

BAD READERS, PERVERSE DREAMS:  
AFFECT AND THE POLITICS OF READING  
IN QUEER EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

written under the direction of

Marianne DeKoven

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October, 2013

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bad Readers, Perverse Dreams:

Affect and the Politics of Reading in Queer Experimental Writing

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“Bad Readers, Perverse Dreams” examines what I call “bad reading”—modes of reading defined by uncritical ardor, perverse identification, hallucinatory confusion, and willful fantasy. I argue that postwar writers turn to experimental writing to develop forms of bad reading that challenge socially sanctioned affective responses to queer sexuality. Bad reading thus expands the affective relations readers can enact with text and texts with readers. Queer experimental writing is therefore not solely transgressive, as is often argued, but a performative mode of social imagination. However, its construction of social forms only becomes apparent when we historicize bad reading within postwar debates over the representation of non-normative desire. Each chapter thus pivots on the problems of reading that arise when writers draw on experimental form to represent sexual fantasy and desire; these writers include William S. Burroughs, Samuel Delany, Kathy Acker, Jeanette Winterson, Eve Sedgwick, and Alison Bechdel, among others. I examine how their experimental writing purposively elicits uncritical responses from readers—shock, disgust, titillation, anger, and love. These affective relations press back against constrictions placed on erotic representation, and they performatively reconstitute the

relations between readers and texts endorsed by normative culture. My dissertation thus reveals that the analysis of affect is key to the definitional volatility of “reading” within the postwar period. I establish that the contestation of “critical reading” has been an ongoing project for authors of experimental writing since the mid-fifties. Whereas scholars tend to oppose critical and uncritical reading, experimental writers dialectically entwine affect, critique, and social imagination within bad reading. Bad reading therefore enables experimental writers to represent queer social forms that are otherwise unrealizable in their present. Thus, I conclude that experimental writing lies at the vanguard of postwar redefinitions of reading as an embodied, critical practice that can spark the desire for queer forms of community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Academic writing typically does not allow for ambiguity, ignorance, or nonsense. To be a “good reader” in this genre is difficult to achieve; it can feel like a strained tension between masochism and mastery, between submitting to the expectations of the institution and demonstrating control over its discourse. Yet if I have learned anything in graduate school, it is that ignorance is a critical dimension of thinking and writing. As Gilles Deleuze once said, “we write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms one into the other. Only in this manner are we resolved to write.” Resolve is important, but it is ineffective without a community. Without support, a writer cannot bear the feelings—anxiety, insecurity, fear—that lie in the passage from ignorance to knowledge, and from knowledge to ignorance, and back again. I have been very lucky to have a caring intellectual community that has enabled me to learn in this transitional space.

I want to acknowledge my dissertation committee for their generosity and patience. They allowed the dissertation to be an experimental process. They encouraged digressions, nurtured risks, patiently endured blind-alleys, and praised surprise discoveries. Even in the darkest moments, I felt their confidence in me to find a way forward. I only hope that the results have been as engaging for them as they have been for me.

Marianne DeKoven has been the ideal director and mentor—rigorous, supportive, and pragmatic. Her support of my work on marginal texts was the cornerstone of the project, and every chapter benefited from her insights into experimental writing, postmodernism, feminism, and the agency of literary form. I am grateful for her rich intellectual engagement in countless meetings, emails, and phone calls throughout my entire graduate education. Richard Dienst posed challenging

questions that enabled me to see the true stakes of the dissertation, and his attentive careful readings of my work helped me to claim my own arguments. He also provided an inspiring model of theoretically informed cultural critique. John McClure was a constant source of warmth and encouragement, confirming my belief in the pedagogical values of positive affect. His insight into postmodern ethics and postwar literature can be felt throughout the dissertation. Elizabeth Grosz's teaching on affect and post-structuralism inspired the questions that underlie my dissertation, and her rich feedback has nuanced my all of my claims about experimental desire, affective bodies, and queer reading. I am very grateful for her attentive involvement throughout the writing process and for her willingness to help me think between the borderlands of critical theory and literary studies.

I also benefited from many sources of support and inspiration at Rutgers University. In particular, I want to acknowledge David Eng and Harriet Davidson, who were both central to the development of my thoughts on affect and queer aesthetics. Barbara Balliet was an key mentor during my first two years of graduate school, helping me to maintain a bridge between literature and women's studies in my graduate education. Janet Larson was a wonderful colleague during my semester teaching for the Rutgers Newark Graduate Program, and I am grateful for her continued support. Cheryl Robinson, Courtney Borack, and Joanne Givand also provided kindness and guidance from the very beginning of my graduate education; they continue to make Rutgers a welcoming place. Paul Benzon and Michelle Phillips were also key support systems, interlocutors, and friends. I want to thank Richard Miller, who had a profound influence on the completion of my dissertation. His humor and generosity provided a lifeline during a difficult time in the process, and his insights into pedagogy and creativity helped refresh and clarify my work in the humanities. Finally, I want to thank all of my students who have helped me grow as a

teacher, writer, and thinker over the past seven years.

I want to thank the many sources of feedback that have enriched the development of this dissertation. I am grateful to countless participants at the MLA, ACLA, NeMLA, and other conferences. I also want to acknowledge the participants in the Rutgers English Writing Workshops, which were expertly taught by Emily Bartels, John Kucich, David Kurnick, and Jonathan Kramnick. Philip Longo, in particular, gave robust feedback to my work and has proven to be wonderful intellectual ally and friend, always ready to debate and commiserate. Megan Paustian helped me to put my project into words. But more importantly, she has been a great source of strength and a true friend during the turbulent emotional moments of graduate school and the writing process. I also owe a great debt to Joshua Crandall, who read and re-read countless drafts of the project and who listened with patience and care to my ideas long before I understood them. Many of these pages were written in his presence, in coffee shops, bookstores, and two different apartments. The effects of his insight and friendship can be felt throughout the project.

There are many people to thank for their critical support beyond Rutgers. I am particularly grateful to Elizabeth Freeman, Jody Greene, and the anonymous *GLQ* reader, who helped me to complicate my arguments in chapter four. I also want to thank E.L. McCallum and Donna V. Jones for their brief but very critical engagements. The excellent archivists, librarians, and staff at Ohio State University and Duke University provided key support of my research on William S. Burroughs and Kathy Acker, respectively. Finally, I am grateful to my mentors at West Chester University for their continuing guidance and mentorship. Anne Herzog and Eleanor Shevlin provided critical support in my transition to Rutgers. Rodney Mader inspired me to pursue queer studies, and his ongoing friendship has been absolutely central to my life beyond West Chester. Carolyn Sorisio taught my first literary studies course,

where I first learned the phrase "intellectual community." She showed me that I could have a rich intellectual life, and I am deeply grateful for the inspiration she continues to provide as a teacher and friend.

There are too many friends to name, but I want to thank them all for their love and support during a very long process. I am particularly grateful to Emily Baroni, Sarah Huskin, Michael Jan, and Jessica Luther—they were cheerleading every step of the way—and to Toby, for being there.

I will never be able to express my debt to my mother, Debbie Bradway, who has cared for me in ways that I can never repay. Not only did she make my graduate education possible, she has been a tireless source of support, generosity, and love from the start. Her capacity to articulate feelings taught me about the importance of language and affect, long before I had the words to understand. Her willingness to support me, no matter what, made it possible to survive.

Finally, I want to thank Jen Lightfoot. Her thoughts about art, queerness, sexuality, and fantasy were a key provocation for this project, and I have benefited from countless debates with her about culture and theory. I admire her unique combination of compassion, sarcasm, and care—she puts everything into perspective and knows how to make me laugh. She has been a wonderful partner throughout a difficult and exciting time, and I am grateful for her love.

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I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Jacob K. Javits Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, Cornell University School of Criticism and Theory, the Rutgers English Department, and the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences for their financial support.

Parts of chapter 4 have been previously published in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 19.1 (2013): 79-110.



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## **Introduction:**

### **Uncritically Queer:**

#### **The Politics of Bad Reading in Queer Experimental Writing**

My dissertation introduces a concept I call "bad reading" to explain how postwar writers challenge dominant modes of critical reading and the heteronormative social worlds they imply. I will argue that a genealogy of queer writers turns to experimental aesthetics to deform and reconfigure the conventional reading protocols that operate in their historical moments. I will demonstrate that these reading protocols are intimately, if complexly, tethered to specific representational problems around queer intimacy. The project will therefore focus on the the affective terms and dynamics that organize the relations between readers, texts, and publics. I assume that affect, even when it is not explicitly "represented" in the text or felt by a character, is a constitutive force of these textual relations and that its traces must be read through experimentations with literary form. I also assume that affect is not the private domain of embodied feeling nor that the conceptual investment in affect results in anti-social solipsism. Rather, I insist that affect reveals the already social orientation of bodies and readers, and concomitantly, that its representation in experimental writing is indelibly marked as "incipiently social." For these writers, affect intimates alternative social forms, alternative ways of organizing and participating in the body politic. Therefore, I argue that the textual affects embedded in "bad reading" provide a visceral as well as symbolic challenge to the diverse strictures around queer belonging in the postwar period. I conclude that experimental writing sheds light on how the redefinition of reading, through affect, continues to be a critical project for writers seeking to imagine queer forms of social belonging and becoming.

In this introduction, I first define the concept of bad reading. Literary studies has recently resuscitated "reading" as a focus of critical concern. Yet this resuscitation has

two significant deficits. On the one hand, the popular critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion has resulted in a narrow binary between paranoid affects and reparative affects, obscuring other crucial affects that inform critical reading.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the turn toward distant and descriptive reading has sidelined the analysis of affect as an outdated remnant of humanist literary studies. By contrast, I position bad reading as a method that can pluralize the affects associated with critical forms of reading, thereby breaking open the binary between suspicion and empathy. Moreover, I insist that the analysis of affect must also attend to the contextual norms that valorize certain forms of reading as critical. Any renewed attention to reading in the academy, I suggest, must keep these norms in view, since they imply and prioritize certain forms of subjectivity over others. Indeed, critical reading often implies a disembodied, rational subject. This is why bad reading has been such a potent force in queer culture—queer writers do not want to sacrifice affect as a relational dynamic between readers in texts; they do not want to position their readers as the disembodied, unmarked, male, or heteronormative reader, and they wish to quite literally elicit affects that “queer” their readers' self-perceptions.

By locating affect as a literal force of the text, I reframe contemporary work in affect theory, which has not yet prioritized the question of how texts elicit feeling through language. Specifically, I expand the psychoanalytic and Deleuzian paradigms, which have narrowed the analysis of textual affect to the terms of desire. While I acknowledge my crucial debts to these paradigms, I reveal their limits for conceptualizing reading as a relational transmission of textual affect, and I also underscore the limits of psychoanalytic concepts for literary writers who are themselves explicitly ambivalent about, or actively resistant to, psychoanalytic models of sexuality. Thus, I turn to queer experimental writers precisely because they insist that their texts manifest a diversity of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sedgwick *Touching*, Berlant "Two Girls," Love "Close But Not Deep," Massumi *Parables* (especially the conclusion), Felski, and Marcus and Best. For a more nuanced approach to the binary, see Latour.

feelings in readers, spanning the range of the erotic and the abject. Furthermore, these writers insist that this manifestation of feeling is a central aspect of the ethical and political work that their literature undertakes. Yet I do not assume that their theories are sufficient for interpreting their fiction. Instead, my project positions these writers' theories of affective reading against key social and representational prohibitions on queer belonging in the postwar period. By doing so, I rewrite the popular conception of experimental writing as a style that is transgressive regardless of its historical and social contexts. While queer experimental writing undoubtedly transgresses certain norms, it also seeks to bring new relations into being, through the often ineffable terms of feeling. More importantly, these writers want to endorse these social relations as livable and durable forms of queer belonging. Therefore, queer experimental writing demands new ways of reading textual affect as, at once, critical and incipiently social. My dissertation strives to meet this demand.

### **Bad Readers, Queer Subjects**

At one time or another, everyone has been a bad reader. We have all, in countless ways, faced shame, mockery, or derision for what we read or that the way that we read. Such a generalization is warranted because reading is defined through so many proscriptions. Immanently linked to context, these norms imply what I call "good" reading—permissible forms of reading that codify, at once, a *certain kind of readerly subject* and that signify, moreover, a *certain form of participation* in the social world. On the one hand, the norms of reading legislate acceptable content—the kinds of books you display on your coffee table and which ones you hide away; the kinds of texts we can cite in a classroom and which we must whisper about in bed. These norms of content signify us as certain kinds of readerly subjects—worldly, juvenile, academic, political, and so on. Our performative relationship to these norms signifies our relative conformity or

resistance to the changing parameters that define us as good or bad readers. On the other hand, these readerly norms also circumscribe legitimate modes of interpretation—what will get to count as a *valuable* and *critical* reading. Although less obvious than the norms that structure content, the norms of interpretation operate constantly, conditioning a field of interpretation. Even before we adjudicate a specific interpretation of a text, these norms delimit the boundaries of admissible evidence, analysis, and significance. Our relative conformity or resistance to these norms mark us in ways that extend beyond our identity. Indeed, they imply an entire social imaginary, a way of "reading" the social world as such and a collective sense of what counts as a meaningful way of participating in this social world.

When we break the rules of good reading, when we become bad readers, we are labeled queer, stupid, or ill-mannered. These terms signify moments of social rule-breaking, not merely individual failures of reading. Indeed, these pejorative terms constrict the field of legitimate textual relations and, crucially, the social relations they imply. Allow me to provide an example. Before we descend to the academic basement, where experimental writing has so often been marginalized, let us turn momentarily to that canonical bad read reader, Victor Frankenstein. Early in *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor arrives at University only to discover that the texts he has read with obsessive interest are hopelessly out of date. When Victor “carelessly” admits his affinity for the alchemists, Victor's professor is shocked. “The professor stared. 'Have you,' he said, 'really spent your time in studying such nonsense?’” (47). In his professor's eyes, Victor has “wasted” his time. But more importantly, his failure to be a good reader marks him as non-modern, as a provincial subject seduced by mysticism “in this enlightened and scientific age.” Thus, his professor laments, “God God! in what desert land have you lived, where no one was kind enough to inform you that these fancies, which you have so greedily imbibed,

are a thousand years old, and as musty as they are ancient?” Here the bad reader is stuck in a Dionysian reverie, ignorantly drunk on ancient texts.<sup>2</sup> The writers I analyze will exploit this very description of the bad reader; indeed, they subversively appropriate the discourse of fancy to critique the sober rationalism of good reading. Yet Victor's professor uses this discourse to shame his student and to lament that a “desert land” exists without a gentle voice of reason to redirect it to legitimate fields of knowledge. If the professor stands as a proxy for the modern social world, and a way of participating in it as a rational subject, then Victor provides a queer alternative. His attachment to dead knowledge is, of course, linked to his attachment to dead flesh. In this precise sense, Victor's textual relations are a metonym for his transgressive relation to the norms of the social world. His *attachment* to bad reading, to decayed ideas and musty texts, therefore intimates forms of social belonging that, in the eyes of the modern Enlightened subject, appear to be unmistakably queer.<sup>3</sup>

The professor's shaming exemplifies the enforcement of good reading and its relationship to a specific cultural context (the University). But I argue that such norms are constitutive of reading more generally—they distinguish disciplinary objects, generic boundaries, interpretative methods, and relevant sets of data. Our “development” as readers is partly defined by our learning to recognize, follow, and reproduce these conventions. Yet norms have been notably absent from the discussion of critical reading in literary studies. Although many critics could be cited here, the most prominent voices in this discussion include Derek Attridge, Timothy Bewes, Jonathan Culler, Rita Felski,

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<sup>2</sup> I take the phrase “Dionysian intoxication” from Gilles Deleuze's discussion of minor literature that seeks to produce an undecidable hesitation between dream and reality. This fantastic state, in his argument, is one way that minor literature eludes systems of Apollonian judgment. See “To Have Done with Judgment” in *Essays Clinical and Critical* and see my discussion of fantasy below.

<sup>3</sup> Many critics have explored the queer implications of Victor's relationship to knowledge. See, for example, Elizabeth Freeman's recent analysis of Victor as a carnally queer historian in chapter three of *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*.

Donald E. Hall, Heather Love, Sharon Marcus and Steven Best, Franco Moretti, and Eve Sedgwick. Each of these critics has proposed new theories about, definitions of, and methods for “reading” in literary studies. Yet they have not sufficiently acknowledged that reading is shaped by proscriptive norms. More importantly, they have not recognized that these norms gain their meaning largely through the terms of affect. Sedgwick is unique in acknowledging the contextual location of affect and reading, particularly in her field-defining essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” Yet her heuristic has, unfortunately, ossified into an ahistorical binary, wherein critics debate the relative value of suspicious versus empathetic reading practices. In effect, critics have forgotten that Sedgwick's critique of “paranoid reading” was inextricable from the post-AIDS context of queer theory and activism; her praise of reparative affects was precisely attuned to how these feelings might inspire a renewed queer critical imagination and, above all, challenge disciplinary norms that privilege suspicion. My project similarly locates affect within the politics of sexuality, yet I break with Sedgwick's dichotomy between paranoia and empathy. As this project will demonstrate, these affects do not do justice to the range and expansiveness of affective relations that authors and texts attempt to elicit. Moreover, paranoid and reparative reading, particularly as Sedgwick defines them, prioritize *academic* definitions and norms of reading, leaving unaddressed the often para-academic contexts in which queer writers experiment with new, unsanctioned and not-yet legitimated, hermeneutic practices.

Advocates of descriptive or distant reading have not redressed these deficits either.<sup>4</sup> This is because they contribute to the claim that hermeneutics is primarily defined by two affects. In her argument for sociologically inspired, “descriptive” reading, for example, Love claims that hermeneutics is split between two dispositions—suspicion and “recognition and empathy” (388). Hence, she insists that the “depth” of depth

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<sup>4</sup> Although Love is my primary target here, my point is relevant to Moretti.



hermeneutics implies “not only the hidden structures or causes that suspicious critics reveal” but also a “dimension that critics attempt to produce in their readings, by attributing life, richness, warmth, and voice to texts.” Dialectically entwined, these two affective relations provide evidence of “an unacknowledged but powerful humanism that defines literary studies.” Later in this introduction, I will explicate how affective reading need not contribute to a retrenched “humanism.” In fact, I will suggest that many queer experimental writers conceive of affect as anti-human or inhuman, as a force that temporarily loosens the boundaries of the self-enclosed subject and reveals the human as an embodied animal.<sup>5</sup> For the moment, I wish to underscore how my analysis of affective reading targets precisely the unreflective, binary humanism that Love sees as lurking beneath the ideology of hermeneutics.

To clarify, the specific aspect of humanism I challenge is the ideal of the reflexive, rational-critical subject that is supposedly produced through the acquisition of literacy and the participation in the public sphere via reading. Indeed, reading is always implicated in a narrative about self-production. In his work on modern publics and queer counterpublics, Michael Warner shows that these reading narratives inevitably rest on a “hierarchy of faculties” that, in the case of critical reading, “elevates rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity” (123). This transposition of faculties restricts the range of reader relations and, crucially, the forms of social agency they imply. Warner writes,

All of the verbs for public agency are verbs for private reading, transposed upward to the aggregate of readers. Readers may scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge and so on... Activities of reading that do not fit the ideology of reading as silent, private, replicable, decoding—curling up, mumbling,

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am particularly influenced by Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, which demonstrates the non-exclusivity of human and animal emotion.

fantasizing, gesticulating, ventriloquizing, writing marginalia, and so on—also find no counterparts in public agency. 123

Note that the degraded activities of reading are affective in nature and that these affects, contra Sedgwick and Love, extend beyond suspicious and empathetic relations. Frequently, the faculties of “good reading” disavow these embodied textual relations and, at the same time, the social bodies that practice these relations. Reading with feeling might appear to be, in many contexts, an uncritical way of relating to culture and society, stripping us of the social agency that accrues to critical forms of participation in the public sphere. But, from another angle, it might provide a way to challenge the formation of that public sphere and, moreover, to elaborate alternative social forms. Bad readers might purposely amplify their affective relations to texts, thereby challenging and expanding the narrow faculties that fuse subjects into the public sphere. For Warner, such practices constitute counterpublic discourse—a counterpublic, in his view, implies an alternative social imaginary, wherein public agency is detached from the state.<sup>6</sup> However, I believe that Warner too quickly equates challenges to public norms with new forms of public agency. While bad reading undoubtedly implies a non-heteronormative social imaginary, I believe it is crucial to foreground the circuitous, heavily mediated relationship between such interpretative practices and their alternative social horizons. The *distance* between these affective acts of resistance and their intimations of other forms of social belonging is relative. But that distance is always there, built into a text, felt deeply, and negotiated in complex ways.

It is important to acknowledge this distance because queer reading practices frequently signify as anti-social, solipsistic, or narcissistic. But it is precisely through its affective distance from the legitimately social that bad reading has proved to be a

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<sup>6</sup> Warner claims that public agency in liberalism is specifically tied to the state-form (*Publics* 124).

significant source of nourishment, self-formation, and critical resistance for queer cultures. Indeed, if bad reading is central to negatively defining the educated subject of modernity, it is also a robust, productive site of alternative social imagination in queer culture. Sedgwick hints at this more general dynamic in reading, long before her more famous discussions of reparative reading. In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick variably labels her reading practices as “perverse” and “ardent” reading, terms which fundamentally mark her reading as queer, erotically invested, and aslant of dominant interpretative protocols. “[B]ecoming a perverse reader,” she explains, enabled her to locate “sites where meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other” and to “invest those sites with fascination and love” (3). On the one hand, this erotics of reading enables her and others of her generation to survive the crushing effects of heteronormative conformity. She quite explicitly links the practice of “smuggling” texts to the highly variable, but to her mind common, experience of “queer survival” in an anti-homophobic culture. Smuggling texts means remaining attached—like Victor—to bad reading, to the very texts that the appear degraded within the public sphere. These texts include “genre movies, advertising, comic strips,” and other forms of popular culture (4). Arguably, one primary success of queer criticism has been to expand the archive of academically and intellectually legitimate culture; it has allowed texts, many that are discussed in this dissertation, to matter, even if they were once read as obscene, silly, ephemeral, or marginal. On the other hand, Sedgwick makes evident that the attachment to texts is constituted through interpretative relationships that are similarly unsanctioned. Explicating her practices of perverse “overreading,” Sedgwick notes

The need I brought to books and poems was hardly to be circumscribed, and I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest from them sustaining news of the world, ideas, myself, and (in various senses) my kind. The reading practices founded on

such basic demands and intuitions had necessarily to run against the grain of the most patent available formulae for young people's reading and life—against the grain, often, of the most accessible voices even in the texts themselves. 4

Sedgwick's impacted phrasing here, especially in the first sentence, points up the mediated, complex distance between bad reading and social agency. “I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest” is such a bizarre grammatical construction, precisely because it signals a confused relationship between affect and knowledge, certainty and uncertainty, present and (conditional) future. Reading has become a “wresting” of news, and it necessarily partakes in the classic formula for the hermeneutics of suspicion, reading “against the grain.” Yet Sedgwick insists that her formulation of queer, ardent, or perverse reading does not rest on “condescension to texts” but a way of letting texts “remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary.” Even so, the exemplary function of a text is “refractory”—a mode of resistance that a text intimates for readers, not something that, as Love suggest, the critic reads into the text itself. Neither Sedgwick nor I make profound claims about the necessary *effectiveness* of this refractory force, but it is nonetheless a central dynamic of bad reading, and as I have suggested, it is a dynamic signaled by affective language, such as Sedgwick's invocation of “intuition.”

Sedgwick fails, however, to historicize her experience of bad reading beyond gesturing in general terms to her “generation” of queer critics. My project picks up this unexplored path, locating bad reading within key conflicts around sexuality and representation in the postwar period. By doing so, I provide more specificity to Sedgwick's broad suggestion that bad reading challenges “hetero-normativity.” This is undoubtedly true in many instances; hetero-normativity is frequently a motivating cause and critical target for constructions of bad reading. Yet queer theory must work to complicate and distinguish the problems associated with hetero-normativity. Otherwise,

this term will flatten into a vague abstraction. Therefore, I offer a more contextually-based approach, locating bad reading against conventions and prohibitions around reading within conflicts over the representation of queer affect. Such an approach provides a sharper sense of how reading has been a volatile site of symbolic redefinition in queer culture. But, more importantly, it reveals that bad reading is not simply performed by queer readers or critics. Indeed, this is the very point that Sedgwick elides in her provocative discussion of reading queerly and refractory texts—that some texts might *actively elicit* bad readers. Thus, I attend to the ways that writers actively deform and reconstruct reading protocols in specific institutional circumstances. I study how they directly challenge the legitimate modes of social relation implied by those reading protocols. In this respect, my project signals a new step in queer criticism. The predominant question of queer criticism has been, how can we “queer” this text by reading it aslant? My gambit, instead, is to ask: how does this text “queer” its readers and the very conception of reading itself?

For my gambit to be effective, I must provide concepts that make evident how affect is an actual force of reader relations, not merely a psychological projection of the reader on the text and not simply a metaphor or trope used by authors and critics alike. I will ultimately return affect to the realm of discourse, demonstrating how affect is intimately embedded in social and historical contexts. Before I do so, I must establish my conception of affect as an embodied, erotic, and above all relational force that entwines readers and texts. At stake in this concept is a critical revision of a dominant binary in affect theory, which oscillates between subjective, personal, linguistically constituted “emotion” and asubjective, impersonal, pre-representational affect. But more fundamentally, my relational conception of affect will help to illuminate how queer experimental writing employs a diversity of forms to thread alternative networks of

social belonging. By eliciting “uncritical” affective responses in readers, queer experimental writing strikes at the disembodied model of “critical reading” and its normative social imaginary. Yet these texts also conceive of affect as a creative or productive force. They use experimental form to position readers and texts in a complex relational circuit, in which the transmission of affect engenders alternative possibilities for social belonging. To lay the conceptual groundwork for this dynamic relational circuit, I will now turn to the field of affect theory to make evident how my project provides a new way of linking affect, reading, and the social.

### **Reading with Feeling: Critical Form and Relational Affect**

How does reading make us feel? For quite some time, literary studies has avoided this question. New Criticism famously sought to divest itself of the reader's subjectivity by critiquing the “affective fallacy.” The critique of the affective fallacy discounted the experience, feelings, and responses of readers to a text, thereby protecting literary criticism's “objectivity” in its aesthetic evaluations.<sup>7</sup> Reader-response criticism made a provocative challenge to the orthodoxies of New Criticism. As Jane Tompkins argues, reader-response directed critical interest back toward the reader and, crucially, to the reader's dynamic role in producing the text. These critics “examine[d] authors' attitudes toward their readers, the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply, the role actual readers play in the determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation, and the status of the reader's self” (ix). However, as this research agenda suggests, reader-response criticism never foregrounded affect as a central facet of literature's effects on readers. Instead, critics such as Stanley Fish prioritized the way “the reader” produces “meaning”: the response of the reader became equivalent to the semiotic production of the text in the reader's mind. Affect, which inhabits a threshold between subjective and objective, and between body and mind, remained a problem to be

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<sup>7</sup> The key reference here is Wimsatt and Beardsley.

subordinated. Tellingly, Fish's early "manifesto" for reader-response criticism was originally titled "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." However, he elides the subtitle in his later publication of the essay. One reason for the elision of affect may be that, for Fish, a reader's "response" encompasses "more than the range of feelings (what Wimsatt and Beardsley call 'the purely affective reports')" and includes, instead, "*any and all* of the activities provoked by a string of words" (27, my emphasis). If the analyst must "take into account all that has happened (in the reader's mind)," do the events of the reader's body matter? How can affect be distinguished from or related to the cognitive production of meaning? Because Fish characteristically includes everything within the category of response, he ultimately "abandon[s]" the terms affective stylistics.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, affect remains an opaque, under-theorized aspect of reader relations.<sup>9</sup>

However, the advent of affect theory, and the so-called "turn to affect" in the humanities, has created new opportunities for reconsidering readerly affect.<sup>10</sup> Theorists as diverse as Martha Nussbaum, Eve Sedgwick, Brian Massumi, Derek Attridge, and Sianne Ngai, among many others, have addressed the category of affect as a significant dynamic of the reader's encounter with a text, and each has argued for its critical significance and social relevance. However, there remains an unacknowledged tendency in the critical conversation thus far that my emphasis on "bad reading" redresses. Specifically, I complicate the location of affect in reader relations and the entwined ethical narrative that is mapped onto that location. As will become clear, the unacknowledged mediating term between affect and ethics is literary form—nearly all literary theorists of affect prioritize a specific literary form as the ideal mode for transmuting affect into an

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<sup>8</sup> See Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?* He writes, "the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning, or at least the medium in which what I wanted to call the meaning comes into being" (3, original emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> As reader-response criticism waned in popularity, its questions have migrated to other fields, particularly "history of the book" criticism and interdisciplinary approaches to literature based in cognitive science.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful introduction, see Clough and Halley.

ethically useful social relation.<sup>11</sup> I challenge this privileging of a specific literary form and seek to pluralize, in the process, the kinds of ethical and political “becomings” that readerly affect can conceivably stimulate.

For critics such as Nussbaum and Sedgwick, affect inheres in the reader's or critic's orientation to the textual object. Drawing on classic philosophies of emotion from Adam Smith and Aristotle, for example, Nussbaum valorizes empathy in readers because it leads us to “form bonds of identification and sympathy” with characters that express “certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns” (*Poetic* 7).<sup>12</sup> Nussbaum subsequently champions the nineteenth-century realist novel, because it possesses an appropriate combination of sympathetic identification and impartial judgment that is “highly relevant to citizenship” (10). Given her investment in sympathy, Nussbaum calls for the field of affect to be “carefully circumscribed,” praising the “cultivation of *appropriate emotions*” for an engaged citizenship (xvi, my emphasis). Here Nussbaum discounts the possibility that inappropriate emotions might, in some contexts, have either a symbolic or visceral value. But more importantly, she does not account for how literature stimulates affects outside of identification. Only narratives that represent concrete worlds with realistically individuated characters signify, in her model, a productive hinge between literary affect and social imagination. This is not an oversight. Rather, it results from Nussbaum's insistence on privileging literary forms that can be mapped onto the ideology of liberalism. Indeed, while Nussbaum admits that music possesses an “emotional expressiveness” akin to the novel, she claims that it is “dreamlike and indeterminate in a

<sup>11</sup> For example, Nussbaum praises realism, Attridge endorses modernism, Newton points to narrative, and Altieri embraces the lyric.

<sup>12</sup> On her Aristotelian ethics, see Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*, especially “Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature.” On her influence by Adam Smith, see *Poetic Justice*, especially 74-75. For an incisive critique of Nussbaum, see Charles Altieri, “Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (30-58). For a valuable critique of the Smithian approach to impartial spectatorship, see Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*.



way that limits its role in public deliberation” (6).<sup>13</sup> By discarding non-representational aesthetics (the “dreamlike and indeterminate”), Nussbaum concomitantly ignores how writers might elicit ethical dispositions that are *counter* to liberalism and its self-image of public deliberation.<sup>14</sup>

A productive alternative to readerly sympathy might claim that the text and the reader engaged in an ethical event that undoes pre-established ethical and political categories. This is precisely the model offered by ethical critics such as Attridge.<sup>15</sup> While these critics follow in the footsteps of reader-response's vision of reading as an “event,” they insist more strongly on conceiving this event in terms of deconstructive ethics.<sup>16</sup> Attridge, for example, argues that the “singularity of literature” lies in formal innovations make demands upon readers akin to the demand of the Other. He argues,

the formally innovative work, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the most sharply challenging (which is not to say the most profound) ethical demand... To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand how little you understand me, translate my untranslatability, learn me by heart and thus learn the otherness that inhabits the heart. 131

Estrangement, surprise, disorientation, and resetting—these are the affective jolts that otherness supposedly engenders and, crucially, they break apart the very structures of

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<sup>13</sup> Hence, Nussbaum values Walt Whitman’s poetry to the extent that it provides a “concrete depiction of different ways of life” (*Poetic* 7).

<sup>14</sup> “Dreamlike and indeterminate” is an apt descriptor for the “waning of affect” that characterizes the postmodern structure of feeling (*Postmodernism* 15). As Fredric Jameson argues, postmodernity dissolves the “bourgeois ego, or monad” dispersing affect into free-floating intensities, “since there is not longer a self to do the feeling” (*Postmodernism* 16).

<sup>15</sup> For keen surveys of the field, see Hale and Eskin. Key theorists in this debate include Wayne Booth, J. Hillis Miller, Lawrence Buell, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Derrida.

<sup>16</sup> Attridge makes clear that this attachment to absolute otherness is the locus of his divergence from Fish. See *Singularity* 144.

identity and relation that are assumed in the liberal-humanist model of sympathy. Here the reader does not imaginatively empathize and thereby understand; instead, readers are overtaken, stunned, and must confront their lack of understanding. While Attridge and Nussbaum similarly conceive of affective encounters as pedagogical, the lesson is clearly different. For Attridge, readers suspend “all those carefully applied codes and conventions” that we typically bring to a work. Indeed, he even equates these conventions with literary criticism (or what he calls “literary instrumentalism”) that approaches texts with preconceived notions, desires, or political requirements. In an endnote, Attridge claims that this instrumentalism is exemplified by feminist and Marxist criticism because such projects supposedly approach the text “with the hope or the assumption that it [a text] can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness” (7). As much as I share Attridge's vision of reading as an unpredictable, immanent, and open encounter, I break with his dichotomy between instrumental and non-instrumental reading. Putting aside his reduction of these bodies of criticism and their own complex considerations of these issues, Attridge does not consider that texts might actually desire to produce political or so-called instrumental effects. Moreover, he shares Nussbaum's narrowing of the field of affect to one tone (estrangement) and the correlative mapping of this tone onto a privileged set of aesthetic codes. Indeed, he praises New Critical aesthetic values, such as originality and invention, and he admits that the distancing, alienating, and estranging forms of modernist aesthetics underlie his vision of an ethical literature.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their resuscitation of reading and affect, these critical approaches clearly prioritize models of good reading. Not only do they subordinate the reader's body, they

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<sup>17</sup> Attridge makes this argument in *J.M Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. See especially 3-12.

circumscribe the field of appropriate feelings—only certain feelings (and certain forms) thus signify as “critical” in these models. Is there, then, a theoretical precedent for bad reading that would allow us to conceive of affect as a truly embodied force, as a force that inheres in the reader's body as well as in the letter of the text? Is there a model that would allow us to valorize less respectable affects, including the erotic? Psychoanalysis seems to provide an affirmative answer. After all, Freud famously theorized that culture itself is a sublimation of desire. From this perspective, literary texts, regardless of their specific form, crystallize sexual desire. Moreover, contemporary psychoanalytic critics, especially those invested in queer theory, have persuasively suggested that Freud's theories of desire admit the perverse.<sup>18</sup> However, I diverge from psychoanalysis because of Freud's (and his follower's) tendency to collapse affect into the instinctual drives. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis note, Freud conceives of affect as the “qualitative expression of the quantity of instinctual energy and of its fluctuations” (13). In other words, an affect is the “subjective transposition,” or mental perception, of physiological energy (14). The benefit of Freud's model is that he emphasizes the sexual basis of the instinctual drives.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in practice, this results in critics passing over qualitative affects (happiness, sadness, annoyance, anger, interest, etc.) to root out their basis in libidinal conflicts. Indeed, Freud insists that the “instincts are *all qualitatively alike* and owe the effect they produce only to the quantities of excitation accompanying them” (“Instincts” 88, my emphasis). Consequently, in Sedgwick's polemic words, “The nature or quality of the affect itself, seemingly, is not of much more consequence than the

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. For other queer uses of psychoanalysis, see Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, and Lee Edelman.

<sup>19</sup> What Freud calls “affect” Massumi labels “emotion” and Damasio names a “feeling.” Despite their terminological differences, their common point is the same—the mind perceives and interprets bodily and physiological sensations, and that these perceptions are experienced as a subjective emotions that we label with qualitative terms. For a brief introduction to the psychoanalytic framework of affect, see Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*.

color of the airplane used to speed a person to a destination” (18). In this respect, my position converges with Sedgwick's belief that affects should be provisionally distinguished from the drives (hunger, thirst, sexual desire) and given more phenomenological specificity.<sup>20</sup> Such a position does justice, I believe, to the way that aesthetic works manifest affective qualities which can be read in their forms and in ourselves.

However, phenomenological accounts of affective qualities cannot do justice to the complex dynamism of reader relations. Because it presumes an intentional, perceiving subject, phenomenology misses the unconscious and non-conscious dynamics of readerly affect. Psychoanalysis conceives these dynamics largely in terms of the unconscious (i.e. repressed instinctual desires). Therefore, I argue that we must look to a broader conception of the affective unconscious so that we can account for a wider range of affects that inform bad reading. This is why my work draws on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their contemporary interpreters in feminist and queer theory, who have complicated the role of sexuality and sexual difference in their work.<sup>21</sup> In Deleuze's and Guattari's conception, art is “a being of sensation and nothing else” (*What* 164). Like many post-structural thinkers writing after the “death of the author,” Deleuze and Guattari wish to dis-articulate art from the author's subjectivity. Yet they are unique in conceiving the work as an autonomous field of sensation that is neither the expression of an authorial subject nor the projection of a perceiving reader.<sup>22</sup> These

<sup>20</sup> For Sedgwick, the problem is that this reduction excludes the ways that affect is relatively autonomous from the drives (hunger, thirst, sexual desire, etc.). On affect as qualitative, see Sedgwick and Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” and Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes.”

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook, Dorothea Olkowski, Rosi Braidotti, and Moira Gatens. I am particularly influenced by Grosz's interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari, because she has remained vigilantly attentive to both the benefits and drawbacks of their work for feminist and queer theory alike. See especially *Volatile Bodies* and *Space, Time, and Perversion* for her consideration of these issues.

<sup>22</sup> Here Deleuze and Guattari exemplify the challenge to what Rei Terada calls the

sensations exist on their own in the material expressiveness of art, and these affects precede and exceed the human subject. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari claim that art strives to “wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations” (167). This bloc of sensations subsequently “undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections, and opinions,” which constitute a perceiving subject as a unified entity (176). In art, then, “Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them” (164). Here Deleuze and Guattari echo their more famous concept of the “body without organs” insofar as affect points toward a non-centralized or non-hierarchical body, one at the threshold of deterritorialization. For them, affect intimates this “more profound and almost unlivable” power—namely, the chaotic forces that underlie and constitute the “lived body” that phenomenology assumes (Deleuze, *Francis* 39). Affect thus pre-exists the body's organization into a coherent, formalized being, and when transmitted through art, it can temporarily undo that organization.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this paradigm, we can conceive of affect as a dynamic force that is expressed through aesthetic compositions (language, paint, etc.) but is not expressive of a subject. This view allows us to identify the phenomenological qualities of affect but also to acknowledge their provisionally subjective status. More provocatively, Deleuze and Guattari show how the perceiving subject is itself formed out of, and dissolves back into, the circulations of sensation. This conceit enables us to redress two problems of reader-response criticism. First, we can now prioritize affect itself as a force of reading. As Brian Massumi insists, drawing on Deleuze, “Reading, however cerebral it may be, does

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“expressive hypothesis” —the conceit that “emotion requires a subject” to express it (11). See Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject.'*

<sup>23</sup> On the partitioning of the senses as a political, see Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation*, especially, 1-44.

not entirely think out sensation” (*Parables* 139). He argues that reading enfolds “muscular, tactile, and visceral sensations of attention [which] are incipient perceptions... In the experience of reading, conscious thought, sensation, and all the modalities of perceptions fold into and out of each other.” Here reading becomes a synesthetic experience, cross-hatched by visual, auditory, and other sensory qualities that are not reducible to discourse alone.<sup>24</sup> Second, we can avoid the presumption that the “reader” exists as a concrete entity that precedes the text. Echoing many queer experimental writers, Deleuze and Guattari disperse the reader and the text into a pre-formalized relational field (what he calls a “plane of immanence”) where neither has a fixed boundaries or identity, transcendental essence, or hierarchical priority. Deleuze's and Guattari's paradigm therefore allows us to reframe reader-text encounters as dynamic, affective events, or a “becoming” to use Deleuzian terminology. Elizabeth Grosz points toward this dynamic event in her argument that art catalyzes becomings by unleashing “pure intensity, a direct impact on the body's nerves and orders” (*Art* 22). At stake in “becoming” is a view of reader relations that does not presume an ideal telos, culminating in an ultimately “good” reader. On the contrary, this view of becoming affirms “zone[s] of proximity” in which “one can no longer be distinguished from *a* woman, *an* animal, or *a* molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and non preexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form” (*Essays* 1). In plain language, Deleuzian becoming means blurring, softening, or mixing the otherwise fixed distinctions of identity and embodiment. This is why Deleuze declares that the “highest aim of literature” is “to escape... the wall of dominant significations” that “[w]e are always pinned against” (*Dialogues* 36, 45).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For an accessible elaboration of this point, see Bruce Baugh, “How Deleuze Can Help Us Make Literature Work” in *Deleuze and Literature* (34-56). See also Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Literature, Music, and the Arts*.

<sup>25</sup> For Deleuze's and Guattari's fascinating approach to the form/content binary in aesthetic analysis, see their provocative chapter, “Postulates of Linguistics” in *A*

Let me acknowledge openly that, despite its benefits, there are also manifest problems with the Deleuzian paradigm of affect. First, as I will show below, I do not see “escape” as the highest aim of queer experimental writing. Even as these texts strive to subvert dominant significations of sexuality, they also wish to create new ones that could potentially be stabilized. In other words, they do not privilege perpetual becoming or escape in the way that Deleuze does.<sup>26</sup> Second, Deleuze privileges one literary form as the exemplary basis for his affective paradigm of escape. In particular, he valorizes a genealogy of male modernism (Francis Bacon, Samuel Beckett, Antonin Artaud, DH Lawrence, Henry Miller, Marcel Proust).<sup>27</sup> While my work suggests that his concepts are not inherently tethered to these aesthetic examples, Deleuze himself never acknowledges the social specificity of his examples, nor does he discuss how extricable his concepts are from his examples. Third, Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of “becoming” is frustratingly vague. Feminist and queer critics have provocatively challenged their implicit masculinist bias in this concept. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari never complicate the highly variable political meaning of “becoming-woman” for people who identify as women or are culturally identified as women. Still, like many of these critics, I nonetheless retain the concept of becoming. I do so because it allows us to reconceive reader relations as immanent, visceral, and embodied. Most importantly, “becoming”

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*Thousand Plateaus.*

<sup>26</sup> My target here is less Deleuze himself than some popular applications of Deleuze and Guattari to postmodern fiction, such as Timothy Murphy's. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari insist that “becoming” is specific, insofar as it implies a specific convergence of forces within a zone of proximity (i.e. becoming-rat). (I am indebted to Elizabeth Grosz for pointing out this distinction). Yet some readings take up becoming to affirm endless de-territorialization. For the strongest critique of Deleuze along these lines, see Hallward. Although I disagree with Hallward's interpretation of Deleuze as a mystical or theological philosopher, he presents perhaps the most coherent case against becoming as a spiritual, asocial concept.

