing skepticism about queer theory itself, while others (apparently not much engaged by the question in our title) reacted angrily to "our" supposition that sex — like, say, Hegel's conception of art — had become a thing of the past.<sup>7</sup>

As if *we* knew the meaning of sex. Or after. Or since. Or writing. Or queer theory.

(Well, we do. But we're not telling. Or showing.)

Thus the space into which this collection crowds its energies is highly specific. Despite all of our different recruitment failures, we present here immensely rich and varied essays that, taken together, suggest that all kinds of excitement remain possible “after sex.” Not only are these essays all “on writing,” they are also the very thing they are writing about. And they are about something that hovers at the limits of articulation, at the opening edge of their authors’ sense of their work and the histories they’ve lived through. Though the contributors wrote for the most part in isolation from one another and had only a few very oblique questions to go by, highly articulate if often tacit conversations can be traced across these different texts. As the first readers of these essays, we were struck not only by their sustained meditation on sex as a source of delight and trouble, as a subject of serious inquiry, as a political conundrum, and as a spur or occasion for writing. We were also astonished at how often that meditation was itself enabled by a thought of “after-ness”: in reporting on the state of queer theory vis-à-vis their own intellectual itineraries, our authors have much to say about the social affects, theoretical demands, and politics of thinking and writing in time.

In the first place, none of the contributors wanted “after” to signify a decisive loss or relinquishment of sex, queer theory, or *temps perdu*. Crisp distinctions between before and after appealed to no one. Instead, the essays multiplied the meanings of “After Sex?” and sent the potential linearity of that question (“Now that sex is over, what comes next?”) around a Möbius strip (“In sex, what am I after?”) in order to make it possible, again and again, for everything that is posterior to precede. Straightforward questions of succession — Did queer theory ever replace feminism? Did Foucault supplant Freud? Did gay and lesbian become queer? — seemed universally uninteresting and inapposite. While no one denied that succession can and does occur (it is, of course, conceivable to smoke a cigarette *after* sex), our authors were much more interested in posing questions about simultaneity, multiple temporalities, and overlapping or internally riven regimes of social practice, thought, and analysis.

There are many good reasons why this complex sensibility about time runs through a collection of essays of/about queer theory. In the first

place, the very relationship between two books crucial for all queer theory — volumes 1 and 2 of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* — plants the temporal question in the center of the courtyard.<sup>8</sup> Foucault’s own struggle with the problematic of a “Great Paradigm Shift” to modernity from antiquity, the intense exploration he made into that claim by proceeding backward, in volume 2, from the modern to the antique, imbricated the question “What is sexuality?” with the question “*When* is it?” — and this has ensured that no simple answer to either will satisfy anyone who has a taste for queer.<sup>9</sup> Freud, too, struggled with the syntax of his discovery that the individual’s progression through a series of stages (oral, anal, genital) is finally all but indistinguishable from a repetitive marching-in-place, “the finding of an object” from “a refinding of it.”<sup>10</sup> Queer theory, dependent as it is on these two precursors, will hence be less the story of the slow-but-steady emergence of an identity over time than an acknowledgment of a temporal predicament — a constitutive impasse, in Lauren Berlant’s terms herein. Which is why so many of this volume’s contributors and other queer writers put pressure on the full semantic range of “after-ness” and the problem of historical periodization.<sup>11</sup> “Did I turn up at the party a little late, or awkwardly early?” Kate Thomas asks, leaving the question suspended. Reciting Gertrude Stein, Michael Moon wonders, “What is the use of being a boy if one is going to grow up to be a man?” What, indeed.

Without a doubt, however, our invitation did encourage people who devoted major portions of their thinking and writing careers to work on sexuality and/or in queer theory to reflect on the possibility of directing some of their passions and energies *elsewhere* — to work that was *not* about sexuality, or that *wasn’t* queer, at least in some significant way. Unsurprisingly, serious dissension broke out over this query. Many of the contributors seem to take some version of Freud’s “expanded notion” of sexuality — its extension beyond its “popular meaning” — to be a prime condition of queer thinking.<sup>12</sup> Thus Joseph Litvak admits in his essay to having trouble identifying what in his work isn’t queer: “It is not just that the imperial ambitions of so much queer theory seem to render the question almost unanswerable. The problem is less that queer theory makes ‘everything about sex’ than that it lodges the nonsexual firmly within the sexual.” Similarly pondering whether a queer sense of sex “obliterates any distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual,” Elizabeth Freeman suggests

that the collapse of distinction is itself the point: “Wasn’t my being queer, in the first instance, about finding sex where it was not supposed to be, failing to find it where it was, finding that sex was not, after all, what I thought it was?” This may be, if such a thing exists, queer doxa. For one potential contributor, the very idea of an “outside” to sexuality (let alone an “end”) seemed preposterous. Milder demurrals also arrived: for several authors, the possibility of a break with sexuality was exactly what they did *not* want—or even think possible. For Moon, sexuality was like the weather, inescapably an element in everything; for Litvak and Richard Rambuss, work on the dark, harsh, and undignified elements of sexuality remained a crucial, treasured, and not-yet-completed agenda. Litvak, Rambuss, and Erica Rand all close their essays with a decisive response to the query “After Sex?”: “No, not for me, thank you.”

For similar reasons, other contributors resisted the idea that queer theory—originating, we suppose most would agree, in work on sexuality—must be limited to that topic. Jonathan Goldberg’s reading of Lucretius is situated in the problematic of succession from volume 1 to volume 2, but is not ostensibly “about” sex, sexuality, or gender; Rand insists on the importance of domains, such as race, that cannot be subsumed in queer (but notes as well that, when she studies them, such domains tend perversely to morph into sex all over again); Michael Cobb proposes bravely to leave sex behind altogether so that he can inquiry queerly into the politics and affects of singleness; Elizabeth A. Povinelli wonders what kind of being she becomes when she passionately affiliates with sexual *and* nonsexual identities; and Freeman probes again and again for what is “least queer in my work”—note, not “not queer” but “*least* queer”—and finds it in her desire to understand the lives of ordinary women, the sentimentalism of their affective appeals to one another, and the sheer relief she herself experiences in putting her scholarly finger on the pulse of the everyday. Thomas invites us to share her amazement that an obsessive emphasis on sexuality has led queer readings of Michael Field’s lesbianism to miss entirely the fact that all of her / their sex was incest!

But even as most who have been interested in queer theory would reject the idea that it has or should have a single “proper object” called “sexuality,” some in the field have been ready to take a break from it, to imagine questions it cannot answer.<sup>13</sup> Sharon Marcus, for example, has complained in an important synoptic essay,

Queer has been the victim of its own popularity, proliferating to the point of uselessness as a neologism for the transgression of any norm (queering history, or queering the sonnet). Used in this sense, the term becomes confusing, since it always connotes a homosexuality that may not be at stake when the term is used so broadly. Queerness also refers to the multiple ways that sexual practice, sexual fantasy, and sexual identity fail to line up consistently. That definition expresses an important insight about the complexity of sexuality, but it also describes a state experienced by everyone. If everyone is queer, then no one is—and while this is exactly the point queer theorists want to make, reducing the term’s pejorative sting by universalizing the meaning of queer also depletes its explanatory power.<sup>14</sup>

“If everyone is queer, then no one is”: Heather Love makes a similar point in this volume about the “queer universal.” Others (including both editors) would suggest that queer theory’s powers are practical and political, not epistemological—one puts tools to use rather than to explanation. For Carla Freccero, the “insatiable appetites and marvelous elasticity” of queer theory are good reasons to treasure, sustain, and extend it, but they also obscure the possibility that queer theory might not be “the conceptual analytic most useful to what is being described.” Here Freccero echoes Gayle Rubin’s pragmatic attitude to theory.

For some, feminism had become the successor to Marxism and was supposed to be the next grand theory of all human misery. I am skeptical of any attempt to privilege one set of analytical tools over all others and of all such claims of theoretical and political omnipotence.

I approach systems of thoughts as tools people use to get leverage and control over certain problems. I am skeptical of all universal tools. A tool may do one job brilliantly and be less helpful for another. [When I wrote “Thinking Sex,”] I did not see feminism as the best tool for the job of getting leverage over issues of sexual variation.<sup>15</sup>

Povinelli makes a similar point, less pragmatic than critical: understanding the “larger social matrices” within which sexuality studies and queer theory have emerged can’t be extracted solely from the materials of sexuality studies and queer theory. And Rand, Neville Hoad, and Heather Love desire an “outside” to queer theory because they want to avoid universalizing politi-

cal formations generally; this seems to all of them important, normatively, at this moment in the historical extension of the American empire.

And then there's "and": queer theory and critical race theory; queer theory and feminism; queer subjects and racial subjects; queer theory and "lesbian and gay studies." And "and" has been multiplying: when thinking about racial, ethnic, religious, and other dimensions along which subjectivity and political life can be divided, the contributors and many other participants in the queer-theoretical enterprise have moved beyond multiculturalism and to transnationality and globalization.<sup>16</sup> Several contributors — plus two who got away — seek to put gay and lesbian identity back on the map, as projects needing queer affirmation, inhabitation, or perhaps even rehabilitation. The affective range of these projects is large and suggests a somewhat surprising — to us, somewhat disconcerting — but apparently strong association of the lesbian mark with utopia (Ann Cvetkovich) and the gay male mark with various intensities of dystopia (Rambuss). We will return to the divisions in the volume that have arisen in response to the "shift to affect" below; here, what interests us is the suggestion that intellectual work might productively correspond, *in queer projects*, with highly conventional gender distinctions. Other contributors took the disaggregative, explosive, biopoweristic, multiple-rather-than-serial impulses of queer work *to* domains strongly structured by racial and national discourses: for Richard Thompson Ford the "queer" is a way to loosen the lockups of race-equality talk, while for Bethany Schneider (via Craig Womack and Hank Williams) the paradoxes of Native American sovereignty are most salient precisely in relation to their queerness. For José Esteban Muñoz the soft, labile openness of peaceful sleep becomes a model for a method opening up feminism, queer theory, and "even race" (race being for all three of these contributors, it seems, more difficult to "queer" than sexuality). That is to say, when our authors offered us identity-inflected or intersectional work, they implicitly argued that a queer impulse was indispensable and directly productive, both of desire and of analysis — even if, as Schneider underscores, different kinds of queerness don't map neatly onto each other. Only Hoard wondered whether the transnational and the global have become "the new queer," effectively supplanting it from a vanguardist position in academic life which it may never regain.

To the extent, then, that queer theory lives on in these essays, it lives on after itself. What is it like to be doing queer theory *still*, to be working today in a tradition that has managed somehow to have acquired a past?

Several essays recall the hectic, heady, and truly terrifying days of its birth in the riveting nexus of the feminist sex wars with the crescendo—which at the time we did not know would diminish—in AIDS-related death among United States gay men. Jeff Nunokawa offers a particularly poignant reminiscence of the queer street, the delicate encounter of activist with theoretical energies, back in the legendary day of Queer Nation and ACT UP. He and Eve Sedgwick take on, directly, the fact that *those days are over*.<sup>17</sup> What replaces the sense of political purpose of those inaugural moments?

Some of our contributors find rich theoretical and stylistic resources with which to make sense of current circumstances in two contemporary forms of queer analysis: the so-called “antisocial thesis” (the Bersanian project, exemplified here by Edelman and qualified by Leo Bersani himself), and the “turn to affect” (the Sedgwickian project, exemplified here *not* by Sedgwick—more about that later—but by Berlant and Cvetkovitch). The difference between these styles of analysis can sometimes be performed as a stark parting of the ways, which may make each as susceptible to caricature as, well, masculinity and femininity.<sup>18</sup> Where the “antisocial thesis” offers a stern polemic, a strict oppositional stance, a lashing style, and an intense focus on political and psychic dysphoria, the “turn to affect” offers an open-ended or exploratory trajectory, a distrust and avoidance of yes/no structures, luxuriantly sensuous writing . . . and an intense focus on political and psychic dysphoria. So much for the absolute difference between the two. To be sure, some of our contributors—Cvetkovitch, Ford, Moon, Muñoz, Thomas—sound an ecstatic, enamored note, while others—Cobb, Litvak, Rambuss—seek out the lessons of hard experience, but these differences resist reduction to any antisocial/affective contrast. Other offerings utterly confound the two poles. Berlant’s essay (which reads as a composite of twenty-two prose poems) is as antinormative as Edelman’s, but also more antiformal; the affective repertoire it discovers in what she describes as the current sexual and political impasse is vast. Povinelli’s essay—which spans her politically and affectively problematic identification with American lesbian life and her equally problematic identification with her Australian tribal friends—concludes with this thought: “I can relate, and as a result I am disturbed.” Freccero, having traced some pretty severe pathologies in queer history to strong social/subjective dichotomies, shifts to a more hortatory mode to urge a queer



and *post-queer* historiography which, rather than dividing affect and desire from the social and the political, aims to study their relations. Indeed, for Edelman, “the antisocial is never, of course, distinct from the social itself,” which means that even in this iconic essay the world of affect is alive and well.

Still, the antisocial project comes in for serious criticism from several quarters, even from Bersani himself here when, in discussing barebacking as a “literalizing of the ontology of the sexual,” he now finds “naïve and dangerous” aspects of his iconic essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Nunokawa, on the other hand, laments that this essay foreclosed all possibility of a utopian search for a happier embodiment that might be launched from the Foucauldian idea that power is not (always) nearly so monolithic and top-down as it had seemed at the very pitch of the AIDS epidemic. For Nunokawa, the microplay of micropowers in the small social avoidances of everyday life—for tools to notice them, he turns (as do Love and Michael Lucey) to the sociologist Erving Goffman—constitute, simply, a factual rebuke to the Manicheanism of the Bersanian vision: “How, by this view, could anyone get out alive?” Similarly challenging any tendency to construe queerness exclusively in psychological terms, Lucey underscores that sexuality “is lived and experienced as a set of evolving cultural forms into which and within which agents move.”

Sedgwick is yet more critical of queer orthodoxies in an essay we include in this collection even though it had its origin elsewhere—and even though (or especially because) it questions both the Freudian and Foucauldian dimensions of queerness and departs from queer theory in ways unlike any other essay in this collection.<sup>19</sup> Sedgwick argues that Foucault himself failed to elaborate any of his utopian hunches, and that queer theory—which she sees as almost completely dedicated to reproducing this failure—entrenches and solidifies (better said, perhaps, *symptomatizes*) the repressive hypothesis in every purported denunciation of it. Along with Nunokawa, Sedgwick marvels at the deathly pall saturating queer work committed to what Duncan Kennedy has described as “paranoid structuralism,” work in which Sedgwick discerns an anguished bondage to Melanie Klein’s “paranoid/schizoid” position.<sup>20</sup> If a certain paranoid response may have been appropriate in the United States during the height of the AIDS crisis, does it remain so today? Both Nunokawa and Sedgwick suggest it does not, in the one case replacing paranoia with a

focus on the small deaths of social separation permeating all sociability, and in the other with what may seem a renunciation of politics altogether. Though she forbears to respond directly to our initiating questions, we think Sedgwick has answered them distinctively. The temporal orientation she seeks is entirely forward. The very futurity which Edelman decries as the teleological design of heteronormative domination, Sedgwick — turning to Klein’s depressive position for help — cherishes. The capacity to foment a future — to *live* — now seems unavailable to her inside the terms of queer theory, including the theory she herself had once produced. We have placed her essay by itself at the end of this collection to mark her departure from all that has gone before: a hard-won, exciting, trenchant form of “after-ness” — and another possibility, adding to the rich array that precedes it in this collection, for writing since queer theory.

## Notes

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- 1 *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory* is a revised and expanded version of an issue of the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (Summer 2007).
- 2 “It is commonly felt that Queer Theory is less an ongoing event than a periodisable moment, a relatively defunct agenda that can be safely syllabised and packaged for digestion through a shrink-wrapped assortment of contained debates (essentialism vs. social construction, the politics of outing, transgenering, etc.)” (Stephen Shapiro, “Marx to the Rescue! Queer Theory and the Crisis of Prestige,” *New Formations*, no. 53 [Summer 2004]: 77–90, at 77). See also David M. Halperin, “The Normalization of Queer Theory,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2003): 339–43.
- 3 An archive of major early statements would surely include Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Teresa de Lauretis, ed., “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” special issue, *differences* 3.2 (1991); Jonathan Goldberg, ed., *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Eve Kosof-

- sky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 4 David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, eds., “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” special issue, *Social Text*, no. 84–85 (Fall/Winter 2005).
  - 5 See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Michael Warner, ed., *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Library of America, 1999) and “Secularism,” in *Key Words of American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Sedgwick noted a progressive decrease in “the sexual interest” of the chapters that her latest book comprises: “A goodish Foucauldian subject, I’m rather abashed that *Touching Feeling* includes so little sex. A lot of the reason is the quotidian chance of my own life, as cancer therapy that aims to blot up every trace of circulating estrogen makes sexuality a less and less stimulating motive of reflection. It’s also seemed, with the strategic banalization of gay and lesbian politics as well as their resolute disavowal in relation to the historical and continuing AIDS epidemic, as though in many areas the moment may be past when theory was in a very productive relation to sexual activism” (13).
  - 6 For an account of the tense interdisciplinary relations between law and the humanities, see Julie Stone Peters, “Law, Literature, and the Vanishing Real: On the Future of an Interdisciplinary Illusion,” *PMLA*, no. 2 (2005): 422–53. Peters’s own work in progress on antitheatricity as a persistent theme in legal settings belies the despair suggested by the bulk of her *PMLA* piece, and we are thrilled to notice a small movement of works, produced by law professors and humanities professors, that similarly integrate literary and legal studies: for instance, Bradin Cormack, *A Power to Do Justice: Jurisdiction, English Literature, and the Rise of Common Law, 1509–1625* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Bernadette Meyler, “Theaters of Pardoning: Tragicomedy and the Gunpowder Plot,” *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society* 25 (2002); Deak Nabers, *Victory of Law: The Fourteenth Amendment, the Civil War, and American Literature, 1852–1867* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Jeannie Suk, *At Home in the Law: How the Domestic Violence Revolution Is Transforming Privacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Still, it is worth noting that queer theory is not the animating impulse behind this new body of work.
  - 7 And what if it were? As Lauren Berlant puts it in her essay for this volume: “So I wonder: is *everyone* beyond sex (not just the queer scholars who might have, you know, been there and done that, aged out, made art, bought property,

- endured AIDS, forged a couple, taken hormones, had events, reproduced, got tenure, had episodes, done new research, said what they had to say, heard what there was to hear, looked around the room, gotten bored?)”
- 8 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985).
  - 9 On modernity and antiquity, see Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 44–48.
  - 10 See Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 35.
  - 11 See, for example, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Carla Freccero, “Fuck the Future,” *GLQ* 12.2 (2006): 332–34; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Essays on Queer Temporality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120.5 (2005): 1608–17; and Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). Erica Rand suggests in this volume an alternative genealogy for queer theory in recalling that Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* appeared the same year as *Tendencies* and *Bodies that Matter*.
  - 12 See Sigmund Freud, “On ‘Wild’ Psychoanalysis,” in *Wild Analysis*, trans. Alan Bance (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 4–5, as well as *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962), xviii.
  - 13 We refer of course to Judith Butler’s essay “Against Proper Objects,” in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 1–30. For one editor’s reflections on why “taking a break” can be a good thing to do, see Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
  - 14 Sharon Marcus, “Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay,” *Signs* 31.1 (Autumn 2005): 191–218, at 196.
  - 15 Gayle Rubin with Judith Butler, “Sexual Traffic: Interview,” in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 97 (originally a special issue of *differences* 6 [Summer/Fall 1994]). Rubin reflects here on the work that led to her “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–319—an essay which, while it does not label itself “queer,” was nonetheless crucial to the development of queer theory.
  - 16 See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncy, eds., “Thinking Sexuality Transnationally,” special issue, *GLQ* 5.4 (1999). For one editor’s contribution to this tradition in queer theory, see Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

- 17 And now over, sadly, in another sense as well: Eve's long struggle with metastatic breast and bone cancer came to an end on 12 April 2009.
- 18 See, for example, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 819–28. The journal asked Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, all participants in a program arranged by the Division on Gay Studies in Language and Literature at the December 2005 MLA Convention, to produce "accounts of their positions." The resulting text has the texture, though not the form, of a debate.
- 19 Sedgwick's essay originated, 20 October 2005, as a presentation in Halley's Book Trouble series at Harvard Law School; the texts that Sedgwick read were Melanie Klein's "Love, Guilt and Reparation," in *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921–1945* (London: Virago, 1988) and Meira Likierman, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context* (New York: Continuum, 2001).
- 20 Duncan Kennedy, "A Semiotics of Critique," *Cardozo Law Review* 22.3–4 (2001): 1147–89, at 1169–75.



Genealogies of After



MY WORK HAS BEEN mostly about advocating for queer's verbally and adjectivally unsettling force against claims for its definitional stability, so theoretically anything can queer something, and anything, given a certain odd twist, can become queer. I have wanted to preserve sexuality's importance to the notion of queer mostly because there are other quasi-concepts that convey the work of denormativization, broadly conceived, for other domains. Queer, to me, is the name of a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity. It can be thought of as, and is akin to, the "trace" in the field of sexuality. Thus *créolité*, *hybridity*, *mestizaje*, *métissage*, *spectrality*, *the trace*, and *the uncanny* all find themselves in certain ways allied with *queer* as terms that do the work of *différance* in relation to the identitarian inflections they carry, though each speaks to different discursive domains and targets specifically and differently inflected binaristic identitarian normativities.

Until sometime last year, I would have said that what most resisted queering in my field — let us call that field for the moment Renaissance studies — was a version of histor-



icism and one of its corollaries, periodization, in European pre- and early modern sexuality studies. Some of the best practitioners of this historicist bent are David Halperin in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* and Valerie Traub in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, with their insistence on the past's differences from the present in the arena of sexual and gender identity, even as they use present (or modern) models as benchmarks for evaluating—and striving to define—that past.<sup>1</sup> Although historicism has a long and complex history as a disciplinary practice, the historicism I refer to here has to do more with the anti-anachronistic move that came to the fore acutely after John Boswell's work asserted the existence of “gay” people across vast spans of premodern time.<sup>2</sup> His anachronistic move mirrored, to a degree, the related ethnocentric move of assimilating culturally different models of gender and/or same-sex desire so that it could be proven that alternative (nonbinaristic) gendering and same-sex sexuality were universal phenomena, the most controversial example of which was probably the assertion that what anthropologists called *berdache* was yet another form of gay identity recognizable to the modern West.

Johannes Fabian (*Time and the Other*) famously pointed out the relation between temporal and spatial alterities by noting that spatially distant cultural others are often scripted as “before” the West, from Western modernity's point of view.<sup>3</sup> Postcolonial critics and scholars have conducted a sustained critique of the timelines of the West, not only to unsettle Western developmental teleologies that proceed from primitive elsewhere to modern “here,” but also to articulate alternatives to the hegemonic pressure of a certain version of modernity and capitalist, globalizing transformations. In a related move, they have also sought to displace the centrality of Western European time and space as the measure of historical time (see, for example, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, and, for modernity, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, and Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, interventions such as Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* approached the critique of Western modernity from within to demonstrate its nonmodernity to itself.<sup>5</sup> And an important influence closer to the domain of sexuality on thinking temporality alternatively was (as with so many things) Michel Foucault, for the ways he argued that historical time was multiple and that multiple temporalities could be seen to coexist synchronically in any given historical formation.

In the field of sexuality studies, the space-time problem looked somewhat different but was related: the anachronists collapsed time by universalizing identity across time, while the ethnocentrists collapsed space by geographically universalizing a culturally specific model of “gay.” The anthropological critique of this latter move focused on differences across geographic space and repudiated the identificatory logics of “we are everywhere” by refusing the existence of a recognizable “we” and concentrating instead on the effort to discern and define — as different and as culturally specific and contextualized — what seemed initially recognizable as identitarian resemblance.<sup>6</sup> European-focused early modernists and premodernists, adopting and applying to time the anthropological critique that was launched against ethnocentric universalizing claims, asserted (as against the notion that “we have always been”) that the past was different from the present and that presentist categories for past sexualities did not apply.

This altericist reaction was undoubtedly necessary insofar as it sought to enable analyses of gender and sexuality rather than foreclose them through a presumption that “we know whereof we speak,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it in *Epistemology of the Closet*.<sup>7</sup> However, as a specialist in a period whose exceptionalist claims are notorious, I continue to worry that altericism is sometimes accompanied by an older, more familiar claim that periods — those confections of nineteenth-century disciplinarization in the West — are to be respected in their time- and context-bound specificity. This is the historicism I speak of, the one that, in the name of difference, smuggles in historical periodization in the spirit of making “empirical” claims about gender and sexuality in the European past. In a review of modern Euro-American New Historicist studies (from the eighteenth century on) relating to homoerotic identities and identifications, Susan McCabe has generously argued for the possibility of practicing a specifically queer historicism, a practice that would combine, strategically, the historicist necessity of charting, taxonomizing, or “excavating” sexual behaviors and experience with the recognition “that sexualities are socially constructed and can take multiple forms” and that “history is riddled by multiple desires,” a practice she sums up as “a critical trend of locating ‘identifications’ (rather than identity), modes of being and having, in historical contexts.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, European pre- and early modern critical work has, for quite some time, at least implicitly troubled periodization in its fully altericist

and exceptionalist form, in spite of the historicizing impulses generated in the wake of New Historicism's call to reinsert history into theoretical and critical work regarded as having been too influenced by poststructuralist, mostly French, deconstructive critical theories. For along with New Historicism, cultural materialists and feminists explicitly politicized the motives for analyzing texts and did so with frankly presentist stakes. In my understanding, this is in part what gave rise to sexuality studies in its lesbian, gay, and queer orientations in the first place: desires in the present to prove the persistent existence of same-sex desires and communities over time, or desires to characterize modernity's relation to same-sex desires and communities as different from or similar to the past, thereby identifying the specificities of modernity's sexual regimes — in short, to intervene politically in the present by using the past. Foucault's notions of archeology and genealogy suggested ways of understanding present stakes in the past that left their imprint on the work of sexuality studies scholars, even as the latter were distracted, one might say, by Foucault's historical arguments regarding the appearance of identitarian formations around sexuality (the famous "acts versus identities" debate).<sup>9</sup> From my perspective, some of the most innovative challenges to strict boundaries of periodization in the name of confronting present interests and stakes in European premodern studies from within the field appear in the work of feminist and queer medievalists, such as Kathleen Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism*, Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*, L. O. Aranye Fradenburg's *Sacrifice Your Love*, and Karma Lochrie's *Heterosyncrasies*.<sup>10</sup>

Inspired in part by the brief foray into these questions represented by the collection Fradenburg and I edited, *Premodern Sexualities*, my recent book, *Queer/Early/Modern*, set itself the task of critiquing historicisms and troubling periodization by rejecting a notion of empirical history and allowing fantasy and ideology an acknowledged place in the production of "fantasmatic" historiography as a way to get at how subjects live, not only their histories, but history itself, to the extent that history is lived through fantasy in the form of ideology.<sup>11</sup> Scholars trained in psychoanalysis in addition to other disciplines and working within queer-theoretical frameworks have forged theories concerning the force of affect in history.<sup>12</sup> Implicitly following through on the ways some of them call for or identify kinds of affect at work in archival and memorializing projects, I sought to theorize affect's persistence across time and its force as that which compels

past-, present-, and future-directed desires and longings. I also sought to forge a kind of ethics of haunting that would motivate queer historiographic endeavor through the project of queering temporality. This haunting would be reciprocal in that it would entail a willingness both to be haunted and to become ghostly, and insofar as the reciprocal penetrability entailed would also be sensuous — a commingling of times as affective and erotic experience — it would also be queer.

Alongside postcolonial critiques of modernity, there has also been a “queering” of temporality from outside queer theory, a denormativization of temporality through its relation to desire, fantasy, wish, and the impossibility of sustaining linear narratives of teleological time, especially in relation to the hope of *longs rêcits*. Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, continuing a meditation on time begun long before his own work and in the wake of a certain “prophetic” Marxism (perhaps most importantly and poetically articulated in Walter Benjamin’s writings on secular messianism), definitively threw a kind of time productively out of joint for those of us grasping for a way to rethink teleological histories and to explain our sense of being profoundly haunted by ethical imperatives that preceded us.<sup>13</sup> I sought to extend this meditation specifically to queer historiography, relying on the critique that had been done to further spectrality’s applicability to certain historical and historically “intimate” questions.

Now it seems to me that queer time is everywhere; the project of queering temporality is in full swing, with many publications and journal issues devoted to the topic. Queer postcolonial critics and theorists working at the convergence of transnational spatiotemporal dislocations are forging new discourses of queer time and space.<sup>14</sup> Queer temporality can be understood to dislodge queer from its gossamer attachment to sexuality by thinking “queer” as a critique of (temporal) normativity *tout court* rather than sexual normativity specifically. But Elizabeth Freeman’s call for alternative chronotopes (“Time Binds”), Madhavi Menon’s arguments against narrative teleology (“Spurning Teleology”), and Lee Edelman’s arguments against reproductive futurity (*No Future*) do a nice job of demonstrating how the queering of temporality, at least narrative temporality, is both related and not related to the specific thematics of sexuality.<sup>15</sup> They identify progressive, and thus future-oriented, teleologies as aligned with heteronormative reproduction. Their proposed responses to normative, reproductive futurity — erotohistory, anachronism, and the death

drive (a kind of antifuturity), respectively—invite us, I think, to continue to generate alternative temporal models that might be said to be queer. Queer spectrality—ghostly returns suffused with affective materiality that work through the ways trauma, mourning, and event are registered on the level of subjectivity and history—is what I regard as my own contribution to this effort. It takes the already deeply queered relation that a nonrationalizable historicity has to eventfulness (what I termed in my book “the not strictly eventful afterlife of trauma”) and to the bearers of such potentially meaningful eventfulness (ghosts and angels, for example), and it proposes an ethics (another way to think “survival”) that might, through remaining open to being haunted, do justice in responding to how we find ourselves impelled by demands that confound the temporalities we call past, present, and future.

However generative “queer” may be—and this is certainly what is either least or most capitalistically queer about queer, its breathtakingly rapid productive generativity—it isn’t, it seems to me, the name for every wrenching that may occur, for every denormativizing project possible. I am not sure why one would want it to be, except for professional reasons related to the marketplace, whether of ideas or of jobs. If, in a given analysis, queer does not intersect with, touch, or list in the direction of sex—the catchall word that here refers to gender, desire, sexuality, and perhaps anatomy—it may be that queer is not the conceptual analytic most useful to what is being described. I understood one of deconstruction’s projects to have been to find such terms, not quite concepts, from within the particular conceptual fields that were under scrutiny—an endeavor that has been creatively practiced in many theoretical fields related to but critical of identitarian projects, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, critiques of color, and varieties of postnationalism and postcolonialism—and I hope that this work will be continued and that “queer” will not swallow up everything with its insatiable appetites and marvelous elasticity.

Queer theory, queer critique, and queer critical studies have spent at least a decade and a half now scrutinizing the vagaries of identity and identification. These have been crucial sites to rework, as queer theory came to the fore precisely in order to challenge identitarian conceptualizations of gendered sexual being and belonging that sometimes also implicitly referred to socially hegemonic subject positions, marked only—in U.S. liberal humanist fashion—by the minoritizing designation of non-

normative sexual orientation. Yet as we know from the many recent queer of color and queer diasporic critical interventions within queer theory, it too often left intact dominant liberal notions of the U.S. citizen-subject.<sup>16</sup> But I think now the intersections and coarticulations of “queer” with other designators are very much at the forefront of the agenda. Likewise, the gendered implications of queering are producing ever-richer analytical work in the areas of intersex, transgender, and transsexual theorizing. Here too, it seems to me, the focus has been on identification and on critiques (or reinstatements) of identity.

One practice I want to argue for at this juncture, rather than an “after” of sex, is a return to questions of subjectivity and desire, to a postqueer theoretical critical analysis of subjectivity that brings together, rather than once again solidifying the divide between, psychoanalysis and other analytics and objects of study. Subjectivity, in its manifold singularity, continues problematically to trouble even queerly deconstructed identitarian and identificatory logics insofar as subjectivity relates only obliquely or metonymically, if at all, to totalizable bodies and agencies, binaristic systems of understanding, and humanist logics. While it is true that queer analyses focusing on identity and identification have also engaged with questions of subjectivity, I’d like to see the queer problematics of subjectivity and desire return to queer theorizing in more explicit ways that are not only confined to psychoanalysis and literature — their “proper” homes — but that also bring into relation desire and subjectivity with politics, sex, community, living, and dying. In some ways, this is what activist community and popular discourses of queer that circulate predominantly in non-scholarly venues more often set out to do. The interdisciplinarity that would consist of dismantling the barriers between the world considered as an object of social scientific study and the world considered as infused with passional attachment, fantasy, and wish is still to be achieved (and other ways of considering the world are still to be invented), though anthropology has done more, perhaps, than other disciplines to confront the interrelation of these dimensions, as has the work of scholar-critics who also understand themselves to be imaginative linguistic, “literary,” or “poetic” world-crafters (what goes by the name of “creative writing” in academic departments). Some of what I am looking for is captured in the titles of Denise Riley’s *The Words of Selves* and *Impersonal Passion*.<sup>17</sup> Her work — and the status of such work as written and writerly, as self-consciously and

frankly figural, is key I think — consistently demonstrates the inextricabilities of relations to the social with the desiring subjectivities that inhabit it through a practice of writing that undoes what is still so persistently, and often disavowedly, Cartesian about so much intellectual work, the separation of something like rational analytical thought from feeling.<sup>18</sup> In different ways, Leo Bersani, Ann Cvetkovich, Freeman, Elizabeth Grosz, David Marriott, and Sedgwick have been working along this edge, focusing on desire's resistances, affect's insistences, and the problem of Cartesian models in our "worldings."<sup>19</sup> Such a practice, which would be, in my view, a queering of the so-called human sciences in their institutionalized and disciplinary forms, would be sex infused because explicitly suffused with a nonrepressed corporeality. As I understand it — and where my hopes and wishes lie — this would be a challenge to engage in risky inter-subjective collectivity and imagine other ways to be, to live, and to fashion worlds.

## Notes

- 1 David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 2 John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage, 1994) and *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- 3 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
- 4 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 5 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 6 For a good example of this argument, see Lisa Rofel, "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China," *GLQ* 5.4 (1999): 451–74.
- 7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- 8 Susan McCabe, "To Be and to Have: The Rise of Queer Historicism," *GLQ* 11.1 (2005): 119–34, at 120, 121.

- 9 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970, repr. 1994), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970, repr. 1980), and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978, repr. 1990).
- 10 Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- 11 Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.
- 12 The list would include Lauren Berlant, ed., *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); David Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 13 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), and *Spectres de Marx: L'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993); Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 253–64.
- 14 See, for example, Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Geeta Patel, "Ghostly Appearances: Time Tales Tallied Up," *Social Text*, no. 64 (Fall 2000): 47–66; and Elizabeth Povinelli, "The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and



- the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998): 575–610.
- 15 Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text*, no. 84–85 (Fall/Winter 2005): 57–68; Madhavi Menon, “Spurning Teleology in *Venus and Adonis*,” *GLQ* 11.4 (Fall 2005): 491–519; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
  - 16 I’m thinking particularly of Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, eds., “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” special issue, *Social Text*, no. 84–85 (Fall/Winter 2005).
  - 17 Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) and *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
  - 18 Slavoj Žižek’s introduction to *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000, 1–5) playfully opens with the declaration that the specter of the Cartesian subject haunts Western academia. Žižek argues that the Cartesian subject against which modern thought rails is a sort of “straw subject”; his project is instead to reassert what he describes as “the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*” (2).
  - 19 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Freeman, “Time Binds”; Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), and *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

 Still After

ELIZABETH FREEMAN

I'M STILL AFTER QUEER THEORY. This might mean: even while queer theory has been pronounced over (can I get a refund?), *I'm* embarrassingly here. And it might mean: invited to the wake of queer theory, I'm *still*, as in somewhat paralyzed, with nothing to say. And it might mean: evidencing my usual incapacity to let go once I attach, I'm still *after* it; I haven't stopped desiring queer theory. More on the latter, in a bit.

I've been asked to consider what in my work isn't queer, the significance of this nonqueer domain, and to what extent these inquiries into my own intellectual life might reveal the limits of the queer paradigm. This would require my knowing what in my work actually *is* queer, or even what sex is, which I never really have. When I began doing serious academic work, two things animated it: lesbian-feminist theory (an undergraduate honors thesis on Gertrude Stein, Monique Wittig, and the relationship between linguistic and sexual experimentation) and AIDS activism (a master's thesis on how and why Nathaniel Hawthorne fictionalized Massachusetts's 1721 smallpox

epidemic as if smallpox were a venereal disease). For me this work's queer-ness, unnamed as such at that historical moment, lay in the unpredictable incommensurabilities and overlaps between poststructuralism and feminism, feminism and New Historicism, linguistic analysis and health issues, women and feminized male bodies, sexual utopias and plagues. Then I turned to *Queer Nation*, my first encounter with the term *queer*. But I didn't assume that the most interesting aspects of the group lay in that appellation. Rather, in conversation with Lauren Berlant, I wondered what the "Nation" part could possibly mean to sexual dissidents, and what sexuality, nation-formation, and corporate marketing strategies had to do with one another. I wondered about how identity politics inflected conceptions of space. I think I thought we were theorizing those things rather than "doing queer theory" and was surprised, though pleased, to find the resulting article, "Queer Nationality," received as the latter.<sup>1</sup> Much of what Lauren and I had to say about queer politics also resonated with what I'd always thought of as the politics of class: the privilege of inhabiting the trademark and the longing for insertion into the nation-form, versus the power of lo-fi productions, culture jamming, and purposefully unintelligible dispatches from the popular front.

It was, in fact, a concern with class politics rather than sexuality per se that informed my next turn to the nineteenth century, initially to the little literary magazines sponsored by pre-Civil War textile mills, which featured the fairly genteel writings of Anglo-American female factory workers.<sup>2</sup> It's obvious to anyone working in periods preceding the twentieth century that inside the academy these specialties can feel like "nonqueer" domains, insofar as the protocols of inquiry, the dominant terms of the field, and the materials themselves resist any easy assimilation into contemporary sexual politics. At the same time, of course, and as critics at least as far back as Leslie Fiedler have recognized, the nineteenth-century United States offered a few more legitimated forms of same-sex eroticism than does our current moment (and I suppose all queer literary critics like to feel that their period, genre, or national area of expertise is the sexiest). Thus there was certainly a sexual angle to my work on factory women: I was interested in this new, extrafamilial site of female-female socialization, and the erotics therein. But I was also — and here perhaps we are getting to what is least queer in my work — compelled by the drive that these women, mostly farmers' daughters, had to pass as members of the urban

middle class. Their writings ventriloquized the sentimental women's magazines that saturated a newly emerging women's market, and these apprentice writers trafficked in the metaphors of a domesticity that the factory environment called into question. Factory writers claimed to be sending the bulk of their wages home to educate brothers or support ailing family members, and to be working only until finding a suitable marriage. But the amount of space they devoted to admonishing one another about the perils of shopping and conspicuous consumption and the way they rewrote tales of female adventure suggested to me that making textiles was, for them, a technique of self-fashioning. Even more important, the literary mode of sentimentalism—which in many ways germinated the form of rights-bearing identity itself that queer theory would so powerfully contest—allowed these writers a certain relief, a certain intelligibility.<sup>3</sup>

So what isn't queer about my scholarship, most probably, is that I'm willing to take seriously people's longing for that relief, for the privilege of being ordinary. I don't mean that I think that activists and critics should just celebrate the ordinary and be done with it. I mean only that that desire is a powerful one, can take honorable forms, and sometimes results in extraordinary outcomes despite itself. As a graduate student I wondered—and I still wonder—whether daring to ask a question that seemed banal, even rearguard, might produce a leap forward of some sort. My first book, *The Wedding Complex*, certainly emerged from what looked like a progressive activist context, in which I puzzled over why the lesbian and gay movement was turning toward legalized same-sex marriage as a private economic solution to large-scale, structural problems like the collapse of the health care system, increasingly restrictive immigration policies, and the shredding of the social safety net.<sup>4</sup> But marriage wasn't the sexy topic, like sadomasochism or femme identity, that this Big Dyke on Campus might have been expected to choose. I began this work on the wedding form in American culture with some simple questions: what does it mean to fall in love with a wedding, with form itself—and is that the same as wanting to be married? I wanted to take seriously people's pull toward normative symbology without assuming that those so drawn in were stupid or brainwashed, or did not wish for non-normative worlds even as they used seemingly banal materials to build them. What I found is not surprising for anyone reared up on early 1990s cultural studies influenced

by deconstruction: that a seemingly hegemonic form contains the history of its own undoing by other possibilities that the law refuses to realize. Or, within the wedding form is an arsenal of possible alternatives to dyadic couplehood. It seemed possible to be against marriage and for weddings, however unqueer this made me.

But still. As both the wedding and critical theory have taught me, what keeps form from congealing is time: it's the often ludicrous anachronisms within a given object or practice that operate as portals to other uses. And lately, time is the "asexual" domain I've been working on, though I can't say that this feels like a departure from, or a beyond to, queer theory. In fact, my new work on time comes from a sense of being haunted, as many scholars in the field are, by the unrealized promises of feminism, critical race theory, AIDS activism, and queer theory as well as by the temporal aspects, un-remarked-upon in the immediate responses to its publication, of some foundational work. Take, for instance, Eve Sedgwick's focus on the queer "inner child" with whom the sexually dissident adult has a complexly narcissistic, avowing and disavowing, even pedophilic relation.<sup>5</sup> Or the importance of melancholia in the second chapter of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which was the point of departure not only for Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* but also for several other important works on queer politics and loss.<sup>6</sup> Or the many undead referents of the title of Cherríe Moraga's play *Giving Up the Ghost*.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the best of theorizing about queer theory itself reminds us of its marvelous temporal axis, one that insists I cannot but still be after queer theory, rather than finding myself over it. In one version of this theorizing, queer marks a "radically anticipatory stance."<sup>8</sup> Powerful as it is, this version does tend to privilege the avant-gardeism of queer subcultures, to celebrate their dissolving and disintegrating work on identity, taxonomy, community, and to claim that queer is always ahead of actually existing social possibilities. Which is to say, on this model it seems that truly queer queers negate forms, and that formalism, particularly of the literary kind, isn't very queer. But this version of "queering" the social text strikes me as somewhat akin to Eve Sedgwick's notion of paranoid criticism: it's about having the problem solved ahead of time, about feeling more evolved than one's context.<sup>9</sup> Another way of exploring the temporal axis of queer being might be to see queers as shuffling along behind form, interested in the tail ends of things, willing to be bathed in their fading light. Some of my best students in

gender / sexuality studies have said that this is what it feels like to them to have missed early 1990s AIDS and women's health activism and the "queer renaissance": that they feel like they are catching up to something that is behind them. Well, me too, and I was supposedly there.

This willingness to be warmed by the afterglow of the forgotten is something like what I mean by a longing for form, even for the hyperintelligibility of a form so ordinary that it has been discarded. It's not simple nostalgia, for it requires giving up the notion that a given form has a stable referent, a prior wholeness locatable in a time and place we ought to "get back to." It is more like what I think Sedgwick means by reparative criticism: that because we can't know in advance — we can know only retrospectively, if even then — what is queer and what is not, we gather and combine eclectically and idiosyncratically, dragging a bunch of cultural debris around with us and stacking it in eclectic piles "*not necessarily like any preexisting whole*."<sup>10</sup> Melancholics all, perhaps, we hollow out the content of obsolete forms but preserve the husk. I am beginning to realize, then, that what might be least queer, least obviously sexual, about my work is its (anachronistic?) investment in aesthetics: in what I experience as a genuinely erotic friction among various genres, modes, literary techniques, allusions, and so on in any given cultural event or object. And this erotics is itself a kind of historicism, a way of confronting the historicity of subjects and politics that finds its queerness in method rather than in object. For as a colleague of mine brilliantly puts it, following Walter Benjamin, aesthetic objects — especially outdated ones — "*make time appear*" in ways that contest dominant modes of writing and feeling properly historical: they demand that we read, and they themselves write, historiographically aslant.<sup>11</sup> The apprehension of this requires a certain stillness.

But even that critical pause isn't a retreat into contemplation, necessarily. For social change itself enables, and perhaps even requires, that incommensurate temporalities — often most available to us via their corresponding aesthetic forms — rub up against one another, compete, overlap, crossreference. The historian Walter Johnson, for example, has demonstrated how leaders of slave insurrections often concurrently mobilized the historical time of Haitian liberation, the cyclical time of a mythologized African past, the sacred time of a Christian afterlife, and others.<sup>12</sup> Each of these historical moments and temporal modes has its own genres

and tropes, and would-be users must recognize these at work in the past in order to deploy them in new combinations for the future. This kind of simultaneously archival and performative work feels as powerful, as embodied, as imbued with strategic and productive misrecognition as, well, sex. It is sex as technique, rather than topic.

However, saying that requires such an expansive sense of what sex is that it obliterates any distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual. Which might be my point here: wasn't my being queer, in the first instance, about finding sex where it was not supposed to be, failing to find it where it was, finding that sex was not, after all, what I thought it was? As a model for doing queer theory, doesn't that rely on the capacity to be surprised, not only by radical transformations but also by the embarrassing reappearance of the ordinary or the over? Having written all this, I'm still not sure what the "after" to that would be. I'm still after sex, too, perhaps as method rather than object: and I am grateful not to be sure what form even sex will take.

## Notes

- 1 Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," *boundary 2* 19.1 (Spring 1992): 149–80.
- 2 Elizabeth Freeman, "'What Factory Girls Had Power to Do': The Techno-Logic of Working-Class Feminine Publicity in *The Lowell Offering*," *Arizona Quarterly* 50.2 (Summer 1994): 109–28.
- 3 On form as relief, see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Sexuality at Risk: Psychoanalysis Metapragmatically," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 387–411, at 389.
- 4 Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 5 The best introduction to this aspect of Sedgwick's work is Stephen Barber and David Clark, "Introduction: Queer Moments: The Performative Temporalities of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick," in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen Barber and David Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–53.
- 6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). See also, e.g., the essays in David Eng and David Kananian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

- 7 Cherríe Moraga, "Giving Up the Ghost: A Stage Play in Three Portraits," in *Heroes and Saints and Other Plays* (Albuquerque, N.M.: West End Press, 1994), 1–35.
- 8 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?" *PMLA* 110.2 (May 1995): 343–49, at 344.
- 9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 8. Italics in the original.
- 11 Dana Luciano, "Introduction: Tracking the Tear," in *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 1–24, at 21. Italics in the original.
- 12 Walter Johnson, "Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Slavery," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Tom Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 148–67.



## After Thoughts

JONATHAN GOLDBERG

BECAUSE IT RELATES to questions I'd been pondering at that time, I begin by thinking about the rubric under which contributors to the issue of *SAQ* that is the basis for this book were asked to organize their thoughts, and under which I assume these pages will be reappearing: "After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory." At first glance, these phrases seem structured by the determinate difference between past and present. If we are—are we?—"after," then presumably there was a before, one that is definitively past (one that, in effect, no longer is). The name of that before was "queer theory," and, just possibly, its other name was "sex." In other words, queer theory is over, and we have gotten past sex as well. This could be a narrative of a kind of normative maturity. It also could mark the undeniable fact that critical styles have their histories and that the demise of queer theory goes hand in hand with the demise of theory *tout simple*. At the moment, this could be the prevailing reading these phrases would solicit, the one that would find widespread institutional and professional support. Yet, much as they seem to

mark the present moment as one that is temporally after, these phrases also glance ahead. Indeed, “after” points that way insofar as it suggests a goal before us (we are after sex) rather than something behind. Time past becomes a space ahead. And the new work we are after could be work that is “after” queer theory in another sense as well—work, that is, that takes after its model. So, it may be that queer theory is less over than continuing under other rubrics and in other venues. Indeed, to perceive that future possibility in the present might mean that our sense of the past needs to be rethought. What was queer theory?

These ruminations intersect with questions that Madhavi Menon and I raised in a jointly authored piece.<sup>1</sup> The model for my reading of the organizing phrases here is, of course, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s pointed intervention in *Epistemology of the Closet* questioning the Great Paradigm Shift as the narrative model for recounting the history of sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Reading “after” so that it can as easily mean “before” seems congruent with Sedgwick’s insistence that any time period is characterized by the “unrationalized coexistence of different models”<sup>3</sup> and, I would venture to say, of different temporalities. One point that Menon and I make in our essay is to notice that the first response to the Foucauldian narrative of a before and an after of sexuality (a narrative that may have something to do with the seeming doubling of “sex” and “queer theory” in the organizing phrases here) was to insist on an unbreachable temporal divide and to prompt numerous studies in the history of sexuality bent on detailing what sexuality looked like at its moment of emergence from something that was not sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Now, and to some extent in response to Sedgwick’s urging a more various sense of what might constitute the present, projects in the history of sexuality have sought to find anticipations in the past of the present. These, however, while they have shown that the present draws upon various incommensurate strands, have tended nonetheless to divide these strands among previous discrete moments and to draw them in relationship to a consolidated present.

These two narratives—the one positing radical difference, the other disclosing teleological similarity—thus prove identical in several respects. For one thing, they can imagine the past under the sign of difference, but not the present. In that way both of these narratives remain devoted to a historical positivity that seems anything but the model offered by queer theory or even by its instantiation in the historical project represented by

Foucault's introductory volume. Which is to say that part of the task that lies ahead, as I see it, is still housed in what came before: the relationship between queer theory and the history of sexuality still remains an unresolved terrain. Or, rather, the resolutions, fastening either on the model of absolute alterity or on the model of ultimate identity, have yet to imagine the possibility of writing a history that attends to the possibility of the nonself-identity of any historical moment.

Moreover, it's worth recalling that Foucault's *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* only delivered "sex" as its punch line in order to problematize the category. "It is precisely this idea of sex *in itself* that we cannot accept without examination," Foucault insisted, treating "sex" more as an imaginary and ideal anchoring point produced by the deployment of "sexuality" than as some inherent truth.<sup>5</sup> On one reading, this makes "sex" merely a construction, a fiction that can be dispelled (as if thereby some truth of the subject would be revealed; to think of construction this way is still to be in the grips of the very deployment supposedly being avoided); on another, this after-the-fact organization installs a history of the subject that repeats on the individual level the story that the history of sexuality supposedly delivers: from a before to an after with no relationship between them, a history, in effect, that is only one of aftering. It seems, rather, that the productive way to consider this point about sex and sexuality is to dwell on the problematic of "*in itself*," for this suggests that the very detachment of sex belies its multiple points of attachment. Just as the task that remains for the history of sexuality involves keeping temporal multiplicity in play, so too the location of sexuality requires us continually to redraw maps of its terrain. Foucault's initial volume, for example, ultimately situates sexuality not in the forms of identity in which it first emerged (around multiple figures at varying times—the hysterical woman/mother; the masturbating child; the reproductive couple; the homosexual), but in relationship to a problematic of life whose most salient marks of differentiation are racialized in terms of those whose lives are worth cultivating and those who are expendable. Giorgio Agamben is the theorist working now whose projects in biopower take off from this point. They are, I would argue, contributions to queer theory that do not appear under that rubric.<sup>6</sup>

Here I would also mention yet another theoretical project that does not imagine itself as a contribution to queer theory but nonetheless speaks to

Sedgwick's critique of the Great Paradigm Shift and its refusal of the model of linearity and supersession. As I've been suggesting, I think this critique ramifies in the direction of linguistic multiplicity (the many meanings of "after") that can be thought of under the rubric of "theory," even as it raises the question of history beyond its instantiation in projects in the history of sexuality. But as my glance at some ways of construing the "constructivist" side of Foucault also might have suggested, another question raised by queer theory is the constitution of materiality (the fact that the real is constructed does not mean that it is unreal).<sup>7</sup> All of which is merely to reiterate that queer theory is not and never was just about sex in itself. Sedgwick, it might be noted here, may have seemed to have abandoned sexuality in itself in her most recent book, *Touching Feeling*, but her focus on texture and on the problematic of besideness has not left behind the concerns of queer theory so much as to continue to explore and expand its terrain.<sup>8</sup>

These are among the contexts in which I would locate the work that culminated in my most recent book, *The Seeds of Things*, which takes as its focus the multiple materialisms to be found in early modernity.<sup>9</sup> That work drew me to Michel Serres; his way of doing the history of science speaks to the history of sexuality. It is my hope that my work will continue to relate the supposedly "nonsexual" to the sexual. In seeking to understand the status of Lucretius (as a kind of placeholder for some strands of materialist thought) in the early modern imaginary, I also aim to explore some of the ways in which the later volumes of Foucault's project in the history of sexuality might prove useful not just for a reading of sexuality in early modernity, but particularly in relation to early modern materialisms, both as matters of thought but also as life practices. This is a two-way project insofar as Foucault's late work takes up philosophical currents from antiquity that can be found in Lucretius. It is, moreover, a project that might even allow access to connections between early Foucault (i.e., the Foucault "before" sexuality) and his final work. Which is to say, it's a project that has multiple investments in the past and present (and in multiple moments in each of those time periods) and seeks to make connections of the kind I think enjoined and still called for by the project once called "queer theory."

Serres takes up a version of the Great Paradigm Shift in the first paragraph of his extraordinary book on Lucretius, *The Birth of Physics*, noting

how “everyone knows” that after the shift from ancient atomism to modern atomism “nothing will ever again be as it was”; if everyone knows this, Serres says, then we are in the presence of ideology: “We recognise, I believe, ideologies, religious or otherwise, by their use of the calendar as a dramatic device: before or after the birth of Christ, before or after the foundation of Rome or the first year of the Republic.”<sup>10</sup> How else might one think about time, how else pursue projects in the history of science? In conversation with Bruno Latour, and often explicitly around the question why Serres is drawn to the supposedly outmoded and unscientific thought of Lucretius, Serres answers by refusing the notion that time is a line, a movement ever forward in which the past is discarded in the march of progress. “Temporal rupture is the equivalent of a dogmatic expulsion,” he declares; “every historical era is . . . multitemporal.”<sup>11</sup> (Latour provokes Serres in a manner that cannot be taken entirely seriously, coming from the author of *We Have Never Been Modern*.) As Serres insists, linear time — which supposedly supports the privilege of the present — is itself not even *au courant*; chaos theory has complicated that model. And chaos theory, he insists, is to be found in Lucretius; it is not a modern invention. Such multitemporality is not just a matter of theory; it also corresponds to lived time. Rather than as a line, Serres prefers to think of time as folded, pleated; *pli* in French is also the root of such words as *complicate*, *implicate*, *explicate*. It’s in this figure (which is not just a figure) that Serres’s thought touches Sedgwick’s textural emphasis. Serres’s insistence on folded time is one of unexpected connections and conjunctions; his time is as unpredictable as the weather, which, as Serres notes, is the same word in French (*le temps*). To think the unpredictable is to enter into the orbit of the philosopher of the swerve, to follow *De rerum natura* in its offer of a foundational declination that unaccountably lies at the root of matter, the transformation of a material principle (the atom) that can never be known as such into the material world that moves on this basis. Serres returns to the Lucretian *clinamen* because it is not yet exhausted; rather, it figures the virtual, which might be yet another way of describing the multiple present.

In Lucretian physics, were there no swerve, atoms would fall forever in straight lines. Never touching, they would never make anything. The lines would go on forever, but they would be unproductive. This is a model of motion dear to classical Newtonian physics, which, as Henri Bergson

pointed out in a decisive critique in *Matter and Memory*, turns motion into a trajectory to be plotted in terms of still points on a line and thinks thereby to have found a principle of order in nature by refusing to admit the role of time, which, for Bergson, is a duration that is necessarily multiple.<sup>12</sup> Newtonian mathematization of the world owes something to Lucretius insofar as a mechanistic worldview arises from a reading of atomic theory. Serres disputes this reading of Lucretius, however, finding in the *clinamen* an explanation of things in a motion that is utterly unpredictable and certainly unattributable to some originary purpose or cause; by a minimal deviation from the straight line, chance meetings and conjunctions occur, some of which come to sustain themselves for some stretch of time, but only and always as they remain in motion. This means that multiple possibilities continue with varying degrees of success and realization.

Serres, of course, is not thinking about the Great Paradigm Shift in the history of sexuality in his advocacy of chance conjunction, creation by deviation, the manifold possibilities of the fold, but the theory he advocates seems to me amenable to transportation in that direction. That it might communicate as well with literary projects is guaranteed by the favored analogy for his physics that Lucretius offers, and which Serres stresses, a textual analogy for this texture. Atoms are like letters; just as they can be imagined in any combination, so, in different times and places, they come to be significant. Letters are like atoms; of themselves they are the meaningless matter from which meaning is made. Left to themselves, lined up in a row, they mean nothing but themselves. In Latin, letters are “elements,” made up of the letters *l-m-n* in the alphabetical row.<sup>13</sup> The textual order, of course, might not be the nature of the elements, but the implication of mind in matter. But since mind is matter, this co-implication might as easily be seen as a form of identification rather than as an imposition. Atoms and letters are less like each other than the same as each other. Moreover, this shared condition in no way privileges the human, and certainly is no endorsement of heteronormativity, since the question of reproduction is not assigned to human agency, or seen exclusively as a human activity. Lucy Hutchinson, in a mid-seventeenth-century English translation of *De rerum natura* that is likely the first, renders Lucretius’s 2.688–699, which delivers many of these points, this way:

Thus divers formes are in one bottom wound  
 And mixt seed doth in every frame abound.  
 As our verse severall elements affords,  
 Which are all common unto severall words,  
 Yet every verse and word must be confest  
 Of severall different elements to subsist;  
 Not that peculiar elements are assignd  
 To each, or that no two of the same kind  
 Meete there, but that their junctures different are.  
 Soe is it with all other things which share  
 Like common principles, when as the same  
 Mixt diversly, doe unlike creatures frame.  
 Soe may we justly say, that severall seed  
 Doth corne, and trees, and humane creatures breed.<sup>14</sup>

What are the consequences for this view and the “before sex” and “after sex” with which we began? I would once again invite translation from one domain to another. Jane Bennett, an avowedly Lucretian political theorist, champions the possibility of a reenchanting world, refusing the mechanism of a dead atomism for the vitality of a shared condition.<sup>15</sup> Everything that exists — people, things, ideas — is, according to the Epicurean philosophy that Lucretius unfolds, matter: “In Epicurean materialism,” Bennett writes, “everything is, more or less, made of the same stuff, and although the arrangement of that stuff counts a lot, there really is no such thing as ‘radical alterity.’”<sup>16</sup> Divisive differences from this atomic perspective could better be described as the narcissism of small differences. For Bennett, to see this is to expand the possibilities for a livable world. Like Serres, she taps into Lucretian politics, which is pacific, and Lucretian ethics, which promotes a state of well-being that comes from the recognition of the limits that are the consequence of materialism of this kind. There are necessarily limits on all sorts of aggrandizement that follow from the recognition that all forms of existence are interconnected at a material level that lies beyond any control; paradoxically, then, a life lived within these limits recognizes that life itself is an unlimited material principle. For Lucretius, it is necessary to dispel all myths of an afterlife, all religions that instill fear. Human life is mortal, the matter of the universe is not. By way of Lucretian materialism we are ushered into a heady prospect of an intertwined sameness and difference that marks the

temporal and spatial fields we occupy. In this context, it helps to be reminded, as Duncan Kennedy has urged, that Lucretius never uses the word *atom*, perhaps because it is Greek and he is trying to turn Greek into Latin, but perhaps, too, because in translating this minimal unit of meaning, he can only multiply; so, for *atom* he writes *element*—but also *materia*, *primordia*, *semina*, *corpora*. Atoms are the beginning principles of a world without beginning or end, the seeds of things that reproduce accidentally and chancily, bodies that have virtually no bodily characteristics, matter on the verge of incorporeality—matter that is at once mind. This multiplication of terms is, I would venture to say, one that impinges on the project of queer theory insofar as its call for us not to remain with sex “in itself” raises continually the question of implication. This not-in-itselfness means that queer theory never was a positivist project but was always one that dwelt in the realm of the simulacrum, to summon up yet another Lucretian term for the atom, especially insofar as it explains not only the aleatory nature of being but the contours of knowledge and perception caused by mobile materializations. The elementary particles can be imagined only in multiple modes of materialization: this perhaps suggests that the new work for queer theory involves the multiplication and dissolution of disciplinary boundaries.

In a 1970 essay, ostensibly reviewing two early books by Gilles Deleuze, Foucault enjoined a return to an Epicurean worldview and the surface effects of its conjunctions; in such texts, he found a distinctly Nietzschean prospect: “The arrow of the simulacrum released by the Epicureans is headed in our direction,” a world that assumes the death of God (Lucretius refuses any notion of divine creation), one in which its couplings, Foucault insists, could best be described as “sodomy.”<sup>17</sup> Late in his life, Foucault returned to the Greeks and Romans, to enjoin *askesis*, life practices of the subject that are meant to be an “art of existence,” precisely a fitting of one’s life into life in its widest sense.<sup>18</sup> This, Foucault emphasized, could produce austerity but was not a matter of prohibition; it obviates the regimes of sex and sexuality for a different relationship to the body and the pleasures of the surface. In this late work, after sexuality, Foucault resumes a project that lies before. It is one that I hope to have furthered in *The Seeds of Things*.

This project on early modern materialisms was prompted by questions of the representation of matter in Spenser and Milton that still remain to be addressed fully: What is the “the first seminarie / Of all things” in the



Garden of Adonis in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* if not a translation of Lucretian materialism, and how would that affect the commonplace view that Spenser is an advocate of Protestant marriage?<sup>19</sup> Why do Milton's angels have sex? In an essay on Margaret Cavendish, I ask what her physics might have to do with her relationship to the Earl of Newcastle, suggesting that a conjunction so outlandish and untoward is best described as one of those chance meetings of atoms that discover a sameness at the heart of difference, and arguing that fastening on the relationship as an exemplary instance of companionate marriage not only normalizes but also provides fuel for a history of sexuality that guarantees a march forward that leads straight to the closet.<sup>20</sup> Similar questions arise in an essay about Lucy Hutchinson that considers the relationship between her best-known piece of writing, her life of Colonel Hutchinson, and her translation of *De rerum natura*.<sup>21</sup> Critics have wanted to see this monumental task as mere juvenalia unrelated to the grown-up pious woman's celebration of her husband's role in the English Revolution. Again, I suggest transformative linkages rather than exclusionary dualisms as a way to read her life and work.

I hope in this project to continue to find terms that will make it possible to see how the late Foucauldian pursuit of philosophy as a way of life can be read in terms that speak to the relations between lives lived and represented and the pursuit of explanations of the phenomenon of life. Categories are relational and contingent, and persistent. The model of supersession and revelation—enlightenment—is always committed to a forgetting or obliteration. That is why I continue to believe that our position must be the double one marked by “after.”

## Notes

- 1 Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120.5 (October 2005): 1608–17. The piece was occasioned by the tenth anniversary of the publication of an anthology I edited, *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), and, like the essays gathered in this book, addresses questions about where the field might be headed.
- 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 44–48.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 4 The galvanizing sentence for this project from Michel Foucault, *The History of*

- Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43), is still being explicated in Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), while David Halperin, who once built his analysis on this paradigm in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), has attempted more recently in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) to find in this utterance warrant for the existence of proto-homosexuality in the period once thought to be before the great divide.
- 5 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, 152.
  - 6 I attempt to move some of the arguments in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), more explicitly in this direction in *Tempest in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 138–47.
  - 7 Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993) is, of course, one of the foundational texts of queer theory that addresses this question; its play on *matter* draws together embodiment and the production of meaning.
  - 8 “A goodish Foucauldian subject, I’m rather abashed that *Touching Feeling* includes so little sex,” Sedgwick writes in her introduction (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 13; see esp. 8–9 for the discussion of besideness, and 13–18 on texture. Throughout, the introduction takes up questions of the relationship between the work done in the book and its relationship to the more explicitly gender- and sexuality-centered books of Sedgwick’s that are cornerstones for queer theory.
  - 9 Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).
  - 10 Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, trans. Jack Hawkes (Manchester: Clarendon, 2000), 3.
  - 11 Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 50, 60.
  - 12 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
  - 13 On the supposition that the Latin word for “matter” is such an alphabetic coinage, see Duncan F. Kennedy, *Rethinking Reality: Lucretius and the Textualization of Nature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 86. The entire book works to articulate relations between Lucretius and the kind of science studies represented by Latour and Serres.
  - 14 Hugh de Quehen, ed., *Lucy Hutchinson’s Translation of Lucretius* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 72; 2:692–705 in Hutchinson’s translation. This edition is the first printing of the poem that exists otherwise in a 1675 manuscript of a text likely composed in the 1640s or 1650s.

- 15 See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 16 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 17 Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 172, 171.
- 18 See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 43, and the section on "The Cultivation of the Self" from which I quote; or, at greater length, Foucault's final set of lectures at the Collège de France, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- 19 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, bk. 3, canto 6, st. 30, lines 4–5.
- 20 "Margaret Cavendish, Scribe," *GLQ* 10.3 (2004): 433–52. For a congruent argument, see Jeffrey Masten, "Material Cavendish: Paper, Performance, 'Sociable Virginity,'" *MLQ* 65.1 (March 2004): 49–68.
- 21 "Lucy Hutchinson Writing Matter," *ELH* 73.1 (2006): 275–301. These two essays are now expanded and joined as chapter 4, "Margaret Cavendish and Lucy Hutchinson: Writing Matter," in *The Seeds of Things*, 122–78.

## Glad to Be Unhappy

JOSEPH LITVAK

SOMEHOW I HAD FORGOTTEN the question mark in “After Sex?” When I went back to reread the invitation to contribute to this special issue, I was somewhat relieved to see that the editors equivocated over the suggestion that we are now in a postsexual moment. “After Sex?” no doubt asks what happens when sex is over, or at least when the academic vogue of writing about sex is over, but it also hints, less chillingly, that the “end” of sex might not be a foregone conclusion, even if the subtitle, “On Writing since Queer Theory,” seems to put the good times behind us. The question mark, in other words, allows me to believe that something is not *quite* being taken away from me. But then — and this may be a subtler ruse of self-consolation — I begin to wonder what I have ever “had” in queer theory in the first place. What is it that I fear is being taken away?

Whatever that precious, precarious object may be, I suspect that queer theory, in my initial panicked reaction to the threat of its historicizing removal, is merely standing in for it. The more I think about it, that is, it occurs to

me that a lot of queer theory, a lot, anyway, that continues to interest me, has always had an “after sex” dimension, where “after” indicates not just temporal posteriority but also the pathos of pursuit (as if the theory itself were *à la recherche du queer perdu*) and where the pursuit, even more poignantly, bespeaks a condition of excludedness, of secondariness, of envy, of — to use a word I cannot encounter without a frisson of delight — *ressentiment*. Here is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, writing in *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990: “Sentimentality, insofar as it overlaps with resentment in a structure we would not be the first to call resentmentality, represents modern emotion itself in Nietzsche’s thought: modern emotion as vicariousness and misrepresentation, but also as sensation brought to the quick with an insulting closeness.”<sup>1</sup> While Sedgwick is keenly attuned to everything extravagantly *special* in Nietzsche, to everything that makes him a *case*, her deconstructive method is to recognize him as a queer theorist in his own right, taking his texts not just as eminently diagnosable but as acutely diagnostic themselves: as anatomies of “modern emotion,” in which the *re-* of *ressentiment* marks the irreducibly split, derivative, belated, invidious character of our relations to ourselves and to others. In this particular queer theorizing, we are always “after sex” — or rather, always “after sex?”: condemned not to know whether the sex we are after is terminable or interminable, heartbreakingly distant or insultingly close.

So instead of registering the “loss” of queer theory as an intolerable deprivation, as I was first inclined to do, I find myself rediscovering it, by a happy turn of the logic of always-already, as a science more melancholy than gay. Although it is hard to think of queer theory apart from a certain tonality of the euphoric and the outrageous, it now seems to me that what I have always secretly loved about it is its preternatural responsiveness to the rich modern repertoire of bad vibes, the verve with which it picks up on all the clammy emotions. Hence the thrill I never fail to get from *ressentiment* — or even from *resentment*, its anglicized and therefore less glamorous, as well as less conceptually supple, cousin. Noting that the French verb *sentir* means not only “to feel” but also “to touch,” “to taste,” and especially “to smell,” Sedgwick glosses *ressentiment* as “re-sniffing . . . as much as ‘resentment,’ or re-tonguing, re-palpat[ing].”<sup>2</sup> In my work “since” queer theory, since, at any rate, *Strange Gourmets*, I have been returning to the thing that won’t let go of me: the bad taste that has migrated, as bad tastes tend to do, into the nose and that has thus become a particular kind of bad smell. As

this noseward drift suggests, the bad smell in question is that of the strange gourmet known as the Jew: not, as contemporary U.S. mass culture might lead us to believe, the sanitized, respectabilized, desexualized alternative to the queer, but, as the recent anthology *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* proposes, another kind of queer.<sup>3</sup>

The Jew's bad smell is of course a venerable anti-Semitic stereotype, and therefore inseparable from the bad smell of anti-Semitic re-resentment or re-sniffing itself. My current work has been in large part an elaboration on the following rather Nietzschean, and rather queer, passage from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Anyone who sniffs out 'bad' smells in order to extirpate them may imitate to his heart's content the snuffling which takes its unrationalized pleasure in the smell itself. Disinfected by the civilized sniffer's absolute identification with the prohibiting agency, the forbidden impulse eludes the prohibition. If it crosses the threshold, the response is laughter. That is the schema of the anti-Semitic reaction."<sup>4</sup> We know from Nietzsche himself that anti-Semitism is one of the modern age's symptomatic forms of *ressentiment*. Horkheimer and Adorno remind us how the anti-Semite's re-sniffing works, the *re-* signaling both the repetitiveness and the imitativeness of anti-Semitic sniffing in the name of social hygiene. The anti-Semite's compulsive re-sniffing is an imitation of the Jew's "snuffling," which, "tak[ing] unrationalized pleasure in the smell itself," is itself "mimetic" in its figuration of a chameleonic erasure of the boundary between smelling subject and smelled object. My work in progress focuses on a specific episode in the long history of Jewish snuffling and anti-Semitic re-sniffing: the period of the Hollywood blacklist, in which the role of the mimetic Jew is taken by the typically, but not invariably, Jewish blacklisted writer or performer and that of the re-resentful anti-Semite by the frequently, but not necessarily, Jewish informer or "friendly" witness. "The man of resentment is like a dog," writes Gilles Deleuze, "a kind of dog which only reacts to traces (a bloodhound)."<sup>5</sup> A "civilized" bloodhound on the scent of dirty underdogs — of perverts called, for the purposes of euphemism, "communists" — the informer appeases the nation's top dogs, represented by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and saves his own career in the only way possible: by throwing them red meat in the shape of those comrades in "unrationalized pleasure" to whom he now pays the murderously insulting tribute of imitation-by-betrayal.

As I explore this treacherous milieu of postwar nasal eroticism, I have trouble even wanting to identify, in the question put by our editors, what in my work on it *isn't* queer. It is not just that the imperial ambitions of so much queer theory seem to render the question almost unanswerable. The problem is less that queer theory makes “everything about sex” than that it lodges the “nonsexual” firmly within the “sexual.” From Nietzsche by way of Sedgwick, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Deleuze, in fact, I derive a lesson in the dogged attachment of the resentfully *post*sexual to the sexual: the anti-Semitic or self-hatingly Jewish informer gets off on re-sniffing the Jew’s criminally seductive snuffling, but even that snuffling imitates the smelly natural environment with which it would merge suicidally. Everything may be about sex; but “after” queer theory, do we know what sex is about? Already in the 1950s, the conflation of “subversives” and “homosexuals” scrambled any certainty about the difference between the sexual and the nonsexual. The strangers we weren’t supposed to talk to were especially scary because their strangeness combined the foreign with the pathological. That the “communist” of the 1950s was outed, in George W. Bush’s America, as the “terrorist” and the “homosexual” — as both the one who will blow your children up and the one who will just blow them — merely furnishes another reason not to be too sure where “sex” ends and, say, “politics” begins.

Keeping “sex” and “politics” strategically entangled with each other — not that there is an alternative — is the aim, then, of my current work, which centers on the modest project of founding a new discipline: one I like to call “sycoanalysis.” Pronounced “sickoanalysis,” but looking like “psychoanalysis” if it were itself a little sick, sycoanalysis is indeed nothing other than the psychoanalysis of a social order (Vichy France, the United States since 1947) in which the sycophant — *sycophant* meaning “flatterer,” of course, but also, in an older yet no less pertinent usage, “informer” — is the model citizen, and in which the sycophantic character of *all* citizenship achieves a kind of epidemic salience. A sycophant is literally one who shows the fig, and showing the fig is still an obscene gesture in certain parts of the world. But let us not forget the “dirtiness” of the more available and more colloquial synonyms for *sycophant*: *bootlicker*, *asskisser*, *arselicker*, *buttsniffer*, *suckup*, *brown-nose*, and, in other languages, *Arschkriecher*, *leccaculo*, *lèche-cul*. How much sexier can you get? And if the sycophant, always a middle dog, is doomed merely to imitate both the pleasure of the

Jew and the power of the Nazi, or of his nicer postwar American surrogate — the “prohibiting agency” vested in the patriotic anticommunist state — this double vicariousness is its own comfort: the vicariousness, I mean, finds its comfort in the doubling of its libidinal field, to include the high as well as the low.

When some people hear that I am working on Jews and the blacklist, they at first seem a little too pleased, as if, indeed, my work were finally “after sex” — as if queer theory had been just a phase I was going through, as if I were at last growing up, addressing the serious issues of race, class, and power. Many of those who greet the news with excessive pleasure are in fact inside the academy, which nowadays, after all, offers a whole host of ways of getting over (i.e., forgetting) not just queer theory, but theory tout court. Imagine their disappointment when I tell them what I mean by “Jews,” or when I explain that cold war anxiety about communism was itself a “front” — to use the language of HUAC and company — for a more diffuse and far less *presentable* obsession. HUAC’s investigations extended beyond the world of entertainment, but the committee members would not have been the first or the last tourists to have trouble tearing themselves away from Babylon for more wholesome destinations. To fulminate against “Hollyweird,” in a favorite piece of contemporary right-wing wit — today’s reactionaries being more brazen than their mid-twentieth-century precursors — is to advertise the psychosexual animus for which 1950s anticommunism provided a more sober cover. Denunciations of “Hollyweird,” of course, perpetuate the homophobia that has played such an indispensable part in U.S. culture for so long. But the same oafish bon mot also betrays the resentment that has always suspected, among the “cultural elite” who would shove themselves down the nation’s throat, the perverted Jew behind the “liberal media,” for which the 1950s “communist,” least enviable of weirdos, provided a convenient metonymic substitute.

How does one tell the difference between a Jew and a homosexual? How does one know when sex is over and something else, say, race, has begun? And how does one separate the “after” of prosecution and persecution from the “after” of belatedness and desire? Let me indicate the peculiarly “1950s” insistence of these questions — though not their 1950s origin, since they are much older than that — by turning to a cold war vignette of citizenship-in-the-making. At the end of his “friendly” 1953 HUAC testimony, the gay Jewish choreographer (and soon-to-be direc-



tor) Jerome Robbins had this exchange with one of the committee members, Congressman Clyde Doyle of California.

- MR. DOYLE: Now, I have a very personal question — and I have never met you, I have never talked with you before, have I?
- MR. ROBBINS: No, sir.
- MR. DOYLE: What is it in your conscience, or what was it in your experience, that makes you certainly one of the top men in your profession, one who has reached the pinnacle in your art, willing to come here, in spite of the fact that you knew some other people, who claim to be artists or authors or musicians, would put you down as a stool pigeon, and voluntarily testify as you have today?
- MR. ROBBINS: I've examined myself. I think I made a great mistake before in entering the Communist Party, and I feel that I am doing the right thing as an American.
- MR. DOYLE: Well, so do I. Again, I want to compliment you. You are in a wonderful place, through your art, your music, your talent, which God blessed you with, to perhaps be very vigorous and positive in promoting Americanism in contrast to Communism. Let me suggest to you that you use that great talent which God has blessed you with to put into ballets in some way, to put into music in some way, that interpretation.
- MR. ROBBINS: Sir, all my works have been acclaimed for its [*sic*] American quality particularly.
- MR. DOYLE: I realize that, but let me urge you to even put more of that in it, where you can appropriately.<sup>6</sup>

The congressman's "very personal question" of course stands in for a very personal question to which he already knows the answer but that he *cannot* come out and ask explicitly. That question, however, is not simply "Are you a homosexual?" Or, rather, the bullying implicit in the congressman's congratulation of Robbins turns as much on his Jewishness as on his

homosexuality. Swinging the twin cudgels of “God” and “Americanism,” “suggesting” to Robbins the proper American use of the talent God blessed him with, the congressman reminds the informer just how precarious his status as a good citizen is in a merely pseudosecular state, where everyone (especially Irving Berlin) knows *which* God blesses America, and where some Americans are more American than others. Unless he continues to watch his step (“let me urge you to even put more of that in it”), Robbins risks tumbling from the “pinnacle” of his art, where he is a “top man” in his profession, descending into the swamp of un-Americanism, the strange netherworld of political and social nonbeing, to which he has just consigned others by giving their names to the committee. Indeed, the fatuous Mr. Doyle is subtle enough to intimate a simulacrum of that mortifying fall by conjuring up for Robbins (that is, against him) the voices of his former friends, who “would put [him] down as a stool pigeon” and so *pull* him down to their level of abjection, the godforsaken wasteland of those who fail not only to be upstanding American citizens, but even to make the grade — they merely “*claim* to be artists or authors or musicians” — in the aesthetic sphere they pretend to inhabit.

All sycophants, all citizens, teeter on the verge of that godforsaken wasteland, precisely because it is their patriotic duty to keep sniffing after those who would enlarge its empire. *As* a godforsaken wasteland, this un-American hell is at once a zone of homosexual-anal jouissance and a primitive chaos of equally perverted Jewissance, to echo Daniel Boyarin’s felicitous pun.<sup>7</sup> And in addition to being a locus of mutually constitutive sexual and racial perversions, this no-place is also a no-man’s-land of mimesis: a place where mimetic snuffling, the art of the Jew, breaks down or prevents manhood and humanity themselves. Here, in this black hole of “mere” imitation, the outcasts from national blessedness can only play at being “artists or authors or musicians.” But since this mimetic playing is what *defines* artists and authors and musicians, the space of un-Americanized abjection may strangely assume the allure of a veritable paradise. One cannot rule out the possibility, anyway, that Congressman Doyle, in sniffing at Robbins’s pretentious detractors and victims, and in congratulating him for sniffing them out in the first place, is himself longing to snuffle along in their chameleonic path. Barred from doing so, of course, if he is to continue enjoying the privileges of his eminently *representative* citizen-

ship, the congressman must settle for the indirect gratification to be derived from the elaborate sycophantic game of *ressentiment* that he and his colleagues are playing with Jerome Robbins and his fellow witnesses: a game in which the “top men” of American politics and their necessary inferiors, the “top men” of the American arts, sniff after each other, all the while disgustedly, which is to say enviously, sniffing after a bottomland, a land of bottoms, where men and God and Americanism disintegrate into ecstatic en-Jewment.

A top bottom, a bottom on top, Jerome Robbins exemplifies the versatile 1950s “cultural elite,” whose eagerness to cooperate with those whom Horkheimer and Adorno call “the true wielders of power” ought to dispel any notion that sycophancy is merely, or even mainly, a red-state affair.<sup>8</sup> In its rush to flex its muscles by making spectacular examples of bad citizens, American state terror recruited accomplices among the semicriminal classes themselves: among, that is, the artists, authors, and musicians who were most likely to cause trouble for the regime and whose treasonous tendencies needed to be counteracted by a carefully staged, widely publicized, government-sponsored *trahison des clercs*. Now, in the long 1950s whose end we have yet to see, the American mainstream once again flows out of a soft and softening mass body of dangerous strangers, whom every upright and righteous citizen has the responsibility to sniff out. Although the academic Left may look down its nose at the odious ideological machinery of the post-9/11 state, our own weird little “cultural elite” not only comprises a rigorous sycophantic organization in itself but also, in its very sniffiness, participates in the contemptuous circuits of sycophantic identification and desire. Just as the sycophant delights in sniffing out “bad” smells, so the sycoanalyst delights in the stench of the sycophant himself. If the sycophant is after the mimetic Jew, the sycoanalyst is after the sycophant. And everyone, including the Jew of unrationalized pleasure, is after sex.

In an essay titled “The Psychology of Quislingism,” Ernest Jones, after having asserted that the quisling typically handles his “fear of the dangerous Father” either by “submit[ing] to” him or by “ally[ing]” himself with him, concludes: “Both are *exquisitely homosexual solutions*.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the problem with these solutions is that they are not exquisitely homosexual enough. Collaboration with the enemy may suggest the sort of cryptofas-

cist muscle-worship supposedly limited to gay male culture; but nothing could be straighter than identifying with the power of the invader. In fact, collaboration usually works hard to spirit away any gay content, establishing, in its place, the joy of an essentially abstract participation in a vast corporate entity, a thoroughly masculine and yet disembodied body, membership in which gives one a hardening thrill, as of one who might say (or, rather, whose car might say), “Support Our Troops.” Far from being deviant, sycophancy is all too normal — even among those who, in the manner of the more famous show-business intellectuals turned friendly witnesses, persist in cultivating images of themselves as progressives, hipsters, provocateurs, or even sexual iconoclasts.

This observation is doubtless the product of a certain queer resentment. What that queer resentment also produces is two linked resistances: a resistance to the suggestion that the party of queer theory is over, and a resistance to a prematurely “nostalgic” forgetting of how rationalized, mediated, *nachträglich*, and reactive the pleasure of the party, indeed, all pleasure, was and is. The party is still going on, and needs to be, not least because so many forces, inside and outside the academy, want it shut down. Yet the parties it most resembles — and herein lies its value — are the parties, say, in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Boys in the Band*, plays from the 1960s but, like so much in the past half-century, suffering from a bad 1950s hangover. “After sex?” No thanks, unless “after” is understood to inhere intimately in “sex.” “After *ressentiment*?” Absolutely not: the fun is just getting started.

## Notes

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 150.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 3 Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- 4 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 151–52.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 115.

- 6 Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938–1968* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 633–34.
- 7 Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 256–58.
- 8 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 96.
- 9 Ernest Jones, “The Psychology of Quislingism,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 22 (1941): 4–5.

## Do You Smoke? Or, Is There Life? After Sex?

MICHAEL MOON

*After great sex, a formal feeling comes.*

IT WAS NOT “SEX” per se (whatever that might be) that I have insisted on (and continue to want to insist on) in my work; it is the connectedness of sexuality to many other forms of life—connectedness that often functions in unexpected and indeed unpredictable ways. Starting out, I hoped that writing about *Leaves of Grass* could make me a kind of licensed explorer of these links, for Whitman himself had written in 1887: “Difficult as it will be, it has become . . . imperative to achieve a shifted attitude . . . towards the thought and fact of sexuality, as an element in character, personality, the emotions, and a theme in literature. I am not going to argue the question by itself, it does not stand by itself.”<sup>1</sup> I had learned something very like this as a child from my brother Tony, two years younger than I and the most perceptive child student of the “mystery of sex” I knew. A few years later, I would invade the bound periodicals section of the local public library and read all the articles in back issues of *Parents* magazine titled “What to Tell Your Child about Sex,” which gave me a certain limited expertise but also, as you can imagine, a certain

highly wrought unknowingness about what actually to expect come puberty and after. But to begin with, I remember standing with Tony before the magazine counter in the local grocery store when I was about eight, not long after he had learned to read, and peering at a line of glossy newsmagazines that all had cover stories that week about “sex on campus.” I might be vague about sex, but I was already fascinated with “campus”; in our Victorian-size family, we already had an eldest brother away at college. Here was something else that sounded possibly enticing, but remained opaque to me as a concept. “Sex,” I remember musing aloud, “what could it be?” “I don’t know,” Tony replied, with more wisdom than he knew, “but I think it must be something that’s sort of *everywhere*, like the weather.”

That may not seem like much to work with, but it was a start. Later that same year, Tony pragmatically redefined *sex* when our teenage sister Eleanor asked him if he liked the red shirt she had given him for his birthday. “Yes, it’s so *sexy*!” he cheerfully responded. Our sister, surprised, countered, “What do you think that word means?” “*Bright-colored!*” Tony, unfazed, shot back improvisatorially. Now all we had to figure out was, what was bright-colored and sort of everywhere like the weather? But then along came that pile of *Parents* and, a little later, a quick session with my by-then-married sister’s copy of Van de Velde’s *Ideal Marriage* and I was launched — certainly no sexpert despite my efforts — into adolescence.

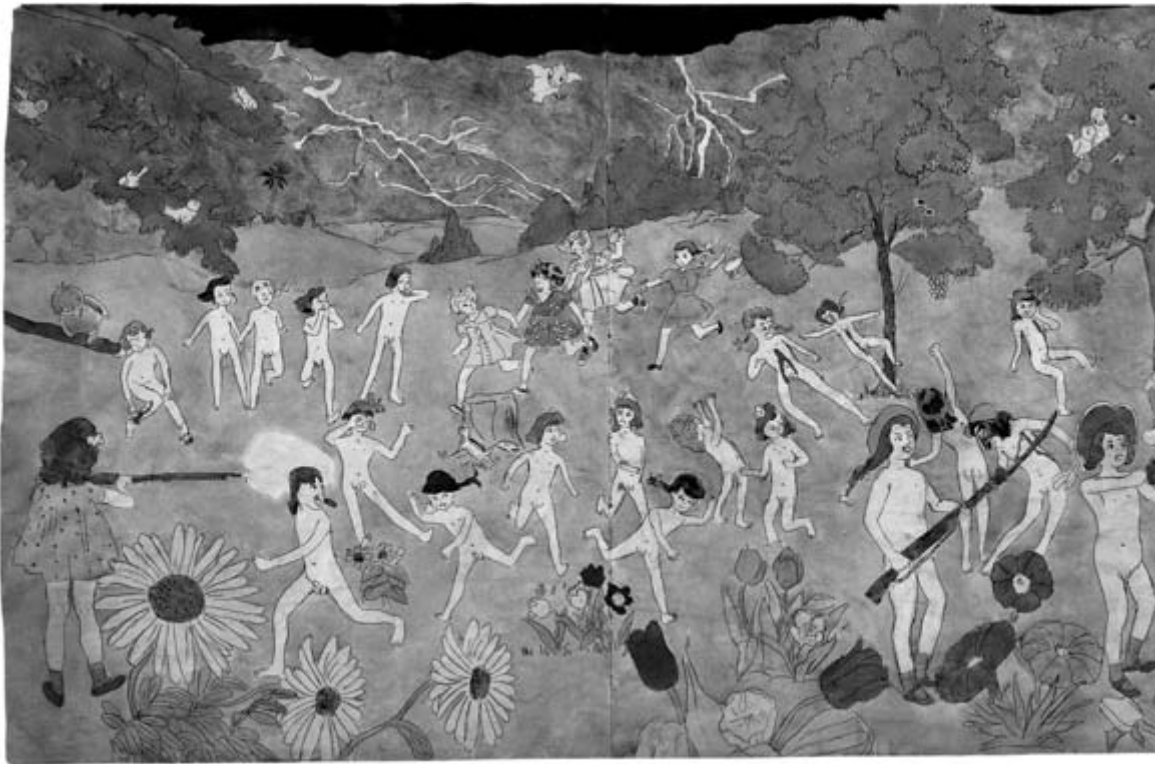
Seventh grade brought gym class and that locker room full of suddenly naked boys. We had all been sitting in English class in second period, sleepily listening to Mrs. Wallace read “The Courtship of Miles Standish” aloud to us, and then, astonishingly, only a few minutes later. . . . Now I had many more questions that were probably supposed to be routed through what was turning out to be the Grand Central Terminal of “sex.” But surely no category, however mysterious, could actually be capacious enough to include everything I had already learned about sex-and-family *and* any reasonable explanation of why my heart leapt up when I beheld, as he stood at his gym locker, the curve of Craig E.’s already manly little butt (Hi, Craig!). One Saturday afternoon that year I looked up the word *homosexual* in the dictionary, and the fact that it meant exactly what I expected it to mean was of no great explanatory help. The books on the short sexological shelf back at the public library were similarly unhelpful; the one aimed

directly at adolescent boys said that almost all boys masturbate a time or two at puberty, but then the good ones, curiosity satisfied, stop.

For the past several years, I have been studying the writings and paintings of Henry Darger, someone who labored at menial tasks in large Chicago hospitals all day and came home and worked into each night writing and illustrating a vast corpus about a child slave rebellion on a nearby planet. John MacGregor, the leading Darger scholar and, in fact, the doyen of the recently emergent field of “outsider art,” of which Darger is ostensibly king, is a clinical psychiatrist as well as an art historian. Many of the girl characters in Darger’s drawing are nude, and they routinely have stylized little male genitals. MacGregor asserts in his monograph on the artist’s work, titled *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* after Darger’s title for his own magnum opus, that Darger did not possess the concept of penetrative hetero-sex, and that is why in his work he at times seems obsessed with scenes of the evisceration of his girl characters; the only kind of “sex” — or the closest thing to sex, so to speak — he can imagine is sadistic and extremely violent, indeed lethal, inflicted by adult males on innocent and defenseless girls, all supposedly because he lacks the conceptual “key.”<sup>2</sup> In Darger’s defense, MacGregor speculates about his having quite likely been sexually abused as an adolescent living a century ago in a vast, warehouse-like “Home for Feebleminded Children” of a kind in which some guards and older boys probably preyed on younger boys. There are scenes in Darger’s writing in which hot, hard objects, some of which emit searing fluids, are forced into children’s mouths; these scenes do sound as though they may contain barely veiled or encoded memories of traumatic experiences of oral rape.<sup>3</sup>

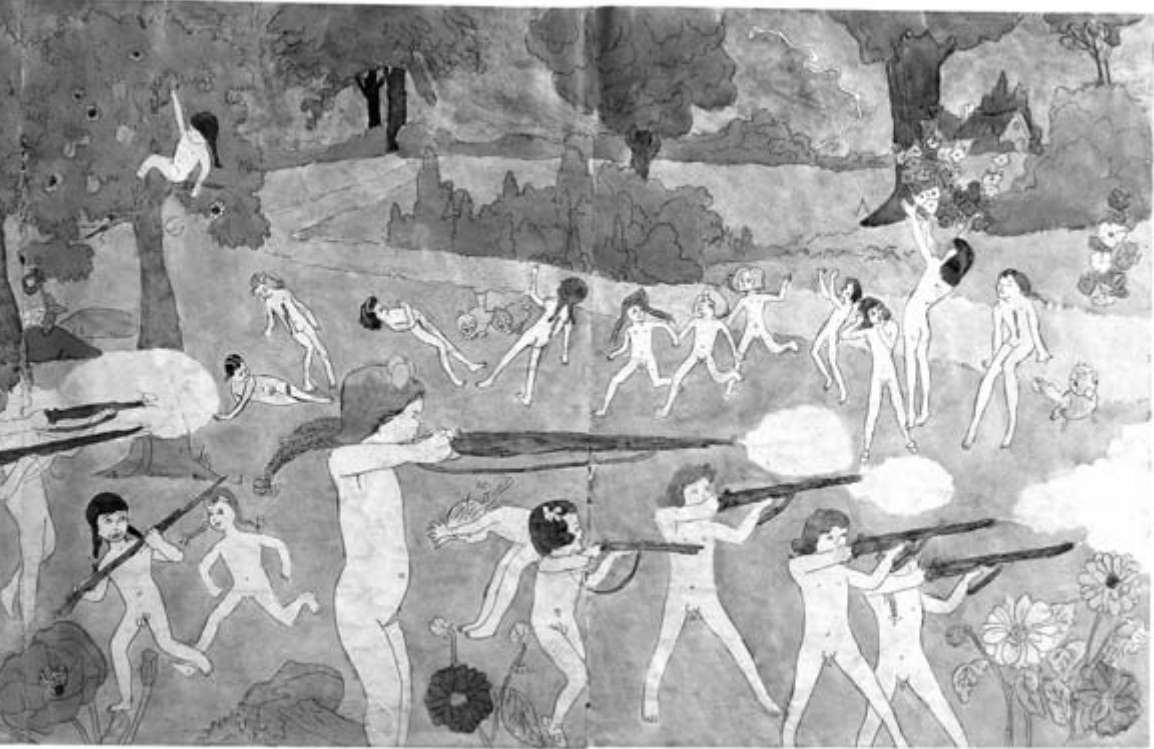
I think of this model of sexuality in Darger’s work as one that was overdetermined by some of the most widespread social and political tendencies of the 1990s. Had Darger still been living (born in 1892, he would have been around one hundred), he could have been welcomed onto *Oprah*, his story of childhood sexual abuse could have been told, a friendly psychiatrist type (perhaps even John MacGregor himself) could have spoken understandingly about the kinks in Darger’s work as a perhaps inevitable consequence of his early mistreatment, and then there could have been a slide show of some of his more idyllic paintings. Jessica Yu’s very well-received documentary film about Darger, also entitled *In the Realms of the*





*Unreal* (2004), treats Darger as if he has already undergone some kind of public recuperative process of the kind I am imagining. Darger worked pretty entirely in secrecy through most of the twentieth century. If people were going to be disturbed and even possibly incited to take steps against him for drawing nude little girls with penises, some of whom are subjected to terrible deaths by torture in war, Darger appears to have been willing and perhaps eager to spare both them and himself the trouble. But at the end of the century we seemed to feel we could, given a “justifying” narrative, just ignore the most disturbing features of Darger’s work, agreeing to tell each other that there was no virtual pedophile sadism here, just an eccentric old man with quite a flair for watercolor. The queer novelist Dennis Cooper remarks in his review of the film, “It’s taken thirty-one years for someone to figure out a way to position Darger as the new Grandma Moses.” Even though, in his opinion, the fit is a bit of a stretch, Cooper does give Yu considerable credit for making Darger accessible to a broad audience, even though her strategy does involve de-eroticizing the ubiquitous girl nude figures that populate Darger’s visual work.<sup>4</sup>

The logic of this sequence of transformation followed by Yu and other



would-be defenders of Darger seems to be that the artist needs to be forgiven for what appears to be the extreme misogynistic violence of his work, and the only basis on which we can imagine forgiving him is if he himself was as a child or adolescent subjected to some of the kinds of “traumas” that he depicts in his work. I want to expose what a twisted and indeed sadistic logic this is in itself, for it posits that some “we” supposedly “need” for this kid living in an asylum in rural Illinois in the first decade of the twentieth century to have been raped — preferably repeatedly — in order that we can, a century later, “understand” and, since *comprendre tout c’est tout pardonner*, retrospectively “forgive” him the alleged offenses of his art, which has in recent decades risen to the top of, and, indeed, synecdochically come to represent, the outsider art market. Those of us who want the art to exist supposedly have to pay the price of performing an act of understand-

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Detail from *Untitled (Battle Scene during Lightning Storm. Naked Children with Rifles)*. Henry Darger (1892–1973). Chicago, Illinois; mid-twentieth century. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper. 24 x 74¾ inches. Collection of American Folk Art Museum, New York. Gift of Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner. 1995.23.Ib. Copyright Kiyoko Lerner. Photo by Gavin Ashworth.

ing/forgiving that is premised on the kid Darger's having previously paid the price of intense and probably prolonged suffering—that price that supposedly alone can proleptically “justify” the radical, and to our eyes all too obviously gendered, violence of some of his work as an adult.

If I had come to the study of Darger and his work ten or twenty years ago, I think that what might have intrigued me most about it would have been the possibility that Darger could have been gay or queer: I would have been most interested in trying to show how this may have encoded itself in his work. Like many aspiring students of modern gay and lesbian culture of the time (the 1980s), I had started out painstakingly studying the lives and writings of what we took to be the most readily certifiable and legible gay lives, Whitman's and Wilde's. But I soon discovered that, as Poe says at the beginning of his highly symptomatic (of modernity) story, “The Man of the Crowd,” *not all books allow themselves to be read*, and lives, perhaps, many fewer still.<sup>5</sup> As part of the rising tide of queer theory in the early 1990s, I became most interested in figures such as Henry James and Andy Warhol, whose lives seemed to me to represent limit cases of indecipherability in relation to the ways we were coming to expect something called “sexuality” to manifest itself punctually and recognizably in people's lives and works.

“What is the use of being a boy,” Gertrude Stein asks in her lecture “What Are Master-pieces,” “if one is going to grow up to be a man?”<sup>6</sup> So much for Wordsworth and the child's being father to the man. The child may be something to the man, but perhaps just precisely not its father. The first time I encountered this aphorism-in-the-form-of-a-question of Stein's, it seemed all the more shocking, since Stein herself held the place for me and many of my contemporaries of the exemplary modern lesbian, much the same way Wilde did for the modern gay man. I had, after all, spent much of my prolonged youth (till I was, oh, forty, say) demonstrating to my own satisfaction something that someone else might have considered the merest tautology: that gay boys grow up to be gay men, and that this to my mind by no means inevitable process was all somehow to be transacted in some magical field of “sexuality?”

And here was Stein with the (to me at the time) potentially crushing perception that perhaps nothing I had done or experienced in the protracted transition of twenty or thirty years' length had prepared me for what I could expect to do or experience as a man, queer or otherwise.

But nestled within the cry of futility that I first heard Stein's utterance as being — "What is the *use*?" — there is interlining it something I soon began to hear quite otherwise than as a counsel of despair: overdetermined as the process of "becoming a man" must be in our society with a myriad of toxic contents, it *doesn't always take* — no, it doesn't. Andy Warhol had been what is called a morbidly shy child, unwilling to confront people outside his immediate family in any way, we are told, until he one day saw an ad in a magazine offering a drinking glass with Shirley Temple's picture on it. He, as a child in a very poor family, had no money, and his older siblings and parents were not the kind of people who sent off for things advertised in magazines — at times they all barely ate. But in this moment, a great dynamic contradiction emerged in Warhol's life: there was simply no money for it, and yet, once he had seen it, he felt he *had* to have one of those special glasses — it was, for the initial moment, an impossible and yet ineluctable necessity. So he began to help his older brothers sell peanuts at games at the local baseball field. Suddenly, there was little Andy, who had never attended a baseball game before, running and calling in his breathy little voice, "Get your peanuts!" and feeling the coins accumulate in his pants pocket. And, before long, that glass came in the mail, along with a photo of Shirley Temple inscribed to him, and he was launched on his long career as a celebrated practitioner of the business of art.<sup>7</sup>

So I felt somehow strangely prepared when I decided, as my first research task in the Darger archives at the American Folk Art Museum, to go through the hundred or so books that he left in his room at the time of his death, and immediately discovered a strong vein of Temple-iana in Darger's modest library: Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* and all its sequels (*Moni the Goat Boy*), a picture-pamphlet of the kind that was handed out at the openings of some of Temple's films, and a book entitled *How I Raised Shirley Temple by Her Mother*. What is the use of being a boy if one is going to grow up to be a little girl? Quite a lot, it turns out, if you let it. Warhol's life and art propose one kind of answer to this question, Darger's another.

Sandor Ferenczi theorizes in his famous psychoanalytic essay "Confusion of Tongues" that when patients told him that their tutors or governesses had engaged in sex with them when they were children, these patients as children had in some cases unwittingly ventriloquized the desire that their adult caretakers felt toward them. Overpowered by the intense but unspoken sexuality (also perhaps unwittingly) directed at them by the

adults closest to them, the children sometimes uncannily voiced the adult desire they themselves could not recognize. Ferenczi attributes this dynamic to the fundamental difference between the cyclical, orgasmically oriented sexualities of the adults in contrast with the more diffuse, uncyclical sexualities of the children. According to Ferenczi, the child can experience the adult's sexuality only as a kind of unnatural or at least unexpected irruption of a focused and directed rhythm (so to speak) into their more arrhythmical and relatively underorganized erotic world in which fragments of what may subsequently "cohere into sexuality" may still arise in relation to, and/or attach itself to, a great many moods, atmospheres, objects, besides another actual person, his or her body or parts thereof.<sup>8</sup>

I value Henry Darger's work highly both because it seems to me the product of a tremendous labor of sublimation, of wrestling and channeling powerful impulses toward terrible violence into some kind of form, and because it grants the interested student unusually extensive access to an erotic realm that seems to partake of the more diffuse and relatively underorganized sexuality or protosexuality of modern childhood more than it does of any of what one might call the standard forms of adult sexuality, hetero-, homo-, or otherwise. The study of Darger's work over the past several years has often returned me to my little brother's and my first attempts at making determinations not just about sex but about the world we were in the process of trying to understand. Darger does not appear to have been obsessed with sex, at least not in any readily recognizable or recoverable way, but the elaborate, hour-by-hour weather journals he kept for years in his later life attest to something like an obsession with weather, and presumably with its pervasive effects on feelings and moods. Darger seems to have taken much of the pleasure he took from keeping his weather diaries in exposing the unremitting regularity with which the local meteorologists misforecast the weather. Perhaps he shared my little brother's six-year-old's sense that whatever sex is, it might be ubiquitous in the way that weather is.

And it turns out in the study of Darger as I understand it that my little brother had also not been so far off the mark in his guess that the magical (to him) word *sexy* meant something like "bright-colored." Again, I am not sure there is anything like a single or coherent sexuality informing many of Darger's pictures, but many of them do exude a remarkably strong sense of a wide range of kinds of pleasures to be taken in colors — a spectrum of

saturated hues, but also of delicately attenuated shades of many tints — an entire field of potential visual happiness for viewers who share Darger’s chromophilia. The love of bright hues is an affliction as well as an alleged moral failing that has been routinely ascribed throughout the modern period to “orientals,” sensuous women, children, and “primitives” of “all stripes,” according to the art theorist David Batchelor, author of *Chromophobia*.<sup>9</sup> Darger produced the vistas and glimpses of intense and nuanced colors that his art affords us using only the cheapest watercolor sets from the children’s toy counter. Brooke Davis Anderson, the senior curator of the Darger Collection at the Folk Art Museum, says that dozens and dozens of tiny pots were found in Darger’s room after he vacated it, with the remnants of the artist’s color experiments in them. His achievements as a colorist and the process Darger pursued over the years of patient experimentation with producing complex color palettes from dime-store watercolors seem to me analogous to the vast effort of sublimation in which he seems to have spent his life engaged. The poet Charles Simic’s phrase for Joseph Cornell’s genius as an artist is “dime-store alchemy”; the phrase also seems highly appropriate to Darger’s gifts.<sup>10</sup> We see the most intense concentration of his gifts at those places in his paintings at which his two chief means of generating atmosphere and aura, color and weather, come together — in the lowering skies, the fulvous clouds, the violent diagonals of arriving storm, the calibration of grays that are anything but “neutral.” Darger’s panoramas of children fleeing (but often failing to escape) inclement weather vindicate my younger brother’s intuitions in childhood that “sex” might be “something like the weather” and that “sexiness” might have something to do with intensities of hue.

We know from the researches of Leon Katz that the young Gertrude Stein likely found theoretical justification for her aspirations to be a woman of genius in what may initially strike one as a most unlikely place: Otto Weininger’s notorious 1903 book *Sex and Character*.<sup>11</sup> How did this Jewish lesbian come to see herself as a genius in Weininger’s rankly misogynistic and anti-Semitic pages? Weininger’s main contention is that Western culture has been feminized to the point of crisis and needs urgently to be remasculinized — yes, a century later, there is still a lot of reactionary, Weiningerian-sounding gender politics circulating in the United States, about how to bring your sons up straight and so on. I like to think that Stein’s 1936 lecture, “What Are Master-pieces,” is her considered response to her early infatuation with

Weininger's thinking. "What is the use of being a boy, if one is going to grow up to be a man?" can be understood from one perspective as Stein's belated kiss-off to the would-be remasculinizing teleology of Weininger's bright ideas. "Boy? Man? *Sequitur?*" But what does it mean for a lesbian and a butch of the 1930s to ask this question? As a "girl," Willa Cather had sometimes dressed and had herself photographed as a boy and styled herself "*Will Cather.*"<sup>12</sup> Being a boy, even "part-time," may be *a lot of use* if one is going to grow up to be a butch. Although Darger scholars have tended to argue that he drew male genitals on girls because somehow he simply *didn't know* about so-called physical sexual difference, I want to contend to the contrary that he may have known or did know, but *it didn't make any difference*. The short downward blip of the "penis," the small curlicue of the "scrotum" with which Darger endows his "little girls," are not signs with readily recoverable referents. They are a kind of writing that we still barely know how to begin trying to read — barely know because we must, in some meaningful sense of the phrase, still be "before sex."

## Notes

- 1 *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, comp. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 669.
- 2 John MacGregor, *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 703 n. 107.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 374–77.
- 4 Dennis Cooper, "Like a Virgin," *ArtForum* (January 2005): 117.
- 5 Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" begins, "It was well said of a certain German book that '*er lasst sich nicht lesen*' — it does not permit itself to be read." See "The Man of the Crowd," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Tales & Sketches*, vol. 1, 1831–1842, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 506.
- 6 "What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," in *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures, 1909–1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), 155.
- 7 See Victor Bokris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 22.
- 8 Sandor Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child," in *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Michael Balint (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 156–67.
- 9 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 15–17.

- 10 Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1992).
- 11 See Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of "Genius"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 65.
- 12 Jonathan Goldberg has pondered this riddle of Stein's in relation to the life and career of Cather in his book *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 10–11.



## Post Sex

### On Being Too Slow, Too Stupid, Too Soon

KATE THOMAS

I BEGAN GRADUATE SCHOOL twelve years ago. It was a queer time all right. *Tendencies*, *Bodies That Matter*, and *Fear of a Queer Planet* had all been published the previous year.<sup>1</sup> My copies of those books bear two dates: on the copyright page, the printed publication date of 1993, and on another, my handwritten name and the date 1994. Did I turn up at the party a little late, or awkwardly early? I had come from a U.K. university at which progressive professors had only just succeeded in demanding that exam papers include “a gender question,” women’s studies was still not accepted as a legitimate academic field, and the possibility that the study of sexuality had a place in the humanities remained for me only obscurely glimpsed in the Luce Irigaray books I’d found in the basement of the social studies library. Turning up at graduate school and taking a queer theory class, I felt late. Like a younger, shorter-legged sibling, it seemed to me that I was trotting to catch up, excited but definitely flustered, my scratchily penned 1994 a reminder that I was lagging behind.

At that time, I was making multiple shifts: of nation,

class, and my own sexual identification, to name a few. I understood them to be shifts of advancement, marking progress forward, but even then I recognized that these “advancements” were less than aerodynamic—if they were hauling me forward, there was substantial frictional drag, a feeling of being a bit behind things. As Beth Freeman has shown, drag can be considered a temporal phenomenon, describing how the past can exert useful “gravitational pull” against presents and futures.<sup>2</sup> Her account recalls the subjects who have been trimmed away from queer politics and theories: the lesbian who wears flannel to the glam-ball of queer, the politics that bore the carefree club-kid, the histories that depress the rainbow-waving optimist, queers who pursue not wealth but economic justice, the awkward and the ungainly, the suicidal, the unhip, the overeager, the immature, and the too mature. Freeman’s work and other recent work on queer historiography reveal these subjects not by way of some democratizing, inclusive effort, but in order to tell a history of disavowal, of strategic forgetting and forsaking. In many ways this is work that enacts its own temporal point: it does not “intervene,” is not “field-altering” in the sense that it proposes to show us something new. Rather, it attends closely to that which is old hat, out of date or favor, and thereby shows how persistently unable we have been to apprehend our lifetimes, our lives and times, our time-life being built of doublings back as much as progression forward. Despite Foucault’s teaching on histories of the present, despite Benjamin’s angel of history, despite Barthes’s invocations of history as love’s protest, despite the “queer” of queer studies being itself a temporal stutter, the redeployment of an old (but also new) slur. Freeman’s emphasis on temporality manages to (finally) reveal some key stigmas within and indeed produced by some of the destigmatizing efforts of the field. There is some value, I like to think, in being a bit backward.

## Too Stupid

Being backward, or facing the wrong way, is suggestive of resistance, contrariness, and perversity—all qualities we merrily associate with the unruly potential of queerness. It is also, of course, suggestive of stupidity—a quality that we have been, until recently, less ready to embrace. But precisely because it is the *inversion* of what we like to think we do—be smart—it should be of more interest to those who study inversions of

other kinds.<sup>3</sup> And recently queer scholars have begun to open the topic: Judith Halberstam has exhorted scholars and activists to rethink the intellectual game of critiquing who and what we don't like as "stupid."<sup>4</sup> This approach, she argues, hasn't borne much fruit politically, and she suggests that we dedicate more time to building an understanding of how stupidity works. Jordana Rosenberg has suggested that the conjuring of a putatively stupid reader is a mechanism by which Judith Butler's essay "The Lesbian Phallus" enacts the power and failure of iteration; it is the dumb, over-literal reader who doggedly believes she can apprehend this lesbian phallus and reads only for it despite the wagging finger of deconstruction, who best "feels" deconstructive dissatisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

Feeling stupid or late, then, at the beginning of a graduate degree, and early too, rushing the threshold of queer scholarship before I'd even begun my training as a Victorianist, was perhaps more queer than I knew. Looking back from the way in which I am using queer theory these days, I have been interested in the way that lagging behind or, indeed, turning up too early are malformations of temporal sequencing that are particularly queer formations. That curious double stigma of anteriority and posteriority I felt on entering graduate school looked like an unruly, slanted sibling relation, as Alfred Tennyson perhaps guessed when he counseled patriots against "Raw Haste, half-sister to Delay." The poem from which that line comes, "Love thou thy land, with love far-brought," is in the voice of a poet-prophet who (ironically, hypocritically for a prophet) counsels against temporal trespasses that attempt to change the course and, specifically, the pace of events. He proposes, with a gritted-teeth calm, a temporal temperateness that he hopes will quell the revolutionary change that those half-sisters threaten to induce. Trusting that revolution is over and done with, to that end he disavows both ancient and modern. It is a model of linear progressive temporality that should make us wary of such models. So when I hear talk of "Whither Queer Theory?" or, more pointedly, laments that the queer moment is "over," that it's all been done, I think about the lessons I feel that queer theories have taught me about the futility or the hubris of such temporal schema. As Tennyson puts it elsewhere, shouldn't we beware "the vanities of after and before"? Reinaldo Arenas had to write *Farewell to the Sea* three times because the first two manuscripts didn't survive the homophobia of Castro's Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Oscar Wilde had to write the text that became known as *De Profundis* serially, as

he was only allowed a new sheet of paper once he relinquished the one he had written — he had to try to remember where his sentences broke and could not review the text to smooth out repetitions or loop-backs. Queer texts have often not been afforded the privileges of linear time and understand all too well how to — like poor old Michael Finnegan — begin again.

## Post Sex

Pre- my interests in queer temporalities, there was post. That is to say, quite literally, the mail. I began my career as a Victorianist studying the nineteenth-century British postal system, intrigued by the notion that the nineteenth century was *the* era of systematized, nationalized, and internationalized communication systems. What were the consequences, I wanted to know, of a discourse machinery that asked everyone to imagine themselves in relations of correspondence with each other?<sup>7</sup> The invention of the modern postal system was a quiet kind of revolution. Queen Victoria had herself championed the invention of cheap, universalized postal communication. She dramatically renounced her royal privilege to free carriage of mail, and the first (ever) postage stamp bore the image of her head in a communications revolution that was part and parcel of England's drive to avoid real revolutions and real beheadings — the French kind. Suddenly the press was full of talk about how dukes and duchesses mingled with illiterate or near-illiterate farmhands — in postbags, that is. My research quickly became taken up by the question of how postal productions, those texts you send before you, after you, or instead of you — as your proxy or your go-between — stood in for the correspondents and their desires. I found that although the nineteenth century witnessed a grand falling-off from the epistolary form and novels built of the contents of letters became defunct, things that were ancillary to the letter (envelopes, stamps, postmen's thumbprints) became narratively all-consuming. Literary interest lay not in the interiors of letters, but in the distance, separation, and most particularly, delays and precipitous deliveries that could skew the trajectory of a communication, or reveal how skewed any communicative trajectory always is. The fictions I was led to were decidedly queer: between men, I found post-letters.

My literary material provided plenty of actual queer sex: scandals involving postboys moonlighting from the p.o. at the local brothel; accusations

of bigamy hanging on the perforations of a postage stamp (bringing a whole new — or, rather, old — meaning to *hanging chad*); telegraph girls dramatized as choosing between prostitution and lesbianism.<sup>8</sup> But I turned to queer theory in this project because it allowed me to theorize deviance at the center of conformity. My topic was the network, and queer theory seemed better than anything else at explaining the ways that networks simultaneously bind us and also show us divergent pathways, help us understand ourselves as both linked and dispersed, reveal the contrapuntal, often erotic relationships between fiction and counterfiction. Postal plots interacted with narratives of family, heterosexuality, and inheritance — sometimes crossing, sometimes double-crossing, and sometimes, perversely, running parallel.

The fiction I used in this project had recognized that a consequence of a universal communication system is quirk and miscellany. As soon as you invoke “everyone” and incorporate them into a network designed to mix and connect everyone, communication interfaces (the term is not of our Internet era but is actually Victorian) become queer. Henry James wrote of the post office as an exemplum and instrument of what he called “the diversity of human relations.”<sup>9</sup> It seemed to me that the network is a similarly important conceptual model in the field of queer studies. I linked the Victorian postal network with queer theoretical frameworks by arguing that both see through or look around forms of relation that insist upon linear, discrete, and exclusive models, engaging instead structures of human relation built on dispersed, infinitely relative, prosthetic, or virtual associations.

Together, postal literature and queer theory helped me describe what I saw as the *prepositional* quality of queer and, indeed, the queer qualities of the preposition. Prepositions denote relative positions, and across the life of queer studies, theorists have increasingly emphasized that queer identities and practices derive intellectual force from being perpetually and shiftingly relational rather than teleological. What, in the nineteenth century, J. K. Huysmans termed “against the grain,” Foucault called “slantwise”; for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, queer positions are those that lie “across,” or “beside,” social and sexual hegemonic planes.<sup>10</sup> These prepositions and the critical modes they induce are themselves still shifting: Sedgwick’s most recent work draws attention to the continuing need to search for new prepositions, vocabularies, and critical methods that creatively

resist delimiting narratives of origin and telos.<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Goldberg has similarly written of the importance of thinking “beyond paradigms of (self-identical) identity,” and he pursues instead “strange conjunctions” and plural lines of “cross-identification (moving not merely across genders, but across history).”<sup>12</sup> As queer theory interrogates its own spatializing and temporalizing metaphors, my analysis of the Victorian postal system as an intermediating network that both prompted Victorians to declare “the annihilation of time and space” and made apparent James’s “diversity of human relations” provided me with a site for the development of modes of critical inquiry that attend to movement and transitivity and shift away from static accounts of identity.<sup>13</sup> For me, a persistently useful tenet of queer theory is that there is more critical mileage in the analysis of queer subject positions than there is in a hunt for gay subjects. Its theorizations of power relations as collaborative mean that pleasure, deviation, and non-standard sex can be theorized not merely as reverse discourses, reactions to the workings of state machinery, but as ways of disclosing that they were integral to that machinery in the first place.

My postal project was animated by the queer potential of virtual alliance and the way that communication systems’ capacities to either rush or delay self-expression engendered queer narratives. It was also heavily influenced by what might be called the “and others” method. This is a phrase I take from Sedgwick via Jonathan Goldberg.<sup>14</sup> I had been arguing that when postal communication was made available and accessible to everyone, it was the invocation of “all others,” combined with the idea of the promiscuity of the postbag, that provoked narratives about queer forms of relation. No one had to touch each other — in fact, not-touching was part of the desire. If communication is about getting in touch, it is also very much about being pleurably, desiringly out of touch. I became enamored of the idea that dispersal and dissemination could be a means of imagining and figuring a queer erotics.<sup>15</sup> In his novella *In the Cage*, Henry James writes of how communication, that bid to deal with being out of touch, produces or reveals “queer extensions” of the self.<sup>16</sup>

These insights about how the queer subject has often found revenue in being out of touch formed a methodological bridge toward a new and quite different project, one about being out of time. I had been reading a lot of Michael Field — the two late-nineteenth-century British women (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) who together wrote huge amounts of

poetry and verse drama and who left, lodged in the British Library, twenty-six volumes of jointly written diary. They were collaborators, lovers, and aunt and niece. Brilliant and eccentric, they had enjoyed a fleeting literary acclaim that perished soon after their “dual lady authorship” had been discovered. Two things struck me forcibly about their work: their obsession with time and the vast plurality of familial relations through which they understood their sexual love for each other. My second observation is made against the backdrop of the (admittedly) limited Field scholarship that fought the “are they lesbians or are they just friends?” battle. I wondered why, in this melee, few scholars felt moved to name the elephant in the room: with a thudding literalism, I wanted to know, isn’t this relationship incestuous? Why aren’t we talking about that? If I had pursued an “and others” method with my postal project, this project stems from noticing that the leap it has taken to name Field as lesbian avoided some of the distinct textures of that lesbianism, namely, how important “others” were to it. Scholars had focused on the question of the women’s dualness, rummaging through the problems and resonances of their single male name and puzzling over how to relate their erotic partnership to their literary collaboration. Michael Field is something of a nineteenth-century face on lesbian melding. But in their notebooks the women use *myriad* nicknames and passionate terms of address for each other and their friends and family. If they write under a single name with a double tongue, they double and redouble, endlessly multiplying the personae of people in their private lives. In a letter to that scientist of sexual typology, Havelock Ellis, they defended Michael Field from being sifted into their two separate selves, describing their writing as a “perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of summer dancing flies.” They begin with a plural, “we,” that they further multiply: “we” are a “company.” And if they “interlace,” they also intergenerate and intermarry. The incestuous nature of their love turns genealogy into a pileup: an aunt is a lover, a sister is a mother, a child is a spouse. Others and lovers commingle.<sup>17</sup>

Field’s historiographic fascination with time other than the writers’ own is not adequately accounted for through accounts of the fin-de-siècle mood that are based on generic “anxiety” models — the idea being that the changing of centuries was and always is scary. At the same time that I was reading Field’s writing, I was reading a lot of new work on queer history,

and liked particularly its moves to identify and reject a tendency to think that queers of the past were born or wrote in the wrong time. I was wary of the impulse within emergent Field criticism to “rescue” Field from obscurity. Unlike some recovery efforts in women’s or minority literature to restore best sellers to scholarly prominence and repair their reputations from the ravages of conservative canon formation, Michael Field’s work fell out of favor in Bradley’s and Cooper’s own time, so they both lived through and, crucially, *outlived*—lived past—their fifteen minutes of fame. And they, presciently, wrote about it. Now that they are being anthologized and written about, now that they are achieving the, let’s admit it, faintly dingy pleasure of scholarly fame, what are the rights and wrongs of just hopping on a bandwagon that promotes them as the “new thing” in Victorian studies? It struck me that we risked losing important textures, or moods, or seasons if we rode over and evened out the ravages of time that Field experienced and wrote about with such intensity. A recovery methodology does not fit with the robustness of Field’s temporal shenanigans.

## Too Soon

There has been for a while, I would propose, a tacit consent in queer theory and culture that queer time is predominantly about being late, or seeking lateness, whether that be through turns to antiquity, cultural disobedience, or affective allegiance to mourning, memory, and melancholia. What about being early, or proleptic? Most recently, queer theory has been gnawing at the question of whether queers have any stake in futurity. Under the pressure of disturbing parallels between queer political investments in marriage and child-raising, and right-wing mobilization of a discourse of prolife futurity and messianic time (“children are our future”), the question has been raised as to whether queers want anything to do with the future. Lee Edelman’s 2004 polemic *No Future* is a caustic refusal of the manic drive to futurity that has the evil twins Reproduction and Redemption behind the wheel. No future, no kin, he says: the queerest mode, he argues, is an intransitive one, one that “insists the future stop here.”<sup>18</sup> While cheering on this politically urgent polemic, I am nagged by the problem that Michael Field poses to such insistence. Must we throw the bathwater of futurity out with the baby? Michael Field’s writing



reaches deeply into a future, powered by a conviction that Bradley and Cooper would be reanimated in the future, across time. Field's kind of future is not of heterosocially construed descendants, on the one hand, or of utopist and forever deferred political aims, on the other, but it is rather a thoroughly eccentric fixation on immortality. What intrigues me about Field is that the authors' longing for and belief in the futural doesn't turn away from the language of children or lineage; it fucks with it — literally — and makes lineage, generation, and posterity into a downright kinky business. For Edelman, the queerest erotic is intransitive, but what if an erotics is to be found not in presentist quasi investments in the future, but in the muscular, epistemic stretch it takes to imagine a queer future? What if that lurching reach forward — that proleptic urge — feels good?

## Notes

I would like to thank participants at the “Feminism Now” conference at Dartmouth College, May 2004; Cornell University's “The Queer's English” conference, November 2004; and the University of Pennsylvania Gender and Sexuality Workshop, March 2005, for generative engagements with earlier versions of this piece.

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 2 Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31.4 (2000): 727–44, at 728.
- 3 Scholarship on stupidity from outside the field of queer studies includes Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 256–58, and Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
- 4 Judith Halberstam, “Dude, Where's My Gender?” (lecture, Dartmouth College, Dartmouth, NH, 2004); also published as “Dude, Where's My Gender? Or, Is There Life on Uranus?” *GLQ* 10.2 (2004): 308–12.
- 5 Jordana Rosenberg, “Lesbian Phallus; or, What Can Deconstruction Feel?” *GLQ* 9.3 (2003): 393–414.
- 6 Arenas's postscript to the novel curtly memorializes the missing manuscripts: “First version disappeared, Havana, 1969 / Second version confiscated, Havana, 1971 / The present version smuggled out of Havana, 1974, / and published in Barcelona, 1982.” Reinaldo Arenas, *Farewell to the Sea*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 413.

- 7 Kate Thomas, "Racial Alliance and Postal Networks in Conan Doyle's 'A Study in Scarlet,'" *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2.1 (Spring 2001): 9–23.
- 8 Kate Thomas, "A Queer Job for a Girl: Women Postal Workers in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *In a Queer Place: Sexuality and Belonging in British and European Contexts*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy et al. (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2002), 50–70.
- 9 Henry James, *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 122.
- 10 J. K. Huysmans, *A Rebours* [Against the Grain] (1884); Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works, 1954–1984*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 138; Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii; Judith Butler, "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy," chapter 2, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 11 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.
- 12 Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), xiii, 113, xii.
- 13 This phrase was used repeatedly in Victorian periodicals, from the late 1830s onwards, to describe the effects of postal, telegraphic, and locomotive technologies. For a railway-focused account of the nineteenth-century "new spatiality," see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Leamington Spa, U.K.: Berg, 1986), 4.
- 14 And Michael Moon via Henry James, too. See Moon's *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 15 Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) was an extremely generative study for me as a book that describes and respects dissemination, literary revision, and homosexuality as cultural processes.
- 16 Henry James, *In the Cage*, in *London Stories and Other Writings* (Padstow, U.K.: Tabb House, 1989), 284.
- 17 See Kate Thomas, "'What Time We Kiss': Michael Field's Queer Temporalities," *GLQ* 13.2–3 (2007): 327–51.
- 18 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 31.



Affects and the (Anti-)Social





## Starved

LAUREN BERLANT

THE PSYCHOANALYST Susie Orbach tells me that there's an "epidemic of celibacy" in the U.K. and the United States.<sup>1</sup> So I wonder: is *everyone* beyond sex (not just the queer scholars who might have, you know, been there and done that, aged out, made art, bought property, endured AIDS, forged a couple, taken hormones, had events, reproduced, gotten tenure, had episodes, done new research, said what they had to say, heard what there was to hear, looked around the room, gotten bored)? Georg Simmel writes that modern boredom is a way to experience overstimulation from a mental distance: perhaps the pressures of reproducing professional sexual life are a lot like sex that goes on for too long, becoming irritating and requiring daydreaming, or analgesia.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it's political depression.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it's that there is no *emotional* habitus for being queer and that building a world for it, being collaborative, is a lot harder than not bothering. Plus, sex complicates the ordinary, because, even when it isn't collaborative, it forces the rational/critical subject to become disorganized for a bit, and that's

hard when the conditions of the reproduction of life are already both so overorganizing and fraying.<sup>4</sup> Sex forces us to *desire* to become disorganized, on top of all that. Being overwhelmed is exciting, except when it's exhausting.