<sup>27</sup> This is a point often noted in Deleuzian criticism, but as Bogue aptly notes, Deleuze and Guattari do not share the definition of “high modernism” as an autonomous or anti-political art (*Deleuze on Literature* 113). Moreover, they also express a fondness for non-modernist writers such as Herman Melville. See, for example, *What Is Philosophy*.

allows us to consider and valorize a far wider range of affects than sympathy, estrangement, or sexual desire—in this one respect, its embodied opacity provides a conceptual opportunity.<sup>28</sup> Fourth, Deleuze and Guattari essentially collapse all aesthetic forms into the term “art,” because they see sensation as a common ontology of all art forms. For a philosophy of aesthetics, this is a provocative and intriguing proposal. However, since I am approaching texts whose experimentalism rests on the subversion and reconfiguration of specific genres of writing (literary and non-literary alike), I part ways with Deleuze's generalized language of “art” in favor of the word “writing.” The latter term helpfully foregrounds the key role that *textuality* (as opposed to other media) has for the authors I examine.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> I should qualify, though, that I think Deleuze and Guattari leave unaddressed some key questions that are begged by the affirmation of textual immanence. For example, readers must recognize certain protocols for the text to be legible, even if there is also something singular or extra-textual that reorients the reading or text anew. As Barbara Johnson puts it, “When we read a text once... we can see in it only what we have already learned to see before.” Yet the text also harbors a force of *difference*, differing with itself, thereby undoing any total reading or transcendental identity (*Critical 4*, original emphasis). “Cliché” is one term that Deleuze and Guattari use to discuss the former. They write, “artists struggle less against chaos... than against the ‘clichés’ of opinion. The painter does not paint on an empty canvas, and neither does the writer write on a blank page; but the page of canvas is already so covered with preexisting, preestablished clichés that it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision” (*What 204*). This process of clearing away is the method by which the artist “restor[es] to their predecessors the incommunicable novelty that we could not longer see.” Clearly, Deleuze and Guattari are not interested in the discursive conditions of legibility as, for example, Michel Foucault is. My concern is that their overwhelming emphasis on the “incommunicable” obscures the complex relation that inheres between novelty and its predecessors. However, two further categories must be brought into contact with the “cliché”: “opinion” (as a subjective, unifying, *lived* correspondence of affections and perceptions with an object) and “habit” (as a contraction of affects, percepts, concepts, and actions). These concepts, I believe, sufficiently complicate the binary that could be read in their opposition of cliché and art. See especially *What is Philosophy* 144–46, 174 and 213. I maintain that their rhetoric around these concepts tends to privilege the non-subjective as the locus of interest. As a consequence, some attempts to adopt concepts from Deleuze and Guattari into literary studies has left unaddressed the friction between these concepts and prominent issues around reading, interpretation, and meaning. Nonetheless, I see this friction as productive convergence rather than a reason to discount Deleuze and Guattari.

<sup>29</sup> For a relevant contrast of Deleuze and Derrida on the definition literature, see Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*, especially chapter four.



There remains one more significant problem in the Deleuzian tradition that I wish to address here, since it is a recurrent site of confrontation throughout the subsequent chapters. In my view, some followers of Deleuze and Guattari too stridently oppose the subjective and non-subjective. For these readers, affect is intrinsically non-subjective. To be sure, Deleuze and Guattari define affect as pure sensation directly impacting the body that is not "perceived" or "lived" by a subject.<sup>30</sup> Yet, as a consequence, some readers position "subjective" terms such as feeling, emotion, or affection as inherent *obstacles* to becoming rather than potential contributors.<sup>31</sup> This binary is particularly striking in Massumi's work when he claims that

...emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. 28

In Massumi's narrative, emotion is the qualitative glue that affixes us to social convention. At stake for Massumi is the conceit that affect always escapes subjectivity and therefore social inscription. Although emotion "capture[s]" affect, he insists that the latter "has always and again escaped" (*Parables* 35). I suggest we take pause at Massumi's rhetoric of the endless "capture," "escape," and "[re]confinement" of affect by subjectivity. This language establishes a sharp dichotomy between emotion and affect

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, *What is Philosophy*, 200-218.

<sup>31</sup> My point here is that subjectivity is formed out of sensation and remains in relation to it. I call for a more immanent fluctuation between these modes, in contrast to the binary I sense in Massumi's work. Similarly, I argue that psychoanalysis has been unfairly maligned for casting "the self" as an essential and static property of subjectivity. For example, the British School of Object Relations allows a more immanent, pliable, and proliferating notion of the self. See, for example, Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, especially 9-10.

and places them in a kind of Gothic plot. It returns us to a view of affect as a homogeneous, unqualified, purely disruptive force, ironically akin to the Freudian instincts. Consequently, Massumi, like Deleuze and Guattari, rarely discuss actual(ized) affects such as enjoyment, interest, or rage. To do so would, in Massumi's view, sap the radical challenge the affect poses to subjective conditioning. He therefore forsakes a rigorous consideration of how affects signify as critical or uncritical in specific social contexts, and he similarly obscures how aesthetic affect might be antagonistically or subversively oriented to these contexts. Finally, Massumi's binaries of subject/non-subject and affect/emotion are mapped onto the binary of affect/signification. By placing affect outside of language, he prevents us from considering how affect yearns to be spoken. In the writers I analyze, affect struggles toward articulation and puts pressure on the orders of grammar and syntax—not to destroy them but to find new ways of being written and rewritten. Once articulated, affect subsequently feeds forward into the perception and conception of bodies and social circumstances. Therefore, I strive to articulate a more non-dualistic relationship between affect and signification, one that allows for a fluid relationship between words, feelings, bodies, and social inscription.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than the final emancipation from subjectivity, then, I analyze how affect opens new paths toward relationality—with language, other bodies, and with the social world more broadly. For me, the ultimate critical value of “affect” as a concept is that it foregrounds how bodies and subjects are inherently relational, open to others by virtue of our affective permeability.<sup>33</sup> Whereas many Deleuzian critics describe affect as force, I

<sup>32</sup> Sedgwick articulates a similar desire in *Touching Feeling*.

<sup>33</sup> I am strongly influenced here by Antonio Damasio. Damasio sees feelings as built out of emotions and emotions built out of appetites and drives—the system is aggregating, evolutionary, and nested. He provisionally distinguishes emotions (body) and feelings (mind). But following Spinoza, he links the two as parallel interpretations of the same substance. They are intimately entwined. He links emotions to evolutionary circumstances—they orient bodies toward positive and negative outcomes and are thus fundamentally oriented toward the social. Moreover, he shows how this social orientation of affect influences decision-making and ethics. (He notes that this

alternately characterize affect as a relation; indeed, throughout this project, I often use the phrase *affective relation*.<sup>34</sup> For me, this phrase helps to highlight that social relations are constituted in and through affective terms, and crucially, that affect itself is a fundamentally relational force.<sup>35</sup> After all, as Antonio Damasio has shown, affect enables bodies—even simple organisms—to “respond effectively but not creatively to a number of circumstances conducive or threatening to life” (80). And as he insists, “There is growing evidence that feelings, along with the appetites [drives] and emotions that most often cause them, play a decisive role in social behavior” (140).<sup>36</sup> My purpose is not to elaborate this decisive role between affect and social behavior. Rather, it is to track how other writers exploit the conceit that affects and emotions have complex, non-dichotomous relations with one another and how, together, these aspects of embodiment make us *responsive* to social circumstance.

Indeed, Damasio is not alone in perceiving affect as central to the body's being attuned to social relations and conventions. To explain why queer experimental writing is the apt place to analyze this conception in literature, I will now turn to the debates over affect and experimental writing. I argue for a more “queer” conception of experimental writing, and in the process, I establish that we must locate queer experimental writing in relationship to the politics of sexuality. By doing so, we will be able to see how the affects associated with bad reading intimate, in displaced terms, incipiently queer

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common to animals and humans, which is why it is important to challenge the human and subjective exclusivity of affect.) I see a strong convergence between Damasio and psychoanalysis. See, for example, Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* on body mapping. Also Damasio and Deleuze share a common interest in William James and Spinoza.

<sup>34</sup> Clearly, affective relations echoes “object relations.” But I believe the phrase helpfully stresses the emotionally mediated nature of relations—that our relations are not object oriented, per se, but that our relations to objects are sensuous and felt relations.

<sup>35</sup> On affect as relation, see Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*. I diverge from Brennan's view that affect points towards a natural, organic unity to the human body, which she describes in avowedly mystical terms, such as “the union of spirit and sensuality that was lost with the fall into a divided mind and body” (159).

<sup>36</sup> On the philosophical view of affect as action- or “capacity-” oriented, see Benedict Spinoza, *The Ethics* and Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*.

publics.

### Queering Experimental Writing

More than any other domain of criticism, feminist theory has been acutely attentive to experimental writing as a mode for “expressing” affects of the sexed body. French Feminists, such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig, famously elaborated (and debated) the concept of *écriture féminine* to signify how, in Nancy K. Miller’s words, “the female *body*, with its peculiar drives and rhythms, inscribes itself as text” (“Plots” 341, original emphasis). As Miller’s word “peculiar” suggests, as well as the term itself, *écriture féminine* sought to define the sexed specificity of women’s writing—how, precisely, women’s writing inscribes sexual difference, how it expresses the female body, and, crucially, how it challenges patriarchal and “phallogocentric” definitions of rational sense. As French Feminism was challenged by other post-structural traditions, especially queer theory, the concept of *écriture féminine* came under increasing scrutiny for its essentialism—the presumption of a biological ground common to all “women,” regardless of social or historical specificity. It has also been critiqued, as Miller notes, for “privileg[ing] a textuality of the avant-garde.”<sup>37</sup> My project undoubtedly follows in these critiques. I wish to expand the range of affective bodies that experimental writing expresses to include queer ones, and I will insist that, in the postwar period, experimental writing cannot be equated to the avant-garde. However, I believe that queer theory has too frequently drawn on the insights of feminist theory without acknowledging its debts.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, I want to acknowledge that my project is heavily indebted to French Feminism, precisely because these critics broke philosophical and literary ground by linking textuality, affect, and embodiment. Not only

<sup>37</sup> On the skepticism toward *écriture féminine* as utopian, see DeKoven, “*Jouissance*, Cyborgs, and Companion Species.”

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which does not engage the wealth of feminist scholarship on issues of reproduction and futurity as ideology.

has this body of thought been inspiring for critics like me, it has been a source of interest (no matter how ambivalent) for queer writers such as Winterson, Acker, and Sedgwick. This is why I seek to resuscitate experimental writing as a literary archive—it has been a place for these writers to actively engage philosophies of embodiment and affect and to challenge conceptual models that deny the body's volatility.

Since experimental writing has been read as the paradigmatic genre of *écriture féminine*, allow me to qualify how my project reframes experimental writing for queer critique. First, I do not presume that the affects “expressed” by experimental writing are necessarily or inherently anti-patriarchal. For Kristeva, the “semiotic” temporarily liberates the sensuous, pre-Oedipal, maternal body from its insertion into the Oedipally organized symbolic order.<sup>39</sup> While Burroughs' fiction, for example could be said to liberate pre-Oedipal affects, his fictions (and these affects) are avowedly patriarchal; he constructs a homo-erotic eros unbound from sexual difference by fantasizing the utter destruction of the feminine and the female. Second, I break the link between experimentalism and the avant-garde. Whereas Burroughs and Acker could be said to fit the model of the avant-garde, others, such as Delany, Winterson, and Sedgwick do not. To my mind, the avant-garde should not be conflated with a *style* but reserved for signifying a community of writers and artists in a specific historical circumstance. Although many of the writers I study are speaking to one another, they do not constitute an avant-garde in this sense. (Indeed, Acker expresses distress at the commodification of the avant-garde and the erosion of the New York art community). I also believe we should avoid equating experimental writing with a common set of stylistic moves. This definition of experimental writing has resulted in a far too trans-historical and formalist notion of experimental aesthetics.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, I use the term “experimental writing” as a

<sup>39</sup> For a helpful explication of Kristeva, see Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*.

<sup>40</sup> Despite its critical significance in drawing attention to experimental writing, this problem is apparent in Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the*

heuristic to link writers that see themselves as experimenting with linguistic, narrative, and readerly protocols. Thus, these writers are not connected by a common aesthetic form. Rather, they share a common *conception* of form—namely, the belief that experimental deformations of prose can expose reading as both a social construction and a corporeal discipline. The obstructions to sense-making in these texts defamiliarize the context-based and historically specific protocols that govern interpretative coherence. And, moreover, they unleash a wide-range of affective responses through this challenge to “sense.” Indeed, I argue that the desire to produce an 'affective effect' on readers is a central part of why these writers turn to experimental aesthetics in the first place. Yet these “turns” to the experimental only become meaningful when we place them against the historical and social norms that legislate acceptable representations of sexuality, desire, feeling, and embodiment.

For my purposes, this contextual-based approach to experimental writing provides a more robust and complex understanding of how experimental aesthetics strategically elude and challenge the protocols of good reading. Thus, I share Marianne DeKoven's view that experimental writing “prevents us from interpreting the writing to form coherent, single, whole, closed, ordered, finite, sensible meanings” (*Different* 5). Yet, while many experimental writers equate this textual style with political “anarchism,” I strive to qualify how their disruptions of coherence politically differ from one another in divergent contexts (16). Not only does this move pluralize our sense of experimentalism's styles, I believe it does justice to the way that experimental writing continues to be a mode that writers turn to in political circumstances where the representation of embodied desire is particularly restricted. If I am circumspect about the political effects of

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*Sequence: Women's Experimental Writing*. For an example of the formalist correlation of style and transgression, see Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax* where he claims “Desire is a threat to the form of realistic fiction. Desire can subvert the social order; it can also disrupt the novelistic order” (66).

experimental writing, however, I do not share Leo Bersani's tendency to read "inhibited reading" as writers' surrendering the cultural authority of art itself.<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, many of the writers surveyed in this dissertation articulate earnest, even utopian, claims about the social relevance and subjective significance of the aesthetic. Therefore, I tend to read their inhibitions of reading as a challenge to specific protocols that define good art, good reading, and good belonging. At stake in my archive of experimental writing, then, is the displacement of the view of experimental aesthetics as radically, inherently "transgressive" in favor of an hermeneutic that can read how these texts articulate new kinds of relations, even when they seem to be retreating from the legibly social world.

Queer experimental writing's construction of social forms only becomes apparent when we historicize its forms of bad reading alongside postwar debates about the representation of non-normative desire. This critical labor allows us to see how the affective dynamics of bad reading signify forms of queer social belonging. Indeed, this is why I argue that the analysis of affective terms for queer reading must be expanded beyond paranoid suspicion and reparative empathy. After all, while all the writers I study share the broad commitment to queer belonging, the affects they stimulate to achieve it are vastly different—Burroughs titillates and horrifies; Delany struggles to express fear and anxiety; Acker combines rage and frustration; and Winterson and Sedgwick make critically sentimental appeals to love. My dissertation locates these affects against dominant discourses of power, which appropriate affective terms and use them to endorse normative forms of social belonging. To do so, each chapter considers a unique obstacle to representing queer intimacies in the postwar period. These obstacles include the obscenity laws governing literary representations of sexuality in pre-Stonewall America; the struggle to narrate the AIDS crisis in the midst of pervasive homophobic rhetoric and

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<sup>41</sup> For a contemporary approach to this issue in affect theory, see Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, especially "Afterword: On Disgust." For Bersani's extended critique of art's cultural authority, see *The Culture of Redemption*.

the absence of certain knowledge about viral transmission; the difficulty of affirming desire, privacy, or intimacy in the context of neoliberal consumerism; and, most recently, the questionable relevance of queer critique in the post-AIDS era. These are formidable obstacles, to be sure. Why, then, would writers turn to experimental writing to grapple with them? After all, many critics have claimed that experimental writing is anti-social precisely because it does not appear to grapple with these political issues in explicitly representational ways. Its flights of fantasy read as a debased solipsism, or an individualist retreat into the personal. Yet critics have ignored how readerly affect takes on the burden of negotiating these political constrictions of queer culture.

To establish this complex displacement of affect into reader relations, the dissertation begins with the last literary obscenity trial in the United States, which focused on William Burroughs' experimental novel *Naked Lunch*. The legal debate over Burroughs' fiction shows how experimental writing and queer representation intersect in the challenge they pose to readers' affect. My first chapter argues that Burroughs' experimental writing creates an intersubjective narrative space that actively implicates the reader in its sexual hallucinations—an “uncritical” form that has had a potent influence on later experimental writers. This form breaks from Burroughs' earlier autobiographical texts, such as *Queer* (1953), which contained fantasy within demarcated interludes. I demonstrate that Burroughs' new form derives from his desire to “queer” his readers by immersing them in perverse affects and desires. I argue that this form points towards a conception of “queer critique” based in the manifestation of bodily affects, and I conclude that the form itself takes on the burden of imagining queer forms of social belonging in a moment when they cannot be directly represented.

Whereas the first chapter expands the meaning of queer critique via affect, the second chapter strives to displace the priority of academic definitions of queer reading.



To do so, I examine Samuel Delany's self-declared turn to experimental writing in his AIDS-era novel *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1984) and his post-AIDS novel *The Mad Man* (1994). I argue that experimental writing provides Delany a “para-academic” idiom to elaborate hermeneutic strategies that are not valued within the academy precisely because of their investment in affect and the erotic. The first novel blends fantasy, memoir, metafiction, and a complex intertextual analysis of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* and Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. Through this disjointed form, Delany reflects on the fearful, anxious experience of writing about AIDS in a historical moment that lacks certain knowledge about its transmission. In *The Mad Man*, Delany returns to the topic of AIDS to redress his earlier injunction that, under these epistemic conditions, queer readers should choose to remain abstinent. Thus, *The Mad Man* creates a form that Delany calls “pornotopic fantasy”—a hybrid of erotica and the academic novel—to reread the abject, homeless, homosexual male body as a site of pleasure, intimacy, and relational knowledge. I argue that this usage of affect functions as a critical revision of Delany's earlier work, and more fundamentally, demonstrates how experimental writing enables Delany to reflect on the historical specificity of queer affect.

Even in his most anxious and bleak representations, Delany always returns to an vision of queer “heterotopia,” where a plurality of bodies and pleasures can be explored and affirmed. By contrast, Delany's friend and interlocutor, Kathy Acker, utilizes experimental writing to foreground the repressive sexual culture of the late eighties and, in particular, the sense of restricted collectivity in a post-feminist and post-industrial age. Earlier in her career, Acker championed a “deconstructive” literary form that rewrote canonical literature to expose its patriarchal and heteronormative bias. By 1988, however, Acker fears that this form cannot encourage readers to imagine new social

forms. To this end, Acker creates an aesthetic called “the language of the body” that frustrates rational sense and foregrounds the physical sensations of the body. Although overlooked by most critics, I argue that this shift reveals the complex role affect plays in Acker’s conception of reading as a queer form of social imagination. Through an analysis of her experimental novel *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) and her critical essays in *Bodies of Work* (1997), I show how Acker draws readers into surreal fantasies that initially promise an escape from patriarchal hetero-normativity. Yet these narratives obsessively stage the failure of escape through the intrusion of rape and patriarchal sadism. I argue that Acker thus redefines reading as an experience of visceral frustration, and that she reclaims frustration as an affect of desire. Indeed, she proudly declares her novels to be “unreadable” and expresses surprise that anyone would finish them. I take this claim literally, arguing that Acker’s experimental form seeks to performatively frustrate the reader’s desires for queer forms of pleasure and belonging. By frustrating these desires, Acker’s fiction amplifies, rather than attenuates, the imagination of a social order in which such desires can be fulfilled. In a historical moment of diminished hopes, Acker’s experimental fiction suggests that negative affects can spur readers to desire and imagine otherwise. In particular, she suggests that these affects can relink that aesthetic with forms of value that have been obscured by the postmodern commodification of art.

Contemporary queer experimental writing diverges from Acker’s reclamation of negative affects. In my fourth and fifth chapters, I argue that contemporary experimental writers seek to overcome the impasses of restricted collectivity through the discourses of positive affect, particularly love. Love has been overlooked in queer theory in favor of negative affects—such as melancholy, trauma, and paranoia—which seem more socially critical. Yet I argue that, for some contemporary writers, positive affect contributes to the manifestation of queer forms of relationality. To do so, I turn in chapter four to

Sedgwick's experimental memoir, *A Dialogue on Love* (1999). Through its combination of narrative, fantasy, therapy notes, and haiku, the memoir models "permeable" intersubjectivity between Sedgwick and her therapist, Shannon Van Wey. Their exchange leads Sedgwick to reappraise how positive affect can contribute to subjective agency and social imagination. Thus, I argue that the memoir illuminates the ethical values that inspire Sedgwick's late-career shift away from "paranoid reading" to "reparative reading," and I suggest that these ethical values redefine queerness itself as a practice of relational care. In the fifth chapter, I demonstrate that reparative ethics are not restricted to queer theory by turning to Jeanette Winterson's experimental novels, particularly *Art and Lies* (1994) and *The Stone Gods* (2008). Despite her reputation for uncritical sentimentality, Winterson's definition of reading as a "love relation" underlies her commitment to an impersonal form of erotic intersubjectivity. I demonstrate how Winterson's fiction links this love relation to the reparation of social traumas. Yet unlike Sedgwick, Winterson grapples directly with the discursive appropriation of positive affects by dominant systems of power, such as consumer capitalism. Therefore, I argue that her fiction provides a robust consideration of how experimental fiction can begin to reclaim and redefine positive affect for queer critique. Taken together, Sedgwick and Winterson reveal that experimental writing continues to be an indispensable genre for reconfiguring the relationship between reading, literary critique, and queer social imagination.

Finally, in a brief epilogue, I reflect on the popular trope of narrating a "turn" to affect. This trope is key to the writers I study, but it has also recently become a central narrative in cultural studies and critical theory. I juxtapose two queer "turns" to affect, one mainstream and the other experimental, to illuminate the limits of framing affect as a subjective "turning." I conclude that the affirmation of affect as a "turn" must be

complexly located against the divergent restrictions on sexuality and aesthetics in postmodern culture.

As should be clear from this survey of the chapters, one consistent focal point for my analysis of “bad reading” is fantasy. Indeed, all of these writers draw on fantasy to represent embodied desire and feeling. I want to stress that I read fantasy as a narrative idiom through which these texts “express another possible community,” to borrow Deleuze's and Guattari's phrase (*Kafka* 17). As they argue in their analysis of Franz Kafka, a “minor literature” is often “affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization,” and this quality of in-distinction—a challenge to more realistically grounded fiction—“marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible—the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise” (16). In my view, fantasy is a mode through which queer experimental writing internalizes and reflects on its own social impossibility—on the kinds of desires that cannot be represented in its historical moment, and on the kinds of representations that cannot be desired in its historical moment. By reading fantasy as a site of narrative agency, I am clearly breaking with the predominantly Lacanian approach to fantasy in queer criticism. For critics such as Lee Edelman, fantasy sutures subjects into a seamless, narcissistic Imaginary; it solders their desire onto normative objects and thereby interpellates their psyche into the social order.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Edelman consistently denounces fantasy because he sees it as “the central prop and underlying agency of [heteronormative, reproductive] futurity” (33-34). Yet I argue, by contrast, that fantasy can provide writers a symbolic idiom to challenge, rewrite, and reimagine heteronormative structures. In short, I argue

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<sup>42</sup> See also Slajov Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. Despite her provocative approach to fantasy in *The Practice of Love*, de Lauretis follows the Lacanian subordination of the imaginary in favor of the drives in her more recent definition of queer writing. See de Lauretis “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future.”

that fantasy can be a mode of agency. To be sure, the writers I study agree with psychoanalysis that fantasy—and its literary representation—is not a free space for imagining desires liberated from censure or law. Yet they represent fantasy to performatively re-imagine the dominant organization of social convention. Thus, I argue that their fantasies, and their accompanying narratives about the bad reading of fantasy, express relations otherwise unrepresentable in their present.

Although my project obviously has a historical trajectory—moving from the pre-Stonewall period to the present—my analysis of ineffable representations of queer belonging requires a pliable historical methodology. I do not assume a progressive movement from Burroughs to Winterson; I do not assume, moreover, that the constrictions on sexual representation or belonging in the pre-Stonewall period are inherently more repressive than those in the present. My purpose is to trace flashpoints around affect and reading and to locate these conflicts alongside the transformations of sexuality in the postwar period. Therefore, my methodology strives to follow Foucault's famous point that

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. *History* 27

In my work, bad reading is a way of attending to the distribution of the feelings and desires marked as uncritical, and fantasy is an idiom for expressing these desires without quite expressing them (or without being read as expressing them). Taken together, these two concepts signal to my contribution to contemporary queer historiography, which seeks to recover affect as a central lineament of historical experience.<sup>43</sup> From one

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Cvetcovich, *An Archive*

perspective, the texts I study fail to be significantly concerned with the political or social imaginary. As one of the critics in Delany's *Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* claims, these texts could be denounced for failing to properly “allegorize” their historical moments and therefore failing to be a properly “political art” for queer culture (333). But from another perspective, it is this failure that signals their very participation in the project of representing queer historical experience. As another character responds, perhaps these authors are not “*trying* to allegorize a political situation. Maybe [they are] trying to allegorize a feeling, a feeling probably everybody has had about it [in this case, the historical situation of AIDS] at one time or another, no matter what side they finally chose—politically, that is” (original emphasis). Here feeling is a collective structure, one complexly, if indirectly, related to the political. As I argued earlier, this mediating distance inevitably marks bad reading. But that distance can also be the way that bad reading threads new relationships between desire and the social world. Therefore, I want to underscore that bad reading and fantasy will often appear to be anti-political, precisely because of their common commitment to narrating intangible, ineffable, equivocal feelings. But I believe texts engaged in bad reading cannot arrest the dialectic between fantasy and reality, imagination and actuality, desire, and history. To do so would falsely salve the wound that lies between what exists, what could exist, and what is not yet allowed to exist, let alone be desired. The very oscillation between these terms—or, more specifically, the written performance of that oscillation—expresses a fidelity to a becoming that they hope to engender in readers.

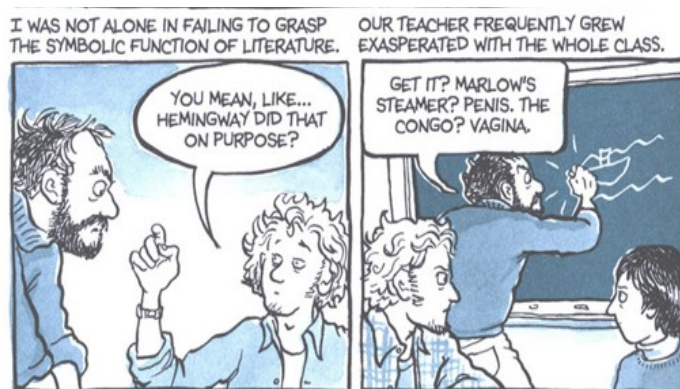
### **Bad Reading and the Incipently Social**

I began this introduction with an exemplary bad reader who attends school and meets shame for his readerly attachments. It seems appropriate, then, to close this introduction with another reader, one who also attends university but, unlike Victor

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*of Feelings*, and Love, *Feeling Backwards*.

Frankenstein, finds newly queer attachments which are intimated through the affective encounters of bad reading. In Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006), Alison attends literature courses that permit the analysis of sexuality in canonical works such as *Heart of Darkness*. Yet the critics insist that a good reading is a Freudian reading, modeled on psychoanalytic interpretations of symbols.



Of course, this interpretative method restricts reading to one (heteronormative) model of sexuality and embodiment. But more importantly, Alison finds it boring—good reading, in this context, is reading for correspondence, in which only one fixed level of reference is acknowledged. Regarding her professor's similar approach to Joyce, Alison wonders, “Once you grasped that *Ulysses* was based on the *Odyssey*, was it really necessary to enumerate every last point of correspondence?” (206). Reading for correspondence obstructs reading for new connections. It leaves little room for students to practice interpretation as a creative, speculative, and even irreverent activity. Therefore, Alison becomes an increasingly bad reader. She procrastinates her reading of *Ulysses* and begins to troll the library in a search for texts on homosexuality, lesbianism, and feminism. When asked by her father whether she is reading anything “good,” she demurs (76). Retrospectively, Bechdel notes that “If only I'd had the foresight to call this an independent reading. 'Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality' would have had quite a legitimate ring” (205). Here *Fun Home* reveals the truly

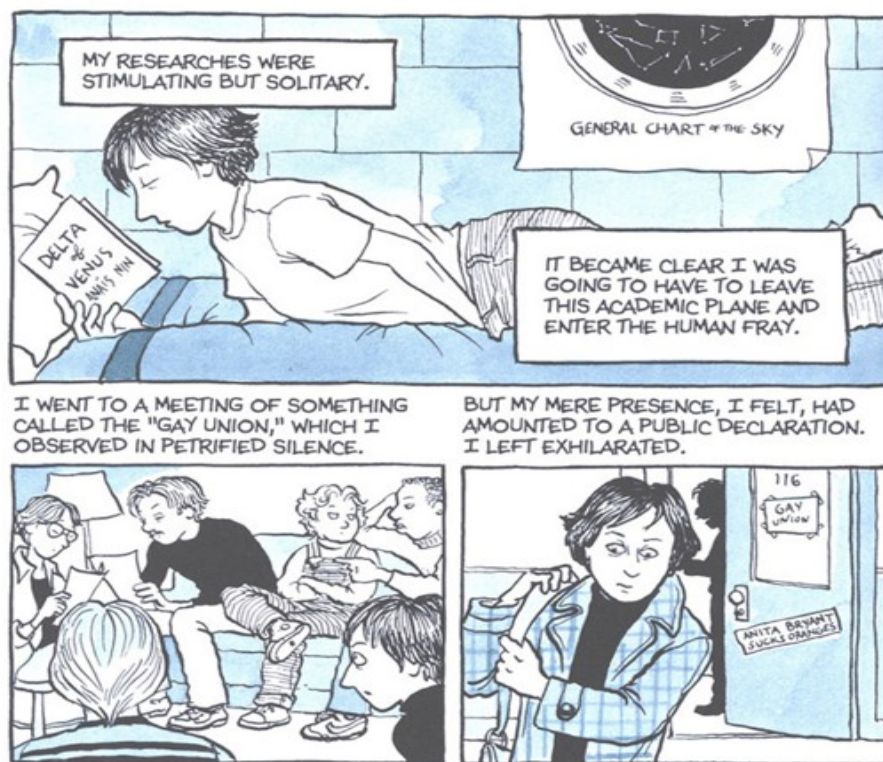
provisional and historical nature of the distinction between good and bad reading. Now, these books might count as “good reading,” especially in an academic context of gender and sexuality studies. But at the time, these texts are shameful and must be hidden away, secreted from the library.



Through the encounter with bad reading, *Fun Home* re-stages the coming out narrative as a literacy narrative. Indeed, Alison notes “My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind” (74). Here the acquisition of a sexual identity and even a sexual practice derives from an encounter with reading. Thus, *Fun Home* immediately undermines the distinction between a realization made through flesh and one made through the mind. Bechdel depicts a number of images of herself masturbating while reading, suggesting that the textual and sexual not merely entwined through discourse but also through actual pleasure. The reading is itself an affective relation—to the text, to the self, to the body, to a collective past, to a potential future. Yet Alison qualifies her masturbation-while-reading by euphemistically stating “My researches were stimulating but solitary. It became clear I was going to have to leave the academic plane and enter the human fray.” Here the academic has been reframed as an erotic and affective but incipiently social. This is why, in the very next image, we see Alison



attending the “Gay Union.” Even though she sits in “petrified silence,” Alison has found the courage to seek out a community where the intimations of queer belonging could be made real. Crucially, this queer public is intimated through the very affects of bad reading.



Part of the tragedy of *Fun Home* is that Alison's father, Bruce, cannot enact this creative, erotic bad reading. Indeed, Alison wonders, "How could he admire Joyce's lengthy, libidinal 'Yes' so fervently and end up saying 'No' to his own life" (228). The answer lies, at least in part, in the absence of a social world that would say “Yes” back to Bruce's yes, that would provide a double affirmation of his queer desires and therefore give him opportunities to experiment with alternative forms of belonging with others and himself. *Fun Home* therefore underscores that bad reading is always an historical affair. Alison's erotics of reading leads her directly toward the social world, because she has a culture available to her, a set of material relations, enabled by second-wave feminism and

the university, to support her desires. Bruce does not, and this is why it's so significant that, when Alison gets him to read Kate Millet, he does, in fact, experience an affective jolt. "I'm flying high on Kate Millet," he writes. And he admits, "I really prefer Millett's philosophy to the one I'm slave to. But I try to keep one foot in the door. Actually I am in limbo. I... oh hell, I don't know what I mean" (224). From Alison's perspective, it is Bruce's sense of himself as a slave to texts that prevents him from reading himself otherwise. One of her dark jokes is that Bruce misreads Camus' famous claim that "suicide is a solution to the absurd" (47). In her mind, he takes this phrase far too literally. And, she notes, "If he'd read carefully, he would have gotten to Camus' conclusion that suicide is illogical. But I suspect my father of being a haphazard scholar."

Perhaps the problem is not that Bruce is a bad reader. Perhaps he cannot read badly enough—he must be *more haphazard*, more willing to detach from what seems like fixed truths. After all, Alison's vision of the scholar is one that entails a radically and ecstatically perverse reading of culture. It a method of appropriation, such as when she narrates her literary, sexual, and political awakening in terms of *The Odyssey* and affirms her being productively caught up in the siren call of books (207). In Alison's hands, the queer scholar reads herself into a new network of queer belonging, and once she is affectively attached to this world, reading badly becomes an addictive and proliferating practice. Normative culture, re-read by the bad reader, subsequently becomes sexual, embodied, and affective in surprising ways. When Alison begins an affair with a fellow student, for example, it is

strewn with books, however, in what was for me a novel fusion of word and deed. I lost my bearings. The dictionary had become erotic. Some of our favorite childhood stories were revealed as propaganda, others as pornography. In the harsh light of my dawning feminism, everything looked different. 80

If even the dictionary can be embodied, erotically invested and culturally located, then definition itself can become self-definition and seduction. Indeed, a reader has the opportunity, however partial, to reread herself and the social world in surprisingly queer ways. She can potentially unmoor heteronormative self-definitions and configure a non-normative subjectivity and set of relations. *Fun Home* undoubtedly reveals the historical conditions that bridge—and fail to bridge—feelings and queer possibilities for belonging. Yet it nonetheless underscores that bad reading is a central focal point in the queer literary imagination. It can activate readings of the past and the future that are not yet sanctioned by culture; and it can make desirable possibilities that seem to exist as mere flickerings of feeling.

If Bechdel's satire on literary criticism seems outdated, I nonetheless believe it frames the significance of this dissertation and of my approach to the intersection of affect and interpretation. Following Bechdel, we must remain vigilant to the ways that good reading immanently disavows certain forms of embodiment and knowledge, and we must admit that affect is fundamental part of reader relations that has been a visceral and symbolic resource for queer desiring. I have tried to suggest that queer experimental writings provide provocative ways to accomplish these two goals, pointing us toward a more capacious relationship between feeling and reading. These literary experiments provide ways for us to rethink the relationship between reading, affect, and social belonging. They encourage us to admit that we are always reading with feeling and feeling with reading. And ultimately, they permit us to find new ways to put those feelings to work in the process of imagining new forms of belonging.

If the works I study are “experimental,” then they are therefore experiments in the most rigorous sense of the word—tests to see what might be possible; tests whose very purpose is to redefine the meaning of the known and unknown; tests based on gut

feelings, with hypotheses rooted in vague sensations of the possible. A bad reader might, on the basis of such a definition, be tempted to call all such experiments queer. In the following pages, I will explore the curious results that can be felt through such irreverent ways of reading.

## Chapter 1:

### Naked Lust:

#### William Burroughs's Spectral Form and Queer Critique Before Stonewall

*“Lest anyone take this seriously, of course, obviously it [Naked Lunch] is fantasy.”*

-- Massachusetts State Supreme Court

*“There is nothing can stop the power of a real dream. I mean this literally.”*

-- William Burroughs, Letter to Allen Ginsberg

The last literary obscenity trial in the United States focused on the conjunction of sexuality and fantasy in William S. Burroughs' experimental novel, *Naked Lunch* (1959). The decision, rendered by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, hinged on whether or not the novel possessed “social value” despite the Court's consensus opinion that the novel “appeals to a prurient interest in sex” and “affronts contemporary community standards” (x). The *Naked Lunch* trial was a testing ground for an historically new definition of obscenity, which separated the social value of literature from its manifestly offensive representations. In 1957, the US Supreme Court determined that “sex and obscenity are not synonymous,” and in 1966, the Court went further, declaring that even “prurient appeal or patent offensiveness” cannot justify censorship (qtd. D’Emilio and Freedman 287). Indeed, as Justice Brennan argued, “A book cannot be proscribed unless it is found to be *utterly* without redeeming social value” (original emphasis). Given this shifting interpretative ground, Burroughs' lawyers sought to defend *Naked Lunch*'s “social value” by proving its literary merit. Drawing on star testimony from Allen Ginsberg and Norman Mailer, the defense placed Burroughs' fiction within a prestigious literary pantheon stretching from St. Augustine to James Joyce. Edward de Grazia concluded his defense with quotations from Sigmund Freud and John Dewey defending the artist's imaginative labor as a necessary contribution to “civilization's knowledge and learning.” Yet literary bona fides, aesthetic rigor, and authorial imagination did not convince the

Court. On the contrary. It was their own framing of *Naked Lunch* as the uncontrolled “hallucinations of a drug addict” that ultimately led the judges to accept the opinion of a “substantial and intelligent group in the community [that] believes the book to be of some literary significance” (x).

Why did the Court need to interpret *Naked Lunch*’s social value through hallucination rather than imagination? The answer, I argue, illuminates the contradictions around the representation of queer desire in postwar America. As the explicit representation of sexuality, including homosexuality, became more socially acceptable, the prohibitions around inhabiting a queer subject-position became more strident.<sup>1</sup> By perceiving Burroughs as a submissive witness to his “subconscious going through all the various trials and ordeals of addiction,” the Court avoids confronting a text written by a homosexual for social critique and social desiring (xvi, emphasis added). Indeed, the difference between imagination and hallucination is that the former implies subjective agency and active desire whereas the latter suggests passivity. This is precisely why the Court posed so many questions about the presence of political allegory in *Naked Lunch*’s narrative. The judges are disturbed, for example, when de Grazia suggests that *Naked Lunch* is “projecting a kind of futuristic [political] party” inspired by “groups today, social groups that are involved in political struggles in the United States” (xxvii). Consequently, the Court demands clarification:

Do you think he [Burroughs] is seriously suggesting that some time in the future that a political party will be in some way concerned with sex?... When I say, ‘Concerned with sex,’ I don’t mean in an attempt to reform perversion. I am not talking about any crusade to make the world a better world in which to live, as you and I understand it today; but I am suggesting that from your answer, what he is trying to portray here, is that some time in the future there

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<sup>1</sup> On this development, see “Redrawing the Boundaries” in John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*.

will be a political party, for instance, made up of homosexuals. xxviii

This series of questions underscores the contradictions that inhere in the representation of homosexuality in pre-Stonewall America, prior to the emergence of a gay liberation movement that would make such a political groups a social reality. On the one hand, homosexuals are legible and representable as a social group. On the other hand, their representation is conditioned by pathology (“perversion”). A “political party” of homosexuals thus presents the Court with a contradiction in terms. If homosexuals are perverts, how could they possibly represent the body politic? How could they “better” the nation if they are the cause of its social maladies? If *Naked Lunch*, as an allegory, was endorsing political agency for gays, then the novel would be truly obscene—beyond any acceptable criteria of social “value.” However, the Court’s renders this interpretative possibility moot when the judges conclude that “there is absolutely no connection with any political party in the United States as you and I understand” (xxvi). In fact, the Court asserts—in an aside that reads as an instruction and a threat—“Lest anyone take this seriously, of course, obviously it [*Naked Lunch*] is a fantasy.” Here, the Court rewrites the text’s threatening social fantasies as mere subjective delusions, circumventing the possibility that they are, in fact, consuming a purposeful political critique written by a homosexual.

Given this context, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the role of fantasy in Burroughs’ experimental writing.<sup>2</sup> All of Burroughs’ experimental writing after his long unpublished novel *Queer* (1985) is stylistically designed to destabilize the relationship between dream and reality.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Burroughs’ final “novel,” *My Education: A Book of Dreams* (1995), is composed from his dream

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<sup>2</sup> The standard approach has been psychoanalytic. See, for example, the essays collected in *Burroughs at the Front* and Harris’ *The Secret of Fascination*. Murphy’s *Wising up the Marks* comes closer to my approach, but he locates the use of social fantasy later in Burroughs’ career. See note 32 below.

<sup>3</sup> Although unpublished until 1985, *Queer* is composed in 1953, between *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*.

journals, and it continues his formal strategy of rendering undecidable the lines between the real, imagined, dreamed, hallucinated, and fantasized. Understandably, most of the critical analysis of Burroughs' form has focused on his innovative "cut-up fold-in" method of composition—the process (inspired by Brion Gysin's painting) of cutting and splicing together blocks of narrative and text. Although Burroughs' use of the cut-up method diminishes after his sixties texts, he never abandons the fantastical narrative mode that the cut-up produces. Many generic labels have been attached to Burroughs' style—fantastic, modernist, and postmodernist, among many others.<sup>4</sup>

While each of these genres incorporate narrative undecidability, they do not foreground the queer context that underlines Burroughs' experimental form. This is why I call Burroughs' style a *spectral form*. This term captures the specifically queer meanings that adhere to dreamlike fantasy in Burroughs' fiction. As I will demonstrate, Burroughs' fiction targets postwar discourses that align homosexuality with the spectral terms of haunting, possession, and exorcism. Burroughs' form critically subverts and redirects these discourses, severing their homophobic correlation of homosexuality with a ghostly possession of the heteronormative self and society. In this respect, Burroughs' spectral form is strategically designed to circumvent homophobic discourses. While many critics have identified Burroughs' fiction as 'transgressive,' few have appreciated this specific relationship between experimental form and queer subversion. After all, Burroughs' form leads the Court to sanction his text precisely because they can dismiss its threats as mere dreams. When read against the postwar constrictions around the representation of homosexuality, then, Burroughs' spectral form coheres into a purposeful confusion of fantasy and

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<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, one formal influence on Burroughs' spectral form is the fantastic, which is similarly predicated on a "hesitation" between fantasy and reality. This definition of the fantastic derives from Tzvetan Todorov's definitive study, *The Fantastic*. For a relevant discussion of the socially subversive tendencies of the fantastic genre, see Rosemary Jackson. A significant generic and historical influence is postmodernism, which has a complex and robust relationship to the fantastic. See McHale and Jameson, *Postmodernism*.



reality to enable the representation of queer desires.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the recent scholarly interest in the “politics” of haunting, few critics have considered these long-standing cultural associations of homosexuality with ghosts, possession, and exorcism.<sup>6</sup> Haunting is, undoubtedly, a “constituent feature of contemporary modern life,” as Avery Gordon argues (206). Yet the social meanings of ghosts—their condensations of loss; their ability to represent the return of the repressed—is fundamentally reshaped by their local contexts within modernity. One reason that the discourse of “visibility” has been so significant to gay liberation, AIDS activism, and gay liberalism (“homo-normativity”), despite their vast political differences, is because queer populations have been recurrently rendered spectral within the postwar period. By spectral, I mean the paradoxical way that LGBTQ populations are depicted as utterly pervasive yet totally invisible; horrifying in their deathly lives and living death; dis-joined from linear historical time; predatory and vampiric while also ineffectual, melancholic, and lonely.<sup>7</sup> Because LGBTQ populations have been rendered ghostly within their own historical present, I contend that we cannot approach queer representations of ghosts through the retrospective methodologies that critics tend to advocate. For example, Gordon instructs critics to listen to “all [the ghost’s] forceful if perplexing enunciations [as if they] are for you.”