We were giving a talk when Orbach said it: the audience laughed and laughed. In England! Laughter was a placeholder for something agape (in the Greek and English senses). I think of the beautiful labia in *The Queen's Throat* and wish that laughter, singing, vocalizing, and talk *were* sex rather than sexuality — and then we could never be beyond it.<sup>5</sup> But the story of being “after” or beyonding sex, which is a phrase's fantasy of having passed through a phase, remains unclear.<sup>6</sup> Beyonding is a rhetoric people use when they have a desire not to be stuck. I take this volume to be such a gesture, a hope that the stuckness is really an impasse.<sup>7</sup> An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional — in the unbound temporality of the lag one hopes to have been experiencing all along (otherwise it's the *end*), it marks a delay. Because you can only know later that this *was* an impasse. This essay is a promissory note for a thought about affect in the sexual impasse.

Leo Bersani, my favorite writer about the phenomenology of sexual attachment, also made an audience laugh once, through me, when I recited his doxa that people don't much like sex.<sup>8</sup> It was Michigan, autumn 1993, an excellent time for me. Liking, wanting, longing — they're on the quiet side. Not liking, named in public: laughing.

Whenever I type the word *laugh* I note that my brain thinks I am typing my own name.

Everything I write lately is from the position of depressive realism, in which the world's hard scenes ride the wave of the optimism inscribed in ambivalence, but without taking on optimism's conventional tones. I do not have the aim of moving beyond *x* but the aim of setting there awhile, dedramatizing the performance of critical and political judgment so as to slow down the encounter with the objects of knowledge that are really scenes we can barely get our eyes around.<sup>9</sup> In other words, I do not want to move beyond a thing, as I am always still approaching it from within a scene of contact. As method, this perspective turns the object *x* into an

impasse, a singular place that's a cluster of noncoherent but proximate attachments that can only be approached awkwardly, described around, shifted. Sex is not a thing, it's a relation; it's a nonrelation in propinquity to some kind of a recognition; it's a sock drawer for the anxious affects; it's a gesture cluster that can be organized in an identity for the purpose of passing through normative sociality; it's an event, an episode; it feels so good, or not; it's an experience of becoming disorganized that, at the same time, can be lived through, assimilated, talked about, tracked (noticed, fetishized, historicized, genealogized), and forgotten, while also being a threat to well-being and to fantasies that in the good life people ought to be protected from being too chaotic, unstable, ambivalent, or enigmatic. Normativity is a vote for disavowing, drowning out, delegitimizing, or distracting from all that's ill-fitting in humans: it can never drown out, though, the threat posed by sex's weird tastes and tonalities to the desire for the everyday to be simpler to live through.<sup>10</sup>

To substantiate this cluster of phrases in a way I can live with takes work: archive gathering, phrasemaking, conversing, reading around, rephrasing, listening, nitpicking—spreading out into the lateral spaces often drowned out by the demands of argument and of interlocutors who want “ways out” while I’m still looking for “ways in.” Moving among different registers of critical work is motivated by a hunger not for satisfaction but for help in articulating different materializations of a scene. It's like hovering around the enigma of a new attachment, a *crush*, but with a more patient epistemulation. This is the reciprocal scholarly obligation of queer attentiveness to which I continue to feel indebted.

In the 1990s I felt that I needed to write openly, undefensively, and with explicit narrative pleasure about sexuality and sex, to convince people — students, really — to be willing to unlearn their attachments to normativity, with its compulsive formalism and unimaginative be-gooderness. My favorite verb was *to lubricate*: as in, I want my intellectual performance to lubricate a discussion about the centrality of sex, sexuality, and subjectivity to being ordinary in the normative political, juridical, and intimate domains of the social. That discussion needed lubrication because it is hard to talk about sex and sexuality without everyone getting jittery, defensive, and ineloquent (including the ineloquence of cliché). My second-favorite verb was *to delaminate*. Normative forms of self-recognition needed to be



peeled away from the desires that brought one to *that* way of being *again*. It was hard to talk about the wildness of affect and the conventionality of emotions without stepping on people's attachment to their emotional authenticity, since performing and being recognized as emotionally authentic is just as important to the modern sense of being someone as understanding one's sexual identity is.

Now when I write about the conditions of attachment to the normal, it's about the attrition of the subject, economies of exhaustion, desires for homeostasis, and the variety of ways that the normal seems like a resting place from the contradictions and impossibilities that threaten the continuity of the scene of the labor of reproducing life. The world in which we reproduce life is exhausting, as Teresa Brennan argues, and I am developing ways to substantiate its varied strategies of wearing out people, especially the ones who don't have lots of congealed privilege.<sup>11</sup> The work is unserene, when it isn't angry. It isn't melancholic, but about scenes in which melancholia would at least be a more appropriate response than the optimism one tends to find there that *this time* the normative posture might produce a simple life, where "simplicity" stands in for, even allows for the pre-experience of, an affective sense that justice, reciprocity, or belonging has been achieved. In the case of endemic exhaustion under conditions of a commitment to the normative continuities, the primary affects are anxiety and threat, with exhaustion and ambivalence as competing subcutaneous pulses. Because of their visceral immediacy they may seem not to need explaining, or to be political. But the insistence with which they haunt the sheer vitality of normativity suggests otherwise.<sup>12</sup> I can tell you one thing about it: exuberance *is* irrational.

Alan Greenspan is the author of the phrase "irrational exuberance."<sup>13</sup> It was initially a public musing that he later regretted saying concerning whether or not capitalist expansion was seeming so permanent that people were taking crazy risks with money they often didn't even have yet. It was about real estate, wealth congealed. "Irrational exuberance" was picked up as a phrase to address the more general question of whether optimism itself were always irrational, and it makes one wonder what burden of fear the word *irrational* betrays: it implies a preference for sensible risk, risk that does not impose itself on the senses as a threat to a comfortable rhythm of the subject in the event. Irrational exuberance is what sex requires, although the scale of the event might be as small as a blurt.

Adam Phillips argues that sexual boredom is the trace of Oedipal melancholy, that sexual anesthesia is the refusal to remember what the melancholy's about, and that the best solution seems to be *thinking about it!* Consult an expert! Phrased this way, deadened sexuality also seems sensible.<sup>14</sup> More interestingly, Phillips keeps mentioning the eruption of slips of verbal amorality, Freud's "surge of guesses" when he's at the brink of a formulation, the prolific emotions that emerge from the breakdown of an analysand's therapeutic blockage — all sorts of ways of describing the rhetorical pleasures of elevated holding that reconstitute the sexual impasse as a punctum where one's imbalance cannot be suppressed or righted. You can't buy real estate there, but you can stay awhile.

As I was saying, I have lost the pleasure of fun frank storytelling when it comes to the analysis of the reproduction of the bad/good life. Relatedly, I have lost the sense of permission to drag readers through a complex process to reach a conclusion I might just have told them in the beginning, using the opinion form, or some other genre. The world is so bad, the banality and comforts of cruelty so expansive, and the urge to interfere with the reproduction of the bad/good life so pressing: I'm anxious, breathless, and vertiginous from the relation between my affects and the attenuated, unpredictable, ridiculous temporalities of counterhegemonic attrition wrought through writing, teaching, conversing. Fredric Jameson writes that anxiety is the appropriate affect for proximity to the utopian: this is the only way I have always been emotionally appropriate.<sup>15</sup>

I've been saying that anxiety is a good but not fun affect of the impasse: but the normative and the utopian are both anxious not to be thrashing around the ellipsis that living on there is.<sup>16</sup> They move to form to get numb with the referent, and to misrecognize the numbness as an achievement. (Numbness is not a lack of feeling, as you know: it involves a hum.) But patience, on the other hand, is something to teach: it's related to pacing, and to taking the time to acknowledge being overwhelmed by, and to become scholars of the complexity of, the distillate that appears as the satisfying object.

Renata Salecl has a brilliant explication of sexual impasse, read as a desire to be done with the whole inconvenient thing that messes up the hygiene of self-organized abstraction — wanting to be above and beyond it all, to be a person in control of the cluster of habits that constitute intelligible

personality. Tracking the desire for celibacy inscribed in sexual desire, she argues that heterosexual people in some novels by Anita Brookner want to want and want to have had, but do not actually want to be in the same room for too long with, an intimate: being-with is too hard, and boring, like politics.<sup>17</sup> It reminds me of the couplet from Gary Lutz's "Devotions": "What was wrong was very simple. / Sometimes her life and mine fell on the same day."<sup>18</sup>

This past summer I saw a television show about this phenomenon. It is called *Starved*: it was the queerest (not the gayest) thing I've seen on TV.<sup>19</sup> It was about a man in love with cake.

But this is terrible storytelling. Let me set the table.

There are four friends in an anti-twelve-step group: in the group, when you admit that you've given in, again, to your compulsion to your ingestion disorder (eating, not eating, bulimia), everyone yells, "It's not OK!" and other abuses, and then the shamed subjects say, "Thank you." These four people love each other in a better-than-family way, because they have to make up the forms for practicing their intimacy as they go along: visiting, only talking on the phone, going to the gym together, having secrets, lying, exposing, laughing at, roommating, being in love, standing outside talking on the street, and so on: surviving-, no, reviving-with. The series is mostly funny when it tracks the nutty creativity of addicted people trying to fold their addiction into the reproductive spaces of everyday life, at home and at work. The presumption is that addicts are most interesting when exposed managing the convolutions of their *lived* ambivalence toward being competent to the normal life, and that personality as addictive repetition, in its manifestation of the desire for near-numbness, is amusing, in a kind of shake-your-head-at-the-child way.

The drama of the series, the tragic part of the comedy, is located in the moments when people get to be quiet with their food. This is especially true about the men in the series. There's a woman who passes through anorexia and alcoholism to a "mature sexual relation": this bisexual female lead attaches to a woman recovering from cancer who has had to choose life, and she rides the wave of her lover's choosing. People are looking for that, in the show: they want to choose life by imitating previous choosing, but the available forms of risk management (being a good cop, a good husband) are mainly soul killing — people are dying from wanting to want it.

In the end, that's what there is, and two of them, the bulimic African American cop and the obese compulsive white novelist, return to normative form, which means to discipline their shamed appetitive ambivalence by way of medicalization. But the lead character ends up alone with his cake, knowing that in eating it he will never be full. He wants to be hungry all the time: he chooses to be starved, to be longing, rather than belonging. Or, since it's a compulsion, longing chooses him. But whatever — his life manifests the sexual impasse neither as melodrama, nor as tragedy, exactly, but . . .

What used to be called “minimalist” fiction in the post-Raymond Carver United States affords a rich archive for tracking the affects of sexual impasse in the ellipsis of the present moment, but only sometimes does it see suspended sexuality as ballast against the reproductive attenuations of capital and normativity. See Amy Hempel, “Jesus Is Waiting,” for instance.<sup>20</sup> Hempel's story is about a road trip a woman takes between episodes of being in a couple. She is trying to find out *the point*, and indeed the story is full of phrases about pointing: people refuse to *point* in a direction, they run over the *pointy* orange rubber buoys that reroute traffic, and, in the communal breakfast rooms of Days Inns, they respond to the TV collectively as though they already agree about *the point of* a story they watch.<sup>21</sup> It's like the depressive's studenty half-question to no one made literal in the lapse into ineloquence: *and the point of all this is . . .* Meanwhile, the road trip woman is also loving the *drone* of the traffic, a word and experience Hempel repeats elsewhere, which hum I take to be the affectively neutral soundtrack that runs alongside the experience of circuitous desires, desires that just point to each other. Jesus, by the way, may or may not be waiting, we learn in the story's last line: the *point* is that the protagonist is at an impasse about whether Jesus is in an impasse too, which is another way Hempel has of talking about love.

Her love plots are always located in the desire to coordinate impassivities. The point here or there isn't teleology but its absence: but what's demonstrated is not the modernist avant-garde literalization of antinormativity or above-the-marketness in heroic displays of generic and subjective formlessness, either. The querying tonal uplift at the end of a statement not grammatically a question is not just a tic but a demonstration of a *something* that isn't shared yet, but could be. In the story about becoming-impasse, what is starved for is not sex or romantic intimacy but the *emotional time* of being-with, time where it is possible to value floundering around with others

whose attention-paying to what's happening is generous and makes liveness possible as a good, not a threat, and in the fear of the absence of which people choose to be with their cake. The impassive fantasy imagines coordinating lives, being proximate, not possessing anyone or anything, and not trying to be good.<sup>22</sup> It's being a friend-with-benefits-that-are-to-be-determined. It often doesn't ask for much, if anything, apart from some form of propping, which could include sex but doesn't see it as the apotheosis of being-with. Indeed, this scene imagines genuine, lovely, weird intimacy without the high drama of apotheosis. Not being situation comedies whose generic job is to manifest a character's personality one more time in an always only slightly altered situation that never changes anything or anyone in a way that can wear a person out, although it never does, these postminimalist rhetorical strategies of maintaining and explaining the impasse involve strange anxiogenic performances of being overwhelmed, flooded, and telling about it in stories about being around oneself that have no narrative shape but exist at the horizon of a memory of optimism for genre, for normativity, or for having someone dependably to talk to and be talked to by.

The sexual impasse is a formal suspension that can allow for a spreading vigilance in sociality that seeks the thing unsatisfied by normativity's failed promise to provide anchors for a satisfying life. In England the genre for this experience is called a "sit-trag." (Its *locus classicus* is *The Office*.) The sacrifice of sex in the impasse is what manifestly makes the situation tragic, or sad, or something, though, and turns queer desires for a world of contact whose temporalities and forms of reciprocity desperately need reinvention into the almost-numbed sadness of people who overidentify with longing, who become starved for longing, who become elliptical with longing, and who laugh aloud when you name their fear of leaping into sex, the collaborative risk of a shared disorganization.

## Notes

Thanks lots to Bradin Cormack, Katie Stewart, Lee Edelman, and the editors for helping.

- 1 It's not actually true that there's a celibacy epidemic, according to Edward Laumann, et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). But another study points out that frequency is different from satisfaction: see Kate M. Dunn,

- Peter R. Croft, and Geoffrey I. Hackett, "Satisfaction in the Sex Life of a General Population Sample," *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 26 (2000): 141–51. Susie Orbach, in response to this piece of writing (personal communication, 2005), opined that sex aversion arises from a "fear of intimacy." By intimacy she means someone's openness to becoming vulnerable to imagining and being imagined by someone else in a way that animates ambivalence about merging, autonomy, exposure, and alterity: in *The Impossibility of Sex* this process is tracked through the failed and successful dynamics of transference (people come to analysis in order to enact their defenses to it, hence "impossibility"). But Orbach also means "fear of intimacy" in the normative sentimental sense. In her clinical work the intimacy concept remains useful precisely because of its imprecision, its implied demand for elaboration, and its permission to fantasize within fear. Placeholder terms like *intimacy* either clog up thought, saturating the space of conceptualization, or, in misnaming *x* in a way that creates a revisionary dynamic, initiate the dissolution of the nominal blockage into an impasse. Elizabeth A. Povinelli points toward some queer potentials of this dynamic of recognition and generative interruption in "Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality," *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 215–38.
- 2 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (1903; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324–39, at 331.
  - 3 Needless to say, it can be draining when, for queers and feminists, the scene of sexual publicity becomes more defensive than oriented toward world building. In this political phase the specter of non-normative sexuality appears mainly not as a condition of invigorating possibility for multiplying viable ways of living but as one of those terrorizing threats to the normal that justifies neo-liberal messianic authoritarianism and the cramping of a counterpolitical imaginary to the size of claims for inclusion, better biopower, and cheerfulness about the inevitably queered excitements and entitlements wrought by or alongside of the capitalist fantasy machine.
  - 4 In contemporary consumer society the process of life building is also life destroying, from the production of value through the attenuation of laboring bodies to environmental destruction at such a vast scale it takes my breath away to think about it as tied up with sexual modernity, which it is, if you think, for example, about "the good life," for a minute, or the administration of AIDS and birth-control policy and ideologies. At stake in the longer analysis is a description of the attrition of the subject under contemporary regimes and modes of biopower. It takes a thousand years for one discarded plastic bag to biodegrade, and that's a micromillennium compared to Styrofoam, e-waste, and the dumps they're decomposing in. The dainty phrase *environmental footprint* obscures the monstrous agency of destruction engendered by ordinary consumption, where unconsciousness about waste is one of the few pleasures whose traces are *not* decaying in a landfill zoned near some poor people whose air, water, and land is becoming poison.

- 5 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2001).
- 6 Throughout this essay the term *phrase* denotes the usual linguistic form but also the *differènd*, Lyotard's measure of a site of dispute made by conceptual or generic incommensurability in the terms of an argument uttered in phrases that must nonetheless be adjudicated. The phrase is a complaint that cannot be heard in the frame of the interlocutor whose hearing of it is crucial to the performance of justice: it represents a crisis, therefore, that is nonetheless not a blockage. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differènd: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- 7 This extends my work in another essay about the affective politics of the *electoral*-impasse: see "Unfeeling Kerry," *Theory and Event* 8.2 (2005). It seems relevant here also to note that *impasse* was invented by Voltaire so as not to say *cul-de-sac*, whose anatomical association in French is a well-traveled road. "I call *impasse*, gentlemen, what you term *cul de sac*, as a street, I apprehend, can signify neither an a — e nor a sack; therefore beg you will make use of the word *impasse*, which is noble, sonorous, intelligible, and absolutely necessary, instead of *cul*, and in spite of Sir F —, heretofore T —." See Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version with Notes*, vol. 39 (Paris; New York: E. R. DuMont, 1901), 66–67. An electronic version of the book can be found online at <http://www.questia.com/read/101398032>.
- 8 Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197.
- 9 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Pedagogy of Buddhism," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 153–82.
- 10 This is my argument against the thought that the rezoning of sexually inevitable shame is the purpose of contemporary sexual normativity. Sedgwick's metaphorization of queer populations as shamed ones has evolved into a reductive mimetic claim about the circuitry of social affect that amalgamates a political point about *shaming* as a vehicle for social negation to a hardwired affective truth claim about sexuality. I want to pry open the scene of this encounter. Normativity is a powerful adhesive not only (if at all) because of a motive to relocate sexual shame and enable thereby a performance of personality that's socially and psychically nonproblematic; normativity also promises to protect a fantasy that there is something simple in the human, something that stands relatively still amid the subject's compelled responsivity to the daunting material conditions of the reproduction of life. Sexuality is a place people learn to invest in not just as truth but as simplicity, a referent, a point among other ballasting points. All sorts of affects are attached to the ways people risk and protect this zone of self-simplification, not just or at root shame. Sedgwick's more recent work is interested in shame as the name for a broken flow of intersubjective exchange; I take this flow to be akin to the

formal simplicity that normative desires can be the placeholders for, alongside the noise of moral assurance or the sense of ordinary belonging. But I want to detach the experience of brokenness from any particular affect, to be *more* formal: if the subject sees itself fundamentally as relational, then nonrelation can be an experience of brokenness or forced detachment that has no necessary affect association but, quite the opposite, can produce a broad range of imaginable experiences of chaos, not knowing, or numbness—affects that might not be all that heightened, either, because while the experience of ejection from recognition can be dramatic, it also is pretty ordinary. See *Touching Feeling* throughout.

- 11 Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000) and *Globalization and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West* (London: Routledge, 2002); see also Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi* (Paris: Poches Odile Jacob, 1988).
- 12 Relatedly, see Sigfried Kracauer's brilliant polemic, "Boredom," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 331–34. Kracauer describes moral normativity and saturation by commoditized immediacies as half-anesthetized ways people have of *not* experiencing the exhaustion of alienated labor and contrasts that with "the radical boredom that might be able to reunite them with their heads" (331). That "radical boredom" might involve something like the kinetics of the impasse, but in that event it will have become other than itself, a refusal of the blasé referred to in note 1.
- 13 Alan Greenspan, "The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society," The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C., 5 December 1996. See also Robert J. Shiller, *Irrational Exuberance*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and the definition of "irrational exuberance" on that book's web site, <http://www.irrationalexuberance.com/>.
- 14 Adam Phillips, "Bored with Sex?" *London Review of Books*, 6 March 2003.
- 15 Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review*, no. 25 (January/February 2004): 35–54.
- 16 In the longer version I will engage the pervasiveness of ellipsis in a certain French theoretical conversation that crosses Jacques Derrida (on Jabés), Jean-Luc Nancy (on Derrida), and Jacques Rancière (on Althusser). In the meantime I'll just say that the concept of ellipsis usually points to circular temporalities in the relation of  $x$  metaphysical concept to its supplement. But this essay's version of the ellipsis is less recursive than that, foregrounding the internal activity of the scene of animated suspension. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 295–300; Jean-Luc Nancy, "Elliptical Sense," in *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks, trans. Jonathan Derbyshire (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 91–111; Jacques Rancière, "Althusser, Don Quixote, and



- the State of the Text,” in *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 129–45.
- 17 Renata Salecl, “Love and Sexual Difference: Doubled Desire in Men and Women,” in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 297–316. Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* provides another great example of this phenomenon.
- 18 Gary Lutz, *Stories in the Worst Way* (Providence, R.I.: Third Bed Books, 1996), 25.
- 19 *Starved* was on the FX Network for six episodes beginning 4 August 2005. It was self-described thus: “*Starved* chronicles the lives of four thirty-something friends in Brooklyn; three men and a woman, each battling eating disorders. The men are ‘Sam,’ a neurotic, commitment-phobic commodities broker; ‘Adam,’ a bulimic, blue-collar cop; ‘Dan,’ a hen-pecked, obese writer; and ‘Billie,’ an anorexic, bi-sexual, aspiring songwriter.” Everyone is white except Adam, who is African American; normatively speaking, everyone is heterosexual except for Billie, who is unpredictable. See the program’s listing on the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com> (accessed 22 October 2005).
- 20 Amy Hempel, *The Dog of the Marriage: Stories* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 17, 121.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 I have been struggling with the sense that the projected habitation of starvation or delay or chaos in the impasse is a game of privilege constructed by the anxious white, straight, Professional Managerial Class sensibility that expected the meritocracy to work, food to be filling, sex to be good, and life’s exchanges to feel confirming. But at least sometimes (I don’t know everything yet) the literature of material deprivation manifests a similar anxiety to maintain proximity to the normative desires and failures, as though juggling phrases that cannot possibly move one toward the reality they point to produces life as a will-to-irresolution while the actual finality is right there in front of you insisting unbearably on the nearness of your disappointment. In both scenes of articulation, with different consequences, exhaustion from juggling proximity to normative desire, a way of playing not just with alterity but with too-closeness, is infused by the hyperactivity of capital’s destructive construction of the scene of life and the attrition of the subject in it. So what we have is a potentially volatile mixture of gases. See Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), for example, or Loïc Waquant’s segments of *The Weight of the World*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Accardo, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Joe Johnson, and Shoggy T. Waryn (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, reprinted 1999), 130–67.

## Shame on You

LEO BERSANI

QUEER INTELLECTUALS are curiously reticent about the sexuality they claim to celebrate. It is frequently said that gay culture — at least gay male culture — is to a large extent a sexual culture, and while it could be argued, as Freud implicitly did, that “sexual culture” is an oxymoron, defending our right to have sex — lots of sex, in many different, at times surprising places — is certainly a defense of a long if not exactly respectable gay tradition. A certain reticence about gay sex, even *entre nous*, may, however, be a necessary part of that defense. For me, the relation between the celebration and the silence was especially striking at the Gay Shame conference at the University of Michigan in 2003. For two days, normativity — both straight and gay — was strenuously, and perhaps deservedly, attacked, but very little was said about the precise value of non- or anti-normative sexual practices. Peculiarly, AIDS was not mentioned in any of the talks. I say “peculiarly” because AIDS had become a major shame-inflicting weapon — a gift, as it were, sent from God — in homophobic assaults from, principally but by no means only, the Christian right on the

homosexual “life style.” However morally repugnant we may rightly judge such attacks to be, it is difficult for HIV-infected gays not to be also infected by the shame-inducing judgment that AIDS is a punishment for their sexual sins. If, as the gay-shame theorists forcefully argue, shame is necessarily constitutive of gay subjectivity in a society that trains us from early childhood to think of homosexuality as unnatural and even criminal, to be stricken with a life-threatening disease as a direct result of having sex with another man can hardly fail to reactivate at least some of the shame that even the proudest of gay men probably felt when they first discovered their sexual tastes.

Of course, things have changed considerably since the early years of AIDS. The Christian shame tactic is undoubtedly much less effective than it was twenty years ago, and, all of the resistance to gay marriage notwithstanding, our insistence on having the right to marry has helped to make us more acceptable to straight people by allowing them to think that we have the same conjugal dreams as they do. We should not, however, exaggerate the degree of acceptance. Let’s not forget that an institution as august and as powerful as the Roman Catholic Church has officially characterized homosexual being as fundamentally disordered being.

There would, then, have been sufficient reason for the Gay Shame conference to devote some time to the ways in which AIDS has interfered with the project of constructing a gay dignity both on and in spite of the ground of an ineluctable gay shame. I suspect that the failure to consider this as a topic for discussion may have to do with certain shame-inducing mechanisms internal to the gay community itself. A potential sexual shame is inherent in being HIV positive. For the overwhelming majority of positive gay men, to acknowledge being infected amounts to a sexual confession: I have been fucked. Many gay men admit freely (generally to other gay men) that they like being bottoms, although a significant number of less liberated brothers may still subscribe, perhaps secretly, to the view that Foucault, in an interview from 1982, attributed to most homosexuals according to which “being the passive partner in a love relationship” is “in some way demeaning.”<sup>1</sup> For Foucault, gay S/M—partly due to the frequent reversibility of roles in gay S/M, partly as a result of the demonstration S/M provides of the power of bottoms—has “helped to alleviate this problem somewhat” by empowering “a position traditionally associated with female sexuality.”<sup>2</sup> Since the political credo of the gay

men likely to participate in an academic conference on Gay Shame includes being a good feminist, they would probably feel uncomfortable publicly investigating, first, homophobic shame associated with being HIV positive, and, second, the involuntarily misogynistic shame of being exposed to others (gay and, even worse, straight others) as having succumbed to, or actively sought, the sexual “position traditionally associated with female sexuality.” While it seems to me that a discussion of all this among gay men might be useful, I can also see how it could easily become politically messy.

Add to this the equally embarrassing fact (also scrupulously avoided at our conference) that an apparently not insignificant number of gays have, in the past ten years or so, been barebacking—that is, engaging in unprotected anal sex. When I mentioned this at the conference, I was dismissed as having bought into homophobic media propaganda which, I was told, had transformed a few isolated incidents into a general practice. The widespread nature of the practice (documented in Tim Dean’s recent research on the topic) can be easily verified by visits to the impressive number of flourishing barebacking sites on the Internet, as well as to the video stores renting and selling dozens of barebacking films.

To what extent is gay shame both a source and a product of gay barebacking? There is of course a politically correct way of dealing with barebacking: all self-destructive, and even murderous, behavior on the part of gay men testifies—rather spectacularly at times—to a self-hatred directly and uniquely traceable to a subjectivity molded by a homophobic culture. Dangers, however, are lurking in this position. First of all, while the socially-inflicted-shame argument gets gays off the hook ethically, it also radically deprives us of agency in our behavior. Barebacking would show how deeply we have been injured by homophobic insults, to the very core of our being, but it also shows what a small inner margin we have in excess of a shamed subjectivity. Catastrophically shamed: we are in such deep if unconscious agreement with the original perpetrators of our shame that, ratifying their judgment of us, we move on to the sentencing stage and condemn ourselves and others to death. Such motives would hardly further the projects of those for whom gay shame serves as the foundation for gay pride. Even more: once we begin to speak of such apparently suicidal and murderous behavior as barebacking, we run the risk of tracing the profile of a psychoanalytically defined death drive. When behavior is un-

ambiguously destructive, oriented toward an orgasmic embrace of annihilation, the ultimately malleable social unconscious (the unconscious favored by anti-Freudian queer intellectuals) becomes a weak rival to the rage for death inherent in the human psyche. We would thus return to the issue of *every* individual's responsibility for the violent impulses that are partly and inescapably constitutive of our psychic structure. We are now in psychoanalytic territory (anathema to many queer theorists), by which I mean territory ontically prior to social inscriptions, and "beyond" such intersubjective categories as shame or pride.



And yet I don't think the death drive provides a satisfactory account of barebacking. Once we have pushed beyond both the shame-based and the death drive arguments, we may find ourselves confronting something rarely associated with irresponsible self-indulgence: the asceticism of an ego-divesting discipline. Let's begin with a brief discussion of someone who has been taken as the very model of non-ascetic self-indulgence, the French writer Guillaume Dustan. Dustan, who died in 2005 at the age of forty, was both an exceptionally gifted novelist and, we may learn with some surprise, a magistrate in Tahiti and in northern France. He became a favorite of talk show hosts on French television (and the pariah of AIDS activists), largely because of his carefully cultivated shock value: he was always ready to defend the practice of unsafe sex in the name of individual freedom, taking a stand against both the straight and the gay censors who would suppress it. His first book, *Dans ma chambre* (*In my bedroom*), a novel or, to use a term favored by Dustan, an autofiction, published in 1996, is pre-barebacking Dustan, although it outlines the sexual and spiritual logic of barebacking, as well as its inevitability. The 150 pages of *Dans ma chambre* are filled with short, declarative sentences that unrelentingly and rather breezily describe in great detail Guillaume's extraordinarily rich (yet also monotonous) sex life. The book seems designed to confirm the most cherished heterosexual fantasies about how gay men live: Guillaume does almost nothing but fuck, take drugs, and dance the night away in packed gay discos. But *Dans ma chambre*, for all its matter-of-fact presentation of a voluminous quantity of scabrous sexual details, is also rather "respectable." There are three pages that simply list all the sexual accessories or toys that clutter Guillaume's closets; while they include such things as handcuffs, nipple clamps, har-

nesses, testicle-stretchers, and whips, there are no scenes in the novel that would qualify as bona fide S/M. “I am not a sadist,” Guillaume candidly writes, “only a little megalomaniacal.”<sup>3</sup> Above all, Guillaume, who is HIV positive, never has unprotected anal sex — or, more accurately, he only briefly has it, always managing not to ejaculate when he is being the active partner and to avoid receiving the ejaculations of the many tops who enjoy his anal favors.

So Guillaume has a wonderful life, one in which, as he says, “sex is the central thing” (75). *Dans ma chambre* is unabashed confirmation of gay culture as a culture of sex. It in fact justifies putting those two words together. When Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, opposes the pleasures of sex to the demands of civilization, he is thinking of those pleasures as entirely private, as removing the individual from the social spaces in which a shared culture is elaborated. The gay sex in *Dans ma chambre*, although it is almost always between only two or three people, is a communal construction. Everything in the “ghetto” — where, as Guillaume notes, you can do just about everything except, perhaps, work and see your family — is organized around sex: “Clothes, short hair, being in good shape, the sex toys, the stuff you take, the alcohol you drink, the things you read, the things you eat, you can’t feel too heavy when you go out or you won’t be able to fuck” (73). Tireless sexual promiscuity makes for a connectedness based on unlimited bodily intimacies. In the most reflective chapter of the book (its title is in English: “People are still having sex”), Guillaume happily announces: “I live in a wonderful world where everyone has slept with everyone” (70). For a period of time Guillaume’s former lover Quentin had the same different tricks every night of the week; there was the regular Monday trick, the regular Tuesday trick, and so on. Weekends were left open for new contacts. Sex was apparently always better with the regular ones, but, Guillaume writes, “the problem is that with them you get into relations that have to be managed.” Quentin wasn’t bothered by that because he “is a little schizophrenic.” And Guillaume concludes this brief portrait of his friend with the astonishing remark: “When no one really exists, there is room for everyone” (111). A universal relatedness is grounded in the absence of relations, in the felicitous erasure of people as persons.

Might some serpent enter this garden of sexual felicity? *Dans ma chambre*’s Dionysian delights are not exactly spoiled by the specter of HIV

infection, but it has clearly become an inescapable part of Guillaume's "wonderful world." Guillaume and his friends are not, as we say, in denial: they talk about their HIV status with one another, Guillaume consoles a sick friend, and he and most of his tricks are never too excited, too drugged, or too drunk to pause and to don the always available condom. And yet, perhaps inevitably, AIDS infects sex with a consciousness of death. Death, however, not as a threat, but as a temptation, a lure. The monotony of Guillaume's sexual exploits — especially of his insatiable anal appetite for multitudinous penises and multitudinous dildoes of the most impressive dimensions — is relieved by a narrative movement away from the sex the narrative also seems never to cease meticulously to describe. Indeed perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of this account of gay sex as, it would almost seem, inherently mindless and affectless is the sexual hero's discovery, within or just to the side of sex, of something superior to or at the very least more desirable than sex. Dustan's novel delineates a wish to die that is at once related to sex and foreign to sex, and in so doing it unselfconsciously resolves the Freudian quandary of a death drive different in its psychic essence from Eros, and yet, as he writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is undetectable "unless its presence is betrayed by being alloyed with Eros."<sup>4</sup> *Dans ma chambre* gives a phenomenological account of that seemingly unaccountable "alloy." At first it would appear that the threat of death merely intensifies the sexual pleasure of unsafe sex. What interests the practitioners of unsafe sex, Guillaume writes, is "to wallow in poisonous come, to have a romantic and dark fuck," to taste and to give "the kiss of death, as they say" (133). Guillaume remembers seeing one man come while penetrating another without a condom, a spectacle he found dizzying, "vertigineux." The potentially fatal fuck is a powerful aphrodisiac. For Guillaume, the dizzying excitement of unsafe sex seems to be the psychic effect of his knowing that what the bottom is being penetrated by may be his own death. It's as if the prospect of death were in itself exciting; here, however, the excitement is being "lent" to sex, where it both intensifies the sensations of those having sex and even momentarily shatters the psychic equilibrium of some one present merely as a witness. So it may be possible to experience the excitement without the sex. Guillaume seems, as it were, to be working toward this desexualizing purification of the death drive; it is his personal ascesis. Unable to come one night while penetrating Stephane, he masturbates after making Stephane come.

Then he lies next to Stephane, without touching him, and closes his eyes. “After a moment Stephane asks me what’s wrong. I say I would like to shoot everyone, break all my toys, and remain all alone in the spilled blood, screaming until I die” (61). The rhythm of excitement leading to a fantasized death parallels the rhythm of a sexual excitement leading to a sexual climax. But here the exciting “friction” is entirely mental — it is the blood-soaked exacerbation of a fatal fantasmatic scream — and what is ultimately evacuated is not semen but life itself.

Unsafe sex becomes so tempting to Guillaume that, in order to escape that temptation, he gets a job elsewhere and leaves Paris. “If I stay here I’m going to die. I’m going to end up putting sperm in everybody’s ass and having them do the same thing to me. The truth is, that’s the only thing I want to do” (152). Why? There is perhaps the memory of the dizzying excitement Guillaume felt watching a condomless top transmit “the kiss of death” to his bottom. But Guillaume also speaks of frequently losing the desire, while having sex, to reach an orgasm; at such moments, he adds, he would like to be dead. To be done with it all — nothing exceeds the desirability of that. From this perspective, both Guillaume’s excitement in his fantasy of screaming himself into death and his dizzying thrill as he watches some one else being fatally infected would be necessary in order to overcome his instinct of self-preservation — as if a destructive, rageful ecstasy could “trick” that instinct into impotence and assure the triumph of the death drive at its most profound instinctual level (where instinct and drive would be indistinguishable).

For all the bourgeois-shocking details he scrupulously transcribes of fisting and dildo-fucking, the Guillaume of *Dans ma chambre* turns out, reassuringly for some of his readers, to be a fairly decent fellow. He is scrupulous about safe sex, and he ends his narrative by confessing how good it was to have been loved by Stephane. This also means, however, that there are limitations to his imagination of intimacy. There is no speculation about the possibility of something other than death, or more exactly in addition to death, resulting from uninhibited unsafe sex. The desire to spread and to receive death is enough to put an end to sex and, apparently, all reflection on sex. Of course, the ground staked out by his indefatigable drugged cruising is in itself a seductively unconventional form of intimacy. Guillaume’s wonderful world, where everyone has been to bed with everyone else, is a world where no one is interested in pene-



trating — more exactly, in invading and possessing — anyone else’s desire. Do you want to have sex with me? This is the limit of psychological curiosity in *Dans ma chambre*, and it is a limit consistent with Foucault’s call for a relational move from a hermeneutics of desire to the pleasure of bodies. Correlatively, there is a profound shift in registers of intimacy: from our heterosexual culture’s prioritizing of the couple to a communal model of impersonal intimacy.



The evolution of gay sex since the publication of *Dustan’s* first novel includes an even more radical relational inventiveness, one Guillaume might have discovered had he stayed in Paris and given in to the temptation to go bareback. Unsafe sex means nothing more to Guillaume than acting on his frightening desire to propagate death, in himself and in others. What has happened since *Dans ma chambre* is an amazing — most of us would say appalling — efflorescence of barebacking as the defining practice of a new if limited gay male sexual culture. I say “culture” because barebacking has not only a large number of conceptually inarticulate practitioners who simply reject condoms as unacceptable inhibitions of pleasure and intimacy, but also a few coherent, at times impressive theoreticians. Tim Dean has recently completed a book-length study of barebacking,<sup>5</sup> and much of what I will say is indebted to his research and remarkable analyses. First of all, let’s distinguish (although the distinction is by no means clear-cut in the barebacking community) between those who practice unsafe sex hoping that it will turn out to have been safe (or who are perhaps so anxious to have “the real thing” — something many gay men under forty-five may never have known — that they’re willing to take the risk), and those who go bareback *in order to be infected*. These men, in the barebacking vernacular, are called bug-chasers, and those willing to infect them are known as gift-givers. Since the sex often takes place at parties at which one bottom may be anally penetrated by any number of tops he doesn’t know (someone anointed the King of Loads received one night the ejaculations of fifty-six tops), the “unlimited intimacy” of barebacking is clearly an impersonal intimacy. It is as if barebackers were experientially confirming a specifically Freudian and Lacanian ontology of sexual desire as indifferent to personal identity, antagonistic to ego requirements and regulations, and, following a famous Freudian dictum, always engaged in group sex even when the actual partic-

ipants are limited to the two partners of the socially approved couple. What is most startling about these analogies — psychoanalytic analogies to which Dean is exceptionally alert — is that they delineate a social practice that, perhaps unprecedentedly, actualizes, in the most literal fashion, psychoanalytic inferences about the unconscious. It is as if barebacking gang-bangs were laboratories in which the social viability of impulses and fantasies condemned by ego-censorship as nonviable were being tested — for their viability.

We may of course not be overly impressed by a social viability that does not extend beyond the confines of a gang-bang. Furthermore, as Dean points out, it is by no means certain that devoted barebackers have entirely dispensed with ego-identities. For Foucault, the virtue of role reversals in S/M was that, by undoing fixed assignments of top and bottom, and of active and passive, they help to create intimacies no longer structured by the masculine-feminine polarity. I think that when he told gays not to be proud of *being* gay, but rather to learn to *become* gay, he meant that we should work to invent relations that no longer imitate the dominant heterosexual model of a gender-based and fundamentally hierarchical relationality. Gift-givers have been known to become bug-chasers, but, while it may seem like a deliberately cruel parody of straight masculinity to call someone like the King of Loads (as he has indeed been called) heroically masculine, the intention in so doing seems to be wholly nonparodic. It is a way of acknowledging the bottom's right to the most revered attribute of manhood. Also, the most articulate members of the barebacking community think very seriously of the act of transmitting the virus as an impregnating act. The title of one barebacking porn film is *Breed Me*; in it, bottoms ask their tops to breed them, thus *obliquely* invoking, through the allusion to breeding animals, a familiar if perhaps consciously infrequent fantasy accompanying gay sex. Asking your top to give you a baby can intensify the excitement of anal sex, an effect that, from a fantasmatic perspective, makes logical sense. The bottom is thrillingly invested with women's power to conceive, and, in a throwback to childhood (and now unconscious) theories about the path of conception, the rectum becomes the procreative womb. But the barebacker's rectum is a grave. And this is where the reproductive fantasy becomes at once more sinister and more creative. Sinister because it's difficult not to see this as a rageful perversion of the reproductive process. A horror of heterosexual breeding (Lee Edel-

man's recent book, *No Future*, is already the classic textbook of this horror) becomes the sexual excitement of transmitting or conceiving death instead of life. It is here that we can legitimately speak of barebacking as a manifestation of a sexualized death drive. What could be more ecstatically dizzying (more *vertigineux*, as Guillaume says) than to participate in (and not merely watch) this suicidal act that is also potentially a murder? More exactly, what could be more fantasmatically explosive for the bug-chaser than to feel the infected gift-giver's orgasm as an anticipatory shattering of his own biological life *and* the murder of the "baby" itself by virtue of the fatal properties of the reproductive seed? Violent aggression toward the other not, as Freud would have it, as a deviation of an original drive toward the subject's own death, but the two ideally, "creatively," condensed in a sexual climax.

I should add that, from a more pragmatic social and ethical perspective, this literal enactment of the death drive fully justifies the heterosexual *and* homosexual revulsed and often convulsed condemnation of barebacking. It *is*, from this perspective, an irresponsible spreading of disease and death, and it is a disastrous setback for the AIDS activism that has saved thousands of lives since the early years of the epidemic. I emphasize this just before turning to the ethical originality and the ethical seriousness of the barebacking rhetoric. This is something of which Tim Dean is acutely aware. Against the view of bareback sex as "mindless fucking," he speaks of it as "deeply invested with meaning."<sup>6</sup> More specifically, barebacking "signals profound changes in the social organization of kinship and relationality," changes that can be thought of as serving love and promoting life.<sup>7</sup> The exceptionally articulate documentary pornographer Paul Morris refers to unsafe sex as both "insane" and "essential." Insane for obvious reasons; essential in that, according to Morris, allegiance to the gay sexual subculture requires the subordination of the individual to the culture's self-defining traditions and practices. "What is at stake isn't the survival of the individual, but the survival of the practices and patterns which are the discoveries and properties of the sub-culture."<sup>8</sup> Barebacking is necessary for cultural transmission, at least according to Morris's rather muddled argument. It would have been nice if the right of all citizens to have consensual sex had been enshrined in the Bill of Rights (especially nice given the attacks on this right), but this is not the same thing as sacralizing sex as a cultural treasure. Certainly homosexuals — especially gay men — have a

long history of enjoying, more or less guiltily, depending on historical and cultural contexts, exceptionally active sex lives, but while this may be, as Morris puts it, a central and defining activity, I'm not sure that it qualifies as a cultural heritage that it is our duty to pass on to future generations. Having a lot of sex is, or should be, immensely enjoyable; it seems to me peculiar to make it a source of collective pride and distinction. In any case, sexual activity hardly needs to be vigilantly transmitted from one generation to the next. Human beings are nowhere more ingenious than they are in overcoming obstacles to finding sexual partners (remember the cruising ingenuities of Proust's "inverts" during World War I blackouts); unsafe sex is in no way necessary as a guarantee of gay male promiscuity in the future. Furthermore, it is by no means clear why unsafe sex is a better transmitter of sexual practices than safe sex; indeed, given the number of men who risk death as a result of unsafe sex, there may be fewer and fewer members of the culture to whom the honored tradition can be transmitted.

There is, however, something else that can be extrapolated from barebacking manifestos and barebacking cinema. We can formulate in another way the intergenerational connections established through bareback sex. Tim Dean describes a Paul Morris video in which semen collected from various sources is funneled into some one's anus. In that video we not only see several men fucking the handsome man introduced in the final scene of *Plantin' Seed*; after the tops' departure, another man uses a blue plastic funnel in which he has collected the semen of other men to inseminate young Jonas with the ejaculate of men he has never met. (Several bottoms in these videos, like Jonas, maintain a smile that struck me as at once idiotic, saintly, and heavily drugged.) Dean calls the funneling scene a "ritual summoning of ghosts" that engenders "a kind of impersonal identification with strangers past and present that does not depend on knowing, liking, or being like them."<sup>9</sup> Barriers of disgust and shame having been overcome, bareback bottoms become "impersonal intermediaries," as Dean puts it, communicating and identifying "with previous generations of the subculture."<sup>10</sup> This is much stranger and more original than Morris's pious invocation of the obligation to transmit cultural practices and traditions. In fact, *Plantin' Seed* proposes a view of barebacking wholly at odds with that invocation. Morris's written manifesto transposes onto bareback sex a conventional view of cultural transmission. The video, on the other hand, is not about the survival of a tradition; what survives — what *lives* — is the

cause of several men's illness and death. Not only does the bottom receive fluid from both those who are penetrating him during the orgy and all those who have contributed to the container from which semen is funneled into his anus; there is also a kind of communication—however psychologically and physiologically unarticulatable it may be—with the men who gave the virus to the men he has had sex with as well as to those whose semen has been dutifully collected in the Tupperware container, *and* with those who infected the men who gave the virus to all these “close” infectors, in addition to all those from a previous generation who may have been the founding infectors in this lineage of HIV-infectors. From the moment of the gang-bang to the time of the bottom's death (from whatever cause), the virus—unlike uninfected semen, which, depending on whether it is received orally or anally, may be quickly absorbed into, or expelled from, the receiver's own system—remains alive as a distinct and identifiable cohabitant within the bottom's blood. A certain community thus thrives internally—although I am aware of the oddity of using the word *community* for a potentially fatal infection from multiple sources. At the very least, the community engendered by barebacking is completely nonviable politically and socially. More exactly, the rich social bonds it creates are entirely reducible to single individuals' awareness of the interpenetration of fluids within their own bodies. Furthermore, this displacement of community from what we ordinarily think of as the theater of social relations to the interior of bodies could be thought of as a freakish elaboration into adult categories of thought of infantile fantasies about the life within us, about what goes on inside (as well as what goes into and what comes out of) the body's holes.

Nevertheless, barebacking's distorted and regressive version of community also strikes me as a model of an ultimately unfathomable spirituality, a spirituality at once exalted and unrelievedly somber. Nothing useful can come from this practice; barebacking does nothing to further the political goals of a minority community (on the contrary!), and it does nothing to transmit the presumed values of that community to future generations. The barebacker is the lonely carrier of the lethal and stigmatized remains of all those to whom his infection might be traced. He may continue to move and to act socially, but that which constitutes his most profound sociality isolates him, makes his life like that of a hermit in the desert. It is as if some monstrously appetitive god had had his way

with him and left his devastating presence within him as an ineradicable reminder of his passage. We are used to seeing, and even applauding, the willing submission of entire populations to the manipulations of political power, but nothing even remotely resembling this truly evil power enters into barebacking. Power has played no tricks on the bug-chaser: from the beginning he was promised nothing more, and he has received nothing more, than the privilege of being a living tomb, the repository of what may kill him, of what may kill those who have penetrated him during the gang-bang, of what has already killed those who infected the men who have just infected him. An intensified sexual excitement may have helped him to reach his willing martyrdom, but a momentarily explosive thrill was really nothing more than the accessory pleasure that accompanied him through his passage into something that is neither life nor death. In fact, barebacking is, teleologically considered, the renunciation of what Jean Laplanche has spoken of as the sexual ecstasy of the death drive; it is the ascetic discipline necessary in order to be replaced, inhabited by the other.

Bareback rhetoric tends, however, to be far removed from such spiritual depths of self-divestiture. There is the bottom's hypermasculinized ego, the grotesquely distorted aping of reproductive values, the all-too-visible appeal of an eroticized militarism, and, finally, the patriotic ethic embraced in the idea of the individual's sacrifice for the sake of the group. As Tim Dean acknowledges — his vast capacity for empathy notwithstanding — “Bareback culture would be ethically troubling less for its radical departure from mainstream values than for its perpetuation of them.”<sup>11</sup> In its most radical form, however, barebacking perpetuates something quite different: an ethic of sacrificial love startlingly similar to the officially condemned form of Catholic mysticism articulated toward the end of the seventeenth century by quietism and the proponents of what was known then as “pure love.” As Jacques Le Brun has emphasized in his admirable study *Le Pur amour de Platon à Lacan*, “The quarrel of pure love” both continued the quietist philosophy of the Spanish theologian Molinos (condemned by the Church in 1687) and shifted the emphasis from the prioritizing of passivity over activity in spiritual life to the exact nature of the state of being, of the love, that would correspond to a perfect passivity. Central to the notion of “le pur amour” is what is known in mystical texts as “the impossible supposition”: if God were to annihilate the souls of the

just at the moment of death, or if He were to banish their souls to hell for all eternity, those whose love for God had been pure would continue to serve Him with an absolutely disinterested love. Not unexpectedly, from the point of view of the politics of Catholic spirituality, the use of the impossible supposition as a kind of touchstone for the love of God was not only frowned upon but officially condemned as it was formulated by the principal theoretician of “pure love” in France, Fénelon, archbishop of Cambrai. What could be more dangerous than a doctrine that preached a purportedly holy indifference to eternal punishment and an eternal reward? But for Fénelon and the remarkable woman who was his mentor in “pure love,” Jeanne Guyon, it demands, as Mme Guyon never ceased to emphasize, a saintly hatred of oneself, a perfect passivity toward God’s will, and “une entière désappropriation,” total self-divestiture.<sup>12</sup> Nothing, she writes, concerns the practitioner of “pure love”: neither paradise, nor perfection, nor eternity. Self-annihilation is the precondition for union with God; only those who have given their eternity to God can be the perfect receptacles for all that God, in His unfathomable arbitrariness, may will to give them. An extraordinary passage from the life of Saint Catherine of Genoa expresses very well this total absence of self from the self. Saint Catherine writes of not knowing how to go about confessing her sins. She wants to accuse herself of sinning, but she can’t; she no longer knows to whom the guilt of her sins can be imputed, for there is no longer any self that could have said or done something for which she might feel guilt or remorse.<sup>13</sup> As Le Brun strikingly formulates the extreme consequence of Fénelon’s thought, it is “as if love were ‘pure’ once the subject absents himself from it, once this love without a subject is settled on its object and is itself absorbed into its object.”<sup>14</sup>

The similarities between the theological notion of “pure love” and the dangerous sexual practice of barebacking may not, to say the least, be immediately clear. And yet both can be thought of as disciplines in which the subject allows himself to be penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness. The barebacking gang-bang has none of what we usually think of as the humanizing attributes of intimacy within a couple, where the personhood of each partner is presumed to be expanded and enriched by knowledge of the other. The barebacking bottom enters into an impersonal intimacy, not only with all those who have pumped their semen into his body, but also with all those unknown partners, perhaps now dead,

with whom he has never had any physical contact. His subjecthood is, we might say, absorbed into the nameless and faceless crowd who exist only as viral traces circulating in his blood and perhaps fatally infecting him. For him, their identities are nothing more than these viral remains; his willingness to allow his body to be the site of their persistence and reproduction is not entirely unlike the mystic's surrender to a divine will stripped of any comfortably recognizable attributes whatsoever. For those of us who insist on more personal intimacies, both these instances of "pure love" can, I suppose, only be thought of as appalling examples of prideful masochism. But it is difficult to locate in either case the pleasure inherent in masochism or, more radically, the subject to whom pride might be imputed. Of course, both barebacker and the proponent of "pure love" continue to exist, for other people, as identifiable individuals; but at the ideal limit of their asceticism, both their individualities are overwhelmed by the massive anonymous presence to which they have surrendered themselves. My analogy between the two may appear less grotesque in the light of the vicissitudes in the history of spirituality. In a fundamentally atheistic culture in which religious belief has to a large extent become indistinguishable from a humanistic agnosticism or has been reduced to an ignorant, intolerant, and ego-driven fundamentalism, the spirituality practiced by Fénelon and Mme Guyon can perhaps best be sheltered and nurtured in such admittedly debased forms as the ethically and politically ambiguous cult of barebacking. We might, however, remind ourselves that a defining characteristic of the intellectual culture we live in is its suspicion of spirituality *tout court*: commentators have, for example, not hesitated to reduce the sublime self-abnegation of Fénelon and Mme Guyon to a discredited sublimation of their sexual interest in each other, just as barebacking can be reduced to an ingenious variation on such mainstream values as patriotism and heroic masculinity.

To the extent that it embodies, both through and beyond death, the desire to maintain an intergenerational brotherhood, barebacking, for all its ethical ambiguities, is a ritual of sacrificial love. A sign of my own troubled response to the practice is that I also find bug-chasing and gift-giving sexually repellent and staggeringly irresponsible behavior. Of course, even the irresponsibility can appear to be a minor sin in the larger social context of the murderous irresponsibility that so continually marks U.S. domestic and foreign policies. Many barebackers (not the self-con-



fessed bug-chasers) prefer not to know the HIV status of their partners, but no one is advocating nonconsensual unsafe sex. This is not to deny the seriousness of spreading the infection, with or without mutual consent, but even the most ardent gift-givers seem unmotivated by the thrill of exercising murderous power. Interpreted as a mode of ascetic spirituality, bug-chasing and gift-giving among barebackers are an implicit critique of the multiple forms of ego-driven intimacy: from the most trivial expressions of sexual vanity (bareback videos, unlike other gay porn, includes singularly unattractive bodies), to the prideful exclusiveness of the family as a socially blessed closed unit of reproductive intimacy, and even to the at once violently aggressive and self-shattering ego-hyperbolizing of racial, national, ethnic, and gendered identities.

A critique but not a resistance: the awesome abjection of “pure love” can only take place in the margins of the far more viable, inventive, and destructive exercises of personal and collective ego expansion. Might there be forms of self-divestiture not grounded in a teleology (or a theology) of the suppression of the ego and, ultimately, the sacrifice of the self? Perhaps self-divestiture itself has to be rethought in terms of a certain form of self-expansiveness, of something like ego-dissemination rather than ego-annihilation. My attempt to do so represents a significant departure from the type of self-divestiture I outlined twenty years ago in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Inspired by Jean Laplanche’s suggestion, in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, that the birth of sexuality in the human subject is inseparable from masochism, I have been arguing, perhaps most explicitly and most strongly in “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” for the value of the self-shattering inherent in the sexual.<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that the acts we identify as sexual are necessarily destructive of the ego’s coherence and power. Indeed, the all-too-familiar exercise of phallic mastery fortifies, even hyperbolizes, the ego. Rather, the best way to understand Laplanche’s proposal — as well, I think, as some of Lacan’s not entirely transparent references to jouissance — is to think of masochism as inherent in the genesis, and consequently as constitutive of the ontology, of sexuality.

One of the most radical conclusions to be drawn from psychoanalytic theory is the distinction between what we ordinarily think of as the sexual and sexuality itself. The former would be a contingent manifestation of a more general phenomenon irreducible to what we ordinarily think of as sex. This is the phenomenon of an intensely pleasurable self-shattering

which Laplanche, following the Freud of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, sees as the result of any event that at least momentarily breaks the ego's controlling and integrative power over both external and internal stimuli. Thus sexuality, as the ground if not the phenomenological content of what we call sexual behavior, is closer to the death instinct than it is to sex. This means — and I offer this as a striking example of the way psychoanalytic thinking blurs the boundaries separating its own presumably distinct categories — that the masochistic excitement of *jouissance* also carries within itself an aggressiveness toward others in which Freud (notwithstanding his cherished dualism of aggressiveness and sexuality) locates a narcissistically invested sense of power over the world. The ego is shattered into impotence by its own hyperbolic inflation.

This is not the place to unfold (if such an unfolding is possible) these psychologically outrageous but, I think, psychoanalytically mandated conflations. Rather, I want to emphasize that the principal interest of a self-shattering sexuality was, for me, its moral value. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” I wrote,

The self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it is a sanction for violence. If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence. Gay men's “obsession” with sex, far from being denied, should be celebrated . . . because it never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice.<sup>16</sup>

I now see something both naïve and dangerous in this claim. While I continue to believe that, following a cue given to us by Foucault, a certain training in forms of self-divestiture is a politically and morally imperative *ascesis*, any such training has to be the psychic condition of possibility rather than the praxis of, to quote Foucault, “new relational modes.” Bare-backing is a literalizing of the ontology of the sexual. As such, it also implicitly destroys the crucial psychoanalytic distinction between fantasy and reality — or, to specify this necessary but by now banal opposition, between the unbounded potentiality of the unconscious and the at times tragically limited consequentiality of what is realized, of what *is*. “Is the Rectum a Grave?” celebrates the rectum as the grave of phallic power;

barebacking celebrates the rectum as the grave *tout court* — or, “at best,” as the corridor that facilitates the possible immortalizing of carriers of death. Even taking into account the fantasy of preserving a community by identifying its deaths with the multiplication of “life,” we have to say that barebacking answers the title of my 1987 essay with a definitive yes. If that affirmation repels us, it should lead to a rethinking of self-divestiture, one in which a potentially catastrophic self-shattering is replaced by an ego at once self-divesting and self-disseminating. Ego identity, the individual personality, could then be sacrificed not to biological or psychic death but, rather, to the pleasure of finding multiple parts of ourselves inaccurately replicated everywhere in the world. This would be the pleasure of what Adam Phillips and I call impersonal narcissism.<sup>17</sup> Our book, *Intimacies*, is the necessarily tentative, experimental formulation of impersonal narcissism as a concept and as a practice — and, I now think, as an alternative to the savage spirituality of barebacking.

## Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: Foucault and Sexuality,” interview with James O’Higgins in *Michel Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Guillaume Dustan, *Dans ma chambre* [In my room] (Paris: P.O.L, 1996), 73. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 117.
- 5 Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 6 Ibid., 45.
- 7 Ibid., 6.
- 8 Paul Morris, “No Limits: Necessary Danger in Male Porn” (lecture, 1998 World Pornography Conference, Universal City, Calif., 6–9 August 1998), available on the Treasure Island Media website, <http://www.treasureislandmedia.com/>.
- 9 Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 143.
- 10 Ibid., 131.
- 11 Ibid., 58.
- 12 Jeanne-Marie Guyon, *Discours Crétiens et Spirituels sur Divers Sujets qui Regardent la Vie Intérieure* (Paris: Libraires Associés, 1790), 379.

- 13 *Life and Doctrine of Saint Catherine of Genoa* (New York: Christian Press Association, 1907), 146–47.
- 14 Jacques Le Brun, *Le Pur amour de Platon à Lacan* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 161.
- 15 Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- 16 Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.
- 17 Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Ever After 

## History, Negativity, and the Social

LEE EDELMAN

AT A MOMENT when violence as a first resort accentuates the fault lines of empire; at a moment when words like *democratization* accompany a brutal power grab that winks at torture, insists on secrecy, and trivializes civil liberties; at a moment when the poor and the powerless find their voices ventriloquized by the institutions that enforce their subordination; at that moment, which is also every moment, we're invited to consider queer theory's moment and to ask whether recent work in that field can be thought of as "after sex." In so framing the question addressed by this volume, I have no intention of trivializing, discrediting, or dismissing it. I mean, instead, to underscore its genuine importance and to indicate what its stake is. I also want to fix a point of reference for my claim that the governing logic of the social insists on this "aftering" of "sex," insists on the movement away from its all-consuming and unmasterable intensities and toward engagement with a world whose hold on us depends on such an "aftering." Sex, as the limitless array of privatized libidinal experiences and affects, at once underspecified and overdetermined,

must submit to the law of culture, to the discipline of sociality, for which it can then come to figure self-indulgent resistance to communal imperatives — a resistance that, in our heteronormative social dispensation, allows for the wholesale embodiment of the antisocial by nonreproductive sexualities. By contrast, heterosexuality succeeds, from within that dispensation, in dissociating itself from the anarchy and ahistoricism of sex by virtue of its socially valorized (re)production of the “after.”

This compulsion to produce the “after” of sex through the naturalization of history expresses itself in two very different, though not unrelated, ways: first, in the privileging of reproduction as the after-event of sex — an after-event whose potential, implicit in the ideal, if not always in the reality, of heterogenital coupling, imbues straight sex with its meaning as the agent of historical continuity; second, in the conflation of meaning itself with those forms of historical knowing whose authority depends on the fetishistic prestige of origin, genealogy, telos. In each case the entry into history coincides with the entry into social narratives that work to domesticate the incoherence, at once affective and conceptual, that’s designated by “sex.” That incoherence, in turn, construed as external not only to the social order but also to the historical self-consciousness through which the social order is born, gets mapped onto sexualities that prove resistant to sublimation, resistant to the reproduction of meaning as social and historical generativity. “After” thus stands in relation to “sex” as “heteronormative” stands to “queer,” or as “history” stands to “repetition,” or the “social” to the “antisocial.” It affirms the identity of value with history, sociality, collective life, over and against the abyss of sex as the site of drives not predetermined by any fixed goal or end, as the site, therefore, where the subject of social regulation might come undone and with it the seeming consistency of the social order itself. Thus to situate queer theory “after sex” is more than a contradiction in terms. It attests to a latent fantasy of gaining political legitimation at the cost of predicating politics on heteronormative temporality, even though such a politics pits sociality against the queerness ascribed to its antisocial other who won’t transcend or repudiate “sex” for the good of the greater community.

But the antisocial is never, of course, distinct from the social itself. The ideological delimitation of an antisocial agency, one that refuses the normalizing protocols that legislate social viability, conditions the social order that variously reifies and disavows it, condemning that localized

agency as the cause of the suffering for which the social order disclaims its responsibility. Whatever the body or bodies that find themselves chosen to flesh it out, this antisocial force absorbs the repudiated negativity without which community is never imagined, let alone brought into being. This focus on the negativity of the social, on its inherent antisociality, does not deny that such commonalities as community may posit can result, according to Jacques Lacan, in “a certain law of equality . . . formulated in the notion of the general will.” But while the imposition of such a law may establish, for Lacan, “the common denominator of the respect for certain rights,” it also, as he goes on to add, can “take the form of excluding from its boundaries, and therefore from its protection, everything that is not integrated into its various registers.”<sup>1</sup> For the general will to be general, that is, it must negate a certain specificity, which reflects, of course, first and foremost, the specific construction of the “general will.” Theodor Adorno, who makes a similar point, proposes that “society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it” — an insight that subsequently leads him to conclude that “under the all-subjugating identity principle, whatever does not enter into identity, whatever eludes rational planning in the realm of means, turns into frightening retribution for the calamity which identity brought on the nonidentical.”<sup>2</sup>

The governing logic I defined in *No Future* as reproductive futurism is one of the forms this calamity takes — a calamity that effects the violent erasure of the cost at which a social order, constitutively self-sentimentalizing, perpetuates, in the name of the future and its privileged embodiment, the Child, the absolutism of identity, the fixity of what is.<sup>3</sup> It does so precisely by proscribing whatever insists on the nonidentical, whatever brings out, through a critical practice that accedes to negativity, alternatives to the terms permitting our conceptualization of the social only by means of compulsory submission to the temporality of community — alternatives that threaten the coherence, and so the identity, of the social itself and with it the utopian fantasy of a collectivity, a general will, whose norms need not themselves conduce to the enforcement of normativity.

For futurism’s dispensation, like the laissez-faire faith of neoliberalism, authorizes every discursive stance to compete in the register of the political except that stance construed, by those on the Right and Left alike, as extra-, post-, or a-political insofar as it directs its negativity at the framing of politics as such. This is the fate of those whom *No Future* describes as

*sinthomosexuals*, those who reject the Child as the materialized emblem of the social relation and with it the concomitant mapping of the political in the space of reproductive futurism. Bringing together the Lacanian *sinthome*, which defines the specific formation of the subject's access to jouissance, and a homosexuality distinctively abjected as a figure of the antibiotic, a figure opposed, in dominant fantasy, to life and futurity both, the sinthomosexual conjures a politicality unrecognizable as such by virtue of its resistance to futurism's constraining definition of the political field. In this way it only ever appears, to return to Adorno's phrase, as the "frightening retribution for the calamity which identity brought on the nonidentical," a retribution that finds expression as a sudden eruption of the Real, of the unaccounted for jouissance that shapes the political situation in which it's permitted to have no place.

As the element procuring the specificity of the subject in its radical singularity, the *sinthome*, of course, could be viewed as a wholly internalized psychic structure, as the trace of a particularity unavailable to political generalization. But sinthomosexuality makes visible the occluded presence of the *sinthome* at the core of the very politics intended to exclude it. Ernesto Laclau asserts that "for a certain demand, subject position, identity, and so on, to become political means that it is *something other* than itself, living its own particularity as a moment or link in a chain of equivalences that transcends and, in this way, universalizes it."<sup>24</sup> In such a context sinthomosexuality would speak to the repudiated specificity of what doesn't and can't transcend itself. So repudiated, however, it enables the specification, over and against it, of what only thereby is able to appear as political universality. Yet in just this way the *sinthome*, insistently nothing but itself, inviting no system of interpretation and affording no symbolic exchange, gets taken up nonetheless *as* "something other than itself" insofar as it figures, to quote Žižek's gloss on Lacan's "*il y a de l'Un*," "the One which persists as the obstacle destabilizing every unity."<sup>25</sup> By allowing itself to stand, that is, for the determining specificity of the subject, a specificity bespeaking the distinctive knotting of its access to jouissance, sinthomosexuality disrupts the identity of the political in Laclau's formulation. It manages to live "its own particularity as a moment or link in a chain of equivalences that transcends and, in this way, universalizes it" only by *refusing* such self-transcending moments of equivalence and becoming, through that refusal, the figure, paradoxically universalized, for



the internal dissension of universality, for the specificity of “the One which persists as the obstacle destabilizing every unity,” including therefore the unity of what it means “to become political.”

As the general figure of what’s not comprehended in the formation of the general will, and so of what never attains to the status of political legibility, *sinthomosexuality* offers no promise of social recognition, the holy grail of the countless projects across the political spectrum that wrap themselves in the ever-elastic flag of democratization. Without for a moment denying the importance that distinguishes many of those projects, I want to insist on the need for an ongoing counterproject as well: a project that’s willing to forgo the privilege of social recognition and so is willing to break the compact binding the image of the human to a social order speciously conflated with kinship and collectivity, the compact adduced to foreclose dissent from reproductive futurism by assuming the ontologized identity of futurism and sociality itself. Even as I call for it, though, I call such a project impossible because it aims, with an insistence I link to the pure repetition of the death drive, to expose within the social something inherently unrecognizable, something radically nonidentical, that functions to negate whatever is, whatever is allowed to be by the various regimes of normativity to which, however inconsistently, we all, as subjects, subscribe. The impossible goal of this project, then, would be to evince what Alain Badiou would call the “void of the situation,” the foundational negativity that keeps the symbolic from achieving self-identity to the extent that the nonidentical persists within as internal antagonism.<sup>6</sup> Such a manifestation could never, of course, be anything *but* impossible, since the void can never appear as itself, in the form of a pure negativity. Instead, there’s the *sinthomosexual*, or, as some might prefer, the queer, a term that evokes an extimate relation to the structure of normative values while affirming, through its historic association with specifically *sexual* irregularities, an indicative link to the unassimilable excess of *jouissance*. But that excess, reflecting the always excessive specificity of the *sinthome*, turns the *sinthomosexual* into a surrogate for the perpetual failure of universalism, which can never account for that element, that specificity, that *sinthome*, voided as the necessary precondition of its own elaboration.

In opposition to this voided specificity of the *sinthomosexual*’s *jouissance*, the nullified presence of which rules out any totalized social reality, futurism adduces the image of the Child as a necessary figural supplement

to sociality as it is. By doing so it perpetuates the hope of a fully unified community, a fully realized social order, that's imagined as always available in the fullness of the future to come. In keeping with the prospect of realizing this phantom community through reproduction, the figure of the Child, whatever political program it may serve, whatever particularity of race or sex or ethnicity it may bear, performs a universalization at the expense of particularity—at the expense, above all, of the particularity of access to the jouissance that makes all subjects, even those committed to disciplinary norms, sinthomosexuals despite themselves. Female, Asian, Hispanic, black, disabled, impoverished, or protoqueer, the image of the Child polices the horizon of social potentiality by maintaining the ironclad equivalence of sociality, futurity, and reproduction. By proffering an ideologically invested face of unconstrained possibility that's bound to a regressive imaginary fantasy of the recognizably human, the figure of the Child thus anticipates what Laclau describes in a different context: “an emancipation which is total and attains a universality that is not dependent on particularities.” Laclau goes on to warn, however, that to achieve such “universality representing a totally reconciled human essence . . . [in] a fully reconciled society . . . would be equivalent to the death of freedom, for all possibility of dissent would have been eliminated from it.”<sup>77</sup> This, however, is reproductive futurism's goal, one it pursues by assigning those who challenge its supremacy to a space outside the social, outside the political as such, thus silencing any resistance in advance by dismissing it as nihilistic.

Against so frivolous and feckless a charge, recall the words of Adorno: “The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, the ones who are thus conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism.”<sup>78</sup> Avoid conflating this destructive principle with the death drive too quickly, however. For it names instead what opposes itself to the death drive's ceaseless negations: the conservative force that defends the entrenched positivity of the “extant,” whose malice is merely the will to identity so calamitous to the nonidentical. Only in a second moment, when preserving the extant social reality compels it to negate the negativity of the nonidentical's retribution, does the death drive proper assume its part in the work of this “destructive principle.” At what, after all, is the destructiveness of that principle principally aimed if not at the labor of critical thought performed by the death

drive's negativity? In place of such thought the "destructive principle" invests what "is" with positivity, reviling the so-called nihilism that addresses instead the determining void of what is thereby forbidden to be.

As the social order's domesticated and domesticating face, pursuing that order's totalization—temporally and spatially both—by defining what always and everywhere affirms the self-evidence of the human, the Child, whose vulnerability conjures images of its suffering, reproaches the putative privilege for which sinthomosexuals stand accused. Though leveled by the right and the left alike, the accusation remains the same: the sinthomosexual (whom those on the right might identify as anyone queer and those on the left might construe more particularly as a white, middle-class, gay man) has the privilege of refusing the responsibilities that come with collective life, the privilege, that is, of sexual license, political disengagement, and thus, most important, the privilege of remaining indifferent to the vulnerabilities of others, who might include heterosexual children and Christian believers for the right or persons of color and unemployed members of the working class for the left. The sinthomosexual, on either hand, gets denounced for affirming a jouissance indulgently fixed on the self, while those who merit recognition as good, as communally minded, as properly social, address the suffering of the other for which the Child is our dominant trope. It remains the case that libidinal investment in the suffering of the other, regardless of whether its dividends come through preventing or producing that suffering, is also an investment tied to a specific knotting of jouissance. But the Child, as the image of a suffering that can never be simply a fact of the real without also becoming a figure for a cultural erotics of social reality, lets the good in their goodness deny their structuring determination by a jouissance that's never permitted to be presented as such in their framing of what "is"—that's never permitted to reveal, in other words, their own sinthomosexuality, though it clearly fuels the aggression with which they vituperate sinthomosexuals.

That's what sociality means, and that's what Adorno meant as well when he insisted that "society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but because of it." As antagonism, as negativity, as the substance of the Real, sinthomosexuality returns us to the endlessly ramifying calamity that has always already been brought on the nonidentical by identity—a calamity no Child can ever redeem, no future can reconcile. How could they when

futurism and the Child alike are outposts of identity itself, repeating the very calamity they purport to overcome? We might call that calamity “aftering”: the temporal distribution of relations and identities that correlates the movement from before to after with a passage from an ignorance to a knowledge and so with the ideological conflation of historical development and genetic narrative, what Paul de Man calls “the pre-assumed concept of history as a generative process[,] . . . of history as a temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure in which the past is like an ancestor begetting, in a moment of unmediated presence, a future capable of repeating in its turn the same generative process.”<sup>9</sup> The logic of this endless aftering, of course, bespeaks the persistence of something intrinsically incapable of *being* “aftered,” something that both resists and occasions reproductive futurism: the compulsory repetition of an “ever.”

That “ever” denotes the antagonism to which Adorno directs our gaze — the antagonism at the core of the social that reflects the calamity of its self-constitution through the positing of an identity that occasions the storm of history. Like Benjamin’s Angel of History, though, the *sinthomosexual* looks back, not ahead, transfixed by that constant calamity, always focused on something within it that remains unrecognized and unrecognizable: the void, the *sinthome*, the particularity of the stubbornly nonidentical, whose ironic retribution in the death drive’s negativity forever renews the will to find ourselves *after* negativity, *after* antagonism, *after* sex. As queer theory, like Adorno, reminds us, though, not aftering, but *ever* aftering, keeps society alive, which is why there isn’t, and there cannot be, queer theory “after sex.”

## Notes

- 1 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, book 7, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 195.
- 2 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1994), 320.
- 3 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 4 Ernesto Laclau, “Structure, History, and the Political,” in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000), 209.

- 5 Slavoj Žižek, “Odradek as a Political Category,” *lacanian ink* 24/25 (2005): 152.
- 6 See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 68–69.
- 7 Laclau, “Structure, History, and the Political,” 208.
- 8 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 381.
- 9 Paul de Man, “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 142–65, at 164.



Queering Identities



## What's Queer about Race?

RICHARD THOMPSON FORD

WHEN I ANNOUNCED my engagement to be married, almost everyone offered the obligatory congratulations and best wishes and left it at that. Marriage is, of course, a social ritual of script and conscription—there is a very limited range of polite reactions one can have to the announcement of a marriage engagement. Decidedly not among them: “Married? You’re getting *married*? Hold on a minute, I need a drink.” This was precisely the reaction of a very dear friend to my happy news. But I was expecting it. She, a scholar who had studied the institution with the beady-eyed, corrosive curiosity of a coroner establishing the cause of a death, was a rare critic (not to say *opponent*) of marriage. She knew more about matrimony than most—certainly more than I. My impression was less that she thought I was making a life-altering and potentially catastrophic mistake, like enlisting in the Marine Corps—though she may have thought that too—than that I was taking the safe and boring way out. “I’d always thought of you two as a hip, unmarried couple,” she mused.

Later, this same friend was visiting and noticed our “en-



gagement photos.” (For the uninitiated: these are photos of the happy couple in staged romantic natural settings and vaguely suggestive “candid” poses; intended to convey to the viewer the dewy optimism of love’s first bloom, they customarily involve beaches at sunset, sylvan landscapes, and the couple gazing longingly into each other’s eyes or lounging in precoital bliss.) To the chagrin of our wedding photographer, we insisted on taking ours at a bar, martinis in hand, evoking companionship, we thought, but also insisting on the cosmopolitan and profane side of the erotic—more film noir than romantic comedy. The photos were in black and white, a medium suited to invoke instant nostalgia and to highlight stark contrasts in tone, such as the black bar top and the white cocktail napkins, the reflective gleam of the silver shaker and the light-absorbing matte black of a leather jacket, or the deep chestnut tone of my skin and the almost luminescent blond peach of hers. My friend (let’s call her “Janet”) scrutinized the photos and then remarked, approvingly, “You *really are* an interracial couple. It’s easy to forget because I know you so well, but looking at this picture. . . . It’s still pretty transgressive, isn’t it?”

I take it as almost axiomatic that queer theory embraces, even celebrates transgression; it seeks the sublime not in resistance—that’s too damn bristly and self-serious—but in blithe and gleeful disregard for social convention. While its matronly stepsister gay rights wants equal access to mainstream social conventions—however ramshackle and dilapidated or procrustean they may be—queer theory is interested in shaking them up so we can see which ones aren’t fit for human habitation. The normalization strategy of gay rights is to merge so seamlessly and imperceptibly into mainstream institutions that it seems impossible to imagine it could ever have been any other way; by contrast, queer theory opts for bullying, razzing, and mocking social conventions until it’s hard to imagine them in the same way. So queer theory has always had a potentially broad applicability. If gay rights would say of marriage, “You have it; why shouldn’t we?” (an uninteresting claim, but one that’s hard to argue with), queer theory would say, “Married? You’re getting *married*? Hold on a minute, I need a drink.”

The not-too-subtle insinuation that marriage—not its hetero-exclusivity but marriage itself—might be the appropriate target of critique makes queer theory portable to foreign and exotic social contexts in a way that gay rights discourse cannot be. Despite what right-wing paranoiacs like

Tom DeLay might believe, gay marriage really has little to do with my heterosexual marriage one way or the other. By contrast, a queer theory *critique* of marriage generally applies to me and mine as much as to Ellen DeGeneres or Rosie O'Donnell.

But why stop there? After all, marriage is a sitting duck; as Laura Kipnis points out, its critique is almost as much a part of the culture as its incessant celebration — before lit-crit attacks on holy matrimony, there was Al Bundy, before him Jackie Gleason, Henry VIII, Agamemnon.<sup>1</sup> No, queer theory's radical attack targets not marriage, but identity. Here's what Janet Halley has written apropos:

One is a lesbian not because of anything in oneself, but because of social interactions, or the desire for social interactions: it takes two women . . . to make a lesbian. . . . Similar things can be said about gay men, homosexuals, bisexuals . . . transvestite . . . transsexual/transgendered people . . . and sexual dissidents of various . . . descriptions. Even more complex challenges to the coherentist assumptions about identity politics emerge when attention focuses on the question of the merger, exile, coalition, and secession of these constituencies. . . . Sexual orientation and sexuality movements are perhaps unique among contemporary identity movements in harboring an unforgivingly corrosive critique of identity itself. . . . The term “queer” was adopted by some movement participants in part to frustrate identity formation around dissident sexualities.<sup>2</sup>

So *queer* denotes not an identity but instead a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a *decision* to live outside some social norm or other. At the risk (the certainty) of oversimplification, one could say that even if one is born straight or gay, one must decide to be queer.

Queer theory's anti-identitarianism is the key to its portability: just as the queer critique targets marriage generally — not just its straights-only exclusivity — so too the queer critique of (nominally) gay identity politics would seem to apply to identity politics generally. If gay identity is problematic and subject to a corrosive critique, might not other social identities be as well? Obviously, the next domino vulnerable to toppling is gender. It's easy enough to read some aspects of gay, lesbian, and transgendered politics as partially — perhaps even fundamentally — critical of gender identity. And as Halley suggests, this is potentially disruptive of other

identities: doesn't a critique of gender destabilize the woman-in-a-man's-body/man-in-a-woman's-body idea of transsexual identity? Unlike Judith Butler's idea of drag as resistance to gender identity, the goal of this type of transsexual identity is not to do gender badly but to do it well;<sup>3</sup> indeed, to *get it right*, to correct nature's mistake and make the body correspond to an intrinsically gendered soul. But, of course, the idea that gender is something one could get right is anathema to much of modern sexuality discourse as well as much of modern feminism. It would seem that one can't take both the critique of gender and the man-in-a-woman's-body transgender identity seriously. Bye-bye, mutually supportive coalition politics; hello, civil war.

As our row of dominos succumbs to gravity, racial identity has been the last to fall. Why the last? Unlike sex difference, which is still widely taken for granted as real, biologically determined, fixed, and intrinsic, it is now widely acknowledged that racial identity is fictitious: the political right now champions a norm of color blindness, while the postmodern left insists that race is a social and ideological construction. So one would expect a critique of racial identity politics to follow hard on the stilettos of queer theory's critique of sexual identity politics.

But racial identity has proven remarkably resistant to critique. Even hardcore social constructionists backpedal, hastening to add to their critiques the caveat that racial identities — however constructed and inessential — are the product of the “real lived experience” of racial discrimination, of social and political communities, and of distinctive cultural norms, all of which are, of course, as real as the hand in front of your face (which is poised to bitch-slap you if you deny it), even if race itself isn't. And while the right sings a stridently anti-identitarian gospel of “color blindness” when resisting affirmative action, they change their tune when it comes to profiling criminals, diagnosing diseases, or choosing spouses.

The resulting schizoid relationship to race is the stuff of farce. Race-conscious progressives insist that generalizations about race are valid for purposes of university admissions but not for stopping terrorists from boarding commercial aircraft or interdicting drug couriers on the nation's freeways; conservatives insist just the opposite. Advocates of multiracial identity beat up relentlessly on racial essentialism when pressed to choose one and only one race, but their solution is to insist on multiracial categories and designations to reflect their “true” racial identity.

So both the left and the right have an interest in protecting racial identity, albeit for different purposes. And also for the same purposes: an unexamined psychological commitment to race as an intrinsic identity motivates left identity politics and the right-wing bigotry underlying *The Bell Curve* or William Bennett's offhand suggestion that the crime rate would drop if all black infants were aborted.<sup>4</sup> Most people want to believe that races are real. It seems that race, like the presumption of innocence, the Hippocratic Oath, or " 'til death do us part," is too useful a fiction to dispense with.

Racial identity, like sexual identity, comes with a set of norms attached; there are (politically) correct ways of exhibiting black, Asian, Latino, and white race — what Anthony Appiah calls racial "scripts" — just as there are established norms for male and female gender.<sup>5</sup> As with gender, many of these norms are very difficult to distinguish from common stereotypes. In socially fluid and insecure environments — cities, large corporations, universities — conventional racial scripts enjoy a magnetic pull. Strangers need easy sources of identification. Alienated and isolated individuals crave belonging. Race supplies these; provided everyone keeps to the script, you can count on a community in almost any unfamiliar setting. Just as an American tourist seeks out McDonald's for a reliable taste of home, so too people look for standardized racial norms as an anchor in alien territory — safe, predictable, comforting.

But maybe not all that healthy. And definitely not all that interesting.

Cruising along at high speed on the momentum of the canon wars, by the 1990s multiculturalism had influenced left liberal legal theory in a big way. Civil rights law reform proposals had taken a sharp identitarian turn; the vogue was to emphasize the ineluctable nature of group cultural difference and insist that law should account for, embrace, and enforce it. According to a raft of law review articles written since the early 1990s, race discrimination laws should be expanded to require employers to accommodate racially specific cultural and social practices. The logic of these proposals consistently asserted the unambiguous and uncomplicated relationship between race and behavior: racial scripts exist, and to resist or challenge them — even to neglect them — is invidious discrimination on the basis of race.

Queer theory's destabilizing agenda offered me a way to resist the supersizing of identity politics at a moment when it seemed at its most

preeminent. In my book *Racial Culture*, I advanced an attack from the left on racial identity politics in legal theory.<sup>6</sup> I argued that the cultural rights law reform proposals either asserted or implied a “repressive hypothesis” that assumed that racial power was exercised exclusively in the attempt to censor or repress expressions of racial difference. Following Foucault, I insisted that this conception of power was inadequate: the production of racial expression and racial norms was also an exercise of power, one made all the more potent by its ability to blend into a background landscape of seemingly unregulated and voluntary family and leisure-time social relationships. Stripped of this naturalistic camouflage, politically correct norms of racial conduct could be seen as mechanisms of coercion.

The necessary correlative to this unearned solidarity is an unwarranted presumption about the entailments of group membership. There is a peculiar variant of political correctness, one that regulates, not what can be said about a minority group by outsiders, but instead the behavior of group members. This political correctness requires and duly produces opprobrium for people who miss their cue: we encounter “Oreos” — blacks on the outside who don’t “act black” and therefore presumably aren’t black “on the inside” — and quickly enough other racial groups acquire similar figures (for some odd reason all refer to food): Asian “bananas,” Latino “coconuts,” Native American “apples.” These figures of scorn imply that there is a particular type of behavior that is appropriate to a given race, and thereby censure deviation from it. (39–40)

*Racial Culture’s* approach to questions of race and racial justice was heavily influenced by queer theory. Queer theory not only offered a new theoretical frame within which to understand and analyze the often severely coercive aspects of left liberal racial identity politics; just as important, it also offered an alternative attitude, tone, or “stance” to occupy in relation to it. As I argued, “One of the most effectively spellbinding aspects of [identity politics] has been its somber and weighty sanctimoniousness, which has intimidated those who might puncture its pretensions and deterred deserved critique” (211). Pretentious and preachy diction has become one of the hallmarks of identity politics scholarship. The hushed and respectful tones of the cemetery and the sonorous oratory of the pulpit both serve an important rhetorical function: to preempt from the outset the possibility that what is being said might be trivial or laugh-

able. Worse yet, the etiquette of the funeral and of the sermon rules out the important stylistic mode of playfulness, the devices of satire and lampoon, the analytics of irony, and the aesthetics of wit.

Queer theory offered me an alternative mode — indeed, an antagonistic mode — of engagement with identity politics scholarship and with racial identity itself. Rather than a Hobson's choice between polite and reserved acquiescence — a sort of forced conscription into institutions of social regulation — or a shrill and angry reaction, queer theory offered a third way, one I find liberating and creative. Instead of insincere congratulations and best wishes or angry denunciation, one could begin by reaching for the Jack Daniel's and highball glass.

Modern identity politics has old and deep roots, but it blossomed in the social movements of the 1960s. The politics of the new left became institutionalized in law reform, in the academy, and in the set of prescriptions and admonishments that travel under the title "Morality." This is by and large a success story, but it has a melancholy subplot. The energy, joy, sexiness, and fun of the counterculture was largely — perhaps inevitably — stripped away as the politics of the new left became mainstream. Ideas became dogmas, rebellion was reduced to rules, commitments became cages. The mainstreaming of identity politics made it routine rather than spontaneous; made it more prescriptive and less liberating; swapped the tang of volunteerism for the bland flavor of obligation.

And, perhaps worst of all, academic identity politics became the domain of the expert. As the term *political correctness* suggests, identity politics developed an increasingly intricate sense of decorum: there was a right way to go about things and a million ways for the novice and the dilettante to screw up. The controversies over terminology were the most striking example of this preciousness. Quick, which is correct: Negro, Black, black, Afro-American, African American, colored person, person of color? Gay, queer, gay men and lesbians, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered? Ladies, women, womyn? Is the gendered pronoun okay? S/he (or does that suggest the female gender is just adjunctive to the male)? He/she? It? Maybe it's better that you just sit in the back of the room and listen. The acknowledged message behind all of this correctness was loud and clear: social justice was the domain of the professional — don't try this at home, kids.

Queer theory offered a way to take race politics back from the profes-

sionals. It had — at least it seemed to me — a closer and fresher connection with the everyday life of a counterculture, with its contradictions, its sweaty struggles, its passions, its screwups, its street styles and fashion faux pas. Queer theory, with its open-handed conflicts and negotiations between gay men, lesbians, trannies, butch and lipstick lesbians, tops, bottoms, clean-shaven Chelsea boys and bearded burly “bears,” felt like London’s music scene in 1979, with its allied, agonistic, and frantically creative relationship between punks, mod revivalists, teddys, skinheads, rude boys, two-tones, new romantics. By contrast, the bloated academic conventions of race and gender identity politics slipped into self-parody worthy of Spinal Tap; the scripted rebellion of the academic new left looked as uncomfortable as Bob Dylan in a tuxedo. My ambition in *Racial Culture* was to write about race without regard to the professional conventions of the genre — to just grab a guitar and play what sounded good. I wanted to say all of the things I had always thought and then censored, without regard to whether they would be received as “liberal” or “conservative”; I wanted to ignore orthodoxies — not self-consciously challenge them but just write as if they weren’t relevant.

So queer theory offered three tools important to my work: the substantive critique of identity; critique as a *style* (much in the way Susan Sontag famously described camp as a style, and with many affinities — satire, lampoon, irony, and wit) that could be used in discussing serious political and social questions;<sup>7</sup> and the liberation from professional orthodoxies: the virtues of apostasy over piety, the productive clash of ideas being worked out, “cults” being formed and broken apart, the energy of an avant-garde (to use an archaic term) in constant motion. That’s better than any wedding gift I can imagine.

## Notes

- 1 Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).
- 2 Janet E. Halley, “‘Like Race’ Arguments,” in *What’s Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 41.
- 3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 4 Richard Herrnstein and Charles J. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and*

- Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994); William Bennett, *Morning in America*, radio program, 28 September 2005.
- 5 Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 148–64, at 160–61.
  - 6 Richard Thompson Ford, *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
  - 7 Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (1966; New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 275–92.



# Queer Theory Addiction

NEVILLE HOAD

## After Sex I: A Cigarette

“AFTER SEX?” My first response is a simple and personal one: “A cigarette.” There could be a slightly perverse queer theoretical and political project in that postcoital cigarette clustered as it is around familiar rhetorics of disgust, pleasure, addiction, health, uselessness, autoeroticism, privacy, and the commodity. There is a long history of the regulation of oral pleasures in the name of public health in the twentieth-century north Atlantic world, though sex and cigarettes are obviously not precise analogues for each other. Part of me finds the No Smoking signs in predominantly, if not exclusively male, public sex venues in a city like New York bizarre in a kind of “you can go in there and suck twenty strangers’ cocks but you can’t smoke a cigarette” way. I can imagine that some other people might find that refreshing. Still, I suspect that with sex, as with smoking, other people’s pleasures are often a bit disgusting, which may be why there are sustained attempts to keep them out of public spaces.<sup>1</sup>

I can imagine a representation of the history of a cigarette in a way that I cannot for sex. My cigarette film

would be one of those grainy early-twentieth-century commodity documentaries inspired as much by exuberance over the then new media's capacity to represent time and space in motion as an impulse to understand smoking. The film would show tobacco being planted, then growing in that speeded-up way, harvested, dried, shredded, then rolled into cigarettes by some fast-moving assembly line, packaged, sold, and then smoked by a smartly dressed couple — both in hats — a man leaning over to light the woman's cigarette. One could, of course, smoke while watching. There was a fairly long moment in which cigarettes were imagined and consumed as emblems of a normatively good life, indexes of relaxation, leisure, reconfigured heterosexual gender relations under the sign of greater gender parity — companionate courtship if not companionate marriage. While all cigarettes are bad now, some sex is still good — and let me stay caught between *good* and *bad* as terms that both indicate a quality of pleasure and have strong moral/health valences.

### After Sex 2: Children, Etc.

What would a parallel grainy documentary of sex look like? Where was sex made? What were the conditions of its production? All I can effectively imagine are the idealized sites of its consumption/consummation. Friedrich Engels gave us a powerful attempt to understand the place of sex in political economy, but he could only imagine heterosexual sex as sex and was reliant on a range of evolutionary anthropologists for evidence, and the racism of that archive may make such evidence inadmissible now. (I am not making an accusation here — Lubbock, Tyler, Morgan, et al., the Victorian anthropologists invoked as ballast of sorts by Engels, relied on the received wisdom of their time and position in ways that make individual accountability well-nigh impossible.)

As I fail to imagine my sex documentary, I realize that many other people may have precisely such a vision of sex — divine origin; “Nature” as the assembly line of production; romantic, reproductive monogamy as the site of consumption. In this story, what comes after sex is glaringly obvious: children, who will eventually continue the same telos/feedback loop. Small wonder my students laugh when I quote Engels at them: “In both cases this marriage of convenience turns often enough into crassest prostitution — sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the

woman, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage-worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery.”<sup>2</sup>

### After Sex 3: Gender

Breaking the frame of my smoking sex documentary, I note that in another register and domain of meaning and inquiry, what comes after sex is, well, gender. The paleonymy of the term *sex* is what produces this productive and reproductive confusion. To gloss: *sex* means both “biological sex” and “sexual intercourse.” Within a genealogy of U.S. feminism, Gayle Rubin disarticulates what she calls *sex* — a biological given in the language of anatomy, but also implicitly in terms of chromosomes and hormones — from *gender*, the system of historical elaboration of this biological given.<sup>3</sup> This refusal of any natural connection between biological sex and social gender does important analytic work during a “sexual revolution.” A definition of *gender* as decidedly social renders it amenable to the intervention of collective will to resignify and change. As an anthropologist, Rubin relies heavily on the Engels/Morgan axis, which may be too politically compromised by the ideological axiomatics of European imperialism to stand today, but archives of knowledge cannot avoid the contaminations of their respective histories, and the disarticulation of *sex* and *gender* undoubtedly did significant denaturalizing work and has been philosophically central to much feminist struggle as I understand it.<sup>4</sup>

Remaining within what could be called academic feminist theory, *sex* did not hold its place as the term generating an “after.” The work of Anne Fausto-Sterling suggested that sex itself was a kind of after-the-fact phenomenon — that its biological givens had social givers and that the biological determination of sex was itself a complex business.<sup>5</sup>

Judith Butler’s 1990 *Gender Trouble* put *gender* back as a term analytically dependent on sex — after sex, if you like — in reading gender as a kind of backformation of heterosexuality, though the relation of sex to sexuality is a hotly contested relation, particularly in the global terrain scholars have inherited from Engels and Morgan. *Gender Trouble* also argues for *sex* (in the confusing plenitude of its meanings) as something produced by iteration — a thing that creates its own before and is its own after again and again through citationality.<sup>6</sup>

## After Sex 4: Sexuality

When, where, and how sex acts give rise to social and personal identity remains a hotly contested political and theoretical question. Working with the Foucauldian cliché/foundational ruse/polemical that the homosexual ceases to be a sodomite — a temporary aberration — and becomes a species circa 1870, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer asserted: “The European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of Imperialism and the two interconnect.”<sup>7</sup> And as Engels reveals, they can interconnect in the critique of imperialism too. The historical and theoretical work necessary to elaborate the precise lineaments of this interconnection is immense. Ann Laura Stoler has shown how the regulation of the sexual practices and to a lesser extent the sexual identities of both colonizer and colonized was a not insignificant problem for colonial governance in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Goldberg excavated a similar dynamic in the Spanish conquest of Panama.<sup>9</sup> Siobhan Somerville established the centrality of racial metaphors and analogies in the medicalization of the homosexual body and psyche in the last fin de siècle.<sup>10</sup> The continually charged debates around homosexuality and national and racial authenticity in a variety of national and transnational contexts today may mark continuing attempts to work through the legacy of late-nineteenth-century thought about the imbrications of race and sex. Sharon Holland’s work on the erotic life of racism suggests the ways in which a New World location may demand different historical and analytic starting points.<sup>11</sup> Queer theory’s commitment to a persistence of critique and an allegiance to an analytic of overdetermination rather than one of identity and narrative building have allowed and continue to allow these interconnections to become visible. I think here of work that engages the shifting relation of sexuality to other identity variables and their histories within the United States — race the most prevalent one — from a vast array of intellectual trajectories within and beyond established academic disciplines. The presence of queer diasporas introduces a complicating variable. The implications for a more generalized queer theory of the psychoanalytically inflected work of scholars like David Eng is still to be worked out, even as the localisms in diasporic formations render the limits of abstract theory visible.<sup>12</sup> The question “Whose theory?” persists. The transforming contributions of what, for the want of a better shorthand, could be called “queer of color critique”

requires much more extensive discussion than I can offer here. The institutional location of this work in the North Atlantic world marks its inevitable complicity with legacies of earlier imperialisms, as it simultaneously provides a critique of these legacies.

### After Sex(uality) 5: Identity

Aikane, arse-bandit, baby, baby-dyke, bear, bent, berdache, bugger, bulldagger, butch, carpet-/rug-muncher, catamite, chaser, cherry-sister, chubby, cub, dandy, dinge-queen, dyke, femme, floozie, friend of Dorothy's, fudgepacker, gay, heterosexual, high-femme, hijra, homosexual, hungochani, husband, invert, jimbanda, john, kathoey, khawal, kiki, lesbian, libertine, light in the loafers, mahu, man, maricon, mary, member of the church, molly, MSM, nanshoku, otter, pederast, pervert, pillow-biter, poofter, postop, pre-op, queen, queer, quimbanda, rice-queen, Sapphist, shirt-lifter, slob-femme, slut, snow-queen, sodomite, soft-butcht, stibane, stone-butcht, straight, stud, that way, trade, trannie, tribadist, uranist, urning, wife, woman, xanith, and so on.

The risk of a list is that it blurs the differences between the items on it. Some of these items will have more in common with other items. Some may be incommensurate. Some identities have been recuperable for political agency. Some remain terms of derogation. Some index subcultural styles. You need to be a member of a group to recognize them as identities. Some have gone global. Some are definitively local. Some derive from gender transitivity. Some derive from a predilection for a position/role in a sex act/relationship. Some emerge from a sexual preference for a certain kind of person. Some are lifelong identities. Some are not. Some are playful. Some have proved deadly. The point of this list is to suggest the staggering diversity of identities that emerge through, during, and after sex.

### After Sex 6: Empire

As some of the items on the above list suggest, the world has been queer for quite a long time, if not always. Or at the very least, as Rudi Bleys has shown, it certainly looked that way to European explorers and mission-

aries, who frequently provided lurid accounts of the bodily practices of the people they encountered.<sup>13</sup>

I remember complaining about the imperial ambitions implicit in a title like *Fear of a Queer Planet*. I wrote: “Charmed as I am by Warner’s use of Gore Vidal’s Myra Breckinridge as a messiah for global queerness, I cannot see the metaphor of a queer planet as only a metaphor, unrelated to the site of queer subjectivity in the U.S. and innocent of its own colonizing fantasies.”<sup>14</sup> Warner had already somewhat archly revised his position: “In the New World Order, we should be more than usually cautious about global utopianisms that require American slang.”<sup>15</sup>

Metaphorically, queer theory was imperial — and I have more patience now with the slippage between imperial metaphors and imperial histories. Queer theory understood itself as having a strange imperial relation to established academic disciplines, couching its utopian revolutionary impulse in relation to knowledge production in the language of the transformation of everything, not in the more obvious imperial metaphors of saving and redeeming, but in those of multiple insurgencies, a refusal of logics of inclusion. Queer theory never worked out how to play multiculturalism. It could not write itself into a narrative of minority inclusion drawing on the powerful rhetorics of civil rights struggle in the United States. A formation called “lesbian and gay studies” has had more success, though it has often needed to make a racial analogy in ways that have invited accusations of appropriation.

Within the trend-spotting gossip channels of academia with which I have some contact, I hear occasional grumblings that the postcolonial/transnational has taken over the institutional space of lesbian/gay studies and queer theory in terms of employment prospects and publishing opportunities. “If you are doing queer work,” the complaint goes, “it has to be about something else as well, race and/or the transnational.” A brief glance at the MLA job list from 2005 may bear this out: not a few jobs have “transnational” appended to gender/sexuality/queer studies. Uneasy echoes of Susan Gubar’s attack on poststructuralists and feminists of color in her “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” may be apparent.<sup>16</sup> In this narrative of injury, what came after gay/lesbian/queer was geopolitical inflection, but this to me is a fundamental misreading of queer theory, which rested on a set of questions that relentlessly problematized certainties of

identity. In terms of colonial attempts to impose the gendered division of productive, reproductive, and affective labor of a state-sanctioned monogamous heterosexuality on the world, connections between the alterity of elsewhere and the alterity of queerness become obvious.

### Smoke Break: After After

Analytically, narratively, ideologically, the temporality of the *after* in “after sex” in addition to the instability in possible meanings of “sex itself” renders the prompt as something like tail-chasing. *After* in certain vernaculars can reverse the subject/object relations in the idea of *after* as “subsequent to” or “following that.” *After* in a sentence like “I am chasing after *x*” — an appropriate idiom in a discussion of sex, perhaps — allows *x* to be what is ahead of me in both time and space, so the prompt “after sex” produces sex as some kind of aspirational future rather than a past of either possibility or disappointment. Within certain theorizings of desire, one may be structurally always after sex in this sense of “after.” In the interest of avoiding the obvious and establishing some associative cohesion, here is Oscar Wilde on cigarettes: “A cigarette is the perfect type of the perfect pleasure. It is exquisite and it leaves one unsatisfied.”<sup>17</sup> After sex, indeed, “unsatisfied.”

There are too many intellectual projects in the arena implied by “after sex” to engage in a position paper, and as in my imagining of the cigarette commodity documentary, the rubric “after sex” could be elaborated into a history and analysis of the world. In the previous sections, I gestured to a genealogy of recent feminist academic thinking on the problem of sex. Within that company, one of the things that came after feminism was a thing of continually uncertain lineaments called “queer theory.” I can imagine queer theory as an “after” of feminism even if only in chronological terms — though queer theory needs the “before” and “during” of feminism as queer theory’s enabler, and there may be ways that feminism was also always a kind of queer knowledge project.

I want to shift prepositions here from *after* to *beyond*. I can imagine a queer theory after feminism, but not one beyond feminism, except in a quite specific sense of *beyond*. The idea of a “beyond” offers a different set of framing possibilities and limits to that of “after.” Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* can be read as an answer to some of the questions inher-

ent in the phrase “after sex.” *Beyond* as a preposition has a spatial as well as a temporal dimension, and a beyond can be a before as well as an after.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the concept of (compulsive) repetition complicates the temporalities of before and after. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* has no telos. The theorizing of the compulsion to repeat allows for no necessary upward or forward trajectory, and revealingly Freud accounts for it in phylogenetic terms, claiming *inter alia* that “the most impressive proofs of their being an organic compulsion to repeat lie in the phenomena of heredity and the facts of embryology.”<sup>18</sup>

Those instincts are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new. Moreover it is possible to specify this final goal of all organic striving. . . . It must be an old state of things, an initial state from which the entity has at one time or another departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons — becomes inorganic once again — then we shall be compelled to say that “the goal of all life is death” and, looking backwards, that “what was inanimate existed before what is living.”<sup>19</sup>

In an illuminating way, the theorizing of the death instincts breaks the ontogeny/phylogeny recapitulation because the drive of species life in evolutionary theory is survival through successful reproduction. If, for Freud, the drive of individual psychic life is to death, how may ontogenesis recapitulate phylogenesis? How may individual life replicate species-being? I have argued elsewhere that phylogenetic buttresses to core arguments in Freud implicate psychoanalysis in a similar discursive frame to the coincidence of European imperialism and the modern construction of sexuality. Phylogenesis in the thought of Freud leaves similar traces to Morgan/Engels in Rubin. In Foucault, the history of European imperialism is strongly marked by absence — Europe’s genealogy is self-referential.

In an intriguing reading of the famous second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Jacques Derrida suggests ways in which Freud’s attempt to theorize the death drives as the beyond of the pleasure principle explodes the possibility of temporal sequentiality in Freud’s thought — an “after” becomes more difficult to think in terms of either progress or



decline. Derrida's reading is useful for me in that it can be made to suggest a radical reconfiguring of relationality in conceptions of time. Derrida's reading implicates Freud's speculative mode (and it is a developmental one — before, during, after) in this chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with the very psychic processes Freud is attempting to describe:

Now, if one attempts to make oneself attentive to the original modality of the “speculative,” and to the singular proceeding of this writing, its *pas de these* which advances without advancing, without advancing itself, without ever advancing anything that it does not immediately take back, for the time of a detour, without ever positing anything which remains in its position, then one must recognize that the following chapter repeats, in place and in another place, the immobile emplacement of the *pas de these*. It repeats itself, it illustrates only the repetition of that very thing (the absolute authority of the P[leasure] P[rinciple]) which finally will not let anything be done without it (him), except repetition itself. In any event, despite several marching orders and steps forward, not an inch of ground is gained; not one decision, not the slightest advance in the question that occupies the speculator, the question of the PP as absolute master.<sup>20</sup>

To call this a difficulty for Freud would be a mistake, as it is this apparent impasse, the task of ascertaining a “beyond” before, which is the speculative motor for Freud's inquiry in this chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I will risk an analogy here: when it comes to the study of sex — which is also arguably, if not obviously, something that comes after sex — the Derridean notion of a “beyond” evident in the excerpt above may offer us a way of doing queer theory — something which arguably institutionally never happened — again. Moreover, the more recent etymology of the term *queer* itself is implicated in the mode of beyond the pleasure principle as the reappropriation of an insult. The term *queer* may mark a compulsion to repeat the social injuries of being called queer in order to master its unpleasure in an active rather than passive way. Queer may move beyond “beyond the pleasure principle” in that it may open up forms of political subjectivity, at least at the level of thinking, that oscillate between resistance — psychoanalytically conceived — and resistance in the agential political sense.

## After Sex 7: The University

The ass-backwardness of “queer” in the mode of the compulsion to repeat is difficult to set on the Gramscian path of the long march through institutions. Queer theory’s stubborn persistence in resisting the production of narratives of development can partially account for its failure to secure a toehold in the disciplinary and even interdisciplinary structures (departments, centers) of the U.S. academy. Its allegiance to the work of the negative, its attachment to the persistence of critique can look something like the death drive. So in the place of beyond, queer theory can only be put in the past tense as something that institutionally has yet to happen. In an “after” of sex, there will have been queer theory.

Anecdotally (from speaking to graduate students on the job market in the U.S. academy), there are now fewer rather than more jobs described using the keywords *sexuality*, *gender*, *queer*. Has there ever been a tenure-track position advertised and filled in “queer theory,” despite a decade of training graduate students in the imagined subfield? On the 2005 MLA job list, a search for the word *queer* produces seven entries — all supplementary to the recognizable literary/historical periodizations. The vitality of a set of intellectual questions cannot rely on the labor of faculty whose primary commitment and institutional responsibility is to something else — though those “something elses” are in some places more queer-friendly spaces than they were ten years ago.

If we understand the analysis of sex as something that comes after sex, this “after” cannot yet and perhaps never becomes a “post-” — as in the facile utopian triumphalisms of “postfeminist” or “postgay.” If I can imagine a utopian future for this kind of “after sex,” it will be a doing and redoing of queer theory in the mode of Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to repeat and push at historical limits as they change. Not in the name of exhaustion, but in the repetition of a “beyond” — the invigorating intransigence of continuing to work on a set of questions. Smoke breaks optional.

## Notes

- 1 To preempt the chorus of “But secondhand smoking kills” that I hear in my head as I write this: so do many things. Emissions from automobiles severely compromise air quality, and automobiles themselves are a significant cause of fatalities in the United States, yet one hears linkages of automobiles to public health only in a prophylactic way: “Buckle up.” No municipality has banned driving a car because it can kill you. The absence of universal affordable health care is an underacknowledged factor in both gay marriage debates and anti-smoking campaigns in the contemporary United States.
- 2 Friedrich Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972), 134.
- 3 Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.
- 4 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 109–10, for a nuanced appraisal of Rubin’s essay in the context of global transcodings of value.
- 5 Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes, Revisited,” *Sciences* (July/August 2000): 18–23.
- 6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 7 Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, “Race, Sexual Politics, and Black Masculinity: A Dossier,” in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. R. Chapman and J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 97–164.
- 8 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and *Carnal Knowledge: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- 9 Jonathan Goldberg, “Sodomy in the New World: Anthropologies Old and New,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3–18.
- 10 Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race in the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
- 11 Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (forthcoming).
- 12 Recent years have seen a proliferation of theoretically driven inquiry into the relation of sexuality-based identity formation to the identity forms of racially and ethnically based subjectivities at the level of both community history and psychic ramification. While initially concerned with U.S.-based diasporic sites, it is increasingly making a transnational turn. See inter alia Rod Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University

- of Minnesota Press, 2004); David Eng, *Racial Castration: Making Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 13 Rudi Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).
  - 14 Neville Hoad, "Arrested Development or the Queerness of Savages: The Imperial and Neo-imperial Uses of Male Homosexuality," *Postcolonial Studies* 3.2 (2000): 133–58.
  - 15 Michael Warner, "Something Queer about the Nation-State," in *After Political Correctness*, ed. Christopher Newfield (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 361–71.
  - 16 Susan Gubar, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 878–902. Robyn Wiegman offers a powerful rebuttal in "What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 362–79.
  - 17 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: New American Library, 1962), 93.
  - 18 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Liveright, 1950), 48.
  - 19 Ibid., 50. In German: "Die konservativen organischen Triebe haben jede dieser aufgezwungenen Abänderungen des Lebenslaufes aufgenommen und zur Wiederholung aufbewahrt und müssen so den täuschende Eindruck von Kräften machen, die nach Veränderung und Fortschritt streben, während sie bloss ein altes Ziel auf alten und neuen Wegen zu erreichen trachten. Auch dieses Endziel alles organischen Strebens liesse sich angeben. Die konservativen Natur der Triebe widerspräche es, wenn das Ziel des lebens ein noch nie zuvor erreichter Zustand wäre. Es muss vielmehr ein alter, ein Ausgangszustand sein, den das Lebende einmal verlassen hat, und zu dem es über all Umwege der Entwicklung zurückstrebt. Wenn wir es als ausnahmslose Erfahrung annehmen dürfen, dass alles Lebende aus inneren Gründen stirbt, ins Anorganische zurückkehrt, so können wir nur sagen: Das Ziel alles lebens ist der Tod, und zurückgreifend: Das Leblose war früher da als das Lebende." Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke: Chronologisch geordnet*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1966), 40. The original allows one to grasp the paradox of the death instincts more fully. The verb *zurückstreben* — translated as "striving to return" — literally means "backwards striving." In the translation it is only the direction of the striving that is reversed; in the German, the qualitative difference of the death instinct is more potently registered. The injection of a Latinate register in the translation of *Leblose* as "inanimate" rather than the more literal "lifeless" undoes some of the intimacy of the *Lebende* / *Leblose* connection.
  - 20 Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 293–94.

## The Sense of Watching Tony Sleep

JOSÉ ESTEBAN MUÑOZ

OFTEN, AFTER SEX, there is sleep. And while I am not interested in displacing the relational and affective centrality of sex, it also seems important to dwell upon modes of being in the world that might be less knowable than sex. Thus I turn in this essay to sleep and the ontological humility that it promises. Sleep, like sex and alongside sex, gives us a sense of the world which potentially interrupts practices of thought that reify a kind of ontological totality—a totality that boxes us into an intractable and stalled version of the world.

A couple of years ago I received a beautiful letter from my friend Tony Just, which he wrote on stationery from the Hotel Villa d'Este. I instantly recognized Tony's good penmanship on the corner of the envelope. Tony and his then-partner, Elizabeth Peyton, were off traveling again. I think Elizabeth had had a show in London. While there, Tony viewed Lord Byron's helmet at a museum, and in the letter he describes the fancy Mohawk on the Romantic poet's armor headpiece. Tony, like his partner, is a talented artist, and his letter actually reminded me of an aspect of



Elizabeth's work, her sketch portraits on textured hotel stationery. A few years ago she gave me a copy of her book, *Tony Sleeping*.<sup>1</sup> The small orange book is made up of twelve images, all of my friend sleeping. Included are two color photos, five black-and-white photos, one watercolor painting, one oil painting, and three color-pencil drawings. In all the images Tony is surrounded by soft white sheets, his loose brown curls spilling all over the pillows as he slumbers. Tony is a good sleeper. I have always admired his capacity for sleep.

Peyton's work has unique resonance to it, what I call a certain kind of queer affective particularity. The artist's own

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Elizabeth Peyton, *Tony Sleeping* (May), 2000, color pencil on paper, 11 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9 inches. Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

biography falls outside what I see as the performative work of her art practice. While some of her portraits look at historical figures like Napoleon emerging from a bath or Oscar Wilde's destructive object of desire, Boise (Lord Alfred Douglas), she also frequently paints slim and androgynous rocker boys, and much of the work focuses on her friends. Critics have compared the work to fashion sketches, a comparison that misses the point insofar as her interest in style is misconstrued as fleeting, not understood as a sustained aesthetic project. One cursory assessment dismisses her work by comparing it to Warhol's pop art practice and accusing it of romanticism. Thus tainted by the pop art brush and the charge of being too romantic, Peyton's art has been phobically identified as too gay, too sentimental, too associated with a foppish homosexual aesthetic — a homophobic response that serves as a negative proof of what I describe and admire as the animating queer energies within the work, the salience of its queer particularity. The straight queer woman trades in feminized male beauty, working in the terrain of contemporary white queer artists like Jack Pierson or Jim Hodges, who do not shy away from deliberately fey and queer representational strategies. Peyton is playing a gay boy's game, her work both rewarded by the art market and attacked by critics as too feminine and too gay. Attention to and identification with a foppish and often elite archive of gay male sensibilities and tastes is in fact at the center of her art practice. Peyton's soft lines, delicate colors, her emphasis on restful and relaxed bodies with elongated and gangly limbs all convey a kind of a dreamy romanticism that resonates queerly. Even though the work might not announce itself as queer with anything like an identitarian pronouncement, through its style and elliptical grace a queer affective particularity is connoted and indeed rendered.

Peyton opens *Tony Sleeping* with Shakespeare's Sonnet 43. When considering this sonnet we might ask what work this seemingly incongruous text — a poem that concerns a lover's absence — is doing in a small catalogue of images that depict a sleepy yet present loved object. Within the context of the artist's book, the poem is less a literary text than a found object. I cite the poem below, and another later, not for the purpose of explaining them as texts but of displaying them as source material for the cross-temporal queer particularity that Peyton's work conjures. It is this constellation of images and texts that fill out my essay. I aim to describe some of the contours of seeing and feeling in the world reproduced in the

dreamy and sleepy realm of Peyton's work. Therefore, my interests are not so much organized around what the sonnet means but, more nearly, what it does.<sup>2</sup>

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see,  
 For all the day they view things unrespected;  
 But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,  
 And, darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.  
 Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright,  
 How would thy shadow's form form happy show  
 To the clear day with thy much clearer light,  
 When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so!  
 How would, I say, mine eyes so blessed made,  
 By looking on thee in living day,  
 When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade  
 Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay!  
 All days are nights to see till I see thee,  
 All nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.<sup>3</sup>

The sonnet presents a lover looking onto a beloved as her or his eyes wink, connoting a certain drowsiness. The lover wonders whether the beloved seen in dreams is rendered more present or more absent. It is the cover of sleep that helps the watcher finally focus on the illumination provided by the loved one. This romantic world is “darkly bright,” which is to say a realm where the visual is inverted, where light is darkness and darkness is light, where sleep gives one sharper perception while vision during the waking day is the looking that one performs in a cursory or practical fashion. This point is conveyed with great vividness at the sonnet's end with the final couplet: “All days are nights to see till I see thee / All nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.” One sees things that are “unrespected” and this would indicate that the totality of visual stimuli does not fully register. It is during the day that the speaker sees things that are unrespected. The idea of these objects that are seen and not seen, visually unrespected, reflects upon a world of visual phenomena that is not registered within the normative protocols of looking that obtain within the harshness of daylight. The phenomenon that is unrespected in daylight is unrespected insofar as our vision is trained to look beyond a visuality that does not conform to daylight's spectrum of the visible. The



poem's end offers a different spectrum attuned to affective perception rather than the merely visual.

The sonnet thus reflects on a mode of seeing wherein one's sight within the realm of sleep supersedes the illumination provided by harsh daylight. Shade provides light not unlike the anticipatory illumination that Ernst Bloch would call a utopian hermeneutic.<sup>4</sup> The anticipatory illumination that art promises displays that-which-is-not-yet-here. This would include new formations/understandings of sex and gender. The field of vision conjured here is an idealistic and dramatic realm to which the sonnet offers an interesting entry. Reproduced in the first few pages of *Tony Sleeping*, the sonnet not only functions as a kind of reading instruction to decipher Peyton's work, but also offers another mode of seeing that does not balk at the affective excess of her painting style. The "instructions" contained in the sonnet and the example of the paintings and drawings work together as a primer for comprehending a visuality that is not organized around the normative glare of harsh daylight.

As announced by the sonnet's inversion of night and day, Peyton's series inverts a tradition of portraiture dominated by men's renditions of vulnerable women. The male in Peyton's visual calculus is the object of the gaze, not the subject behind the gaze. Furthermore, attributes that are not usually assigned to male beauty, like softness, vulnerability, and sensuality, are intrinsic to these portraits of Tony. The aesthetic experiment in much of Peyton's work is devoted to investigating an androgynous or perhaps even a transgender presence. In the harsh light of sex and gender normativity, this rendering of a boy's beauty through a set of aesthetic codes usually assigned to the feminine is a shadowy act indeed. The fact that the producer of these images is a woman casts yet another shade on art history's protocols.

Peyton is best known for her renderings of an extravagant and somewhat feminized male beauty. In several gallery retrospectives of her work, for example, the portraits of Tony stood next to sketches and paintings of rock stars and teen heartthrobs. Peyton's technique indexes what I would describe as the performance of sketching the loved object. This performance brings to mind the heightened Eros of adolescence, which is to say a temporal coordinate when one's desire, which is not new, is nonetheless narrated as emergent. She conjures the ways in which the object of desire is idealized and rendered dreamily in sketches that one might produce in

attempting to capture the loved one's image. While the images are masterful on the level of technique, they nonetheless index the ways in which a person (especially a young person) might daydream about a desired object by a visual rendering that could be anything from a doodle on a notebook to a traditional oil painting.

Tony's mention of Lord Byron calls to mind some of the poet's verses that resonate with Shakespeare's sonnet and further inform a theory of sleepy visuality that is calibrated to help understand the different visual and affective particularities that fall out of dominant visual fields. I invoke below Lord Byron's famous poem "Stanzas for Music" not because it mirrors the sonnet I cited earlier. Shakespeare's sonnet is, for the most part, affectively distant from the Byronic lyric. However, there is one affective thread that links these texts within the logic of my makeshift archive—a provisional collection of objects, both literary and visual, calibrated to represent a dreamy and sleepy queer sense and view of the world. It is an almost translucent thread that provisionally links these texts, which trade in the play of shadow and shade. Both of these queerly resonant luminaries of English literature used metaphors of shadow and shade to approach the romance of seeing and feeling things differently.

"STANZAS FOR MUSIC"

There be none of Beauty's daughters  
 With a magic like thee;  
 And like music on the waters  
 Is thy sweet voice to me:  
 When, as if its sound were causing  
 The charmed ocean's pausing,  
 The waves lie still and gleaming,  
 And the lull'd winds seem dreaming;  
 And the midnight moon is weaving  
 Her bright chain o'er the deep;  
 Whose breast is gently heaving,  
 as an infant's asleep:  
 So the spirit bows before thee,  
 To listen and adore thee;  
 With full but soft emotion,  
 Like the swell of Summer's ocean.<sup>5</sup>

This poem considers the dark allure of existing within a realm that is not waking consciousness. The beloved's sleepy ontology brings the onlooker/speaker to bow, with "a soft but full emotion" that swells like the "summer's ocean." The world of the poem is described as one in which even the "lull'd winds" seem to be dreaming. In its rhythm and rhyme as well as in its imagery, Byron's text signals a certain transcendence or transformation that occurs when waking consciousness is challenged or foregone. One feels and sees things differently, rising above the strictures of the waking world, a condition that can easily be coded as normative in relation not only to sex and gender but other antagonisms within the social. "Stanzas for Music" concludes with the affective recognition that happens within this space of sleep and dream. One therefore sees and knows the other not through established codes within the visual but, instead, through the impact made by affective particularity.

When I consider these questions of darkness and not-quite-presence I can imagine following a hermeneutic track suggested by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, where she argues persuasively that representations of the play of shadow often suggest a repressed Africanist presence in literary production. This darkness represents a challenge to whiteness as the fixed and universal subject of American and English literature.<sup>6</sup> Another interpretive possibility is a version a Marxian reading might suggest, that Peyton's images of a soft boy sleeping, while the sun shines in through the window, is something of an effrontery to capitalism's mandate to labor and therefore a symbolic interruption in a narrative that leads a subject to be alienated from her labor and self. Where standard academic practice would integrate these and other possible lines of inquiry in producing a much more thorough approach to this collection of words and images, I offer instead some further points about sleep and sleepiness in and apart from Peyton's work and from and for my current disciplinary coordinates: a point between the postdisciplinary site from which I often write and teach, performance studies, and the theoretical fields of inquiry I am most interested in engaging, critical race theory and queer studies.

In this light, I resist looking at Peyton's images and simply assigning them the value of queer or feminist not because powerful queer and feminist energies don't animate this work (I have indicated above why I think they do), but because affixing such static epistemological markers would prematurely over-illuminate this productive intersectional shadow play. I

am not taking the anti-identitarian turn here for the purpose of simply holding up some poststructuralist piety. My use of the term *intersection* aims to convey not “multiple identities” but, instead, convergent and diverse modes of recognition that are best characterized perhaps as affective particularities. Thus I want the notion of intersectionality to describe the beautiful and complex choreography of gender and sexuality at work in Peyton’s image production, as well as Shakespeare’s notion of a “fair imperfect shade” and, concomitantly, the “full but soft emotion” Byron expresses. Through Peyton’s eyes, the viewer perceives the “fair and imperfect shade” that is visually available despite normative reason’s harsh glare. In this practice of gazing the watcher is filled with “full but soft emotion,” which is a way of both sensing the world and recognizing others who see the world as you do.

Sleep, or sleep and all its performative effects (what sleep *does*), is about a kind of sleepy recognition that can happen in a realm of soft emotion and “fair imperfect shade.” It seems useful to frame concepts like feminism, queerness, and even race as affective taxonomies — as shared ways of looking and feeling that offer us a different sense of the world. A postdisciplinary perspective would be interested in the performative effects of words, objects, and affective states. Such attentiveness would not constitute a reading practice that seeks to tag the museum’s ruins — pink for feminist, lavender for queer. Queerness, like feminism, is an essentially performative endeavor, a mode of doing as opposed to being. This is not to say that being and performativity are easily unyoked, but I do want to suggest that shifting away from a hermeneutic that is primarily attuned to the epistemological is a good thing.

At a moment in history where “all sense has been abandoned,” as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, “the only chance for sense and its only possible sense reside either this side of or beyond the appropriation of signifieds and the presentation of signifiers, in the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world.”<sup>7</sup> My essay has tried performatively to abandon the disciplinary *sense* of what is to be done when considering a poem and its relation to a visual text. I have instead leaned on a certain associative mode of composition in order to effect a kind of opening in comprehension. Similarly, doing away with feminism, queerness, and race as epistemological certitudes would open a site of potentiality where these particularities exist as methodologies that free new meaning. We cannot

know in advance the politics prescribed by these critical modes, and we should not. What we should know is that, from this intersectional/interdisciplinary point of departure, our conceptual grasp would expand to encompass an intersection of race and sexuality and other modes of particularity. Peyton's renderings of sleep are images of a certain kind of sense that makes no sense, and they stage a performative opening for a new sense of the world. This sense of the world fills me with a "soft emotion" that I recognize in myself and others — not only seen through an identitarian optic as feminists, queers, people of color, but through a lens that registers affective particularity, relational sensuousness, and the intricacies of belonging as friends, lovers, and beyond.