<sup>5</sup> For an insightful explication of homosexuality in Burroughs' fiction, see Jamie Russell, *Queer Burroughs*. I disagree with Russell's conclusion that Burroughs' work does not have relevance to contemporary queer theory. At the same time, Russell's insight into Burroughs' construction of sexual difference helpfully expands and complicates the narrative about his misogyny. Russell makes clear how profoundly misogyny and essentialism fit into Burroughs' cosmology of masculinity and sexuality, and he convincingly demonstrates how these ideologies attempt to combat the predominant homophobic narratives about gay effeminacy in postwar America.

<sup>6</sup> The most relevant critical approaches to social haunting for this discussion include Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, Avery Gordon, the essays collected in Eng and Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, and especially Carla Freccero's chapter “Queer Spectrality” in *Queer / Early Modern* (69-105). I position “queer spectrality” as a cultural practice deployed by writers in their present rather than, as Freccero does, a retrospective historical methodology.

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between heteronormativity, homophobia, and emotion, see “Queer Feelings” in Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

By contrast, I argue that postwar queer writing requires an interpretative method that recovers the critical possibilities enabled by spectral representations within their own historical moment. The ghosts represented in queer fiction are undoubtedly imprinted by the homophobic discourses of spectrality. However, these figurations also offer critical possibilities for their writers and their publics that are decidedly *not* “for” us. This is particularly true in our historical present, when queer intimacy has become hyper-visible and, as such, newly burdened with social meanings pertaining to the vitality of nationalism, modernity, and romance that are utterly foreign to pre-Stonewall America.

Therefore, this chapter turns to Burroughs' pre-Stonewall experimental writing to identify a correlation between spectral form and queer critique that has been obscured by a more general approach to haunting. To do so, I draw on Jacques Derrida's foundational theorization of “spectrality.” Whereas other discussions of the spectral (such as Gordon's) privilege narrative figures of ghosts, Derrida captures the tension between spectrality and form. As Derrida writes, “The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements; one feels looked at by what one cannot see” (*Specters* 169-70). Derrida's definition of the specter aptly describes the discursive effect of Burroughs' form on the reader—one cannot decide what is dream or fantasy, one cannot “fix any form.” Yet this disorientation makes readers feel as if the prose is possessing, inhabiting, even haunting us. This feeling is not incidental. Rather, it is central to Burroughs' inversion of the discourses of homosexual haunting, his attempt to turn these discourses against the normative reader. But more importantly, this haunting is produced through the text's experimental language—the transposition of spectrality from the queer subject to language as such. Thus, my focus on spectrality as a form recovers the specifically

queer implications of language in Burroughs' experimental fiction.

To demonstrate this complex form of queer critique, I first trace Burroughs' shift from realistic narrative in *Queer* to spectral forms of writing in *Naked Lunch* and its sequels (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*). Surprisingly, *Queer* deploys the tropes of spectrality to represent both queer desire and homophobic narratives about gay men. The latter restrict Lee, the novel's protagonist (and semi-autobiographical representation of Burroughs), as he tries to establish a durable homosexual relationship. By localizing these tropes within the homosexual psyche, Burroughs inadvertently contributes to the the homophobic narratives he wishes to challenge. Thus, in *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs develops a spectral form that implicates the reader within the fiction's sexual and sadistic fantasies. By doing so, Burroughs' experimental writing collapses the voyeuristic and clinical distance that structures his earlier realistic and journalistic writing—a distance that contributed to the homophobic pathology of marginal communities in postwar America. I demonstrate how Burroughs' theories of reading, developed within the cut-up novels, transpose these homophobic figurations of predatory ghosts to language in general, thereby making all readers, regardless of their sexuality, susceptible to erotic seduction. This violent seduction captures the antagonism in Burroughs' reader relations—his representation of the word as a possession, a haunting, and a virus that infects. Yet I contend that his representation of reading nonetheless expresses a desire for queer community. This desire has been missed in the critical narratives focused Burroughs' individualism, solipsism, and anti-social ethos, because critics have not missed how deeply queer “community”—both political and erotic—is in a definitional crisis in this' historical moment. Tracing the fissures of this crisis through the poetics of Burroughs' spectral litanies, I conclude that Burroughs' spectral form enables him to express the desire for queer community in a discursive context where the

conjunction of sexual “perverts” and collectivity is otherwise inadmissible.

### ***Queer Ghosts and the Obscenity of Intimacy***

In *The Problem of Homosexuality* (1930), Alfred Adler invokes the negative cultural association of homosexuality and haunting. “The problem of homosexuality,” Adler writes, “hovers over society like a ghost or scarecrow. In spite of all the condemnation, the number of perverts seems to be on the increase” (qtd. in Hocquenghem 36). Homosexuality horrifies, here, because of its spectral persistence. No amount of moral condemnation or medical pathology has killed off the ghost of homosexual desire. On the contrary. Perversion is *proliferating*. Given this hysterical and homophobic rhetoric, why does Guy Hocquenghem quote this very imagery in his progressive polemic *Homosexual Desire* (1972)? Paraphrasing Adler, Hocquenghem similarly declares that “Homosexuality haunts the ‘normal world’” (36). In the four decades between these invocations of homosexuality and haunting, the discourse and lived reality of sexual politics has fundamentally shifted as a result of the sexual revolutions, second-wave feminism, the counter-culture, and gay liberation. In a rhetorical move that critics would now call “queer,” Hocquenghem re-signifies the homosexual specter as a figure of critique—the ghost of queer desire now stands as a counter-force to heteronormativity’s repressive voice of judgment.

Given the pervasiveness of homosexual haunting as a discourse in the postwar period, it is no coincidence that Burroughs’ fiction also traffics in the language of ghosts. Yet whereas Hocquenghem’s queer specter is triumphantly defiant, Burroughs’ is far more ambivalent. In this section, I analyze *Queer* to demonstrate how Burroughs’ discourse of haunting reveals the pressure of homophobic social restrictions on his early fiction. *Queer* uses spectral images to critique heteronormativity and to express queer intimacy. At the same time, the novel’s ghostly figurations perpetuate homophobic images of melancholic and predatory queerness.

By analyzing these ghostly figurations, we can locate the impetus behind Burroughs' subsequent formal innovation in *Naked Lunch* and its sequels—to make literary form itself spectral. By the completion of *Queer*, Burroughs realizes that he cannot represent queer intimacy and, at the same time, maintain the clinical distance that enables readers to be voyeurs and critics of marginalized communities.<sup>8</sup> The novel constructs this distance by locating the ghosts of queer desire firmly within the narrator's psyche. The book's purported representation of an inside look at the gay lifestyle thus contributes to the pathologization of queer desire that Burroughs will challenge in the cut-up novels. Thus, *Queer* illuminates the emergent formal shift from subjectively localized spectral desire to the spectral form that defines all of Burroughs' experimental writing. Tracing the roots of this shift in his early narratives about homosexuality reveals that Burroughs' spectral form is inextricable from his later development of queer critique.

Of course, the irony of *Queer*'s publication difficulties is that the novel does not actually represent gay sex. On the contrary, it excises all sexual acts, akin to the way that Hollywood films cut from foreplay to afterglow. ("Later, when they lay sided by side smoking.") (44). Contrasting Burroughs' exhaustive delineation of orgies, orgasms, anal sex, individual and collective masturbation, and erotic asphyxiation in the cut-up novels, *Queer* narrates a sentimental desire for romance that readers rarely associate with Burroughs' fiction. One reason the text went unpublished until 1985, I contend, is that it represented such intimacies, thereby challenging the cultural reduction of male homosexuality to either sexual acts (sodomy) or a pathological identity (the pervert and invert). However, the novel also went unpublished because Burroughs concluded that its style no longer characterized his work. In 1959, Burroughs writes to Ginsburg that "I really *do not* want *Queer* published at this time.

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<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Burroughs' publication history, see Oliver Harris, *The Secret of Fascination*. Harris is the authority on the variations of Burroughs' routines as they iterate across his letters, novels, and other aesthetic experiments.

It is not representative of what I do now, and [has] no interest except like an artist's poor art school sketches—and as such, I protest” (*Letters* 430, original emphasis). In a sense, Burroughs is right. *Queer* is not disorienting, obscene, satirical, crude, funny, horrifying, or difficult to read; it does not possess the anthropological scope of *Junky* or *Naked Lunch*; and it does not proliferate narratives in a disjunctive blur of voices, perspectives, and contexts. Quite simply, *Queer* follows one character, Lee, as he attempts, and fails, to establish a long-term relationship with a male lover, Allerton, in Mexico. Although Lee and Allerton begin a sexual relationship, Allerton is indifferent to Lee—he does not express any of the emotional turmoil that Lee feels. Ultimately, Lee persuades Allerton to accompany him on a trip to Ecuador to search for the drug Yage by drafting a “contract” for sex between them. After the trip, Allerton disappears and Lee searches for him back in Mexico while he is plagued by dreams of his former lover. It is this frustrated romantic desire between men that the text struggles to narrate, and it is the obstacles to this desire that leads *Queer* towards spectral images that prefigure Burroughs' experimental writing. However, it is Burroughs' location of these spectral images within the psyche of the melancholic homosexual character that truly distinguishes *Queer* from Burroughs subsequent experimental writing.<sup>9</sup>

*Queer* establishes the association between the frustrated homosexual man's desire and his psyche's turn to spectrality in its opening scene. We are told that “What Lee looked for in any relationship was the feel of contact. He felt some contact with Carl [Steinberg, a cipher for Allen Ginsberg]” (2). Rebuffed by Carl, however, Lee feels “lonely and defeated,” and he slips into an depressive fantasy (3).

He saw a shadowy line of boys. As each boy came to the front of the line, he said ‘Best of luck,’ and ran for a streetcar.

‘Sorry...wrong number...try again...somewhere else...someplace else...not

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<sup>9</sup> On the association of homosexuality and melancholia, see especially “Unhappy Queers” in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. See also Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*.

here...not me...can't use it, don't need it, don't want it. Why pick on me?' The last face was so real and so ugly, Lee said aloud, 'Who asked you, you ugly son of a bitch?'

Lee opened his eyes and looked around. original ellipsis

This passage is characteristic of *Queer*'s location of fantastical imagery within Lee's psyche. Demarcated by the closing and opening of his eyes, the fantastic elements of this passage (shadowy boys, real and ugly faces) never threaten to break the line between the real and the imagined. The sharpness of the line between reality and psyche underscores the novel's point that the frustration of homosexual "contact" plunges Lee into his own mind, where he must confront unsettling and disturbing fantasies. Indeed, the shadowy procession of boys performs a grotesque reenactment of Lee's broken connection with Carl, and they give voice to Lee's paranoia that others perceive him as a gay predator.<sup>10</sup> Although the boys initially view the disconnect as accidental ("Sorry...wrong number), they quickly re-interpret Lee's contact as a persecution ("Why pick on me?"). Lee's fear that others see him as predatory is indicative of the homophobia he suffers in Mexico. For example, his conversation with Moor is interpreted as a seduction, and Moor's public gossip to the bartender portrays Lee as "detestably insistent queer, too stupid and too insensitive to realize that his attentions were not wanted" (9). Thus, the image of broken connections in Lee's fantasy characterizes *Queer*'s ideology of "contact," because Lee desires mutual, reciprocal interest—someone to pick up the phone that wishes to receive his call.

In the absence of reception, Lee turns angry or depressive—expressing his rage at others or himself. (Lee's shouting at realistic, yet imagined, ugly faces in his own mind entwines both directions of his anger.) More importantly, the form of

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<sup>10</sup> In this respect, Lee's fantasies give voice to, and do not displace or reinscribe, the social law. This aspect of fantasy conforms with the psychoanalytic account of fantasy, which undermines the idea of fantasy as transgressive. For the definitive explication of this issue in psychoanalysis, see Žižek.

*Queer* itself becomes increasingly fantastical as Lee's search for contact is frustrated. As Burroughs explains in his letters to Ginsberg, the style of his verbal and narrative “routines,” which Lee performs as a means of seduction throughout *Queer*, becomes altered when they are ignored. “If there is no one to receive it,” Burroughs claims, the “routine turns back on me like homeless curse and tears me apart, grows more and more insane (literal growth like cancer) and impossible, and fragmentary like berserk pin-ball machine and I am screaming: ‘Stop it! Stop it!’” (201). Not only does Burroughs' become a victim of his own desire, torn apart by his own frustrated contact, the routine itself becomes fantastical—its insanity is, at once, literal yet impossible, fragmentary yet pervasive and proliferating, berserk and random yet directed at Burroughs. In its hesitation between literal and figurative, this description characterizes Burroughs' fantastical (and later spectral) discourse. When the discourse in *Queer* itself becomes fantastic, it correlates to the frustration of mutually queer desire in Burroughs' writing. Lee's shouting at ugly faces in his mind is thus an inverted image of what he truly desires throughout the novel—to escape his own mind, and his own routines, by accessing an emotional relationship with a lover. Such a relationship might rescue him from the “homeless curse” of loneliness, where his own words can betray him, transforming into a violent attacking enemy.

Thus, *Queer* faces a representational problem. It could plunge the reader into the experience of the berserk pin-ball machine of frustrated routines, intimacies, and desires. It could dislodge readers from any narrative grounding by literalizing the cancer of disconnection that Lee suffers. Alternately, the novel could locate its representation of homosexual desire within a broader social framework, showing how a repressive culture of homophobia creates and maintains the social obstructions to Lee's desires. *Queer* makes gestures in the latter direction, noting the shame that turns some lovers away from Lee; it also gives voice to Lee's rage at a homophobic society.



Yet the novel largely settles on a “modernist” compromise; it locates its spectral images firmly within the psyche of the homosexual man. But in doing so, the novel risks perpetuating the pathologies of the predatory pervert or the lonely, tragic invert—the very homophobic discourses that Lee hates. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze how *Queer* deploys spectral figurations to confront, and ultimately, complicate both of these pathological narratives. Take, for example, Lee's initial introduction to Allerton, in which he produces a image of himself as a tragic and horrifying creature:

As Lee stood aside to bow in his dignified old-world greeting, there emerged instead a leer of naked lust, wrenched in the pain and hate of his deprived body and, in simultaneous double exposure, a sweet child's smile of liking and trust, shockingly out of time and out of place, mutilated and hopeless. 18

Because it is narrated in the third person, this perception floats between Lee, Allerton, and the social gaze of the narration, which generally fixates on Lee's emotions. The ambiguity of perspective is key to the hesitation that this passage performs in its representation of Lee: is he a child or an old man; is he a mutilated, hopeless victim or a desiring subject? This “simultaneous double exposure” expresses the contradictions inherent in the homophobic narratives that delimit Lee's self-perception as well as the social perception of him. It is absolutely critical, then, that this passage inspires the title of *Naked Lunch*.<sup>11</sup> *Naked Lunch* therefore encodes a reference to the “naked lust” of the homosexual man leering at his object of desire. Yet, as we will see, *Naked Lunch* fundamentally rewrites the homophobic implications of the lusting gaze: in *Queer*, the revelation brought into naked view is the contradictory symbolic status of the gay man's desire; in *Naked Lunch*, the revelation is the “truth” about all social control, which hangs at the end of every fork, for all readers to inspect in its truth and to swallow. In short, *Naked Lunch* generalizes the condition that is here limited to the

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<sup>11</sup> This is the phrase is that Jack Kerouac incorrectly remembers when he suggests the title “Naked Lunch” for Burroughs' novel.

horrifying, abject gay man. In *Queer*, the homosexual agent, the subject of a desiring gaze, is simply a horror show, met with patronizing sympathy, clinical disinterest, and disgust. Indeed, “Allerton was appalled” at this vision of Lee (19).

Although the tropes of spectrality enable *Queer*'s representation of frustrated desire, they also subversively express the agency and embodiment of that desire. Note, for example, how Lee's imaginary reverie—articulated while he listens to Allerton's routine—engenders an 'embodied,' erotic contact that is far more explicit than any sexual encounter the two share later.

An imaginary hand projected with such force it seemed Allerton must feel the touch of ectoplasmic fingers caressing his ear, phantom thumbs smoothing his eyebrows, pushing the hair back from his face. Now Lee's hands were running down over the ribs, the stomach. Lee felt the aching pain of desire in his lungs. His mouth was a little open, showing his teeth in the half snarl of a baffled animal. He licked his lips. 25

Here the spectral figurations of queer desire allow for the representation—however mediated by fantasy—of embodied contact. To be sure, Lee's cannibalistic mouth, and his transformation into an animal, appear to perpetuate the vampiric, predatory narrative of homosexual desire. Yet *Queer* makes clear that Lee is made into an animal by the “invisible bars” that attempt to constrict his “unyielding” desire: “his eyes looked out through the invisible bars, watchful, alert, waiting for the keeper to forget the door, for the frayed collar, the loosened bar...suffering without despair and without consent” (ellipsis original, 25). Thus, the spectral discourse that frames Lee as predatory also makes legible the social prohibitions on his desires. In fact, this discourse provides Lee a temporary escape from those prohibitions by softly blurring the agency of Lee's and Allerton's “contact.” For example, it would seem that Lee is the possessor of the groping phantom limb. Yet Lee himself appears to be possessed

by Allerton. After all, the latter speaks in a “high thin voice, the eerie, disembodied voice of a young child. Lee had never heard Allerton talk like this before. The effect was like the possession voice of a medium” (24). The indeterminacy of this ghostly effect—on Allerton's listeners or on Allerton's voice—is exactly what *Queer*'s spectral rhetoric produces in these passages. But more importantly, it is their common ghostliness that allows us to see Allerton and Lee as connected, if only via metaphor. Framed as a “medium,” Allerton, too, possesses (and is possessed by) the out-of-time spectral quality that Lee exemplifies in his naked lust. *Queer* thus deploys the language of spectrality to configure a queer relation where the distinctions between subject and object, possession and possessor, are temporarily blurred.

Crucially, this loosening of distinctions relates to the racial and national context in which Lee and Allerton meet. In his retrospective description of Mexico, Burroughs fondly recalls being labeled “El Hombre Invisible” by the locals. In his analysis, Timothy Murphy echoes Burroughs' affirmation of this ghostly appellation, claiming that Burroughs' “invisibility stems primarily from the same circumstances that render [Ralph] Ellison's narrator [in *Invisible Man*] and [Gilles] Deleuze invisible as well: he does not fit into a tidy category that is already subordinated to the larger scheme of capitalism” (4). Murphy's equation of Ellison's racial marginality with Burroughs' social and Deleuze's philosophical marginality obscures a number of fundamental distinctions between them. For our purposes, it is crucial that Burroughs *chooses* to embrace his invisible status; that Burroughs' invisibility also derives from his privilege as a white, male, moneyed, US citizen in Mexico; and that his invisibility largely enables him to be “out” as a homosexual. Yet in his preface for *Queer*, Burroughs himself obscures these very distinctions when he praises Mexico's seeming lack of a distinction between public and private.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Harris' analysis of *Queer* in *The Secret of Fascination* for a different but convergent analysis of Burroughs' preface and its relationship to the text (78-132).

The City appealed to me. The slum areas compared favorably with anything in Asia for sheer filth and poverty. People would shit all over the street, then lie down and sleep in it with the flies crawling in and out of their mouths... It seemed to me that everyone in Mexico had mastered the art of minding his own business. If a man wanted to wear a monocle or carry a cane, he did not hesitate to do it, and no one gave him a second glance. Boys and young men walked down the street arm in arm and no one paid them any mind. It wasn't that people didn't care what others thought; it simply wouldn't occur to a Mexican to expect criticism from a stranger, nor to criticize the behavior of others. vi

Here Burroughs transposes bodily and social abjection into the evasion of social criticism. Of course, this transposition is predicated on a deep rooted Orientalism, in which the bodily desires of the Western subject can be expressed through the racial Other and in the space of racial and national difference. Indeed, Burroughs never wonders if the reason people do not give *him* a second glance, or express "criticism" for his choices, is because of his relative privilege in the slum.

Yet Burroughs racism gives us a clue to his own fantasies and their relationship to postwar America. He claims, for example, that "No Mexican really knew any other Mexican, and when a Mexican killed someone (which happened often), it was usually his best friend" (vii). Taken on its own terms, Burroughs' claim is absurd. Obviously, Mexicans cannot, at the same time, not know one another and also be "best friend[s]." On the one hand, Burroughs wants to imagine Mexico as a space of radical non-conviviality, disinterest, and disregard, where no one has any knowledge of anyone else, where flies can crawl in and out of people's mouths and no one passes a second glance.<sup>13</sup> This social space allows him to be, in a sense, "out," and

<sup>13</sup> Given the complex status of racial otherness in Burroughs' representation of homosexuality, it is crucial that Allerton inhabits a racially hybrid position. In Lee's perception, Allerton has an "equivocal face, very young, clean-cut and boyish, at

it also allows him to imagine the social body as similarly porous in sexual terms. Not incidentally, being “out” in Mexico essentially means becoming spectral--invisible yet visible, expressing the private in public without notice or comment. On the other hand, Burroughs depicts Mexico as a space of betrayal, where best friends murder each other without hesitation or remorse. This conceit re-frames the brief, disappointing romance of Lee and Allerton against the dark backdrop of fraternal betrayal. Their contact, in this new narrative, is nothing short of a miracle, a glimmer of queer social possibility in an asocial world.

However, *Queer* does not support the reading enacted by Burroughs' retrospective preface. First, the only *reciprocal* conviviality, fraternity, and homoerotic desire that the novel represents exists among Mexican boys, whom Lee typically lusts after at a remove. After his fantasy of the shadowy, angry boys, for example, Lee opens his eyes and sees “Two Mexican adolescents [walk] by, their arms around each other's necks. He looked after them, licking his dry, cracked lips” (3). The public and mutual intimacy that these boys share is precisely what Lee cannot achieve with Allerton, who Lee believes is “not queer enough to make a reciprocal relation possible” (60).<sup>14</sup> Second, as *Queer* presents it, Mexico is not at all a space absent of social criticism. In addition to the judgmental American ex-patriots, Lee confronts Mexicans who insult him. When Lee and Allerton drunkenly flirt in the street, a Mexican walks past and utters “*Cabrones*,” and Lee is subsequently incensed about being “Insulted inna public street,” despite being an American with money (53).

*Queer* in fact builds toward Lee's feeling an intense “killing hate for the stupid,

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the same time conveying an impression of makeup, delicate and exotic and Oriental” (16).

<sup>14</sup> I believe it is important that readers and critics avoid assuming too much about Allerton's “actual” feelings in *Queer*. First, Lee makes very explicit how hard it is for him to imagine Allerton's perspectives, largely because of the pain he feels when trying to focalize Allerton. Second, Allerton, despite Lee's perceptions, appears very sexually interested in Lee and engages in a great deal of flirtatious romance. Therefore, we must always take Lee's conclusions about Allerton as limited by the subjective perspective of the novel.

ordinary, disapproving people who kept him from doing what he wanted to do.

‘Someday I am going to have things just like I want,’ he said to himself.’ ‘And if any moralizing son of a bitch gives me any static, they will fish him out of the river.’”

(97).<sup>15</sup> Here *Queer* captures the sadistic rage that Burroughs' fiction directs at social prohibitions. As much as his fiction seems to express a liberatory and libertarian ethos, unmoored from any moralistic concerns, *Queer* makes clear that these social forces continue to put direct pressure on his expression of sexuality.

Indeed, Lee retreats from his own yearnings when confronted with the prospect of a world without restrictions on “limitless desire” (96). Looking at Chimú pottery in Ecuador, he observes illustrations of male sodomy. In response, he wonders,

What happens when there is no limit? What is the fate of The Land Where  
Anything Goes? Men changing into huge centipedes...centipedes besieging  
houses...a man tied to a couch and a centipede ten feet long rearing up over  
him. Is this literal? Did some hideous metamorphosis occur? What is the  
meaning of the centipede symbol? 95, original ellipsis

Here *Queer* teeters on the precipice of a representational space where “Anything Goes.” In Burroughs' experimental writing, the rhetorical question that goes unanswered here, “Is this literal?” will become the question asked by Burroughs' readers, not his characters or narrators. Indeed, the later work represents very similar images of violence, unmoored from psychological or subjective grounding. Yet here, the novel remains fixated on Lee's psychological experience of sexual and romantic frustration. Despite his ambivalence about unrestricted desire, Burroughs nonetheless uses the spectral to transcend those restrictions—precisely because the spectral

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<sup>15</sup> Burroughs makes evident that the moralists are themselves centrally concerned with homosexuality. Hence, he expresses disgust at Donald Webster Cory's suggestion in *The Homosexual in America* (1951) that “a queer learns humility, learns to turn the other cheek, and returns love for hate...I never swallowed the other cheek routine, and I hate the stupid bastards who won't mind their own business. They can die in agony for all I care” (*Letters* 106).

inhabits an undecidable relationship to the literal, the embodied, and the real. In effect, it can be disavowed as a mere flight of fantasy. Indeed, after seeing the Chimu pottery, Lee passes a group of “Six or seven boys, aged twelve to fourteen” who are playing on a rubbish heap and urinating in public. Upon seeing Lee, their “play [becomes] overtly sexual, with an undercurrent of mockery. They looked at Lee and whispered and laughed” (96). Lee looks back “openly, [with] a cold, hard stare of naked lust,” and as he focuses on one boy, Lee suddenly possesses that boy's body: “He could feel himself in the body of the boy. Fragmentary memories... the smell of cocoa beans drying in the sun, bamboo tenements, the warm dirty river, the swamps and rubbish heaps on the outskirts of the town.” Here the prose presses towards the poetic litany that is characteristic of Burroughs' experimental writing and, as it does, *Queer* represents a psychic and sexual possession of the male body that similarly recurs in the cut-up novels. First, Lee and the boys engage in an orgy, culminating in an image of embodied intimacy: “Another boy rested his head on his stomach. Lee could feel the warmth of the other's head, itching a little where the hair touched Lee's stomach” (97). Then, Lee transports to a “bamboo tenement” where he “feel[s] desire for the woman [in the room,] through the other's body. 'I'm not queer,' he thought. 'I'm disembodied’” (97). This substitution of spectrality for queer desire could not be clearer. Immediately after this reverie, Lee feels his “killing hate for the stupid, ordinary, disapproving people who keep him from doing what he wanted to do.” Thus, the spectral allows Lee to temporarily escape the gaze of disapproval from the social public, and it allows him to inhabit, via spectral possession, the body of those who express “mockery” at his desires. Although the disembodied, dreamlike nature of the spectral allows him plausible deniability, it fundamentally permits Lee to represent, in fiction and fantasy, sexual contact between male bodies.

Yet a limit of spectral contact is that it remains rooted in the hierarchies of

subject and object. As such, *Queer*'s spectrality paradoxically undermines the reciprocal contact that Lee wants to establish.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, Lee does wish to possess Allerton throughout the novel. For example, Lee feels “his body pull towards Allerton, an amoeboid [sic] protoplasmic projection, straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other's body, to breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and genitals” (36). Akin to his fantasy with the Mexican boys, Lee's desire leads toward possession, and this possession would allow him to usurp the bodily functions of his desired object—seeing, breathing, feeling with the senses of the medium. Of course, this possession does not occur in reality, only at the level of fantasy. Thus, Lee seeks two alternative “realistic” routes for possession. On the one hand, Lee desires Yage because it would allow him to have “literal thought control” over Allerton, effectively turning him into a slave. On the other hand, Lee attempts to establish a financial contract with Allerton, wherein Allerton receives payment for traveling with Lee to Ecuador and having sex with him twice a week. Both of these ‘possessions’ of Allerton fail. They never find Yage, and Lee's desires constantly outstrip the contract: “Lee said he was sorry he asked so soon [for sex] after the last time, which was a breach of contract” (103). Neither money, law, nor drugs can maintain Lee's possession over Allerton, because possession does not actually allow for the *reciprocal* relation that Lee desires. On the contrary, possession actively undermines it.

The novel also critiques the attempt to possess via contract, and it does so through the narrative form of spectrality. The novel ends in a dream with Lee appearing as as the “Skip Tracer” from “Friendly Finance,” who is “a finder of

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<sup>16</sup> I diverge from Harris' reading of sadomasochism in *Queer* insofar as I see the text as more overtly critical of these tendencies. This is why I stress Lee's dissatisfactions that result from the subject/object hierarchies of possession.. I also see fantasy are more overtly performative than psychoanalytic. By doing so, I emphasize the break, rather than continuity, between *Queer* and Burroughs' experimental writing.



missing persons” (132). I disagree with Murphy who sees the Skip Tracer as a figure for “the potential for real subversion and new community grounded in the proliferation of ghetto subcultures” (66). The Skip Tracer, I contend, is the last vestige of Lee's fantasy that a contract that could secure the contact, or intimacy, that he seeks. The Skip Tracer states, “We don’t like to say ‘Pay up or else.’ It’s not a friendly thing to say. I wonder if you have ever read the contract *all the way through?*” (132, original emphasis). Despite his threats, Lee’s “face went blank and dreamy. His mouth fell open, showing teeth hard and yellow as old ivory,” and he drops hundreds of dollars on the ground for Allerton to take. The Skip Tracer is here a figure of frustrated desire -- the mouth has shifted from its possessive, incorporation to an ecstatic surrender. Intimacy has been frustrated and indeed, Lee wanders, dissatisfied, through the expatriate community in Mexico. The novel is not clear whether the failure is anyone's “fault.” Rather, it underscores the impossibility of artificially contracting another person's desire through such “unfriendly” means.

In its epilogue, *Queer* returns to the vampiric, possessive narrative one final time to underscore its inadequacy—and its danger. As Lee takes pictures of people of color, stalking them and photographing them when they look away, he notes that “There is in fact something obscene and sinister about photography, a desire to imprison, to incorporate, a sexual intensity of pursuit” (124). Immediately after this acknowledgment, Lee looks through magazine entitled *Balls: For Real Men* which displays a photograph of “a Negro hanging from a tree” with the caption “I Saw Them Swing Sonny Goons” (130). Lee's sinister, incorporative drive to photograph is here correlated to hyperbolic white masculinity. This magazine for “real men”—a subject position that queers in *Queer* cannot inhabit *as queers*—displays its masculinity by witnessing (“I saw”) racist lynching. Of course, lynching was frequently an act of sexualized violence, and it was predicated on hysterical fears about black men raping

white women. Thus, *Queer* critiques the possessive drive because it also buttresses the dynamics of violent white masculinity that Lee sees as central to hetero-normativity and, more generally, to mainstream American culture.

The novel also critiques the attempt to possess via contract, and it does so through the narrative form of spectrality. The novel ends in a dream with Lee appearing as the “Skip Tracer” from “Friendly Finance,” who is “a finder of missing persons” (132). I disagree with Murphy who sees the Skip Tracer as a figure for “the potential for real subversion and new community grounded in the proliferation of ghetto subcultures” (66). The Skip Tracer, I contend, is the last vestige of Lee's fantasy that a contract that could secure the contact, or intimacy, that he seeks. The Skip Tracer states, “We don’t like to say ‘Pay up or else.’ It’s not a friendly thing to say. I wonder if you have ever read the contract *all the way through?*” (132, original emphasis). Despite his threats, Lee's “face went blank and dreamy. His mouth fell open, showing teeth hard and yellow as old ivory,” and he drops hundreds of dollars on the ground for Allerton to take. The Skip Tracer is here a figure of frustrated desire -- the mouth has shifted from its possessive, incorporation to an ecstatic surrender. Intimacy has been frustrated and indeed, Lee wanders, dissatisfied, through the expatriot community in Mexico. The novel is not clear whether the failure is anyone's “fault.” Rather, it underscores the impossibility of artificially contracting another person's desire through such “unfriendly” means.

*Queer* thus leaves its readers in a dream-space that Burroughs' fiction will never leave. The dream in *Queer* is a frustrated, depressive, tragic search for a lover. It is a haunting, ambiguous metaphor for a love relation that could not be maintained in fantasies of control or contract. Yet, as we have seen, these spectral figurations have been central to *Queer*'s narration of homosexual desire and the homophobic social prohibitions that constrict that desire. I have already suggested that the ambivalence

about representing homosexual desire is thus central to *Queer*. In a shift that is exemplary of this ambivalence, Burroughs' retrospective preface disavows the sexual and romantic aspect of *Queer*'s spectral narratives. Indeed, Burroughs disavows the conceit that he wanted Allerton as a lover—"There is something curiously systematic and unsexual about his [Lee's] quest for a suitable sex object...he is not really looking for sex contact" (xv). Then, Burroughs claims that *Queer* reveals that he/Lee was possessed by "something in my being that was not me, and not under my control" (xx). But that force is not sexuality or desire—it is the spectral force that drove him to kill his wife. "I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have no choice except to write my way out" (xxii). On the one hand, Burroughs has retained the language of spectrality and, in fact, externalized it into a grand struggle between humanity and invading spirits. As he asserts in his preface,

My concept of possession is closer to the medieval model than to modern psychological explanations, with their dogmatic insistence that such manifestations must come from within and never, never, never from without.

(As if there were some clear-cut difference between inner and outer). xix

Here Burroughs short-circuits the line between inner and outer, which was impermeable in *Queer*, and he intimates that readers, too, are subjects to controlling spirits, regardless of their sexuality, identity, or social position. By doing so, Burroughs has erased the sexual and romantic quest that *Queer* represents through the narratives of possession. This elision reveals that the homosexual desire represented in *Queer* must *still* be managed, deflected, and mediated in a way that blurs the agency of the queer subject. Here Lee/Burroughs no longer has agency, except through writing. Rather than continue to locate possession within the incorporative

and vampiric queer psyche, Burroughs disperses it into the world. As we will see, this conceit of possession infuses his theories of language, reading, and social liberation. I contend that this shift derives from the very limitations we have explored in *Queer*—namely, that his representations of spectrality inevitably circle back to the pathological queer subject. To understand the alternate form that he develops to criticize this dynamic, then, we must turn to his cut-up novels and the expansion of spectrality into a “human” condition.

### **Giving You the Horrors: Burroughs' Theory of Spectral Critique**

The most succinct encapsulation of Burroughs' formal break between his narrative fiction and experimental writing lies in a shift in object pronouns. In *Junky*, Lee is constantly “getting the horrors,” typically (but not exclusively) as a result of his junk-inspired hallucinations. Lee, Burroughs' surrogate narrator, is thus the witness to and receiver of the horrific spectrality of the self and society. Upon walking into a “queer bar” in New Orleans, for example, Lee observes that

A room full of fags gives me the horrors. They jerk around like puppets on invisible strings, galvanized into hideous activity that is the negation of everything living and spontaneous. The live human being has moved out of these bodies long ago. But something moved in when the original tenant moved out. Fags are ventriloquists' dummies who have moved in and taken over the ventriloquist. The dummy sits in a queer bar nursing his beer, and uncontrollably yapping out of a rigid doll face. 60

Perhaps one of the most controversial passages in Burroughs' corpus, this moment exemplifies the homophobia that his texts often express.<sup>17</sup> Yet critics often forget that *Junky* is written for a mainstream audience—its title, like *Queer*, promises a

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<sup>17</sup> Here Burroughs' homophobia is buttressed by misogyny, insofar as the “fags” represents the disgusting, inhuman feminine. As Harris points out, that distinction between “fags” and “queer” relies on their respective femininity and masculinity, and the former bears the brunt of Lee's disgust.

voyeuristic, 'insider look' at the seedy underbelly of postwar American life. The single marginal figure stands as an exemplar for the entirety of a 'community,' even as he negotiates these communities with a critical eye. Thus, it is significant that after these texts, Burroughs generalizes this discourse of “fag” horror to all of the humanity. In *Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*, queers continue to be “puppets.” But they have become sympathetic figures whose oppression exemplifies the “biocontrol[s]” wielded by the bureaucratic state. The bureaucratic state becomes, in Doctor Benway's words, a “turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action, to the complete parasitism of a virus” (*Naked* 121-22). At first glance, this contrast between spontaneous diversity and bureaucratic homogeneity seems derivative of postwar lamentations of all forms of institutional control.<sup>18</sup> Yet note how Burroughs's narrative shifts the qualities he previously attributed to homosexuals onto the state, effectively rendering all of humanity the puppet of and the prey to the non-spontaneous parasite of bureaucratic control. Whereas the desiring homosexual male was the predatory, possessive figure in *Queer*, now the bureaucratic state is the “true parasitic organism” (121). Put simply, whereas Lee was the one “getting the horrors” throughout Burroughs' early narrative fiction, it is now “you,” the reader, that gets the horrors.

This expansion of the horrors marks the most subversive shift in Burroughs construction of the reader. Readers become the primary figures of non-spontaneous life, and they must be liberated through the method of the cut-up, which enables them

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<sup>18</sup> From Ken Kesey's representation of mental institutions to Jack Kerouac's representation of domesticity, postwar literature excoriates any regimentation of life as “emasculating.” (Hence, Kesey's Nurse Ratchet and Kerouac's Camille, like many women in Beat fiction, represent castrating limitations on masculine freedom). Without a doubt, Burroughs's fiction echoes the contradiction between spontaneity and social control, and it also reproduces the sexist structure of that division. For a relevant discussion of the discourse of spontaneity in postwar America, see Daniel Belgrad.

to free themselves from all language that controls mind and body. As Burroughs theorizes, humanity is controlled by “word locks” that enable “those who manipulate words to control thought on a mass scale” (*Job* 59). In Robin Lyndenberg's phrasing, these word-locks “dictate our ways of thinking and feeling, stifling spontaneous life and change” (5). Rather than the homosexual male, language is now the spectral predator; words also adopt the qualities of erotic seduction, because they affectively and viscerally impact the body. Only the cut-up can produce reflexivity by helping readers to “see who you are” as well as “who programs you” (*Ticket* 213). Thus, Burroughs' experimental writing extends the project of revelation associated with “getting the horrors.” When Lee gets the horrors during a hallucination in *Junky*, he sees an “Oriental face” eaten away by disease, which gives way to “A series of faces, hieroglyphs, distorted and lead to the final place where the human road ends, where the human form can no longer contain the crustacean horror that has grown inside it” (111). In short, the horrors reveal the inhuman, dead, controlled, mechanistic, and reptilian Other that lurks within and controls the human self.

Whereas this revelation is noted in passing in *Junky*, the cut-up novels' goal is to infuse the revelation of crustacean inhumanity throughout every sentence of the text. The cut-ups thus “give” readers the horrors by making form itself become spectral—by making the prose surface become, like the Oriental face, distorted and proliferating, beyond human scales of interpretative comprehension.<sup>19</sup> The novels do so by proliferating random, spontaneous associations, which are the result of the cut-up method. At their most disjunctive, the novels break away from narrative sequence

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<sup>19</sup> For the definitive explication of Burroughs' cut-up novels, see Robin Lyndenberg, *Word Cultures*. Lyndenberg offers what I believe is an essential introduction to the primary stylistic and conceptual practices of each of Burroughs' cut-up texts, and she makes a series of provocative theoretical connections between Burroughs' work and post-structuralism. Although my interpretations of Burroughs' style do not manifestly break with hers, my argument is more centrally about how the style translates into a contextual subversion of the discourses around homosexuality. While Lyndenberg focuses on sexuality, she tends to subordinate its significance to Western Culture and binaristic division (including mind and body) more generally.

into an incantatory litany of short phrases, most of which repeat throughout all four novels (and even beyond these). The repetitions occur in vastly different contexts, and they often have little or no logical relation with one another. Put simply, there is very little hermeneutic ground on which to build an interpretation of the cut-up texts because each signifier points, prospectively and retrospectively, to countless other contexts. Equating the cut-up novels to a marijuana dream, Burroughs insisted that he “do[es] not see [their] organization as a *problem*” (original emphasis). The reason it is not a problem, I suggest, is that his aim is to encourage—or rather force—the reader to surrender the desire for logical, narrative, or conceptual forms of organization. By rendering every word spectral—predatory and yet also undecidable—Burroughs hopes to enable his readers to shed their word locks. Linear temporality is sundered; epistemological grounds break away; and the texts flower in and out of one another as their language pushes towards the spontaneous contingency that Burroughs idealizes as the opposite of control.<sup>20</sup>

How does spectral form contribute to the project of queer critique that I locate at the heart of the cut-up novels? Does Burroughs' fiction merely invert the discursive terms of homophobia, or does it somehow move beyond the terms of pathology and perversion? My characterization of the cut-up's spectral form as participating in “queer critique” requires qualification. Typically, the critical force of queerness is associated with various forms of exposure, demystification, and denaturalization. Codifying this association, Judith Butler argues in “Critically Queer” that the “critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders... but rather with the *exposure* or the failure of heterosexual regimes ever to fully legislate or contain their own ideals” (237, my emphasis). For Butler, drag is 'queer' precisely because it

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<sup>20</sup> For the definitive analysis of Burroughs' affirmation of spontaneity against control, see Marianne DeKoven's “William Burroughs: Any Number Can Play” in *Utopia Limited*. DeKoven captures the variegated lines of modernism and postmodernism that shape Burroughs' sixties fiction. The ideology of authentic liberation (against control) is one of the most significant historical dynamics that she traces.

exposes the unnatural construction of gender roles; it does so through a hyperbolic “allegory” that demystifies, through parody, the seemingly essential connection between gender performance and biological sex. This concept of critique has become so prominent in queer theory that forms with alternative “critical promise[s]” often fall to the margins. They fail to signify as critically queer. Burroughs' fiction is a perfect example. Although the cut-up novels constantly narrate the exposure of control mechanisms that camouflage themselves as natural, Burroughs' fiction has struggled to inhabit the category of “queer.” This is due largely to his ideology of sexual difference. Despite his very strong tendency to depict sexuality as contingent and socially constituted, Burroughs also makes a sharp distinction between masculinity and femininity; this is clear in his separation of “fags” from “queers,” as Jamie Russell demonstrates in *Queer Burroughs*, and it is also evident in Burroughs' unrelenting and consistent misogyny. Yet the critical focus on Burroughs' rigid representation of gender has obscured other aspects of his form that demand a different conception of “queer critique,” one not based on the narrative of exposure and denaturalization. Indeed, exposure implies some form of distance from the object of critique—however ironic, ambivalent, or complicit that distance may be. By contrast, Burroughs' spectral form collapses distances, folding the reader into its spectral mystification of the world as a horrifying war between parasites and hosts. Rather than taking away false perceptions, Burroughs' experimental writing gives readers a *gift* of the horrors—it enacts a poetic manifestation of affects and emotions that have largely been assigned to homosexuals, and it rewrites the undifferentiated reading public within the discursive terms of homophobia that Burroughs' loathes. In this precise sense, Burroughs' makes his readers “queer.” He forces the reader to “experience” the spectrality that he previously represented for them at a critical remove.



The cut-up novels provide a meta-textual commentary on their positioning of the reader through a series of direct addresses. For example, the narration of *Naked Lunch* declares, “Gentle reader, we see God through our assholes in the flash bulb of orgasm.... Through these orifices transmute your body.... The way OUT is the way IN....” (208, original ellipsis). Hailing the reader as a corporeal being, this brief address inverts the values of critical distance. Here the reader does not discover insight through the mind or soul but through the asshole, and the asshole now opens onto an orgasmic, ecstatic possibility for transcendence. Similarly, the novels foist image after image of abjection onto readers, refusing to let them look away because the way “OUT” of control leads “IN” through the disavowed body of the homosexual male. No longer does Burroughs let his reader go “in” to the psyche of the marginal figure (the junky or the queer); the reader must “transmute” by entering the porous orifices of his or her own body. Of course, Burroughs does not really give readers a choice. If the reader's affect is central to liberation, it is also the primary mechanism of the parasitic word.<sup>21</sup>

Gentle Reader, The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunist land crab, it will hang you and catch your jissom like a scrutable dog, it will coil round your thighs like a bushmaster and inject a shot glass of rancid ectoplasm. 208

Here the “Word” does not merely return the socially and sexually repressed to readers. The word violently tears them apart, rendering them passive subjects of control, soliciting orgasms against their will, injecting them with “rancid ectoplasm.”