## Notes

- 1 Elizabeth Peyton, *Tony Sleeping*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer (Greven, Germany: Druckhaus Cramer, 2000).
- 2 In this way I am following the grain of the postdisciplinary formation that is performance studies, a mode of analysis that privileges the performative dimensions of the object over the epistemological. For more on the performative, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) and the helpful introduction to *Performativity and Performance* by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 3 Peyton, *Tony Sleeping*, 2.
- 4 See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), vol. 1.
- 5 Lord George Gordon Byron, *Selected Poems* (New York: Dover, 1993), 17.
- 6 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 7 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

 Oklahobo

Following Craig Womack's American Indian  
and Queer Studies

BETHANY SCHNEIDER

ACADEMICS — INDIVIDUAL AND FIELDS — travel by riding rails, bumming around, catching rides, and finding old stogies. In spite of (or maybe because of) tenure, in spite of (or maybe because of) mandates about scholarly rigor and archival obsessions, ours is a business defined by itinerancy and made difficult by brakemen, enclosures, and depressions. In that spirit, this essay hitches its wagon to a star and tags along in the wake of the Creek theorist and novelist Craig Womack's "coming and going" thoughts on the relationship of two fields that I have traveled between since entering graduate school twelve years ago, two fields that have grown enormously across that decade: queer and American Indian studies.<sup>1</sup>

In 1999 Womack published a monograph titled *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Interspersing traditional essays of literary criticism with fictional letters from a cast of characters who function as a bitingly funny, wickedly critical "Creek chorus" to the "straight" work of academic writing, Womack's book is both brilliant and directly challenging. From insisting that his book focus on

and take its critical cues from the literary production of *one* nation, the Creek, to rejecting the centrality of Indian-white “contact” to most academic understandings of Native cultural production, Womack’s book unwaveringly argues for a specifically nationalist and separatist direction in American Indian literary study. Womack works from “the assumption that Indian viewpoints cohere, that Indian resistance can be successful, that Native critical centers are possible, that working from within the nation, rather than looking toward the outside, is a legitimate way of examining literature, that subverting the literary status quo rather than being subverted by it constitutes a meaningful alternative.”<sup>22</sup>

Womack ends his field-transforming book with a queer chapter on a Cherokee, rather than a Creek, author: “Lynn Riggs as Code Talker: Toward a Queer Oklahomo Theory and the Radicalization of Native American Studies.” Womack explains that he includes a Cherokee author because of the way Riggs “formulated actual written theories about Oklahoma” (*Red on Red*, 19). Lynn Riggs was the gay Cherokee author of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the 1931 play on which Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein based their 1943 hit musical, *Oklahoma!* Oklahoma the state is “Indian Country,” the land promised to already removed Indian nations and then devastatingly compromised through statehood, and *Oklahoma!* the musical is the Pulitzer Prize–winning blockbuster that transformed Broadway, while its originator, the singular Cherokee queer, was obliterated by the boisterous white homosociality of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Womack theorizes the abject irony of a gay Indian dreaming up a heterosexual romance that narrates the statehood of Oklahoma as the triumph of white nation-building. The chapter argues that Riggs “really wanted to write about . . . being Indian and gay” (*Red on Red*, 303) and uplifts Riggs’s abjection by building bridges between queer and American Indian literary studies. Oklahomo theory, Womack suggests, can account for the multiply lost and silenced Indians and queers that both Oklahomas violently suppress.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, Womack uses the word *queer* to describe his methodology. He does so because, he says, “it acknowledges the importance of cultural differences and the usefulness of maintaining those differences rather than simply submitting to dominant culture norms. In other words, it is an anti-assimilationist term” (*Red on Red*, 301). When Teresa de Lauretis, writing in 1991, hailed queer as “a discursive horizon, another way of thinking sexuality,” the thrill was and is that of imagining and acting toward

other, as yet almost inarticulate worlds.<sup>4</sup> Horizons are never reached, of course, so the pleasure is in the not-yet-ness of queer, in its potential, its traveling-sideshow quality. The pan-Indian Two-Spirit movement and scholarly work done on gender diversity in some traditional American Indian cultures is also dedicated to possible horizons at both ends of the time spectrum, referring us back to forgotten or misremembered sexual cultures of the past in order to build a future that can resonate across a homophobic and colonized present.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the chapter Womack, who otherwise resolutely seeks alternatives to pan-Indian methodologies, uses *Two-Spirit* as an example of how trickster-like wordplay can open up “multiple possibilities for meaning.” *Two-Spirit* is exciting for him because of “the idea behind the word that gayness is a blessing, as well as that the choice of the term is an act of self-definition” (*Red on Red*, 302).

*Red on Red* is a challenging, useful polemic, and its queer/Two-Spirit ending is only one of many gauntlets that it throws down in the field of American Indian studies. The work that final chapter does in the interstices of American Indian and queer studies is exciting, motivating us to see the very challenge of the title *Red on Red* in relationship to same-sex desire. But there is certainly reason to suspect that Womack’s utopian, bridge-building mood at the end of the book is not his *only* mood regarding how *queer* and *Indian*, as well as, importantly, *Oklahoma*, go together. I would like, therefore, to “hare off” and begin again (again, with a difference) and turn to an earlier, autobiographical essay of Womack’s called “Howling at the Moon: The Queer but True Story of My Life as a Hank Williams Song,” written for the 1997 essay collection *As We Are Now: Mixed-blood Essays on Race and Identity*.<sup>6</sup> I want to explore why, in this essay, Womack *doesn’t* build bridges.

So, who am I finally? An Indian man? Yes. A gay man? Yes. But who I am really isn’t the question, is it? What matters is the people, survival, continuance, protection of our Nations, and sovereignty. We must find ways to write about such issues in our stories and poems in a way that makes our people themselves want to read what we have to say. There aren’t any easy answers, but we have to keep posing the questions, searching, realizing we all have a long ways to go. (“Howling,” 49)

Thus ends “Howling at the Moon.” Womack assents to a pair of identities — Indian man and gay man. They each carry manhood but are clearly



presented as separate possibilities that Womack stages for us as potentially friendly, potentially hostile. Whatever they are, they are shudderingly generic. Womack does not have a legally acknowledged tribal affiliation, and he does not match what most non-Indians think Indians should look like. Nevertheless, his Indianness—specifically his Creekness and not so much his Cherokeeeness—is not a choice. “Indian people have always recognized me as being Indian, so [pretending not to be has] not been an option, even if I wanted it, which I don’t” (“Howling,” 48). Womack also relates with some pride that he is marked as Indian by the police when pulled over for speeding. If Womack shows up as Indian to Indians and policers of Indians, he also recounts being clocked by both queer and homophobic gaydar. Having outlined the structural parallels between his Indianness and his gayness, the expectation is ripe that he will end the essay in a healing or aggregating gesture, “I am an Indian gay man,” and show us what a beautiful and rich experience it is to be *both* of those fascinating identities.

“But who I am really isn’t the question, is it?” Womack asks, snatching back both “Indian man” and “gay man” and the erotic possibilities of their cohabitation in his supposedly always singular being. He rejects as unimportant, destructive, or perhaps simply boring the two-step going on between his several selves. But if Womack teases with the generic expectations of a gay politics that teaches us to come out and to begin our sentences with “As a lesbian” or “As a gay man,” he is also a very good student of queer studies and of Indian studies, each of which suggests that naming ourselves and standing alone in our personal identities is dangerous. His rejection of “who I am really” sounds like Foucault steering us away from the lure of ontology and suggesting that we aim to “work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are.”<sup>7</sup> It also sounds like the advice of the Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham, who cautions against the power of the desire to be authentic: “The noble savage stereotype works within us, even if we condemn it and recognize it as racist and false. . . . One of the most terrible aspects of our situation today is that none of us feels that we are authentic. . . . We accuse each other of not being true to our traditions. That phenomenon is part of the romantic exploitation.”<sup>8</sup>

But if it is easy to read Womack’s intellectual position—his refusal to say “I am”—as congruent with the mandates of both American Indian and queer studies, we have to take very seriously the fact that he turns on his

heel at that precise moment of possible congruence. The essay's ultimate question, "So who am I finally?" to which the entire essay has seemed to tend, allows Womack to offer an entirely different final answer: "What matters is the people, survival, continuance, protection of our Nations, and sovereignty." Yes, yes, Womack says. We can toss around the questions of Indianness and gayness until the cows come home. But, finally, sovereignty is the answer. That turn to sovereignty as somehow more than or other than identity is challenging above and beyond the quotidian challenge in queer studies to be ever more multiple. Is Womack actually subordinating to sovereignty the fact and therefore the attendant theoretical possibilities of queerness, of Two-Spiritness, of any "-ness" at all that might keep sexuality on the table with Creek? And what does it mean to queer studies if he is? For if queer studies is happy to think *itself* past identity, is it happy to *be thought* out of parity with other concerns? Elsewhere in the essay Womack ponders denying his complex set of contingent relations bound up in claiming mixed-blood identity: "I'm wondering if identifying as a mixed-blood, rather than as part of a tribal nation, diminishes sovereignty? What might be called for is a view of identity in terms of the larger picture — the tribal nation — rather than in terms of the fragmented mixedblood individual" ("Howling," 32). His gayness works in this essay like his mixed-blood-ness — to be the stuff of the essay but not, in the end, the question the essay poses. If, in other words, the fractured individuality that gayness and mixed-blood-ness both illuminate diminishes sovereignty, then yes, he is subordinating the agonistics of that individuality.

Womack doesn't ever say he isn't Indian or gay. He doesn't say that being gay or being Indian isn't important or doesn't have meaning. He says it doesn't *matter* — and that's different. To try to explain this distinction, I'm going to do what, in *Red on Red*, Womack says we must not do: jump to a Lakota example to shed light on a Creek perspective. Luther Standing Bear explains the way in which Lakota men, on the one hand, are raised up to be what he calls "individualized" and, on the other, cannot express that "individuation" without losing it outside of "tribal consciousness": "Though each person became individualized . . . he could not consider himself as separate from the band or nation. Tribal consciousness was the sole guide and dictator, there being no human agency to compel the individual to accept guidance or obey dictates, yet for the one to cut himself off from the whole meant to lose identity or to die."<sup>9</sup> So if we take

this, awkward as the comparison may be, as a demonstration of how Womack can, in this rhetorical instance, figure the individual expression of sexuality as subordinate to sovereignty without in turn sounding as incomprehensible as a Log Cabin Republican, we can begin to see what he means by his gayness “not mattering.” If “matter” is sovereignty—the matter of land and the matter of culture—and if “identity” is, in Standing Bear’s terms, that which you lose upon claiming it as your personal own, then what we see Womack doing is insisting that in his case Creek sovereignty makes three-dimensional, real, matterful any other position, such as sexuality, that he might happen to express.

“Howling at the Moon” was published in 1997, before José Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), before Siobhan B. Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000), and before Roderick A. Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004).<sup>10</sup> But although it predates these works, I find the essay *still* challenging to the relationship between queer and American Indian studies—more challenging, in fact, than that final chapter of *Red on Red*. In “Howling at the Moon,” Womack’s is not the disidentificatory practice through which “queer” and “of color” come together to critique the sacrifice of gender and sex radicalism in nationalist movements. Nor does Womack’s indifference to the identity “gay man” achieve what Muñoz describes Vaginal Davis achieving through performative *disidentification* with normative formations of “gay”: Davis, Muñoz writes, “clears out a space, deterritorializing it and then reoccupying it with queer and black bodies.”<sup>11</sup> Muñoz’s hopeful metaphor of space-clearing, deterritorializing, and reoccupying is no metaphor when it comes to Oklahoma. The fact that it is no metaphor raises the question, can a postnationalist, deterritorializing vision of the relationship between “queer” and “of color” be satisfying in many American Indian contexts? Womack turns away from gay *and* Indian, from queer *and* of color, as rallying points for the effects on the Creek Nation of repetitive space-clearings, deterritorializings, and reoccupations to, from, in, and in orbit around Oklahoma. What he replaces them with is a list of concerns that is national if not nationalist and about territory if not territorialization.

Womack takes us on a trip that seems to have a destination: “I’m a gay Indian.” Instead we arrive at sovereignty. Why this redirection? Because “sovereignty” as it is debated in American Indian studies is very much in

the becoming.<sup>12</sup> And because sovereignty is always en route, in transit, not-yet-arrived, it is difficult and perhaps wrong, under Womack's logic, to consider oneself "arrived" at any other identity formation. For Womack, sovereignty is a series of questions, a quest, a tendency. Which is why when he stops at sovereignty, he doesn't stop at all. The journey is only just beginning: "There aren't any easy answers, but we have to keep posing the questions, searching, realizing we all have a long ways to go." Let me be very clear. I do not read this moment as symptomatic of Womack being unwilling or unable to accommodate gayness or queerness or queer studies into an Indian and specifically Creek frame — although that's not to deny the traces of struggle or to say that it is easy for him to bring everything to the table. I see his refusal in this instance to merrily meld identities as a blinking yellow light that allows us to keep traveling, but cautions us to slow down and recognize that there are some deep structural reasons why queer and *specifically* Indian seem to go together so nicely yet can fail each other at certain crucial moments.

So let's pick an origin story for queer studies out of a hat. What can it teach us about the possible siblinghood of queer and American Indian studies? In *Epistemology of the Closet*, published in 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asked — and I'm going to place her argument in past tense because I want to remember that *this* book, because it functions as an origin of sorts, is now a useful marker of its moment — what room is there in the canon for lesbian and gay male writing? She began her marvelous riff on the certainty of there having been a "gay Shakespeare" by citing Saul Bellow's question as to whether there has been a Tolstoy of the Zulus and by pointing out the extreme cynicism of "a question posed with the arrogant intention of maintaining ignorance." She used Bellow's racist quip to turn from the supposedly humorous extremity of the Zulu Tolstoy to a twin extremity, that of a gay Shakespeare. In that turning, she showed that the gay extremity is not an extremity at all, but an essential organ. She asked, "Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare? Has there ever been a gay Proust?" And the famous and delightful answer: "Does the Pope wear a dress?" Sedgwick then went on to point out that "dozens or possibly hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to consider 'our' culture" have been and are gay and/or have been and are available for what we would now call queer studies. It was and is an elegant argument

in every way, but it left Sedgwick with a problem: that “impossible” Zulu Tolstoy, still out in the cold. So Sedgwick slipped in this little clause that I want to look at closely. She finished her sentence about monoculturalism by saying that what is true of “‘our’ culture”—that gay writers are at its core and that queerness is constitutive of its canon—is also true of “every other” culture. But, she said, parallel queer centrality manifests itself in other cultures “in different forms and senses” than it does in “ours.”<sup>13</sup>

Back then, Sedgwick recognized the problem. Her solution then was to posit a multicultural queerness that was prophylactically protected from its own multiplicity. She offered up a vision of multicultures, each with parallel central queers, but whose parallel but different queernesses were nevertheless distinct and discrete. In other words, although Sedgwick critiqued monoculturalism, she didn’t, in that book at that time, account for cross-culturalism, or nested cultures, or, to stop beating around the bush, for what it means to be a gay Creek novelist scholar in present-day Oklahoma, perhaps the most cross-cultural, nested, bush-beaten acreage in North America, all puns intended. Not that Craig Womack needs Eve Sedgwick to have painted his picture, but it is interesting to look back at that founding moment of queer studies to see how closely knit questions of race, sexuality, and authorship were and also how fundamentally Sedgwick could recognize, even then, that they were separated at birth. Now, seventeen years later, how do those siblings, queer and American Indian studies, resemble each other—or not?

Turning from Sedgwick’s “other forms and senses” to look squarely at what happens to Indian sexuality in the embedded and multilayered spaces of colonialism, we confront another monolith—the “Indians are gay” monolith. Indianness and homosexuality are firmly sutured together in colonialist discourse; indeed, languages of savagery and homosexuality are so deeply dependent on one another that the roar of representation and of scholarship elucidating that representation is quite deafening. Was there a gay Shakespeare? Sedgwick answered, “Does the Pope wear a dress?” The answer, she was telling us back in 1990, takes us to the heart of the canon, and letting that answer have meaning transforms the orientation of the canon forevermore. But let’s stand at the heart of the canon and look around for Native people. They aren’t the authors of the canon, to be sure, but nevertheless, and to borrow a phrase, they are everywhere. Caliban, Chigachgook, Friday, Queequeg. They’re all here, and guess what?

They're all queer. Standing here in the heart of the canon and in the wake of an enormous amount of queer scholarship we ask, are Indian men gay? And the answer comes ringing back: Does Felipe Rose wear a warbonnet?

To turn to another founding moment in queer studies: in his 1992 book *Sodometries*, Jonathan Goldberg entitles his section on the Americas "They Were All Sodomites," pointing to the ubiquitous habit of Europeans in the first decades of contact to so characterize the Indian men they encountered and killed.<sup>14</sup> Indian hating and queer hating form a powerful pair of pistons in the history of white colonization of the Americas. This is to say not that the history of genocide and the history of homophobic violence are the same history but — after Goldberg — that the tendency or tactic of Europeans to see sodomy everywhere in the so-called New World enabled a devastating two-fisted excuse for murderous violence and a complicated homoerotics of genocide. It is also to argue, with Mark Rifkin, that policies aimed at assimilating Indians through the destruction of kinship structures figured Indian cultures as other than heteronormative in order to reinvent and assimilate them as straight, private-property-owning, married citizens.<sup>15</sup> When you look through the lens of histories of colonization, Indians look gay. But Goldberg warns us that simply noticing how homicidally homophobic the practice of Indian-hating is "does not tell us anything about the sexual practices of these Indians; it functions only as a spectacle for Europe and its ruses of power."<sup>16</sup>

In colonialist discourse, in other words, there is a switchback effect, whereby Indianness and queerness shift back and forth in an exchange whose very instability is profoundly useful in discourses of both Indian hating and queer hating, and Indian queer-hating and queer Indian-hating. The Indian and the queer often stand in for each other, swap hats, play dress up together. George Catlin's 1832 painting *Wi-jun-jon, The Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light), Going to and Returning from Washington*, shows an Assiniboin chief on the left all dressed up like an Indian and on the right all dressed up like a primping dandy complete with fan. It is a dyad that, on the surface, bemoans white corruption of the authentic savage into a queer. In fact, it teaches us to see Indian men as natural dandies, as Beau Brummells of the wilderness. We look from the outrageous "white," obviously effeminate getup on the right back to the gorgeous buckskins and feathers on the left, which we suddenly also recognize as very fancy, indeed. The masculine Indian does not become

effeminate upon arrival in Washington. He was always effeminate, so the transformation is more subtle than that. The picture shows us an Assiniboin man who, in donning white clothes, loses his specificity, his nation. He stays a queer figure but becomes the generic dandy, made extra-ridiculous—but not specific—by his race. And this genericizing aspect of the figure of the queer when it is used in relation to the figure of the Indian is deeply insidious. The pairing of the specific Indian and the generic queer—or the production of the Indian as generically queer immediately upon contact with Europeans—aids discursively in the assault on specific Indian sovereignties and land claims. Thus—to remind us in a very fast and loose manner of Jefferson’s 1787 *Notes on the State of Virginia*—Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, can argue the generic degeneracy of the New World by accusing Indian men of being passionless toward women and small-penis-ed. Jefferson defends “his” Indians’ masculinity, arguing that they are as passionate toward women and as well endowed as white men.<sup>17</sup> Here Jefferson is not defending Indians—he is defending the healthful and generative properties of American land. He seems to defend Indians because he sees them as placeholders for what will become white land and is arguing that once whites inhabit Indian land, they will not descend into homosexual sloth. What is at stake for both Buffon and Jefferson is land. Between the two white writers, the question of whether Indians are queer enables the claiming of Indian land, and the question enables that claim *no matter what the answer is*. The invocation of queerness—or queer hating—alongside Indianness is a crucible for Indian-hating genocidal violence, the theft of Indian land, and the destruction of sovereignty. This is precisely not to argue that Indians are figured as queer and that therein lies the root of dispossession, thus claiming a more-object-than-thou status for the generic queer. Rather, I’m trying to articulate how queerness and Indianness form a sort of tag team in their very relationality within colonialist discourse, sometimes operating together in the service of Indian dispossession.

It is particularly interventional, therefore, for Womack to turn away from gay Indianness and toward a notion of sovereignty that looks far more transitive and malleable than either of the categories of Indianness or gayness he says he inhabits. But Womack is a self-proclaimed trickster, and as he turns away at the essay’s end, we catch a glimpse of an embedded resolution in his and our rearview mirrors. Denied the happy cohabitation

of queer and Indian at the end of the essay, and confronted instead with this challenge to think about a notion of sovereignty defined by its not-yet-ness, we are recalled to an earlier moment in the essay that slipped past as good storytelling but that, upon reflection, reveals itself as a resolution of sorts. The essay's title, "The Queer but True Story of My Life as a Hank Williams Song," showcases Hank Williams as a site of affective identification for Womack. Hank Williams is the place, or rather the nonplace — the sound, the transmission — through which Womack can feel, through hearing, his gayness and Indianness together. The discussion of Hank Williams is the *only* moment in the essay where the word *queer* appears as a term that can account for that feeling. Womack is showing us that gay and Indian come together for him where, in fact, there appears to be no place for either gayness or Indianness at all.

Womack describes his attraction to Hank Williams as an attraction sparked and sustained by his male relatives — his grandfather and father — and their refraction of themselves as "a coming and going people" ("Howling," 32). The phrase, of course, references both removal histories and more recent histories of moveable labor practices. Toward the end of his career Hank Williams sometimes recorded under the name Luke the Drifter, and it is Williams's identification with nomadism, with removal and travel, that Womack's essay reanimates. Williams becomes the voice, drifting out of radios, sung along with, rehearsed and resung, of that coming-and-going-ness. For the young Womack, it is specifically Williams's hoboness that proffers a site of articulation of love and ties between men, now and in the past and down a masculine family line. Womack explains that this connective power extends into his adulthood when he tells us of an evening that he spent with an "Oklahoma Indian friend of mine." The friend confesses to a love of Hank Williams, and Womack describes that moment of connection between them as "a small miracle." In another kind of autobiographical essay this moment of connection might be narrated as revelatory and liberating, revealing to the gay subject that there are others like him and that community will be his salvation. This is not, however, how this embedded scene plays out. Although later we learn that the friend is gay, Womack hasn't told us that yet, nor in this moment of miracle does the friend come out to him. This is not a mutual revelation of either Oklahoma Indianness, which is already known, or gayness, which is yet to be spoken. It is, rather, a radio wave of connection, with hobo music expanding to envelop, backward and forward in



time, Womack and his Oklahoma male progenitors, Womack and another Oklahoma man, Womack and another Oklahoma Indian man, Womack and another Oklahoma Indian gay man. The feeling of connection, resonating to encompass men in so many directions, comes precisely because Hank Williams articulates noncommunication so well. Womack tells his friend why he loves Williams's "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" so much: "That was the purest, rawest, most emotional thing I had ever listened to. I thought, good god, this isn't an expression of pain, this is pain, the stuff of which pain is made" ("Howling," 38). Williams is not "expressing" pain. This is not mediated, narrated self-revelation. It doesn't even result in catharsis. Williams "could" cry, but he doesn't. Why is that so precious to Womack in the tension between Indian man and gay man? It doesn't matter that Hank Williams is a straight white guy. It is his *hoboness* — his Oklahoboness, if I may be so bold — that renders him a transitive cultural and civic character. A white "Okie," after all, carries his Oklahobo -homo -home with him everywhere in his very name. To be a hobo is to be a noncitizen of either canon or nation; it is to be adrift, to be coming and going.

The story of Hank Williams comes to its conclusion when Womack and that same friend are in a car with two white gay friends. Womack secretly slips in a Hank Williams tape, which appalls the white friends: "One of them referred to my Hank Williams collection as incestuous hillbilly warbling." For the white gay friend, that "incestuous" signifies poor white trash and the hyperbolic and genealogically myopic heterosexuality supposedly performed more insistently by poor whites than rich. For the white friend, "incest" calls up a certain classed and sexed configuration of whiteness, and it signifies everything that queerness framed as cosmopolitan-white-male wealth supposedly overcomes.

But that same accusation of incest is important to understanding how Hank Williams works for Womack. The slur of incest, which in the mouth of white gay men scared of country music adheres specifically to white "Okies," becomes a means of making a sort of traveling sense of Womack's radio-wave model of connection. This model broadcasts three-dimensionally in time and space to encompass a past and present bloodline of male Indian Oklahoman Hank Williams listeners gay *and* straight. To the extent that it catches up both a despised sexuality and a despised structure of kinship, this connection looks more like what Womack's gay white

friends mean by “incest” than what they mean by “gay.” Womack is not interested in his white friends’ model of connection, which substitutes the horizontal of “queer” for the vertical of “incest.” Through the love he and his gay Indian friend share for the so-called incestuous Williams, Womack can show how an Indian version of queer connection moves in all directions, catching up male-on-male, red-on-red, *familial* and *national* interaction among Indian men, a web that includes Womack’s queerness but as one of many points of relation. But most important, it is the hobo movement among those points — the coming and going regardless of direction — that keeps Womack and those who travel in relation to him always in movement toward the immanence of “sovereignty.”

In tune with Williams, Womack and his friend “howl at the moon in true coyote abandon” in a car moving through Oklahoma and across the protests of white gay men. “I don’t know quite how to put my finger on it,” Womack says of the experience, “but it has to do with alienation, loneliness, a shit-load of pain, and not being able to speak to the one you love, remaining hidden and silent in the shadows for a lifetime. The songs have everything to do with being queer. The songs have everything to do with being Indian. And me and my buddy were the only two people that night who knew the beauty and terror of both identities” (“Howling” 38). Womack still refuses to produce a neat Venn diagram for Indian and queer — he and his friend understand *both* identities, rather than understanding “*that* identity.” Hank Williams, however, can account for both without being either.

Everything I am saying while tagging along behind Womack could be summarized as a critique of the historical tendency and a present critical impulse to make queer and Indian into metaphors of each other: being Indian is being queer, and vice versa. The etymological meaning of *metaphor* is “transport”; metaphors are also described as having “vehicles.”<sup>18</sup> What we find, at the affective crescendo of this Womack essay, is Womack and his friends in that moving vehicle, refusing to arrive at the resolution of the metaphor, instead continuously “coming and going” across the empty impulse to make queer and Indian the same: it is plainly, painfully evident that for many people they are simply coincident or congruent or collisional. A metaphor strives to produce sameness across difference. But Womack and his friend find the most powerful reverberations in a series of doubled feelings of difference (“we were the only *two* people who knew

the beauty *and* terror of *both* identities”; emphasis added) through the recorded and reproduced sound of a reproductive sameness that is resolutely *neither* Indian nor queer — just “incestuous hillbilly warbling.”

## Notes

I am grateful to Michael Moon and Jordan Stein for introducing me to “Howling at the Moon” at the Queer October program at Johns Hopkins University in 2004 and to participants Deborah Miranda, Scott Stevens, Craig Womack, and Ada Norris, who made that weekend so generative. I am also grateful to Heather Love, Kate Thomas, and Jordana Rosenberg for early readings of this essay.

- 1 Womack is only one of many scholars, Native and non-Native, and only one of many Native novelists, poets, and playwrights, who are thinking and writing queer and American Indian studies together. I choose to think in his wake here not to privilege him but simply because his work has been knocking about in my mind for a long time, enabling and challenging me on many levels. Other scholarship includes Paula Gunn Allen, “Beloved Women: Lesbians in American Indian Cultures,” *Conditions: Seven* 3.1 (Spring 1981): 67–87; Beth Brant, “From the Inside — Looking at You,” *Canadian Woman Studies — Les Casiers de la Femme* 14.1 (Fall 1993): 16–17; Beth Brant, “Giveaway: Native Lesbian Writers,” *Signs* 18.4 (Summer 1993): 944–47; Daniel Cornell, “Woman Looking: Revis(ion)ing Pauline’s Subject Position in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 4.1 (Spring 1992): 49–64; Peter Dickinson, *Here Is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Janice Gould, “Disobedience (in Language) in Text by Lesbian Native Americans,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 25.1 (January 1994): 32–44; Beatrice Medicine, *Learning to Be an Anthropologist and Remaining “Native”: Selected Writings* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Deborah Miranda, “Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for Native American Women’s Erotics,” *Frontiers* 23.2 (2002): 135–49; Michael Moon, “Whose History? The Case of Oklahoma,” in *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 24–34; Tara Prince-Hughes, “Contemporary Two-Spirit Identity in the Fiction of Paula Gunn Allen and Beth Brant,” *SAIL* 10.4 (Winter 1998): 9–31; and Annette Van Dyke, “The Journey Back to Female Roots: A Laguna Pueblo Model,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Racial Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay, Joanne Glasgow, and Catherine Stimpson (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 339–54.

Since I first wrote this essay, there has been a great deal of new scholarship, for example: Mark Rifkin, “Romancing Kinship: A Queer Reading of Indian

- Education and Zitkala-Sa's American Indian Stories," *GLQ* 12.1 (2006): 27–59; Scott L. Morgenson, "Activist Media in Native AIDS Organizing: Theorizing the Colonial Conditions of AIDS," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 32.1 (2008): 35–56. And recently, two special issues in the fields of Native American studies and queer studies have been entirely devoted to the question of the intersection of each. Daniel Heath Justice and James H. Cox edited *Queering Native Literature, Indigenizing Queer Theory*, a special issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures* 20.1 (Spring 2008), which includes essays by Sophie Mayer, Michael Snyder, and Quentin Youngberg. Justice, Rifkin, and I edited *Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity*, a special issue of *GLQ* 16.1–2 (Winter/Spring 2010), which includes essays by Scott Lauria Morgenson, Andrea Smith, Qwo-Li Driskill, Craig Womack, Janice Gould, Lisa Tatonetti, James Thomas Stevens, Sarah Dowling, Deborah A. Miranda, Daniel Heath Justice, and Sharon P. Holland.
- 2 Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *Red on Red*.
  - 3 Michael Moon very usefully stages Oklahoma as particularly suited to thinking the differing alterities of queer and Indian together in his "Whose History? The Case of Oklahoma," 24–34.
  - 4 Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," *differences* 3.2 (1991): iii–xviii, at iv.
  - 5 For scholarship on American Indian cultures and gender diversity, see Evelyn Blackwood, "Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females," *Signs* 10.1 (1984): 27–42; Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998); and Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
  - 6 Craig Womack, "Howling at the Moon: The Strange but True Story of My Life as a Hank Williams Song," in *As We Are Now: Mixedblood Essays on Race and Identity*, ed. William S. Penn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 28–49. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as "Howling."
  - 7 Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994), 135–40, at 136.
  - 8 Jimmie Durham, "Geronimo!" in *Partial Recall*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New York: New Press, 1992), 55–58, 57.

- 9 Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 124–25.
- 10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- 11 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 115.
- 12 Womack is tapping into a discussion of American Indian sovereignty as a future- and community-oriented process that is of long standing. See Vine Deloria Jr., *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). It is a discussion that Womack continues to theorize in *Red on Red*.
- 13 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 50–52.
- 14 Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
- 15 Mark Rifkin, “Romancing Kinship: A Queer Reading of Indian Education and Zitkala-Sa’s *American Indian Stories*,” *GLQ* 12.1 (Winter 2006): 27–59.
- 16 Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 183.
- 17 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 18 Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal,” in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 277–316, at 280.



Lesbian and Gay after Queer



 Public Feelings

ANN CVETKOVICH

THE EDITORS' INVITATION to write about how our work on "nonsexual" domains relates to our interest in sexuality spoke to me because of my engagement with the topic of "public feelings" with a group of scholars both nationally and at the University of Texas (UT). Aiming to explore the role of feelings in public life, the project emerged from collective meetings on the future of gender and sexuality and the question of how to give feminism greater impact in the public sphere. A core group of about half a dozen people have organized sessions at conferences such as MLA, ASA, and the Cultural Studies Association and local events at their home bases; at the University of Texas, I have also coordinated a research seminar that has met semiregularly since 2002. But the Public Feelings group has also very significantly worked informally—in some measure, of course, due to lack of funding or institutional support but also out of a desire to figure out new ways to make academic work and to create conjunctions between academia, activism, and art. Our meetings, whether public or among ourselves, are as likely to start with a



mood as an idea; at one of our national gatherings, for example, many of us admitted to feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by our professional obligations, and we considered what kinds of projects might emerge out of those conditions and how to produce scholarship not timed to the rhythms and genres of conferences, edited collections, and books. In a public event at UT shortly after the United States invaded Iraq, the dominant response was one of incredulity, a seemingly low-grade or normalized version of the epistemic shock that is said to accompany trauma. At another public UT event, this time to discuss reactions to Hurricane Katrina's devastations, many participants described a sense of divided attention, the movement back and forth between the everyday business of the semester's beginning and the urgency of the disaster, a split focus that constitutes the lived experience of class and race divisions.<sup>1</sup>

Begun in 2001, our investigation has coincided with and operated in the shadow of September 11 and its ongoing consequences—war in Iraq, a sentimental takeover of 9/11 to underwrite militarism, Bush's reelection, and the list goes on (including, at this writing, Obama's presidency). Rather than analyzing the geopolitical underpinnings of these developments, we've been more interested in their emotional dynamics. What makes it possible for people to vote for Bush or to assent to war, and how do these political decisions operate within the context of daily lives that are pervaded by a combination of anxiety and numbness? How can we, as intellectuals and activists, acknowledge our own political disappointments and failures in a way that can be enabling? Where might hope be possible? Those questions stem from our experience of what one of our cells, Feel Tank Chicago, has called "political depression," the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better. The concept of political depression is not, however, meant to be wholly depressing; indeed, Feel Tank has operated with the camp humor one might expect from a group of seasoned queer activists, organizing an International Day of the Politically Depressed in which participants were invited to show up in their bathrobes to indicate their fatigue with traditional forms of protest and distributing T-shirts and refrigerator magnets carrying the slogan "Depressed? It Might Be Political!"<sup>2</sup> The goal is to depathologize negative affects so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis. This is not, how-

ever, to suggest that depression is thereby converted into a positive experience; it retains its associations with inertia and despair, if not apathy and indifference, but these affects become sites of publicity and community formation.

Along with being a stealth feminist project, that is, one designed to incorporate the insights of feminism into a broad-based effort to reimagine political life and collectivity, Public Feelings is also implicitly queer but not always announced as such. Many of our members are veteran AIDS activists and come to the project with various forms of political depression in the face of an ongoing and too frequently normalized health crisis of global proportions, but they also have a keen interest in new forms of collectivity. Indeed, it's impossible to imagine the Public Feelings project without the inspiration of queer work. Our interest in everyday life, in how global politics and history manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experience, is bolstered by the role that queer theory has played in calling attention to the integral role of sexuality within public life. Moreover, our interest in negative affects draws inspiration from the de-pathologizing work of queer studies, which has made it possible to document and revalue non-normative ways of living. Queer theory contributes to the more expansive definition of political life that Public Feelings also seeks to foster—that political identities are implicit within structures of feeling, sensibilities, everyday forms of cultural expression and affiliation that may not take the form of recognizable organizations or institutions.

Given these ambitious goals, it's not surprising that queer activists would feel politically depressed when confronted with a mainstream gay and lesbian political agenda that consists of gay marriage and civil rights. Was this the visibility and recognition that we fought for? If so, "writing since queer theory" sometimes seems like a necessary, if remedial, backtracking to reassert forms of queer affiliation and identity that provide alternatives to the privatized family and couple. Public Feelings member Lisa Duggan's critique of gay marriage has provided a particularly vivid example of how putatively private or personal matters are in fact central to political life; she argues that the call for legalized gay marriage simply reproduces neoliberal efforts to make access to rights contingent on a privatized family form and that it contributes to the shrinking of the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> A cluster of essays in *GLQ* discusses the importance of continuing to remember queer AIDS activism and its cultural records as a

repository of grief and optimism that remain ongoing. For example, Alex Juhasz, writing about her video documentary *Activist Remains*, which revisits tapes of her dead friend James Lamb, argues for the productive possibilities of nostalgia, and Lucas Hilderbrand writes about the forms of “retroactivism” that can be inspired by the documents of AIDS activism.<sup>4</sup> Just as queer AIDS activism has done, *Public Feelings* holds out for a queer agenda that moves beyond gay rights and is attentive to the linkages between sexual politics and other issues such as war, migration, and racism.

### Affect and Sexuality

I would not want to suggest that work on “affect” comes after queer theory or is separate from sexuality, since in my own work the two have always been closely intertwined. Indeed, affect and sexuality are not merely analogous categories but coextensive ones with shared histories, raising questions, for example, about how affective categories ranging from desire to shame and loss get sexualized. Work on affect bears a particularly close relation to work on sexuality and queer theory because affect has benefited from the same historicization that is central to Foucauldian and other social constructionist approaches to sexuality; Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis applies as much to affect as sexuality, warranting a skeptical approach to claims for interiority or emotional expression as the truth of the self. My own early work on sensationalism and the politics of affect was deeply influenced by this model and was also significantly inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s formative work in *Between Men*, in which the category of “homosocial desire,” so central to systems of social power, linked sexual and nonsexual domains.<sup>5</sup> I was glad to be able to use theories of sexuality as a way to legitimate work on affect; although affect sometimes seemed even less tangible or defensible than sexuality as an object of study, I also took encouragement from both the struggles and the successes of efforts to make sexuality a field of inquiry.

As scholarship on affect flourishes, I no longer think of it as a minor spin-off from work on sexuality; instead, it extends the reach of studies of sexuality and enhances its status as a broadly intersectional category. Consider, for example, how Judith Butler takes up the categories of loss and melancholy first developed in the context of her work on gender in her

recent writings on human rights, 9/11, and other topics of broad general interest.<sup>6</sup> Eve Sedgwick makes an explicit turn to affect in her investigations of shame, and the tellingly titled *Touching Feeling* is simultaneously continuous with her earlier writing and marked by her call for queer scholarship that moves beyond a critique of the repressive hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick favors the rich nuances and idiosyncrasies of what she calls reparative reading over programmatic or ideological readings that seek to line up cultural texts as progressive or reactionary. Reparative reading is affectively driven, motivated by pleasure and curiosity, and directed toward the textures and tastes, the sensuous feel, of one's objects of study.

Not only does this suggestion seem especially important for work on affect that must necessarily attend to specificity; it also explains why queer theory might appear to lose some of its polemical focus in favor of a proliferation of projects. While critique may remain necessary, it is no longer sufficient. It has been extremely important for queer studies to move across historical and geographic boundaries, away from the recent history of gay and lesbian identities and communities in the Western metropolis. In such contexts, what counts as (homo)sexuality is unpredictable and requires new vocabularies; affect may be present when overt forms of sexuality are not. Affect not only expands the field of sexuality studies but also transforms its methods. In her work in medieval studies, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that historical inquiry can be motivated by an affective relation between past and present rather than a causal one.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing affect and desire as the motive for intellectual projects has of course long been central to queer studies—evident in the legitimization of camp as a form of queer culture and the value frequently given to the unexpected object, including the popular or the disdained. The turn to negative affects such as shame, loss, melancholy, trauma, and hate within queer studies also reflects this tendency.

The embrace of affect within queer studies has also enabled new forms of personal voice in academic work, including criticism based in memoir, public intellectual work that seeks a general audience, or overt declarations of love and other investments in our intellectual projects. For example, I have been combining memoir and critical essay to critique medicalized notions of depression and to document the pressures of surviving academia. This is the riskiest project I've yet undertaken, even as I am inspired by other academic and specifically queer experiments in writing and take

heart from the claim that the queer memoir operates as a form of collective witness.<sup>9</sup> I write in the spirit of AIDS activists who have rejected the victimization that so often accompanies illness and have instead claimed agency for the sick person, as well as challenging medical notions of sickness and disease; I am also questioning professional norms that demand success, productivity, and a seamless public persona. I find myself working in this idiom in part as another experiment in form and as an ongoing engagement with questions of confession, self-display, and coming out, first inspired by feminism's sense of the personal as political and bolstered by queer theory's work in making new knowledges possible.

### Public Feelings as Trauma Studies

I struggle against the fear that such a project is too local or too personal and seek ways to use public feelings to connect queer studies to a range of other projects with geopolitical urgency. The term *public feelings* has helped me to move beyond my earlier work in trauma studies and to situate that field more broadly. In *An Archive of Feelings*, I wanted to create a context within which it would be possible to talk about queer and lesbian sites of trauma and affect in relation to slavery and diaspora, human rights, and the aftermath of war and political violence.<sup>10</sup> Too often within those frameworks, my queer examples have seemed minor or irrelevant even to me, and I have felt the pull of other topics that seem more broadly based. For example, inspired by my oral history work with AIDS activists, I have been involved in conducting and analyzing interviews for Columbia University's September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project. I was motivated at first by my sense that the mourning of 9/11 might benefit from the model provided by AIDS activism, such as Douglas Crimp's call for forms of militancy that include mourning.<sup>11</sup> Although the desire for scapegoats and simple solutions that drove the Bush regime can still pervade the national memory of 9/11, alternative forms of public discourse that combine anger, sadness, apathy, ambivalence, and confusion are readily available within queer studies.

My work with the category of public feelings builds on my efforts in *An Archive of Feelings* to create an approach to trauma that focuses on the everyday and the insidious rather than the catastrophic and that depathologizes trauma and situates it in a social and cultural frame rather than a

medical one. The distinction between everyday and catastrophic trauma is also tied to the distinction between public and private, since often what counts as national or public trauma is that which is more visible and catastrophic, that which is newsworthy and sensational, as opposed to the small dramas that interest me because they draw attention to how structural forms of violence are so frequently lived, how their invisibility or normalization is another part of their oppressiveness. Situating trauma within the larger context of public feelings offers a more flexible approach to the unpredictable linkages among violence, affective experience, and social and political change.

Another motive for my move from trauma to public feelings is to explore the affective legacy of racialized histories of genocide, slavery, colonization, and migration. While this could be construed as a trauma project, I have increasingly found it more useful to think of it as a public feelings project, since this shift allows for languages of affect to be generated organically from within particular histories and discourages the imposition of categories developed in other contexts. While the categories used to describe genocides such as the Holocaust can be productively backdated or transported to other contexts, it's important to note that most of the writing commonly associated with trauma theory has little to say about slavery and colonialism. I'm also interested in new vocabularies for thinking about how historical trauma finds its way into daily life. If you're looking for trauma, you might miss what are often more everyday forms of distress and affect. There is, for example, an extremely powerful body of work on African American and African diaspora culture and slavery that could be included in the canon of trauma theory.<sup>12</sup> Often, however, this scholarship is less visible within trauma studies because it doesn't explicitly use the term *trauma* even as it seeks to record the affective aftermath of racisms grounded in historical events such as slavery. In other areas of American studies, scholars have been working with the category of melancholy as it relates to racialization and also to processes of assimilation and migration.<sup>13</sup> Although all of this scholarship could be used to expand the field of trauma studies, particularly so as to provide a fuller account of racial trauma, it also points the way toward the wide-ranging significance of affect that the Public Feelings project seeks to explore.

One premise of both trauma studies and the Public Feelings project is that we have yet to attend to the past adequately and that one measure of

that neglect arises at the affective level. Affect is often managed in the public sphere through official discourses of recognition or commemoration that don't fully address everyday affects or through legal measures (ranging from the abolition of slavery and segregation to affirmative action) that don't fully provide emotional justice. The goal is something more than statues and monuments, something that involves ways of living, structures of feeling. The Public Feelings project carves out space for strategies beyond those that have been critiqued on affective grounds as sentimental. It aims to critique liberal forms of affect and, moreover, to think about liberalism and neoliberalism in affective terms—to take on the vocabularies of tolerance, diversity, and multiculturalism as connected to certain affects or structures of feeling that are inadequate to, or that too conveniently package and manage, the messy legacies of history.

### Utopian Locations

In exploring racialized public feelings, I have also drawn on my other work on queer subcultural forms. At this level of daily experience and the cultural forms to which it gives rise, affective life is often central and also more complexly visible than in sensationalized media. One finds also a range of both experimental and popular media and forms that suggest models for an alternative affective public sphere. Among these, the many modes of autobiography—memoir, zines, punk rock, solo performance, autodocumentary in film and video—are very prominent as mechanisms for bringing into public view individual experiences that should be understood as collective, however idiosyncratic and queer. Although this is not the only repository of models for public feelings, it is definitely a rich one and one that I have sought to publicize in my own way so that it can have an impact outside its immediate spheres, and because it is important not to underestimate the power of those public spheres that may remain quite local or subcultural.

It's odd to me that after so many years of queer theory, I would still find myself torn between what I think of as universalizing and minoritizing projects, but this distinction remains resonant for me. Thus, in addition to making queer interventions into projects that aren't overtly about sexuality, I also want to continue to document the queer subcultures that remain unrepresented by mainstream media. For example, I have been writing

about my experiences working over the past decade at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, as well as continuing to document the work of lesbian artists doing experimental work across a range of genres that includes performance, writing, music, and visual arts. Writing about the music festival, the haven of lesbian separatism and women-only space, might seem like an anachronism, a return to the period before queer culture, yet it is a significantly queer project for me since the festival, particularly the workers' community, has survived as a locus for alternative cultures and visionary thinking. I focus on how forms of manual labor associated with the working class, especially working-class masculinities, can be the site of community building and creativity, remaking Marxist notions of alienated labor. And I consider the continuity between labor and performance, as evident in the many impromptu kinds of performance that occur in the festival community beyond the more formal staged events. The festival enacts utopian possibility, and for those workers, performers, and audience members who establish a sustained relation to it, it can be transformative far beyond its temporary duration.

My interest in utopian feelings finds company in the projects of Judith Halberstam on subcultures and queer temporalities, of José Muñoz on downtown New York's art worlds, and of Jill Dolan on performative utopias.<sup>14</sup> Dolan, for example, writes about how performance makes it possible to experience what utopia feels like because it creates a sense of community, however ephemeral, within the fragile but still visceral spaces of the live encounter. These scholars and others document queer arts and subcultures that continue to survive and in turn enable survival in a harsh political climate. Their sensibility overlaps with that of Avery Gordon, who, guided by the writings of Toni Cade Bambara, articulates a utopia that exists in the here and now rather than the fantastic visions of science fiction and new worlds, a utopia that includes hardship and violence and that offers strategies for survival.<sup>15</sup> Thus, if I began with depression and close on utopia, I have not necessarily shifted topics or even affective registers — the point would be to offer a vision of hope and possibility that doesn't foreclose despair and exhaustion. It's a profoundly queer sensibility and one that I hope can enable us to tackle the work that needs to be done and to create the pleasures that will sustain us.



## Notes

- 1 Other events and projects since the initial publication of this essay include the October 2007 conference at the University of Chicago, “Political Feelings: Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope” (<http://politicalfeeling.uchicago.edu>), which was reviewed by Todd Carmody and Heather Love in “Try Anything,” *Criticism* 50.1 (Winter 2008): 133–46; the October 2008 conference at University of Texas, “Political Emotions,” and the related anthology, *Political Emotions*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2010); and José Esteban Muñoz, ed., “Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: A Public Feelings Project,” special issue of *Women and Performance* 19.2 (Fall 2009).
- 2 For more on Feel Tank Chicago, see [www.feeltankchicago.net](http://www.feeltankchicago.net). Feel Tank members have included Lauren Berlant, Debbie Gould, Vanalyne Greene, Mary Patten, and Rebecca Zorach. The group helped organize a conference at the University of Chicago called “Depression: What Is It Good For?” in March 2004. See also Lauren Berlant, “Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 445–51.
- 3 See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
- 4 See Alexandra Juhasz, “Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism,” *GLQ* 12.2 (2006): 319–28; and Lucas Hilderbrand, “Retro-activism,” *GLQ* 12.2 (2006): 303–17.
- 5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- 6 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
- 7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 8 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities Pre- and Post-modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). See also Chris Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 9 Holly Hughes and David Roman, *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove Press, 1998).
- 10 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 11 Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
- 12 The list of authors and works would include, just for starters, the following:

- Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (1989): 1–34; Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 299–306; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 13 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 343–71; and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 14 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
- 15 Avery F. Gordon, "Something More Powerful Than Skepticism," in *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2004), 187–205.

## Queers \_\_\_\_ This

HEATHER LOVE

### You Can't Take that Away from Me

NO, I DON'T MEAN SEX. I can do without it if I have to. It's identity that I won't let go of. And in particular—*lesbian identity*. I've been loving it too long. The wide stance, the longing, the social work, the sluttish classicism, the frumpiness, the bad relationships—it's all too perfect in my eyes. In graduate school, I learned how to distance myself from these experiences, to see them as part of a general history of sexuality. This process of self-abstraction allowed me to go from writing about my problems in my journal to writing about my problems in journals. From a certain angle it can look, even to me, like the "theory" in my work is a professional overlay—a way of dressing up activities and preoccupations that are, at heart, extracurricular. My love of queer theory is not less authentic than my love of lesbianism. It's just that it's hard for me to imagine a form of queerness that does not maintain its ties to a specific experience of sexual identity. Behind my work on affect, historiography, and the social, there is a lesbian lying in bed crying.

My story is tied up with the rise of queer studies in the

academy, and with processes of abstraction that launched the field. When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identified two key modes of understanding sexuality in *Epistemology of the Closet* as “minoritizing” and “universalizing,” she sought to elucidate the double-bind that structures representations of homosexuality. Sedgwick argued that the understanding of same-sex desires as widely shared is caught in permanent contradiction with the understanding of same-sex desire as the property of a minority population; rather than arguing that either view of homosexuality was correct, Sedgwick demonstrated how dangerous the space of overlap between these two contradictory views could be for queers, and sought to develop strategies for identifying and responding to this situation. Sedgwick’s account of universalizing and minoritizing frameworks for homosexuality also furnished a useful language for capturing the tension between sexual identity (minoritizing) and sexuality as an abstract force that cuts across established sexual identity (universalizing).

*Epistemology* is not only about this contradiction, however; it also performs it. The book is grounded in a deep engagement with the history and experience of gay male identity; at the same time, it models an especially powerful and persuasive act of universalization. In the first sentence of the book, Sedgwick declares that any analysis of any aspect of Western culture that does not “incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” is “not merely incomplete, but damaged.”<sup>21</sup> While it would be a mistake to see this act of universalization as separate from the book’s specific account of gay desire and gay culture, it was Sedgwick’s argument that “modern gay and antihomophobic theory” (1) deserved a central place in the general analysis of Western culture that has made us what we are today.

Which is to say: queer. Part of what distinguishes queer theory from gay and lesbian history and criticism is precisely this move away from the ground of a specific identity — what Michael Warner called “an aggressive impulse of generalization.”<sup>22</sup> Early critiques of queer theory focused on the fancy pedigrees and highly abstract language of early practitioners as signs of the “elitism” of the field.<sup>3</sup> I would say, instead, that it was the move away from minority sexual identities and toward a general theory of sexuality that raised the profile of sexuality (or queer) studies and allowed it to “outperform” gay and lesbian studies. The consequences for those of us who teach sexuality studies that, whatever our intellectual position vis-à-vis

so-called identity politics or the value of queer studies, we are indebted to the universalizing claims of these critics. They argued successfully that sexuality might matter to anyone: as a result, we have gained professional standing, clout, university press imprints, degree-granting programs, tenure lines, and so on. While most of us maintain ties to the minority identities that led us to the field in the first place, we are also tied to universalization, which is the enabling condition of the field and our own place in the profession today.

### Queer Is, Queer Ain't

The universalizing strain of queer studies has significantly expanded in recent years. Queer is “after sex” in the sense of moving away from both evidentiary claims about same-sex desire and acts, and also from a specific focus on gay and lesbian people. These days, queer is not only also about race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nation, but is also about affect, citizenship, the death drive, diaspora, digitality, disability, empire, friendship, globalization, the impersonal, indirection, kinship, living underground, loss, marginality, melancholia, migration, neoliberalism, pedagogy, performativity, publicity, self-shattering, shame, shyness, sovereignty, subversion, temporality, and terrorism. The semantic flexibility of queer—its weird ability to touch almost everything—is one of the most exciting things about it. Despite its uptake into any number of banal and commoditized contexts, the word still maintains its ability to move, to stay outside, and to object to the world as it is given.

We might look to the opening of queer studies as a sign that the field is living up to its early promise. We might, for instance, understand queer studies today as answering Michel Foucault’s call in his late interview “Friendship as a Way of Life” for a radical questioning of the significance of same-sex relations. Foucault describes an alternate trajectory for sex and the thought of sex: “The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of sex but rather to use sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And no doubt that’s the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable.”<sup>24</sup> There is, at least for me, no more appealing articulation of the utopian promise of queer than Foucault’s dream that same-sex relations might create new social “virtualities”—as yet unimagined forms of individual and collective existence.

In addition to the notion of queer as virtual, queer also was meant to designate a form of intersectional critique grounded in a politics of antinormativity. According to this idea of queer, the term promised to speak to critics working in ethnic studies, African American studies, feminism, critical race studies, transgender studies, disability studies, and — just maybe — to bring together a range of social outsiders united against the “regimes of the normal.” At its most expansive, queer studies imagined a federation of the shamed, the alienated, the destitute, the illegitimate, and the hated.

There are certainly ways of narrating the history of queer studies that allow us to see it as becoming more effective as it loosens its ties to gender and sexual identity: it’s the up, up, and away story, and it is very compelling. Before we get too excited about the expansive energies of *queer*, though, we have to ask ourselves whether queer actually becomes more effective as it surveys more territory. In many cases, the intentions in generalizing queer are good: the idea is to keep queer from being parochial, from focusing on a single axis of oppression, from forgetting the way that sexuality is implicated in larger social structures and processes. The problem with such a broad vision of queer is not only that it loses the specific experiential and historical anchors that gave it meaning in, for instance, Sedgwick’s early work, but also that the intention to be answerable to many different constituencies can end up looking like a desire to have ownership over them. There is a reason that queer theory has been called out for its imperial ambitions: why, after all, should so many different forms of social marginality travel under the name queer? The original dream of *queer* was that the term might function as an empty universal or a space of potential; over the past two decades, as a queer coalition of outsiders has failed to materialize, many have pointed to the false universalism of the term as the cause.

Cathy J. Cohen offers one of the most pointed critiques of the failures of queer in her article “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” She argues that “in its current rendition, queer politics is coded with class, gender, and race privilege, and may have lost its potential to be a politically expedient tool for addressing the needs — and mobilizing the bodies — of people of color. As some queer theorists and activists call for the destruction of stable identity categories — for example, moving instead toward a more fluid understanding of sexual behavior — left unspoken is the class privilege that allows for such

fluidity. Queer theorizing that calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival.<sup>25</sup> Cohen identifies a form of false universalism in queer's undermining of stable categories of identity: although it supposedly undermines the very notion of identity, queer only corrodes certain forms of identity while solidifying others. Cohen's concerns are shared by many queer of color scholars, who suggest that the apparent expansiveness of queer would be better understood as a politics of annexation — paying lip service to other identity formations without a questioning of a relatively stable and cohesive core set of methods and ideological commitments.<sup>6</sup>

Cohen frames her essay with an articulation of a hopeful vision of the renewal of *queer* that would privilege “one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity . . . in determining one's political comrades” (22). She imagines a form of politics that is both expansive and still grounded in the experience of particular social groups. In her call for the renewal of “queer,” Cohen counsels attention to highly specific social categories — punk, bulldagger, welfare queen are her examples — in order to make queer fulfill its promise of bringing together “a transformational coalition . . . among marginal subjects” (47). Such a broad coalition must be based in the “specific lived experience of distinct communities” in order to reach across differences without erasing them.

Like Cohen, I am not ready to give up on the vision of coalitional politics once promised by *queer*, though I am no longer sure that *queer* is the name it should travel under. Not only are the failures of the term to date bound to alienate many, but at root I think the “post-identity” aspect of *queer* makes it difficult for it to work across identity categories. For the kind of coalition that Cohen imagines to work, we need to bring our identities with us, not leave them behind. That is, of course, not a solution, merely a starting place — and an invitation to further trouble. Speaking across categories of identity has never been easy — it's hard enough speaking within an identity category. But we need to keep inventing new ways of speaking to each other.

I see an example of this kind of reach grounded in specific difference in Marlon Riggs's films of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his last film, *Black Is, Black Ain't* (1994), Riggs mined his own experience, letting the

categories of “black” and “gay” and “man” resonate with and often undermine each other. The film is structured around some abiding contradictions about black identity: black is high and low, it’s a fact and a fiction, it’s yes and no, it’s a form of suffering and a form of affirmation, it’s degraded by white America, yet completely central to U.S. cultural identity. Black, for Riggs, is full of contradictions: one can never say what black is without saying at the same time what black isn’t. Riggs never backed away from the most difficult, embarrassing, and painful aspects of his identity. In his exploration of his attraction to white men, for instance, or in his on-screen struggles with the fact of his mortality, Riggs exposed the roughest dimensions of his experience. Riggs frames the film as completed under the pressure of death: he knows that he does not have long to live and all he wants to do, he says, is to figure out how to get black people to talk to each other. The most troubling category in the film is that of community. In an interview with Riggs, Michele Wallace discusses her fears of community, saying that to her the words *unity* and *community* signal “turf war.” She wants to run. As a counterpoint, Riggs also includes the words of Essex Hemphill: “Don’t let it be loneliness that kills us.” And that’s true too.

### Is It In You?

In my first book, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, I did not directly address the possibilities for coalitional politics. Instead, I focused on the messy, uncomfortable realities of identity: I attempted to trace a “backward” history of same-sex relations, looking to the feelings of pain, shame, self-hatred, and loss that mark late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Anglo-American gay and lesbian literature. I used *queer* throughout that book in part to mark a general skepticism about identity, but really what I wanted from queer was its dark energy—the bad feelings and ambivalence that marked early appropriations of the term. Queer, for me, was not a sign that I was getting rid of identity; rather, it points to the fact that it is spoiled, partial, never fully achieved, but sticky, familiar, and hard to lose completely.

The categories that defined gay, lesbian, and transgender life in the early days of modern homosexual identity were pretty rotten. In reflecting on the lives of the sad queers of the past, I tried to make an argument in



favor of taking ideology seriously. Ideology may be an illusion, but it provides the common sense, the recognition, the sense of belonging, the look and feel and taste of life itself. The fact that ideology is so tricky might be taken as a reason to redouble our efforts to get free of it, to see through it. We do have the tools to see through certain ideological forms, but such critiques will get us only so far: they do not change the experience of living with these social realities. While we have to continue the work of critiquing ideology, there's a lot more work to be done on the surface of things: my interest in affect studies and what Rita Felski has called the new phenomenology is tied to this interest in describing the qualities of lived experience without moving immediately to debunk it.<sup>7</sup>

Although I have absorbed the critique of identity, I just can't get enough of those accreted, embarrassing social categories that may not be real but feel like it. I think my growing interest in identity was enabled by getting a job: being a scholar in queer studies (rather than just trying to be one) gives me less of an obligation to the founding tenets of queer theory and more freedom to be a lesbian. But I think even more significant in explaining the gravitational pull I feel toward identity is the historical framework of gay assimilation. As Janet Halley and others have noted, the sexuality-rights movement is unusual among identity-based movements in the extent of its critique of the concept of identity.<sup>8</sup> While all kinds of queers have shown themselves willing to go off script, that quality might carry its own dangers in a flexible economy that rewards global subjects for their quick changes. In light of the major clean-up operation in gay and lesbian life that has been taking place over the last few decades, the *outré* realities of sexual identity have become more and more attractive. Clinging to identity — it's my way of saying no to the good life.

Identity shows us the places where inequality actively structures the social world: identity effects are ongoing and pervasive. It is still the case that identities can seem too personal, too embodied, too embarrassing to matter because the people who bear them often don't have social or economic power. But the history of the production of these categories, and the experience of living in them in the present, still need living attention. Besides the fact that identity is important politically, it is also, I'd argue, interesting. Post-identity discourses tend to cast identity as fixed, predictable — what we already know. But I can't get over identity, in both senses. I can't stop living it, and I remain fascinated by it. Even the aspects of my

own biography that I consider most personal are more compelling to me as seen from the outside rather than the inside. I am fascinated by the spectacle of my own life lining up with familiar scripts; the melodrama of social determination still holds me rapt. This investment in identity is, I realize, a wounded attachment. But if an attachment isn't wounded, what's the point in having it?

### What Does It Feel Like to Be a Person?

Distress about the failures of queer coalitional politics has led me to choose stigma as the organizing term for my current research. My sense is that though the potential of *queer* may be exhausted, the project of a comparative analysis around social injury and social exclusion is still possible — and that *stigma* might be a key term in this undertaking. I am working on a book about the source material for Erving Goffman's 1963 book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* ("The *Stigma* Archive"). Though *Stigma* does not address possibilities for collective organizing (but rather strategies adopted by individuals dealing with social disqualification), it is a key text in the history of comparative analyses of identity and exclusion.

Goffman's *Stigma* brings together a remarkable collection of materials. Alongside early- and mid-twentieth-century studies in sociology and psychology, Goffman reads memoirs, biographies, case histories, as well as novels and short stories that describe the experience of bearing a stigmatized identity. The vast majority of these materials are from the 1950s and early 1960s, and many of them were from the popular press. Because his concept of stigma is so capacious and his reading habits were so eclectic, his footnotes represent an important midcentury archive for scholars working on race, sexuality, disability, class, ethnicity, immigration, as well as legal and carceral studies. Goffman is committed to seeing the commonalities among different forms of social exclusion: out of a miscellaneous collection of vastly different texts, he produces a set of extremely powerful organizing concepts (passing, covering, minstrelsy, and others). But if the reach of Goffman's book can look utopian from the present, many of his methods now seem troubling. *Stigma*'s flat account of social otherness, its methods of categorical thinking inherited from a long and troubled history of deviance studies, and its sweeping analogies between social groups offer negative examples for critics working on identity today.

We can see Goffman's method even in a single footnote. In a section of the book on "Professional Presentations," for instance, Goffman describes the difficult balance between "revealing and concealing" (109) difference that stigmatized individuals' experience; in order to be perceived as having an authentic form of identity, they should engage in neither minstrelsy nor passing. While a stigmatized person is on the one hand warned against acting out "before normals the full dance of bad qualities imputed to his kind," he is also "encouraged to have distaste for those of his fellows who, without actually making a secret of their stigma, engage in careful covering, being very careful to show that in spite of appearances they are very sane, very generous, very sober, very masculine, very capable of hard physical labor and taxing sports, in short, that they are gentlemen deviants, nice persons like ourselves in spite of the reputation of their kind" (110–11). To illustrate this impossible and contradictory demand, Goffman offers the following list of citations: "On Jews, see Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 95–96; on Negroes, see Broyard, *op. cit.*; on intellectuals, see M. Seeman, *op. cit.*; on the Japanese, see M. Grodzins, 'Making Un-Americans,' *American Journal of Sociology*, LX (1955), 570–82."

There are several moments like this one in *Stigma*: Goffman outlines an abstract concept and then, in a footnote, points to his examples (e.g., for Jews, see X; for Negroes, see Y; for intellectuals, see Z): "For another study of the mental defective" (15 n. 31), see A; "An example from the experience of a blind person may be found in" (33 n. 67) B; "On similar techniques employed by a man with hooks" (137 n. 12), see C. It is not only in such omnibus footnotes that Goffman performs his work of comparison; his method throughout the book is informed by acts of comparison and abstraction. His ability to generate abstract principles out of the details of extremely disparate sources is arguably what makes the book so powerful, and what has made it last.

Still, if it is this characteristic operation that makes *Stigma* a resource for many critics today, it is also what can be most troubling about the book. For those critics who have moved away from identity, Goffman's ties to the deviance paradigm and his flat depictions of social groups are troubling. But for critics who want to hold on to the notion of identity, it is Goffman's comparative reach and conceptual emphasis that might be troubling. Linda Alcoff, for instance, in *Visible Identities* writes: "I believe that the topic of identity is best approached in very specific context-based

analyses. This locality and specificity is necessary because identities are constituted by social, contextual conditions of interaction in specific cultures at particular historical periods, and thus their nature, effects, and the problems that need to be addressed in regard to them will be largely local."<sup>10</sup> In some sense, Goffman's version of social-interaction theory is very specific, as it deals with the particularities of face-to-face encounters. But at the same time, it is breathtakingly abstract.