As much as Burroughs claims that this form liberates readers, making them

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<sup>21</sup> Burroughs insists that the psyche must be tethered to the visceral body: “Ego, Super Ego and Id, floating about in a vacuum without any reference to the human nervous system, strike me as highly dubious metaphysical concepts” (*Adding* 91). Burroughs also criticizes Freud, because Freud does not believe that “we cannot enjoy the advantages of so-called civilization without crippling conflicts. Freud uncovered the extent of marginal, unconscious thinking, but failed to realize that such thinking may be highly useful and advantageous” (90).

participatory agents, it is key that the reader is positioned as an uncritical subject of verbal and erotic violence. By having “rancid ectoplasm” shot into their bodies, readers not only experience the haunted status of the junky; they are now subject to the ghostliness that renders homosexual subjects spectral.

That the ectoplasm has become “rancid” points up the discursive shift that spectrality takes from *Queer* to *Naked Lunch*. Although Burroughs will continue to draw on this discourse for critique, he marks spectrality itself as an undesirable, even disgusting, position to inhabit. Yet it is no longer the homosexual that inhabits the ectoplasmic position alone. It is the “white reader” who, particularly in *The Soft Machine*, receives these images of abjection. Commenting on this recurrent phrase in the novel, Lyndernberg claims that this “randomly generated nonsense” phrase (“Return it to the white reader”) “actually stumbles on significance. It captures the ultimate direction in which Burroughs is always moving: the return back to the reader, to the reading of the word, to language as both the origin and dead end of our experience” (69). While Burroughs' fiction certainly draws reflexive attention to the limitations of language, I suggest that there is significance in the conjunction of *white* and *reader* in this recurrent phrase. In Burroughs' essay on the “job” of writing, “The Name is Burroughs,” he invokes this phrase in an opening scene that takes place in the Interzone, the setting of *Naked Lunch*. The narrator meets a young boy Guide who asks what he wants, and he replies, “Well uh, I would like to write a bestseller that would be a good book, a book about real people and places” (*Adding* 1). The Guide replies, “That's enough Mister. I don't want to read your stinking book. That's a job for the White Reader.” Suddenly appearing on the Guide's face-screen, the White Reader offers to connect the writer with the “best continuity man in the industry” to purchase his novel. Recall Burroughs' reminder to the writer of a “bestseller” to “never expect a general public to experience anything they don't want to experience” because there are

some things “the general public just doesn't want to see or hear” (*Adding* 22). Hence, returning “it” to the white reader translates into a challenge onto the publishing industry that prioritizes safe, bourgeois comforts for a primarily white audience. The text assaults the white reader not only through sexuality, violence, and cross-racial desire; it also breaks apart the “continuity” that is central to the texts preferred by white readers—the “good book” that purports to merely represent “*real people* and places” (my emphasis). In *The Soft Machine*, the white reader receives this assault within a scene that entwines all of these elements:

Pants down to the ankle, a barefoot Indian stood there watching and feeling his friend—Others had shot their load too over a broken chair through the tool heap—Tasty spurts of jissom across the dusty floor—Sunrise and I said here we go again with the knife—My cock pulsed right with it and trousers fell in the dust and dead leaves—Return it to the white reader in the stink of sewage looking at open shirt flapping and comes maybe five times his ass fluttering like— 25

Typical of the cut-up's prose, the continuity of subjects and objects is utterly broken. We cannot decide what the ass flutters like, what precisely the cock pulses with, or which “it” is returned to the reader. Yet the very combination of these elements expresses the project of returning the socially disavowed to the white reader:

homosexual eroticism, desire, and sex is represented in the nude Indian, the orgasms, and the “Tasty spurts of jissom” which obviously imply a pleasure-experiencing subject; violence is intimated in the knife; and the abject is brought into the open through the stench of sewage. All of these figures culminate in an indeterminate subject having an orgasm “maybe five times his ass fluttering like.” Even if that subject is indeterminate, the white reader is one possible (even likely) subject of this ecstasy. This ass may flutter like a flapping shirt, but the broken sentence does not

structurally clarify the object of analogy. Instead, the prose continues to flow on beyond the em-dash. In this sense, Burroughs' style proliferates continuity rather than merely severing it—many possible conjunctions, associations, or completions could be chosen.

This stylistic manifestation of linguistic simultaneity and horizontality—which produces undecidable semantic meaning—buttresses Burroughs' attack on fixed truths.<sup>22</sup> Hence, his most famous pronouncement “nothing is true, everything is permitted” delights in the conceit that there will be no limitations to social (and sexual) permission (97). Note how far we have traveled from Lee's hesitation about unrestricted desire. Now, *everything* is permitted because no one truth or law pertains.<sup>23</sup> This is why the style itself permits and encourages all manner of interpretations, readings, and fantasies—none of them are more permissible than any other. In this sense, Burroughs style approaches the affect produced by Gertrude Stein's experimental writing, which Sianne Ngai aptly calls “stupefaction.” Stupefaction, in Ngai's definition, results from a “strain on the observer's capacities for conceptually synthesizing or metabolizing information” (263). Stein's writing, like Burroughs', engenders this combination of stupidity and sublimity because it constructs a “language founded on a not-yet-qualified or -conceptualized difference” (252). This is why, when reading Burroughs and Stein, one can feel the intense pressure of attending to every single word, because each addition reorients the entire, open-ended semantic chain. Yet, at the same time, one can feel utterly stupefied, bored, exhausted, and lost by the overwhelming amount of (often repetitive) data to track. The reader almost feels drained of memory and, concomitantly, all other

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<sup>22</sup> In Lyndenberg's apt discussion, Burroughs' fiction “displace[s] metaphorical habits of assimilation and vertical transcendence with metonymic patterns of collage and horizontal juxtaposition” (x). Her phrase, “metonymic dismemberment,” captures the way that this prose style seems to inevitably draw bodily analogies (xi).

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see “Beyond Good and Evil: 'How-to' Read *Naked Lunch*” in *Word Cultures*. Lyndenberg analyzes Burroughs' displacement of moral truths through his attack on binaristic and Aristotilean logic.

epistemological protocols that typically guide the reading of a novel.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Burroughs' insists that the mode of thought encouraged by his writing has “nothing to do with logical thought... It is precisely delineated by what it is not. Not knowing what is and is not knowing we know not... The new way of thinking grows in this hiatus between thoughts” (91). Burroughs' explanation is as opaque as some of his cut-ups. Stylistically, his explanation performs a negative poetics that idealizes a space beyond the *established* grounds for knowledge. Burroughs' style does not reject knowledge as such, but it wishes to encourage thinking that in the “hiatus” between conventional or codified assumptions.

The corollary of Burroughs' undermining of epistemic grounds is a defusing of social critique. As Gilles Deleuze notes, “the question of judgment is first of all knowing whether one is dreaming or not” (*Essays* 129).<sup>25</sup> In the absence of any stable line between reality and dream literal and figurative, truth and false, the basis for judgment is sundered. While Burroughs' fiction denounces *all* social prohibitions, I want to underscore the prominence that homophobic prohibitions have in the cut-up novels. By doing so, we can see that Burroughs' spectral form is intimately tied to his development of queer critique. *The Soft Machine* provides an apt example of the cut-ups' subversion of homophobic criticism in its iteration of the “hanging routine.” The hanging routine is a recurrent trope of Burroughs' fiction, and it has a particular

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<sup>24</sup> This feeling is produced by the prose's overwhelming set of possible associations. For a helpful and relevant discussion of how reader's may cognitively relate to a conventional prose novel, see Eve Sedgwick's commentary in *Epistemology of the Closet*. In her view, readers begin novels in a “space of high anxiety and dependence” because they must “plunge into worlds that strip them, however temporarily, of the painfully acquired cognitive maps of their ordinary lives ... on condition of an invisibility that promises cognitive exemption and eventual privilege” (97). Burroughs' fiction never relents the status of anxiety and it never provides the relief of knowledge that Sedgwick describes. For relevant discussions of how Burroughs' prose refuses the “relief” of knowledge, see Lydenberg and Shaviro.

<sup>25</sup> My conception of Burroughs' eluding of critique is influenced by Deleuze's essay “To Have Done with Judgment,” which details the “state of Dionysian intoxication” that escapes judgment by undermining the binary of dream and reality (*Essays* 130).

prominence in the cut-up novels. It typically involves one character surrendering to, or being forced into, an erotic asphyxiation by another character. The scene often entails questionable agency, cross-racial sex, transmutation into the body of another, and, above all, the eroticization of death as an orgasmic ecstasy. Once Lee is hanged and his neck snaps, for example, he observes that

a silver light popped in my eyes like a flash bulb—I got a whiff of ozone and penny arcades and then I felt it start way down in my toes these bone wrenching spasms emptied me and everything spilled out shit running down the back of my thighs and no control in my body paralyzed, twisting up in these spasms the jissom just siphoned me right into Xolotl's cock and next thing I was in his ass and balls flopping around spurting all over the floor and that evil old fuck crooning and running his hands over me so nasty—But then who am I to be critical? 17

Lee's question expresses a meta-textual awareness that readers will demand an explicit critique of the violence, sexual perversity, and immorality displayed here. We can re-transcribe Lee's question in a number of ways: Who am I to be critical of Xolotl's perversion, given my desire and pleasure in being fondled by Xolotl? Who am I to be critical, given my passivity and lack of agency in this moment? After all, Lee is “paralyzed by the medicine any case,” and thus has no choice to participate or not (16). And who is Lee to be critical, anyway, since he is *inside* Xolotl's genitals? The two may have switched bodies, or Lee is fondling his own body and Xolotl has become the passive host to Lee's possession, or Lee is mere voyeur, or Lee is a complicit participant with Xolotl. Since there is no manifest distance between Lee and Xolotl, the presumed object of critique, there is no space between their desires. Thus there is no conventional logic that can allow Lee to be critical. Of course, the ultimate point in this passage is that there is no point—it is characteristic of Burroughs'

fantastical surrealist play. Indeed, Lee has no anxiety about this utterly confused situation. Yet the tone of Lee's question reveals the divergence of Burroughs' cut-up fiction from *Queer*. In the latter, Lee worried whether his visions of sexual violence were "literal." Here, he dismisses such concerns and enjoins the reader to simply enjoy the "fun and games what?" with bemusement and casual indifference (25). Indeed, *The Soft Machine* does not explain or resolve Lee's temporary lack of a body. Right after this experience, Lee wakes up and heads south for more sex with young boys and more adventures. Refusing to stabilize the line between dream or reality, *The Soft Machine* also refuses to criticize its confusing performance of homoerotic fantasy, and it consequently denies readers the opportunity to identify with a critical narrator of such eroticism.

Why does Burroughs' experimental writing withhold "criticism" of perversion in favor of an affective immersion in it? By making readers stupefied, confused, and potentially even aroused by its representations, Burroughs underscores the "biocontrol" mechanisms that he locates as central to the oppression of homosexuals and, more generally, humanity. The affective control of homosexuals, in fact, becomes the primary exemplar of humanity's subjugation, thereby totally inverting the homophobic discourses of postwar culture. Note, for example, Burroughs' criticism that the sexual revolution has not moved into "the electronic stage." The "revelation of electric brain stimulation," Burroughs claims, is that "sexual excitement and orgasm can be produced at push-button control or push-button *choice*, depending on who is pushing the buttons" (*Adding* 88, original emphasis). Thus, Burroughs speculates that a

homosexual can be conditioned to react sexually to a woman, or to an old boot for that matter... In the same way, heterosexual males can be conditioned to react sexually to other men. Who is to say that one is more desirable than the

other? Who is competent to lay down sexual dogmas and impose them on others? 87

Clearly, the moral and political implications of this “scientific” conclusion interests Burroughs more than its reality. If sexuality, as such, is contingent and manipulable, then sexual identity is a matter of power. If heterosexuals react with fear, horror, and disgust at the concept of such conditioning by others, then perhaps they can understand the experience suffered by homosexuals in a homophobic culture.

The “examination” routine in *Naked Lunch* is perhaps the sharpest exemplification of this inversion. This scene introduces Carl Peterson, who becomes subject to Doctor Benway's biocontrol mechanisms. Benway, a “manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems,” expresses the ideology of control throughout the cut-up novels, underscoring the importance of instilling subjugation through affects, such as guilt and anxiety, rather than direct violence. Not only does this process make resistance more difficult, since the subject cannot “contact his enemy direct” behind the “arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy,” the focus on emotion makes the subject believe his subjugation is appropriate: “He must be made to feel that he deserves *any* treatment because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him” (*Naked* 21). Hence, Benway assures Carl that homosexuality is merely a “misfortune...a sickness...certainly nothing to be censored or uh sanctioned any more than say...tuberculosis...” (170). Yet despite his rhetorical pacification, Benway stares at Carl with “cold and intense, predatory and impersonal” eyes, and Carl feels watched with a critical, loathing hatred: “Something was watching his every thought and movement with cold, sneering hate, the shifting of his testes, the contractions of his rectum” (174). Despite protesting that he is attracted to women, and despite passing Benway's attraction tests, Carl finally succumbs and recalls repressed memories of sexual intercourse with men from his time in the military. When he does



so, “A green flare exploded in Carl's brain. He saw Hans' lean brown body—twisting towards him, quick breath on his shoulder. The flare went out. Some huge insect was squirming in his hand. His whole being jerked away in an electric spasm of revulsion” (178). Here we identify with Carl, precisely because the control system is so invested in *producing* him as a “sexual deviant” (170). Based on Benway's predatory interrogation, the scene reads so clearly as a control trap, in which the system *desires* him to be a homosexual—and thus confirming its necessity as an institution of social purification. At the same time, Carl does indeed recall homosexual experiences (or at least appears to), and this is key to the novel's returning to the “white reader” desires he or she might otherwise disavow. Rather than marking these desires as spectral, by locating them firmly within Carl's subjective perspective, the entire narrative becomes spectral. When Carl wishes to escape, he observes “the *whole thing* is unreal” and, as in a dream, a “creeping numbness dragged his legs. The door seemed to recede” (179). The horror here, given unto Carl and the reader, is precisely the horror of biocontrol, exemplified by the suffering of someone positioned as a homosexual. The unreality of the situation is not at all the experience of desiring as a homosexual but the position of being subjugated for one's sexual attractions. Hence, the squirming insect in Carl's hand exemplifies the revulsion that the reader feels at the techniques and desires lurking behind the seemingly innocuous bureaucracy of Benway's “Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis” (168).

While it is possible that “white” readers may experience such an inversion of perspective, Burroughs' spectral form is decidedly not intended to produce empathy. Rather, it assaults readers with the very control mechanisms that Burroughs critiques. Indeed, this assault encompasses and accounts for the most fundamental paradox in Burroughs' corpus. On the one hand, the fiction continually delights in pornographic displays of eroticism and the pleasures of embodiment; it represents junk as

lamentably beyond these pleasures because it is a “need without feeling and without body, earthbound ghost need” (19). Junk makes its user a “grey, junk-bound ghost... El Hombre Invisible,” divesting him or her of “sex and all the sharp pleasures of the body” (61). This is because, as Burroughs argues elsewhere, “AFFECT—emotion” represents the “unpredictable factor” that “Any machine tries to absorb, eliminate” (3). Hence, Burroughs makes clear that the cut-ups themselves produce liberation through affective stimulation. In *The Ticket That Exploded*, the cut-ups created by the characters engender “produc[e] a strong erotic reaction. Curiously enough the content of the tape doesn't seem to effect the result” (18). Encountering the *form* of the cut-ups then, regardless of their actual content, may have a “sexual effect” on the reader. On the other hand, affective embodiment represents the very mechanism through which the Controllers of the novels subject humanity. For example, one such parasite is “engaged by silver cord to all erogenous zones—lives along the divide line—is an amphibious two-sexed actor half-man half-woman,” and these parasites produce “Muttering addicts of the orgasm drug, boneless in the sun... eaten alive by crab men” (*Ticket* 159-60; *The Soft Machine* 107-08). Indeed, the Controllers in *Nova Express* denounce Hassan i Sabbah's liberatory appeal to “cold windy bodiless rock” in favor of “all pleasures of the body,” which they offer through orgasmic delights and love.

Why do the cut-up novels embrace both positions—affect as the path to contingency and human freedom, and affect as the seductive locus of control? I argue that the contradiction allows Burroughs to focus on the erotic pleasures of the body and dismiss these representations as parasitic control mechanisms; consequently, the fiction eludes the representational prohibitions placed on homosexual desire. *Naked Lunch*'s most famous scene—Dr. Benway's “talking asshole” routines—provides a clue to how the spectral form of the cut-up novels' subvert the censor. In this brief scene, a carnival performer teaches his anus to speak on command. However, the anus

takes on a life of its own: it talks, grows teeth, eats, drinks, demands "equal rights," and yearns for a lover to kiss it the "same as any other mouth" (120). Slowly, the anus consumes the performer by sealing his face within un-D.T. (undifferentiated tissue). Despite the many interpretations of this surreal narrative, critics often pass over the statement that Benway makes immediately afterward:

That's the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through between bureaus, because there's always a space *between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, giving away the basic American rottenness, spurting out like breaking boils, throwing out globs of that un-D.T. to fall anywhere and grow into some degenerate cancerous life-form, reproducing a hideous random image. Some would be entirely made of penis-like tissue, others viscera barely covered over with skin, clusters of 3 and 4 eyes together, criss-cross of mouth and assholes, human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell. 121, original emphasis

In what possible sense does the "talking asshole" narrative constitute "sex that passes the censor"? I argue that the scene is meant to evoke the spectral horror of queerness. It does so, however, by substituting the desirous gay man for an asshole—substituting the subject position for the orifice with which he is culturally associated. Akin to Lee, the asshole yearns to become a subject worthy of social inclusion and mutual desire; it also becomes a consumer and agent rather than merely a passive orifice for excretion. Yet this scene passes the "censor" precisely because it does not read as sex or sexuality but as horror. Indeed, Benway's description of DT globs spurting over humanity similarly substitutes a sexual image (ejaculation) for a horrifying image (hideous mutations in humanity). Thus, I take Benway's speech as a meta-discourse about *Naked Lunch*'s own formal critique of "the basic American rottenness." Like the anus, the text will secrete un-D.T. that will reduce readers to monstrous, spectral

beings; their mouths and assholes will become crossed; their genitals will morph and even fall away. The novel thus collapses the dynamic of subject and object, self and other, that kept readers at a distance in Burroughs' *Junky* and *Queer*. Here readers are consumed by a text that has grown utterly cancerous, and the result is that it mutates the undifferentiated reader, breaking them into parts and switching them at random. In short, the reader, as a result of the text that passes the censor, will become monstrously spectral. Therefore, the representation of affect as a monstrous parasite—however true it may be for Burroughs' cosmology—also allows him to explicitly depict the pleasures of embodiment while simultaneously denouncing them as cancerous.

As we have already seen, Burroughs also describes his spectral prose style as a cancer. However, a key shift has taken place. Previously, the cancerous prose surface represented the non-reception of a routine by a lover or listener; its spectral elements expressed the writer's or speaker's frustrated desires as they ricocheted against the walls of his own mind. Now, the cancerous text represents a social critique and an attack on the “white reader.” The more cancerous, the more boils spurting, the more critical of “the basic American rottenness.” Thus, the cancerous prose now reflects the horrors of the social world itself, and it rewrites the reader within the discursive terms of monstrosity and horror that have been written onto homosexuals.<sup>26</sup> Based on these assaults on the reader, it may seem as if the cut-up novels have a solely antagonistic relationship with its reading public. If this were the case, then the novels may only be subversive and negative, as many critics suggest; they would not share in the “utopian” or anticipatory project of Burroughs' later fiction, which strives to actually represent queer forms of social, erotic, and even political community. In the final

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<sup>26</sup> Crucially, cancer is also Benway's (and *Naked Lunch*'s) central metaphor for political control: “Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer,” because bureaus are “always reproducing more of its own kind, until it chokes the host if not controlled or excised” (121).

section, however, I conclude that critics have ignored the way that the spectral poetics of the cut-up novels substitutes for a more realistic and overt representation of queer sociality. This substitution is due, in part, to the representational censors we have seen Burroughs suffer, critique, and elude. By looking to the spectral litanies of the cut-up novels, we can see how queer sociality, in a pre-Stonewall context, demands experimental forms to represent it.

### **The Phantoms of Queer Sociability**

Flirting with Allerton in *Queer*, just before they have sex, Lee speaks to him in “baby talk” and says, “Wouldn’t it be booful is we should juth run together into one gweat big blob.... Am I giving you the horrors?” (100). This iteration of “giving the horrors” suggests another dynamic for Burroughs’ spectral form—one that is less antagonistic, more playful and seductive.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, the seduction remains veiled in irony; the dialect of baby talk pretends that the desire for merging into a “blob” is infantile. Yet the desire is expressed nonetheless, and even though Allerton claims to be horrified, both participants know that they share a mutual yearning for physical and emotional communion, if only in this moment. After all, flirtation often relies on an ironized surface discourse of denial. Taking that irony at face value, however, has led many critics to read Burroughs’ pre-Stonewall fiction as totally disinterested in affirming queer “community.” By community, critics tend to mean the representation of a social group that signifies as a viable political alternative and an explicit challenge to the established (specifically capitalist, bureaucratic, and heteronormative) social order.<sup>28</sup> For example, Murphy argues that the cut-ups are marked by “cynicism”

<sup>27</sup> Ginsberg himself suggests a way of reading Burroughs’ routines as veiled seductions. He calls them “an exquisite black-humorous fantasy... and a parody of his [Burroughs’] feelings, lest his desire be considered offensive... The reader will thus recognize many of the ‘routines,’ that later became *Naked Lunch*, as conscious projections of Burroughs’ love-fantasies—further explanations and parodies and models of our ideal love schlupp together” (qtd. in Murphy 144). On the signification of the “schlupp” in Burroughs’ fiction, see Douglas Kahn.

<sup>28</sup> For insightful alternatives to this critical tendency, see especially Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*. Both texts elaborate

that denies a “commitment to social change” and the production of “new social groups” (5, 145). These texts “negate the given social order but refuse to offer new forms of social organization” (5).<sup>29</sup> Note the language of “refusal” here, as if the texts are denying something that they can actually offer. Critics lament the cut-up and sixties novels for their lack of affirming social communities, and they claim that the cut-up method is an unable to imagine a new social order.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, Burroughs's later, less experimental novels—beginning with *The Wild Boys* (1971) and culminating with his late “trilogy,” *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), and *The Western Lands* (1987)--represent anarchist, homosexual, and

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convergent methodologies for interpreting virtual, untimely, anticipatory, or utopian queer social forms within seemingly debased, obscene, fantastical, or trivial representations.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Ihab Hassan claims that “we are never certain of what he affirms” (66). Skerl argues that “Burroughs’ utopian fantasies are always placed in the past or in the future as alternative realities that can prompt change in the present, but they are never portrayed as existing in present time... They are utopian as a *force*, not as literal images of the ideal community (192-93). Katherine Hayles writes that “the emphasis remains on subversion and disruption rather than creative rearticulation” (220). Harris states that a new social order cannot be made “with a Stanley knife” (197). Finally, Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue that the cut-up method preserves social order because “in the supplementary dimension of folding, unity continues its spiritual labor...No typographical, lexical, or even syntactical cleverness is enough to make it [the multiple] heard. The multiple *must be made*” (*Thousand* 6). Regarding the question of creation, Burroughs himself notes that the “the machine can only repeat your instructions since it can not create anything” (*NE* 85). Thus, he represents machines as incapable of interpreting and resisting. They are therefore susceptible to repetition. Repetition, via the cut-up, can be viewed as a performative enactment of this process so self-destruction. In short, the cut-up may not be intended to *create* in the ways that these critics imply.

<sup>30</sup> For the primary development of this argument, see Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks*. Murphy's synthesis of Burroughs' literature and Deleuze's philosophy is insightful, and it enriches the reading of both. At the same time, Murphy consistently subordinates the analysis of homosexuality in Burroughs in favor an all-encompassing, unmarked “desire.” While the latter exists in Burroughs' fiction, my argument attempts to show how provocatively this conceit of desire or eros enables critical possibilities for homosexuality in Burroughs' historical moment. Murphy's claim about (unmarked) social communities is also indicative of a critical trend that seeks “explicit” representations without analyzing the historical conditions of possibility for distinct or indistinct representations of community. Still, I find Murphy's analysis of “radical fantasy” in *The Wild Boys* highly convincing, and our accounts of spectrality (fantasy, in his terms) converge in central ways. My primary disagreement is historical—I see the roots of the spectral much earlier in Burroughs' work, and I see its emergence as tied to social prohibitions rather than other causes.

revolutionary collectives. Yet Burroughs' early experimental novels must be assessed in relationship to the constraints on queer sexuality in pre-Stonewall America.

To be sure, Burroughs is rightly understood as an individualistic, even anti-social, writer. "There are no good relationships—There are no good words" (*Ticket* 85) could serve as his manifesto, a condensed version of the "symbiosis con" in which *all* relationships inhabit the space of parasitic power relations (one host, one parasite, no possible compromise or mutual interest). The parasitic relation captures Burroughs' typical anti-social tendency and his libertarian ideologies. But there is an intense ambivalence regarding "sociability" in his fiction that critics have obscured. Alfred Kazin, for example, depicts Burroughs as a "victim of solitude" who possesses a lamentable "infatuation with the storeroom of his own mind," which results in a lack of affirming social alternatives in favor of self-indulgence (117-18). Yet, as Michael Warner suggests, texts that seek to rewrite the divisions of public and private, which buttress the definition of sociality, can often read as "debased narcissism" (*Publics* 62). After all, publicity "requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private," and as we have seen, Burroughs' fiction refuses to repress the erotic or abject body. I would argue this refusal leads to the very ironization of "universalist" discourses that Lee articulates in *Queer* and *Junky*. In his coming out routine, for example, he tells Allerton about Bobo, the "wise old queen," who instructed him to "bear my burden proudly for all to see, to conquer prejudice and ignorance and hate with knowledge and sincerity and love" (39-40). Tragically, Bobo dies in a car accident, and Lee claims that

Then I knew the meaning of loneliness. But Bobo's words came back to me from the tomb, the sibilants cracking gently. 'No one is ever really alone. You are part of everything alive.' The difficulty is to convince someone else he is really part of you, so what the hell? Us parts ought to work together. Reet? 40

Often read as a parody of coming out stories and sentimental platitudes (about human community, spiritual community, and liberalism), this passage also points up the way Lee that rhetorically ironizes communal discourses to demand the inclusion of queer bodies and desires. Indeed, he follows Bobo's advice, again flirting with Allerton by telling him that "we are all parts of a tremendous whole. No use fighting it." There is no use fighting precisely because the "tremendous whole" must include homosexuals. Rather than rejecting communalism, then, it is more apt to say that Burroughs refuses any vision of the communal that disavows the queer body from its body politic.

Thus, the ambivalence about sociality in Burroughs' fiction stems from the homophobic restrictions that limit the possibility of bringing these communities into being in a rigidly heteronormative society.<sup>31</sup> This ambivalence is expressed at the outset of Burroughs' first novel, *Junky*. Lee begins the novel by narrating his failure to establish community with queer and marginal figures. He hopes his "romantic attachment" with a boy will provide an escape from the "dullness of a Midwest suburb where all contact with life was shut out" (xxxviii). Yet they are arrested for vandalism and theft, and Lee's lover "packed [him] in' because the relationship was endangering his standing with the group. I saw there was no compromise possible with the group, the others, and I found myself a good deal alone." This relationship endangers the lover not simply because Lee is a criminal because because the relationship itself is criminal; after all, this is a historical moment in which homosexuality, encoded in Lee's desire for "contact with life," is a crime. Crucially, homosexual relations are opposed to "compromise" with the social group—Lee experiences the two as mutually exclusive. Hence, Lee idealizes the autobiography of a criminal, aptly entitled *You Can't Win*, which suggests that prison is the only viable

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<sup>31</sup> As D'Emilio and Freedman explain, "the discourse on sexuality expanded enormously [in the culture of the postwar period], blurring the distinction between private and public that characterized middle-class life in the previous century... On the other hand, even as the erotic seemed to permeate American life, white middle-class America struggled to maintain sexual boundaries" (277).



space for marginal subjects to survive. Yet Lee absolutely desires a viable social community. After suffering exclusion at his Ivy League college, Lee meets a group of wealthy, cosmopolitan homosexuals. In them, “I saw a way of life, a vocabulary, references, a whole symbol system, as the sociologists say. But these people were jerks for the most part and, after an initial period of fascination, I cooled off on the set-up” (xxxix). Crucially, *Junky* contrasts the homosexual “way of life” to junk, which similarly is defined as “not a kick. It is a way of life” (xli). The difference, however, is social—junk teaches the user that “no one can help anyone else,” and it “short-circuits sex. The drive to non-sexual sociability comes from the same place sex comes from, so when I have an H or M shooting habit I am non-sociable” (104). Junk provides a relief from *social desire* which is also a sexual desire. Although Lee desires both of these relations (social and sexual), their frustration is painful. Hence, he continually wishes for asexual transcendence, the desire for “momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh” (128). In one sense, this desire for transcendence demonstrates the strength of homophobia on Burroughs’ fiction. At the same time, he wishes for that “uncut kick that *opens out* instead of narrowing down like junk” (my emphasis). Opening out would mean accessing the queer sociability that he desires, rather than narrowing down into an a-social, uncommunicative being. Indeed, as *Naked Lunch* makes painfully clear, the junkie suffers “permanent backbrain depression and a state much like terminal schizophrenia: complete lack of affect, autism, virtual absence of cerebral event” (32-33). As a consequence, the junkie has “no affective connotation” with people that are present because “my affect having been disconnected by the junk man for the non-payment” (209). Thus, *Junky* concludes with a desire that, I suggest, remains central to Burroughs’ sixties texts and beyond—namely, a kick that *opens the subject out* affectively, dissolving him into a social field without sacrificing his queerness.

How, then, does the spectral form of the cut-up novels inflect the representation of this ambivalence about queer sociality? On the one hand, the novels deploy spectrality in an equivalent manner to *Queer*; they represent a great deal of homosexual sex and eroticism, but these interactions are cast in melancholic terms, signifying the impossibility of these relations in the novel's present. In *The Ticket That Exploded*, for example, two lovers meet in a "ruined warehouse swept by winds of time," surrounded by "ectoplasmic flakes of old newspapers," and they lie on a "mattress twisted and molded by absent tenants—ghost rectums, spectral masturbating afternoons reflected in the tarnished mirror—" (6-7). Here the poetics of spectrality express a melancholic temporality. Indeed, the cut-up novels are littered with spaces akin to this warehouse, which is haunted by the absence of queer inhabitants. At the same time, these melancholic spaces imply that they were not always absent, that the mirror once reflected untarnished encounters. By doing so, the spectral poetics instantiates a pastoral, almost Edenic, queer space. Even if that space never existed in reality, the scenes savor and construct the possibility of such sociability. Following the trajectory established in *Queer*, these scenes inevitably reveal the tentative nature of queer sociality. Thus, we see the two lovers as they

twisted free of human coordinates rectums merging in a rusty swamp smell—  
 spurts of semen fell through the blue twilight of the room like opal chips—The  
 air was full of flicker ghosts who move with the speed of light through  
 orgasms of the world—tentative beings taking form for a few seconds in  
 copulations of light—Mineral silence through the two bodies stuck together in  
 a smell of KY and rectal music fell apart in time currents swept back into  
 human form-- 7

Not only are these pleasures obstructed by the return to human form, they also give way to control scenarios; thus, Bradley finds himself subsequently consumed by The

Green Octopus and parasitic Garden of Delights in the following scene (8). Yet, these “tentative” beings nonetheless express a temporary moment of contact. Their merging rectums—meeting like kissing lips—give way to a chorus of “flicker ghosts” that literally possess the entire world through orgasms. For one moment, queer desire is universalized, and its social dispersal is made possible by the discourse of spectrality, which provides a temporary reprieve from the limitations of embodied “human” form. Of course, the poetic corollary to this embodied reprieve is a similar divestiture of form. Hence, the cut-ups similarly shed narrative sequence and express, in countless litanies, the melancholic latency of queer desire. During a sex scene with Johnny and an unnamed Mexican boy, for example, there appears “spectral smell of empty condoms down along penny arcades and mirrors—Forgotten shadow actors walk beside you—” (*The Soft Machine* 61). These images evoke the spectral past: condoms empty because the users are long gone, and condoms empty of ejaculate and thus unused. The empty condoms condense the tone of loss, of spaces for sex and communalism with nothing to mirror now, shadows forgotten, like the actor, yet persisting beside you even if you have forgotten.

On the other hand, the spectral form goes beyond this compensatory and melancholic function, and the crucial difference lies in these very poetic litanies. I argue that the spectral litany substitutes for a kind of ecstatic communalism that does not represent subjects or defined selves in “human form.” These ectoplasmic blobs, which the prose surface mirrors in its agglutinating tendency toward lists of abjection and eroticism, evoke a desire for social possibility, for the kick that “opens out” rather than narrowing down, for the kind of universal communalism that does not require the repression of certain bodies and desires to exist.<sup>32</sup> The irony around “merging” blobs that we saw in *Queer* disappears and, in its place, the text itself becomes deliriously

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<sup>32</sup> I draw the term agglutinating from Ngai's work on Stein's style. See “Stuplimity” in *Ugly Feelings*.

—and earnestly—ectoplasmic. Take, for example, the famous “Hassan's Rumpus Room” routine in *Naked Lunch*. Although not evidently produced through the cut-up method, this scene anticipates and prefigures the style that the cut-up litanies will share. The narration of the orgy itself gives way to thumbnail sketches of various, surreal forms of eroticism, which themselves become increasingly compressed—from two or three sentences to mere phrases. Indeed, the scene culminates in

Pictures of men and women, boys and girls, animals, fish, birds, the copulating rhythm of the universe flows through the room, a great blue tide of life.

Vibrating, soundless hum of deep forest—sudden quiet of cities when the junky copes. A moment of stillness and wonder. Even the Commuter buzzes clogged lines of cholesterol for contact. 74

The primary image here—the rhythmic eros of the universe—foregrounds what lies behind the ectoplasmic litanies in the cut-ups—namely, the attempt to make legible the perverse desire that binds together the universe *in its perversity*. The entire universe becomes one orgy here, and crucially, that “copulating rhythm,” in its expansive plenitude, is contrasted to the “sudden quiet” produced when the junky grapples with the junk addiction that narrows down. When the litany is at its most ecstatic, however, it pushes its subjects and objects towards the threshold of non-distinction. Hence, we have mere “men and women,” not the highly specified set of figures previously detailed (Aztec priests, naked life guards, etc). In the rush of eros, the world becomes an abstract blur of communalism. One might object that the consequence of spectral abstraction is a drive toward asociality, insofar as Burroughs' cut-up novels rarely delineate actual social worlds. His litanies are quite unlike Walt Whitman's, which famously index an entire urban milieu through citations of different classes and social types. If Whitman's litanies are historical, Burroughs are purposely *anti*-historical.<sup>33</sup> They do not seek to “represent” the social as it is or as it could be. I

<sup>33</sup> The cut-up undoes temporality via its associative gravity, pulling the reader in

would insist, however, that this refusal attests to the cut-up's drive to negate the heteronormative world as it exists. It projects onto language itself the dynamics it wishes to bring into being. This is clear in *Naked Lunch*'s explication of language:

The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth, in and out fore and aft like an innaresting sex arrangement. This book spill off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yipes and the slamming steel shutters of commerce, screams of pain and pathos and screams plain pathic, copulating cats and outraged squawk of the displaced bull head, prophetic mutterings of brujo in nutmeg trances, snapping necks and screaming mandrakes, sigh of orgasm, heroin silent as dawn in the thirsty cells. 207

Here language possesses the disjunction expressed by Burroughs' experimental prose. Divided into units, there is no linearity, continuity, or necessary order to found. At the same time, the word takes on the proliferating, ecstatic, and agglutinating capacity that is characteristic of the litanies. Crucially, the proliferation maps social and geographic visions onto the affects of the body—the books spills out into sights, screams, sighs, mutters, medleys, farts, junk cravings, and orgasms. If, as Warner argues, “the modern hierarchy of faculties and its imagination of the social are mutually implying,” then Burroughs' realignment of the faculties here aims toward a new imagination of the social that acknowledges the abject and desirous as driving forces of an *embodied* sociality (*Publics* 116).

Yet, this imagination of sociality is defined by its non-distinction, its lack of form or definition. This conceit is reflected in the novels' representation of the Nova Police, who are similarly defined in negative terms. As the District Supervisor

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retrospective and prospective directions at once. Burroughs' representation of the melancholic eroticism and ectoplasmic utopia are the figural corollaries of this formally produced temporality.

explains, “In this organization, Mr Lee, we do not encourage togetherness, *esprit de corps*. We do not give our agents the impression of belonging” (*Ticket* 9). Not wanting him to follow orders, he insists that “This is in point of fact a *non-organization* the aim of which is to immunize our agents against fear despair and death” (10). On the one hand, non-organization resists the bureaucratic control mechanisms of Benway and the Nova Mob. Indeed, the Nova Police frequently claim that they will disperse upon the dissolution of social control, refusing to perpetuate any hierarchy that remains in the Mob's absence. On the other hand, non-organization allows for the kind of social non-distinction that enables the fiction to celebrate erotic communalism. Hence, the cut-up advocates the idea that “everybody splice himself in with everybody else yes boy’s that’s me here by the cement mixer” (165). In effect, this blobbing of people evades the parasitic relations, even if only for a brief time. Indeed, the parasite explains that

I am alone but not what you call ‘lonely’—Loneliness is a product of dual mammalian structure—‘Loneliness,’ ‘love,’ ‘friendship,’ all the rest of it—I am not two—I am *one*—But to maintain my state of oneness I need twoness in other life forms—Other must talk so that I can remain silent—That makes two ones makes two and I am no longer one—77

The parasite possesses individual oneness, but it survives on the division within humans. Even if Burroughs expresses the modernist drive toward redeeming the human individual, his formal appeal to the communal evades the binary of whole or divided. It allows for a kind of divided whole that, because it is dis-organized, evades hierarchical division.

Thus the cut-up novels reject the kinds of social organization available, and they insist that any new definition of the body politic must proceed through the queer body. This is clearest in *The Ticket That Exploded*, which recurrently depicts an

ecstatic and erotic dissolution of subjects into communal blobs. Bradley, for example, enters a sense withdrawal tank with ten other men. Floating in darkness, the

two halves of ten bodies permuted to heartbeat body music vibrating through the tank—Body outlines extend and break here—The stretching membrane of skin dissolves—Sudden taste of blood in his throat as gristle vaporizes and the words wash away and the halves of his body separated like a mold—Fish sperm drifted through the tank in silent explosions—Skeletons floated and the crab parasites of the nervous system and the gray cerebral dwarf made their last attempt to hold prisoners in spine and brain coordinates—screaming “You can't—You can't—You can't”—Screaming without a throat without speech centers as the brain split down the middle and the feed-back sound shut off in a blast of silence. 83

Although the parasites scream and die here, and the scene concludes with surgeons extracting the crab parasites from Bradley's brain and spine, the doctors lament that “other parasites will invade sooner or later” (85). Thus, the ecstatic permutation of bodies, brains, and sperm does not lead to a complete utopian space beyond control. However, any path toward liberation proceeds through this homoerotic, ecstatic process—one that challenges the spectral parasites lacking throats and bodies by splitting the subject's body apart.

Of course, these scenes of literal, embodied permutation function as narrative analogies for the formal permutation of text which, in *Ticket*, approaches the limits of nonsensical delirium. As we have seen, the novels insist that the cut-up has an “erotic reaction” regardless of its content. Yet even more importantly, *Ticket* stresses that “In fact the same sexual effect can be produced by splicing in street recordings recorded by two subjects *separately*” (18, my emphasis). Therefore, we must understand the form of Burroughs' experimental writing as enabling a social encounter or communal

space. Although critics have consistently emphasized the disjunctive *cut* of the cut-up fold-in method, we cannot forget the *fold* as establishing new lines of association where none existed before. This is why the cut-up novels are packed with graphic em-dashes. Surely, the prose would be far more schizophrenic and disorienting if Burroughs excised these cues. But they function to remind the reader, in nearly every line, of the suturing function of the ecstatic litany of the Word. The Word agglutinates, gathers, stitches, and weaves. If association is often taken in the semantic or signifying sense, it also, I contend, implies a social association, a bringing together of bodies. Thus, it is essential that the form itself, regardless of its content, produces an erotic effect that can work even if its producers and consumers are physically *separate*. In effect, Burroughs theorizes that the form can produce an erotic encounter without any representation of eroticism and without any bodies present to the affair. This fantasy eludes the censor on homosexual desire, as we have seen, but it also allows Burroughs to envision the poetics of cut-up fold-in as an erotic, yet spectral, encounter among countless participants. In this sense, the style expresses a displaced desire for queer communalism. However, this form of sociality—which is paradoxically formless—cannot be represented yet, only grasped toward like a protoplasmic arm outstretched toward the other.

To understand why queer communalism need be represented in such displaced terms, we need only recall the Court's concern over *Naked Lunch's* representation of political parties consisting of homosexuals. The conceit that homosexuals would be represented positively (not pathologically) as a social group was absurd; the implication that homosexuals would have politically transformative desires was obscene in the exact terms established by the laws of censorship—namely, opposed to any conceivable standard of “social value.” As we have seen, Burroughs' form attacks the very meaning of “social” in a number of queer ways. Yet to see this curiously



spectral form as political, queer, or critical has required a particular reading practice—one that attends to the enabling, critical possibilities created by linguistic and narrative significations of spectral delirium. It is no coincidence that Burroughs' post-sixties fiction becomes (relatively) more representational, linear, and novelistic at the same time that it begins to narrate alternative social configurations in more explicit ways. This is because the lived experience and discursive terms for sexuality, sexual politics, and community radically change after the sixties. This new situation allows and demands new narrative tools. Yet we cannot forget the power that experimental writing has to pass the censors and repressions around homosexuality in the pre-Stonewall moment. Although Burroughs' fiction becomes somewhat more realistic, the tradition of queer writing will continue to take up experimental forms to challenge, elude, and redefine social and representational prohibitions in other key historical moments, where the representation of dissident sexuality meets social restrictions. Lee, or Burroughs, or whoever narrates the conclusion *Naked Lunch* confronts precisely these prohibitions when the narrator laments: “I don't know how to return it to the white reader” (202). He or she explains that, “You can write or yell or croon about it...paint about it...act about it...shit it out in mobiles....*So long as you don't go and do it....*” Despite this relative representational freedom,

Senators leap up and bray for the Death Penalty with inflexible authority of virus yen...Death for dope fiends, death for sex queens (I mean fiends) death for the psychopathy who offends the cowed and graceless flesh with broken animal innocence of lithe movement.... 202

Here the narration plays coy, performing a Freudian slip as a satirical commentary on the pressure that the law (represented these braying Senators) places on mere representation. This is precisely how the text “returns it to the white reader,” but the narration expresses, I believe, a real concern when it states that it does not know how

to achieve this act. How can Burroughs' experimental writing give the horrors if the law itself saps the visceral field of representation by demarcating it as a space of compensatory fantasy—a place where you can write about it so long as you don't go and do it?