There are three main difficulties in Goffman's work that are most relevant for critics today: comparison of different forms of social identity (*analogical thinking*); abstraction from particular experience to general rule (*categorical thinking*); and making stigmatized others into examples for general theory (*the problem of exemplarity*). In the book, I take *Stigma* itself as a case study for exploring the methodological challenges of comparative studies of difference, inequality, and stigmatization. Rather than seeing the difficulties that Goffman encountered as shortcomings particular to his theory or to the discipline of sociology or to his historical moment, I want to reframe them as inevitable challenges faced by scholars who work across or between fields such as disability, sexuality, and critical race studies. Reading this collection of memoirs, biographies, case studies, and novels alongside the concepts that Goffman generated out of them will allow me to think about what is lost in particular instances of translation from narrative to abstraction; it will also allow me to consider what particular histories, experiences, and tonalities are being elided in moments of comparison across different kinds of identity.

At the end of *Stigma*, Goffman offers a powerful account of what we stand to gain from working across forms of difference at the same time that he indicates the potential losses of such a method.

I have argued that stigmatized persons have enough of their situations in life in common to warrant classifying all these persons together for purposes of analysis. An extraction has thus been made from the traditional fields of social problems, race and ethnic relations, social disorganization, criminology, social pathology, and deviancy — an extraction of something all these fields have in common. These commonalities can be organized on the basis of very few assumptions regarding human nature. What remains in each one of the traditional fields could then be re-examined for whatever it is that is really special to it, thereby bringing

analytical coherence to what is not purely historic and fortuitous unity. Knowing what fields like race relations, aging, and mental health share, one could then go on to see, analytically, how they differ. Perhaps in each case the choice would be to retain the old substantive areas, but at least it would be clear that each is merely an area to which one should apply several perspectives, and that the development of any one of these coherent analytic perspectives is not likely to come from those who restrict their interest exclusively to one substantive area.<sup>11</sup>

Though Goffman is speaking the language of social science and of the “extractions” that the distanced observer can make from the archives of otherness, one can hear in his call for a “coherent analytic perspective” a desire for something more than professional gain or scientific progress. In Goffman’s ambivalent incorporation of the “old substantive areas” and the voices they claim to represent I hear, or want to hear, the “dream of a common language.” Whether or not Goffman’s method can be a model for us in the present, *Stigma* produces, at least in me, the desire for a comparative account of social injury—a longing that, in the current climate, might itself count as utopian.

## Notes

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.
- 2 Michael Warner, “Introduction,” *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.
- 3 See, for instance, Suzanna Danuta Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (or, Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Fag?),” *Signs* 21.4 (Summer 1996): 830–69, and the essays collected in Dana A. Heller, ed., *Cross-Currents: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
- 4 Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” trans. John Johnston, in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 308–12, at 308.
- 5 Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 21–51, at 34. Originally published in *GLQ* 3.4 (1997): 437–65.
- 6 See, for instance, Marlon B. Ross’s critique of the paradigm of the closet. He

- writes, “In absenting and bracketing race, Foucault and Sedgwick respectively are able to erect a coherent epistemology of the closet as a ground for modern identity. . . . In most (white) queer theory, race and class make a cameo appearance . . . only to disappear after they have served to foreground uncloseted desire as definitive of modern sexual identity.” Marlon B. Ross, “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 161–89, at 176.
- 7 Felski notes that critics working in this mode are “trying to capture something of the quality and the sheer intensity of attachments and orientations rather than rushing to explain them, judge them, or wish them away.” Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), 19.
  - 8 Halley writes, “Sexual orientation and sexuality movements are perhaps unique among contemporary identity movements in harboring an unforgivably corrosive critique of identity itself, and they have launched significant activist and theoretical impulses in the direction of a ‘post-identity politics.’” Janet Halley, “‘Like Race’ Arguments,” in *What’s Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40–74, at 42.
  - 9 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 111 n. 15. The previously cited sources in this footnote are Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Grove Press, 1960); Anatole Broyard, “Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro,” *Commentary* 10 (1950); M. Seaman, “The Intellectual and the Language of Minorities,” *American Journal of Sociology* 64 (1958).
  - 10 Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9.
  - 11 Goffman, *Stigma*, 146–47.

## After Male Sex

RICHARD RAMBUSS

*I remember going in one end and coming out the other.*

— ANTHONY SWOFFORD, *Jarhead*

BUT FIRST SOME HINDSIGHT. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick launches her *Epistemology of the Closet*, a work that for me changed everything, with a set of axioms: a series of assumptive critical prescriptions for an emergent field of inquiry, which is to say axioms chiefly in the sense of ventured starting points or working theoretical givens. Sedgwick's second one is: "*The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will be different.*"<sup>1</sup> Returning to this book nearly two decades since its publication, I find myself, even "after sex" and "since queer theory," newly energized by the anti-identitarianism of its undertaking (which sometimes goes by the name of gay studies or gay male studies and sometimes, as in this axiom, doesn't) to think apart what's often been thought together — before, perhaps, rethinking them together again differently. I have in mind, however, more than parsing the study of sexuality at times from that of gender, or allowing, as Sedgwick rightly urges, room for antihomophobic inquiry and feminism to figure out their

divergences as well as convergences. For in addition to the two propositions of Sedgwick's axiom, I'm also interested in allotting "space for a gay male-oriented analysis that would have its own claims to make for an illuminating centrality" (this is her language again [16]), and doing so sometimes inside, sometimes aside queer theory, toward which *Epistemology of the Closet* is itself tending, is beginning to formulate, if not yet denominate.

Let me be clear. My aim is not to partition critical practices, much less identities, according to solidifying taxonomies. It's rather, as Sedgwick further explains in her introduction, to see what might come of keeping their relation to each other "open a little longer by deferring yet again the moment of their accountability to one another" (16). In this instance, Sedgwick is specifically speaking to dealings between feminism and gay studies, the former being, she recognizes, "considerably more developed than gay male or antihomophobic analysis at present — theoretically, politically, and institutionally" (16).<sup>2</sup> The rubric of this volume could be taken as evidence that what Sedgwick here alternately names "gay male or antihomophobic analysis" has come a long way since then in catching up, theoretically at least, especially as it came to be (how to put this?) renamed? reconceived as? subsumed by? developed into? mostly left behind for? queer theory. In fact, we are now in the position of asking of queer studies: "What's next?" Yet at the risk of seeming backward in view of a call to look ahead, I'd like to posit that there may be something gained — descriptively, analytically, affectively — in keeping open some space (highly motile space, to be sure) between "gay male" and "queer."

All this, it will become apparent over the course of these few pages, is another way of saying that I've been pondering critical *desire*, my own critical desire, for starters — what I'm after — and how that may have shifted since queer theory.



Male subjectivity, especially in extremis. Male eroticism, particularly "bad" desire. All-male rites. Male violence. Male intimacy. Male sociality and asociality. Male manners and male mannerism. Male taste. Hypermasculinity. With a new project about war movies, war literature, and military masculinities in hand, I find my current thinking about gendered performance — both what's sexual and what's nonsexual (though still perhaps



sexy) about it—clustering around such matter. The solicitation to find myself “after” queer theory has further set me wondering where the work on masculinity I’m in the midst of undertaking belongs. Queer theory is, of course, behind it. But I’ve also been feeling that some of the principal modes of inquiry in gender and sexuality studies—gay, feminist, queer—haven’t been asking the kinds of questions that I find these military texts (not to say my own desire) now prompting me to ask or generating the kinds of readings that they make me now want to try out.

*Arma virumque cano.* “I sing of arms and the man,” blazons Virgil. War continues to be a cultural locus classicus of masculine expression: a hyper-performative domain supercharged with a plethora of affective male energies. So much so that no less than God himself “has a hard-on for marines.” That remarkable revelation of divine desire comes by way of Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (Lee Ermey), the most memorable figure in Stanley Kubrick’s Vietnam War film, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). “God has a hard-on for marines,” Hartman explains, “because we kill everything we see! He plays His games, we play ours! To show our appreciation for so much power, we keep heaven packed with fresh souls.”

Like Kubrick’s earlier, acclaimed World War I movie *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Full Metal Jacket* has exerted an outsized influence on the war film genre. But *Paths of Glory* and *Full Metal Jacket* are also unusual instantiations of the form inasmuch as they are war stories that decenter combat and its horrors (though those are amply rendered here too). *Paths of Glory* features only one three-minute-long battle scene. After that, the narrative is given over to the highly ritualized court-martial of three French soldiers for cowardice. Though not themselves cowards, these unlucky men are designated scapegoats for a perceived collapse of military discipline across an entire regiment in an abortive assault on an impregnable German outpost called the Anthill. The capricious high command directive to “take the Anthill” is handed down from one markedly effete general to another to Col. Dax, who is played, in contrast to his superiors, with true-grit male bravura by Kirk Douglas. (Dax first appears in the movie stripped to the waist in his battlefield bunker: a harbinger of Douglas’s next beefcake role for Kubrick as Spartacus.) Dax also happens to be a lawyer in civilian life—“the foremost criminal lawyer in all France,” we’re told—and he takes it upon himself to defend the three soldiers. Notwithstanding his scrappy courtroom efforts, however, they are summarily convicted and

executed the next morning with pomp and circumstance by a firing squad of their own comrades. The court-martial plot gives scope to what I take to be the movie's chief interest: the hierarchies, protocols, rites, and bonds of the military as an all-male society, one in which we find a variety of masculinities.

"What kind of man do you think I am?" one soldier challenges another in *Paths of Glory*. "Pull yourself together. Act like a man," yet another is exhorted as he faces a firing squad of his fellows. *Paths of Glory* abounds in such confrontational talk. While Kubrick's Great War movie is about what's expected of men once they become soldiers, his later Vietnam War film expresses a nearly clinical preoccupation with an antecedent question. That is, how men — boys, really — are made into soldiers, specifically into marines, into deindividuated, readily replaceable cogs in what one of the film's grunts dubs with pride "Mother Green and her killing machine." This brash moniker not only cyborgically melds the green, the organic, with the machinic; it also reinscribes the feminine in Marine Corps hyper-masculinity. The most fearsome marine in *Full Metal Jacket* bears the name Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin).

The familiar "Mother Green and her killing machine" marine cliché is not intoned until late in Kubrick's film, when the narrative, with its mounting body count, has at last reached the killing fields of Vietnam and the marines are deep "in the shit," as they call it. Before that comes Parris Island, the setting for the first hour of *Full Metal Jacket*. There, in a series of cinematically gorgeous scenes — scenes imbued with their own powers of seduction — the movie renders the rites of desubjectification and fraternal initiation by which a group of recruits is assimilated into the Marine Corps: an extended, martial male family (though it's one, as we've seen, that also goes by the name of "Mother"). "From now on, until the day you die, wherever you are, every marine is your brother," Hartman tells them upon their completion of basic training. "Most of you," he continues, "will go to Vietnam. Some of you will not come back. But always remember this: marines die, that's what we're here for! But the Marine Corps lives forever. And that means *you* live forever!" *Semper fi*. This is a religious claim, indeed an evangelical one. Boot camp is the place where newly minted marines — "minister[s] of death," Hartman ordains them — have been "born again hard" with the promise of eternal life. "You can give your heart to Jesus," he bellows to his men on Christmas morning, "but your ass belongs to the Corps!"<sup>3</sup>

Is there any film genre more intensely concerned with male relations and masculine performance than the war or military movie? But what masculinity means, apart from a training in and for slaughter, is for the marines of *Full Metal Jacket* hardly a settled matter, at least with respect to the Corps's own formative rhetorics of gender and sexuality. "What do we do for a living, ladies?" Hartman demands. "Kill, kill, kill!" comes back the reply in husky chorus. Over the course of boot camp and even beyond it, the marines — as a type, poster boys of a certain kind of American masculinity (picture Tom Cruise at the beginning of *Born on the Fourth of July* [dir. Oliver Stone, 1986]) — are variously, often simultaneously, effeminized and hypermasculinized by "Mother Green and her killing machine." "Sound off like you got a pair!" What does "like" mean here? How does the drill sergeant's challenge gender these marines-in-training? Does it signal that they sound to him like girls? (But then what kind of girl would that be? *GI Jane*?) Does it mean that they don't sound like the kind of men they in fact are (becoming)? Does "like" imply that they will always be at best an approximation of an unobtainable masculine ideal? Can they, in short, ever be male enough?

Hartman also accords the recruits both a nascent heterosexuality that is already past ("Your days of finger-banging old Mary Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over!") and abiding homosexual interests. "Do you suck dicks?" he interrogates two of them in turn in the film's second scene, which transpires in the barracks, with the newly uniformed recruits lined up in front of their bunks in facing rows. (The first scene of this fetish-rich movie is a montage set in the base's barbershop, where the boys are ritualistically given their first jarhead, "high-and-tight," haircuts.) When Hartman learns that one of the recruits hails from Texas, he mockingly renames him Private Cowboy (Arless Howard). "Only steers and queers come from Texas," Hartman taunts him, "and you don't look much like a steer to me, so that kinda narrows it down!" "I'll bet you're the kind of guy," Hartman further presses Cowboy, "that would fuck a person in the ass and not even have the goddamn courtesy to give him a reach-around!" In *Full Metal Jacket*, Marine Corps camaraderie — its fraternal male manners — demands some gesture of sexual reciprocity.

Marine fucking marine makes for one of the most memorable scenes in Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead*, his melancholy Marine Corps memoir of the Gulf War, a book that became a film in 2005. "Field-fuck!" one of the

marines here summons his fellow grunts. The field-fuck, explains Swofford, is “an act wherein marines violate one member of the unit, typically someone who has recently been a jerk or abused rank or acted antisocial, ignoring the unspoken contracts of brotherhood and camaraderie and esprit de corps and the combat family. The victim is held fast in the doggie position and his fellow marines take turns from behind.”<sup>4</sup> This instance devolves from an overheated game of pickup football in the Arabian Desert, with Swofford and his marine jock buddies surreally encased in their MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear and gas masks. Staff Sergeant Siek orders the game to show off to a group of reporters that American soldiers in these anti-chemical-attack outfits “are virtually an unstoppable fighting force”: “The Pentagon,” Swofford informs us, “insists that warriors can fight at 100 percent in full MOPP and gas mask for eight hours. Siek wants us to play ball for an hour” (19).

An overly aggressive tackle on the playing field, however, suddenly turns into a three-way brawl—Kuehn “takes Vann down hard. Vann punches Kuehn in the side of the head, Combs kicks Kuehn in the ass” (20)—which then quickly “degenerates into a laughter-filled dog-pile” involving all the players. “[Staff Sergeant] Siek,” Swofford continues, “doesn’t like our grab-ass, and he yells at us to resume the game, but we do not listen. He must know what terrible treat will soon be played out for the colonel and the reporters”: “Combs pulls Kuehn from the bottom of the pile and yells, ‘Field-fuck!’ Fowler starts the fun, thrusting his hips against Kuehn’s ass, slapping the back of his head; when you aren’t field-fucking, you’re shouting support and encouragement or helping secure Kuehn” (20–21). “Get that virgin Texas ass! It’s free!” (21), someone then yells out, taking a page out of *Full Metal Jacket* and Hartman’s homosexualized hazing of the Texan Private Cowboy. Later in the book, one marine, again harking back to Kubrick’s movie, will teasingly ask of another, “Do you include a reach-around or is it gonna cost me extra?” (110).<sup>5</sup>

As for the field-fuck at the beginning of *Jarhead*, everyone takes a turn at Kuehn, the scapegoated member of Swofford’s unit who has been selected for “violation” on the desert playing field.

“I want some of that. I ain’t seen boy ass this pretty since Korea.”

“*Semper fi!* Scout-sniper!”

“Somebody get a picture for his wife. Poor woman.”

Kuehn yells: “I’m the prettiest girl any of you has ever had! I’ve seen the whores you’ve bought, you sick bastards!” (21)

Not that Kuehn is really being fucked. One imagines the impervious MOPP suits getting in the way of that. But the book is careful not to leave anything unsaid on this account. For its rendering of the field-fuck is protectively buffered by Swofford’s pointed disavowal, before and after his narration of the incident, of any erotic significance in what these marines here do to one of their own. “This is fun, plain mindless fun, the kind grunts are best at,” Swofford declares, setting the stage for what’s to come, “with guys fighting their way from the bottom to climb back to the top, king of the pile, king of the Desert” (20). Afterward he reflects: “I stand back from a turn with Kuehn. I feel frightened and exhilarated by the scene. The exhilaration isn’t sexual, it’s communal—a pure surge of passion and violence and shared anger, a pure distillation of our confusion and hope and shared fear” (21).

“The exhilaration isn’t sexual.” What then does it mean, one has to ask, to use the sexual—sexual language, sexual theatrics—to express what is supposed to be nonsexual? That was the question of my book *Closet Devotions*, where the subject is Christianity and its bent for figuring religious devotion in manifestly erotic, at times homoerotic, terms. Here the matter at hand is the way that marines, hypermasculine young men—“We’re all in great shape,” Swofford interjects (18)—act when they’re together. All this, no doubt, begs the question of what counts as sex and what doesn’t. (Need it be said that the former amounts to more than penetration?) But for me the more interesting issue at hand (to reformulate the sexual vs. the nonsexual question) is how the nonsexual can be so sexy. (Marines mounting each other in gas masks and “hermetically sealed” suits “bound together with duct tape and nylon rip cord” [18]: this tableau looks to be right out of gay BDSM porn.) Such, I take it, is *Jarhead*’s real anxiety here: not that the reader knows for sure that Kuehn’s “boy ass” hasn’t really been violated, that these marines haven’t really “had sex” with each other, but that this nonsexual scene might still come off as too sexy. And yet Swofford seemingly cannot resist adding in passing the enticing, exhibitionist detail (how else to hear it?) that on this makeshift desert playing field there are “those of us, like me [and perhaps Kuehn?], who . . . go naked beneath” their MOPP suits (18).

So what comes after (playing at) male sex in *Jarhead*? The denial that “the pure surge of passion and violence” of the field-fuck was sex, or sexual, or even sexy. Instead it’s all about “shared anger,” about pent-up group male rage: “We aren’t field-fucking Kuehn: we’re fucking the press-pool colonel, and the sorry, worthless MOPP suits, and the goddamn gas masks and canteens with defective parts, and President Bush and Dick Cheney and the generals, and Saddam Hussein . . . ; we’re fucking the world’s televisions, and CNN” (21). The marines’ anger here, and throughout the book, is palpable. Indeed, this account turns into *Jarhead*’s most ecstatic passage: “We continue to scream, in joy, in revelry, still wearing full MOPP and gas mask . . . and we sound thousands of miles away from ourselves” (21). It is also one in which Swofford keeps writing the sexual, as well as a bittersweet note of male-male seduction, back into the scene he’s unfolding, even as he takes such pains to keep it out.

We’re fucking the sand and the loneliness and the boredom and the potentially unfaithful wives and girlfriends . . . ; we’re fucking our confusion and fear and boredom; we’re fucking ourselves for signing the contract, for listening to the soothing lies of recruiters, for letting them call us buddy and pal and dude, luring us into this life of loneliness and boredom and fear; we’re fucking all of the hometown girls we’ve wanted but never had; we’re angry and afraid and acting the way we’ve been trained to kill, violently and with no remorse. (21–22)

Of course, no one is killed in this scene, and no one (one presumes) gets off.<sup>6</sup> Swofford’s rhythmically insistent, concatenated prose, like the *ad seriatim* all-male gang bang it renders and explicates for us, isn’t pointed toward climax. Rather, it culminates in a reaffirmation of Marine Corps fidelity, an avowal of the bonds of something that also sounds like male marriage: “We take turns, and we go through the line a few times and Kuehn takes it all, like the thick, rough Texan he is, our emissary to the gallows, to the chambers, to death do us part” (22).<sup>7</sup> By then the field-fuck has stopped; it has made its point. *Semper fi*. And the marines are now stripping out of their MOPP suits and gas marks: “We’re bent over at the waist, hands on knees, breathing hard, breathing free. . . . We’re standing around the trench either naked or in skivvy bottoms” (22). This early chapter of *Jarhead* begins not on or even near the desert battlefield, but back in California with Swofford working out in the base gym, “lifting a

few hundred pounds over my chest, working off the days-long damage from our Vietnam War Film Fest” (9), which, as a matter of course, had included the screening of *Full Metal Jacket* (6). This portion of the chapter that begins in the gym ends with naked marines in the Saudi desert and Swofford staring at his muscular “forearms as though they are a map” (23). *Arma virumque cano*. I sing of arms and the man. My own arms.



Queer theory has been very good for thinking about some things, less good (so far) for thinking about others. It has given us, for instance, new ways of theorizing and taking pleasure in drag, in gender impersonation. And thanks to Judith Halberstam, among others, we can now better savor the nuances of female masculinity.<sup>8</sup> But what have we put ourselves in the position to say about the enactment and experience of — what do we even call it? — male masculinity? Is there a male masculinity for us to desire that isn’t masculinist? Might we even allow for — might some of us even be turned on by — a masculinity that *is* masculinist in places: say, inside the homotopia of gay male porn (where, let’s face it, nary a woman appears), or a certain kind of gay bar, or most male sex clubs, or even a gay male couple’s bedroom, never mind the playing field of a Marine Corps field-fuck? Sometimes — not always, but I’d venture often — the particular eroticism of such sites is keyed to their homoeroticism, their particular sociality a function of their marked male homosociality. These domains are masculinist insofar as they substantively depend on some form or degree of single-sexedness. I say some form or degree of single-sexedness because the male exclusion of women or of femaleness (not, we know, necessarily the same thing) isn’t always as utter as it may at first seem, especially in the register of our complexly gendered imaginaries. Here I’m referring not only to the awed male invocation of “Mother Green and her killing machine” in Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* but also to how in Swofford’s *Jarhead*, Kuehn, “thick, rough Texan” that he is, playfully taunts his fellows, as he gets field-fucked by them, that he’s “the prettiest girl” any of them has ever had. As Swofford renders it, the field-fuck is an expression of masculinity, and this no less so for Kuehn, who takes it all like a man — that is, from behind — even as he playfully terms himself a pretty girl. I’m reluctant to freight all such male homosocial bonding perforce with misogyny (or homophobia), in part because it tends to retain such an intimate relation to

“the female.” Male masculinity sometimes sustains misogyny, but I don’t think that it is reducible or has any necessary relation to it. Virility — as feeling, as sentiment, as performance, as manners, as comportment, as role, as position, as power, as hierarchy, as fantasy, as an erotics — need not be coextensive with a patriarchy that enjoins a political gendered inequality.

So I find myself, after queer theory, wanting to think about the desire for male masculinity, for what Leo Bersani reifies in *Homos* as love of the cock.<sup>9</sup>

I trust that it’s been clear that I’m not seeking to resuture gender or sexuality to nature and biology, or endeavoring to reinstall an identitarian gay studies. Male masculinity points not to a new identity politics but to something more like a “desire politics.” Not that I conceive of a univocal male homosexuality any more than I credit a single heterosexuality. The male subject is also the sex that is not one. That said, when I reread *Epistemology of the Closet* these days, I’m struck by Sedgwick’s invocation therein of what she calls the “indicatively male,” an expression that shows up on the book’s first page and then recurs again later (1, 18). I am not exactly sure that I always know what Sedgwick means by this suggestive — to my ears sexy — phrasing, but it’s clear that here it’s not charged with the same kind of opprobrium that the term *homosocial* sometimes emits in Sedgwick’s *Between Men*, the feminist precursor to *Epistemology of the Closet*.<sup>10</sup>

As for feminism, I don’t think it has ever developed much of a lexicon (apart from terms of censure) for describing and analyzing what’s perceived to be indicatively male. Nor do I think that it especially needs to do so. But I also wouldn’t say that queer theory has been particularly effective on this account either. Gay male sex and what gay men find sexual may be much more, or even quite other, than love of the cock. For some, it might also, or even instead, be love of the ass, the male ass. Notwithstanding the queering, gender-blurring tendency of a later essay by Sedgwick on Henry James that queries “Is the Rectum Straight?” the ass is a site, at least for some gay men, of an erotic cathexis that is indicatively male.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of that desire — however one names or experiences it: that is, whether as biological or fantasmatic, as natural or perverse, queer (or paradoxically all these things at once) — one doesn’t fuck ass; one fucks a male ass. That’s the particular psychic investment here, that’s the particular pleasure. Which is to say that from my vantage the ass hardly looks genderless.

Gay male sexuality is, of course, much more than love of the cock or the ass, but if the multimillion-dollar gay porn industry bespeaks anything



about post-Stonewall American gay male erotics — and whether it's for better or worse, gay men learn a lot about gay desire from gay porn — it's that the indicatively male forms its core. We see this in mainstream gay porn's nearly undeviating reliance on the trappings of the most conventional, not to say banal, expressions of essentialized masculinity in our culture. Just look (I realize that this is the most commonplace of observations) to the hard-core video releases issuing by rote from outfits like Titan Men or Falcon Studios, whose subsidiary lines are called Mustang and Jock. Gay male porn is dick and muscles; it's hairy or shaved chests and butts. It's jockstraps, briefs, and boxers. It's a male fantasia of desirable and desiring men, some staged solo, most in couples, still others as multiples erotically choreographed into group scenes. Here one can relish narcissistically matched, interchangeable, and sexually versatile gym bodies, as well as dominant dad figures and "boys." The gym and the locker room, the barnyard and the construction site remain classic situational turn-ons. So do law enforcement and military scenes (talk about "bad desire," especially now, in this historical moment). Of course, porn is a plethora, and there are genres and individual examples of it that play more overtly with denaturalizing expressions of gender. But as a visit to most gay video outlets would readily illustrate, trans porn, say, represents, at least for gay men, a much smaller commercial market than the pornography of male masculinity. Mainstream gay male porn runs on the desire for masculinity, on an erotic intensification of it.

Donna Haraway declared in her "Cyborg Manifesto" that as we all turn increasingly cyborgic we are also becoming "creatures of a post-gender world."<sup>12</sup> I'm intrigued by that prospect. At the same time, the idea of a postgender world doesn't always sound, well, all that erotic to me. Haraway's posthuman manifesto remains important to me for all kinds of reasons, but I'm glad that the queer project hasn't altogether shaped up to be a postgender one, and I hope that what comes after won't do so either.

## Notes

I am grateful to the editors of this volume for pushing back so hard. Thanks to Jonathan Goldberg for his encouragement. And to Chuck O'Boyle for everything. Again. And, finally, thanks to Jim Grimsley for saying just the right thing at just the right time.

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 27 (italics in the original). Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 2 Sedgwick continues: “And indeed, when another kind of intersection has loomed—the choice between risking a premature and therefore foreclosing reintegration between feminist and gay (male) terms of analysis, on the one hand, and on the other hand keeping their relation open a little longer by deferring yet again the moment of their accountability to one another—I have followed the latter path. This is bound to seem retardataire to some readers, but I hope they are willing to see it as a genuine deferral” (16).
- 3 I offer a fuller reading of the film in these terms in “Machinehead,” *Camera Obscura* 42 (1999): 96–122.
- 4 Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Marine’s Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 20–21. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 5 The son of a Vietnam vet, Swofford introduces himself at the beginning of *Jarhead* as “a young man raised on the films of the Vietnam War” (7). And “Vietnam war films,” he here declares, “are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended.” Far from delivering an antiwar message, these “filmic images of death and carnage,” Swofford continues, “are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck” (6–7).
- 6 While elsewhere in the book Swofford reports getting off (with various women), *Jarhead*’s great irony is that this highly trained and outfitted, elite Marine Corps sniper never gets a single “kill” in a war that is essentially over before American land forces are brought into combat. Irony is, of course, the master literary trope of Paul Fussell’s war lit classic, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). By beginning *Jarhead* with an epigraph from Pound’s *Cantos*, Swofford is, I take it, signaling his engagement with Fussell and his account of the First World War as “Oh What a Literary War.” (This is the title that Fussell gives to chapter 5 of his book.) I also find Swofford talking back to *The Great War and Modern Memory* in the litany of remembrances that concludes *Jarhead*’s first chapter.

I remember most of the names and faces of my platoon mates. I remember the names and faces of some of their girlfriends and wives. I think I know who cheated and who stayed faithful. I remember who wrote letters and who drove their men mad with silence. I remember some of the lies and most of the questions. I remember the dreams and the naive wishes, the pathetic pleas and the trouser-pissing horror.

I remember some of the sand, but there was so much of it, I should be forgiven.

- I remember about myself a loneliness. . . . I remember going in one end and coming out the other. I remember being told I must remember and then for many years forgetting. (2–3)
- 7 Whereas in the book there is a targeted “bottom” for the marines’ sodomitical horseplay, the depiction of this scene in the film version directed by Sam Mendes has them all taking turns before and behind each other, as well as at giving and receiving simulated blow jobs. This rescripting of the field-fuck has the effect, even as it multiplies the sexual acts and roles on display, of diffusing the concentrated eroticism of the scene as it’s rendered in Swofford’s book.
  - 8 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
  - 9 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8.
  - 10 See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 15–16, for her own positioning of these two books in relation to each other.
  - 11 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Is the Rectum Straight? Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 73–103. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number. Critiquing what she sees as the implicit heterosexual “rectification of the rectum” (98) in Kaja Silverman’s work, Sedgwick states: “It is the fact that the anus is not the property of a single gender, then, that indeed makes for the possibility of homosexual emergence in Silverman’s account. But is the rectum nonetheless straight? The answer, in this psychoanalytic framework, would have to be yes” (97). Sedgwick doesn’t seem to disagree, however, with how “Silverman follows Freud in describing the anus as ‘an erotogenic zone which is undecidable with respect to gender’” (97).
  - 12 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.



Neither Freud nor Foucault?



*Je fermerai partout portières et volets  
Pour bâtir dans la nuit mes féeriques palais.  
[I'll lock up the doors and shutters neat and tight,  
And build a fairy palace for myself at night.]*  
— CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, *Les Fleurs du mal*

## One Is the Loneliest Number

HOW TERRIBLE TO BE ALONE! And yet that's where my queer-theoretical self has crept: toward the isolated, the single, the singular, or the person without a significant other — in other words, toward what others might call or presume to be the person who is lonely. It's strange to lean this way. I was trained as a literary critic with specialties in critical race theory and queer theory. I was hired as a queer theorist to teach, as one student put it, “all things gay.” I'm expected to produce flashy scholarship that revolves around sex. Numerous colleagues send me any announcement about any lecture, class, or piece of institutional gossip that has anything to do with sex. Much of my work to date has been invested in the predicaments that happen around nonmajority desires and acts. But suddenly some major conceptual shifts have started to happen in my thinking. In fact, intimacy, sexuality, and the rhetorics of relation that so deeply inform how I've been trained to think about the cultural, political, and social worlds are strained as I ask about those who simply don't relate to others in a concentrated and committed manner.

Not too long ago, at a queer conference, I toyed with the notion of attaching the letter *S* to the LGBTQ acronym (LGBTQS) so I could affiliate those who are “single” with the ever-elongating list of nonmajority sexualities. I was hoping to provoke serious reflection on why “relationships” and “coupledom” were often the most important objects of my fields of study. I wanted to inquire why there was always the demand to be oriented toward sustained, intimate relationships, especially since the single felt (and still feels) like one of the most despised sexual minority positions one could be. As anecdotal “proof” of such a condition: the scent of rotting vegetables and unused product portions drifting out of my fridge; the numerous wedding invitations with an “and guest” violently scrawled next to my name; the pathetic glances of people saddened that I often have nothing of substance to report about a “love life” (and the relieved glee when sometimes I do have things to report); the sad knowledge that not even the commodity form fits the single; and the perplexed utterances of waitstaff asking me, “Just you!?” The explosion of *Sex and the City* cultural banter, commodities, and analysis, catering to and panicking the now very much insistent and pathetic category of the premarried, offers the most obvious and rerunned objects of inquiry we could investigate. And the perpetual “*Sex and the City* panic” can indeed be partially blamed for driving people into increasingly legitimized forms of desperate Internet mate shopping on sites such as Nerve.com (“Never.com”?), lavalife.com, Friendster.com, myspace.com, manline.com, e-harmony.com, Planetout.com, and so on. Such flip commentary was fun to think about, but people immediately were worried that I was rehashing a well-trodden sexual liberation argument about sex without love; sex without relationship; and sex without the imperatives of marriage.<sup>1</sup> Some commentators were nervous that I was advancing yet another position that vilifies those who make meaningful, often monogamous, commitments to a significant other. Something about sex radicality (and the old debate about whether or not sexual acts must translate into sexual identities) preoccupied a number of respondents. I came away frustrated because the questions I wanted to ask were not wrapped up in the imperative to think sex rather than think single. So I’ve begun to leave sex, whatever sex may be, out of it. I’ve left sex behind.

Now, instead of simply thinking “single,” I’ve been *thinking* “lonely” because I want a notion of sexlessness to be attached to singleness. I’m not

particularly interested in versions of the single that are thought to be the free and noncommitted category describing those who eschew or escape intimate attachments and duty; nor am I immediately concerned about the single as the designation of those who have lost loves (widows, for instance); I'd like to avoid the assumption that single life is either masturbatory or celibate, especially if masturbation is now what provides, as Thomas Laqueur asserts, "an experience of self-esteem or self-love, a form of personal autarky that allows each of us to form relationships with others without losing ourselves."<sup>2</sup> It's not that any of these ideas of single experiences are bad or bankrupt, especially masturbation; I just want to avoid the typical conceptual assumptions about single life, which so quickly are posed as the exact opposite of coupledness and then lauded as freedom from attachments like wedlock, and often, especially in queer work, as a freedom that resists normalization. In fact, I want to suspend questions of sex and sexuality altogether, at least for a few moments, to start asking other questions about what it means to be alone, to be in solitude, and whether or not that is now permitted when the world wants people to feel desperate, lonely, and ready for toxic forms of sociality.

It's no accident that Hannah Arendt ended her magisterial *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with a discussion of terror and ideology that pivots on the feelings of loneliness. In this discussion, she makes clear that totalitarianism, which relies on creating new and unpredictable order through terror-filled ideological forms of reasoning, requires that people lose their abilities, or perhaps their sensibilities, to be with others in generous and meaningful relations. She distinguishes between the capacity to be in solitude, which does not necessarily imply one is lonely, and the condition of feeling deserted, abandoned. The feeling of loneliness produces sensations of desperation that open one up to the cruel ideologies of totalitarianism — ideologies that produce compelling ideas, full of persuasive power, that have logics that are much too consistent, much too able to misread the circumstances of the world, providing, instead, a paranoid "sixth sense" through which the strong idea can order the world, regardless. Let me quote, at length, one of the closing paragraphs of the book.

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become



an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our [twentieth] century. The merciless process into which totalitarianism drives and organizes the masses looks like a suicidal escape from this reality. The “ice-cold reasoning” and the “mighty tentacle” of dialectics which “seizes you as in a vise” appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon. It is the inner coercion whose only content is the strict avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm man’s identity outside all relationships with others. It fits him into the iron band of terror even when he is alone, and totalitarian domination never tries to leave him alone except in the extreme situation of solitary confinement. By destroying all space between men and pressing men up against each other, even the productive potentialities of isolation are annihilated; by teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of loneliness where man knows that he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started, even the slim chances that loneliness may be transformed into solitude and logic into thought are obliterated. If this practice is compared with that of tyranny, it seems as if a way had been found to set the desert itself into motion, to let loose a sand storm that could cover all parts of the inhabited earth.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of connection, the absence of even having a connection with oneself, is the condition of loneliness, which makes one too much of a one, outside of relationships, mistrustful of everyone. And when one is made to feel lonely, one is prepared to endure a kind of “inner coercion” by permitting oneself to seek out logic for why the world is barren, for why one has been abandoned. One is given a quest for a sharp and insistent support system, which will make one read the world ideologically, feel the world terribly, and thus make one ready — prone — for any kind of strong movement totalitarian forces wish upon the masses.

In some ways I hope it sounds odd that I would immediately start thinking about totalitarianism’s origins and the sociopsychological effects of terror as one method to think beyond sex. But if queer theory has taught me anything, it is that I should be vigilant about the rhetorics and politics of connection, especially intimate connection. And if there’s no intimacy, no intimate connection, then what can one think? At first blush, what one begins to encounter among the lonely is not the absence of

people, but the sheer abundance of others. Arendt believes that “loneliness . . . [is] the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government” (475). On this common ground, we have an incredible crowd—an army of the lonely, too many lonely. And one of the primary logics of this ground is what is thought to be the ultimate antidote for the lonely: falling in love, coupling off, or simply the rubbing and touching of sexual contact. But, and here’s the strange twist my work after sex has taken, this “being together” is one of the primary totalitarian logics that accelerate the feelings of alienation and dislocation. The loneliest of us are not necessarily those who are actually alone but rather those of us trying our hardest not to be alone. Arendt is shrewd when she reminds us that sometimes terror will not be so explicit; total terror will succeed in becoming the fabric of life, the bonds between humans, who will be forced together so deeply. The “body politic,” then, “no longer uses terror as a means of intimidation,” for its “essence is terror” (468).

So in my work now I want to think about how the couple form, the logical leap away from loneliness, is one major method of making the “body politic” full of terror. I’ve initiated a research protocol that traverses the ideology of the couple—which is distinct from the myriad of intimate relationships that are often the most important relationships in people’s lives, as they should be. I have to interrupt the steely, enduring logic of the couple. To do so, I have to pursue a heuristic, a tentative method of thought, that will propose that we focus on the single, not the couple. It requires taking a step away from sex.

Of course, I’m not the first queer to crowd the couple into a lonely corner.<sup>4</sup> Quite recently, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit seem to do as much when they generate subtle readings out of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963). Rather than try to explain the psychological or social reasons for why the couple in question contemptuously breaks up, Bersani and Dutoit try to do away with the easy knowledge one might try to construct out of the film’s dynamics of intimate relating. So they isolate figures that are isolating themselves from one another—characters that confuse rather than explain, characters that refuse to be fully expressive. They read Godard’s film about the catastrophe of the modern couple as an opening up of deep questions about the ontology of the couple form, about the kinds of possibilities and impossibilities that one finds in the couple form, indeed multiple kinds of couple forms, that will not be ever

fully understood using typical, conventional forms and figures of intimacy. They fixate on the lonely and alienating images of the characters in Godard's film — who have “lost the levity of imaginary being”<sup>5</sup> — not to offer a story about relating gone wrong but to offer something like a cautionary tale that has enormous relevance: the failure of coupledness is a result of the couple's attempts to be too real, too understood, and too explained. Bersani and Dutoit, following the film's visual and formal cues, thus urge us to remember that we have a “responsibility *not to be*,” that perhaps the couple's loneliness would not have had to be so catastrophic: “By potentializing their relation *while they are in it*, they would have left their condemned coupledness and given to each other the freedom to reappear, always, as subjects too inconclusive, too multiple, too unfinished, ever to be totally loved” (67–68).

I appreciate this kind of couple critique so much, especially since it can be optimistic about the way that we can relate beyond the ideological grips of any relating we are coerced to assume. But I'd like to situate my very unruly, often inconsistent object of inquiry — the lonely — in a perhaps less lyrical, less aestheticized conceptual space. For the aesthetic often offers, as the solution, more intimacy, more special and secretive knowledge, that resists easy communication. While arguing about the couple formation, Bersani and Dutoit also argue something quite revealing: “To aestheticise our relation to the past is not to remove ourselves irresponsibly from it, but rather to live in proximity to it” (67). I couldn't agree more, which makes me nervous. The aesthetic, especially when it is erotic, always seems to give us so much freedom. A literary closeness, if you will, provides for a kind of intimacy that has the capacity to escape typicality and convention; it's often the solution we find at the end of our queer critiques, which doesn't make them any less correct. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of masturbation and Jane Austen, for another example of a literature that redeems intimacy as a closely felt experience, finds that “*Sense and Sensibility* . . . can succeed in making narratively palpable again, under the pressure of its own needs, the great and estranging force of the homoerotic longing magnetized in it by that radiant and inattentive presence — the female figure of the love that keeps forgetting its name.”<sup>6</sup> Something about the erotic in the aesthetic inevitably conjures up the intimately felt, the palpable, which seem to always resist the more negative forces of power that surround sexuality. This is very local, however inarticulate,

knowledge and/or feeling. And although I always find such gestures simply alluring, I want to arrest my own patterns of thought for a bit and think about Arendt's critique of totalitarian loneliness, which is really a critique of a forced intimacy, intimacy we always seem to welcome because a terrifying loneliness keeps us up at night.

### For the Love of Couple

Since I finished a book on the religious right and homophobic hate speech during this time of the war on terror, I've been thinking a great deal about that nebulous category, the "values voters," made even more successful by the controversy and outrage over same-sex marriage — the plea for participation in state-sanctioned coupleness, state-sanctioned "freedom" from the terror of being lonely. These values voters are, for the most part, conservative Christians (even if they are not named as such) who profit, in many senses of the term, from patrolling and excluding those who can enter into official and state-sanctioned forms of intimate couple relating. Marriage is serious political and cultural business, and with the other values voters issues that will have continued and substantive clout in the Bush regime (and really, any other regime, Democratic or Republican) — abortion, stem cell research, affirmative action — we have what sounds very much like biopolitics, not wedge issues, ferociously animating our political present and future tense. Marriage and, for that matter, coupledom are at the heart of this political life. And if one is at the heart, one should have a heart and be open to love and connection, which are increasingly the prerequisites for personhood in a form of government (say, the U.S. government) that certainly has forceful resemblances to other totalitarian regimes in the last century.

For love, the emotion that putatively relieves (or promises to relieve) loneliness, is not merely an activity one adds to a list of things that have to get done in this life. For many, it is not life's primary obsession, but life itself — life in which important feelings and work are permitted to be accomplished. It is the steely, "vise"-like logic that captures everyone in its grip. And if you belong to a couple, on sliding scales of social and legal legitimacy, you occupy a not-so-frivolous status. Laura Kipnis's saucy polemic *Against Love* puts love, and particularly the extensive work of love, in terms that can help us with what seems to be a long-overdue critique of

the couple form. She wonders, “Has any despot’s [love’s] rule ever so successfully infiltrated every crevice of a population’s being, into its movements and gestures, penetrated its very soul? In fact it creates the modern notion of a soul — one which experiences itself as empty without love. Saying ‘no’ to love isn’t just heresy, it’s tragedy: for our sort the failure to achieve what is most essentially human. And not just tragic, but abnormal.”<sup>7</sup> Kipnis is entirely right: you’re not allowed to be without love; you’re not allowed to be merely single — which is different from being pre- or post-married or coupled, with designs on changing that nonimportant status by making your way into essential humanity qua the couple. There is, as Kipnis reminds us, “no viable alternative” in the “couple economies” that “are governed — like our economic system itself — by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibitions” (23).

The critique Kipnis offers, although quite productive, turns on some familiar tropes that miss some crucial insights: “Why bother to make marriage compulsory when informal compulsions work so well that even gays — once such paragons of unregulated sexuality, once so contemptuous of whitebread hetero lifestyles — are now demanding state regulation too?” (41). I appreciate Kipnis a lot, but I’m afraid that the audacious and too-easy characterization of queers gone bad into the fight for wedlock fails to take into account just how necessary the marriage form (and its not-so-distant child, the couple form) is for not only intimate stability but also for judicial, political, and cultural legibility that belongs to and exceeds official state regulation. If we believe Arendt, loneliness has serious political and cultural consequences. People want to belong so they don’t feel menaced by their isolation. If the fury over marriage and the increasing prestige of the values votes can tell us something, surely it is that for the United States, marriage and couples are foundational. In fact, they are *the foundation* on which society is built — they are society’s life-support systems. From this vantage point, the American individual is not a he or a she but rather a *we*, not *we* the people but *we* the couple (and, ideally, a couple with kids).

So here’s where Kipnis and I part ways: she wants to subvert the labor of love by ushering in a radical politics of adultery, with new and exciting (not dead or exhausted) loves perpetually on the horizon. I want to suggest that we think beyond, think after, the potentials of sex and sexuality in which Kipnis seems to have faith. I want to question what it

means to be in any kind of close intimate contact in an intimate sphere and a public sphere that are so intertwined as to be almost nondistinct.<sup>8</sup> I want to mine the much-too-close quality of “men [and women] pressing men [and women] together” and assert: to indulge the couple form is to indulge the crowd. I wonder if we can then discover figures that are alone, but not lonely, not menaced by the feelings of loneliness that push us into the couple, which is really the crowd. I must stress that I’m not arguing for the value of individuation at the expense of meaningful connection and ethical responsibility toward others. I’m not against couples, or even love. Instead, I’m thinking about figures of the single, the alone, the isolated, which critique (but don’t necessarily abolish) the couple as the default model of very significant relating that is at the core, the soul, the heart, and the mind of the United (and other) States.

### The Man Not of the Crowd

So I have a major, isolated figure—a figure of nonrelation—that helps give an important perspective on this crowd and its emotions. Walter Benjamin, who first inspired me to read Baudelaire, helped me see that within the very sad and lonely verses of Baudelaire’s words there were crowds. And Benjamin writes of crowds to initiate a series of reflections about the never-ceasing conflict between the mass and the person and, more important, how the conflict makes the poet (or a person) a mass, or a mess (“a traumatophile”), who is nevertheless forced to offer some kind of statement about the modern age’s effect on imagination, memory, feeling, perhaps even sexuality. What we discover is that one’s contact with the crowds of modern life puts what Benjamin elsewhere calls “aura,” the “unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be,” into crisis.<sup>9</sup> There is the “desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”<sup>10</sup>

Here, Benjamin’s insights resonate with Arendt (who introduced his work to English-speaking readerships) when she argues, “By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them” (466). Men (and women and others) pressed together are given generic and needy totalitarian ideologies that feel like support, but such support takes away space, the possibility of distance, thereby giving us a strange twist on

what feels like a remedy for the terrible, everyday sense of dislocation and alienation we are made to feel. People are pressed to be together in order to eliminate the space between themselves. Modern life domesticates distant things; shocks of novelty that a crowd might excite (in either negative or positive ways) in the modern human are absorbed, mechanized, defended against. I'll put it like a pedestrian: the individual is crowded, but not in a good way. And more to the matters I have at hand: the individual is crowded with couples, but not in a good way. Closeness has come at the expense of distance.

Perhaps a poet or some other kind of observer (maybe even Godard) might get us out of this condition, but characteristically, Benjamin and, for that matter, Baudelaire don't provide us with any clear indication. Instead we're given these sentences of Baudelaire's: "Lost in this mean world, jostled by the crowd, I am like a weary man whose eye, looking backwards, into the depth of the years, sees nothing but disillusion and bitterness, and before him nothing but a tempest which contains nothing new, neither instruction nor pain."<sup>11</sup> There's really too much touch, too much pressing, to be truly moved or excited. The banal touch of the crowd has dulled the speaker's senses. One is weary, not deeply disturbed. We're left with a tragic Baudelaire, betrayed by allies who, according to Benjamin, "indicated the price for the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the modern experience of shock."<sup>12</sup> Instead of distance, we have proximity — intimacy, but an intimacy that refuses to acknowledge the shock and awe of connection. Even the *flâneur* cannot have the appropriate perspective on the world that no longer lets a shock be a shock. He or she cannot have the perspective because there is no more space; all is crowded, especially the public, which is full of couples absolutely everywhere. "We know that the iron brand of total terror," writes Arendt, "leaves no space for private life and that the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys man's capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action" (474).

In my most ambitious desires, I'd like the work I'm doing now to give us back some space, some crucial distance in the world of pressed men and women (and other genders). I'd like to figure out a way for loneliness to be removed from the condition of modern life by bringing back a perspective, not unlike the *flâneur*, who looks for more than the relief of loneliness

in the shocks of the crowd's sociality, who looks for more than what I've been trained to look for: sexual relations.

Giorgio Agamben often says provocative things, but he helps here because at various points in his work he's trying to think the impossible: nonrelation. More specifically, he's concerned with those who are lonely, abandoned, and thus deeply bound to "sovereignty and constituting power." He offers an antidote: "thinking ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation."<sup>13</sup> It's one of those ideas that is maddening, especially if one wants to relate, and especially if what Freud says is true: "In the last resort we must begin to love in order that we may not fall ill, and must fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we cannot love."<sup>14</sup> But we must remember that Agamben is not being literal; his analyses of ontologies and politics are often invested in figurations, especially figurations that go beyond what we've been bound to for too long: figures of relation. He's challenging many ethics that are so caught in Levinas's emphasis on the Other, but not in order to further aggrandize an autonomous and empowered self. He's not advocating the simple arguments that we should abolish relationships or neglect significant others, and neither am I. Instead, he's critical of the manner in which one's being is so wrapped up in toxic postures toward others, which bind one desperately to destructive, totalitarian, sovereign forces of power that potentially negate all.

I want his quick statement about figures "beyond," or after, relation to begin thinking (not necessarily living) the "beyond," and specifically the "beyond" (or after) without sex. I want to think about the isolated figures of the "single" who are misconstrued as lonely figures. They might not be lonely—they might just want to be antisocial, they might just want to relate to others outside of the supreme logic of the couple, which has become the way one binds oneself to the social. To do so is a potentially massive project: for instance, I want to think about the status of single people in marriage, property, corporate, and tax law; I would like to trace the intellectual, political, and cultural history of single types such as the Bachelor, the Widow, the Celibate, the Priest, the Masturbator, the Nun, and so on; I can see exploring the philosophy of the "Enlightened," rational subject from Rousseau on; I would need to analyze the development of the psychoanalytic concept of the ego; I'd like to think about alienated labor and its impact on value in Marxist thought; I'd want to



figure out how chattel slavery and racial logics further crowd the many into the One; and I'd be compelled to wonder how sex and gender difference could be nonrelational. Hopefully, I'll figure out ways to limit the project, which is still such a difficult project to even grasp as I research it.

One thing, however, is certain: I would never have been able to even think about this project had it not been for the now cultivated body of queer-theoretical and critical work that has given us, among other things, a language to think about the relative closeness and distance between bodies. Queer works have brought the controversies of intimacy into close view. Now, as if I'm shifting a car into reverse, I'd like to imagine an aura, or the possibility of being distant from others, at least for a little while. Not a nonrelation per se, but another kind of relation. Sure, such a gesture might just be another form of coupledness (the binary—distance vs. intimacy). But at least this couple doesn't promise, right away, that my feelings of disquiet will be relieved by doing what we're all supposed to do: touch! For I'm less optimistic about the kind of closeness, the kind of crowdedness, that love and sex often make us believe.

Perhaps another way to think about what I'm trying to say is to think about what happens, if one's lucky, after one has had enough sex: sleep. Anne Carson, in "Every Exit Is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep)," tells us about a dream she describes as her earliest memory; it's a dream of a green living room she knew well, with everything in its place, but a room that, in her dream, became radically different, if not distant, from her commonplace understandings of the space: "Inside its usual appearance the living room was as changed as if it had gone mad." Because her youth did not permit concepts of madness to help her explain the dream, she described her encounter with the uncanny evocatively: "I explained the dream to myself by saying that I had caught the living room sleeping." She elaborates: "For despite the spookiness, inexplicability, and later tragic reference of the green living room, it was and remains for me a consolation to think of it lying there, sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one, apparently penetrable everywhere and yet so perfectly disguised in all the propaganda of its own waking life as to become in a true sense something *incognito* at the heart of our sleeping house."<sup>15</sup> This kind of perspective, this kind of distance, is not just another gesture of defamiliarization we bring to so many of our critical questions. It's a form of thinking that isolates. And it's about a comforting, not menacing,

form of isolation — a form of not being “answerable” to the propaganda of our “waking lives,” enabling, one hopes, to give what an isolation free of loneliness could ideally give, according to Arendt: the capacity to be productive and creative when humans are forced into an “impasse into which men [and all others sorts of humans] are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of common concern, is destroyed” (474). Further, this retreat away from the ruins of the public sphere and into isolation might produce some very important kinds of dreaming: for perhaps even the lonely queer, at a conceptual remove, can one night put away some of that proximity, that lonely terror, that needy sex, and get a bit of much-needed sleep.

## Notes

- 1 For an example of this important line of inquiry, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 2 Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 23.
- 3 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; San Diego: Harcourt, 1976), 478. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 4 I’m thinking of figures of loneliness and problematic coupling in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” and “A Poem Is Being Written,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 109–29 and 177–214; Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); and, in a way, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Sedgwick’s focus on the ways that the witnessing of masturbatory desire can teach us much about modern sexual identities is, typically, excellent. I’d like to resist, however, a reliance on sexual desire in my preliminary investigations of loneliness.
- 5 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, and Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 67. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 6 Sedgwick, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” 129.
- 7 Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 26. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 8 See all of Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 9 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–51, at 223.

- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 155–200, at 193.
- 12 Ibid., 194.
- 13 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 47.
- 14 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 14:67–102, at 85. Thanks to Ann Pellegrini for reminding me, over nachos, about Freud's worry after love sickness.
- 15 Anne Carson, "Every Exit Is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep)," in *Decreation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 17–42, at 20.

## When? Where? What?

MICHAEL LUCEY

### When?

IN *HOMO ACADEMICUS*, examining the crisis of 1968 in France, Pierre Bourdieu wrote about the social processes he called *coincidence* and *synchronization*. What was it about the situations of students, of tenuously employed young academics, of factory workers that allowed them, for a short moment, to make common cause? A number of his methodological observations in that book turn out to be useful for thinking about the queer moment of the early 1990s, which might be taken to be, in his words, “an intersection of several partly autonomous series of events arising in several fields pregnant with their own specific determinants,” or as “the *synchronization* of crises latent in different fields.”<sup>1</sup> The histories that collided to produce a sense of a queer moment are many: various strands of the history of sexuality, obviously, and, in particular (but not exclusively), the history of the gay and lesbian social movement in the United States, which includes the development of lesbian and gay studies; the history of the feminist movement and of feminist thought inside and outside the academy; the history of affirmative action and other anti-

discrimination struggles inside and outside the academy; various ongoing histories within North American universities and, more specifically, the histories of certain academic disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences as well as the struggles between various theoretical and methodological tendencies within those disciplines; and the history of the AIDS epidemic and the way that the AIDS crisis and AIDS activism gave such visibility to various ongoing areas of contention in the U.S. polity (discrimination against various sexual minorities, unequal access to health care, the absence of legal protections for various kinds of intimate relationships, discrimination due to immigration patterns and politics, income disparities, and so on). The powerful shared sense that there was a queer moment within the academy surely arose from an “effect of synchronization,” an effect that was unavoidably temporary, given that the various tempos of the series of events that coincided in the moment wouldn’t allow the multiple series to stay in synch for long.<sup>2</sup>

In establishing an objective or, in other words, a historical time, that is a time transcending the specific time-scales of each different field, the situation of general crisis renders practically contemporary, for a shorter or longer period, agents who, although theoretically contemporaneous, evolved in more or less completely separate social times, each field having its own specific time-scale and history, with its specific dates, events, crises or revolutions, and rhythms of development. Moreover, it renders contemporary to themselves agents whose biography is answerable to as many systems of periodization as there are fields in whose different rhythms they share.<sup>3</sup>

The sense of afterness to which this volume is devoted is perhaps the sense of a loss of contemporaneity as the energies that coincided for a moment, creating what felt like a communal project, continue on different paths. AIDS becomes a manageable disease for some people in some places, while remaining an epidemic with few available treatment options in other places; new sexual formations emerge; new people enter the discussion; universities evolve; within universities and other academic spaces disciplinary formations evolve and new areas of intellectual inquiry and new disputes about disciplines and resources emerge. Then, too, different kinds of research and thinking take their own kinds of time and aren’t always responsive to temporalities parsed as moments.

All kinds of pressure related to time, fashion, and ideology interact to inflect choices regarding the kinds of academic work people pursue as a field develops. Auras of sophistication which seemingly inexplicably come to surround the writings of one thinker rather than another — what’s so sophisticated about Lacan, after all? — prove hard to resist, at least for a while.<sup>4</sup> Being interesting or relevant and being topical are easily conflated. Specific notions as to what is radical or queer (or what is “theory”!) coalesce into normative dogma with amazing rapidity. Time pressures sometimes create practical kinds of bias against work that requires extensive archival research or the assimilation of large amounts of material. Projects requiring the acquisition of languages, archival projects, ethnographic projects, projects requiring extensive efforts at historical reconstruction, projects that excavate the intellectual traditions and sociocultural contexts from which a given key thinker emerges all have difficulty being responsive to the temporality of a moment. They inevitably tend to come “later.” All in all, being “after” the queer moment — however contentious and messy the aftermath might seem — could be a bit of a relief, intellectually speaking, an opportunity, a critical opening.

It takes time for a field to get messy, and once it has gotten messy certain kinds of new possibilities may be ready to reveal themselves. Sharon Marcus’s helpful “Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay” offers relevant insights in this regard, as in the following call for a synthetic moment in the field.

We now have a critical mass of scholarship on homosexuality based on legal and criminal records, medical writing, popular journalism, and novels. Those sources best illustrate how lesbians and gay men negotiate with institutions and individuals more or less hostile, neutral, or external to them. We also have a smaller body of research that draws on sources shaped by a presumption of shared location within a sexual culture: participant observation, oral history, letters exchanged among lovers and queer allies, and documents crafted for a specific rather than a general public. The two kinds of sources have generated very different histories of sexuality. The United States in the 1950s is a period of repression for Terry (1999), who focuses on law, science, and mainstream journalism; of ambiguity for Michael DeAngelis (2001), who explores popular teen culture; and of transition for Newton (1993),

who interviews residents of a long-standing gay community. The time is ripe for a queer history that synthesizes extant scholarship and draws on the fullest possible range of sources.<sup>5</sup>

The synthesis is likely to be challenging, simply because the object under study, “sexuality,” might not be the same in all cases, ranging, say, from an effect of official and semi-official discourses to a key component of particular lives and the personal accounts offered of them. Such a synthesis would in fact seem to require taking into account the way disciplinary formations shape their object of inquiry.

In sum, the practical contemporaneity of a moment that seems like an origin inevitably dissipates as the agents who interacted to make up the moment move forward to the different rhythms to which their lives are answerable. Suddenly, looking back, it can feel like a communal critical and intellectual project has evolved into a multifarious set of barely related projects that on occasion even seem at loggerheads with each other. Both personal and disciplinary trajectories diverge. Obviously, something about the complex object in question, sexuality (especially if you want to attach the adjective *queer* to it), is in play: the complexities inherent in deciding what it is or has been (before it has changed into something else) and where to find it (before it has moved somewhere else) make up some of the particular difficulties in thinking about it. Like many objects so tightly woven into our social reality, part of the work of studying it is the work of constructing it. But there’s another part, whose urgency is probably also felt “later”: at some point along the way intellectual rigor (or what Bourdieu calls epistemological vigilance) would suggest the need to study not only the object but the subject that constructs the object, to “objectivate the subject of objectivation.” How (and when) do you study your subjective relation to the object you study, and the effects of that relation on your work?<sup>6</sup>

## Where?

Let’s rework one of the questions from the editors: “Does the very distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual matter to queer thinking, and, if so, when, where, and how?” Let’s start more simply, by asking: “What makes ‘the sexual’ distinctive?” Or “When is ‘the sexual’ distinctive?” Or

where? Or how? Or to whom? These questions feel close to the work I'm trying to do these days. In a different context, Bourdieu recalled a lapidary formulation by the linguist Emile Benveniste: "Être distinctif, être significatif, c'est la même chose."<sup>7</sup> To be distinctive and to be meaningful are the same thing. A distinction that grabs our attention makes meaning by doing so. Which means we might wonder: what about distinctions that don't make much of a difference, that are barely worthy of note, and that consequently don't carry much meaning (yet)? What do you do with them? To what extent do you notice them?

There is an ebb and flow to various patterns of distinctiveness, to what is granted salience in the patterns that make things readily notable, noticeable. The right to grant salience to certain distinctions is also itself socially contested. Over time (and over space), distinctions that made no difference come to make one; distinctions that made a difference cease to do so. If the distinctions have to do with social categories and their effects, with the social forms available for various kinds of interaction, then part of what is involved in these shifting patterns of distinction might be called social history, or political history, or, in some cases, the history of sexuality. Social categories are not permanently configured, nor is any configuration permanently distinctive. Perhaps it's some kind of an experience of distinctions having shifted that has provoked the collection of these essays. Things change, and it could hardly be expected that the patterns of distinctiveness that characterized sexuality and its study in the U.S. academy around 1990 would escape modification.

There are plenty of rich questions to ask about sexuality or sexualities, sexual culture, the social forms of sexuality, sexual identities, but there are also the basic questions of how, when, where, and why sexuality itself *becomes* a question, and how, when, where, and why it remains one. These are the questions that have been holding my attention lately, and I've been curious about what kinds of intellectual traditions hold the best resources for grappling with them. I'll lay out some of the territory I've been mapping for myself here as a small contribution to the collective endeavor of understanding what happened in the "queer" moment of the 1990s, and what might have been happening since. My intellectual investment in general is in slower archival work, work that doesn't reach for the topical too quickly, work that wonders why certain theoretical or methodological traditions are so popular, and wants to take the time to look into where



theories and methodologies come from as part of figuring out how certain forms of inquiry, certain kinds of questions, and certain results all fit together.

Working, as I do, mostly on French materials, I've become particularly interested in interactions over the past century or so between French and American critical traditions, in particular in the areas of semiotics, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Often American and French thought or intellectual traditions interact directly; often they turn out to be distant cousins sharing a common Continental ancestor. A certain amount of what is called queer theory might even be taken to be part of a recent episode in this kind of interaction.

Shifts in sign systems, in received categories, in conceptual maps, in discursive formations, in cultural systems as loci of meaning and spaces in which lives take on form, as often as not take place so slowly as to be imperceptible. These kinds of changes can be thought of as happening the way language change is sometimes thought to happen. Here's a description of language change written in the late nineteenth century by the American linguist William D. Whitney.