Perhaps the greatest irony, then, is that the generic tradition of queer experimental is shaped by the very law that seeks to censor queer representation. When the Court insists that “Lest anyone take this seriously, of course, obviously it [*Naked Lunch*] is a fantasy,” they miss one crucial problem (xxvi). In some cases, the limitation of fantasy to one subject of the text can contribute to the very legal and social pathologies that the Court wishes to maintain. Quite surprisingly, the vision of the text as a total fantasy, a complete delirium, one that swallows everyone and everything into it, can be even more threatening and queerly seductive. A naked lunch, in this case, ultimately becomes more threatening than a naked lust. This is precisely why Burroughs adopts the very discourse of dreaming.

Of course life is literally a dream, or rather the projection of a dream. That is why political action fails, just as attempts to coerce neurosis with so-called will-power always fail. But the whole existing system can be *dreamed away* if we get enough people dreaming on the Gysin level. There is nothing can stop the power of a real dream. I mean this literally. 398

Of course, the substitution of dreaming for “political action” sounds like apolitical wish-fulfillment, especially if taken “literally” as Burroughs wishes. Yet perhaps the vision of mass dreaming through the Gysin level (the cut-up fold-in method) now signifies as a spectral social possibility. If enough people participate, then *nothing* can stop the power of a “real dream.” We can now hear in that “nothing” the strictures of homophobic pathology and control. The insistence on the literal, the “real” dream, need not only be a claim about dreams as such. It can also be read as a performative

claim about how the discourse of dreaming can, when displaced from the solitary subject, make critical and creative possibilities newly available for queer forms of sociability.

## Chapter 2:

### Reading in Crisis:

#### Queer Hermeneutics in Samuel Delany's Para-Academic AIDS Fiction

At the 1994 OutWrite Convention, an audience member asked a panel of young LGBT authors, “What do you think of experimental writing for gay writers?” (Delany *About* 226). Norman Wong, an author and teacher of creative writing, responded with vitriolic disdain for the genre. “No experimentation!” Wong declared, “Experimental writing is just bad writing... It mutes and muddies your ideas, makes for dull reading, and loses you your audience. So don't do it.” Wong aptly captures the popular critiques of experimental writing—it's boring, insular, and incoherent; it's bad writing and bad reading. The audience responded to Wong's assessment with enthusiastic applause, with perhaps one notable exception. Samuel Delany, who was also in attendance, was distressed. In his view, Wong and the audience reveal more than an aesthetic preference for mainstream fiction. They speak to the success of a generalized “publishing mentality” among marginalized writers and readers, a mindset which prioritizes marketability over intellectual or formal concerns. At the same time, the panel and audience indicate that experimental writing no longer provides a medium for representing contemporary queer interests. After all, Wong does not address the central point of the audience member's question—namely, what are the possibilities and consequences of experimental writing for gay writers. Putting aside, for the moment, the complex question of what defines a “gay writer,” Wong's purely aesthetic judgment obscures the contexts in which experimental writing has been, and continues to be, useful for queer representation.<sup>1</sup> One subtext for this entire exchange, then, is the shifting historical relationship between experimental aesthetics and queer publics. After all, Delany notes that many of the featured panelists share

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<sup>1</sup> Delany addresses this issue in “The 'Gay' Writer / 'Gay Writing'...?” in *Shorter Views*.

“just the sense of [social] crisis that, a decade and a half ago I had (when I decided to write a novel about AIDS)” (226). However, “they no longer see experimental writing as a way to deal with it aesthetically.”

What accounts for this shift in the perception of experimental writing by queer authors? Although Delany does not provide an answer, he speculates that “the codification of it in textbooks on how to write experimental fiction and poetry and academic considerations, even such as this one, have something to do with that [the rejection of the experimental], however indirectly” (*About* 226-27). As I will show, Delany's speculation provides an important clue to his own experimental fictions, which have a complexly antagonistic relationship with academic culture that critics have yet to recognize. Indeed, Delany sees experimental aesthetics as a way to unsettle the codification of conventional norms for reading, which are, in his narratives, often articulated by academics. This is why he praises experimental writing as a genre that productively “retards readability” (213). By forcing readers to “virtually learn how to read” anew, experimental writing provides him with a para-academic mode to reflect on—and to expand—the very meaning of “readability” for queer publics within the context of the AIDS crisis (234).

“Para-academic,” as I define it, encompasses modes of writing that are explicitly engaged with, responsive to, and invested in institutionally produced academic knowledge—but writing that is, itself, not derived from the academy and is not legible as knowledge because it does not conform to the genres of discourse authorized as academic knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Exemplifying this genre, Delany's experimental writing both draws on and critiques a wide-range of academic knowledge, from

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<sup>2</sup> Delany views academic writing as another paraliterary genre. While I agree with this definition in formalist terms, I stress the differences of institutional authority between academic and para-academic writing. As I show in Delany's fiction, the former is accepted as knowledge by academic institutions whereas the latter has a far more ambiguous status. For a convergent approach to the para-academic, which use different terminology, see Judith Halberstam's discussion of “low theory” in *The Queer Art of Failure*.

statistical analyses of HIV seroconversion to canonical works of post-structural literary theory. But it does so through experimentally hybrid, non-canonical literary forms. For example, Delany's first AIDS novel, *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1984), mixes fantasy fiction ("sword-and-sorcery"), meta fictional autobiography about the AIDS crisis, and an intertextual engagement with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*. Similarly, Delany's second AIDS-related novel, *The Mad Man* (1994), cross-pollinates pornography (what he calls "pornotopic fantasy"), the academic novel, mystery fiction, and Greek and Romantic philosophy (especially Diogenes, Nietzsche, and Hegel). As I will demonstrate, Delany's promiscuous blending of genres reveals how experimental writing has been critically significant for queer critiques of academic knowledge, particularly in the midst of AIDS.

Yet I argue that Delany's experimental writing exemplifies a much broader historical tension between queer and academic cultures—a tension that has been paradoxically obscured by the partial legitimization of queer theory within the academy in the aftermath of AIDS. Para-academic discourse has been—and continues to be—central to queer culture. This is because queer culture often refutes strict divisions between institutionally authorized and non-authorized knowledge.<sup>3</sup> However, the para-academic does not simply produce different objects or contents of knowledge. Rather, para-academic discourse, I contend, provides a symbolic forum for experimenting with different interpretative practices. In other words, para-academic discourse does not assume, in advance, what counts as knowledge. The struggle to define interpretation, as well as the content of its knowledge, is a central aspect of the para-academic formal project. Elizabeth Freeman touches on this point in her recent

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner echoes this point when he describes the queer circulation of sexual knowledge outside of authorized channels: "Circulating knowledge about sex, especially knowledge not already pleasing to 'community standards,' is a way to make that [ethics of sexual] autonomy available in a less distorted way" (*Trouble* 16).

analysis of queer experimental aesthetics when she claims that “hermeneutics [is] the property of art as well as criticism” and that hermeneutics “indirectly feeds the making of new [queer] social forms across space and time” (xix). I share Freeman's view that hermeneutic practice is a creative and perversely common property of queer culture and critique. However, I stress the tension that remains between art and critique in queer culture, precisely because the academic space has produced such intense discursive violence against queer bodies. Of course, this violence has been (and still is) clear in the psychological pathologies that frame LGBTQ identities and sexual practices as “perverse.” But for Delany, the violence is specifically tethered to the institutional knowledge offered as scientific fact and moral truth during the AIDS crisis—truths that were, in fact, infused with homophobic bias.

Therefore, I define “hermeneutic” more narrowly than Freeman. She stresses the “grasp of loving detail” as a practice of erotic and embodied knowledge—an intensely close practice of reading that embraces detail as the key to affective histories otherwise obscured by progressive historiography. By contrast, I relocate affect in the relation between a reader and a text, focusing particularly on the affects that compel and obstruct interpretative relations. Rather than stress “detail” as the centerpiece of hermeneutics then, I stress the terms of “form,” because experimental form is the symbolic medium through which Delany reconfigures both the meaning and the phenomenology of reading.<sup>4</sup> This formal reconfiguration of reading is the point of convergence between Delany's turn to experimental writing and para-academic discourse more broadly. Thus, Delany's experimental fiction provides a synoptic glimpse into the ways that para-academic discourse has developed queer hermeneutic models that redefine those traditionally developed within academic discourse.

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<sup>4</sup> For an entirely different approach to hermeneutics and queer theory, see Donald E. Hall's recent *Reading Sexualities: Hermeneutic Theory and the Future of Queer Studies*. Hall turns primarily to Gadamer for his conception of hermeneutics. See his first chapter, “Sexual Hermeneutics,” for a helpful explication of why queer theory has largely avoided hermeneutic theory.

My analysis of Delany provides a timely counternarrative to the history of “critical reading” as it is currently being narrated within academic criticism. The dominant tendency, evident among critics such as Timothy Bewes, Jonathan Culler, Heather Love, Sharon Marcus, Steven Best, and Eve Sedgwick, among many others, is to tell the history of critical reading as a solely disciplinary affair and, moreover, to equate critical reading with the hermeneutics of suspicion as practiced by academic critics.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Marcus and Best depict “symptomatic reading” as a method of interpretation that enabled “exchanges between [academic] disciplines” and was particularly formative for “a relatively homogeneous group of scholars who received doctoral degrees in English or comparative literature after 1983” (1). Acknowledging only the disciplinary context of literary studies, these critics obscure rich cultural experimentations in critical reading, which have developed alongside academic forms of symptomatic reading; these experimentations have even appropriated and rewritten the meaning of symptomatic reading as such. Yet, by positing academic critical reading as its only relevant form, critics have ignored hermeneutic experimentations within literary culture that do not conform to disciplinary models.

Critics have missed these experimentations precisely because, as Francois Cusset laments, academic culture has brought “harsh judgment to bear on strange or foreign readings” of critical and theoretical discourses (338). Striving to preserve our authority over “legitimate interpretations,” Cusset argues that we have ignored “felicitous misreading[s]” and “creative, even performative misprision[s]” which constitute a “vast zone in which both political and cultural values can be discovered” (337, original emphasis#). I argue that para-academic “misreading” redraws the

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<sup>5</sup> To be clear, I do not accept the seemingly monolithic equation of critical reading with symptomatic reading, because it collapses many divergent academic definitions of critical reading under one common rubric. However, I believe that one way to defamiliarize this narrative of critical reading is to look beyond academic definitions to writers who have appropriated these discourses and, crucially, responded to them in remarkably complex and innovative ways.



parameters for adjudicating the values that will define reading and critique alike.

Delany's experimental writing allows us to see how these redefinitions are not abstract or speculative, as they often are in academic criticism. Rather, para-academic queer hermeneutics are intricately keyed to their social contexts. Because their forms often appear "illegitimate," these discourses may strike readers as "dull reading" or "bad writing," to borrow Wong's phrases. Yet it is by contesting the affective relations that condition "good" writing that such experiments expand what counts as legitimate literary and cultural critique. Therefore, I will show how Delany's work unravels the predominant knotting together of critical reading and symptomatic demystification through the affects of suspicion. By constructing alternative affective relations between interpretation and critique, Delany exemplifies how para-academic discourse provocatively rewrites the meaning of "critical reading" for queer culture.

In the following section, I broaden the popular critical narrative that conflates the hermeneutics of suspicion with queer hermeneutic responses to the AIDS crisis. The AIDS crisis demanded a broad range of interpretative responses from activists, theorists, and cultural critics. I stress the divergence between these interpretative responses because of the unique problems that arise for Delany as he attempts to craft an *aesthetic* response to AIDS. By establishing Delany's critical shift in emphasis from semiotics to hermeneutics, I demonstrate how he calls for a "radical reader" to supplement the aesthetic text that is responding to the AIDS crisis. Then, I argue that his definition of reading is complexly engaged with academic theories of deconstruction. I show how Delany appropriates literary deconstruction to reflect on its legitimacy within the historical and social context of AIDS. Turning to his first experimental AIDS novel, *Plagues and Carnivals*, I then demonstrate how Delany seeks to solicit a "radical reader" through experimental form. The novel constructs a mode of "allegoresis" that reflexively attends to the problem of writing a novel about

AIDS within a moment when that historical context cannot yet be stably codified. The novel's complex formal attention to the violence of reading demands vigilant critical attention to the exclusions caused by academic and political discourses around the "plague." I then turn to *The Mad Man* to show how Delany's para-academic form changes in the aftermath of AIDS. Although the academy remains a site of contestation, Delany creates a para-academic character that passes between divergent sexual and discursive economies. *The Mad Man* therefore complicates *Plagues and Carnivals*' hermeneutics of exclusion by demonstrating how these economies can enable marginal spaces of queer pleasure. It thus recuperates pleasure (specifically sexual pleasure) as an important interpretative referent, one that the para-academic critic is uniquely poised to read. The novel's pornographic form therefore documents the experience of gay male sexuality in the midst of AIDS. Yet it also rereads this historical moment to reveal the diversity of queer sexualities that have been silenced by AIDS (and post-AIDS) "safe sex" discourses. Taken together, Delany's novels demonstrate that para-academic forms of experimental writing have been central to the aesthetic and critical response to the AIDS crisis. But more importantly, his fiction underscores why queer criticism should not abandon interpretation as a focus of critical concern. Indeed, I conclude that queer theory must see interpretation itself as a historically sedimented form of cultural inheritance. If queer criticism wishes to maintain an active historical relationship to the AIDS era, then we must attend to--and drawn on--the diversity of hermeneutic practices that era elicited.

### **Pluralizing Queer Hermeneutics**

Critics have long recognized that the AIDS crisis elicited a crisis of reading. In Paula Treichler's words, AIDS wrought an "epidemic of signification," which demanded a vigilant attention to the discursive framing of the crisis (qtd. Tucker 232).<sup>6</sup> For this reason, AIDS activists employed practices of reading that could contest

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<sup>6</sup> For the most comprehensive and incisive overview of AIDS as a crisis of reading,

a broad range of discourses. These discourses included the moralizing rhetoric of religious and political figures, the figural language that framed AIDS in militaristic terms, and even the rarefied, seemingly “objective,” languages of science, statistics, and public health. Despite the naturalized appearance of these discourses, activists had to, in Michael Warner's words, “insist over and over on the cultural construction of the discourses about AIDS” (*Fear* xii). Warner does not indicate the multifarious cultural forms in which this insistence took place, nor does he question whether terms such as “cultural construction” and “discourse” mean the same thing for non-academics as they do for academics. Rather, he posits a homology between queer and academic cultures, claiming that “Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer” (xiii). Clearly, this homology grants desperately needed legitimacy to queer practices of knowledge, especially in 1993, when Warner published his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Yet the equivalence fails to capture the singularity of queer “practical social reflection” and, crucially, the ways in which these knowledge practices respond to and break with conventional academic ones.

The legacy of this critical blind-spot is evident in contemporary critical accounts of queer hermeneutics. For example, in her paradigmatic account of reading practices in queer theory, Eve Sedgwick fundamentally equates the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in queer and critical theory with non-academic as well as activist responses to AIDS. For Sedgwick, the “hermeneutics of suspicion” encompasses the academic and non-academic range of queer responses to AIDS because this strategy of interpretation strives to demystify signs, denaturalize narratives, expose hidden causes, identify conspiratorial connections, and dispel false consciousness. Suspicious hermeneutics, what Sedgwick calls “paranoid reading,” thus cover the entire field of

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see Tucker's "A Revolution from Within: Paraliterature as AIDS Activism" in *A Sense of Wonder*. I explicate my divergence from Tucker below.

queer responses to AIDS.<sup>7</sup> After all, Sedgwick recalls, “This was a time when speculation was ubiquitous about whether the virus had been deliberately engineered or spread, whether HIV represented a plot or experiment by the U.S. military that had gotten out of control, or perhaps was behaving exactly as it was meant to” (*Touching* 123). By privileging paranoia as the common affective and hermeneutic root of queer theory and activism, Sedgwick obscures queer cultural practices, equally engaged with the politics of the crisis, that do not share the drive to demystify. Ironically, Sedgwick's essay actually points to this alternative story, if only implicitly. The essay begins with a brief anecdote about the “activist scholar” Cindy Patton, who was disinterested in the paranoid hermeneutics of AIDS activism. Patton questions the legitimacy of these suspicious narratives, wondering “what would we know then [about the crisis] that we don't already know?” Patton's disinterest in paranoid knowledge symbolizes, for Sedgwick, an alternative epistemic and critical relation to the AIDS crisis. Yet Sedgwick positions Patton as a proleptic critic of contemporary queer theory. Consequently, she misses an opportunity to explore other non-paranoid hermeneutic practices and affective relations to interpretation that were elaborated *concurrently* with the AIDS crisis.

Samuel Delany elaborates such an alternative hermeneutic, and he does so in direct response to the crisis. However, Delany's queer hermeneutics has been eclipsed in the criticism around his work due to his lengthy and explicit critical engagements with structuralism, post-structuralism, and especially semiotics. On the one hand, critics have tended to read Delany's engagements with theory as a largely one-way relationship. Even a scholar as attuned to Delany's critical originality as Jeffrey Allen Tucker writes that the author's *Neveryon* series (which includes *Plagues and*

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<sup>7</sup> In “Melanie Klein and the Difference that Affect Makes,” Sedgwick relocates paranoia as a secondary response to the predominant affects of abjection and “intense dread” that queer people suffered in the midst of AIDS (“Melanie” 639). Yet she never revises this correlation of the hermeneutics of suspicion with queer hermeneutic responses to AIDS.

*Carnivals*) “demonstrates the influence of Saussure and Peirce, often to the point where the books read as textbooks for a graduate seminar in critical theory as much as sword-and-sorcery” (118-19). Undoubtedly, Delany's essays and his novels cite luminaries of critical theory, including Saussure, Peirce, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and countless others. However, Delany does not merely dramatize their concepts, nor does he explicate them in a faithful way, as Tucker's analogy to a “textbook” implies. On the contrary, Delany's engagement with theory is dynamic, partial, and revisionary—he is seeking to “influence” conversations in the academy as much as he may be influenced by those conversations. This is no doubt why Delany includes lengthy citations of academic works by critics such as Barbara Johnson, Teresa de Lauretis, Michael Ryan, Gayatri Spivak, and lesser known critics in literary studies; he wants to give non-academic readers a context for understanding his citations to theory and, moreover, to give these readers an entrance point to theoretical discourses they might otherwise find daunting, boring, or irrelevant. (Thus, his essay, “Neither the First Word nor the Last on Deconstruction, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, and Semiotics for SF Readers,” introduces non-academic science fiction readers to theoretical discourses and speculates on the relevance of theory to the legitimation of paraliterary genres more generally.) Yet Delany is also offering a “works cited” to make evident to his academic readers that he is conversing with and contesting them, albeit in a different formal language.

On the other hand, Delany's hermeneutics have been obscured by the overwhelming critical focus on semiotics in his fiction. This focus understandably derives from the author's explicit and long-standing discussion of semiology. He has produced lengthy semiotic analyses of science fiction (in *Starboard Wine* and *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*), which have had a measurable impact in science fiction studies. And, as Tucker intimates, Delany often references theories of semiotics by Charles

Sanders Peirce, Umberto Eco, Ferdinand de Saussure, Willard Van Orman Quine and Roland Barthes.<sup>8</sup> More broadly, Delany's work continually raises questions that lie at the critical heart of semiotic inquiry: What is the relationship between the signifier and the signified? What happens to signs as they iterate into different contexts? How does a discursive context (such as a genre) delimit the signifying possibilities of a sign? How do codic systems condition and construct subjectivity and society?<sup>9</sup> Delany once declared the *Neveryon* series to be a “child's garden of semiotics,” and throughout the series he offers a critical metacommentary on how the novels correlate to certain questions pertaining to language, signification, and semiology (*Flight* 270). It has therefore been difficult to read Delany's work outside his own frame—the desire to take Delany at his word regarding the centrality and stability of “semiotics” to his work has been intense.

Yet I argue that a critical shift takes place in Delany's AIDS writing, a shift that he never discusses directly as a complication of his previous investment in semiotics. This shift exemplifies an increasing concern with hermeneutic questions—questions pertaining to reading, interpretation, reference, and truth. To be sure, his earlier work took great delight in exploiting the slippery nature of signification—deconstructing the “natural” signs of gender, race, and sexuality and utilizing these signs for subversive purposes. However, Delany's AIDS writing expresses increasing concern about the instability of signification. Let me be clear: Delany never recuperates an ontological foundation for truth, nor does he suddenly locate the grounds for transcendental meaning. Yet the “epidemic of signification” wrought by AIDS

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<sup>8</sup> Delany's semiotic analyses of science fiction has contributed to the (partial) legitimation of the genre in academic literary studies. For discussions of his influence, see especially Carl Freedman.

<sup>9</sup> For examples from Delany's earlier fiction, see especially *Babel-17* (1966), which provides a complex allegory of semiotics via alien languages. Delany's conceit of the “modular calculus” is central to *Trouble on Triton* (1976) and is addressed in *Plagues and Carnivals*. See especially *Flight from Neveryon* for his metacommentary on the modular calculus (375-377).

provokes in Delany an increasing attention to, and complication of, hermeneutic practices by readers. This anxiety is evidenced, for example, in an admission that Delany makes in a metafictional authorial aside in *Plagues and Carnivals*:

By now I'm willing to admit that perhaps narrative fiction, in neither its literary nor its paraliterary mode, can propose the *radically* successful metaphor. At best, what both modes can do is break up, analyze, dialogize the conservative, the historically sedimented, letting the fragments argue with one another, letting each display its own obsolescence, suggesting (not stating) where still another retains the possibility of vivid, radical development. But responding to those suggestions is, of course, the job of the radical reader. (The "radical metaphor" is, after all, only an interpretation of preextant words). 339, original emphasis

By beginning this passage with the phrase "By now," Delany indicates a relationship between historical context and his admission. He has been reluctant, once might say, to concede the ineffectiveness of narrative fiction as a means of "proposing the *radically* successful metaphor." But something about the time has changed his mind; he is now willing to concede the effectiveness of literary metaphors. Note, however, that Delany retains his belief in that effectiveness (what he vaguely labels radical success and radical development). He has displaced that effectiveness from the subversive sign to the subversive reader. Fiction thus retains its critical semiotics—its potential to deconstruct "historically sedimented" signs. Yet its dialogic structure can now only "*invite* a certain richness of reading;" it cannot "*assure* such a reading. That is something that can only be supplied by the radical reader" (*Shorter* 126). The text merely invites. It cannot make promises. The reader, now, has an ethical responsibility (the "job") to supply the subversive reading.

Ironically, Delany's admission takes the form of a proposition about narrative

fiction's inability to propose. It seems that Delany cannot give up the formal structure of propositions to explicate, rather than dramatize or metaphorize, this claim. His attachment to propositions indicates the truly fraught—if not traumatic—status of metaphors in Delany's AIDS writing, and it explains why Delany shifts his attention from the work of metaphor to the work of the reader of metaphor. After all, as Derrida and Delany both often note, a supplement is never merely a secondary addition to an already complete whole. Rather, a supplement implies a lack or an incompleteness, and Delany now sees the reader as a supplement to the incomplete text. What hole, then, does the “radical reader” fill for Delany? The answer to this question is suggested on the second page of *Plagues and Carnivals*, where Delany deconstructs the countless metaphors that adhere to AIDS, including “disease” and “health.” He writes,

'Dis-ease.' Non-easiness. Difficulty.

'Health.' Via the Old English 'haelp,' from the Old High German, 'heilida':  
*whole, or complete.*

Metaphors fight one another. They also adjust one another.

Can a person who is 'whole' also be 'dis-eased'?

The answer, 'Yes,' would seem to be what modern medicine is all about.

But consider a variant of the same question: 'Can a whole person be diseased?'

To answer, 'Yes,' is to give *one* answer to *two* questions with nearly diametric meanings. That the common form of the question can be deconstructed in this manner is the sign of our dis-ease before anything that might bear 'disease' as its proper designation. 176-77, original emphasis

To an extent, this passage performs one dimension of the “radical reading” for which Delany yearns in *Plagues and Carnivals*. But more importantly, it reveals that the radical reader is a necessary supplement to Delany's anxiety about the overwhelming



impossibility of stabilizing a “radical metaphor” within the discursive context of AIDS. Citing Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Delany insists that “Diseases should not become social metaphors” (176). Yet here Delany shows that even the seemingly innocuous term “disease” implies a whole range of metaphors and ideologies pertaining to health, medicine, and person-hood. Of course, metaphors “fight” and “adjust” one another, but Delany loses faith in the effectiveness of this discursive battle. In a dazzling display of deconstructive acumen, *Plagues and Carnivals* subsequently deconstructs other metaphors associated with AIDS—including those used by progressives (AIDS as “an opportunity for consciousness raising”) and conservatives (AIDS as “a Scourge of Satan, the Wrath of Kahn”) (179). In the process, Delany yearns for a “*better* metaphor,” one that can “stabilize those thoughts, images, or patterns that, *in the long run*, are useful—useful to those with the disease, to those who care for them, or even to those who only know about them” (original emphasis). Yet the overwhelming conclusion he reaches is that “metaphors by themselves are, finally, neither radical nor conservative. They gain their ideological slant only as they are read. And any attempt to pose a radical metaphor is only a more or less conscientious call for some hard work at a more or less radical reading” (*Longer* 108).<sup>10</sup>

This is an aching conclusion for a writer to make. What else can narrative do, if not construct metaphors? What other contribution can the author make? As Delany makes clear, he writes *Plagues and Carnivals* as an effort to foreground AIDS “in [the reader's] attention as something important, so that when new information arrived, it

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<sup>10</sup> Later, Delany will even see *Plagues and Carnivals*' deconstruction of metaphors as perpetuating the reactionary discourse of AIDS. He explains, the “*controlling* metaphor structure for AIDS from the very beginning was: ‘*What* metaphor shall we use for it?’ AIDS has been from the beginning a term-in-search-of-a-metaphor—and, in that sense, both her book [Sontag's *AIDS and its Metaphors*] and mine fall right *into* the controlling, dominant metaphoric structure” (*Shorter* 137, original emphasis). He insists that “by purging the disease of still *another* metaphor, we were all furthering the *dominant* discourse of the disease-with-*no*-fixed-metaphor” (original emphasis).

could and would be dealt with—rather than sloughed off and ignored” (*About* 212).

Yet the novel indicates how truly problematic that project is in novelistic terms, because any representation of AIDS (even the term AIDS itself) risks becoming complicit with discourses that could be (or could become) disabling for queer people. Hence, the novel insists that “What is most useful in the long run is what destabilizes short-run strategies, the quick glyphs, the clichés, the easy responses history has sedimented” (*Tale* 179). The desire to elicit a radical reader is therefore no mere supplement to the *Plagues and Carnivals*-- it is its central formal project, because the reader is where Delany now perceives long-term hope for challenging the immediate discursive context surrounding AIDS.

My claim thus far has been that reading becomes a newly fraught critical term in Delany's lexicon and that interpretative relations become increasingly problematic in his work as a consequence of AIDS. While Delany continues to perform a critical semiotics, he becomes increasingly interested in soliciting a reader that can enact some specific interpretative relation that will recuperate the otherwise defunct "effectiveness" of narrative fiction. Before I demonstrate how Delany uses experimental form to generate this interpretative relationship, and how this hermeneutic responds to the discursive trauma of AIDS, I want to linger on Delany's specific understanding of the “radical reader.” In particular, I want to underscore the uniquely para-academic nature of the radical reader -- it is complexly positioned against definitions of reading that Delany otherwise finds attractive in deconstruction. By analyzing his definition of reading in more detail, we can see how Delany rewrites academic discourse in an effort to establish a critical dialogue with those discourses so that they too can reflect on their implication with the AIDS crisis.

### **The Vigilance of Deconstruction**

Contemporary critiques of the hermeneutics of suspicion tend to include

deconstruction within their list of critical dispositions that perpetuate a paranoid approach to culture. However, Delany finds inspiration in deconstruction precisely because it undercuts the possibility of an omnipotent, masterful, or ultimate critical stance.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the hermeneutics of suspicion, Delany defines reading as a fundamental lack of mastery. “[T]he fine points of reading,” he claims, “lie in the margins of a mastery never ours” (*Silent* 16).<sup>12</sup> These fine points are not points of insight but rather the ways in which our insight fails to be complete. Reading, he claims, is “always a tangle of glitches, inattentions, momentary snags, occasional snoozes, chance oversights, and habitual snarls” (7). Whereas some might lament the inability to master the text, Delany sees the text's excessiveness as a way to challenge the “idealized and ultimately nonextant and masterful reader,” the one who ‘arrives’ at the complete truth of a text in a pointedly “transcendental experience of understanding” (4, 7).

Although he clearly undercuts the ideal of ultimate meaning, Delany does not sacrifice interpretative labor. “Even if blindness is inevitable,” he insists, “it is readerly vigilance that frees us” (6). The word “vigilance” might seem to echo the interpretative subject of the hermeneutics of suspicion—the ever-attentive, watchful self keeping a lookout over the battlements of discourse. However, Delany's definition of vigilance implies an alertness to the ways in which we can never be fully or finally alert: “Only through the vigilance needed to keep close to the text can the careful reader know just how distant (and idiosyncratic that distance is for each one) they are, text and reader, one from the other” (6). This curious sentence suggests a

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<sup>11</sup> Cusset notes that reading is the specifically American inflection of deconstruction (113). Delany notes his own expansion of the term “reading” mirrors Derrida's expansion of “writing” (*Silent* 277).

<sup>12</sup> In a recent *PMLA* essay, Richard Klein praises deconstructive theories of reading in very similar terms to Delany: “Reading uncovers not only the laws and rules that constrain the production of the text, that limit its play, but also whatever defies them. The reader, never the master of the game, is constantly surprised by the resources of its ruse” (921-22).

fundamental rethinking of “close” and “distant” reading—a rethinking that includes the subjective (idiosyncratic) within these textual relations. But more importantly, Delany displaces any transcendental reference point for closeness or distance, implying that textual relations (especially those described in spatial terms) must be conceived as radically relative, immanent, and subject to contextual redefinition. Thus, Delany's conception of reading does not provide any foundational or idealist definition of hermeneutics as “close reading,” except insofar as that phrase must remain radically (and productively) undecidable. This is why Delany's most frequently quoted statement about reading derives from Roland Barthes' claim that “Those who fail to reread are obliged to reread the same story everywhere (2). For Delany, the only reading that deserves the name is re-reading—and it is only through re-reading that readers begin to ‘perceive’ the text's excessiveness. It is this excess, or *difference* that (as Barbara Johnson writes in her explication of Barthes' quote) “subverts the very idea of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole” (*Critical* 4). No reading can therefore be close or distant enough, paranoid or reparative enough, because there will always be another reading to come.<sup>13</sup>

Delany is obviously influenced by American interpreters of deconstruction, but

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<sup>13</sup> Even as Delany engages the concepts of post-structural theory, it is crucial to note that he is also influenced by theoretical discourse as a *style of writing*. When critics have put literature and theory in dialogue, they generally follow Judith Ryan's path of conceiving of the interaction as an “intertextual” encounter. I agree that writers like Delany “wrestle with the issues posed by theory and in doing so, reveal its fault-lines and limitations” (209). However, Ryan misses the *stylistic* convergence between theory and postmodern fiction. Delany describes post-structuralism as a “stylistic explosion... only matched in English by the explosion represented by Carlyle, Ruskin, and Pater in the nineteenth century. My own response to all these thinkers [in French theory] has been, primarily, as writers. Demanding as their texts can be, for fifteen years now, I've simply found them the most exciting *reading* available” (*Shorter* 184, original emphasis). In this style, “original processes are slowed down and fixed with a comparatively heavy, if not ponderous, diction, to allow us to see what is really going on—things that, often, we've only watched rush past” (*Silent* 247). He insists that “the analytic vigilance I have already spoken of... can only be carried out *at such a pace* (*Shorter* 184, original emphasis).

he is also speaking back to these critics. Through this para-academic dialogue, Delany forces deconstruction to reflect on its impact within the American discursive context of AIDS. For example, Delany places an epigraph from Michael Ryan's *Marxism and Deconstruction* (1982) at the front of *Flight from Nevèrjon* (the collection that includes *Plagues and Carnivals*). The epigraph quotes Ryan's claim that "There is no such thing as an absolutely proper meaning of a word which is not made possible by the very impropriety of metaphorical displacement it seeks to exclude" (*Flight* 8). We have already noted how Delany's ambivalence about "metaphorical displacement" is conditioned by the proliferation of metaphors to describe AIDS. Even if Delany conceptually agrees with the inherent and infinite displaceability of a word, he does not share Ryan's affirmative conclusion or his rhetoric. Ryan argues:

The impropriety of displaceability of meaning and of infinite openness of syntactic reference beyond that circumscribed by proper meaning is a material force... The political equivalent of displacement—that force deconstruction foregrounds against absolutist philosophies of identity—is continuous and plural revolutions, the openness of material forces which exceeds the imposition of power. *Marxism* 8

The corollary of deconstructive displacement, Ryan concludes, is "the continuous revolutionary displacement of power toward *radical egalitarianism and the plural defusion of all forms of macro- and micro-determination*" (my emphasis). For Ryan, the instability of signification is not merely a metonym (or metaphor) for political revolution; it is itself a "material force" that outstrips despotic power and results in plural, open, excessively egalitarian possibility. By contrast, Delany is far more ambivalent about the consequences of linguistic iterability. Returning to the Ryan quote in his second appendix to *Flight from Nevèrjon*, Delany asks,

Do I believe, then, Michael Ryan's assertion with which I opened this volume,

i.e., that the impossibility of individuating meanings at the level of the word... is a *material* force? Frankly, I don't know. But I think the possibility must be seriously considered by anyone interested in either language or power, not to mention their frighteningly elusive, always allusive, and often illusive relations. 360, original emphasis

Note the final litany of terms here emphasizes the *frightening* nature of discursive displacement. Even if displaceability provides opportunities for subversion, Delany nonetheless stresses the concomitant fear and anxiety stimulated by this discursive condition. Of course, *differance* cannot be 'experienced,' but its effects can be and, indeed, Delany does not experience the "impropriety of displaceability" in AIDS as a positive, egalitarian revolution.<sup>14</sup> If the ethos of deconstructive criticism has, in some instances, too affirmatively lauded iterability in abstract (even metaphysical) terms, Delany provides a crucial counterpoint. Delany suggests that the affective and experiential suffering wrought by displaceability matters, and it must be part of the analysis of the relationship between language and power.

To my mind, Delany's contextualizing of "displaceability" constitutes an important supplement to the American deconstructive critics that Delany addresses—critics who frequently locate only abstract, non-contextualized anxiety or ecstasy as the available emotional response to the instability of signification.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, Delany represents undecidability as (also) a contextual discursive situation—one that demands readerly vigilance. Indeed, Delany presents the AIDS crisis as a moment of epistemic undecidability. In his own assessment, Delany is writing in a historical moment when "what is *known* about AIDS... has been changing month to month for more than a year and will no doubt continue to change until a vaccine is developed"

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<sup>14</sup> For a convergent analysis of literary writers responding to deconstruction, see Punday.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Paul de Man *Allegories of Reading* (19). For a rich and original reading of affect in deconstruction, see Terada.

(“Tale” 352, original emphasis). While *Plagues and Carnivals* continually strives to be a historical document, Delany concedes that

largely what it documents is *misinformation, rumor, and wholly untested guesses* at play through a limited social section of New York City during 1982 and 1983, mostly before the April 23, 1984 announcement of the discovery of a virus (human t-cell lymphotropic virus [HTLV-3] as the overwhelmingly probable cause of AIDS. 351, original emphasis

Here the undecidability of AIDS is marked with dates, locations, and discursive context—Delany imprints his uncertainty with historical reference points.<sup>16</sup> Tragically, Delany's own appendix is shaped by this undecidability. In the appendix, he exhorts readers that “Given the situation [of AIDS], total abstinence is a reasonable choice” (*Flight* 352). Not only will Delany later regret this claim, he will come to see it as complicit with other 'reasonable' 'safe' rhetoric about sex articulated in the early days of AIDS. This was not “responsible caution but rather... a discourse as murderous, pernicious, and irresponsible as the various antisemitic and racist pronouncements from Germany before and during World War II” (*Silent* 160). Here Delany defines AIDS as a historical moment in which he is profoundly alienated from his own words; the knowledge they communicate is deeply questionable, and the effects they have on readers turns out to be, in retrospect, materially dangerous.

Readerly vigilance is clearly no match for this potential for dramatic reversal, in which even the author's own carefully considered words can turn on him. What, then, makes for a “radical reader,” in Delany's terms, and what kind of interpretative work must he or she perform to combat, however partially, the ruses of discourse? Delany provides an answer in his most extended discussion of reading, his essay

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<sup>16</sup> Not only does Delany mark undecidability as historical, he also suggests it is an affective, embodied quality, one that experimental fiction can produce. Delany notes that Kostelanetz's fiction produces “undecidability [that] registers as an uncertainty in the body” (*About* 243).

“Reading at Work, and Other Activities Frowned on by Authority,” which is itself a lengthy reading and critique of Donna Haraway’s “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” This essay is an exemplary instance of para-academic discourse, because Delany directly responds to Haraway, who points to Delany’s fiction in her conclusion as an example of progressive “cyborg imagery.” Haraway places Delany alongside a series of science fiction writers, including Octavia Butler (Delany’s former student), Joanna Russ (Delany’s frequent interlocutor), Vonda McIntyre, and Anne McCaffrey (whose fiction Delany analyzes at the beginning and conclusion to his essay on Haraway). By responding to Haraway’s response to their fiction, Delany effectively reverses the power dynamic of literary studies, where the fictional text often serves as a (mute) example and model for the writer’s analytic claims (as, no doubt, Delany’s work serves in my own). It should be no surprise, then, that Delany primarily takes issue with Haraway’s appeal to “tak[e] seriously the imagery of cyborgs” and her claim that “Cyborg imagery [such as Delany’s] can help express two crucial arguments in this essay” (qtd. 116-17). The phrase “can help express” ironically grants priority to the literary text, but it does so at the cost of subordinating the critic’s idiosyncratic interpretation of the text itself. Thus, Delany recurrently tropes on the phrase “something is missing” throughout the essay, underscoring that Haraway has, to an extent, left her own interpretative framing, and even distortion, of the literary fiction unmarked.

At stake, for Delany, are the work that fiction can accomplish in its own discourse and the interpretative work that must be supplied by the radical reader. In Delany’s words, “[C]yborg imagery will not *do* the work, will not promote the necessary analytic vigilance, *for us*” (*Longer* 117). Although he acknowledges that Haraway advocates such critical labor, Delany focuses on moments in her essay where she overlooks “reading, aggression, critique—interpretative *work*, if you will”



(114, original emphasis). Thus Delany argues that,

I find the assumption that critique can be taken as a given, that it simply and uncritically falls out of the technology [that transmits representation], a suspect if not outright dangerous notion... Nevertheless, and once again: metaphors are *not* radical in themselves, whether they are delivered by TV soap operas, science education programs, science fiction tales, or social feminist manifestos. Critique—critical work—is created and constituted by people, by individuals, by individuals speaking and writing to others, by people who are always in specific situations that are tensional as well as technological. 114-15

Here Delany insists on critique as the fundamental operation of a radical reading—and, to be clear, he defines critique as a necessarily violent and interpretative practice. “Frankly,” Delany explains, “I do not see how reading can be other than a violent process....For without violence, all ideology—radical or conservative—is incomplete and blind to itself” (*Longer* 98). In other words, violence is a condition of possibility for dialogue, even if that “hermeneutic violence” necessarily excludes, rewrites, and appropriates.<sup>17</sup> There is no ideal here of a pure dialogue, but Delany ironically correlates interpretative violence with a more whole (though never complete) reading.<sup>18</sup> The question to be asked of every reading, Delany suggests, is whether or

<sup>17</sup> Delany shares the Nietzschean, anti-interpretative thrust of post-structuralism, which, as Jameson explains, denounces the existence of a “master code or Ur-narrative” that would provide the “ultimate hidden or unconscious *meaning*” of the surface text (*Political* 22, original emphasis). However, like Jameson, I see post-structuralism allowing for an “immanent or antitranscendent hermeneutic model,” and I would locate Delany within this analytic project.

<sup>18</sup> Akin to my reading of Delany, Asja Szafraniec sees productive comparisons between deconstruction and hermeneutics. She writes that Derrida’s “work is not as hostile to interpretation as is often suggested” (109). However, she rightly notes that interpretation, for Derrida, is “nonhierarchical and not absolute (against Hegel) but it is also (against Gadamer, who would agree with Derrida that every interpretation is finite) never presupposes a unitary horizon of meaning” (213-14). This project of non-hierarchical and non-teleological interpretation applies equally to Delany, who is a studious reader of Derrida.

not a dialogic passage has occurred, whether or not interpretative violence has enabled or obstructed dialogue. This is why he performatively acknowledges that he has “cut... compressed, paraphrased, brought together dispersed bits, constrained and contorted [Haraway's argument],” and then asks “to what ends?” (*Longer* 118). We are left to consider whether his reading (called “a simulation of an interpretation”) is merely a “simulation of a passage”: “By reading, do we halt it? By reading, do we move it along? Do we move along it?” The hesitation in subject-object relations is key to Delany's point that reading is constituted by an undecidable “movement.” What makes the reading “radical” is not an ideological perspective; it is the willingness to bring one's reading to its thresholds of undecidability—to even question, as Delany does here, whether any reading has occurred at all. And it requires the concomitant vigilance and violence to continue *attempting* to read, despite the inherent and historical obstructions to reading. The point is to enable some passage, some dialogue, between interpreters, even if that dialogue is intrinsically partial.

Delany's “reading” of Haraway exemplifies the para-academic dialectic: he is influenced by academic writing; and he is speaking back to academic reading, including readings of his own work. As much as Delany's description of reading is theoretical or conceptual, it should also be read as a metaphorical expression of the difficulty confronted by para-academic writers. Is his “reading” of Haraway a *reading* or merely a “simulation of an interpretation”? If it is merely a simulation, Delany's text betrays its inauthenticity by lacking the rhetorical decidability of an argument or a manifesto. The questions that conclude his reading thus also express an anxiety about critical dialogue across the discursive gaps of academic and non- (or not-enough) academic writing. “But, now,” Delany concludes, “we'd best let Helva have back her screw and get on with her work,” referencing the McCaffery story that forms his epigraph and that Haraway also cites. “*Pace*, and good luck, Ms. Haraway, with

yours.” *Pace* signifies respectful disagreement and, appropriately, in its archaic usage, it indicates *passage*. As we have seen, critique and passage are bound together in Delany's lexicon; they are mutually constituting. This final line expresses the hope of a passage of reading across discordant positions and presuppositions. It does so by indicating, and thus desiring, a future reading—by Haraway and by a reader of Haraway: “Clearly, there is no survival [of Haraway's text] *here* unless the reader turns to Haraway's manifesto, to do her or his own work, which alone can restructure mine” (original emphasis). With this line, Delany cements his endorsement of hermeneutic violence and vigilance, and he creates a para-academic bridge for the reader to begin that interpretative labor. However, the image of Helva getting “on with her work” is an ambivalent one-- certainly, it might signify the reader, as Helva, taking up the interpretative work, as Delany hopes. But it also might signify a parting of ways between Haraway and Delany, back to their discursive fields of fiction and theory respectively.