Our inquiries into the phenomena of speech have thus far shown us that the mass of each one's language is acquired by him by a process of learning, of direct acquisition of what is put before his mind by others; that, however, each one is at the same time a partner in the work of changing the language: contributing, indeed, only an infinitesimal quota toward it, in exact proportion to his importance in the aggregate of speakers by whom the language is kept in existence, yet doing his part in a sum which is all made up of such infinitesimal parts, and would not exist without them. The tradition of speech is carried on by him and such as he is; its modification is due to no other agency. . . . But if this is true, then there must be in every existing language, at any time, processes of differentiation not yet fully carried out, words and forms of words in a state of transition, altering but not altered; words obsolescent but not yet obsolete; old modes of pronunciation beginning to seem strange and affected, new modes coming into vogue—and so on, through the whole catalogue of possible linguistic changes.<sup>8</sup>

What Whitney is describing in terms of language change, words, and modes of pronunciation seems true as well of the social forms and discursive

sive categories through which something like sexuality would be lived and perceived, as well as written about. Foucault suggested in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that sexuality could be thought of as a set of possible things that could be said about a set of objects which was itself constructed by the enunciations that would reference them: “Instead of studying the sexual behavior of men at a given period . . . instead of describing what men thought of sexuality . . . one would ask oneself whether, in this behaviour, as in these representations, a whole discursive practice is not at work; whether sexuality . . . is not a group of objects that can be talked about . . . a field of possible enunciations . . . a group of concepts . . . a set of choices.”<sup>9</sup> In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault maps out an archival practice and a practice of reading in which individual texts are studied as part and parcel of larger discursive masses; the boundaries of individual works, in this kind of study, can be seen as somewhat arbitrary delimitations within a larger discursive field. The intent of the study is to investigate the establishment of discursive regularities, or of slow shifts within the overarching regularities of a given discursive formation. Matters related to the internal workings of a particular text are likely to be somewhat backgrounded in this kind of work. For Foucault, an archeology of sexuality of this sort “would reveal, not of course as the ultimate truth of sexuality, but as one of the dimensions in accordance with which one can describe it, a certain ‘way of speaking.’”<sup>10</sup>

In the report he wrote on Foucault’s work at the moment of Foucault’s election to the Collège de France, Jules Vuillemin emphasized the principle of “anonymity” behind Foucault’s practice: “For the history of systems of thought . . . the actors who think they are making this history are no longer front and center. . . . Consequently ‘a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose on the part of speakers any new ideas, invention, or creativity,’ but only those transformations that can be discovered on the level of discourse itself, occurring within an anonymous practice.”<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu offered a well-known critique of Foucault on this point, observing that Foucault’s fidelity “to the Saussurean tradition” meant that “he refuses to look outside ‘the field of discourse’ for the explanatory principle of each of the discourses in the field.” For Bourdieu, “it is not possible to treat cultural order . . . as an autonomous and transcendent system.”<sup>12</sup> Foucault was, of course, aware of this problem. In an interview from 1967, “Sur les façons d’écrire l’histoire,” he commented,

I had noticed that . . . discursive domains are not always governed by the structures that they in fact share with their associated practical and institutional domains, that instead they are governed by structures they have in common with other epistemological domains, that there were isomorphisms that existed between different discourses of the same era. So one is faced with two perpendicular axes of description, that of theoretical models common to a number of discourses, and that of the relations between the discursive domain and the non-discursive domain.<sup>13</sup>

He added, “To show that a given era’s scientific discourses all fall under a common theoretical model is not to say that they escape from history and float in the air as if isolated and disembodied, but rather that one cannot write the history, or analyze the functioning or the role of these bodies of knowledge, the conditions under which they operate, or the way they are rooted in society without taking into account the force and the consistency of these isomorphisms.”<sup>14</sup> This tension between, on the one hand, the structure of discourse — the structuring effects of discourse — and, on the other, the articulation of the discursive realm with the realms of practices and of social and political relations, a tension Bourdieu and Foucault both spent a great deal of time thinking about, has also been a crucial element in the development of sexuality studies over the past several decades. It’s certainly the tension that I’m working away at in these pages.

How to understand the relationship between behavior and discourse? If a certain kind of behavior is to be enduringly distinctive, ways of talking about it, of indicating it, must emerge to house that distinction. Think of these “ways of speaking” as resembling the sound system of a language, its phonology, in that they evolve according to their own rules. Every competent speaker of a language incorporates some version of its phonology. Nicholas S. Trubetzkoy famously defined phonology as the study of “which differences in sound are related to differences in meaning in a given language” and of the way “the discriminative elements (or marks) are related to each other, and the rules according to which they may be combined into words and sentences.”<sup>15</sup> In Trubetzkoy’s hands (or in the hands of someone like Roman Jakobson, or, in the tradition of American linguistics in the hands of someone like Leonard Bloomfield or Benjamin Lee Whorf), the sound system of a language becomes an abstract structure with super-individual existence, a structure available for linguistic

analysis, if not necessarily fully encompassed in any given speakerly incorporation.<sup>16</sup> Speakers apparently invoke some version of this abstract sound system in the moment of hearing speech, yet probably no one speaks with phonological purity; no one fully possesses the phonological system of a language.<sup>17</sup> The sound system is, in short, not usually *subjectively* apprehensible. Nor is language change. Nor are the discursive regularities through which our speech seems intelligible to others and to us. Whitney observes that “in a true and defensible sense, every individual speaks a language different from every other. The capacities and the opportunities of each have been such that he has acquired command of a part of English speech not precisely identical with any one else’s: the peculiarity may be slight, but it is certainly there.”<sup>18</sup> Everyone’s speech is peculiar, but usually the peculiarities don’t mean much given the overriding regularities. Yet somehow, some peculiarities are distinctive, memorable, forms of friction that become noticed, produce reactions, create social divisions; maybe they indicate emergent forms of meaning.<sup>19</sup>

We could maybe distinguish between a few different kinds of distinction to help us on our way. There are those distinctions that, through their regular production, make language function (cat vs. bat) or that make everyday actions within a culture legible and meaningful (a handshake vs. a kiss). There are distinctions that in a given language or culture make little difference linguistically or culturally (minor differences in pronunciation that may suggest some kind of accent, or suggest nothing at all; preferring sex in the morning, or the afternoon, or the evening). Then there are distinctions that are hard to be articulate about, including those related to what Whitney called “processes of differentiation not yet fully carried out,” and also including an interesting kind of meaning that Michael Silverstein has called “cultural concepts beyond lexicalization.”

Habits of speech and of interaction more generally are in part the effect of structural regularities that exist in a culture; perceptible peculiarities are the product of individual interactive performances that somehow produce a kind of semiotic friction within systems of regularity whose very regularities remain mostly beyond subjective ken. The subjective imperceptibility of the system of regularities (and the attendant peculiarities) that structure action (and language use) within a given cultural arena is a particularly interesting problem when it comes to thinking about sexuality — about what makes sexuality distinctive, about what makes certain kinds

of sexuality distinctive, about what grants salience or what produces peculiarity within our sense of sexuality, about whether the distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual matters. In an article from 1920 Franz Boas noted the following:

The general concepts underlying language are entirely unknown to most people. They do not rise into consciousness until the scientific study of grammar begins. Nevertheless, the categories of language compel us to see the world arranged in certain definite conceptual groups which, on account of our lack of knowledge of linguistic processes, are taken as objective categories and which, therefore impose themselves upon the form of our thoughts. It is not known what the origin of these categories may be, but it seems quite certain that they have nothing to do with the phenomena which are the subject of psycho-analytic study.<sup>20</sup>

That is to say, what is not subjectively known about the regularities and peculiarities of the actions of individual agents within culture, what is “anonymous” (to use Foucault’s word) in the regular workings of a discursive formation, what is unconscious in linguistic and cultural action — what is unconscious in the enactment of a given instance of sexuality — may be unconscious according to logics that are not psychoanalytic, or, we might say, not patterned on the scale of the individual.<sup>21</sup> Where, then, does the distinction of the sexual reside, and how do the regularities that ground the distinction manifest themselves in individual cases?

Just as I earlier jumped, perhaps a bit jarringly, from Whitney to Foucault to indicate the range of thought that can in my view be productively brought to bear on a critical reflection about the implication of sexuality in language, in discourse, and in cultural forms, let me here jump from Boas to the sociologist Erving Goffman. The connection turns on the idea that for Goffman our actions become intelligible due to our unconscious mobilization of pre-established social forms for action, just as for Boas our successful use of language mobilizes concepts and categories about which we are normally inarticulate.<sup>22</sup> In his classic essay “Where the Action Is,” Goffman takes an interest in forms of doing that are sharply distinctive. As he puts it, “By the term *action* I mean activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake. The degree of action — its seriousness or realness — depends on how fully these

properties are accentuated.”<sup>23</sup> Ordinarily, Goffman points out, our interactions avoid sharply distinctive actions; that is to say, we are more commonly disposed toward interactions that are well carried out and are *not* fateful or consequential (Goffman’s terms) or distinctive in the sense of producing some kind of social friction.

The ceremonial order sustained by persons when in one another’s presence does more than assure that each participant gives and gets his due. Through the exercise of proper demeanor, the individual gives credit and substance to interaction entities themselves, such as conversations, gatherings, and social occasions, and renders himself accessible and usable for communication. Certain kinds of misconduct, such as loss of self-control, gravely disrupt the actor’s usability in face to face interaction and can disrupt the interaction itself. The concern the other participants have for the social occasion, and the ends they anticipate will be served through it, together ensure that some weight will be given to the propriety of the actor’s behavior.<sup>24</sup>

Our interactions are not only forms of exchange; they also serve to reference and confirm what Goffman calls “interaction entities” (genres for interaction, we might say, forms that exist socially and exert a structuring influence on interaction). Our interactions reference those entities in a way similar to the way an utterance references the phonology (or any other aspect) of a language. Concern for the social occasion, which is often a not particularly conscious part of the interaction, might be like concern for pronunciation — a concern mostly unnoticed until some consequential deviation from what is expected presents itself.

In writing *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, Laud Humphreys made interesting use of Goffman’s thinking about where the action is (and *what* action is: “action is to be found wherever the individual knowingly takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable”).<sup>25</sup> At a certain point in his research, he informs us, he chose to abandon trying to analyze the psychological motivations of the participants in the interactions he was observing and instead decided to work to understand how the participants gave themselves over to interactions that were somehow prestructured forms of consequential action. For Humphreys, tearooms revealed “ritual means of achieving collective action” and a set of roles specific to the ritualized behavior in question. “A role unfolds,” he noted,

“becoming evident only as the action approaches showdown. . . . Even the actor may not know his role until the action is finished.” He concludes: “If we may view role performance as shaped by the end of the action and identifiable only in terms of the payoff, it may help us to understand the difficulties sex researchers have with applying traditional, psychologically oriented analyses of gender identity to actual patterns of homosexual performance.”<sup>26</sup> Humphreys’s use of Goffman’s framework is a helpful challenge to the prevailing tendency in much critical discourse to locate sexuality too exclusively in the psychological realm and to neglect the extent to which it is lived and experienced as a set of evolving cultural forms into which and within which agents move.

One of my favorite literary examples of this involves a throw of the dice toward the beginning of Jean Genet’s novel *Querelle*. In the brothel run by Madame Lysiane and her husband, Nono, the rule of the house is as follows: should you want to have sex with Madame Lysiane, you have to have sex with Nono first, but whether Nono fucks you or you fuck Nono is determined by a game of dice. Sometimes guys, as one might expect, say they want to have sex with Madame Lysiane in order to be able to have sex with Nono. Genet lays out a structured system of sexual interactions in which a kind of accident determines the roles into which you will fall regardless of how you imagine yourself motivated by “your” desire. The novel presents a clear sense that there is the mimetic imbrication between individual motivations and the structured system. Bourdieu’s description of this kind of imbrication is a classic one.

All the schemes of perception and appreciation in which a group deposits its fundamental structures, and the schemes of expression through which it provides them with the beginnings of objectification and therefore of reinforcement, intervene between the individual and his/her body. Application of the fundamental schemes to one’s own body, and more especially to those parts of the body that are most pertinent in terms of these schemes, is doubtless one of the privileged occasions for the incorporation of the schemes, because of the heavy investments placed in the body.<sup>27</sup>

For Bourdieu, these schemes of perception, which are part of what produce regularity and intelligibility within a culture, are, of course, not acquired consciously. “The process of acquisition . . . [—which] has

nothing in common with an *imitation* that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a model—and the process of reproduction . . . tend to take place below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance which these presuppose.”<sup>28</sup>

*Querelle* could be understood as Genet theorizing the process of acquiring those structures which ground sexual interaction and sexual expression; it could be understood as an ethnography of the “interaction entities” that make coherent sexual interaction possible. The novel also studies individual attempts to be expressive within those entities, as well as the accidents attendant on witting or unwitting improvisation within a ritually defined interaction entity. In the process, it almost necessarily depicts the various forms of semiotic friction that given acts of expression or improvisation can produce within the system. Does *Querelle* (or anyone else in the novel) know when he breaks the rules, improvises in unexpected ways, fails to conform to standard patterns? *Querelle*, as macho looking a fellow as one could like, asks to sleep with Madame Lysiane and then cheats at the game of dice in order to make sure that he will be the one getting fucked by Nono. The cultural expectation is understood to be that someone like *Querelle* should cheat toward a different end. The fact that he cheats at the game of chance in order to be sure to get fucked by Nono is clearly a form of what Goffman would call consequential action. Goffman suggests that consequential action has a close relationship with what we know as character. Character, he tells us, “refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments. . . . The individual can act so as to determine the traits that will thereafter be his; he can act so as to create and establish what is to be imputed to him. Every time a moment occurs, its participants will therefore find themselves with another chance to make something of themselves.”<sup>29</sup> This is clearly how *Querelle* approaches and reacts to the fateful toss. He knows his actions will be parsed in certain ways. He loses Nono’s respect—as the rules of the games dictate he should—but gains a chance to be made into something new, to be made into his role. “What new body would be his?” he wonders.<sup>30</sup> Yet even as he gives way to the rules of the game, somehow he seems also to change the game itself. He challenges the forms of legibility it provides. The novel ends (at least in the most complete French version; the English translation, having been made from a less complete edition,



ends somewhat differently) with a postcoital Querelle kissing Madame Lysiane on either cheek as he leaves her bedroom to head back to sea. The game of dice has thus played itself out to the expected end. And yet Querelle's pathway through the social forms of sexuality that surround him is not exactly an expected one — cheating to make sure he gets fucked by Nono, and taking on the consequences of that action over the long term (consequences having to do with character, honor, masculinity — a few of the currencies of sexual exchange, as well as consequences for his imagination of his own body), while still finding his way to Madame Lysiane's bed. The novel uses Querelle to confront the regularized patterns of distinction that form a normative scheme of sexual perception with a series of unpredictable actions. Querelle's actions instantiate semiotic unpredictability. "He had appeared among them with the suddenness and elegance of the joker in the pack. He scrambled the patterns, yet gave them meaning [il brouillait les figures mais leur donnait un sens]."<sup>31</sup> His unexpected moves produce new meanings out of the arrangement of the same traditional game pieces. Genet's interest in *Querelle* seems to have been both in the highly structured, predictable set of sexual forms through which people usually move and in the phenomenon of an agent who moves through those forms in unpredictable ways, throwing standard schemes of perception out of kilter.

Genet comes from a moment well *before* the queer moment of the early 1990s we are now clearly after, as does Balzac, another novelist who occupied my attention for a number of years. Both worked primarily in France, and both found their analytic instrument in the novel, rather than in the theoretical or critical genres characteristic of the recent work on sexuality from the North American academy. Both were preoccupied with what makes sexuality distinctive in a given time and place and in relation to other features of the social arena they investigated. Both took as their topic not only sexuality, but the schemes of perception that produce the sexual as an object. It wasn't exactly the same object for each of them, nor is it the same object for us. Genet's novels are peopled with the down-and-out of mid-twentieth-century Europe, the economically as well as sexually marginal — sailors, criminals, migrant workers, vagabonds — and he studies the social forms for interaction (including, but not exclusively, sexual interaction) that structure their worlds, constantly insisting that those social forms are not the same as the ones that most likely govern the lives

of his readers. Balzac showed how the distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual mattered in different ways to different people in the evolution of various social worlds (mostly those of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy) of early-nineteenth-century France, where different social groups were struggling for dominance. They worked in a particular genre at particular moments, and they thought about the patterns of distinctions that made what they took to be sexuality salient and that articulated it with other social questions. Certainly the queer moment of the 1990s provided tools for seeing anew what Balzac and Genet had to contribute; perhaps they can in turn help particularize that moment of the 1990s by way of the lessons they might teach about the contingencies of the object that is (or isn't) sexuality.

So let's come back to the editors' question, "Does the very distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual matter to queer thinking, and, if so, when, where, and how?" as well as to their general prompt to think about what isn't queer in our own work. My own intellectual time line is such that I elaborated a research agenda while reading along with and learning from the main texts of queer theory as they appeared, and of course I have used the word a lot in my work, but it seems more interesting to me now to link up the "queer" impulse with the general conceptual and sociosemiological problematic I've sketched here, having to do with emergent distinctions and, in particular, with those odd kinds of distinction that have effects but seem inarticulable. It seems hard to know in advance when and where differently patterned distinctions will cause us to notice something new about sexuality.

## What?

Also, at this point in my career, it seems interesting to try to understand, "archeologically," the emergence of the discursive formations, conceptual frameworks, and schemes of perception that have enabled the work I do, as well as the limits of those formations, schemes, and frameworks. The particular apprehension of an object (say, sexuality) and something of the object itself are determined by the tools used to apprehend it. In trying to understand something of the contingency in the construction of my objects of study, in wondering what has been missed, or what else there might be, I study the thinkers who help me think, and wonder how they

came to think the way they did. Whitney was important to Saussure. Saussure was important to Benveniste, Trubetzkoy, and Jakobson. Benveniste, along with other structural linguists such as Jakobson, was important to Bourdieu and Foucault. Goffman drew on ideas from French sociology (Durkheim), and his work would be important to later French sociologists such as Bourdieu and to thinkers such as Silverstein. Boas was important to Jakobson. Silverstein studied with Jakobson and edited a volume of Whitney's writings. An interest in American pragmatism in relation to the philosophy of language is another common point for many of these thinkers.<sup>32</sup> From my curiosity about the forms of contingency, of discontinuity, that certain histories or archeologies or sociologies of sexuality might reveal, and also a curiosity about the kind of object sexuality is (how, when, and where it became/becomes distinctive) arose a curiosity about the methodological traditions Bourdieu and Foucault worked within and furthered (their shared relation to epistemologists such as Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, Ernst Cassirer, for instance), and that has expanded into an exploration of various related traditions, different branches on an intellectual tree, so to speak, where other helpful resources might be available.

Sociological and discursive accounts of sexuality—loosely speaking, those which locate the structure of sexual experience outside of the individual and in the sociocultural realm or the realm of discourse—often seem highly counterintuitive in everyday contexts. The importance of the break with these everyday intuitions is one of the key epistemological principles governing Foucault and Bourdieu's work. Bourdieu, for example, drawing on the work of Bachelard and Cassirer, speaks in an early article of the need to “bracket the naïve experience of apparent relations” in order to find a way to “encompass both the objective sense of conducts organized according to observable and measurable regularities, and the particular relations that individual agents hold with the regularities objectively defining their condition of existence and the objective sense of their conduct—a sense which possesses them because they are dispossessed of it.”<sup>33</sup> One finds here echoes of the linguistic thinking cited above that dealt with the way an individual's speech relates to the regularities of language more generally. In specific relation to same-sex sexualities, this means accepting, for instance, that the most common names “naïvely” used to

cover all extant forms of sexual experience cannot be imagined to capture the significance immanent in all of those experiences. It also reminds us of the extreme difficulty of discovering what “regularities” we might choose to use in order first of all simply to observe and apprehend forms of sexuality and sexual conduct accurately enough to grasp more of their significance. One of the most important impulses in Foucault’s work was to encourage us to recognize that extant discourses on sexuality are often a hindrance to grasping the complicated object “sexuality” in either its being or its becoming. Both Foucault and Bourdieu are thus helpful for thinking about the way our quotidian patterns of understanding are structured by categories that, rather than being “scientific,” are the historical residue of dominant models of understanding that regularly disallow a critical apprehension of the object.

In a recent article, “‘Cultural’ Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus,” Silverstein, from a different branch of the particular intellectual tree I’m calling attention to here, asks a resonant set of questions.

Is there . . . a sociocultural unconscious in the mind — wherever that is located in respect of the biological organism — that is both immanent in and emergent from our use of language? Can we ever profoundly study the social significance of language without understanding this sociocultural unconscious that it seems to reveal? And if it is correct that language is the principal exemplar, medium, and site of the cultural, then can we ever understand the cultural without understanding this particular conceptual dimension of language?<sup>34</sup>

At a certain point in the article, Silverstein is particularly interested in a conceptual dimension of language that is, as he puts it, beyond lexicalization. This would be a conceptual dimension that structures individual perceptions and actions, but that an individual could not articulate, could not refer to. It exists in language only pragmatically and resists (it is a semiotic resistance, not a psychoanalytic one) being brought into the referential realm.<sup>35</sup> These nonlexical concepts, in which sexuality seems to me closely wound up, “turn out to be . . . revealed in cultural practices. . . . They are empirically investigable once we abandon the idea that they are analogues . . . to lexically coded concepts.” They constitute a kind of “presumptively shared knowledge,” and people “indexically access [that

knowledge] and experientially renew it each time words and expressions are used in the emerging ‘poetic’ structure of denotational and interactional textuality.”<sup>36</sup>

Silverstein’s approach is part of what he has called a “semiotic praxis orientation,” a pragmatics of “language-in-use, both as a cultural prototype and as the cultural medium par excellence.” Silverstein is happy (like Bourdieu) to scuttle modes of thought that extend the ideas from structural linguistics regarding phonological regularity to the realm of discourse, referring to it as “a misleading calque.” Projects that proceed this way “presume upon the model of an isolatable language system — a *langue* — in the Saussurean construal of the matter, even though it is language-in-use — a socioculturally inflected *parole* — that makes of language a substantive part and parcel of culture, as well as a more fruitful exemplar of the cultural and a guide into it.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps because of my own investment in literary artifacts and my training in certain modes of literary analysis, I am not so interested in rigorously dissociating *langue* and *parole* in order to leave the realm of *langue* far behind. Nor does it seem to me correct to associate the Foucauldian archeology of discourse exclusively with *langue*. I would prefer to see Foucauldian-style analysis of discursive regularities as an interesting and important moment within an analysis of the history of culture. For Silverstein, “cultural knowledge *lives and dies in textual occasions*. We create it on occasions of use of particular words and expressions in particular cotextual arrays one with respect to another, as much as, on subsequent occasions of use of them, we try to presume upon the knowledge previously experienced and, perhaps finding our presumption being questioned, have to create it again or modify it for some new interlocutor.”<sup>38</sup> How long is a “textual occasion,” and where does cultural knowledge go outside of those occasions? Silverstein, all *parole*, seems to prefer short-term interactive textual occasions. Foucault, the archeologist of textual artifacts, could perhaps be said to prefer them long. Silverstein is interested in “here-and-now contexts of use,” in the indexical invocation of sociocultural conceptualizations in specific discursive interactions.<sup>39</sup> When it comes to textual artifacts, what draws Silverstein’s interest is “not the denotational text directly or simply, but rather indications of more originary interactional text(s) of inscription. We seek the residue of past social interaction carried along with the sign vehicle encoding the semantic, or denotational, meaning in denotational text.”<sup>40</sup>

Foucault was not interested in the “denotational text directly or simply,” either. What interested Foucault at the moment of the interview “*Sur les façons d’écrire l’histoire*,” in 1967, was to see the textual artifact as

a set of elements (words, metaphors, literary forms, a set of narratives) between which one can reveal absolutely new relations, in the sense that they weren’t included within the writer’s own project and only become possible by means of the work itself as such. The formal relations that are thereby discovered were not present in anyone’s mind, they are not the latent content of the utterance, not some indiscrete secret; they are a construction, but an exact construction once the relations thus described can really be assigned to the materials being worked on.<sup>41</sup>

I think that what Foucault imagined himself doing was, in fact, creating an image of past arrays of cultural knowledge that enabled, that formed the background for, given acts of meaning production. One might even choose to say that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is, at least in part, a book about discovering the indexical relations that tie together different cultural or discursive formations.

We must grasp the utterance in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. . . . [A]n utterance is always an event that neither the language (*langue*) nor the meaning can quite exhaust. . . . [L]ike every event, it is unique, yet subject to repetition, transformation, and reactivation. . . . [I]t is linked not only to the situations that provoke it, and to the consequences that it gives rise to, but at the same time, and in accordance with a quite different modality, to the statements that precede and follow it.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously, when it comes to studying the place of literary artifacts within the history of sexuality, or, more specifically, to appreciating the analysis of the social forms of sexuality that can be found within a certain epistemological tradition of the French novel (Balzac, Proust), this kind of approach has a good deal to offer.

But I am finding in certain recent moments in French literary history, and in certain particular literary artifacts (those associated with Colette,

Genet, and Pinget, for instance) a particular interest in the nonreferentially accessible aspects of sexuality, an interest Silverstein's work in particular has helped me appreciate. It seems paradoxical, at least initially, that a novel, not the text artifact the most obviously well suited to dealing with the pragmatic aspects of language, could find a way to focus on nonlexicalizable aspects of sexuality, but there it is.

Genet's *Querelle*, as we have seen, exhibits a certain kind of pragmatic finesse as regards sexual interactions that leave those around him inarticulate. Indeed, he is inarticulate himself about the way he moves within the sexual culture that surrounds him. Genet thematizes inarticulateness at various points in the novel, including in the following difficult sentence toward the beginning of the novel. The published translation gets the sentence wrong — not hard to do, given how hard it is to understand, how compressed its meaning.

Nous aimerions que ces réflexions, ces observations que ne peuvent accomplir ni formuler les personnages du livre, permettent de vous poser non en observateurs mais en créatures ces personnages qui, peu à peu, se dégageront de vos propres mouvements. (24)

It means something like this:

I would like these reflections, these observations that the characters of this book can neither complete nor even formulate, to permit me to present you these characters not simply as observers but as creatures, who, bit by bit, will emerge from your own movements.<sup>43</sup>

The reflections referred to have to do with the relations that might exist between the proximity of two men, the experience of sexual arousal, the attempt to account for that arousal in one's own imagination, and the speech and other sounds that result from that arousal. The inarticulateness of the characters about their own relation to sexuality allows the novelist room to reflect upon it. Their inarticulateness is not a failing, so much as an opportunity to recognize that we know more about sexuality than we can say. Genet's goal vis-à-vis his characters and his reflections is therefore complex. The characters are not meant to be simply representational; they are not to be assigned the role of mapping out some territory for us. What cannot be articulated by the characters about sexuality in their world might only be "understood" by the reader should the novel somehow

activate the pragmatic cultural knowledge of that reader (and should the reader have the practical knowledge in question available for activation). Genet understands his novel not simply as a space of representation, in which various referential aspects of culture can be recorded. He works to make it an instrument that calls to our attention the myriad ways we invoke culture to act in the world. It's as if the book wants to make us feel as acutely as possible our participation in the nonreferential aspects of sexual culture (which is not necessarily where identities happen), to feel culture happen as we read, in particular that part of a culture which cannot be found in the denotational value of the words on the page. This theoretically complex sense of both the location and the substance of the cultural phenomenon of sexuality had been developing within a certain tradition of the French novel for some time and constitutes a remarkable theoretical achievement. Much of the richness of the explorations of these writers in this regard still awaits discovery. Maybe they'll have something to say to us regarding not so much what we are after, but what we are before.

## Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 161, 173. I took a stab at talking about synchronization, politics, and sexuality in France in 1968 using some of Bourdieu's ideas, in my "Sexuality, Politicization, May 1968: Situating Christiane Rochefort's *Printemps au parking*," *differences* 12.3 (2001): 33–68.
- 2 Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 180.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 It can take a long time for a context of origin to catch up with theoretical texts that circulate quite rapidly within the decontextualizing currents of the international exchange of ideas. The work of contextualization takes its own time and then requires translation and circulation in its own right. For instance, much of the interesting work in French on the reactionary origins of Lacan's thought and its ongoing reactionary impact within French culture awaits translation and reception within the English-speaking world. A list would include Didier Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire: Variations sur un thème de Jean Genet* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); Michel Tort, *La fin du dogme paternel* (Paris: Aubier, 2005); Didier Eribon, *Echapper à la psychanalyse* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005).
- 5 Sharon Marcus, "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," *Signs* 31.1 (2005): 191–218, at 213. The titles being referred to in the passage are Michael DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson,*



- and Keanu Reeves (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); and Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 6 See, for instance, the helpful section called "Objectivating the Subject of Objectivation," in Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, trans. Richard Nice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
  - 7 See Pierre Bourdieu, "Pour une science des oeuvres," in *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 70.
  - 8 William Dwight Whitney, *The Life and Growth of Language: An Outline of Linguistic Science* (New York: Appleton, 1875), 153–54.
  - 9 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 193.
  - 10 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 193. The jump from Whitney to Foucault might seem a large one, except that in a large sense they both belong to the set of modern critical thinkers engaging with different versions of the idea that, to borrow from Benjamin Lee, "language is not merely a transparent means for expressing thought, but it helps shape thought" (Benjamin Lee, *Talking Heads: Language, Metalanguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1997], 181). We could say that they are both engaged with thought about the subject in and of language — as are most of the other thinkers I will mention here.
  - 11 The text of Vuillemin's report is reprinted in an appendix to Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault (1926–1984)*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 371.
  - 12 Pierre Bourdieu, "Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works," trans. Claud DuVerliee, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 179.
  - 13 Michel Foucault, "Sur les façons d'écrire l'histoire," in *Dits et écrits, vol. 1: 1954–1969*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 590.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, 591.
  - 15 Nicholas S. Trubetzkoy, *Principles of Phonology*, trans. Christiane A. M. Baltaxe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 10. Cited in Lee, *Talking Heads*, 149.
  - 16 On Bloomfield and Whorf, see Michael Silverstein, "Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality," in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2000), 85–138, esp. 86–94.
  - 17 Indeed, it has been shown that analyses of the phonological system of a language are not necessarily unique, or correct, "but may be regarded only as being good or bad for various purposes." Yuen Ren Chao, "The Non-Uniqueness of Phonemic Solutions of Phonetic Systems" (1934), in *Readings in*

- Linguistics*, vol. 1, ed. Martin Joos (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 38–54, at 38. Cited in Lee, *Talking Heads*, 154.
- 18 Whitney, *The Life and Growth of Language*, 154.
- 19 Note these remarks by Pierre Bourdieu: “Language is a body technique, and specifically linguistic, especially phonetic, competence is a dimension of bodily hexis in which one’s whole relation to the social world, and one’s whole socially informed relation to the world, are expressed. There is every reason to think that, through the mediation of what Pierre Guiraud calls ‘articulatory style’, the bodily hexis characteristic of a social class determines the system of phonological features which characterizes a class pronunciation.” Pierre Bourdieu, “Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits,” in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 86.
- 20 Franz Boas, “The Methods of Ethnology,” *American Anthropologist* 22.4 (1920): 311–21, at 320.
- 21 For helpful commentary on Boas’s ideas, see Roman Jakobson, “Franz Boas’ Approach to Language,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 10.4 (1944): 188–95.
- 22 Perhaps, in fact, the jump from Boas to Goffman needn’t be seen as all that jarring, since they are both regularly considered to be important figures in the American tradition of linguistic anthropology. See, for example, William F. Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 184–200.
- 23 Erving Goffman, “Where the Action Is,” in *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 185.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 194.
- 26 Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, enlarged ed. (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2007), 48, 50, 51.
- 27 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 73.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 29 Goffman, “Where the Action Is,” 238.
- 30 Jean Genet, *Querelle*, trans. Anselm Hollo (New York: Grove, 1974), 70.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 269. In French: Jean Genet, *Querelle de Brest* (Paris: Gallimard [L’imaginaire], 1981), 247.
- 32 A couple useful resources: John E. Joseph, *From Whitney to Chomsky: Essays in the History of American Linguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002); William F. Hanks, “Pierre Bourdieu and the Practices of Language,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 67–83.
- 33 Pierre Bourdieu, “Structuralism and Theory of Sociological Knowledge,” *Social Research* 35 (1968): 681–706, at 704.

- 34 Michael Silverstein, “‘Cultural’ Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus,” *Current Anthropology* 45.5 (2004): 621–52, at 622.
- 35 As he says in another, related article, “The limits to pragmatic awareness of social action are also definable, constrained, and semiotically-based.” Michael Silverstein, “The Limits of Awareness,” in *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 382–401, at 401.
- 36 Silverstein, “‘Cultural’ Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus,” 638.
- 37 Michael Silverstein, “Language/Cultures Are Dead! Long Live the Linguistic-Cultural!” in *Unwrapping the Sacred Bundle: Reflections on the Disciplining of Anthropology*, ed. Daniel A. Segal and Sylvia J. Yanagisako (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 99–125, at 110. Bourdieu has noted that “transferring the phonological model outside the linguistic field has the effect of generalizing, to the set of symbolic products[,] . . . the inaugural process which makes linguistics *the most natural of the social sciences* by separating the linguistic instrument from its social conditions of production and utilization” (*Language and Symbolic Power*, 33).
- 38 Silverstein, “‘Cultural’ Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus,” 634.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 622.
- 40 Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, “The Natural History of Discourse,” in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–17, at 5.
- 41 Foucault, “Sur les façons d’écrire l’histoire,” 592.
- 42 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 28.
- 43 Genet, *Querelle de Brest*, 24. The erroneously translated version of this sentence comes on page 20 of the English edition.

# Queer Theory

## Postmortem

JEFF NUNOKAWA

OF COURSE what came to be called “queer theory” didn’t begin with *ACT UP*, but man did it get a major jolt there. Anyone around for those weekly meetings at the New York Gay and Lesbian Community Center from the late 1980s to the early 1990s will recall the spectacular charge the fervid energies of political activism gave to the (already) late deconstruction that was the going theoretical thing then. Those of us who flocked there from college libraries and classrooms will remember the buzz of phrases like “an epidemic of signification,” and the train of poststructuralist thought heralded by them, a train of thought whose electrification during the state of emergency that drew us all together was so well advertised in academic circles and journals that their mention even at this late date is probably enough to recall all the excitement that surrounded them.<sup>1</sup> Of course the plug-in required some assembly. There were problems of translation that beset efforts to turn “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” into good copy for the retail “culturally activist cultural analysis” that the pressure of the AIDS crisis made the marching order of the day for many politi-

cally minded critics, problems whose solution involved trading in the rebarbative rhetoric of poststructuralism for postmodernism, its less redoubtably theoretical cognate. The challenge of popularization, though, was eased by the common sense of common cause that was the chief source of warmth at those weekly events; the spirit of solidarity, the best part of those hard times, was sufficient to entertain, or at least let slide, the claim contained in a headline like “an epidemic of signification,” the claim that Cultural Analysis of the postmodern kind had a place at the meetings of Cultural Activism, a seat there as an instrument or even an instance of political action.

This spirit of solidarity, capacious enough to make room for all kinds of critics, cranks, and crackpots, critical crackpots and crackpot critics, not to mention — at least by name — cranky critics, was the bright side of the story. The well-lit feeling of community at those meetings — far too well lit; those fluorescent bulbs were “a disaster for *everyone*,” as a friend recalled recently, with a slight shudder even after all these years — worked at full wattage to deny or diminish the darkness just outside the hall, the lonely feeling of the dying, and the lonely feeling of fearing death. Dispelling these lonely feelings is among the charms of the minor-league sociability enabled as much by major political outfits like ACT UP as by any bar or party, the likes of which those meetings often came to resemble. Of course, all that bonding and backbiting was hard to hear as anything other than background chatter, dwelling as it did in stereo with the epic sounds of solidarity necessary to tackle the grand goals of political militancy: those group demonstrations (often abetted and sometimes inspired, it should be said, by some pretty brilliant “cultural analysis” — albeit usually more in the groove of graphic design than the groves of academe), those collective actions designed to protest the powerful sources of murderous delay in the midst of a terrible emergency. Still, no one who has sat around a sickbed with a bunch of friends, cheering an ever-more-aged Bette Davis as she refused, time and again, to go gently into the lesser light of the small screen or, come to think of it, into a still more private place where all light is quite shut out; no one who has sat around a hospital room talking, loudly and softly, about matters of vital concern, such as the criminal state of health care here and abroad, or the ludicrous cluelessness of another friend — “Did he really *say* that?!” — announced with the speed of an arrow the second he was out the door, can doubt the small powers of such chat-

ter to dispel, however briefly, the solitude that engulfs the subject of fatality: the slight power of the merely sociable to keep us together for just a bit longer. I'll return in the end to this party, which back in the day did — it still does — its little part in the fight against death, at least to make gentler the going away from others that witnesses near and far have called the hardest part of dying.<sup>2</sup>

But queer theory before social gaiety: the spirit of solidarity that accepted, or at least benignly ignored, the claims made by cultural analysis to constitute a form of cultural activism defined and animated as well the analysis itself, and never more so than in that inaugural and by now canonical anthology *October* 43: “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.”<sup>3</sup> For the good of the cause, the academically inclined thinkers gathered together there (roughly half the roster of the volume), and, later, elsewhere essayed to expose the socially (read: discursively) constructed character of this or that element of the crisis, and it hardly seems wild to surmise that this wartime record in the critical battle against the “epidemic of signification” helped elect the school of social constructionism to the governing board of queer theory. This hunch seems obvious enough to stipulate as axiomatic: what interests me more now, in the wake, at least, of queer theory’s first phase, is to go back and consider what else, aside from the promotion of postmodernist analysis, was going on at those meetings and in the anthologies where some of their spirit is archived that has had consequences for criticism dedicated to illuminating the relation between sexuality, eccentric or not, and society. I want to take up one of the articles assembled in *October* 43, located on the far end of the cultural analysis side of the two regions demarcated, or not, by the bar between cultural analysis and cultural activism; an essay that, for all its gestures of being with the team, did not really play well with the others; an essay less committed to the applied postmodern critique that was the main charge of the cultural analysis to be found there and in those that followed it — or, to put this differently, one with a decidedly deeper and more violent view of what such a critique entails. For Leo Bersani, the social construction that must be rooted out and routed dwells far below the topical surface of this or that slanderous characterization, this or that association of AIDS and HIV with this or that sexual or ethnic identity. By his Lacanian lights, the fight must be taken to the shores of *identification* itself; his ferocious sensibility will not be satisfied with any quarrel that stops short of a battle

to the death, a discarding of the self in an ecstatic annulment that cancels the condition that enables it. This heroic casualty is the breach in the citadel of phallic subjectivity, the breach that is the titular locus of Bersani's essay, the fatality that results from the sexual violence that takes place there, like the shudder in the loins that draws down the towers of Ilium, ruins a bellicose culture, and, in his book, the conditions that make any culture possible as well. Listen to Bersani, speaking the language of psychoanalysis where he is most at home, admire the gleam of the fatal thrust.

If the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared — differently — by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death. Tragically, AIDS has literalized that potential as the certainty of biological death, and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the fantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality. It may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him.

That judgment . . . is grounded in the sacrosanct value of selfhood, a value that accounts for human beings' extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements. The self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it is a sanction for violence. If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence. Gay men's "obsession" with sex, far from being denied, should be celebrated — not because of its communal virtues, not because it offers a model of genuine pluralism to a society that at once celebrates and punishes pluralism, but rather because it never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice. Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of asceticism.<sup>4</sup>

Clambering to the heights of the poststructuralist theory that postmodern critics sought to bring to the streets, Bersani finds a form of ecstasy, "a lonely impulse of delight," whose full force he only half stresses.<sup>5</sup> No

less sublime than the out-of-self experience he attributes to the thrilling wounding of the phallic ego, the razing of all that arises from the mirror stage — identification, identity, and the glorious armor of a “proud subjectivity” where the sense of these things most shimmers — is the out-of-society experience that takes place there as well. Not that Bersani declines to depict a scene of “away[ness]” from others that attends the sexual shattering of the self (“sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart”), an awayness that he emphatically refuses to mitigate by rerouting it as the underground railroad to a greater society.<sup>6</sup> (Bersani’s contempt for the very idea of communal values in bathhouses or back rooms has cut so deeply that all subsequent celebrations of group sex in queer theory circles as a kind of world making or a counter-public sphere have been obliged to address it explicitly or run in the other direction.) Nevertheless, the strain of psychoanalysis that animates Bersani’s work from beginning to end ensures that his story will feature first of all the formation and destruction of a singular self: thus the amazing tale of its disappearance subordinates nearly out of sight the no less amazing tale of its disappearance from the society that brings it into being.

And yet like so many things barely mentioned or nearly out of sight, this secondary loss dwells at the heart of the matter: the departure of the self from society may appear at first glance to be no match for the extraordinary measure by which this departure is arranged; the spectacular explosion of the self rather likely eclipses the simple social distancing of the self entailed by its explosion.<sup>7</sup> But the being whose demolition Bersani celebrates with a fervor we can fairly call apocalyptic is an irreducibly *social* being, a self defined at its foundation by its susceptibility to others. What makes this self so hateful in Bersani’s eyes is not simply its specific character as an identity contaminated by an especially baleful social relation — the “uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against” it, the mirror trick by which the always already-tarnished ego of the self-hating gay man comes into being — but rather its categorical character as an identity constructed out of *any* social relation whatsoever.

The finer details of Bersani’s avid and elegant broadside against the violent introjections that, according to the terms of his arraignment, all at once shatter and form the social self need not detain us here; its theoretical context can be sufficiently invoked by dropping a few names and titles.<sup>8</sup> In



any case, the familiar and familiarly recondite conceptual particulars of the prison house shades that define Bersani's variation on the classic theme of society as iron cage have not detained me in the work I have undertaken in the years since first looking into his essay: I could not waste the afternoon, or the decade, explaining them.<sup>9</sup> Something about that text did stay with me, though, something vaster than its scholastic specificities, something that remains as much a part of the way I think now as my warm associations, after all these years, with those ACT UP meetings; as much a part of the way I think now as the pity and terror before the spectacle or specter of death impossible to separate from the vicissitudes of sex — a pity and terror, linked like night and day, to the light and heat of those meetings.

I will confess in a moment how I couldn't in the end, but let me first indicate how I sought to part company with Bersani's essay: it's been my aim in the last few years to help develop a less eschatological picture of the self's escape from society, a picture undarkened by the vision of a self that is nothing more than the scar tissue of the violence done to it by a culture that is itself nothing more than the sum of this violence. What to call the point of view from which I have sought to take leave? Manichaeism comes to mind: Bersani's sense of self, society, and the relation between them is the psychoanalytic angle on the view of the social made most familiar to recent students of theory — that code term for the whole array of structuralisms and their apparently infinitely prolix postscripts — by Foucault in his utopian mood. Thus, in the famous last words of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*: on one side, society in all of its dark constructions: the world we know, pervasively polluted by the insinuations of an infinitely cunning power; on the other, a promised or possible land, a world of light, of "bodies and pleasures" unfettered by the weight of the social denominations that define them all the way down.<sup>10</sup> But perhaps a better label for the conception of the self, society, and their relation to one another I have sought to escape for some time now would be *monism*: I suspect that the theoretical worldview able to stiffen even a mind as supple as Bersani's imagines society, at the end of the day, at the end of this or that rationalizing talk of semi-autonomous arrangements, as a univocal entity (call it what you will, or what wills you: ideology, power, violence, language) and its subjects as more or less indifferent instantiations (call them the effects of interpellation or subjection) of this entity. How, by this view, could anyone get out alive?<sup>11</sup>

But there are other, less totalizing, less totalitarian ideas of what binds self to society, and it is to them I have turned in my current research about what it's like to get away from others in nineteenth-century literature and political theory. I have become attached to one such idea, in particular, attracted to its catholic quality (not like the Catholic quality whose affiliations with the Marxist version of structuralism is as well documented as it is easy to deduce), which equips it to concede without a shot the catechism of grand theory that no one escapes the force of the social: Erving Goffman to his macrosociological critics, "saying that [their] concerns were not his concerns, but they were more important than his concerns!"<sup>12</sup> Goffman is perfectly happy to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, because his fine eye is forever finding, in the interstices of social bonds from which no disengagement is possible, all kinds of looser, smaller social situations from which it *is* possible. It was his delight to study the rules and ruses of disengagement, the ways in which the self negotiates to gain her temporary release from these situations, and his belief that they counted for something a little less than revolutionary subversion and a little more than simply appeasing the powers that be. Compare what Goffman, our "theorist of the infinitely small" (Bourdieu), admires — the little strategies, as prosaic in their periodicity as they are charming in their cunning, by which the self purchases some temporary withdrawal from the society that surrounds him — compare these to the sublime destruction of the subject that is the only exit Bersani sees.<sup>13</sup>

The rule against "having no purpose" or being disengaged, is evident in the exploitation of untaxing involvements to rationalize or mask desired lolling — a way of covering one's physical presence in a situation with a veneer of acceptable visible activity. Thus, when individuals want a "break" in their work routine, they may remove themselves to a place where it is acceptable to some and there smoke in appointed fashion. Certain minimal "recreational" activities are also used as covers for disengagement, as in the case of "fishing" off river banks where it is guaranteed that no fish will disturb one's reverie. (58)

What could seem farther away from the epic battleground where every Achilles is made to heel, where the Subject is carried away from the Social, like the corpse of the warrior lifted on his shield, than the green thoughts or brown studies that are Goffman's version of the pastoral, those moments of

awayness shaded by sanctioning alibis? Strange to say, though, my own essays in the spirit of Goffman's stories about getting away from others have often been overtaken by an alien force, like a tidal pull, or a felt social fact, that drew them back to the darker shades of social distance, where being away from others is a lonely place full of mortal dangers to body and soul, and where getting there is less a matter of going by choice than being spirited away by the twin engines of eros and thanatos that together propel what we know best as the death drive.<sup>14</sup> Characters near and far, in Austen, Brontë, Dickens, Thackeray, Browning, Mill, and Eliot, are removed by raptures more or less noticeably erotic, more or less noticeably mortifying. I have heard, if not the loneliness of the dying, some echo or prophecy of it in the most unlikely places: in disengagements as slight as a romantic daydream, a "dreadful force" that "strike[s]" the dreamer.<sup>15</sup> I have seen, if not a shattering sexual penetration, a sight that bears signs of this primal scene — the picture of the most flexuously stylish, socially-conscious girl imaginable, moved by a paralyzing terror beyond all thought of society: "a piercing cry" and then "she looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered; her pallid lips were parted; her eyes, usually narrowed under their long lashes, were dilated and fixed."<sup>16</sup>

My guess now is that I have been drawn to discover the mortal terrors that attend even the smallest social escapes — all of them more or less caught up with erotic penetrations — in the literature I study, in part by Bersani's astonishing story of sexual intercourse, social withdrawal, and self-destruction. Or, just as likely, the no less breathtaking affect that I now suspect was interred there all along: "If the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity (an ideal shared — differently — by men and women) is buried." "Is the Rectum a Grave?" is a resting place, I now think, for a common terror of death that was especially terrible at the time of its writing for the gay men who were its subject and to whom, in the first place, it was addressed. Bersani's meditation strikes me now as a kind of theodicy for that terror, rather like those rationalizing accounts of the "panther feast" sexual practices and cultures that are the stuff of urban legend and living color, those liberal pluralist blandishments Bersani prosecutes with such relentless brilliance both here and in the briefs he has submitted since to the courts of queer theory. What is that climactic scene of the essay, that Samson act of suicide violence where the hero "demolishes" his hateful self and, along the way, severs all relations

with the society that makes him so, if not a translation of the horrible sight of death, the departure of the dying from those around them? What is the discarding of the social self that Bersani so articulately approbates as the good-war casualty of gay sex but, by the saving grace of metaphor, a negation of the lonely end that so many of us so dumbly feared, and fear, more or less dumbly, still?

But I mean to honor the memory of that essay, to praise and not to bury it; to hail the rancor of its frank hatred of identity, and the fury of its applause during the scene of its undoing, the scene where, where, it is unfixing? No, no!: where it is *demolished*: how tinny, how thin, how programmatic queer theory's business-as-usual opposition to fixed identity can sound when it is set next to the voice of the take-no-prisoners prophet we hear in "Is the Rectum a Grave?"; how pale, how paint-by-number the sight of its unfixing can look next to the flames of the funeral pyre where Bersani stages its immolation. As with the enduring melancholia that Judith Butler has so finely explicated at the heart, as the heart of an identity—gay, lesbian, or queer—exemplary in its instability, a bracing sense of catastrophe, the feel of a hurricane nearby, underwrites Bersani's bestowing of flagship status to what he *will* call specifically gay identity as a social imposition whose undoing illuminates the vulnerability of all identity.<sup>17</sup>

Most important, I mean to honor Bersani's abidingly unpopular recognition that however much sex is put out in public, made the medium of some new and improved society, sex invokes an urge to get away from others as much as an urge to join with them. We can begin to remark the persistence of this urge in the very realm of public sex itself: anyone accustomed to the cultures of public sex in which Michael Warner and others place considerable hope knows full well the more or less articulated, more or less conscious, more or less courteous "involvement shields" (38)—the averted or unanswering eye; the polite excuse; the turning of the back—thrown up in the face of the unpreferred object. But I do not mean to stop there: I am persuaded that the connection between sex and social withdrawal is as deep as Bersani says it is, as deep as that, but different, working through mediations whose particularities cannot be summarized as the perturbations of a single psychic catastrophe.<sup>18</sup>

Finally back to those ACT UP meetings, and in particular to the "subordinate involvements" of those "focused interaction[s]" (45, 25), all the social buzz that fell below the radar of the official proceedings I mentioned

earlier. It is here, in the very midst of all that high- and low-grade gossip, that I learned what I know best about the relation between the social, the *sociable*, really, and the fear of death, something quite opposed to the awful, awesome exodus that Bersani sees as our sole salvation. What I learned best from ACT UP was detached as much from the traditional wisdom, so routinely impeached now, which prefers reproduction as the instrument by which societies defy the ontological fact of death, as from the more obviously admirable coalition that did battle with the political causes of how many unnecessary deaths, that noble coalition under whose banner so many different kinds of people gathered. As I've said, anyone who remembers them knows that those meetings were about other things as well, and the lesson that drove itself most deeply into my research dwelt among these trivialities, a lesson as simple as what comes from the comfort of connecting with a stranger in the midst of a mortal emergency. I suppose I could have read all about it in Jane Austen — she certainly knows how to tell it — but I guess I needed to see it for myself.

*Think where man's glory most begins and ends,  
and say my glory was I had such friends.*

— W. B. YEATS, "The Municipal Gallery Re-Visited"

## Notes

This essay is dedicated to my friends: sine qua non.

- 1 Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 31–70.
- 2 Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Continuum, 1985).
- 3 Douglas Crimp, ed., "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," special issue, *October* 43 (Winter 1987).
- 4 Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222.
- 5 William Butler Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 133–34.
- 6 Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 69. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 7 Bersani's reader would be well advised here to take a meeting with Lady Bracknell, whose rigorous lucidity in *The Importance of Being Earnest* amounts to never removing her eye from the ball of social demands. Nothing will shake

her consciousness that the rules of social engagement apply to everyone, exploded or not. According to her unswerving standards, such an explosion of the self is first and foremost a social dereliction rather than a personal undoing:

LADY BRACKNELL: May I ask if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr. Bunbury resides?

ALGERNON: [*stammering*] Oh! No! Bunbury doesn't live here anymore. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead.

LADY BRACKNELL: Dead! When did Mr. Bunbury die? His death must have been extremely sudden.

ALGERNON: [*airily*] Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon.

LADY BRACKNELL: What did he die of?

ALGERNON: Bunbury? Oh, he was quite exploded.

LADY BRACKNELL: Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity.

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 2:1702.

- 8 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); and Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
- 9 "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 150.
- 10 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 159. See also "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," *The Advocate*, 7 August 1984.
- 11 The most searching accounts that I have found of the modern tendency toward philosophical as well as specifically sociological monism are to be found in the work of Georg Simmel. See *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1964); *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); and *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmet Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
- 12 Gordon Marshall, ed., *A Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 261.

- 13 Pierre Bourdieu, "La mort du sociologue Erving Goffman: Le decouvreur de l'infiniment petit," *Le Monde*, 12 March 1982.
- 14 See Jeff Nunokawa, "Speechless in Austen," *differences* 16.2 (Summer 2005): 1–36, and "Eros and Isolation: The Anti-Social George Eliot," *ELH* 69.4 (2002): 835–60.
- 15 Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. James Kingsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 408.
- 16 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. with an introduction by Barbara Hardy (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 91.
- 17 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 18 I should be clear here: it is not my intention to suggest that sex is univocally allied with social withdrawal. Such a claim would only recapitulate the monism and Manichaeism that I have sought to criticize in this essay. Besides, such a claim would just be silly on the face of it; silly in the magnificent face, sad or not, of "Eros, builder of cities" (W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson [New York: Vintage Books, 1979]). Not for nothing have so many ministers of sex for such a long time now praised it as the best image and catalyst of the broadest social communions.

## Disturbing Sexuality

ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI

FOR THE PAST twenty-two years I have worked with members of a small indigenous community, Belyuen, and their relatives who live along the coastal region of north-western Australia. From this perspective, I have written about a certain impasse in liberal politics of cultural recognition and about the multiple double binds and capacitating possibilities that emerge from it. I have tried to show that this impasse and its social consequences arise not from liberalism's bad faith but from its strongest ethical impulse to embrace difference. Some of the central questions I have sought to answer include these: How does a specific structure of liberal recognition reproduce rather than disrupt networks of power that negatively ramify on my friends at Belyuen? Are these harms external to the logic of cultural recognition or internal to it? How do they relate to a specific nonpassage between liberal deliberative sense and liberal moral sense?

These conceptual questions mask a question that may seem to some more personal: Why do I care about these harms, here, with these people, rather than some other set



of harms, some other group of people, elsewhere? One answer is that I have witnessed the debilitating and capacitating effects of cultural recognition on people whom I have known quite intimately for some time now. This answer, however, prompts other questions: Why do I know them so intimately? Why do I return to Belyuen year after year? After all I live a rich queer life in the United States that is disrupted by these periodic visits. And, to complicate matters, some of my closest friends at Belyuen do not think homosexuality is a viable way of life. So what's up with all this "going bush"? Why not study closer to home, where I can be fully me?

One response would reduce these personal peregrinations to the manifestations of disciplinary power. Modern anthropological method has stereotypically rested on a bout of "fieldwork" ("participant observation"). Fieldwork once meant traveling to a remote place and staying there for a year or so. The more toxic and distasteful the fieldwork, the tighter it tied the researcher to the disciplinary imaginary. This may not be the case any longer—fieldwork is now often multisited, proximate to power, comfortable, and collaborative—but granting agencies and PhD programs continue to be organized around the rhythm of a "year or so." After that year, anthropologists establish different kinds of relations with the people with whom they have worked. Some people keep in touch and periodically visit. Some don't. From a professional anthropological viewpoint, then, it is neither completely bizarre nor all that normal for me to have spent twenty-two years returning to Belyuen annually, watching kids being born and growing into adults, people aging and dying, community politics morphing and iterating, national discourses shifting and bobbing.

The disciplinary response to why I have returned to Belyuen is easier to swallow in some ways than another equally true response—namely, that this relationship and my entry into anthropology were the result of friendship, a friendship that existed before I became an anthropologist, and a way of doing anthropology based on friendship. I wasn't an anthropologist when I first arrived at Belyuen. I didn't know there was such a thing as anthropology, let alone know what it encompassed. I also didn't know when I began returning to Belyuen as an anthropologist that rooting research and theory in friendship increases rather than lessens the ethical, theoretical, and political stakes of acting and writing. Friendship cannot abrogate the racial, national, or sexual discourses in which and through which they and I meet. Nor are these discourses repealed by the fact that

“friendship” signifies awkwardly at Belyuen, where kinship is the presupposed background of social relations. People there tell me to experience my relationship to them in kinship terms, and in fact I have developed deeper familial relations with them than with my family of birth: I feel obliged to show up for them in ways I wouldn’t show up for my other family. Nevertheless, neither friendship nor its translation into kinship can neutralize the fact that discourses and imaginaries of race, nation, and sexuality do not merely show up in my relationship with people at Belyuen but are internal to the construction of the scene itself. All of this ramifies awkwardly when moved into a nationalized and internationalized politics of representation. Which makes me less irritated than amused when I am “reminded” by some critics that there is an inherent differential between a scholar from the North and subjects from the South; that it is not clear whether we can learn anything foundational about a national discursive order from the perspective of a small, regionally marginal place; and that there is something suspect about using anything that smacks of queer theory (or sexuality) to understand the discursive constitution of indigeneity.

In other words, Andrew Parker and Janet Halley’s request that I — and other authors in this volume — consider how my research on “nonsexual” topics relates to my research on “sexual” topics touched on a number of problems that have long knotted together my academic and personal life. I am going to take advantage of the editors’ offer in order to reflect on some of the problems of sexual and nonsexual identification and legibility that animate two scenes of sociality — scenes of U.S. homosexuality and scenes of Belyuen geophysicality — and on how these scenes have shaped my critical approach to liberal recognition and queer theory.



We can begin with the dynamics of interpellation: “Ah, that’s me!” — the prototypical scene of subjectivation in which “we were seeking each other before we set eyes on each other.”<sup>1</sup> “That’s me,” I thought, when I saw two women kissing in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “This is me,” I thought when I went hunting with a group of women and men from Belyuen. But what is “this” and “that”? — an identity, a mode of life, a form of association? Surely I was hailed in both. But as surely, I was not hailed into an equivalent social form or mode of being. When I said, looking at Codey and Tasha kissing,

“That’s me,” I found waiting at the end of the demonstrative an intelligible identity organized by a language game, widely available to others with whom I interacted. I am gay; this is homosexuality. When I said, “This is me,” as I slogged through a dense mangrove with friends from Belyuen cooperatively and competitively looking for mud crabs, what identity dangled at the end of this? Was it an identity — some awkward agglutinated nominal form, “kin-being-in-the-woods” — or an Arendtian mode of being together in activity? But what is that? How can I convey what that is to others? And how can I constellate an identity around it? I could provide more and more personal context that would overflow the awkwardly hinged term *kin-being-in-the-woods* and would suggest why I felt addressed by this mode of being together. I could describe how my eldest sister raised my siblings and me in such a way that “the woods” became the protective brace against domestic peril. I could then go on to describe how these ways of being together in the woods became layered into another familial story: my grandparents’ insistence that our real home was a small kin-based village, Carisole, in the Italian Alps. But no matter how these nativity scenes overdetermined the identifications that felt like recognition when I first showed up at Belyuen, they do not provide me with an available name for this mode of social being. Nor do I think that they should — that the ethical, political, or social task is to find an identity that can retroactively constitute the truthful name of this mode of life that so rivets me.

Even if a nominal form lay at the other end of my outstretched arm, retroactively constituting who I am and understand myself to be, the practical way that my Belyuen friends and I are in the world is hardly equivalent. In part, this is due to the noncorrespondence of the components of our coming into being. Simply, what I am seeing and identifying in this scene is not there in some objective sense, nor is it what my friends are seeing. Even though my Belyuen friends and I share narratives about the tremendous violence of domesticity, an orientation to “the bush / the woods” as a subjective and social resource and comfort, and an ideology of kinship-based homelands, these narratives, orientations, and ideologies are not equivalent. The conditions of my family and its violences and their families and their violences are not the same. Carisole is not Belyuen. Sexualities built out of forms of stranger sociability cannot be translated

without serious distortion into sexualities built out of forms of kinship sociability. This is the case for my friends at Belyuen and me.

Take, for instance, a scene on a beach near Belyuen some seventeen years ago. As we were fishing along a creek, a girl, Anna, declared to another girl, and to everyone gathered around, that when she grew up she was going to marry her *menggen*. *Menggen* is a kinship term referring to all of one's mothers' brothers' daughters or fathers' sisters' daughters. *Menggen* are referred to as "wives" in the local Aboriginal English and are the structural equivalent of *panen* ("husbands": mothers' brothers' sons and fathers' sisters' sons). A mother of Anna—who was about twenty years old at the time—corrected her daughter, saying that girls marry boys, not other girls, to which Anna replied, turning to her grandmother, "Neh, I can marry her. I call her wife. I can marry her. Eh, Nana?"<sup>2</sup> Anna's grandmother, who was sitting nearby, agreed, saying, "That's her wife, that's her proper *menggen*, finished, you can't make them different." The older woman's statement did not end the argument, for Anna's mother retorted, "Old lady, you don't understand, that's different, that's not *menggen*, that lesbian." For Anna's grandmother, these were absolutely different social skins, but not the way her daughter had suggested: "No, no, don't say that, you're wrong yourself, you say *menggen*, you say *wife*, that girl can play with that other girl, that not lesbian, that *menggen*." One doesn't translate these forms of sexuality. One passes from one language game and the dense discursive and habitual matrices that support it to another.

Of course, friendship is not reducible to an identity or a mode of life or the processes of identification that animate these, even if a friendship found its origins there. I can certainly identify with a mode of life and yet find no one I consider a friend within that space of being together. Moreover, in friendship we may find ourselves obligated to one another in ways that disrupt habitual forms of identity and identification. This is certainly the case with my friendships with men and women at Belyuen. The more deeply I am awake to the demands of this personal relation, the more I seem personally implausible, my political allegiances awkward to others and myself. If I locate myself within a world of stranger sociality and the sexuality it entails, then I have separated myself from them. But I also separate myself from myself because at this point who I am is unimaginable outside these twenty-two years of being in this family. They have

disturbed me. They disturb me not merely because they live in a world of kinship or because they are homophobic but because I find retrospectively that being bound to my friends and family along the coast means that I can be neither with them nor with myself easily anymore. The incommensurate nature of these social worlds and of the racial and sexual discourses that apprehend them make it difficult for me to do such normal things as express joy and grief in one world for the people I have found and lost in another, and for me to make sense of my insertion in either. I can relate, and as a result I am disturbed. Here we begin to touch the depersonalizations of identification (and self-expressivity) that so interested Leo Bersani and Candace Vogler, but outside of sex, gender, and other available modes of associations.<sup>3</sup>

In some ways, the above discussion simply reiterates a well-known point: All identities are vulnerable and disturbed by the play of citationality. But in saying this, we have only just begun. We have merely chalked the starting line of our social analysis. Beyond the typical problems of indeterminacy and hermeneutic horizons lie other sources of disturbance. It is certainly true that my Belyuen friends are as disturbed in their identities as I am. But something different organizes how we are disturbed and how these disturbances will matter in our social lives. When I began looking at the social matrices that stood between us, I was confronted not with sexuality, race, or nationalism per se but with the discourses of individual freedom and social constraint — what I have been calling autological and genealogical discourses — that animate and en flesh love, sociality, and bodies; that operate as strategic maneuvers of power whose purpose or result is to distribute life, goods, and values across social space; and that contribute to the hardness of liberalism as a normative horizon. At stake was not merely their and my interpellation into social nominations or modes of being, but how their and my modes of being were always already enclosed within these two discursive grids.

By *autological discourse* I mean to refer to discourses, practices, and fantasies of self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom, and by *genealogical discourses* I mean to refer to discourses, practices, and fantasies of inheritances of various sorts as constraints on the self-actualizing subject. These discourses figure not simply the frameworks of freedom and its other, but of time and the Other. Of course, the use of time as a method of disciplining others within the liberal diaspora has

interested postcolonial critics, including myself, for some time now. Johannes Fabian first demonstrated the role time played in anthropological figurations of the Other, such that people living in the same time and thickly engaged in relations of war, trade, marriage, and death were figured as living in two very different times and spaces.<sup>4</sup> What seems quite clear is that this anthropological imaginary emerged from and migrated into modes of colonial governance and into modes of postcolonial recognition. Indeed, difference itself is saturated with an injunction about time and the voice — whose voice is marked by past, present, and future time — as a condition of material and authorial distribution. Thus, for instance, Gayatri Spivak has argued that the very enunciative structure of “speaking as” embeds the subaltern subject in her corporeal heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Discourses of autology and genealogy allow people in the liberal diaspora to articulate their most intimate relations to their most robust governmental and economic institutions; make sense of how others do the same; account for the internal incoherence of these discourses; and distribute life and death internationally. This hardly means that the sense and meaning of “autology” and “genealogy” remain the same in the different language games in which they are deployed. Indeed, these discourses are not compelling because of the certainty or consistency of their referent. They are compelling because they function as a diagram: at one and the same time these positions fit together, interpret, orient, and provide a means of moving among an array of disparate phenomena and organize these disparate phenomena into a definite field of values. They make sense of how our intimate relations relate to our political and economic actions, and how they differ from the ways other people do these things. Not only does this diagram allow unlike phenomena to be made alike or not depending on how the context is secured; it also constitutes identities as such and as apprehensible by law and governance.

When we track the care with which liberal discrimination (otherwise known as the practice of “recognizing difference”) proceeds, it becomes clearer how this temporal structure articulates the nonsexual and sexual aspects of social life. This is particularly clear if we think of time not as a set of moving moments that we can fast-forward or reverse but as a set of structuring fantasies about the destinations of two forms of social association. Take, for instance, my earlier remark that my Belyuen friends insist that I think of our relation in familial terms because kinship is the presu-

posed background of their intimate social relations. The more a person acts on the basis of proper kinship, the deeper their truth as a moral subject. This doesn't mean that the language of friendship is never heard at Belyuen. If someone wishes to exit the conditioning discipline of kinship — or violate a social relation of kinship — friendship is now an available way of switching, and signaling that one is switching, language games and the social worlds they index and bring into being. Friendship leaves the realm of kinship, but it leaves it in a different way than I leave it when I say of my American sisters that they are true friends to me. I am signaling that a deeper, truer form of human relationship among us has occurred. They are not.

My friends at Belyuen and I may play among incommensurate hierarchies of moral obligation and social truth, but we are all playing in the present and maneuvering among the discursive languages of association available to us. The state of recognition does not merely want to witness different ethical practices within moral frameworks. It also demands that these practices and frameworks reference a set of ancient rules, beliefs, and practices that predate the settler nation; be based on abstract principles that do not demand an actual relationship with indigenous peoples; and provide the bureaucratic order with disciplinary certainty. Contemporary indigenous men and women are asked to cart into the contemporary nation (the nation they live in) a “beyond the nation” and “before the nation” — not the harms national time has done and continues to do to them, but a lost indeterminable object, separate and separable from the often messy flows among modes of being in late liberalism.

This way of apprehending the indigenous subject is not restricted to Australia. In a number of recent U.S. court cases, the exemption from prosecution for the religious ingestion of schedule one drugs has pivoted on the difference between the self-determining and genealogically determined subject. For instance, *State of Utah v. the Mooneys* (2004) considered whether the amendments to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1994) restricted the drug exemption to “an Indian” engaged in “bona fide traditional ceremonial purposes in connection with the practice of a traditional Indian religion” or applied to anyone who was a member of the Native American Church. In other words, was the exemption based on the freedom of religious association or on the determinations of traditional and racial inheritance? The state of Utah argued that the Mooneys,

though recognized members of the Native American Church, were not exempted from state prosecution for the religious use of peyote because they were not members of a federally recognized tribe—they lacked the government seal of genealogical determination. The Utah Supreme Court disagreed, ruling that the exemption applied to all members of the Native American Church irrespective of racial identity. They did so by interpreting the Utah Controlled Substances Act (1953; amended 2006) under an earlier regulatory protocol that did not restrict the exemption to “an Indian.” They did so even as the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) sought to tighten the relationship between corporeal inheritance (race) and symbolic inheritance (religious customs) in order to restrict the scope of religious exemptions for criminally defined acts. If the DEA has its way, communities of faith will file into their pews under the signs of freedom and inheritance.

The state of recognition hardly restricts its gaze to indigenous worlds. Wherever the force of liberal law needs to be justified, we can expect discourses of the autological subject and the genealogical society to arrive on the scene. In President George W. Bush’s address to the National Endowment for Democracy on the topic of terrorism and Islam during his presidency, all three of these orders of the social—the gendered intimate, the religious, and the course of history—were evoked. Comparing “radical Islam” to communism, the speech Bush read (but surely did not write) insists that this form of religion not only seeks to ban books, desecrate historical monuments, and brutalize women but seeks all of these at once because it fears freedom.

By fearing freedom—by distrusting human creativity, and punishing change, and limiting the contributions of half the population—this ideology undermines the very qualities that make human progress possible, and human societies successful. The only thing modern about the militants’ vision is the weapons they want to use against us. The rest of their grim vision is defined by a warped image of the past—a declaration of war on the idea of progress, itself. And whatever lies ahead in the war against this ideology, the outcome is not in doubt: Those who despise freedom and progress have condemned themselves to isolation, decline, and collapse. Because free peoples believe in the future, free peoples will own the future.<sup>6</sup>



Of course, free people open the future only to some. And by restricting who will have access to the future and on what terms, these people of freedom find themselves awkwardly interned in the past and their own carnal conditions. Take, for instance, recent debates in the United States over gay marriage. Many people who have argued for the extension of marriage rights to homosexual couples note that gays and lesbians base their unions on the same principles as heterosexuals—a love that may feel more like a compulsion than a choice but is, nevertheless, free. One of the arguments for denying the state institution of marriage to gays and lesbians is that marriage in its very nature is a “societal institution that represents, symbolizes and protects the inherently reproductive human relationship.”<sup>7</sup> In claiming marriage rights based on the freedom of the subject from and over his or her body, proponents of same-sex marriage have prompted some of its opponents to inter the truth of heterosexuality in the constraint of the body, to carnalize it in a truth resistant to freedom as such.

In short, as I shuttled back and forth between various queer spaces in the United States and indigenous life-worlds in northwestern Australia, this diagram of differences shuttled along with me. After a while it seemed clear that autological and genealogical discourses were not different in kind, even though they are used to differentiate kinds of people, societies, and civilizational orders. They both presuppose a liberal humanist claim that what makes us most human is our capacity to base our most intimate relations, our most robust governmental institutions, and our economic relations on mutual and free recognition of the worth and value of another person, rather than basing these connections on, for example, social status or the bare facts of the body. These presuppositions circulate through the subjects and institutions of liberal settler colonies, informing how people talk about themselves and others, how they govern themselves and others, and who they think they are or who they think they should be. As people go about their ordinary lives—their practices of love, work, and civic life—they continually constitute these discourses as if the discourses were the agents of social life, as if there were such a thing as the sovereign subject and the genealogical society, as individual freedom and social constraint, and as if the choice between these Manichean positions were the only real choice available to us. They do this as if all other actual and potential positions and practices were impractical, politically perverse, or socially aberrant. And they do so even as the peoples of freedom are

constantly constraining various parts of other people's freedom, where these others challenge their own "warped vision" of the past. After all, this was one reason Bush was addressing the National Endowment for Democracy: to move attention away from his nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court by reassuring social conservatives that they—and not the advocates of women's reproductive freedoms and gay rights—held the key to the definition of *freedom*.

These meanderings across the politics of recognition and their discursive grounds have changed how I think about sexuality studies. First, they have forced me to pay more attention to the ways in which queer and gender theory are themselves animated by the dynamic of individual freedom and social constraint. Biddy Martin touched on this dynamic in her analysis of the distribution of these qualities in theoretical construction of gender and sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Michael Warner and others have more or less explicitly evoked the same dynamic in the critique of the normative politics of gay marriage.<sup>9</sup> Both have tried to understand how rooting a gay politics in discourses of the self-actualizing subject participates in the fantasy projection of the specter of the genealogical society—or not.

Second, examining how liberal politics of recognition are animated by these discourses of freedom and constraint has led me to look more closely at social experiments that reflexively resist their Manichaeian choice. Lisa Duggan, for instance, has insisted that we remember not only that decisions about who we marry are inextricably about a larger network of social kinship and friendship but also that many people are seeking to organize and capture public resources and legal rights on the basis of a multiplicity of forms of social desire stretching beyond the conjugal couple.<sup>10</sup> And a number of filmmakers from the global South have explored how to think about and portray the compulsions of family honor and shame outside the Manichaeian choice of autology and genealogy. For example, *Late Marriage* (dir. Dover Koshashvili, 2001), *Head-On* (dir. Fatih Akin, 2004), and *Rana's Wedding* (dir. Hany Abu-Assad, 2002) struggle to explore the dynamic of intimacy and arranged marriage, directly engaging presuppositions about self-authored love and the family, while attempting to articulate a new visual and emotional language that refuses the global North as a referent.



Finally, I have been forced to examine once again a structure of mimesis that continually throws queer politics off its radical axis. On my reading, a certain literalism of the referent has hovered over Euro-American studies of sexuality as they opened themselves to their transnational conditions.<sup>11</sup> The study of “woman,” “third world women,” “men,” “the third sex,” “new masculinities,” “gay worlds,” “lesbian worlds,” and “straight worlds,” and the globalization of the hetero/homo binary were considered to be the proper object of those scholars, academic programs, and activists who study sexuality and gender as transnational phenomena. Progressive politics and scholarship addressing, for example, indigenous worlds, the international division of labor, emergent Islamic theocracies and reformations, fundamentalist Christian social politics, postcolonial racializations, and other aspects of social life not explicitly self-characterizing as sexuality or gender per se tend to enter sexuality studies either through a grammar of concatenation or through a transformational grammar of pleasure, desire, and sexual identity. For all the good these studies have done (and I think they have done tremendous good), they have also literalized queer attachments. The different ways that friendship meets a sexuality already animated by discourses of the free subject and constrained by society present a real challenge to sexuality studies defined by the dynamic of identity and interpellation. Rather than judging the appropriateness of social relations, identifications, and identities on the basis of their proximity to a disciplinary name — sexuality, queer, gender studies — perhaps we might base their appropriateness on the degree to which, in disturbing identities and identifications, in pushing against legibility, they illuminate how these relations and identities are held in a larger social matrix itself separating people and placing them on different trajectories of life and death.

## Notes

- 1 Michel de Montaigne, “On Friendship,” in *On Friendship*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2005), 10.
- 2 This quote and subsequent ones are translated from Aboriginal English.
- 3 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Candace Vogler, “Sex and Talk,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 328–65.
- 4 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- 5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Di-*

- alogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 6 The comparison of Islam with Communism reflects the views of the Rand Corporation and other conservative think tanks. See, for instance, Jamie Glazov, "Symposium: Diagnosing Al Qaeda," *FrontPageMag.org* archives, 18 August 2003. For Bush's speech, see the press release "President Discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for Democracy," 6 October 2005, available at the archival website for the George W. Bush White House, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/>.
  - 7 Margaret Somerville, "The Case against 'Same-Sex Marriage,'" a brief submitted to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, 29 April 2003, available at the Catholic Education Resource Center website, <http://catholiceducation.org/>.
  - 8 Biddy Martin, "Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary," *differences* 6.2-3 (1994): 100-125.
  - 9 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
  - 10 Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
  - 11 We were witnessing, I thought, an example of what Judith Butler described as the disciplinary function of the "proper object." "Against Proper Objects, Introduction," *differences* 6.2-3 (1994): 1-26.

## After Sex?!

ERICA RAND

### Queer Theory Here and There

I NEVER really thought of myself as a queer theorist. Until I got an invitation to contribute to this special issue, I thought no one else considered me one either. In fact, for a long time I thought that queer theorists were the anonymous readers of my manuscripts who called my writing antitheory or undertheorized when I thought it was theorized in reader-friendly language. I, in turn, during my crankiest, most defensive moments, imagined those readers to have lives as cold and unlubricated as the prose they wanted me to adopt. Why would someone possibly think that phrases like “the paradigm of binary sexual figuration,” a line that I will never forget from one hostile reader report, would enhance my discussion of a photograph depicting a woman using Barbie as a dildo? I preferred the people who wanted me to explain why anyone would insert that plastic hair. (Answer: feet first.) As it turned out, I had something substantially wrong. While I never learned the identity of my binary figuration foe, I did learn that queer theorists included people who appreciated my work, who wanted me to elaborate on race traitors or She-

Ra Princess of Power (my shorthand here for good politics and good fun) and were, naturally and perversely, trying to figure out how to stick Barbie where.

Yet I still felt less like a queer theorist than a sometimes-welcome guest peripheral to the life of queer theory's party. This was partly, I think, because the life of my own party was somewhere else. In 1993 — a big year of queer theory publishing, with *Tendencies*, *Bodies that Matter*, and *Fear of a Queer Planet*<sup>1</sup> — the transformative events of my intellectual life, which still bear on my work today, revolved around another new text of that year, Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*, and an anti-queer referendum in Lewiston, Maine, the town where I lived and worked.<sup>2</sup> The novel changed my world because I recognized in its main character someone who had a lot in common with the person I then called my girlfriend who subsequently came to identify as FTM (female-to-male). New and intensely personal engagement with the issues affected my own understandings of sexes and genders in relation to words, texts, bodies, and identities: what sounded like construct but felt like essence, or the other way around; how desire might turn, then turn again, on a pronoun; what it might mean to be a dyke with a boyfriend, bio or trans, which suddenly seemed a lot different than even a few months earlier, when my sex advice column had blithely advised a dyke with a male lover in hiding to follow her heart/lust and brave the idiocy of closed-minded naysayers as long as she was mindful of attendant privilege and didn't try to force her boyfriend's way into dyke rugby.

The referendum changed my world through my experience with Equal Protection Lewiston (EPL), the town group organized to defeat it. Serving on the steering committee, which was diverse in vernacular, politics, and background, renewed my commitment every day to the goal of finding common language for theory at work and taught me how much beyond vocabulary was involved. I might believe that everyone around the table was "doing theory" when we advanced individual and group analyses of town values or voter strategies. But I couldn't just will myself away from the perception that professors, for better and worse, had things to say that were fancier and foreign, in multiple senses of both words. I ran into this problem not only with people like the local police chief, my frequent antagonist on EPL (although his gift to me of a handcuffs tie tack as a souvenir of our affiliation betokened some mutual success at working

together). But even my friends in the ACT UP Portland Pissed-Off Dyke Cell, I eventually learned, didn't actually see me apart from the professor label I imagined myself to be free of there. The difference was that kindred politics occasionally led them to more generous if equally unhelpful conclusions, like that when I didn't make sense it was because my ideas were beyond them, versus what was more often the case, that they were bad or badly expressed ideas.

Of course, none of what I just described was insulated or isolated from queer theory. I can't separate queer theory from how I reacted, or wanted to react, to the possibility of my girlfriend becoming my boyfriend, or from my willingness, around the same time, to entertain a sexual invitation from a male-bodied person who understood his sexual body as lesbian. Nor would I claim that other writers associated with queer theory never engaged local politics or vernaculars — I found especially helpful the work of Cindy Patton, including her essay in the very *Queer Planet* that I just set to the side of my core text world. Besides, some aspects of queer theory just seemed to be in the air: "I don't care what your other girlfriend thinks, the one with the fancy college education. I've been butch all my life — that's my nature and there's nothing constructed about it." Right there in the theorized rage of messy relations is a great illustration of how the boundaries, texts, agents, and content of queer theory fail easy mapping onto an inside and outside.

So what made me see queer theorists nonetheless as over there while I was over here? Did I have some stake in keeping the same marginal relation to queer theory as to my discipline of origin, art history, the way we sometimes take our family-of-origin positionings and weirdnesses into communities and relationships we make? Did matters of geography (living in Maine away from the queer-theory action) or gender (living as female) matter? A joke among women in ACT UPS about the 1993 LGBT March on Washington was that the women went to political meetings while the men partied. Sometimes the queer caucus meetings of my professional organization, the College Art Association, seemed to have related gender disparities: a bunch of dykes, many the only out dykes on our campuses, shared political and survival strategies, while the men lubricated professional opportunities. While neither of those oppositions tells anything like the whole story — for one thing, add a lot of sex and keep

stirring—they hit on some of the disparities that have made many people disparage queer theory as the province of white professional men.

### What's My Line?

I've been writing lately about heritage and the cultural institutions that encourage us to identify our ancestors through breeder narratives. Maybe that's why, in situating myself regarding queer theory, I find myself impelled to people my text with heroes who might not make a queer theory greatest hits parade. I list three such texts here.

- Joanna Russ's "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love," in her 1985 *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans, and Perverts*. The essay concerns K/S fanzines written by women that portray sex and romance between Kirk and Spock of *Star Trek*. While I can't follow Russ down all of her interpretive paths, I have always admired this early critique of the suspect ingredients in criteria separating "erotica" from "pornography," particularly two features: Russ's appreciation for interesting sex fantasies outside the standard subcultures that are often presumed to house them, and her demonstration of the frequently profound lack of match-up between what it might turn you on to imagine and what you'd actually want to do, and the twisted paths from one to the other.<sup>3</sup>
- The dissents written by three of the women involved in the 1986 Meese Commission on Pornography report. The women took issue with the report's description of all pornography as a woman-abusing scourge of society. Judith Becker, Ellen Levine, and Deanne Tilton-Durfee wrote, "We abhor the exploitation of vulnerable people. . . . We respect, however, the rights of all citizens to participate in legal activities if their participation is truly voluntary. We reject any judgmental and condescending efforts to speak on women's behalf as though they were helpless, mindless children." In a lengthier joint statement criticizing "research" standards and criteria for studies showing harm, Levine and Becker noted as one of many ways that antiporn attitudes skewed the commission's findings: "To find people willing to acknowledge their personal consumption of



erotic and pornographic materials and comment favorably in public about their use has been nearly impossible. Since such material is selling to millions of apparently satisfied consumers, it seems obvious that the data gathered is not well balanced.<sup>3</sup> I love their insistence on keeping female agency and sexual pleasure in the mix and their refusal to presume that consumers — any more than the porn-soaked researchers who often deem themselves immune from any effects — are monkey-see-monkey-do idiots.<sup>4</sup>

- *Her Tongue on My Theory* (1994), by the lesbian art collective Kiss and Tell (Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, and Susan Stewart). The group actually set out to deal with how making sex theory can and often does take you away from sexual pleasure, a problem they tried to counteract by having a porn story running across the bottom third of the book's pages. Besides being a sexy read (under a theory-crit text that is also gloriously legible, and don't forget the images), the back-and-forth possibilities offer readers many ways to engage with how sex and theory may couple and uncouple and what we may bring to the tangle. If I skip ahead to read all the sex first am I insufficiently disciplined? Should I save the best for last? Am I wrestling with pleasure or duty or the relations between them, and how might that affect the theory I'm doing?<sup>5</sup>

### A Tale of Two Showers . . .

Perhaps because I'm a water sign, I usually have big breakthroughs in the shower. That's where I came up with the title for *Barbie's Queer Accessories* relatively early into the writing process, and that's where I decided a few years later, prepublication, that I didn't like it so much.<sup>6</sup> Sure, it was still catchy, but the more I wrote the book, the more race became a central topic that I feared *queer* worked to erase. I'd used *queer* for the double purpose of describing sex and gender nonstraightness and in the more general sense of differing from apparent and invited norms. Barbie's queer accessories might have her date Midge instead of Ken. Or they might queer Mattel's Barbie profile by having her wait tables or fight imperialism instead of practice law or join the military. But what does it mean to call resistance, subversion, and deviation "queering"? The play between sex/gender-queer and deviation-queer invites several forms of blanketing vagueness of

dubious political effect. On the one hand, it threatens to lend to an association with sex/gender queerness an aura of the transgressive or progressive that can mask precisely the opposite. Is Bates College, where I teach, progressive for offering queer studies courses and domestic partner benefits if it also brought in a union-busting law firm to quash dining-service activism for decent wages? On the other, the “queer” blanket threatens to subsume all kinds of activist cultural and political work. White supremacy and heteronormativity feed each other to make Barbie’s world—and its nonplastic counterpart in which the U.S. government stirs support for military actions by portraying the enemy as effeminized, or monstrously masculine, brown-skinned perverts.<sup>7</sup> But that hardly makes antiracism a subset of “queering.” We need to study how race, ethnicity, and nationality figure in the stigmatization of sexualities and sexual practices—including, as Cathy Cohen emphasizes, some acts and hookups that fit into “heterosexual”—and how the stigmatization of sexualities feeds racism.<sup>8</sup> To call work against regimes of oppressive meanings and actions “queer” seems colonizing—kind of like crediting “postmodernism” with exposing the fiction of master narratives as if no one had hitherto questioned the story of the first Thanksgiving or other tales of “men and nations,” to quote the title of my high school textbook for History of Civ.

### . . . and a Very Long Bath

Breakthroughs in the shower, panic management in the bathtub. A decade later, I spent hours in lavender bath salts, freaked out by what I saw as the sudden impending loss of control over another framing strategy that I’d spent years trying to develop after my disappointment with myself over what might be termed premature evaluation: getting hooked into a title that came not to reflect the content, although “Barbie’s Queer Accessories” did turn out to have some advantages. Primary among them, as far as I can tell from feedback, was to reveal by counterexample the white-centeredness of much in queer studies, an effect I discern from both compliments and veiled criticism about taking seriously cultural production by people of color. And I haven’t abandoned the framework of queer titles. “Queer Plymouth,” for instance, my collaboration with the artist Deborah Bright, concerns how turning a queer eye to cultural engagements related to this landscape of American mythmaking can lead to

productive questioning about racial and colonizing formations: a tour of local statuary finds heavily clad colonist William Bradford gazing at the gloriously buff, nearly nude Massasoit, the “friendly Indian” of textbook fame; the Web site for the PBS reality show *Colonial House*, in which people try to create a Plymouth-like colony as if they lived in 1628, omits both the coming-out of one actor and the departure of another who could not live with reenacting a history that naturalized slavery.<sup>9</sup>

Yet “Queer Plymouth” explicitly argues against making the counter-hegemonic or heritage-deviant “queer” by definition, and in other projects, most intensely my second book, I put a lot of work into anti-umbrella strategies. My intended subtitle for *The Ellis Island Snow Globe*, “Sex, Money, Products, Nation,” represented my attempt to name without ranking key issues that I came to see as knotting up around two heritage sites, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.<sup>10</sup> I eventually dropped the subtitle, primarily out of worry—to reprise the party metaphor—that it issued an invitation implying more requisite discursive finery than I hoped readers would need. But I retained the aspiration, along with what I considered to be various related subprojects. One involved trying to imagine new relations between objects and contexts. How might we think beyond using context to explain objects or objects to explain context? The second subproject involved questions about applying expanded methods of categorizing to the past without imposing anachronistic labels. My specific concern in this book was the term *passing woman*, which is still frequently applied to all female-bodied people presenting as male during the early twentieth century and before. I argued for applying to the past from recent trans/gender studies and activism the presumption that gender identity and expression were more nuanced and varied than any one term or narrative can characterize. I don’t mean that some people labeled “passing women” should really be labeled “boydykes,” or other terms suggesting identities forged a century later. But surely we can’t assume that all “passing women” understood themselves, as the term suggests, as *really* women or as pretending to be men for the utility of it all, especially when evidence exists to the contrary. Issues with the term *passing women* also, I think, raise in microcosm the problem with continuing to use *women’s studies* for gender studies of all sorts.

What plunged me into the bathtub was an invitation to situate my book within a series focused around one aspect of the knotted issues to

which I pointed with “sex, money, products, nation.” I won’t say which series. The point isn’t to air the particulars or rehash the pain of it, although I do want to acknowledge that in retrospect I attribute the absolute failure of aromatherapy, my heart still pounding after an hour in lavender, partly to extraintellectual matters. A season of grief and loss made accepting or rejecting the invitation seem like an inevitable path to more loss: who would hate me, whom would I disappoint, what potential readers would walk away? At the same time, my amplified sense of the stakes forced me to think about and articulate what was important to me. A year later, the absolute anguish had passed, but not my sense that the ethics and politics of erasure by umbrella matter a lot.

### This Is My Brain, This Is My Brain on Sex

A funny thing happened during my attempt to cure premature evaluation; I almost did it again. I thought *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* was going to be especially about sex; it turned out to be significantly about race. I thought the *Ellis Island Snow Globe* was going to be especially about race; it turned out to be significantly about sex, which kept migrating across the subtitle until it got to the front. My own work isn’t “after sex,” to answer the question posed by this book’s title. I don’t think it ever will be. That’s partly for a reason all about me, as I learned from a queer theory classic, Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*. On her fantastic and illuminating list of how many ways we might characterize sexual orientations other than by the gender of object choice, she suggests, “Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.”<sup>11</sup> I was so shocked when I first read “others little” that I went on a canvassing binge, which I continue to update periodically. Apparently it’s true. But I occupy probably the far end of “a lot.” I love to think about sex, talk about sex, read about sex, teach material about sex, and write about sex. (Probably even my wildly rigid boundaries come partly from how much sex is on my mind. Never students, of course, but how many people have bothered to think through categories like “students’ parents”?) To use that weird colloquialism, intended more expansively, however, than the flesh-penis-in-vagina activity often implied by ordinary use, I also love to “have” sex. Dump the ideologies that brought us no-sex-before-the-big-game or every-ejaculation-means-a-lost-poem mentalities. At the same time, I would argue, I’m not

inserting sex where it doesn't belong. My work concerns social justice, which includes the right to sexual pleasure, freedom from sexual coercion, and a vision that abets rather than demonizes people's beings, acts, and identities within the realm of consensual practices. Pleasure and justice come together.

Twenty-five years ago, when I thought my academic future lay in a dissertation on "nude women and clothed men in nineteenth-century French painting," I could never have predicted what my life or work would be like today. I live in a state I first visited for the job interview. Although I still feel like an exiled city girl fending off alien identity by refusing to shop at L. L. Bean, I've also gotten immersed enough to be brutal when urban-centered queer activists make insulting or dangerous presumptions: yes, we have direct action here; no, we don't have subways, so a person needs to think more than twice about bumper stickers that might put your only transportation under attack. Meanwhile, my personal and professional life with sex, sexuality, and gender involves people and issues I wouldn't have known to think about. Who are "men" or "women" anyway, and does that nude/clothed scenario inevitably mark some sexist horror show I first theorized it to signal? What I could have predicted were the constants that put me in queer theory's orbit even as I construed it in semi-antagonism: an activist focus, displeasure with academy-speak, and a history of luck, circumstance, and whatever else that makes sex central to what I do. After sex? Not if I can help it.

## Notes

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 2 Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Firebrand Books, 1993).
- 3 Joanna Russ, "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love," in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans, and Perverts: Feminist Essays* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1985), 79–99.
- 4 Judith Becker, Ellen Levine, and Deanne Tilton-Durfee, "Statement of Judith Becker, Ellen Levine, and Deanne Tilton-Durfee," in *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography* (Meese Commission Report), vol. 1, part 1, section 3:

- Individual Commissioner Statements (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1986), 194; Becker and Levine, "Statement of Dr. Judith Becker and Ellen Levine," in *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography*, vol. 1, part 1, section 3, 196.
- 5 Kiss and Tell (Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, and Susan Stewart), *Her Tongue on My Theory: Images, Essays, and Fantasies* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994).
  - 6 Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
  - 7 On this topic, see Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text*, no. 72 (Fall 2002): 117–48.
  - 8 Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3 (1997): 437–65.
  - 9 Deborah Bright and Erica Rand, "Queer Plymouth," *GLQ* 12 (2006): 259–77.
  - 10 Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
  - 11 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 25–26.



*After After Sex?*







## Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes

EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

SOMETIMES I THINK the books that affect us most are fantasy books. I don't mean books in the fantasy genre; I don't even mean the books we fantasize about writing but don't write. What I'm thinking of here are the books we know about — from their titles, from reading reviews, or hearing people talk about them — but haven't, over a period of time, actually read. Books that can therefore have a presence, or exert a pressure in our lives and thinking, that may have much or little to do with what's actually inside them.

Again, I don't mean here the books that, rightly or wrongly, we minimize and dismiss without having read them — whether from competitive anxiety or anticipatory boredom. No. Instead, at least for me — and you can tell that over the years I've developed a commendably rich and varied spiritual practice of failing to read books — there are a few special titles that persist as objects of speculation, of accumulated reverie. Far from minimizing, I seem to enhance and enrich them over time, investing them with my own obsessions and the fruits of my varying

thought and self-relation. Except of course it's not "them" I invest in this way, but their titles or their authors' names as valued, phantasmatic objects internal to myself.

If this sounds like part of a Melanie Kleinian kind of dynamic of projection and introjection, it is exactly that, and in some ways it especially characterizes my difficult relation over time to the work of Melanie Klein. One odd feature of this history is that I can't remember when, in this decades-long process, I did start actually reading Klein rather than just brooding over her. I don't know what it says about her writing or my reading process, either, that it hasn't been so much the actual experience of rereading Klein that has kept dramatically punctuating the great attractions I've repeatedly found in her work. Instead it's been encounters with other writers' persuasive paraphrases of her, notably those of R. D. Hinshelwood and, more recently, Meira Likierman.<sup>1</sup>



Here's another, less sunny story from my personal history that I also, for some reason, think of as very Kleinian.

For this one, picture me around age three, in Dayton, Ohio, where my grandmother has come from New York to visit our family. Today's outing: we're going to Rike's, the local department store, where my six-year-old sister will get to pick out a new doll. I, in turn, am the recipient of her current doll, an eight-inch or so plastic doll representing a girl of about her age. And at Rike's, too, I'm supposed to pick out a new blanket for my "new" doll.

Except that I absolutely don't want my sister's doll. Characteristically, I have a well-reasoned account of what's wrong with it: it's not big enough for me. I need — and somehow feel emboldened to demand — a doll that is bigger, baby- or toddler-shaped, and new. A doll on the smaller and grownup scale of the one I've been given, I'd simply lose. (And it's true, small-muscle coordination is about the least precocious thing about me, if you don't count emotional maturity.) I can remember offering this explanation to my parents with the calm confidence of someone quoting a well-known adult dictum: younger children need larger-scale toys. An argument that apparently didn't persuade, since the next thing to happen seems to be my descent into the awful whirlpool of tantrum mode. What I remember better, though, is the aftermath: me later abject, flattened by the ordeal of

my rage, trailing through the innards of the department store in a state of apparent social death. Also the numb shock of finding, before the end of our afternoon there, that the smaller, inappropriate doll I was carrying had indeed disappeared.

I could go on for ages about this story—which, while it's remained accessible in my memory for a long time, is the kind that nonetheless rearrives on the scene with a fairly ferocious new vitality when I'm really engaged with Melanie Klein. Along with the sense of access to vivid insight, these periodic reengagements with Klein are accompanied by painful dreams and painfully crabby days. Also by series of uncontrolled flashes in which many aspects of my life, including those I'm especially fond or proud of (call them Buddhist ones), appear in the light of fragile, exhausting, sometimes impoverishing, and barely successful defenses against being devoured by my own cycles of greed, envy, rage, and in particular, overwhelming anxiety. There isn't even the comfort of self-pity, since Klein makes so very palpable the exacerbated grain of psychic lives that are much less tolerable than one's own. And even though for me everything in Klein resonates with issues about vocation, thought, reading, and especially writing, I also don't have the Romantic consolation that these upsets are the extremities of genius. Rather, they're testimony to the almost grotesquely unintelligent design of every human psyche.

I've always taken to heart Thoreau's guess that quiet desperation characterizes the majority of lives. The question of whether or not mine is part of that majority—though I have plenty of questions about the question itself, including who's asking it—nonetheless still feels crucial to me and many times frighteningly unsettled. Klein is one of the people who most upsets me by unsettling it—vastly more than Freud or Lacan does, for example, and even more than the Marxist or anticolonial perspectives from which my preoccupations are so effectively made to feel marginal, even to me.



I keep remembering that there's nothing so special about the incident with the doll, but the clanging emotional and intellectual vibration it evokes, when I'm deep into Klein, effortlessly traverses not only the different *areas* of my life, but the whole range of scales on which the life is lived, from its microirritants to love and work to abstruse theoretical

activity to investments in death or even enlightenment. In fact, that's why I started out telling the story: I think I meant it as a fairly simple story about scale. Just to say how the right scale of doll for my older sister was the wrong scale for me, how I needed something chunkier. I needed, or thought I did, something with decent-scale, plastic, resiliently articulated parts that I could manipulate freely and safely (safely for *it* as well as me): this seemed to be the condition for my loving or identifying with the creature, even just not abandoning it.

And, I was going on to say, as an adult that's the way I now am about ideas. I like them pretty chunky. Not dramatic or caricatural, certainly not dualistic (never dualistic), but big, big and palpable; big enough so there's no swallowing risk, and also so I won't forget them, which hasn't become any less of a danger as I've gotten older. I'm happy with ideas where you can do a lot of different things with them and be in many relations to them, but they'll push back against you — and where the individual moving parts aren't too complex or delicate for active daily use.

In some ways Melanie Klein is perfect in offering ideas on just this scale. Her work has a reassuring groundedness, a sense of reality. I realize that remark may sound implausible to anyone unwilling to sail through sentences about the cannibalistic defense of the good partial breast against the devouring invasion of the feces. But as someone whose education has proceeded through Straussian and deconstructive, as well as psychoanalytic, itineraries where vast chains of interpretive inference may be precariously balanced on the tiniest of details or differentials, I feel enabled by the way that even abstruse Kleinian work remains so susceptible to a gut check. It may not be grounded in common sense, but it is phenomenologically grounded to a remarkable degree. A lot of this quality is owing to the fact that Klein's psychoanalysis, by contrast to Freud's, is based in affect and offers a compelling account of the developments and transformations of affective life. Likierman helpfully uses the word *qualitative* to distinguish Klein's approaches, and I think *qualitative* in this context translates neatly as "affect-based." Likierman writes, for instance, that in contrast to Freud's undifferentiated notion of primary narcissism, in Klein "the infant is . . . equipped from birth to apprehend a qualitative essence in different kinds of life experiences" (55).

About Klein's theoretical formulations Likierman also identifies her "tendency to use a term both to describe the subject's internal experience

and, simultaneously, to offer a technical psychoanalytic designation of a phenomenon . . . while Freud's thinking distinguished between theoretical definitions and subjective descriptions" (108–9). This tendency of Klein's, again, while reflecting a sort of Ferenczian refusal to conceptually privilege the supposed objectivity of the psychoanalyst over the patient's subjectivity, also seems to reflect a difference between the kind of distance involved in theorizing about drive versus theorizing about affect.

But the invitingly chunky affordances of Klein's thought probably have most to do with a thematic aspect of her view of psychology: it's she who put the objects in object relations. In her concept of phantasy-with-a-*p-h*, human mental life becomes populated, not with ideas, representations, knowledges, urges, and repressions, but with *things*, things with physical properties, including people and hacked-off bits of people.

If this almost literal-minded animism makes Kleinian psychic life sound like a Warner Bros. cartoon, you might think it would be far too coarse-grained, too unmediated to deal with adult creativity in ambitious intellectual or artistic modes. Even Freud, after all, who, unlike Klein, invested so much of his best thought in issues of representation, had to either interpret actual creative work in diagnostic terms or bundle it away under the flattening, strangely incurious rubric of sublimation. Paradoxically, though, this is one of the areas of Klein's greatest appeal: she makes it possible to be respectful of intellectual work without setting it essentially apart from other human projects. That our work is motivated — psychologically, affectively motivated — and perhaps most so when it is good work or when it is true: with Klein this is an extremely interesting fact, much more so than an ignominious or discrediting one. If anything, Klein presents the course of very ordinary psychological development in terms that will be especially recognizable to ambitious or innovative thinkers.

This becomes especially true in her writing after 1935, where Klein gives a detailed account of what she calls the depressive position, involving the vicissitudes of relation to a "good internal object": a relation that is conceived as virtually intersubjective, profoundly ambivalent, and a locus of anybody's special inventiveness. If anything, in fact, as I suggested earlier, Klein's account of internal object relations resonates *so* fully with the structure and phenomenology of intellectual work that it makes a problem for some of the very kinds of thinking that it also stimulates. I think this is why Klein isn't used more explicitly in critical theory, even

though so many theorists, queer and otherwise, have drawn important energies and ideas from her. There is a kind of clangor or overload from the intense way these resonances flash out at the reader at so many micro-levels and metalevels at once. Engaging closely with Klein often feels like getting stoned, in the sense that the unchecked proliferation of the reader's sense of recognition, endlessly recursive and relentlessly architectonic, quickly turns into a kind of fractal ineffability, resistant to the linear formulations of ordinary exposition. But when deconstructive or Lacanian insight, for example, proliferates at different levels in a similar way, an effect of fine-spun abstraction or even sublimity results; while with Klein, the additional, unmediated charge of all that thematized bad affect— anxiety in particular— can be genuinely disabling to cognitive function. At least I've often found it so.

That's a lot of the reason why secondary studies of her work, like Likierman's monograph and Hinshelwood's dictionary, are peculiarly indispensable in trying to actually use Klein. Both of those books do for readers a lot of the work of abstraction, of absorbing the transferential near-chaos that can be generated in learning from Klein's work; both books could be described as being, in a good sense, *well-analyzed*, a term that one wouldn't apply to Klein herself or to how the reader feels in encountering her. But much more, productive work can be done on Klein at this mediating level. And while that process goes directly against many of my own close-reading, literary impulses, it does hold out the promise of a good new handful of chunky tools and the affordances for using them.

For me there has also been a lot of help, in approaching Klein, from having two other sets of ideas concurrently in mind. One is an understanding of Buddhist psychological thought, especially in the Tibetan tradition, that often diverges sharply from Klein but at other times comes close enough to clarify it startlingly, or vice versa. The other, in which I've been involved almost as long, is the work of Silvan Tomkins (1911–91), an American psychologist who pioneered in the understanding of affect.<sup>2</sup> Though he was interested in psychoanalysis, Tomkins was most influenced by early work in cybernetics and systems theory. His sophisticated understanding of feedback mechanisms— such as the transferential and recursive ones set in motion so disruptively in the process of encountering Klein— seems to give him an invigorating theoretical purchase on the workings of affect, one that permits him the rare achievement of doing full

justice to the qualitative differences among the affects without triggering disruptive affect spirals in his reader.

Tomkins's systems-theory framework, which Klein was born half a generation too early to be at home with, offers another way of beginning with chunky ideas and using them to get to a lot of different places; and also like Klein's work, it does so without the shortcut of a structuring dualism. And from a feminist and queer perspective I find it helpful to have a second, binocular angle of vision that begins farther outside of psychoanalysis than Klein, that is more programmatically resistant to some of the damaging assumptions that have shaped psychoanalysis in (what I think of as) its Oedipal mode: the defining centrality of dualistic gender difference; the primacy of genital morphology and desire; the determinative nature of childhood experience and the linear teleology toward a sharply distinct state of maturity; and especially the logic of zero-sum games and the excluded middle term, where passive is the opposite of active and desire is the opposite of identification, and where one person's getting more love means a priori that another is getting less.



Here's one example of the importance of the excluded middle term: a crucial dynamic of omnipotence and powerlessness that emerges from Klein's work. In Freud's view, notoriously, our relation to omnipotence is pretty simple: Bring it on. According to Freud's work, we want as much power as we can get and indeed start out with the assumption that we are omnipotent; everything after that is the big, disillusioning letdown called reality. Yet in a sense, Freudian analytic theory, especially in its structuralist or Lacanian aspects, never does let go of an implicit view that power of any sort or degree can only mean omnipotence. What changes with maturity and Oedipalization is the view of whom or what you have power over, rather than the understanding of power per se *as* omnipotence. One must give up the infantile fantasy of owning Mother, this formulation says, but as one matures and masters an economy of substitution, one can achieve both ownership of other women and an ownership (however displaced and distributed) of the means of production of meaning itself.

For the Kleinian subject, however, unlike the Freudian one, omnipotence is a fear at least as much as it is a wish. It is true here, as in Freud, that the infant's self and its constituent parts, like others and their parts, can



only be experienced as all or nothing, either helpless or omnipotent. The problem is that the infant's desires are passionately experienced but intrinsically self-contradictory. The Kleinian infant experiences a greed—her own—whose aggressive and envious component is perceived as posing a mortal threat both to her loved and needed objects and to herself. Thus the perception of oneself as omnipotent is hardly less frightening than the perception of one's parent as being so.

In fact, this all-or-nothing understanding of agency is toxic enough that it is a relief and relaxation for the child eventually to discover a different reality. The sense that power is a form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win-win negotiations), the exchange of affect, and other small differentials, the middle ranges of agency—the notion that you can be relatively empowered or disempowered without annihilating someone else or being annihilated, or even castrating or being castrated—is a great mitigation of that endogenous anxiety, although it is also a fragile achievement that requires discovering over and over.

Clearly, one of the main cruxes for such issues is the status of repression. For Freud, “the theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests,” and of course its importance extends far beyond psychoanalytic thought.<sup>3</sup> To offer a reductive paraphrase, Freudian repression is an internal defense mechanism—the prototype of defense mechanisms in general, as Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis note—that is modeled on and in fact originates with external prohibition.<sup>4</sup> Civilization, in the Freudian view, cannot coexist with the individual's uncorrected sense of omnipotence, with the untrammelled satisfaction of the individual's inherently insatiable desire, or with its uncensored expression or even self-experience. To internalize societal prohibition in an effective but not paralyzing way is, for Freudian psychoanalysis, *the* maturational task of the individual. While different kinds of psychoanalytic politics may be more or less invested in the repressive needs of civilization as opposed to the countervailing claims of individual desire, such arguments have the almost uniform effect of reinforcing a single structuring assumption: that psychic activity is ultimately, definitionally constituted by the struggle between intrinsic desire and imposed or internalized prohibition. Other defining concepts, such as the unconscious itself, with its inaccessible topography and distinctive hermeneutic imperatives, are founded on the absolute primacy of repression. In Freud-

ian psychoanalysis, repression is both entirely necessary and largely sufficient as a determinant of the nature of psychic life.

Melanie Klein, like Silvan Tomkins, works not so much against the concept of repression as around it. Without contesting either the existence or the force of repressive mechanisms — both external and internalized — Klein views them in the context of other, earlier and more violent conflicts and dangers that, by contrast, result directly from the internal dynamics of the emerging psyche in what Klein came to call the paranoid/schizoid position. The whole Freudian dialectic between desire and prohibition is only a secondary development for Klein, and one among several such. Moreover, the structure and importance of repression as a secondary defense mechanism vary according to how the individual has already dealt with such primary defense mechanisms as splitting, omnipotence, and violent projection and introjection.



What defines the paranoid/schizoid position into which we are born, in all its terrible fragility, are five violent things. The first is the inability of the self to comprehend or tolerate ambivalence — the insistence on all or nothing. The second is its consequent, “schizoid” strategy of splitting both its objects and itself into very concretely imagined part-objects that can be only seen as exclusively, magically good or bad — where those are not in the first place ethical designations but qualitative judgments perceived as involving life or death. Third, as we’ve mentioned, is that, in the paranoid/schizoid position, the sense of agency, too, occupies only two extreme positions. The self and its constituent parts, like others and their parts, can only be experienced as either powerless or omnipotent. Fourth is a kind of greed for “good” things that is figured in terms of ingesting them and holding them inside, where they are liable to remain distinct and magically alive, doing battle with “bad” contents and vulnerable to being devoured or fatally contaminated by them. And fifth is the mechanism of projection, classically that of attributing to other people the unacceptable parts of oneself, but given, as we’ll see, a new immediacy in the work of Klein.

Overall, perhaps the crucial difference from Freud is that in Klein, what these primary defense mechanisms have to defend *against* is not prohibitive external impingement, as in Freud, but instead the devastating force of a largely endogenous anxiety. By analogy, in Tomkins, the conflict of

substantive affects *with other substantive affects* is at least as basic and consequential as any conflict with outside forces, however intimately internalized.<sup>5</sup> It is not mainly “civilization” that needs the individual to be different from the way she spontaneously is. The individual herself needs to be different, insofar as her intrinsic impulses conflict with one another even more drastically than they conflict with the claims of her environment. Instead of the undifferentiatedly blind, pleasure-seeking drives of the Freudian infant, which encounter no check but the originally external ones of prohibition or lack, the Kleinian infant experiences a greed whose aggressive and envious component is already perceived as posing a terrible threat both to her desired objects and to herself. The resulting primary anxiety is an affect so toxic that it probably ought to be called, not anxiety, but dread. It is against this endogenous dread that the primary defense mechanisms are first mobilized — the splitting, the omnipotence, the violent projection and introjection.

These defenses in turn, which may be mitigated but never go away, can impress their shape on the internal experience of repression as well as the social experience of suffering from, enforcing, or resisting repression. The complex developments that later characterize the depressive position will also have an impact on the shapes ultimately taken by repression. It remains true, however, that endogenous primary dread, whose corrosive force varies from person to person for essentially constitutional as well as environmental reasons, takes the central place in Kleinian thought that desire and repression occupy in Freudian psychoanalysis.



Of course this issue of repression is not a question of interest only within psychoanalysis. The primacy of repression structures a near-universal, dualistic Western view of politics and, for example, religion as rigorously as it does a Freudian view of the psyche. Foucault demonstrates as much in volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality*, in his justly famous though ultimately circular analysis of what he calls the repressive hypothesis. According to the repressive hypothesis that Foucault attempts to disassemble here, which is entirely of a piece with Freud’s own repressive hypothesis, the history of sexuality could only be that of the “negative relation” between power and sex, of “the insistence of the rule,” of “the cycle of prohibition,” of “the logic of censorship,” and of “the uniformity of the apparatus” of

scarcity and prohibition: “Whether one attributes it to the form of the prince who formulates rights, of the father who forbids, of the censor who enforces silence, or of the master who states the law,” — or, we might add, that of the internalized superego — “in any case one schematizes power in a juridical form, and one defines its effects as obedience.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Foucault describes the whole range of Western liberatory discourses — those of class politics, identity politics, Enlightenment values, and the projects of sexual liberation, including psychoanalysis — as being congruent and continuous with one another precisely in their dependence on the centrality of external and/or internal repression.

More disturbing, Foucault demonstrates a devastating performative continuity between the diagnostics of these projects, the way they analyze the central problematic of Western culture (repression), on the one hand, and on the other hand their therapeutics, the ways in which they propose to rectify it. For if there is some problem with the repressive hypothesis itself, if in important ways repression is a misleading or even damaging way to understand the conditions of societies and individuals, then the main performative effect of these centuries-long anti-repressive projects may be the way they function as near-irresistible propaganda for the repressive hypothesis itself.

Perhaps inevitably, Foucault in turn seems to me to be far more persuasive in analyzing this massive intellectual blockage than in finding ways to obviate it. The moves demonstrated in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, at any rate, like much of Foucault’s work before that book, might instead be described as propagating the repressive hypothesis ever more broadly by means of its displacement, multiplication, and/or hypostatization.



The structure of this kind of conceptual impasse or short circuit is all too familiar: where it is possible to recognize the mechanism of a problem, but trying to remedy it, or even in fact articulate it, simply adds propulsive energy to that very mechanism. For one example: in Buddhist psychology, samsara, the treadmill-going-nowhere of death and rebirth to which lives are bound within history, is driven ever harder and thus made ever more exhausting, not only by striving for personal advantage or even progress in altruistic pursuits, but by spiritual striving as well. Such vicious circles work like Nietzsche’s analysis of resentment, which he diagnoses as a self-

propagating, near-universal psychology compounded of injury, rancor, envy, and self-righteous vindictiveness, fermented by a sense of disempowerment. Nietzschean ressentiment is not only epistemologically self-reinforcing but also contagious at a pragmatic level. Its intrinsic relationality is spontaneously generative of powerful systems. What is the most defining act, the conclusively diagnostic act of ressentiment? It is *accurately* accusing *someone else* of being motivated by it. Where then to find a position from which to interrupt its baleful circuit?

If I've correctly identified an important, damagingly circular dynamic of Foucault's influential volume, then I also understand better the source of an inveterate impatience I've felt with critical work conducted — as it seems to me, rather blindly — under the aegis of the “Foucauldian.” By now there seems to be a near-ineradicable Foucauldian common sense structuring the routines of work in the fields of cultural studies, literature, history, and others. But arguably, the formative queer theory work of the 1980s, some of my own very much included, has generated a disciplinary space called queer, where those circular Foucauldian energies inhere with a strikingly distinctive intimacy.



Characteristically, Klein's resource in such a situation is neither to minimize the importance of this circular mechanism nor to attack it frontally. Instead she contextualizes it newly — just as she had reshaped the view of repression by framing it as a defense mechanism among others rather than the master key to mental functioning. Klein in fact is fearfully attuned to human relations that are driven by the uncontrollable engines of ressentiment: *tu quoque*, it takes one to know one, or, in technical terms, “I know you are but what am I?” which have been so fecund for queer thought. She sees this dynamic in terms of the “primitive” defenses that characterize the paranoid/schizoid position: the prophylactic need to split good from bad, and the aggressive expulsion of intolerable parts of oneself onto — or, in Klein's more graphic locution, *into* — the person who is taken as an object. Klein writes that these projected “bad parts of the self are meant not only to injure but also to control and to take possession of the object”; she calls this mechanism “projective identification.”<sup>7</sup> Projective identification is not only a form of magical thinking found in infants, but virtually coextensive with Nietzschean ressentiment in adults. It is a good way of

understanding, for example, the terrifying contagion of paranoid modes of thought — and certainly seems indispensable in understanding political dynamics as well as many a small-group interaction, including those in the classroom. Projective identification is related to Freudian projection but more uncannily intrusive: for Freud, when I've projected my hostility onto you, I believe that *you* dislike *me*; for Klein, additionally, when I've projected my hostility *into* you, you *will* dislike me.

Thus for Klein's infant or adult, the paranoid/schizoid position — marked by insatiability, hatred, envy, and anxiety — is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into the world around one, and vice versa. The depressive position, by contrast, is an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting. And it becomes increasingly unclear in Klein's writing after 1940 whether she envisioned a further space beyond the depressive position.

Not that she saw people as doomed to, at best, a permanent state of depression per se. Rather, the depressive position becomes, in Klein's later writing, a uniquely spacious rubric. Despite its name it comes to encompass, for example, both the preconditions of severe depression and also quite a varied range of resources for surviving, repairing, and moving beyond that depression. It is the site for Klein's explorations of intellectual creativity; it is also the space in which challenges to a normalizing universality can develop.

What makes the depressive position “depressive”? The threshold to the depressive position is the simple, foundational, authentically very difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level. “The infant,” as Hinshelwood summarizes this argument, “at some stage is physically and emotionally mature enough to integrate his or her fragmented perceptions, bringing together the separately good and bad versions. *When such part-objects are brought together as a whole they threaten to form a contaminated, damaged, or dead whole object*,” whether internal, external, or both — what I take to be a description of the experience of depression per se (138, emphasis added).

“Depressive anxiety,” Hinshelwood continues, “is the crucial element of mature relationships, the source of generous and altruistic feelings that are devoted to the well-being of the object” (138). Only from this position, then, can one begin using one's own resources to assemble or “re-

pair” the part-objects into something like a whole, albeit a compromised one. It is worth emphasizing that Klein’s rhetoric of reparation does not assume that the “repaired” object will resemble a preexisting object—there is nothing intrinsically conservative about the impulse of reparation. Once assembled, these more realistic, durable, and satisfying internal objects are available to be identified with, to offer one and to be offered nourishment and comfort in turn. Yet the pressures of that founding, depressive realization can also continually impel the psyche back toward depression, toward manic escapism, or toward the violently projective defenses of the paranoid/schizoid position. We feel these depressive pressures in the forms of remorse, shame, the buzzing confusion that makes thought impossible, depression itself, mourning for the lost ideal, and—often most relevant—a paralyzing apprehension of the inexorable laws of unintended consequences.



My own uncomfortable sense is that, for me at any rate, activist politics takes place—even at best—just at this difficult nexus between the paranoid/schizoid and the depressive positions. Suppose the paranoid/schizoid, entirely caught up in splitting and projection, to be always saying, like Nietzsche or Harold Bloom, “Those others are all about resentment.” Or you can translate it into Republicanese: “*Those others* are all about partisan rancor.” Suppose the depressive to be able to say at least intermittently, “We, like those others, are subject to the imperious projective dynamics of resentment; what next? By what means might the dynamics themselves become different?” As I understand my own political history, it has often happened that the propulsive energy of activist justification, of being or feeling joined with others in an urgent cause, tends to be structured very much in a paranoid/schizoid fashion: driven by attributed motives, fearful contempt of opponents, collective fantasies of powerlessness and/or omnipotence, scapegoating, purism, and schism. Paranoid/schizoid, in short, even as the motives that underlie political commitment may have much more to do with the complex, mature ethical dimension of the depressive position.

In an earlier essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” I speculated about why queer theory in general seems to display, if anything, a distinctive surplus or overdetermination in its elaboration of paranoid

energies and forms of thought.<sup>8</sup> That tendency is fully visible in *Epistemology of the Closet*, for one example, whose rhetorical and polemical energy are so dependent on the projective symmetries of “It takes one to know one”—even as the analysis of those symmetries, in all their tricky performative pragmatics, is also the constative project of the book.<sup>9</sup> “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” also takes up the marked centrality of paranoia in other founding texts of queer theory and activism. But in those speculations I overlooked the crudest, most contingent, and probably also most important reason why paranoia seems so built into queer theory as such. To quite get that, I think one has to have experienced gay life in the 1980s and early ’90s, when queer theory was still a tentative, emergent itinerary. That was also the moment when AIDS was a new and nearly untreatable disease—bringing a sudden, worse than Euripidean horror into the lives of urban gay men and their friends. It was not an uncommon experience then to be in a room of vibrant young people, conscious that within a year or two, all but a few of them would have sickened and died.

What’s equally hard to reconstruct now is the not knowing what kind of response to AIDS might crystallize from the state and the public sphere. This was the time when, despite the hecatombs of dead, the word AIDS didn’t cross the lips of the U.S. president for the first six years of the epidemic, while prominent legislators and complacent pundits busied themselves with fake-judicious, fake-practical, prurient schemes for testing, classifying, rounding up, tattooing, quarantining, and otherwise demeaning and killing men and women with AIDS. Now we live in a world in which most of these things haven’t happened, at least in relation to AIDS. But they were staples of public discourse at the time, and there was no visible brake on their implementation from any sanctioned, non-homophobic argument in the public sphere. The congruence of such fantasies—fantasies that never understood themselves to be such—with Foucauldian understandings of how panoptic power gets embodied through the disciplines of bureaucracy, law, psychiatry, science, and public health was inescapable to those who awaited or fought to prevent their implementation.

Dread, intense dread, both focused and diffuse, is a good name for the dominant tonality of those years for queer people, at least for those who survived. The punishing stress of such dread, and the need of mobilizing



powerful resources of resistance in the face of it, did imprint a paranoid structuration onto the theory and activism of that period, and no wonder. The wonder, at least to me, is at the resoundingly vigorous resource of thought and action that many people were able to mine from that otherwise impoverishing, and humiliating, enforced resort to the paranoid position.



In the mid-1990s, developments both public and private came together, for me, to produce some changed relations to paranoid thinking and writing. A nodal point was the summer of 1996, when news from the Eleventh International AIDS Conference in Vancouver indicated for the first time that for many, HIV could plausibly be treated as a chronic disease through the use of cocktails of newly developed drugs. The brutally abbreviated temporality of the lives of many women and men with HIV seemed suddenly, radically extended if not normalized. Along with many, many others, I was trying over that summer to assimilate an unaccustomed palette of feelings among which relief, hope, and expansiveness and surprise set the tone. But the end of that summer was also the time that, in a strange chiasmus, I learned that my breast cancer, diagnosed in 1991, had spread and become incurable. So my own temporality and mortality came into an unexpected kind of focus—informed by my immersion in the AIDS emergency, but experienced, as it also happened, through a very different set of affective frameworks.

I've often wondered why my relation to my own disease hasn't involved the emotions of anger, disbelief, or even dread to anything like the degree that I felt them in relation to the AIDS experiences of people I cared about. Surely it has something to do with the differences between a new disease and an old one; a highly stigmatized disease and one that, even then, was much less so; and, more generally, vicarious as opposed to direct experiences of pain and debility. But I'd also invoke my lifelong depressiveness. Among its other effects, it had endeared to me the idea of nonbeing, as well as made me perhaps oversensitive to the psychic expense extorted by the paranoid defenses. Without necessarily being secure in my depressive position, I knew for sure that the paranoid/schizoid was no place I could afford to dwell as I dealt with the exigencies of my disease. This was also the moment when a lot of Buddhist reading helped me find

(or construct) an articulated psychological framework that promised to sustain some of the antinomies of my situation.

At any rate, for reasons both private and public, I found myself at this point increasingly discontented with the predominance of the self-perpetuating kinds of thought that I increasingly seemed to be recognizing under the rubric of paranoia. Other first-generation queer thinkers seem to have felt a similar need and moved in different directions with it; while I see my own work since then as a series of experiments aimed at instantiating, and making somehow available to readers, some alternative forms of argument and utterance. Twenty-first-century mainstream gay and lesbian culture and politics, meanwhile, have resolutely pushed the whole AIDS experience behind them with an all but programmatic disavowal of trauma and dread—but with the expensive result that those venues have become affectively hollowed out, brittle and banalized. I also see that a lot of more recent queer theory has retained the paranoid structure of the earlier AIDS years, but done so increasingly outside of a context where it had reflected a certain, palpable purchase on daily reality.



Sometimes I think of the shape of my present life in terms of a flight from that dangerous-feeling, activist proximity of paranoid/schizoid energies—a flight into depression, occasionally, but on a more reliable basis and more productively and pleasurably, a flight from depression into pedagogy (*pedagogy* not referring, for me, to the academic institution so much as to a mode of relationality—not only in the classroom, but equally around it and, especially, as a writer). Last year at a meeting of my department's graduate admissions committee, one colleague was complaining about a particular applicant whose personal statement focused on being diagnosed with depression in the middle of college. "I hate it when they use depression as an excuse," this colleague said. To which another one responded, "Depression is no excuse! Excuse, hell—it's a prerequisite."

I don't know whether it's true that intellectuals and teachers, especially in the humanities, are more prone to depression than other people; but I strongly believe that, as Klein would have predicted, for the many of us who are prone to it, this tendency is woven as densely into our abilities as into our disabilities, our quite individual creativity as much as our sometimes stereotypical forms of blockage.

Among these and many similar dynamics, there's sometimes an unexpected psychological leverage from invoking another Buddhist idea: it's about karma. Not karma as a system of reward and punishment, in which, to be honest, I could not be less interested, but karma as plain causality, exemplified by the inexorable Rube Goldberg physics of those uncontrollable, paranoid/schizoid chains of projective identification; the ways in which what one already is puts its inevitable spin on what one says, does, and perceives — and vice versa. For resentment, then, read karma — the big, sloppy, psychic hurricane-footprint, the interactive histories that make someone difficult to be with or difficult to be. I'm imagining something like this: that the paranoid/schizoid position involves bad karma, lots of it — it emerges from bad karma and, through projective identification, sends more bad karma careening out into the world. And the depressive position involves the endless, heroic, but discouraging attempt to turn bad karma into good karma.

In every religious tradition I know of, though, there is at least one stream of mystical thought that is heading somewhere different from this. In Buddhism you could paraphrase it like this: it's better to have good karma than bad karma; but the best thing of all, the most liberating and skillful thing, is to have no karma.

I should probably add that, at least in mystical Buddhism, no karma doesn't mean no action. Instead, it's the figure without karma, the bodhi-sattva, the ultimate teacher, who is able to perceive and be perceived clearly enough that the things he or she does are efficacious — and no more than efficacious.

It seems inevitable for us karmic individuals, trapped in the rounds of samsara, that even the invocation of nonkarmic possibility will be karmically overdetermined. It will have all too many uses, too many causes, and too many effects. Clearly it can function as evasion, as the notion of the Aesthetic is now commonly seen as functioning. You might even see it as overdetermined by our depressiveness itself and by our pedagogical neediness. At any rate, that these elements can be closely proximate is clear. To me, though, apparently a vision of nonkarmic possibility, however subject to abuse, also illuminates some possibilities of opening out new relations to the depressive position.

## Notes

- 1 R. D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (London: Free Association Books, 1998), and Meira Likierman, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context* (London: Continuum, 2002). Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
- 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
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- 5 Adam Frank pointed this out to me.
- 6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 82–85.
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- 8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.
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