Yet, as I will show, Delany's work undercuts such stable distinctions between theory and fiction, narrative and speculation. In fact, his experimental AIDS fiction is marked by an intensified passage between these discourses. I contend that the blurring of fiction and theory is a central part of Delany's formal production of the radical reader—his attempt to ensure that Helva returning to her “work” results in interpretative violence that creates a passage between academic and non-academic publics. To demonstrate this formal dynamic, I will now turn to *Plagues and Carnivals* to show how its experimental form “invites” the radical reader's violence. The novel suggests that, in the absence of history, such hermeneutic violence becomes ethically salient. *Plagues and Carnivals* draws on experimental writing to express the anguishing experience of AIDS, when historical “reality is constantly and catastrophically—with the death of thousands as both result and cause—changing”

(157). At the same time, experimental form dialogically intensifies the disagreement and opacity about “what happened” in an effort to allegorize the process of writing history itself. As Delany insists, “History begins only when we do *not* know what happened—when there is disagreement over what happened. When everyone ‘knows’ what happened (and I know you can detect the irony in that epistemological dictum), there is only mythology” (*Silent* 147, original emphasis). The novel suggests that narrative fiction can make palpable the exclusions made by the mythologized discourses around AIDS. In the process, the novel constructs a reader that can balance the inevitable “failures” of discourse against the ethical demand to render the historical reality of AIDS. Experimental form enables this paradoxical hermeneutic project, and it is this mode that revitalizes Delany's belief that narrative fiction can respond ethically to the crisis of reading that characterizes AIDS.

### **Allegory in the Absence of History**

Delany labels *Plagues and Carnivals* a “novel,” but a reader could be forgiven for being confused about how exactly to categorize the text. Fredric Jameson famously describes Delany's *Nevèryon* series as “a major and unclassifiable achievement in contemporary American literature,” and its ambiguous classification is encapsulated in *Plagues and Carnivals* (qtd. *Ash* ix). *Plagues and Carnivals* appears within *Flight from Nevèryon*, which is, itself, the third volume of the four that comprise the *Nevèryon* series. All of these novels share the same pre-modern setting, genre (fantasy or “sword and sorcery”), and many of the same characters, which recur across the embedded “tales.” Yet there is no single, overarching master narrative that unifies the series. Moreover, each “novel” has a series of para-texts included within it. In fact, *Plagues and Carnivals* is technically labeled an appendix to *Flight from Nevèryon*, and that appellation indicates the strangely ancillary status of this novel within the novel, even though *Plagues and Carnivals* comprises more pages (182

total) than the other two tales and second appendix. Finally, the novel's complete title —*Appendix A: The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, or, Some Informal Remarks toward the Modular Calculus, Part Five*—links the text to the ongoing consideration of the “modular calculus” in Delany's fiction, which extends beyond the *Nevèryon* series itself.<sup>19</sup>

The “novel” thus inhabits an absent center, existing within a vast inter-textual network of Delany's entire corpus and, moreover, in an inter-textual network of paraliterary fiction more generally. Given this dispersed structure, it would seem that Delany frustrates the reader's hermeneutic work before any reading has occurred. There is no final gathering together that could unify *Plagues and Carnivals* into a complete whole. In this respect, the novel's structure echoes the discursive crisis of AIDS. As Delany writes, the body with AIDS “refuses to heal, will not become whole” and is “ravenous for metaphors to stifle its unsettled shift, its insistent uneasiness, its conceptual turbulence” (178).<sup>20</sup> Delany clearly forestalls any figural reparation of this trauma, but *Plagues and Carnivals* nonetheless stresses the necessity for a hermeneutic response to the “uneasiness” of incomplete understanding. That demand is staged by the novel's complication of historical reference. *Plagues and Carnivals* asks the reader to interpretatively attend to the referential relationship between the cultural text of AIDS and its fictional translation of its historical context. To do so, the novel juxtaposes two narrative time-lines--one taking place in contemporary New York City and the other in the fantasy city of Kolhari. In the former, autobiographical narrative, Delany struggles to write *Plagues and Carnivals*,

<sup>19</sup> This is a recurring conceit, originating in his science fiction novels (beginning with *Trouble on Triton*). Inspired by Quine's theories of grammar and description, the calculus addresses the questions “how do we know when we have a model of a situation; and how do we tell what kind of model it is?” (*Flight* 377).

<sup>20</sup> For a reading of the *Nevèryon* series that integrates its queer and Marxist thematics, see Battis. While Battis aptly renders the queer marginality of *Plagues and Carnivals*, I break with his affirmative reading of the *Calling* as a queer heterotopia. For an altogether different approach, see Darieck Scott. See also Kathleen L. Spender's wonderful “*Nevèryon Deconstructed*” in Sallis, *Ash of Stars*.

reflects on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the midst of AIDS, and strives to document the sense of fear and confusion about the disease among urban queer communities. In the latter fantasy narrative, a series of characters from a strata of social positions grapple with the confusion around an emergent, sexually-transmitted plague, and the narrative tracks their various responses to the city's "carnival," planned to distract the residents from the plague.

The juxtaposition of these two narratives invites comparison and analogy, but the novel stresses the irreducible gap between them. By doing so, Delany performatively underscores the difficulty of fictionally allegorizing an historical context in which so little certainty is available.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the meta-fictive discourse in the text is part of the allegory itself, since the meta-commentary performs both the anxiety of unstable reference and the desire to stabilize reference. Indeed, Delany admits that he does not know where to look for the "material" to make his fictional characters complete: "in the past? in the future? on the roaring shore where imagination swells and breaks? in the pale, hot sands of intellection? in the evanescent construct of the here and now—that reality always gone in a blink that is nevertheless forever making history?" (188). This wave of question-marked phrases erodes any basis for an allegory to reference. Past and future, imagination and reality, are swept into and out of consideration, because reality itself is already blinked away by the end of the sentence. Certainly, Delany has mixed metaphors. But that mixing is, in fact, the point: the author yearns for a stable referent, regardless of whether it has a fictional or historical ontology, yet none lasts long enough. That dreadful impropriety

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<sup>21</sup> The problem of "representing" AIDS is central to the "literary response" to AIDS itself, and many critics and writers have grappled with this issue, especially in the first wave of academic criticism on AIDS literature. For a helpful overview of some of these critical responses, see Lawrence Howe. My reading of Delany is particularly influenced by Nelson's *AIDS: The Literary Response*. This collection addresses, among many issues, the contradictory ways that post-structural theory resonates within the context of AIDS. On the role of academic criticism in the midst of AIDS, see especially Ross Chambers.

is precisely the force "making," and un-making, history in the novel.

Of course, postmodern fiction is often characterized by a lack of foundational "truth" and a problematizing of hermeneutic work. Yet this is not the proper framework for reading *Plagues and Carnivals*, because the novel's "anxiety" about reference should be understood as a very specific response to the project of fictionalizing AIDS. *Plagues and Carnivals* unveils this anxiety over the course of its very first section, where Delany describes a "contemporary Bridge of Lost Desire" on "On—th Street, just beyond Ninth Avenue" (175). The Bridge of Lost Desire is a central social space in Kolhari where prostitution and other forms of sexual congress occur. By describing a "contemporary" version of this bridge, Delany plunges us into the speculative practice of analogy, but he troubles its historical coordinates. He constructs a bridge in the past from elements of the present, and yet these elements are partly opaque, given that the street in New York is unnamed. Then, he frames the analogy as an imaginative construction that must be generated by "you," the reader: "It's the proper width. You'd have to double its length, though. Give it the pedestrians you get a few blocks over... Then put the market I saw on the Italian trip to L'Aquila at one end..." The use of the second person underscores that reference is not given but supplied through the labor of a reader. Yet even though the fictional world will be erected out of contemporary elements, it will nonetheless remain radically undecidable--because these contemporary elements are, themselves, uncertain. Thus, this brief opening section concludes with Delany noting that this is "the bridge Joey told me he was under that sweltering night last July when, beside the towering garbage pile beneath it, he smelled the first corpses." Whose corpses are these? Why are they rotting in the open air? What have they died from? All of these questions are begged by this passage, but they are left open throughout the novel. The bodies' irreducible materiality, their stench, troubles the fictional construct as interpretatively

indeterminate. Yet it is their undecidable relationship to the plague that truly undoes any stable interpretation here. By the end of the novel, it will be suggested that these corpses are the bodies of the street people who have been slaughtered by a Jack-the-Ripper style serial murderer who is preying on the homeless. It will not be determined, however, whether the killer's targets are random or motivated by the pervasive fear (depicted through the novel) that prostitutes, drug users, and the homeless, like Joey, are the "cause" of AIDS. These deaths are specific yet fundamentally ambiguous, because their cause is unclear. Such deaths thus haunt the allegorical project of the text, undoing its referential work as Delany strives to bridge history with fiction.

Even as Delany uses fiction to "document" historical reality, then, he does not collapse the work of fiction into the work of other discourses, such as politics or history. *Plagues and Carnivals* thus holds contradictory definitions of "reference" in constant tension. By doing so, it challenges a purely formalist understanding of aesthetics while, at the same time, undermining an equivalence between art and activism. Note, for example, the novel's critical commentary on Annie Dillard's *Living By Fiction*. Delany targets Dillard's insistence that "you do not read Nabokov as a document of the times" (qtd. 237). For Dillard, experimentation ("formally ordered pattern") and representation ("verisimilitude") are mutually exclusive. Any attempt to read the Nabokov as a "document of the times," as providing historical or allegorical reflection on his social context, will betray the aesthetic singularity of his work. In direct contrast, Delany insists that his Nevèryon series is "from first tale to last, a document of our times," and that its relationship to the historical is "Rich, eristic, and contestatory (as *well* as documentary)" (237, 377). Here Delany balances the aesthetic's agency alongside its historical documentation, but neither of these projects is reducible to simple, un-mediated "reference." At the very same time,



Delany insists that he sees “art [as] a wholly formal enterprise” (273). This concurrent appeal to formalism captures Delany's uncertainty about the political effectiveness of art within the context of the crisis. Indeed, I disagree with Tucker, who reads Delany's writing as a “brand of AIDS activism” (233). For Tucker, Delany's performative distinction between fiction and activism is a claim made “out of modesty.” Yet I see Delany's contradictory meditation on formalism and reference as expressing a concern about politically responding to AIDS through fiction; this is the primary reason, I suggest, that *Plagues and Carnivals* incorporates such an explicit, lengthy meditation on aesthetics and politics. Delany may wish to intervene in the crisis via narrative. However, he is cannily aware of the ruses of discourse that would undermine such an “intervention.” First, any such representation (especially one written in such historical uncertainty) might later turn out to be complicit with reactionary discourses, regardless of its intent. Second, Delany notes “In terms of AIDS itself, there are all sorts of social practicalities one can endorse,” and he is therefore reluctant to fictionalize demands for “better research, better information” (339). Fiction, here, might actually *obstruct* the practical demands. Indeed, activism is necessarily bleached of doubt. It must claim decidability. Yet, for Delany, narrative fiction is a symbolic medium to both express and reflect on historically produced undecidability as well as the irreducible undecidability of language. Consequently, *Plagues and Carnivals* skates a kind of conceptual figure-eight--the aesthetic is referential and non-referential and yet referential--and that circuitous movement traces the novel's commitment to articulating the limited ethical work of fiction in a historical crisis.

Delany realizes that his experiment in undecidability may elicit severe critiques from gay and academic publics alike. These readers, the novel suggests, may not read its problematizing of allegory as “responsible historical fiction” (329). This is, in fact, the assessment of one such reader in *Plagues and Carnivals*. Two

archaeologists, uncovering a city with "uncanny" similarities to Kolhari, read and debate Delany's novel. Kermit is a white gay man, who lived in the New York during the AIDS crisis, and Leslie is an African American woman, whose research was inspired by Delany's novel. Whereas Leslie finds the novel intriguing and worthy of discussion, Kermit is deeply disdainful. In his assessment, the text fails to "document" the actual "complex political situation" of AIDS (333). He critiques the novel's exclusions, such as "the attempts to close the gay bathhouses and the harassment of gay-owned businesses, not to mention straight-owned gay bars?" (332). Moreover, Kermit rejects the novel's representation of Kolhari: "He's just playing at their lives, anachronisms all over the place" (326). Yet it is the juxtaposition of the two narratives that truly offends Kermit: "If he [Delany] wanted to allegorize what was actually going on, he should have had a platoon of Imperial storm troopers arrive at the bridge and just start tearing it down because of *course* it was the source of the epidemic" (333, original emphasis).<sup>22</sup> If allegory demands the metaphorical dramatization of a historical situation, then Kermit sees the novel as a profound failure, one that does not go nearly far enough in capturing the hyperbolic violence enacted against homosexuals in New York.

To read Kermit's reading of *Plagues and Carnivals* as merely "reflexive" critique would miss the specificity of his location as both an academic and a gay reader. Through his voice, *Plagues and Carnivals* articulates the interlocking interpretative expectations that these publics may bring to the text. By acknowledging those expectations, the novel forges its para-academic relay between academic, activist, and fictional discourses, yet it also critically redraws the basis for those

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<sup>22</sup> *Plagues and Carnivals* also includes an epigraph from Allen Mandelbaum's introduction to Dante's *Inferno*: "Ours, too, is an age of allegoresis" (173). Citing Benjamin, Mandelbaum's point is that there are significant "proximities" between the medieval and the modern but also that modernity betrays a desire to allegorize much as Dante did (viii). This term "allegoresis" recurs throughout the novel and is an apt descriptor for Delany's meta-fictive, reflexive approach to allegory.

expectations. Of course, one could argue that Kermit simply misreads the novel, or reads it poorly. After all, he admits, “I’ve read it—or skimmed it, at any rate. Certainly I’ve read as much as I need to” (327). Yet the joke about Kermit’s skimming is that his reading is sufficient to confirm his already established expectations. His reading is not sufficient, therefore, to bring his own expectations into question, nor is it sufficient to consider whether a writer can meet those expectations, if that writer wants to “allegorize” the experience of attempting to allegorize the crisis. This may sound hopelessly insular. It may sound as if the writer’s struggle to write is the most important issue in the AIDS crisis. Yet Delany’s struggle (as a character in the novel) metonymically stands in for a broader set of struggles around the representation of AIDS. The textual stabilization of either “history” (verisimilitude) or “allegory” (hyperbole) would betray the experience of the historical moment itself *and* the ethical problems entailed in representing that moment. If neither reality nor fiction are sufficient in themselves, how should the writer represent the suffering of marginalized communities and subjects? *Plagues and Carnivals* suggests that the question itself is insufficient. Rather (or, in addition) we must ask: how can the reader interpret the writer’s meta-fictive struggle? What interpretative expectations are appropriate to this text and its historical undecidability? Hence, Leslie offers Kermit an alternative hermeneutic framework for the novel: “maybe he [Delany] wasn’t *trying* to allegorize a political situation. Maybe he was trying to allegorize a feeling, a feeling probably everybody has had about it [AIDS] at one time or another, no matter what side they finally chose—politically, that is” (333, original emphasis). Here the “feeling” of the historical situation is a central aspect of the allegory itself. Leslie’s substitution of feeling for politics does not suggest that affect is pre-political. Rather, it suggests that the affective complexities of the crisis are not simply reducible to pat political positions. Affect is thus part of a collective structure of feeling that infuses the

political (in all of its contradictory forces and desires) prior to being codified as history. Therefore, the reader must enact a hermeneutic relation to affect itself--we must locate affect between allegory and history, as it were, and grant that the text's meta-allegory represents, in some mediated way, the feeling of the crisis.

*Plagues and Carnivals* dramatizes this complex mediation of affect when the text collapses from narrative into notes. Soon after Kermit's and Leslie's debate, Delany inserts his writing instructions, telling himself "*Expand this scene to some six/eight pp.*" and "*Possibly okay. But clean and clarify: how Pheron got in, etc.*" (337, original emphasis). These notes perform the unfinished nature of the narrative. Yet the affective referent of 'unfinished' writing only becomes clear when the narrative gives way completely to the notes. Delany stops writing a scene where heterosexual couple care for a homosexual character (Pheron) suffering from the plague. I quote the scene at length because it captures the complex relation between the writer's affect and the political problem of representing AIDS:

*No. Can't write it out. Not now. Partly because it touches too many emotional things in me. And partly because, seven weeks beyond my forty-second year, I'm cynical enough to wonder seriously if a young, heterosexual, working couple would give up, for a gay friend (even if he were dying), what amounts, after all, to a night's sleep on the last day of carnival before returning next morning to a full work schedule: ten, twelve hours for them both. (They probably would have gotten him home, whether he wanted to go or not, and left him there, feeling vaguely put out.) They cannot bear to think about it directly any more than can the Master. The relation of those two feelings in me is, of course, the bottom-line political question for this particular scene. Is the cynical response to protect myself from the emotions? Or: Does my knowledge of a cynical truth make the emotions as painful as they are? Or: Are the*

*emotions and the cynicism two valid responses to the world as I've known it at painful play within me, in no particularly contingent hierarchy? Certainly this last is what I suspect.* 338-39, original emphasis

As this passage reveals, Delany's allegory is not simply writing about writing. It contextualizes the fraught practice of writing about AIDS within the text. The writer's affect indexes the ambivalent, mediated relationship between the narrative and the social reality of AIDS. His rhetorical questions dramatize that distance to underscore the "political question[s]" of narrative representation. Of course, these questions also condense the pain that gives rise to the writer's cynicism. Yet Delany's uncertainty about which responses are "valid" (captured by the "painful play" between them) stands in for the political question itself: Will heterosexuals care about homosexual suffering? Delany's reflexive meditation on answering this question, via narrative, only underscores his desire for historical accuracy: "*to sketch out what I hope would happen seems fair*" (339, original emphasis). Yet the text cannot actually render a "fair" portrait; it puts into critical question how one could read a fictional representation as "fair" or not. Delany's meta-fictive and metaphorical deconstruction therefore foregrounds the mediated nature of history as such. The writer's feelings intimate the lack of stable narrativization in the midst of the crisis, even as they betray his ethical commitment to narrating history fairly.<sup>23</sup>

The writer cannot, for all of these reasons, complete the novel. Yet, as Delany notes, "Pheron's incompleteness... is an incompleteness of the text, not of a person" (339). He suggests, "(One could make Pheron far more 'whole' by thinking in fictional terms precisely where he was among all these possibilities that night with his

<sup>23</sup> Delany's representation of history resonates with Fredric Jameson's understanding of history as an "absent cause" that is "inaccessible to us except in textual form... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (*Political* 35). AIDS is very much an absent cause in *Plagues and Carnivals*. Yet I would qualify that, in Delany's novel, the feeling of the writer inhabits an indeterminate space between the Real of history and the Symbolic of the political narrative.

particular support group, what precisely had happened, and how. Go on, then, *mon semblable,--nom frere!* [sic]" (340, original emphasis). Here Delany cites Baudelaire's "To the Reader" (in *Flowers of Evil*), which declares "You know him reader, that refined monster, / — Hypocritical reader, — my fellow, — my brother!)." In Baudelaire's poem, the reader and writer are brothers in their common knowledge of the refined monster of "Ennui." In the context of *Plagues and Carnivals*, the reference thus poses the question: will readers supply a hermeneutic "completion" of Pheron by "thinking in fictional terms," or will their ennui leave the text unfinished? Although it is most likely an unintentional error, Delany misspells the French in his citation (writing "nom" instead of "mon"). Whether intentional or not, the typo produces a stutter around the possessive, "my brother." That stutter echoes the text's broader uncertainty about whether a reader will heed Delany's call for hermeneutic work. Leslie appears to provide such support. She counters Kermit's reading of the allegorical form, stating "you have to read the textual shape as just the kind of conservative reification you do, but at the same time opposing it with a vigorous deconstruction of—" (328). But Kermit cuts her off and, in the process, expresses *Plagues and Carnivals'* para-academic skepticism about the kind of readerly practice it can solicit through its experimental form. Kermit states,

I don't understand a word you're saying. What's more I don't believe you do either. And even if the kind of reading you're talking about *did* exist, somewhere or other, I don't think any...text...that goes out into the world with an initial printing of—what? A hundred-fifty thousand copies?--can really look forward to it, assuming it *is* possible. 328 original

For Kermit, academic discourses (signaled by terms like deconstruction) redouble the marginality of the experimental text with an already small audience—he claims the novel has no right to expect this type of reading. This captures Delany's para-

academic anxiety. While he complicates the academic and the activist desire for historical accuracy and allegorical stability in narrative fiction, Delany nonetheless draws on academic discourse, as we have seen, to theorize his aesthetic response to AIDS. A non-academic public may indeed find these terms alienating, whereas academics like Leslie may find these terms to be legitimating keywords for the text. Yet the discursive gap between these reading publics remains a source of concern for *Plagues and Carnivals*--it forces the text to stutter even as it explicitly calls out for such a complexly located reader to complete its articulations.

I must stress that the split between the academic and para-academic discourse is only made meaningful by their hierarchical relationship to institutional power. *Plagues and Carnivals* makes evident how the academic reception of a text can defuse, rather than preserve, its critical energies. By virtue of its institutional authority, the academic interpretation (and its very strategy of interpretation) masks its own forceful rewriting of the text. The obstacle to political allegory, then, is not solely the absence of a responsive reader; it is the possibility of a rewriting that excludes the text's critical and contextual violence. *Plagues and Carnivals* dramatizes this rewriting through the Master, the administrator of a prestigious school in Kolhari. The Master's former student, the Mummer, performs politically subversive skits in the marketplace, including skits that humorously mock the Master. The Master sends his current students to watch the performances and even begins to stage his own versions at the university. Yet the Master rewrites the performances in two key ways. First, he re-frames the dialogues between Master and Mummer with "the imaginative fancy added that he had somehow *won* them all--when I had considered them a draw!" (263). For the Mummer, their student-teacher dialogues were "a chance to exercise my own rational faculties," not an attempt to launch an argument or take a strong position. The Master has not only rewritten the outcome of the original dialogue, then,

but also its form--he has turned a mode of dialogic inquiry into the achievement of an argument. Second, the Master re-stages the Mummer's performances in "calmed and reasoned rhetoric," deleting the "my [Mummer's] screams and protests, my nose thumbings, farts, and insults—and the curses and violences against me they elicit from violent men" (267). This second layer of revision saps the contextual and bodily violence of the aesthetic performance; it leaves out the subversive relations between the performer's body, the performance, its object of satire, and the public (relations which can even result in literal violence, as the Mummer intimates). At the most general level, then, the Master's interpretation rewrites and excludes critique to preserve his own authority. Yet this violence is effaced because his form of inoffensive, proper rhetoric is implicitly authorized by his institutional power.

Despite receiving much critical scorn, the Master's narrative constitutes the longest section in *Plagues and Carnivals*. As Kermit observes, "slowly and inexorably the Discourse of the Master displaces everyone else's, until, finally, it completely takes over. Soon, it's even speaking *for* the little people--at least those the Master himself wants to consider" (326, original emphasis). This is a fair description of the form of *Plagues and Carnivals*, yet it misses how the Master's narrative performs this displacement. *Plagues and Carnivals* purposefully underscores how the Master's reading of others--his subordinates, his students, his research subjects--swallows them into his own interpretative desires, which are sanctioned merely as a result of his hegemonic authority. This is a polemic portrait of "the academic," to be sure, and it may seem to over-estimate the power that academic figures have, even in Delany's context. I have already noted that this polemic portrait of academic knowledge provides an important critique of "objectivity" in a historical moment when AIDS "data" is represented as impartial data, rather than a partial, biased, socially informed interpretation. Here, I want to stress that the critique of academic interpretation also



targets fields more amenable to "subjective" interpretation, such as those in the humanities.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Delany critiques the (at the time) fashionable critical interest in Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as a subversion of the administered political order. Indeed, Delany explains in the autobiographical narrative that *Plagues and Carnivals* was written in "critical dialogue" with an academic presentation on Bahktin's notion of the carnivalesque, and the novel briefly mentions Delany's attending a conference at Temple University entitled "Post Barthes / Post Bakhtin," attended by Michael Holquist, Carol Emerson, Barbara Johnson, and Samuel Weber.<sup>25</sup>

For Delany, the interpretation of the carnivalesque as subversive obscures its pacifying function--its role as an aestheticized distraction from the plague. In the medieval narrative, for example, the government officials sanction a week of Carnival, with reduced work hours and increased time for "leisure and license" because, as the minister hopes, "that... should get their minds off this unbearable plague!" (216). On the one hand, Delany's representation of the carnival strategically rewrites Daniel Defoe's famous narrative in *A Journal of the Plague Years*, which has become a canonical intertext for AIDS narratives.<sup>26</sup> In Defoe, the government suspends "plays and interludes... gaming-tables, public dancing-rooms, and music-houses," in favor of "public prayers and days of fasting and humiliation... public confession of sin" (qtd. 221). In Delany's narrative, the governmental endorsement of pleasure is far more effective than its suppression. However, he refuses to accept even the corollary of Bakhtin's thesis that, given its suppression, the unauthorized emergence of the carnivalesque is likely to be a subversive act. As an example of this

<sup>24</sup> A recurrent trope of *Plagues and Carnivals* includes Delany's speculation on how the character's would respond to a psychoanalytic reading and, crucially, how their location in a pre-modern moment shapes their interpretation. Except for the Master, all of the characters have similar fables and their own complex reaction to such an interpretation. Not only does this trope de-prioritize contemporary psychoanalytic reading (as well as historicize it), it also provides interpretative agency to the characters that are supposedly non-modern (184, 189).

<sup>25</sup> Holquist and Emerson are translators of Bahktin.

<sup>26</sup> On Defoe as AIDS intertext, see Brodsky.

conceit, Delany quotes at length Artaud's famous analogy between the theatre and the plague--wherein he suggests, as Delany writes, "the birth of true and valid art/theatre/spectacle" will take the form of a plague (222). In Artaud's words, the plague causes all "regular forms [of society to] collapse," resulting in a pure reversal of social mores: "the obedient and virtuous son kills his father; the chaste man performs sodomy upon his neighbors. The lecher becomes pure," and crucially, everyone begins to act without concern for "purpose or profit" (qtd. 205). In Delany's view, this subversion merely bespeaks the "politically reactionary" response of a "mindless mob" (206). He forcefully critiques the fetishistic transformation of the plague into a metaphor of aesthetic subversion. Moreover, the novel insists that the aesthetic has a fundamentally ambiguous political value in the context of a plague, precisely because it has been historically and culturally aligned with the potential for subversion. Delany counters the praise of the carnival with the thought of its exclusions. As we have seen, *Plagues and Carnivals* turns the reader's interpretative labor to what is necessarily incomplete in the text (because of the historical moment of AIDS). On top of these exclusions, the novel layers those that are made--and, at very the same time, covered over--by institutional power. Therefore we should follow in Norema's footsteps, because she notes that "[W]hen I think of what those songs, that laughter must mean to those who are excluded from it, I want to flee this city, this country, this land ready to think of anything but the pain within it" (221). Here, carnivalesque pleasure is a defense, warding off suffering, confusion, anxiety, despair, and pain. Pleasure is, moreover, a collective affect, sanctioned and constituted by the state, intended to dispel the thought of *who* suffers while others enjoy.

Crucially, *Plagues and Carnivals* distinguishes this hermeneutics of exclusion from the academic's model of discursive failure. Indeed, the Master's entire narrative pulls toward an existential acceptance that narrative and language do not

communicate intent. His reputation is marred by rumor, and his research quest has only revealed "contradiction, supposition, miscalculation, impossibility, and ignorance" (302). Thus, he passively accepts the existential "pressure toward misunderstanding that haunts all social communion" (201). It is no surprise that he attends "The Calling of Amenwor," then. This pseudo-religious performance by a Wizard is meant to counter the carnival's "political positivism," and indeed, the Wizard encapsulates the Master's world-view: "Failure signs our beginning... Failure will sign our end" (253, 320). The Wizard ultimately affirms this failure as the condition of salvation:

it is the discrepancy, the contradiction, the gap between what you recall and what you can say (even as you strive for accuracy and articulation) that vouches safe our hope, that indicates the possibility of something more, just as, at this end, its total articulation (the complete knowledge that one lies) signs, again, our failure. 326

The failure of complete, final, or total articulation is, as we have seen, the central deconstructive point of *Plagues and Carnivals*. Its ethical appeal to the radical reader rests precisely on the conceit of the text's incompleteness. However, as Kermit notes in his critique, there is a dangerous possibility that, as the Master and the Wizard imply: "in our failure lies our salvation!... Well, *whose* failure, I'd like to ask. The Master's? Oh, yes. *Do* tell me another one!... Just suppose the people who isolated the virus and who're developing the vaccine took that tack?" (327, original emphasis). Note that Delany *does not* attend the Calling of Amenwor. (The novel includes a list of those who did not attend, stressing that "Samuel Delany (Chip)" was absent) (320). As much as he shares the view articulated by the Wizard, his own absence suggests a purposeful distancing from it. Kermit's critique thus underscores the reflexively precarious nature of Delany's hermeneutics: the reader relies on the failure of

discourse, but he or she must be wary of fetishizing or simply accepting that failure; instead, we must attend carefully to the question of "who" fails, when, and where. In this respect, *Plagues and Carnivals* politicizes the un-masterable, always incomplete text. It locates this deconstructive notion within the specific affective trauma of AIDS, insisting that any abstract proclamation must be met with the necessary critical vigilance to measure its insight against the exigencies of this historical catastrophe.

By stressing the gaps between AIDS research and the Master's rhetoric, *Plagues and Carnivals* points up the fundamental, irreducible ambivalence that shapes the para-academic narration of AIDS as a discursive crisis. That ambivalence must not be arrested, however, but allowed to fibrillate in its dual trajectories--a hopeful desire to bridge discourses and a fear that only silence will prevail. *Plagues and Carnivals* manifests these affects in its final narrative. Delany strolls through Riverside Park and stumbles across Noyeed, one of the characters from the medieval narrative (who figures marginally in *Plagues and Carnivals* but is more central in other tales). Noyeed's speech is stilted and somewhat incoherent, particularly when he tries to explain how he arrived in contemporary New York City. So Delany asks him to "Tell me in your own language. Go on. I'll understand" (346). In a lengthy section composed in italics, Noyeed explains how he discovered a dragon and rode it to this new world, transcending the boundaries between them: "I've never been a man to believe in limits, borders, boundaries" (349). This moment represents *Plagues and Carnivals* utopian desire to cross discursive boundaries--to bridge genres, historical moments, fiction and reality. Yet, despite the bridge between past and present, the present seems even more strange and incomprehensible, not domesticated or familiar when compared to the fantasy. Indeed, Delany asks Noyeed, "how do you find our strange and terrible land? Have you heard that we have plagues of our own?" (350). Noyeed pauses, looking at the city, and the novel concludes in Delany's voice, "And I

would have sworn, on that chill spring night, he no longer understood me." This line crystallizes that the point of analogue--the comparison of *plagues*-- is the point of misunderstanding. Fictional worlds have folded onto one another, but a critical dialogue between them is still not possible, even though they seem to share a common trauma. Is there a precedent for this plague? What causes it? What transmits it? How should it be understood? Will it be cured? These questions cannot be answered yet, and so the novel ends on the lack of passage, a failure of reading between Noyeed and Delany. Or, more precisely, *Plagues and Carnivals* waits for a future reading, one to turn this "near-mute" moment into a dialogue. The failure of the text to produce a dialogue is therefore the site of possibility for a reader. This reader, one hopes, will not be the Master(ful) critic who would silence the text in his or her own voice, but one who would articulate folds of the text that have been kept apart by historical forces of exclusion, opacity, and misunderstanding.

This is the limit of Delany's first para-academic representation of AIDS. As much as he desires hermeneutic reference, the interpretative process remains undecidable -- and that openness is represented as a failure, a breakdown, and a silence. In the next section, I will turn to Delany's second para-academic experimental novel, *The Mad Man*, to demonstrate how Delany reconfigures queer hermeneutics a decade later. *The Mad Man* extends Delany's historiographic project, but it shifts away from the problem of historical reference toward the problem of sexual reference in post-AIDS discourse. As I show, the novel's experimental representation of pornography counters discourses that disavow non-normative sexual practices. The novel thus repairs the negative representation of pleasure in *Plagues and Carnivals* and, more importantly, challenges the discourses of "safe sex" that have perpetuated material violence against homosexual communities. Whereas Delany's first AIDS novel aligned the para-academic with the hybrid discursive form of experimental

writing, *The Mad Man* actually constructs a para-academic character in the form of a graduate student who passes between different social and sexual economies. These marginal economies of sexuality provide a more utopian space for queer pleasure, even as the novel underscores how these pleasures are historically imprinted by AIDS. Yet hermeneutic vigilance remains a necessity for the figures who cross between these precarious and antagonistic social fields. By tracking the formal shifts in his representation of AIDS, I conclude that experimental writing continues to provide Delany a narrative mode for complicating academic interpretative relations to sexuality. However, the increased stability of sexual pleasure as an interpretative referent points up the representational challenges posed by the predominant forms of post-AIDS discourse. Indeed, reading queerly thus remains a critical task for Delany because AIDS seems to have shifted from allegory into History.

### **The Hermeneutics of Sex**

A decade after publishing *Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany returns to experimental writing when he again addresses the historical experience of the AIDS crisis. *The Mad Man* (1994) is a truly experimental text: it is a five hundred page historical, and largely pornographic, novel that begins with a disclaimer and ends by republishing the (at the time) most recent academic study of risk factors in HIV seroconversion.<sup>27</sup> These bookends are not incidental to the text. Rather, they frame the critical significance of *The Mad Man*'s combination of historical and pornographic narratives. As Delany observes in his disclaimer, the fact that the study was published in 1987 is an "appalling, horrifying, and ultimately criminal" testament to the continuing dearth of research on AIDS (xiii-xiv). Read within this context, then,

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<sup>27</sup> For the best reading of *The Mad Man* in relationship to AIDS, see Tucker. For a brilliant reading of the novel's ethical revision of abjection, see Mary Catherine Foltz. See also Ray Davis. The novel might also be productively read alongside Delany's earlier pornographic fictions, such as *Equinox* (1973) and *Hogg* (1969). For a reading of Delany's critical use of pornography, see Gabriel Zinn. For a helpful analysis of Delany's unique rendering of "apocalypse," see Guy Davidson.

Delany insists that *The Mad Man*

is specifically a book about various sexual acts whose status as vectors of HIV contagion we have no hard-edged knowledge of because the monitored studies that would give statistical portraits between such acts and Seroconversion (from HIV- to HIV+) have not been done. xiii

Delany again frames AIDS within a narrative of uncertainty. Here, that uncertainty is produced by the lack of monitored scientific knowledge, which is itself produced by the willed cultural ignorance about the variety of "sexual acts."<sup>28</sup> *The Mad Man's* pornographic narrative strikes at the heart of that cultural repression. Indeed, the novel represents--in intensely specific and erotic detail--sexual acts that fall outside of the norm and, crucially, have an ambiguous relationship to HIV transmission. (These acts primarily include fellatio, urophagia, and coprophagia. Crucially, the novel never represents one scene of anal sex.) Recall that *Plagues and Carnivals* left little narrative space for exploring queer pleasures in the midst of the crisis. By contrast, *The Mad Man* places these pleasures, in their diversity, at the core of its narrative and formal structure. In this respect, the novel constitutes a reparative rewriting of Delany's own AIDS narratives. First, Delany challenges his problematic injunction in *Plagues and Carnivals* to remain abstinent.<sup>29</sup> Second, he undermines the consequence

<sup>28</sup> For relevant critical considerations of these issues, see "On the Unpseakable," "Street Talk / Straight Talk," and "Pornography and Censorship" in *Shorter Views*. See also "Averson/Perversion/Diversion" in *Longer Views* for Delany's non-fictional articulation of this project. This essay was originally given as a talk at Rutgers University at the Fifth Annual Lesbian and Gay Conference on Gay Studies, and it para-academically combines autobiography, sexual narrative, and theoretical speculation. On the role of public sex in New York, see also Delany's acclaimed ethnography *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. This critical text brings together two essays with very different forms--one narrative-based, the other much more theoretical and speculative. They also combine photographs taken by Delany himself. Delany's "writer's preface" negotiates the critical and interpretative expectations about this hybrid form in a manner that suggests it, like many of Delany's critical essays, should be considered under the rubric of the "para-academic."

<sup>29</sup> The novel also critically rewrites Harold Brodkey's memoir *This Wild Darkness: The Story of My Death* (1996). The opening lines of the novel are a precise inversion of Brodkey's, intended to complicate and challenge Brodkey's

of such a broad repression around queer sexuality, specifically the analysis of the *relative* safety of various sexual acts. As Delany recalls, "*any* suggestion at all [in 1984] that one mode of bodily sexual behavior was safer than another was considered totally irresponsible" (*Shorter* 50, original emphasis). Drawing on pornography, the novel challenges this discursive prohibition simply by representing a panoply of sexual behaviors. Yet pornography is also a genre that titillates--it attempts to affectively stimulate the reader's interest, curiosity, and desire in sex. Therefore, by eroticizing acts--drinking urine, consuming feces and snot--that are barely considered erotic (by mainstream culture), let alone *sexual*, *The Mad Man* formally queers sexuality; it challenges the literally reductive conception of sexuality implied by "safe sex" discourses.

Yet for all of its willful rewriting of the past, *The Mad Man* is undoubtedly a historical novel, one that, like *Plagues and Carnivals*, strives to faithfully represent the historically specific structures of feeling that dominated during the crisis. Unlike *Plagues and Carnivals*, however, *The Mad Man's* hermeneutic dilemma does not center on the writing of history itself. Rather, the novel constructs a hermeneutics of sex, in which sexuality itself is the interpretative referent that must be uncovered if one is to understand the historical magnitude of AIDS. The hermeneutic stakes for *The Mad Man's* narrative therefore lie in developing an interpretative relationship to sex that can map its changing historical meaning and value in queer communities. The novel maps these changes through the first-person narrative of the main character, John Marr, an African American philosophy graduate student, who narrates his experience of having public and semi-public sex with homeless men in New York City from 1980 to 1994.<sup>30</sup> Marr's doctoral research focuses on Timothy Hasler, a

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reactionary representation of homosexual sexuality.

<sup>30</sup> For Delany's most intriguing comments on cross-class eroticism, see "Sword & Sorcery, S/M, and the Economics of Inadequation: The *Camera Obscura* Interview" in *Silent Interviews*.



brilliant young Korean American philosopher of semiotics who was mysteriously murdered in 1973 before receiving his doctorate. As Marr discovers, Hasler was gay, and much like Marr, enjoyed a number of unconventional fetishes and sought out public sex with homeless men. Despite the many similarities between them, however, Marr insists that an "incredible historical, fundamental abyss" exists between him and Hasler (177). That abyss is not "some homily like 'Hasler was a gay man before the age of AIDS.'" Rather, it is the excruciating "experience" Marr has when he realizes that sex during AIDS means "gambling, and gambling on one's own--rather than seeking some possible certain knowledge" (176). Ironically, this realization "obliterates the terror" Marr has in having sex, because there is, as yet, no real knowledge of the statistical "chances" of contracting the disease. Marr is uniquely capable of embracing this "gamble" as a Nietzschean affirmation of life.<sup>31</sup> Yet he insists that this persistent structure of fear nonetheless creates the historical abyss between gay communities that exist before and after AIDS. Therefore, as Marr writes to a friend, the disease must be "reinscribe[d] over" all of the "inner drama" of his sexual experiences (172). As he admits, "I thought about AIDS constantly and intently and obsessively... we [gay men] move through life fully and continually oppressed by the suspicion that we already have it!" (173-74). Here *The Mad Man* documents the collective psychological anguish of gay men who choose to risk queer pleasure in the midst of so much uncertainty about the consequences of those sexual acts. The abyss between Marr and Hasler thus stands in for the fundamental discontinuity of "sex" before and after the emergence of AIDS. As Marr writes, "I don't think anyone *can* really understand what AIDS means in the gay community until she or he has some understanding of the field and function--the range, the mechanics--of the sexual landscape AIDS has entered into" (179, original emphasis). If *The Mad Man's*

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<sup>31</sup> *The Mad Man* quotes Nietzsche's dictum, "Man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him. The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to live dangerously" (237)

pornography traces some outlines of this sexual landscape, its historical structure underscores the shifting hermeneutic grounds for what sexuality "means in the gay community" as AIDS unfolds in its historical reality.

*The Mad Man* represents academic modes of reading as a critical obstacle in this hermeneutic project. To be sure, the academic characters stand in for a generalized cultural homophobia and repression of queer sexuality. Yet their location in the academy is, in fact, central to *The Mad Man's* suggestion that the hermeneutics of sex must be undertaken in para-academic genres of discourse, which allow for experimental bridges to be built between the erotic and the intellectual. Indeed, Marr's dissertation advisor, Irving Mossman, initially intends to write a biography of Hasler. However, Mossman discards the project when he discovers that Hasler enjoyed, to Mossman's horror, "the most degrading—and depressing—sexual 'experiments'" (22). "[R]ather than try to separate the sexual practices from the thinking," Mossman passes his research to Marr and concludes, with racist and homophobic disgust, that Hasler was "an obnoxious little chink with an unbelievably nasty [sex life]" (46-47). Mossman's disgust prevents him from reading, let alone interpreting, Hasler's journals, because they include lengthy entries that fantasize about bestiality and document his foot fetish. By contrast, Marr refuses to "separate the sexual practices from the thinking." He is willing to link Hasler's sexual experimentations to his writing on semiotics, and he is capable of reading Hasler's descriptions of bestiality as *fantasies*—not literal transcriptions of his experiences but as complex transfigurations of his desire. Concomitantly, Marr refuses to separate Hasler's philosophical writing (such as his book on the rhetoric of Nietzsche, Pascal, and Peirce) and his para-academic writing. For example, Marr publishes essays on the relationship of Hasler's philosophy to his friend Almira Adler's poetry and to Hasler's own science fiction stories. Although his essays eventually find an academic audience, Marr's work must

initially be published in para-academic venues such as edited collections of science fiction and *Umbilicus*, a "Canadian magazine of radical sexual politics" (493). Since Hasler never received his doctorate, and since much of his writing was "marginal to scholarly pursuits," Marr's department chair believes it is apt that Marr's own criticism "occup[ies] an identical position" (240). Yet *The Mad Man* suggests that these "marginal" venues allow for reading practices that the academy discounts. Of course, they allow for the discussion of degraded subjects annexed from philosophy (poetry, sex, and science fiction). Yet they also permit Marr to bridge genres of discourse that are otherwise segregated from one another and kept in a strict hierarchy of authorized knowledge. Crucially, this relationship among genres serves as a metaphor for the ways that philosophers like Mossman wish to segregate mind and body, intellect and sex. Yet, in the case of reading Hasler, these generic relations literally prevent the critical practice of reuniting mind and body in the work of the philosopher.

Clearly, Marr's hermeneutics of sex is not a hermeneutics of suspicion. Suspicion implies that insight derives through critical distance from the cultural text. By contrast, the hermeneutics of sex requires *immersion* within the social economies from which the cultural text emerges. *The Mad Man* highlights this immersive hermeneutic through its undermining of the traditional mystery plot. Adler asks Marr to discover the cause of the philosopher's murder. Almost immediately, Marr discovers the answer, simply by entering the gay bar, The Pit, where Hasler was seen before his murder. There, Marr talks with a bartender who vividly recalls the circumstances of Hasler's death. If Hasler's murder is not a "secret," then what prevents Adler, Mossman, and others from accessing the truth? As Marr explains to Mossman, "To a lot of people, it wasn't a secret at all. Only to the official forces--the police, people like that. It's a matter of getting yourself in the right system" (488). Here Marr suggests that anyone could have discovered the truth, if they were willing

to immerse themselves in unofficial systems. Of course, these systems are defined by sexuality, and this is precisely what prevents Adler from discovering the truth. She cannot see the truth of her friend's death because, much like Mossman, she is disgusted and ashamed of Hasler's desires. Indeed, she admits "at that time, I felt I didn't want to know anything at *all* about Tim's death. It was part of the ugly and tragic sector of his life I had nothing to do with--and I wanted it to stay that way" (301, original emphasis). Sexuality is not *actually* hidden, and the truth is not metaphysically veiled. Both are willfully repressed from entering one economy of knowledge, even as they vibrantly live on in an "unofficial" system that one merely must find a way to inhabit. As a para-academic figure, Marr is adept at passing between the official and unofficial social (and sexual) systems, and he is therefore capable of relinking sexuality, knowledge, and history in ways that academic figures cannot.

While *The Mad Man* clearly critiques the critical gap between these systems, it also relies on that gap to produce subversive spaces of sociality. In particular, the novel suggests that the unreadability of queer sexuality to dominant systems creates opportunities for marginal, heterotopian forms of pleasure and intimacy. Highlighting this point, Marr repeats two jokes throughout his narrative. First, he reminds us that, upon entering graduate school, he wished to write a thesis in the tradition of Hegel entitled "The Systems of the World." This text would be a "six hundred-page tome on psychology, history, reality, and metaphysics, putting them once and for all in their grandly ordered relation" (10). Mossman quickly discourages Marr's project, because, he explains, scholars do not write these kinds of grand (notably interdisciplinary) texts anymore. Yet Marr himself humorously recalls the project throughout the novel to mock the desire to synthesize all the systems of the world into one totality. Marr mocks that desire because he learns, through his sexual experiences, that the blindness

between systems can be productive. Thus, his second joke derives from a story that Pops tells him after Marr fellates him in the park. Pops recalls a similar sexual experience, when his partner told him not to worry about having sex midday while white men played baseball nearby. In Pops words, the man said,

it don't make no difference. They come down here and play every week. They won't see nothin'... Look, there're two kinds of people in the world: there's baseball players. And there's cocksuckers. An' the baseball players just don't never even *see* the cocksuckers... An they wouldn't say nothin', even if they did see. 58, original emphasis

Pops' story proves to be true throughout the novel, as public sex is rarely noticed, and never chastised, by the heteronormative world. (This is perhaps the most fantastical element of the novel, but it is also a convention of pornography that represents public sex-- being caught is largely a condition of, not an obstacle to, the pleasure). Thus, Marr frequently jokes about "baseball players" in the world, recalling Pops' point that this group cannot see non-normative sexuality because they do not know to look for it. Quite literally, they cannot see these bodies or their pleasures, despite their visibility. This is because the baseball players "play every week;" their system is ordered and regimented, whereas the public sex is decidedly spontaneous. Even if public sex has its strict conventions (as we will see), *The Mad Man* suggests that the very expectation of normativity by the baseball players ironically leads to their inability to perceive any divergence from these norms; it makes deviation partially unreadable.

Although the unreadability of queer sex creates some space for non-normative sociality, *The Mad Man* is not content to quietly position sex on the margins of society. On the contrary, the novel signifies the perverse 'revelation' of sexuality as a critical challenge to the normative economies of heteronormativity and homosexuality

alike. The novel points to this revelation through the term "EKPYROSIS," which is written in excrement on the walls and windows of Hasler's apartment and which Marr later writes on his own mirror (480). As Marr explains, the word means "'conflagration' or 'apocalypse'" in pre-Socratic philosophy and that it "is generally assumed to refer to the end of the universe, when everything, according to Heraclitus, would collapse into fire" (307). To be sure, the apocalyptic ethos of the novel results from AIDS, which gives rise to an imminent and pervasive dread of death. Yet Delany also correlates apocalypse to sexual revelation. Note, for example, that he calls the genre of *The Mad Man* "pornotopia," because this term indicates "not the 'good sexual place.' (That would be 'Upornotopia' or 'Eupornoopia.') It's simply *the* 'sexual place' -- the place where all can become (apocalyptically) sexual" (*Shorter* 133, original emphasis). Pornotopia represents a place "where any relationship can become sexualized in a moment, with the proper word or look--where every relationship is potentially sexualized even before it starts." Simply by revealing the immanence of sexuality, pornotopia contributes to what Delany sees as "a necessary deformation of an older, pre-AIDS discourse, which privileged sexual reticence, into a discourse that foregrounds detailed sexual honesty, imagination, and articulation. AIDS makes such a discursive adjustment imperative. (Today, anything else is murder)." (123). At the same time, *The Mad Man* makes evident that the revelation of sexuality constitutes a para-academic challenge to the discipline of philosophy itself. In one of its many epigraphs, the novel quotes Michel Foucault's claim that "The *bios philosophicus* is the animality of being human, renewed as a challenge, practiced as an exercise—and thrown in the face of others as a scandal" (qtd. *Mad* 5). Throughout his lectures, Foucault invokes the scandalous revelations made by Cynic philosophers (such as Diogenes) that challenged social conventions. Indeed, both Foucault and Delany, like other queer writers, cite Diogenes the Cynic as a proleptically queer philosopher.<sup>32</sup> As

<sup>32</sup> Michael Warner begins *The Trouble with Normal* with a reference to this story

Foucault mentions, for example, Diogenes famously masturbated in public, demanding to know: "why are you scandalized, since masturbation satisfies a need, just as eating does. I eat in public, so why should I not satisfy this need also in public?" (*Courage* 171). The performative, subversive pornographic act here effectively "brings to light, in their irreducible nakedness, those things which alone are indispensable to human life," and in Foucault's argument "this mode of life simply reveals what life is...[and] what life ought to be." Delany's hermeneutics of sex therefore cites a range of philosophical texts to challenge the reticence around sexuality and AIDS and, conversely, to challenge philosophy to admit the sexual as at least part of the irreducible nature of human being. Like Diogenes' masturbation, *The Mad Man*'s pornographic titillation strives to pose a scandalous question that forces a reconsideration of the norms of sexual representation and public sexuality alike.

*The Mad Man* dramatizes the utopian and ethical (Foucault's "ought to be") dimension of the *bios philosophicus* in its climactic orgy, which should be read as a literalization of the Delphic Oracle's injunction to Diogenes to "Change the currency" (qtd. *Mad* 89). In this scene, Marr meets Mad Man Mike, who was once Hasler's lover. Mike teaches his lovers a sexual game, in which everyone pays a penny to "buy" sex with one another. Beforehand, Marr grapples with the disturbing evocations of slavery that come with purchasing another human being. Yet he comes to appreciate the game. On the one hand, as Hasler explains (paraphrasing Mike), "knowing somebody wanted you enough even to pay a penny for you meant you were not in the unenviable position that most of the people he knew {card 239} [sic] living in the parks and the streets was in: i.e., no one wanted them at all and to most people they were worth *nothing!* " (456, original emphasis). In this respect, the game constitutes a literal resignification of the "currency" of the homeless and homosexual body, which is socially viewed as worthless. It constructs an economy in which that

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about Diogenes.

body has material and erotic value. On the other hand, Marr's actual experience in the orgy reveals the excessive nature of exchange in this economy. "What stays with me, of course," he explains, "were those moments that seemed in excess of this endless systematic interchange" (441). For example, when Leaky possesses all the pennies, Mike "by fiat, simply redistributed the wealth, as it were, as absolutely and autocratically as any avatar of Marx might have done. Leaky didn't complain" (445). Similarly, when all the men fall asleep together, Marr recalls that as Big Buck starts to snore "his hand open[ed] , and [Marr heard] the sound of a half dozen pennies falling out." Here a penny no longer signifies meager value in a capitalist exchange. A penny is no longer the price of a penny. Rather, the pennies falling from Buck's hand underscores that their *only* value lies in the exchange of sociality and sexuality they have enabled. (This is why Leaky does not complain -- the redistribution of wealth means the production of more collective pleasure). This is also why Buck can drop the pennies to the floor and no one cares: the pennies have no value once these relations have ceased to be performed. And, crucially, everyone can sleep; no one needs to watchfully hoard the pennies for a future profit, because the pennies do not condense, in this context, some abstract value that makes them exchangeable. This scene is a metonym for Delany's more general view that cross-class erotic economies can pose a literal challenge to the values and hierarchies of capitalist culture. In response to critics who question his eroticizing of the homeless bodies, Delany claims that "The easier it is to name, survey, and pathologize the eroticization of any particular set of class relations, then the more *dangerous* that set of relations—and their eroticization—is to patriarchal *status quo* society." (*Silent* 136, original). Therefore, he claims that eroticized cross-class relations "represent lines of communication, fields of interest, and exchanges of power" that pose a challenge to the dominant social economy and its structures (136-37).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This is why the novel's disclaimer disavows historical reference, "Correspondences



Clearly, this utopian desire infuses *The Mad Man's* representation of queer sexual economies. Yet the novel is *not* utopian. In fact, its hermeneutics of sex is precisely attuned to the violence that results when a subject is incapable of properly reading the social economy that they inhabit. Crucially, Mad Man Mike fails in maintaining this vigilance, and this failure leads to Hasler's death. As Marr learns, Mike and Hasler went to The Pit, which is a hustler's bar. The bartender explains that the Pit caters to

a lot of older men who think the only way they can get anything worth having sexually is to pay for it. And the kids who come here are all kids who want to get paid--need to get paid... the thing that makes this whole place possible is a belief that sex--the kind of sex that gets sold here--is scarce. Because it's scarce, it's valuable. And because it's valuable, it goes for good prices. 353-54

In direct contrast to this economy, Mike cannot conceive of sex as scarcity, since so many people yearn for it. Indeed, as the bartender recalls, Mike did not "think sex was scarce at all. He thought it was all over the place. He didn't mind older guys--'cause he liked all sorts of guys, young, old, and everybody in between" (354). Indeed, Mike does not even perceive the body's productions as *waste*. Instead, he views these fluids as a desirable natural resource, a kind of endless plenitude. Commenting on the semen in the orgy, for example, he proclaims "There's gonna be so much of that shit around... ain't nobody gonna have to *fight* for it" (434, original emphasis). Obviously, Mike's world-view presents a manifest challenge to the hustlers and their patrons. In Ronnie Apple's explanation, "*We* come to places like this, to pursue our clean and costly pleasures... and *they* come to soil it all, pollute it with pain and rage and lust---" (478,

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are not only coincidental but preposterous" (xiii). This is a strange declaration, given that so much of the novel provides a seemingly realistic portrait of marginal public sex. However, the novel leaves out a great deal of violence in its idealization and revision of marginal sexuality. Indeed, the disclaimer admits that its representation of homelessness leaves out the winter and many other hardships faced by people living on the street.

original emphasis). Apple's rhetorical binary is key. The economy of the hustler bar perceives sexuality as inherently *costly*, because they see it as a commodity structured by supply and demand. (Hence, Mike's disinterest in *young* men upsets the economy of demand). Threatened by Mike's alternative, Apple necessarily degrades "*them*" as "polluted," even though Mike and his lovers re-signify the "polluted" body as excessively, endlessly desirable. This discursive violence becomes actualized in *literal* violence when a hustler attacks Mike and accidentally murders Hasler in the process. In the exact same manner, and for the exact same reason, Joey (another of Mike's lovers) is murdered while Marr discovers the truth about Hasler's death in the present. This historical repetition underscores that the antagonistic economies of queer sexuality are neither in the past nor are they purely caused by AIDS. As Marr reflects, "How could you explain to someone like Almira Adler what happened [to Hasler] when --for certainly this was closer to the problem--*one entire system of the world turned on another and tried to obliterate it*" (483, my emphasis). The systems of the world are not simply nested but antagonistically oriented to one another. Therefore, the hermeneutics of sex demands an ongoing attention to the conflicting economies that underlie social and sexual relations, because an inattention to those values will result in real violence. And that violence itself must be read as indication of the hierarchical and repressive relations that organize the economies of sexuality.

*The Mad Man* stresses that these antagonistic circuits also condition the relationship between the academic world and its cultural and intellectual outside. No matter how much Marr passes between these economies, he cannot completely shift one discursive orbit into another. (Sometimes the gaps between these economies enables satirical results, such as in the conclusion of the novel when he brings his lover Leaky to faculty parties. Leaky's wry commentary on the academics is shaped by his difference from them as a frequently homeless, poor, and uneducated man with

a penchant for queer sex.) However, *The Mad Man* concludes by stressing the ways that queer history, subjectivity, and experience cannot be simply recovered from the economy of the past. Marr prepares to publish Hasler's memoir, "The Mad Man," yet Leaky admits that its publication may not "mean anything to him [Mad Man Mike] at all" (499). Mike, as Hasler's mad man, stands outside meaning here, because he is incapable of being assimilated to the Marr's economies of discourse. After Joey's death, in a shocking scene, Mike "rapes" Marr--it is the only sexual scene that Marr does not detail and the text does not eroticize. Yet when Marr tries to speculate on the meaning of this violence to Mike, he cannot determine whether Mike has heard him or not. Mike nods and states, "There wasn't nobody to come with no more..." (497). In response, Marr wonders,

Now the nod may have signified just that Mike had heard what I'd said. The look may have meant only that he didn't understand it. And the comment may have meant only that he didn't understand it. And the comment may have had something to do with Joey that I simply didn't follow. But I choose to read from the three together that my supposition was right: he'd questioned the past and told me his reason. But with madmen such readings are always questionable.

Marr chooses his reading, but crucially, Mike remains a figure that, maddeningly, produces "questionable" readings. To be sure, Marr's hermeneutics of sex enables the "revelation" of Hasler and his sexual economy. Yet he cannot, finally, understand how Mike feels about the violence he has caused in the past or the present. Likewise, he cannot determine whether Hasler's writing will "mean" anything to him. This opacity underlines the gap between Marr's practices of reading and those subjects that cannot, finally, be understood within its terms. Yet the opacity does not undermine the hermeneutic labor or forsake para-academic writing. Rather, it points to the

irreducible social and historical trauma felt by queer subjects like Mike who cannot make their experience legible, readable, and meaningful to others. Thus, Marr wonders, "What would the world have to inflict on Leaky to transform him into such an out-of-touch, hurtful, and outraged sexual creature [like Mike]? Picturing the specificities of the answer actually gave me the chills!" (483). Akin to Marr's letter to Sam, we should read Mike as part of *The Mad Man's* insistence that there is a fundamental limit to what can be learned or represented about "the gay experience" (183). (He writes to Sam, "The gay experience, then...? I can only smile"). This is due to the diversity of gay experience, surely, but it is also a result of the historical oppression that makes so much of queer experience unreadable. Mike thus represents the incalculable losses that linger between sexual and social economies, between the economies of the past and present, and between the self and the discourses that make the self readable to others.

One could read *The Mad Man* as an allegory of the academy prior to the emergence of queer theory and other critical ventures that created analytic space for minority sexualities. Yet such a reading might imply that queer theory and sexuality studies have dispelled the discursive problems represented in *The Mad Man*. If one were to read the novel this way, then, it would be important to recall that the critical analysis of queer sexuality did not arise from *within* the academy. It began in para-academic spaces, and it was erotically immersed in marginal social economies. Yet rather than read the novel as an allegory of the academy, I have argued that it constitutes a para-academic dialogue in its own experimental bridging of genres. Like Marr, the text demands modes of reading that stretch beyond those traditionally sanctioned by and rewarded in academic spaces. Indeed, pornography is rarely perceived as the aesthetically rich and valuable genre that Delany claims it can be. In Elizabeth Freeman's words, "we know a lot less about how to do things with sex than

we know about how to do things with words" (172). As a consequence, we lack hermeneutic tools to contend with reading sex as, at once, titillating *and* critical, erotic and philosophical. Their very juncture is, of course, central to the hermeneutics of sex performed by *The Mad Man*. But it is, most importantly, the basis for Delany's final response to the discursive crisis of AIDS. Rather than begging an ear, as he does in *Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany calls for a proliferation of voices. He asks that "we all begin to put forward the monumental analytical effort, in whichever rhetorical mode we choose, needed not to interpret what we say, but to say what we do" (*Shorter* 56). The pornotopic fantasy of *The Mad Man* may not count as a rhetorical mode of confession or truth. Even Delany demurs on its representational status. Yet, read alongside Delany's critical and fictional work, *The Mad Man* captures the truly daunting cultural obstacles that we face in "say[ing] what we do" with respect to sex. The novel expands, I have suggested, the viable "rhetorical mode[s]" in which this "analytic effort" can be performed. But it also demonstrates that, even if we do not need to "interpret what we say," the political, ethical, and historical problems of interpreting sexually are still very much our problems.

### **Interpretation as Inheritance**

Delany's fiction reveals that AIDS produced, among many things, a crisis of reading. Recent critics in literary studies have argued that this crisis remains with us, demanding the construction of new methodologies for interpretation.<sup>34</sup> While I agree with this goal, my task in this chapter has been different. Rather than look ahead, to the future of the crisis, I have looked backward, to its past. My purpose has been to establish that there has been a plurality of interpretative relations to the crisis. More importantly, I have argued that AIDS must be thought of as a fundamental event in the history of queer hermeneutics--it dramatically, if not irreversibly, altered the reading of certain terms implicated with AIDS (plague, disease, health, body, sex, etc.). But it

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<sup>34</sup> See especially Tomso.

also, I contend, altered the meaning of "reading" itself.

Admittedly, my evidence for these claims has been small, resting largely on Delany's most marginal fictions. I have not produced a history of the epidemic nor of queer cultural responses to it. However, my claim has been that such a history cannot be properly written without first broadening the predominant definition of "queer hermeneutics." First, the dichotomy between paranoid and reparative reading must be expanded, if not abandoned, to recover the diversity of affective responses to the crisis of interpretation wrought by AIDS. Second, the concept of "queer hermeneutics" must be repatriated from purely academic territory and returned to the broader cultural field from which it emerges. My analysis of Delany has served these two goals. My focus on Delany's "para-academic" dialogue demonstrates that queer writers are deeply invested in and responsive to academic terms of interpretation. The para-academic is thus a helpful concept for locating queer hermeneutics in a cultural field that exists to the side of institutionally sanctioned modes of reading. Both the *marginality* and *experimental form* of Delany's para-academic fictions is, therefore, emblematic of their ambivalent relationship to the authorized genres of fiction and academic criticism alike. But perhaps most importantly, Delany's para-academic representations of AIDS highlight that "queer hermeneutics" is not an abstract concept--it is fundamentally responsive to the needs of an historically located struggle around sexual politics and homophobic oppression.

Of course, I am not the first critic to call for a renewed attention to the AIDS era in queer criticism. Many critics have recently urged queer theory to keep alive an active historical relationship to the crisis. This is due to the noticeable absence of AIDS-related issues in mainstream sexual politics. Consequently, critics such as Heather Love have argued that a queer resistance to "the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the

dead" (*Feeling* 30). My argument assumes that interpretation must be considered a layer of the "accreted historical meanings" that Love identifies as part of queer identity. My fear is that recent appeals to objective modes of reading (including Love's concept of "descriptive reading") obscure the queer inheritances of interpretation. To twist Love's words, queer critics should equally refuse to write off the least presentable, the least readable, modes of interpretation that animate this inheritance. Certainly, the hermeneutics of suspicion is too narrow to capture the dynamic, non- (and not-only) institutional practices of reading created by queer writers. The veneer of objectivity equally dispels the ways in which interpretation is a condensation of habits historically shaped by queer desires, needs, oppressions, and prohibitions. As Fredric Jameson once argued, "we apprehend [texts] through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or--if the text is brand-new--through *the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretative traditions*" (*Political* 9, my emphasis).

For writers such as Delany, this inheritance is one actively bequeathed to future readers. Therefore, this chapter should be read as an initial step in documenting the inherited interpretative traditions of queer culture. Undoubtedly, this historiography must acknowledge queer theory as a disciplinary transmission of interpretative protocols. As Cusset argues, "The mission of the scholarly institution is to produce readers that meet certain standards, and, in the name of professorial competence, to impose not only a list of required texts but also the various modes of reading appropriate to them" (223). Even if queer theory does not have one dominant mode of reading--and even if its modes of reading remain contested in academia--it nonetheless constitutes one institutional project of reproducing certain interpretative habits. The historiography of queer hermeneutics will thus have to also look beyond queer theory, to its institutional unconscious, to the interpretative practices that live

outside of the university. Experimental writing has been a mode for Delany to practice this hermeneutic work, but it is not the only genre. As Delany's fictions dramatize, para-academic spaces have a vibrant dialogue with queer theory that has yet to be written.

To conclude, then, let me insist that the practices of reading in Delany's fiction have critical relevance to queer theory, even as AIDS recedes from the horizon of queer politics. In Delany's hands, hermeneutics always correlates to a vigilant, recursive attention to exclusion--to the ways that discourses disavow and marginalize by their very nature. Although he does not locate a final referent, Delany's work performs an immanent unveiling of exclusion and its implicit economies of valorization. Therefore, as we saw in *The Mad Man*, a "reparative reading" of the past is only meaningful given a history and context of abjection. The popular critique of suspicious reading has, I believe, forgotten this point--that the choice between critical and affirmative readings is, ultimately, a contextual decision. Even the vocal "affirmative" critic, Brian Massumi, notes that the balance between critique and affirmation must be approached as "a question of dosage," conditioned by "timing and proportion" (*Parables* 13). I have challenged Massumi's claim that "critical reading" is necessarily structured by "the intemperate arrogance of debunking" (12). Yet his metaphor of dosage is apt, perhaps even more than even he realizes. Delany's linkage of hermeneutics and AIDS reminds us that "critical reading" takes place within social, historical, and bodily economies. Our interpretative choices must be responsive to their necessities.

To be sure, the outlines of marginalization and valorization shift with the movement of history. In the contemporary moment, some forms of queer sexuality have taken on a hyper-visible relation to mainstream culture and the nation-state. It is perhaps tempting, then, to think that the need for critique is as outdated as the early



days of the AIDS crisis. We should resist that temptation. After all, critique need not entail self-satisfied suspicion. Such a repetitive affective and interpretative relation to culture will, ironically, prevent hermeneutic vigilance. Instead, critique might be rewritten as an attention to the constantly snaking boundaries of violence and valorization as they cross over one another and, in so crossing, compose the power relations of the social world. Given such immanent complexity, critique cannot make us masters. On the contrary, the failure of our vigilance is the only given. But what if vigilance is a sedimentation, a historical debt that is inherited and acted on, even if it is not consciously known? Then, perhaps, our goal is not to become the *most* vigilant, as if such a transcendental subject existed. Rather, we might strive to become (however partially) aware of our hermeneutic inheritances, and in the process, become capable of finding new ways of reading our relation to those debts. To return, finally, to Delany's most repeated quote: "Those who fail to reread are obliged to reread the same story everywhere" (*Silent* 2). Re-reading will occur, no matter what. The only question is whether we will find the same story everywhere, or by re-reading, make difference possible.

### Chapter 3:

#### Becoming Unreadable:

#### Aesthetic Consumption, the "Languages of the Body," and the Value of Sexuality in Kathy Acker's Fiction

*"I'm not writing for the reader."*

--Kathy Acker, Interview with Sylvère Lotringer

*"All my senses touch words. Words touch the senses.*

*Language isn't only translation, for the word is blood."*

--R. in *In Memoriam to Identity*

Kathy Acker's fiction has often been called "unreadable" by her critics. On the one hand, her novels maintain the barest level of narrative consistency, with characters shifting names, genders, and personalities as their plots ignite and fizzle out at a feverish pace. In this sense, Acker's novels are literally unreadable, if readability is defined by realist or Aristotelian narrative expectations. On the other hand, the primary theme of Acker's novels is the sexually taboo. In the tradition of transgressive writers such as the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille, her fiction represents rape, incest, child molestation, patriarchal and sadistic violence, maternal hatred, forced prostitution, and the constant betrayals wrought by lovers and the ideology of love alike. All of these dynamics are represented within an eroticized, even pornographic, discourse, which produces a truly discomfitting gap between form and content. In this sense, Acker's novels have been, for many, morally and politically repulsive and thus unreadable.

Yet it is rarely noted that Acker proudly embraced the unreadability of her fiction. Or, more specifically, she sought to frame her fiction as unreadable. To be sure, many writers craft texts that are estranging, ambiguous, and schizophrenic. Few writers, however, rival Acker's performative claims to unreadability. Taking estrangement to its logical, anti-social extreme, Acker's avowed unreadability defuses the conventional relationship between writer, reader, and text. Take, for example, the

blurb placed on the back of *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991), a collection of Acker's short writings published by *Semiotext(e)*: "This writing is all fake (copied from other writing) so you should go away and not read any of it."<sup>1</sup> This assertion appears without quotations in front of a photograph of the author, so it is not clear whether this a "quote" from Acker, the publisher, or someone else. In its ambiguity, the blurb undermines the conventions of literary consumption: there will be no seduction of the reader as consumer; there will be no advertisements of authenticity or originality, which typically grace the backcover of books; and there will be no sanctioning of the author, via praise, by another critical authority.

Of course, one could read Acker's refusal of the reader as totally disingenuous, a kind of hipster-cool distance that, indeed, was a key part of her self-cultivated transgressive image. However, I contend that there is an earnestness and complexity to Acker's claim to unreadability that emerges in her interviews, essays, and fiction, which points to her underlying struggle to redefine the social relations of "reading" through the medium of experimental writing. Indeed, as Acker suggests in her interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "I'm not writing for the reader" (*Hannibal* 15). "[T]he primary pleasure is not for the reader, it's for me," she explains, "Probably it makes my texts a bit unreadable." Here "unreadable" takes on a new meaning, one that diverges from the two (formal and thematic) elaborated above; unreadability now signifies the narcissistic or, simply, self-oriented pleasure of the text; the conceit that enjoyment is not *for* the reader challenges the economy of pleasure that typically adheres to the ideology of fiction as either a commodity purchased by the reader or a gift given unto the reader. In this dissertation thus far, bad reading has signified queer social relations otherwise unrepresentable in a specific historical moment. In Acker's case, unreadability resists the predominant social relations implied within the

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<sup>1</sup> Acker famously plagiarized a great deal of her writing, although she rewrote it in an improvisational manner which she equated with jazz. In this respect, her claim that nothing is original in the text can also be taken literally.

consumer structures of good reading. Her representation of the text as a queerly erotic, literally masturbatory body of pleasure will come to stand in for a moral and political economy in which neither language nor value can be abstracted from the material body. This conceit does not recuperate the author's identity or body as the unified ground of fiction. Rather, Acker's "languages of the body" strive to transmit the sensations of an impersonal, a-subjective, chaotic, and erotic "becoming" that she sees as the material reality of the sexed body. By analyzing this fantasy of her texts as corporeally unreadable, I argue that we can locate how Acker's assaults on patriarchy and consumerism are bound together within the body of queer eroticism.

The irony of Acker's proclaimed unreadability is that she was--and continues to be--manifestly readable within the frameworks of postmodernism, deconstruction, and post-structuralism, three frameworks Acker also invokes to describe her fiction. Readers (myself included) have found no shortage of productive links between Acker and post-structural theorists, particularly Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray (all theorists that Acker herself cites or analyzes). However, critics have not acknowledged Acker's ultimate frustration with the way that theory made her fiction readable, sapping it of its estrangement and political critique, rendering it subordinate to another explanatory discourse. This is likely due to Acker's own initial praise of theory as a discourse that, at least initially, made her readable to critics and academics. As she explains to Lotringer,

meeting you changed me a lot because by introducing me to the French philosophes, you gave me a way of verbalizing what I had been doing in language. I didn't really understand why I refused to use linear narrative; why my sexual genders kept changing; why basically I am the most disoriented novelist that ever existed.... I was like a death-dumb-and-blind [sic] person for

years, I just did what I did but had no way of telling anyone about it, or talking about it. And then when I read ANTI-OEDIPUS and Foucault's work, suddenly I had this whole language at my disposal. I could say, Hi! And that other people were doing the same thing. I remember thinking, Why don't they know me? I know exactly what they're talking about. And I could go further.

*Hannibal* 10

Note how, in Acker's tale, theory renders her a social subject, shifting her from insularity and ignorance to articulation ("I could say, Hi!") and potential reception ("Why don't they know me?"). Yet even as she prioritizes theory as a frame, Acker insists her work can somehow "go further." The problem she confronts is that readers often do not agree, taking her work as merely *exemplary* of theory itself. Take, for example, David Foster Wallace's review of Acker's novels, in which he calls one a "theory-vector," claiming that its "entire interest for the reader lies in the theoretical justifications for its form" (155). In a pointed joke, Wallace writes "Acker should have to hand over 15% of every royalty-dollar to the authors of *Anti Oedipus*: Deleuze and Guattari are all over her stuff like white on rice."<sup>2</sup> Wallace's sense that the ideal audience for Acker's fiction is academic is characteristic of many reviews of her work. (Notably, Wallace does not acknowledge that Acker's novel was published in 1973, one year after the French publication of *Anti-Oedipus*, which seriously challenges the idea that her work is simply reiterating their theoretical claims). In Acker's eyes, this reception increasingly and problematically rendered her work too narrowly readable within the terms of theory.

Acker's late aesthetic turn to what she labeled the "languages of the body" indicates an attempt to reframe her work in relationship to theory. To an extent, this shift constitutes a certain disavowal of theory. Despite the very clear influences of

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<sup>2</sup> This novel is published in *Portrait of an Eye* (1997) which compiles three of Acker's early novels.

*écriture féminine*, Kristeva, and Irigaray (among others) on this concept, Acker claims that "I'm at this place where I was prior to when I met you [Lotringer] where don't [sic] have the theory anymore to talk about it" (*Hannibal* 24). This disavowal of theory is not merely a marketing ploy or an attempt to recapture critical cache. Rather, I suggest that it constitutes Acker's attempt to displace the interpretative authority of theory by inhabiting the role of the 'theorist.' Hence, she proclaims--in an critical essay that, crucially, pushes against Judith Butler--that she is searching for, expressing, and conceptualizing languages of the body that are somehow beyond theory. These languages express the chaotic sensuousness of the (typically but not exclusively) female body, outstripping rational, critical, and Logocentric discourses. Clearly, the languages of the body does not, in fact, diverge from the principles or style of Acker's previous "postmodern" project. Her work continues to represent perverse sexualities, irrationality, and patriarchal violence through her characteristic narrative disorientation. Yet the framework around the texts has changed. Throughout her essays, Acker repeatedly proposes a break from what she variously labels "deconstruction," "conceptual art," and "postmodernism," claiming to be shifting from a destructive, negative art to a constructive affirmation of social alternatives. Her performance of this turn, I will argue, is more important than the question of whether or not a turn has occurred. Specifically, I contend that Acker's "turn" is central to her perception that theory has been de-politicized by the "American academy"-- a development she fears has de-politicized the reading of her fiction and, at the same time, sapped its capacity to produce affective estrangement. Therefore, I argue that the languages of the body is central to Acker's attempt to recuperate the unreadability of her fiction. This unreadability, as I will show, is specifically tied to an affirmation of the queerly chaotic and material body as the ground of ethical value. Grounding her writing in this material body, Acker carves out a new space for experimental writing

as a practice of critique within a political economy that consumes and annuls aesthetic subversion.

Most critics have focused on Acker's earlier work, prior to her elaboration of the languages of the body. However, a few prominent critics have targeted the concept as an indication that Acker's work is symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism itself. Aligning her work with Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, Walter Benn Michaels argues that Acker "ontologize[s] [writing] in the way that politics is in *Empire*" (110).<sup>3</sup> In his view, this move mystifies politics, such that "The left must make up for its refusal of better ideas by a demand for better bodies." Similarly, Michael Clune argues that capitalism itself is quite eager to produce new bodies and pleasures, within its own discourse of irrationality. Moreover, he critiques Acker's myth of "liberation from the insidious web of social control" as a desire for "purification of the blood and the restoration of a natural, true self" (498). In his view, this natural self is inspired by a Smithian belief that the natural, unfettered market is an ideal social space, free of exploitation. My primary concern is that both of these critiques ignore the specifically queer and feminist dimensions to Acker's representation of the body.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I urge Acker's critics to consider how Acker's literature-as-chaotic-queer-body signifies in relationship to the commodification of art in late capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Sianne Ngai argues, for example, that the discourse of "desire" has been central to literary and cultural theory because desire can fit comfortably within liberal discourses of pluralism and tolerance. This is precisely why Ngai positions

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<sup>3</sup> For a nuanced counterpoint to Benn Michaels, which also grapples with Acker's representation empire and terrorism, see Milletti.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, some domains of Marxist criticism have suggested that, in their very attachment to "identity politics" and embodiment, queer and feminist theory merely repeat the market logic of consumerism in late capitalism. See Hennessy, Harvey, and Jameson.

<sup>5</sup> For a convergent approach, see Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*. Acker differs, however, in her linking of the "cultural authority" of art with its market value, whereas Bersani and Dutoit largely discuss the aesthetic in ideological terms alone.

"disgust" as a minor affect that can tentatively, provisionally subvert "the market's disarmingly friendly *tolerance* of art--a tolerance that assumes its social ineffectuality or innocuousness" (345, original emphasis). Desire is, of course, a key term in Acker's fiction, but it is a desire for the abject, taboo, and socially disgusting. In this respect, Acker's work breaches the limits of the market's "tolerance" of art, which she sees reflected in the critical appropriation of art through theory. Like Ngai's "disgust," Acker's languages of the body thus tentatively resuscitates the aesthetic's "suspended sociopolitical agency" in postmodernity (346). More specifically, it challenges what Ngai calls the "hegemonic pluralism [of late capitalism] that willfully misidentifies *multiplicity* with *commensurability*" (342, my emphasis). Thus, I provide a double reading of Acker's conception of the body as a chaotic, queer multiplicity in becoming: it challenges, in its own terms, the Cartesian and patriarchal disavowal of the body, a challenge that is central to Acker's feminism; but it also (ideologically) grounds the text in an economy that cannot be de-materialized into the commensurable relations of abstract difference necessary for exchange value. The queer erotics of the text therefore aligns patriarchy and capitalism in their mutual efforts to transcend the body and to locate value in exploitative relations. In doing so, Acker charts a way for experimental aesthetics to remain queerly critical within late capitalism.

### **Against Conceptual Writing and "Deconstruction"**

Roland Barthes famously argues that the "fundamental ethical problem is to recognize signs wherever they are; that is to say, not to mistake signs for natural phenomena and to proclaim them rather to conceal them" (qtd. in Culler 308).

Barthes' ethic effectively captures the project of Kathy Acker's early fiction.<sup>6</sup> Acker

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<sup>6</sup> For accounts of Acker's development as a writer, see Friedman, "A Conversation with Kathy Acker," Acker's interview with Lotringer (*Hannibal*), the documentary *Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker* (2008), and the collection edited by Scholder et. al., *Lust for Life*. Key influences on her aesthetic practice include the Black Mountain school of poetry, especially Charles Olson, as well as her teachers, Jerome



was primarily inspired by conceptual art and "deconstruction" (a term that, as will become clear, she does not use in any orthodox way). She plagiarized, appropriated, and rewrote canonical fictions such as *Don Quixote*, *Great Expectations*, *Huckleberry Finn*, as well as popular fiction by William Gibson and Ian Flemming. In every case, she re-contextualized these narratives to reveal their latent sexism, racism, homophobia, and class exploitation. The goal, in her words, was "to deconstruct, to take apart perceptual habits, to reveal the frauds on which our society's living" (*Bodies* 11). Despite some initial resistance to her work by feminists, Acker's transgressions of normative sexuality, her dissolutions of fixed gender categories, and her expropriation of male texts has been lauded by feminist critics as representative of a politically engaged postmodernism aimed at subverting hegemonic, "naturalized" images of women to reveal their underlying sexism, objectification, and brutality.

What has received less critical attention, however, is Acker's movement away from an aesthetics of subversive re-signification.<sup>7</sup> This movement was sparked by Acker's experience of living in England for six years, where she became disillusioned by the intense class stratification and the commodification of the art world. Before living in England, Acker felt that art could be "an angel miraculously living amid the greed and zombielike behaviors of those outside the art world, the faceless business-suits who crowded into Wall Street every morning" (*Bodies* 84). Yet Acker was disappointed in her search for an "art community" like the one she inhabited in New York, which was influenced by punk culture and incorporated a variety of class positions. Acker recalled, "in England I found an art world, if not composed then certainly defined by the upper-middle class," which made art appear to be "another game played by the upper and upper-middle classes for their own amusements." This

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Rothenberg, David Antin, and Herbert Marcuse. On Acker's relationship to Burroughs, see Latham. On Acker's affinities with the punk movement, see Kathryn Hume and Larry McCaffrey.

<sup>7</sup> For the authoritative take on postmodern aesthetics and "complicit critique," see Hutcheon *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

experience changed her perception of the American art-world upon her return: "Art was simply stock in a certain stock market" (*Bodies* 86). Ironically, artists who had previously worked alongside Acker, including Sherri Levine, Richard Prince, and Jenny Holzer, had become marketable commodities. In Acker's view, "the old community in which an underground gradually became commercial has disintegrated into a market whose share-holders, frightened, are determined to take no chances." Acker's narrative underscores the critical significance of the art-world as a context for her own aesthetics, but it also dramatizes how this art world constituted an actual intellectual *community* for Acker. She mourns the loss of the aesthetic as a marginal and critical dynamic, to be sure. But this marginality is tied specifically to her loss of a community to support, practice, and value that marginality.

As a consequence, Acker began to "question all the precepts" of her art-making, specifically asking "What were and are the political realities surrounding Conceptualism?" (*Bodies* 85). For Acker, conceptual art (including conceptual writing) is intimately tied to post-structural theory, precisely because the latter enabled her to articulate the conceptual labor of her writing. Citing Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, as well as her own meetings with Guattari, Acker explains that "I had been writing in certain ways due to do certain theories about deconstruction and decentralization," and these philosophies were "working for cultural and *political* purposes," noting Deleuze's and Guattari's involvement with Autonomia in Italy (original emphasis). Yet Acker argues that

The Anglo-Saxon adoption and adaptation of deconstruction had depoliticized the theories. It seems not an act of chance that Jean Baudrillard, out of all those French theorists, became the theoretical idol of the New York art world, Baudrillard whose politics, unlike Deleuze's and Guattari's, are, at best, dubious[...] Suddenly and ironically, in this Anglo-Saxon climate,

deconstructive, now known as postmodernist, techniques, became methods for applauding the society and social values composed by American postindustrialization. Freed of Nietzschean sovereignty, any value or text could be equivalent to or substitute for any other value or text. *Bodies* 85

To be clear, Acker's use of "deconstruction" indicates a general cultural practice rather than an orthodox version of Derridean (or another form of) deconstruction. (Hence, she calls Deleuze and Guattari deconstructive). In this respect, Acker's critique targets a postmodern cultural mode that presupposes that "every phenomenon, every act is a text and all texts refer to other texts. Meaning is a network, not a centralized icon" (*Bodies* 83). Her concern is precisely that deconstructive or postmodernist aesthetics-- those predicated on the *equivalence* of interchangeable text-- cannot combat the post-industrial de-politicization of theory and art alike. This approach "applaud[s]" instead of critiques the status quo. To be clear, Acker does not critique postmodern aesthetics as *inherently* valueless. Rather, she insists that their critical function has been defused by the commodification of these techniques and of the community that drew on them for subversive purposes. This is precisely why Acker laments that, of all the post-structuralists, Baudrillard had the most impact and fame in the art world.<sup>8</sup>

Baudrillard's success signals, for Acker, an amoral and apolitical relativism that buttresses the status quo by confirming the all-pervasive subsumption of the real into the cultural simulacrum. She fears that an aesthetic practice, framed by the "simulacrum," based in radical equivalence of texts, cannot combat the values of post-industrial, postmodern culture.

Consequently, Acker desires "somewhere to go, a belief, a myth. Somewhere real" (*Bodies* 11). Clearly, the alignment of reality with myth, belief, and

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<sup>8</sup> Friedman argues that Acker and Baudrillard actually share the same view that those who control the "means of representation" (rather than the means of production) hold ideological and political power ("Now" 43). For a critique of Acker's work as post-Marxist, see Clune.

"somewhere" does not indicate an empirical real. Yet it expresses a desire for an affirmative art, based in Acker's sense that perhaps "society is now in a 'post-cynical phase.'" In Acker's view, her novel *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) concluded with "hints of a possibility or a beginning: the body, the actual flesh, almost wordless, romance, the beginning of a movement from no to yes, from nihilism to myth" (*Bodies* 13). Rather than take all of these terms as literal equivalents, they should be read as Acker's performance of a search for a new conceptual language to frame her aesthetic practice. Of course, these specific terms matter, as we will see, but I want to stress that Acker's discourse should be read as a specific challenge to the precepts of conceptual writing that previously defined her work. Take, for example, Acker's recollection that "I was taught by the Conceptualists that all that matters, in art, in the making of art, is the intention, intentionality... That all that does not concern intention is simply prettiness; that prettiness is, above all, despicable" (*Bodies* 83). By direct contrast, the final line of *Empire of the Senseless* declares, "And then I thought that, one day, maybe, there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust" (227). Rife with hesitation—"one day, maybe"—this is a not utopian declaration. But it signals Acker's yearning to shift from subversion to affirmation, which is matched by a concomitant shift in aesthetic terms. The language of beauty here runs against Acker's previous Conceptualist rejection of "prettiness." Implicitly, *Empire of the Senseless* suggests that the imagination of a "human society" organized by different values will require a different aesthetic form--a form that not only allows for aesthetic values (beauty) but also relies on affect as a discourse to signify values that challenge the social relations of disgust.

Of course, Acker's turn to "the body, the actual flesh" breaks with conceptualism's privileging of the concept as the organizing principle of art. But it also strikes at conceptualism's full-throated resistance to subjectivity, affect, and

emotion. As the famous conceptual writer, Kenneth Goldsmith, notes in his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing," "If the author wishes to explore her idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while *caprice, taste and other whimsies* would be eliminated from the making of the text" (my emphasis). For Goldsmith, the cultural privilege of subjectivity in aesthetics is a lamentable remnant of Romanticism that is outdated in the post-human culture of late-capitalism. Hence, Goldsmith's "writing"-- perhaps more than any other contemporary conceptual writer-- strives to eliminate the agency and subjectivity of the author; it challenges any "expressive" notion of writing as the subjective representation of the author's feeling or perception. To do so, Goldsmith characteristically re-presents text with very little alteration. (Indeed, Goldsmith and other conceptual writers frequently critique Acker's self-proclaimed alignment with the conceptual movement, given how much she always revised the text that she appropriated).<sup>9</sup> In his most famous example, *Day* (2003), Goldsmith literally rewrites (if this can be considered re-writing) one complete issue of the *New York Times* (September 1, 2000). In *The Weather* (2005), he transcribes weather reports for an entire year. These texts are prime examples of how conceptual writing appropriates text to challenge the very notions of writing (and re-writing) as self-expression and, especially, "creative." (One of Goldsmith's recent publications is characteristically titled *Uncreative Writing*).

Therefore, the context for Acker's shift away from appropriative, subversive aesthetics is more specific than her term "deconstruction" would suggest. Whereas deconstructive theory problematizes the signified as a "referent," conceptual writing takes a different approach based in a notion of allegory as a "mirror" of culture. In their *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman capture the divergence: "Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual

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<sup>9</sup> Acker is perhaps best understood in Place's and Fitterman's terms as a post- or impure- conceptualist, because she extensively revises the material she appropriates

writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to *mirror it directly*. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly...The critique is in the reframing" (20, my emphasis). Yet Acker's worries that critique-as-mirror will not combat the society of disgust. By re-articulating that society, conceptual writing cannot, in Acker's view, articulate alternative representations, values, or social possibilities. Hence, she asserts "Deconstruction [the aesthetic practice] is always a reactive thing and as long as you're dwelling in the reactive you're really reinforcing the society that you hate" (*Hannibal* 17). Therefore, Acker breaks with the conceit of writing as a mirror, arguing instead that "Writing must break through the representation or fictional mirror and be in equal force to the horror experienced in daily life" (*Bodies* 68, my emphasis). Acker's critique of representation should now be read as a rejection of conceptualism's re-presentation. At the same time, Acker's critique should be aligned with the conventional postmodern critique of realist representation. Hence, Acker praises her mentor, William Burroughs, for constructing an experimental form that provides "weapons in the fight for our own happiness," contrasting him with a hypothetical realist "novelist who writes about the poor Cambridge vicar who can't deal with his homosexuality" (*Bodies* 11). Burroughs' "realism," as Acker calls it, lies in the "discontinuity" of his form, which *both* reflects the discursive structures of the postmodern world *and* "fights this post-bourgeois language with poetry: images, dangling clauses, all that lingers at the edges of the unsaid, that leads to and through dreams" (*Bodies* 3). In short, queer experimental form, in the tradition of Burroughs, allows for "dwelling within verbal sensuousness" without recuperating the concepts of self-centered creativity that conceptual writing has productively critiqued.

Thus, Acker draws inspiration from the affective sensuousness of the body, which she sees as fundamentally defined by chance and caprice: "my body, being

material, is never the same; my body is controlled by change and chance" (*Bodies* 149). By aligning the material body with language itself, Acker makes her final break with conceptualism's desire to transcend the body. This break is most memorably and humorously staged in the conclusion of *Empire of the Senseless* when the main character, Abhor, has to repeatedly stop riding her motorcycle to check *The Highway Code* for the "rules of road behavior" (213). After a series of collisions and altercations, Abhor realizes that she cannot relate the rules of the pre-determined code to her embodied situation. She tears out the pages that do not conform to her "commonsense," urinates on the book, and decides that the code "no longer mattered. I was making up the rules. This is my rule" (222). This rejection of rules points up Acker's satire of a pre-determined and invariable "intention" governing textual production-- the first principle of conceptual writing. The ideological problem with this methodology is that it registers as transcendent rather than immanent and embodied. Abhor's urinating is thus opposed to the rule book because the body is defined by its excremental immanence, its uncontrollability, and its mockery of idealist conceits. Hence, Acker insists that the body's essence is not "transcendence but excrement," and, as we will see, she re-conceives language as viscerally *excremental*, rather than as a combination of signifiers that can be stolen to mirror the cultural condition (*Bodies* 92). Modeling her writing on this excremental body, Acker locates affect as the basis for an aesthetic politics that was incommensurable with conceptualism.

It is clear, then, why Acker ultimately perceives conceptual writing as a constricted form of aesthetic critique. First, she sees this mode as *reactive*, not allowing for the affirmation of new values and social relations necessary to challenge the society of disgust (especially patriarchy), which has been a constant target of Acker's fiction. Second, she believes conceptual writing itself has been commodified

by the art world, defusing its subversive appropriation of culture. Despite its ripe exploitation of the latent meanings within any text, Acker yearns for an experimental style that does not work within the mirrors of hegemony. Yet Acker does not recuperate a realistic form of writing, nor does she actually turn to a more narratively coherent structure. Following in the steps of Burroughs, she conceives of form itself as an affective, viscerally erotic force--one that can foreground "verbal sensuousness" and, by doing so, challenge the patriarchal disavowal of the body, the laws of identity, and the discourses that represses the a-subjectively dreamlike world of the irrational. This is a tall order, to be sure. My task is not to evaluate whether or not such an aesthetic practice could actually achieve the effects that Acker claims for it. My goal, instead, has been to establish the aesthetic and social context that compels Acker's performative "turn" from conceptual writing and deconstruction. Now, I will demonstrate how "the languages of the body" enables Acker to recuperate the critical function of her aesthetic form. My purpose will be to demonstrate that queer affect plays a central role in this renewal of critique. In doing so, I will contend that Acker's conflation of the body and language--and her representation of this body-language as queerly immanent, chaotic, and excremental--underlies her attempt to relink the aesthetic to a material "outside" that she fears postmodernism has lost.

### **Queer Words and the Perverse Dream of Unreadability**

Although the phrase "the languages of the body" appears intermittently throughout her last three novels, Acker addresses the concept most extensively in a series of essays composed in the 1990s. In these essays, Acker elaborates on her break with conceptual writing. However, her more prominent target is post-structural theory, which provides a framework that, I have suggested, renders her fiction too readable, undercutting its affective estrangements. It is no surprise, then, that these essays oppose affect to theory and, moreover, a discourse of affect to a discourse of criticism.



In "Seeing Gender," for example, Acker incorporates a reading of Judith Butler's essay, "Bodies that Matter," into an analysis of Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Plato's *Timaeus*, and Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. These readings are book-ended by Acker's fictionalized, autobiographical reflections on gender and childhood and her first written experiment with the languages of the body--a short text composed during masturbation and orgasm. At stake in this hybrid form is Acker's desire to find a language "other than mimesis," and crucially, she distinguishes this discourse from Butler's conception of language. She wonders,

... what if language need not be mimetic? I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible? Like Alice, I suspect that the body, as Butler argues, might not be co-equivalent with materiality, that my body might deeply be connected to, if not be, language. But what is this language? This language which is not constructed on hierarchical subject-object relations? *Bodies* 166

Here Acker accepts Butler's influential claim that "the body" only exists as an effect of its inscription within a discursive economy. Yet note how Acker's rhetorical questions create a distance from Butler as well. She twists the implicit meaning of the 'connection' between language and embodiment that Butler identifies. Rather than subordinate the material of the body to its discursive representation, she rewrites language as an embodied materiality; she wonders, in fact, whether there might be *languages* of the body, "a plurality or more of such languages" such as "the language that moves through me or in me or... [original ellipsis] for I cannot separate language body and identity ... [original ellipsis] when I am moving through orgasm or orgasms" (*Bodies* 167, original emphasis). Undoubtedly, Acker draws inspiration here from Irigaray's claim that a language of the feminine would be rooted in the body and,

crucially, could break with the model of language imposed by patriarchal structures.

However, I want to stress that Acker's search for a language of the body must be relinked with her performative break from conceptual writing. Indeed, echoing her praise of Burroughs, Acker compares this non-mimetic, non-hierarchical language to dreaming: "When I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer. In other words, in this case or in this language, I cannot separate subject from object, much less from the act of perception" (166). On the one hand, Acker maintains the conceptual and postmodern critique of subjective creativity, claiming that in these languages "I cannot *make up*... I cannot *create* or even *create in*" (*Bodies* 167, original emphasis). On the other hand, Acker complexly, if implicitly, distinguishes this seemingly essential premise from the concept of *écriture féminine*, suggesting that, "I have become interested in languages which I can only come upon (as I disappear), a pirate upon buried treasure." Here the disappearance of the self is coincident with the revelation of an essential value. Yet the "pirate" is Acker's characteristic image of an anti-Oedipal and non-heteronormative dissident, "pirates didn't have parents... I wasn't a pirate because my mother wouldn't allow me to be one" (*Bodies* 158). As a child, Acker initially perceives her mother as "the key to my buried treasure," yet she learns it is her mother that prohibits piracy, keeping her locked within the symbolic order of patriarchal gender roles. In a myth fundamental to all of Acker's fiction, the mother-figure is unhappy in a "monogamous marriage with a man who isn't mean enough to her," and viciously takes out her resentment on the child. Therefore, the "buried treasure" Acker seeks in the language of the body is not the pre-Oedipal maternal language, because she perceives the maternal order as part of a patriarchal symbolic economy she wishes to escape.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I would suggest that Acker ultimately "prefer[s]" Irigaray to Kristeva because Irigaray locates sexual difference ontologically, prior to the body's entrance into language, whereas Kristeva understands sexual difference as inscribed within the symbolic law of the father: "I was disappointed in Kristeva's text, for there she indicated that she seemed unable to leave herself" ("Paragraphs" 89). (Note that

At the same time, Acker's languages of the body are not *beyond* sexual difference; they are ambivalently and ambiguously related to the search for the specificity of the sexed body. Thus, she concludes her example of orgasmic, masturbatory language with the question, "Could gender lie here?" (*Bodies* 168). This question recurs throughout the essay, playfully performing the search for a link between language, embodiment, and gender while undermining any definitive referential ground for their relationship. Acker asks, "Is it possible that the girl can find her actual body, and so what gender might be, in language? In a letter that, not yet language, has no discernible *mimetic* meaning?" (*Bodies* 164, original emphasis). To be sure, the conceit of an "actual" body implies an essential content to the body as well as to gender. Rather than betray the queerness of Acker's representation of the body, this questioning indicates the complex, riven lines of convergence between her feminist investment in the sexually specific body and her queer critique of any metaphysical ground for gendered identity. Acker's attempt to maintain both of these conceits is expressed in her view that these plural languages of the body are ultimately not "mimetic." They do not, in other words, represent a subject or express a gender; they communicate, instead, the affects of the body itself "in language" which is "not yet language" because it "had no discernible *mimetic* meaning." Let us put aside, for the moment, whether or not such a concept of language is true. Instead, I want to underscore the work that this concept does for Acker's reframing of her aesthetic work. In this narrative, Acker's writing can become utterly non-mimetic. In fact, it

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Acker plagiarizes "About Chinese Women" in *My Mother: Demonology*. Feminism for Kristeva, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, "is usually a negative and reactive counterstruggle against sexism. It does not provide the materials needed for developing alternatives. Its function is to say 'no' to this or that view, opposing what exists, without actively contributing to something new" (*Jacques* 166). Irigaray, by contrast, seeks to affirm "accounts of subjectivity and knowledge that acknowledge the existence of two sexes, two bodies, two forms of desire and two ways of knowing" (169). Thus Acker, via Irigaray, affirms the possibility of "females" "reinstat[ing] the mother as another person" rather than maintaining a "victim" identification."

*must* become non-mimetic if it is to access, through language, these languages that are outside of language. If her writing becomes primarily, viscerally unreadable, then Acker's writing no longer "mirrors" the language of the social world. It does not, as Acker's work once did, re-iterate this language to subvert it. Instead, Acker's writing now speaks with its own tongue, in a non-language that is neither meaningful nor discernible nor readable. This is a dream of language *becoming unreadable*, and in so becoming, expressing, in a nearly mystical way, the paradoxically impersonal, and yet specific, sensuousness of the body.

My use of the term "mystical" is not an accident. Throughout her late work, Acker invokes mystical discourses and the language of magic. Although she does not use these terms in any consistent way, Acker fundamentally depicts her language of the body as an irrational, semi-spiritual force. Therefore, it would be easy to dismiss her aesthetic turn as an increasingly mystified view of language, a retreat from a properly political understanding of language as a *social* discourse constituted by history, located within social class, and indicative of political (not corporeal) structures of feeling. Such a critique is, of course, characteristic of many appraisals of postmodern aesthetics. For example, Sean McCann and Michael Szalay famously identify a strict opposition between "ordinary language" (this is Acker's term) and a language of irrational, magical, sublimity in postmodern fiction. For them, "language [in this fiction] assumes a magical and anti-authoritarian power only to the degree that it has nothing to say" (451). In deracinating the content of language--its capacity to say *something*--postmodern writers reject "mundane political efforts to work toward imperfect justice" in favor of a "deep investment in the therapeutic value of ineffable mystery." Others have ably critiqued McCann's and Szalay's narrow definition of "political" work.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I want to draw attention to their assumption that the "politics" of fiction lies in its capacity for representation. Indeed, they assume that

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<sup>11</sup> See John A. McClure, "Do They Believe in Magic?" and his *Partial Faiths*.

fiction models politics in a mimetic way and, moreover, that a reflexive focus on language itself inevitably turns into solipsistic formalism and libertarianism. Such critiques have been launched at deconstructive criticism for decades, but McCann and Szalay are uniquely forceful in their claim that an ultimately "redemptive" vision of words lurks beneath the postmodern skepticism of stratified, rationalistic, "ordinary" language.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I want to stress that my reading of Acker points up how postmodern writers might embrace a non-mimetic conception of literature precisely to redefine the relationship between the aesthetic and political in a postmodern political economy of art. Acker's "mystic" view of language must be, I contend, dialectically linked to her critique of the commodification of art and, specifically, to the theoretical frameworks that previously legitimated her writing. Her appeal to unreadability must be read as both a conceptual proposition as well as a specifically historical subversion of the prevailing discourse around conceptual writing and postmodernism that, previously, sanctioned her work.

Note, for example, that Acker specifically defines "ordinary language" in terms of *art criticism*. Such a specific--even idiosyncratic--definition suggests that the appeal to irrational language must be located in its aesthetic and social contexts. Postmodernism might offer a generalized discourse of the sublime. However, we cannot assume in advance that sublime words have the same (anti-political) meaning for all writers. Indeed, Acker critiques art criticism as the prime example of "ordinary language" because this discourse, in her view, enables the commodification of the aesthetic. She writes,

Any artwork which is not propagandic [sic] and perhaps artwork which is, is ambiguous with regard to deep meaning. Art criticism must deny this ambiguity, so that the buyers know what to buy. So that the culture-mongers

know what culture to eat. Those who deal in commerce do not want to, cannot

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference*, especially chapters 1-3.

afford to live in chaos. *Bodies* 88

Here criticism renders the aesthetic consumable. Acker claims it "transforms a complex of meanings that do not have closure (the artwork) into a structure of closed or centralized meaning and defined position in culture and history." To be sure, Acker transposes this "phallogentric, patriarchal" dynamic to the social world as a whole, but it is key that this closure of aesthetic chaos enables consumption--the "culture-mongers know what culture to eat." Acker's challenge to stable meaning, then, is fundamentally a challenge to the commodification of aesthetics. Yet her use of the body to forge this challenge is not incidental because, she notes, in the context of New York in the late eighties, "political and economic chaos" is "mask[ed]... by turning to and increasing political and moral repression." Indeed, Acker claims that capitalists cannot "afford to live in chaos. *Perhaps especially, moral chaos*" (my emphasis). One might argue that capitalism both relies on and produces moral chaos. Yet Acker insists that moral repression has a complex ideological relationship to that chaos. Given the strict repressions around queer sexuality and AIDS discussed in the previous chapter, it is understandable why Acker thus desires to model her aesthetic practice on the "multitudinous languages of the body" (*Bodies* 89). In her view, critical language "denies ambiguity" and concomitantly "denies the existence of the body," repressing flux, materiality, and death. Thus, Acker seeks to undermine the cogito of art criticism by insisting on the libidinous and dynamic relationship between language and the body--one that "being of the body, no longer reduce[s] difference to identity, radical difference to a schematic controllable form."<sup>13</sup> Framed by this narrative, Acker can thus present her aesthetic practice as eluding the (rhetorical) commodifications of criticism as well as the moral repressions that she perceives as the handmaidens of that commodification in the late eighties. Yet the binary Acker posits here is not

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<sup>13</sup> Acker quotes this line almost word-for-word from Weiss's discussion of Nietzsche in *Aesthetics of Excess*.

between chaos and order, irrationality and rationality, as McCann and Szalay might claim. Rather, it is a binary between the chaos of the body and a political and economic chaos. As we will see, this binary is central to Acker's repatriation of "value" to the (non-exchangeable, non-abstracted) body and a language drawn from that body.

Yet we must pause to ask: what precisely does Acker mean by "the body"? Given her constant investment in gender, why does she invoke "the body" as an abstract signifier? The answer is that Acker is less invested in representing a body as it is or was; she wishes to represent the body as a site of material becoming.<sup>14</sup> The body "being material, is never the same," she claims, and it is thus "controlled by change and by chance" (*Bodies* 149). Aside from masturbation, Acker's primary example of the body producing an "unexpected event" is bodybuilding--an activity that she practiced at length later in her life. Bodybuilding exemplifies a language of the body because it enables Acker to "glimpse the laws that control my body, those of change or chance, laws that are barely, if at all, knowable" (*Bodies* 150). These laws only become 'knowable' through failure. Specifically, Acker correlates the "failure" of weightlifting--when a muscle reaches a threshold of its capacity-- to the "failure" of controlling the chaotic forces of the body. On the one hand, this failure undoes the ego's sense of control, its confident belief that the body can be transcended. As such, Acker "come[s] face to face with chaos, with my own failure or a form of death." On

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<sup>14</sup> In this respect, I would align Acker's body with Claire Colebrook's consonant challenge to Butler and a certain interpretation of deconstruction. Colebrook challenges the conceit that difference is a "system of representation subsequently imposed on a grid of experience... It may not be that the body or materiality is only known or posited through difference (or the linguistic structures of difference). Corporeality might itself be *differential*" (81-82, original emphasis). There is an ambiguity in Colebrook's phrasing that is also at play in Acker's work: are the body and materiality the same; can this materiality somehow be "known" in its differential becoming; what precisely is the relationship between the difference of linguistic structures and of materiality? In Acker's case, this ambiguity is key to her location of the material body 'outside' both language, knowledge, and established representations of value.

the other hand, failure produces, as it does in bodybuilding, "growth." Hence, Acker does not posit the failure of language as an absolute dissolution of meaning, a traumatic outside to all cognitive and symbolic order. Rather, failure becomes an immanent, and mundane, goal that does not "hurt" or "destroy" her body but "shock[s] it into growth." She explains, "Whatever way I choose, I always want to work my muscle, muscular group, until it can no longer move: I want to fail (*Bodies* 145). This process leads Acker to ask: "Is the equation between destruction and growth [in bodybuilding] also a formula for art? Bodybuilding is about failure because bodybuilding, body growth and shaping, occurs in the face of the material, of the body's inexorable movement toward its final failure, death" (*Bodies* 146). Here the common formula for bodybuilding and art is their shared movement toward a failure that reveals the material limits of the body, and extends those limits, while ceding the ego's control in the face of chaos. The goal is, as Airplane states in *In Memoriam to Identity*, "Pushing the emotive, perceptive, and rational capacities beyond their limits" (227).

It is key, however, that Acker rewrites language as a medium for accessing this bodily knowledge rather than an obstacle to it. When she depicts bodybuilding as a language of the body, Acker does not invoke its semiotic structures or its imbrication within a complex set of social codes (in the gym or in popular culture, for example). Instead, Acker conceives bodybuilding as a convergence point between a primordial or essentialist language and the materiality of the body. She writes, "In ordinary language, meaning is contextual. Whereas the cry of the beggar means nothing other than what it is; in the city of the beggar, the impossible (as the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and Heidegger see it) occurs in that meaning and breath become one" (*Bodies* 148). How should one read this "claim"? On the one hand, Acker's citations of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and many others (Blanchot, Bataille, and especially



Nietzsche) demonstrate her attempt to inhabit the position of theorist.<sup>15</sup> If theory has rendered her fiction readable in one language, Acker reclaims that readability, shifting its citational grounds. On the other hand, this is not, in any conventional sense, a theoretical argument. It is a collage or, better still, a labyrinth of intertextuality that does not so much sanction Acker's ideas as claims as perversely recontextualize the theory, rewriting its own critical relevance. Clearly, Acker has not abandoned the subversive, appropriative tools of conceptual writing. Yet it is also true that this theoretical collage is contextualized in the service of a queer body of language, wherein words *mean nothing* and, at the very same time, they are like a "cry" meaning "nothing other than what it is." Of course, a cry might have any number of possible, fundamentally contextual, meanings. Yet it is the fantasy of words becoming like a cry that is central to Acker's language of the body. Indeed, "meaning and breath" are unified in her bodybuilding. Likewise, she calls for the languages of the body to become "laughter, silence, screaming," to express "Scatology. That laughter," to be "Above all: the languages of intensity... The sexual and emotive languages" (*Bodies* 92). In effect, this is a fantasy of language as *absolute sensation*, as "pure intensity," as a visceral transmission of affect.<sup>16</sup>

I call this a "fantasy" not to diminish its theoretical or philosophical legitimacy. Instead, I want to underscore that, whether or not one perceives this linguistic form as possible, Acker deploys this narrative to (re)frame the reading of her prose. By doing so, she not only recovers, at least nominally, the unreadability of

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<sup>15</sup> These thinkers provide her with a representation of the body as a multitude of forces that defuse any priority of language over the body. They also enable her to identify the transgressive and chaotic amorality of the body's becoming. See especially Allen S. Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Excess*, and Steven Shaviro, *Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory*.

<sup>16</sup> Acker transmutes scatological excess into the sacred site for the de-repression of a logos that conceives itself as autonomous from the body. In this respect, her bodies of the language is heavily influenced by Bataille and his interpretation of Nietzsche. See Acker's *Bodies of Work*, especially 90. On Acker's relationship to Bataille, see also Terry Engebretsen.

her fiction. She also constructs a narrative in which *becoming unreadable* is the entire political and philosophical trajectory of her writing. In one stroke, this narrative relinks language and embodiment, effecting the "return to the body" for which Acker yearns, and it counters the conceptualist "deconstruction" narrative, wherein language's most interesting and fundamental purpose is to become appropriated (*Bodies* 82). By direct contrast, Acker presents the laugh, the cry, the breath as utterly incapable of being appropriated into "contextual meaning." Hence, Acker requests that "one of art criticism's languages be silence so that we can hear the sounds of the body: the winds and voices from far-off shores, the sounds of the unknown." And she immediately follows with the concluding statement: "May we write, not in order to judge, but for and in (I quote George [sic] Bataille), 'the community of those who do not have a community.'" Therefore, Acker's sensuous and mystic discourse of the "unknown" signifies a conceptual challenge to patriarchal and rationalist representations of the body. But the "voices from far-off shores" are inextricably tethered to Acker's yearning for social and artistic community--one that has been eviscerated by, among many forces, the commodification of that community. Acker's language of the body must be read, then, as a placeholder for an actual community and an attempt to bring such a community into being, even if it does not 'represent' that community directly.<sup>17</sup>

Community is a strange word to hear in relationship to Acker and, especially, to the languages of the body. After all, Acker's fiction perpetually represents the betrayal of all forms of community, and her languages of the body are crystallized through activities (masturbation and bodybuilding) that are, at least in Acker's representation of them, non-communal. To an extent, this paradoxical call for

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<sup>17</sup> Not coincidentally, Acker wrote essays and criticism for money, because she had a difficult time being financially supported by her fiction. She also took teaching jobs for the same reason. This may be another reason that she equates critical discourse with commodification.

community through non-community derives from Acker's negation of the social world as it is. Take, for example, the narration in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, when it depicts a group of prostitutes

learn[ing] that if language or words whose meanings seem definite are dissolved into a substance of multiple gestures and cries, a substance which has a more direct, a more visceral capacity for expression, then all the weight that the current social, political, and religious forms of expression will be questioned. Become questionable. Finally, lost. 31

Here meaning morphs into bodily affects—cries and gestures—and in this transformation, or “dissolving,” the speaker becomes unfettered from the social, political, and religious status quo.<sup>18</sup> (Note, too, that Acker’s use of “direct” expression provides a direct contrast to Place’s and Fitterman’s description of appropriative conceptualism that mirrors the culture industry “directly.”) Therefore, the anti-social conception of language stands in for a critical loosening of the repressive ideologies that currently constrict the social world. However, Acker's claim to an "affirmative" art underscores that she conceives of the languages of the body as performing more than a negation of the social world. In her view, it retrieves value that has been severed by the equivalence of textuality in postmodernism. This is why she counterposes "visceral" language to a conception of meaning where, quoting Wittgenstein, "*The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen--in it no values exist, and if they did, they'd have no value*" (qtd. in *Bodies* 148, original emphasis). That Acker returns to “values” here is not incidental. In her narrative, the non-arbitrary link

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<sup>18</sup> Explaining her use of the labyrinth to characterize art, Acker looks to Bataille’s secret society, “Acéphale,” to argue that the colon is a labyrinth where reason and law are lost, offering “not transcendence, but waste. Beyond meaning. For the head is no longer the head; we live, perceive, and speak, in our bodies and through our bodies” (*Bodies* 91). See also Acker’s essay “Moving into Wonder” where she retells the “origin of art” through the Daedalus myth (*Bodies* 93-97).

between language, body, and the material outside of the world *should* be the locus of "value." The invocation of value is therefore central to Acker's recuperation of the body, and it points ahead to a social world, a community, structured by values that contrast those of the "society of disgust."

In Acker's lexicon, disgust implies both a disgust for the body (especially the female body) and it also implies a structure of hierarchical relations, since disgust is, of all the affects, one of the most polarized in terms of subject and object relations.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Acker's appeal to value, rooted in the body, implies non-hierarchical and non-patriarchal relations. The question that her fiction poses is whether or not new values can be affirmed outside of the moral economy of patriarchy. How can a writer affirm a turn to "value" without, at the same time, reproducing a kind of conservative recuperation of tradition? In the next section, I will answer this question by explicating the role that Nietzschean ethics play in Acker's representation of value. At stake in Acker's turn to Nietzsche is precisely her attempt to imagine non-abstract value, a meaning of value relinked to the "sense of the world" dynamically entwined with the material body. Inspired by Nietzschean sovereignty, Acker relinks art and the body to the Dionysian flow of life, and she finds a narrative in which values can be constructed that do not merely re-iterate, and thereby perpetuate, the terms that they oppose. By tracing her alternative to dialectical critique, I will argue that Acker clears space for the creation of non-patriarchal values and social relations that embrace, rather than transcend, the erotic body.

### **The Difference that Affirmation Makes**

Acker is not unique in expressing concern that postmodernism has somehow lost "values." Indeed, David Harvey famously critiques postmodern relativism in strikingly similar terms. He writes,

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<sup>19</sup> On disgust as a hierarchical affect, see Ngai and Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

There is, in postmodernism, little overt attempt to sustain continuity of values, beliefs, or even disbeliefs. This loss of historical continuity in values and beliefs, taken together with the reduction of the work of art to a text stressing discontinuity and allegory, poses all kinds of problems for aesthetic and critical judgment. Refusing (and actively 'deconstructing') all authoritative or supposedly immutable standards of aesthetic judgment, postmodernism can judge the spectacle only in terms of how spectacular it is. 56-57

Despite my suspicion of Harvey's sweeping claims here, my purpose is not to re-litigate decades-old disputes about postmodernity or deconstruction. I merely want to highlight that Harvey and Acker are two leftists writing in the same historical moment, and that despite their divergent political investments, both relate the loss of ethical value to the erosion of aesthetic critique. If my argument is correct, then cultural theory is not alone in questioning how aesthetics might recuperate a critical position. Reading experimental writers as engaged in this project requires a mode of interpretation that deftly moves between theoretical propositions and stylistic performativity. This is precisely because these writers may feel compelled to construct a conceptual frame around their work, given that postmodernism defuses the stability or priority of interpretative grounding. It is key, then, that Acker does not seek to recuperate any "historical continuity in values" or to return to "immutable standards." Rather, she fully embraces postmodern relativism as a means of producing an affirmative discourse of value, one that does not return to transcendent, eternal, or historically traditional foundations.

To articulate this postmodern sense of value, Acker turns to Nietzsche. After all, she laments, as noted above, a social context in which "any value or text could be equivalent to or substitute for any other value or texts" once it becomes "[f]reed of Nietzschean sovereignty" (*Bodies* 85). Her goal, then, is to re-link the aesthetic to

Nietzschean sovereignty. In Richard White's reading, Nietzsche's concept of sovereignty "involves a relationship to the cosmos, or the outside, and that which is 'other.' Not as something 'out there,' to be used and appropriated in terms of the categories of the self, but as the Dionysian order of 'life' that supports and subtends the individual, who belongs to it completely" (21). On the one hand, Acker's invocation of Nietzsche points up a material outside to the order of cultural representation. Relinking aesthetics to this outside means, precisely, opening the text to collective material forces that "subtend" the text itself. On the other hand, this "opening" implies an "absolute 'openness' to the forces of life; and for this to be possible, true sovereignty must involve self-dispossession and a continual self-overcoming that refuses any final determination" (White 22). Here White makes it clear that the affirmation of dynamic, chaotic life implies a certain death of the subject, an overcoming of the identity or the ego that is the most constant theme in Acker's fiction. More specifically, this overcoming challenges the structures of identity that shelter the "self" from the Dionysian *becoming* that exceeds the subject and also compels the subject's constant, endless fluctuation. Thus, this self-dissolution and subsequent 'participation' in the Dionysian reality of material becoming is not an accomplishment of the subject's agency.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it "follows" from a "creative act of the will that wills itself; it is an experiment with life, through which the individual transfigures nature by working on the self" (White 23). Thus, sovereignty is not wholly wielded by an agent, "not simply a subjective accomplishment of the will," even though it is also a self-oriented dissolution of the subject. By invoking

<sup>20</sup> For this reason, I disagree with Kathryn Hume's claim that "The values espoused [in Acker's writing] by the voice are humanist insofar as it defends the individual self and sees human life in this world as its only concern" (506). Not only does this disavow Acker's anti-humanist representation of sexuality as an animalistic force, it also unifies Acker's disjunctive style. Hume argues a "voice" coheres across all of Acker's texts, and despite her truly excellent typology of the modes of this voice, I disagree with her conflation of the voice with a "persona," preferring instead to understand it as an affective disorienting force that does not unify into an identity or self.

Nietzsche's materialism, Acker reframes the work of art as an "experiment" with life in precisely the terms that White uses to narrate the overcoming of the self.<sup>21</sup> Doing so re-establishes art's connection to a material world outside of culture. But more importantly, it provides Acker with a cosmology in which the body is fully engaged in the material world as a central locus (although not a "center" or "foundation") of value because it shares in the world's concomitant becoming.

Acker's understanding of values is therefore relativistic, but relativism has been redefined in terms of the immanent becoming of the material world.<sup>22</sup> Through this cosmology, Acker avoids an empty nihilism, incapable of articulating *any* values whatsoever, and the status quo, which would simply reiterate the hegemonic values as they are defined by patriarchy and consumerism. Yet the most important consequence, for our purposes, is that Acker finds a narrative structure that allows her to step to the side of the Hegelian dialectic--that relationship of master and slave that is the most persistent, gendered opposition of her novels.<sup>23</sup> Acker's turn to Nietzsche, via Bataille and others, clears space for her to imagine a break with the hegemonic "society of disgust" that does not rearticulate, sublimate, or otherwise preserve the values of this social world. Of course, critics invested in the Hegelian tradition argue that such a move is not possible. Judith Butler, for example, argues that "references to a 'break' with Hegel are almost always impossible, if only because Hegel has made the very notion of 'breaking with' into the central tenet of his dialectic" (*Subjects* 184). Moreover, Butler critiques the Nietzschean tradition (especially as it is exemplified in the work of Deleuze), because it reifies "multiplicitious affect as the invariant, although largely repressed, ontological structure of desire" (*Subjects* 214). Such a

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<sup>21</sup> See especially *Bodies of Work* 10 and 89-92.

<sup>22</sup> For a succinct elaboration of Deleuze's ethics, see Daniel W. Smith. For critiques of it as theological, see Buchanan and Hallward.

<sup>23</sup> Following the idea that "subject-object dualism" is "the basis of all hierarchically structured political oppression," Acker also seeks to fragment the dialectic between subject and object (DeKoven, *Rich and Strange* 10).

conception of desire not only reiterates Hegel's "all-encompassing being" as the plentitude of desire. It constitutes an "insupportable metaphysical speculation" that woefully and dangerously forgets that "all desire is linguistically and culturally constructed." In a critique that could equally apply to Acker, Butler suspects writers who posit an "elusive and tantalizing 'beyond' to culturally instituted desire, the promise of a liberation" (*Subjects* 216).<sup>24</sup> This is why, by contrast, Butler endorses Michel Foucault's theoretical project to "displace the hegemony of the prohibitive law through *the accentuation of that law's self-subverting and self-proliferating possibilities*" (*Subjects* 215, my emphasis).<sup>25</sup>

Based on Butler's phrasing here, it is no surprise that critics have frequently compared Butler's "parodic subversion" to Acker's complicitly deconstructive writing. Whereas theory must often draw strict conceptual battle lines (as Butler does between Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, Hegel, and Nietzsche), the experimental writer has the power to make perverse, irreverent juxtapositions. I have been arguing that these juxtapositions do, in fact, constitute a semi-coherent conceptual "argument," but I have also made clear that Acker's "theory" is proudly, manifestly inconsistent. Therefore, she is quite capable, as we will see in the following section, of integrating the cultural critique of desire with the ontological speculation of desire as a force of immanent, material, embodied becoming. If these two positions are seen as contradictory, all the better, since Acker's languages of the body proudly purport to

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<sup>24</sup> For a convergent argument, see Hennessy. Hennessy aligns Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari with a desire to "reclaim the core of identity in the form an ahistorical pleasure (as *jouissance*, ritual, *chora*, or ambivalent consumer satisfaction," a desire that this is reflected in Foucault's affirmation of "bodies and pleasures as the ground for resistance to power" as well as Deleuze and Guattari's depiction of "the material of the [as] the primordial matter of energy flows or of things connected by energy flows," such as menstrual blood, feces, urine, semen, and amniotic fluid (70-71). For Hennessy, these concepts are too ahistorical and endemic to "avant-garde queer theory" that embraces "the potential of sexual pleasure."

<sup>25</sup> This is why Butler emphasizes the *psychic* life of power. Because she resists ontological discourse, Butler locates the law within the psyche and the potential for resistance within the epistemological limits of subjective constitution.



“contradict themselves” (*Bodies* 92). Yet these contradictions cannot be resolved into a dialectical opposition or a synthetic unity because Acker’s conceives contradiction as expressing the radical difference or multiplicity of chaos itself. This is perhaps why, unlike Butler, Acker does not perceive the cultural and ontological approaches to desire as fundamentally opposed. She is writing in a discursive context in which, it seems, the former has become too segregated from the latter. Yet she does not wish to return to an ontological, metaphysical *essence* to desire, identity, or sexuality. Rather, her narrative of embodiment--and equally, the languages of the body-- as part of a world-in-becoming allows Acker to imagine that this chaotic force will impel the overturning of the cultural order, even as these forces suggest that the cultural and ontological have a dynamic, imbricated relationship that the discourse of “textuality” has perhaps obscured. Put simply, Acker recuperates difference itself as an ontological, corporeal, *and* linguistic force.

Acker's rewriting of "value" is based in this affirmation of difference as a dynamic multiplicity that cannot be resolved into an oppositional contradiction or abstract difference. Indeed, I contend that Acker's invocation of Nietzsche is based in an effort to imagine *non-exchangeable* and *non-abstract* difference, a material difference that cannot be abstracted from the body.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, Acker's expanded ontology of difference provides an alternative to the dialectical narrative she has so often confronted. The dialectic misses the “subtle and subterranean differential mechanisms” by conceiving difference as an opposition or contradiction, an abstract relation predicated on a conceptual negation (Deleuze, Nietzsche 157). In Deleuze's words, “Opposition can be the law of the relation between abstract products but difference is the only principle of genesis or production; a principle which itself produces opposition as mere appearance.”<sup>27</sup> Not only does difference-as-dialectic

<sup>26</sup> For a convergent consideration of difference and ethics, see Grosz, "Feminism, Materialism, Freedom."

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze offers a memorable and polemic example of the dialectical construction of

buttress abstract relations of comparison, Deleuze claims, following Nietzsche, that the dialectic rests primarily on sad passions, on an investment in negation, passivity, suffering, and melancholy (*Nietzsche* 195-96).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche memorably argues that the only "creative deed" of the dialectic is to say no; to denounce and reject but not to affirm (*Nietzsche* 9-10). The dialectic thus produces a reactive form of self-constitution, a slave morality made through negation and resentment, a morality that does not challenge established values. Tied to what it negates, parasitic on the terms of established values, based in a struggle for recognition within these pre-established terms, it is "powerless to create new ways of thinking and feeling" (Deleuze *Nietzsche* 159). We should be very suspicious of the rhetoric of affirmation that Deleuze invokes via Nietzsche. This affirmative rhetoric has had a deeply problematic history, often aligning the vitalistic and affirmative with the supposedly superior race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality.<sup>29</sup> Butler points up this rhetoric when she admits that "One reason I have opposed Deleuze is that I find no registration of the negative in his work, and I feared that he was proposing a manic defense against negativity" (*Undoing* 198).<sup>30</sup> My purpose here is not to endorse or defend Nietzschean

materialism nor Deleuze's particular interpretation of it. Rather, I have articulated

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abstract contradiction when he claims, "That the flower is the antithesis of the leaf, that it "refutes" the leaf—this is a celebrated discovery dear to the dialectic" (15). For a positive re-reading of the dialectic in terms of classes, parts, and wholes, also invoking plants, see Michael McKeon (*Origins* xiv-xv). At stake in this debate is whether or not the dialectic turns multiplicities into oppositions or wholes and whether it is a method or an ontological condition of human life.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze writes that "The slave only conceives of power as the object of a recognition, the content of a representation, the stake in a competition, and therefore makes it depend, at the end of a fight, on a simple attribution of established values" (*Nietzsche* 10). The qualities of resentment include a "desire for revenge," the "capacity for disparagement" that undermines the ability to "admire, respect, or love" and is linked to reproach, judgment, and blame. Passivity is coupled with "perpetual accusation," which is not aggressive (thus active) but a reactive delineation of other's faults and responsibilities (117-19).

<sup>29</sup> For recent critiques, see especially Donna V. Jones and Claire Colebrook "On Not Becoming Man."

<sup>30</sup> For Butler, this is precisely the failing of Deleuze's philosophy. She writes, "Psychoanalysis seems centered on the problem of lack for Deleuze, but I tend to center on the problem of negativity" (*Undoing* 198).

these principles because they help illuminate Acker's transition toward a "language of the body," which intriguingly upholds key elements of postmodern aesthetics while challenging others. Therefore, the question we must ask is clear: why does Acker find the rhetoric of affirmation enabling for her "turn" from conceptual writing, and how does this rhetoric change in the hands of a writer devoted to the social critique of patriarchy and heteronormativity?

First, Acker's affirmation of desire as an immanent, dynamic pluralism enables her to reject the psychoanalytic conceit of desire driven *by* lack. An important motive for Acker is that this concept of lack has historically been used to characterize women's sexuality. Invoking Irigaray, Acker writes in her essay on "Colette," "according to the discourse of the (male) world, female sexuality is 'lack,' 'atrophy' (of the sexual organ), and 'penis envy,' the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value" (*Bodies* 154). Acker insists instead that "Female sexuality is not negative" (*Bodies* 155). Of course, Acker insists that women's bodies and sexual organs have value, and that this value exists independently of recognition by the patriarchal or male order. But more broadly, she rejects the psychoanalytic edifice that locates lack as the hallucinogenic motor for the psyche's desire. This concept, too, positions women as objects to fulfill men's desires. Yet it also grounds the interpretation of art as *sublimated* desire, a weak compensatory form of sexuality.<sup>31</sup> Rewriting desire as a material force, a force imbricated with and unleashed by the aesthetic, Acker's languages of the body *literally* release sexuality. Given Acker's call for a non-mimetic approach to desire and a "sensuous" form of writing, her turn to Nietzschean sovereignty (via Bataille) makes sense--it enables her to place desire as a fundamental condition of life rather than merely a part of the psyche, and it allows her to affirm desire as a resource for women and other non-patriarchal subjects. As Acker

<sup>31</sup> On this issue, see Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*. For a positive re-reading of sublimation, see Grosz, "The Strange Detours of Sublimation: Psychoanalysis, Homosexuality, and Art."

writes in her essay on Sade, "The Law is not patriarchal because it denies the existence, even the power, of women...[it] is patriarchal because it denies the bodies, the sexualities of women. In patriarchy, there is no menstrual blood" (*Bodies* 78-78).

Acker's pivot to bodily materiality (here represented through menstrual blood) as a site of sexual productivity outside the repressions of patriarchy signals the second possibility for feminism she derives from the Nietzschean tradition--namely, the rejection of what she calls Hegel's "cloturing dialectic of recognition" (*Empire* 12). The dialectic of recognition, in her narrative, reproduces the (female) self in terms of the (male) other. This is why, as we will see in the next section, Acker writes a "memoriam" to identity rather than constructing a newly legible, newly recognizable identity. I will now turn to Acker's first post-conceptual novel, *In Memoriam to Identity*, to reveal the tension between Acker's theoretical claims and their narrative representation. To be sure, the novel locates sexuality as both value and Dionysian "outside." At the same time, the novel displays a trope characteristic of Acker's late novels, in which she, in Svetlana Mintcheva's words, "invents myths of a society free of both the psychological determinants of the patriarchal family and the economic determinants of the capitalist system of property, only to have them repeatedly shattered by her own acute materialist awareness of the constraints of the utopian imagination" (48).<sup>32</sup> The tension between her conceptual utopianism and the impossibility of narrating this ideal expresses Acker's paradoxical commitment to clearing the space for new values without naively suggesting that the established order has been simply and cleanly overturned. Rather her texts evoke "sexuality" as a name for a set of social and self relations that *could* be explored but which, as yet, remain culturally and socially repressed. Therefore, I conclude that "sexuality" becomes a queerly compacted signifier in Acker's late narratives--a site of skepticism and violence, desire and despair, and above all, a becoming that is, for now, productively

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<sup>32</sup> For this reading, see Marcella Althaus-Reid.

unreadable within the terms of the current social order.

### **Immanent Sexuality in *In Memoriam to Identity***

*In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) constitutes Acker's most sustained consideration of the problem of the dialectic and the possibility that sexuality presents for affirming value beyond the structures of patriarchal and heteronormative identity. To be sure, this struggle is at work through all of Acker's novels. However, this novel is written alongside Acker's development of the languages of the body. As such, its narrative crystallizes the stakes for breaking with dialectical critique, and it illuminates Acker's increasing interest in the body as a locus of non-exchangeable value. Her previous novel, *Empire of the Senseless*, also attempts a description of "a society not defined by the oedipal taboo...by phallic centrality and total domination on political, economic, social, and personal levels" (*Bodies* 12). Yet Acker "found [herself] at the end of the second part of a dialectical argument. I was back to my original question: In a society defined by phallic centrism or by prison, how is it possible to be happy?" (13). *Memoriam* takes up this search for "happiness" and insists that sexuality can be a resource for affirming values that do not buttress the society of disgust.

To represent this search, *Memoriam* employs a prose surface similar to Acker's other novels. Indeed, *Memoriam* effects a dreamy, surreal style because the narrative does not sustain coherent characters, plot, or conflict. Even characters with the same name change throughout the novel. For example, R, the anti-patriarchal libertine of the first section, "Rimbaud," reappears as Rimbaud in the third section, "Capitol." In the first iteration, the character rails against bourgeois domesticity and yearns for non-patriarchal sexuality, yet in his reappearance, the character relentlessly controls his sister and dictates the Oedipal prohibitions on her sexual desire. The writing also articulates lengthy poetic and philosophical digressions that are not easily attributable

to the consciousness of a particular character or narrator. As such, the narrative lacks consistent planes of psychology, temporality, or space. Finally, *Memoriam* employs Acker's older plagiarist methods, rewriting Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*, *Sanctuary*, and *The Wild Palms* as well as Rimbaud's poetry and biography. The collision of these two sources enables Acker to draw Rimbaud's affirmation of desire as a liberatory force into tension with Faulkner's characters (especially Quentin and Jason), who seek to repress and control women's sexuality. Although *Memoriam* devotes less time than *Empire* to the political situation that surrounds its characters, "Rimbaud" sharply frames the social context of the novel—as the French and German governments turn “people into TV zombies and corpses,” and Germans invade Paris, the city is “deindustrialized by a noncontractual association of bankers, real estate entrepreneurs, patrician elite (for moral and aesthetic reasons), and national and city government officials” (7, 55). The irony with which the narration invokes morality as a mask for economic motives establishes an overturning of moral discourses that runs throughout the novel. *Memoriam*'s world is wholly corrupt, lacking in any values beyond the economic. Even the political conflict between the French and Germans is muddled by the French colonists who “hire ex-top German military,” which leads R to feel that “When there's no values, it's hard for me to find a reason to live” (27).

Finding values by which to live constitutes the fundamental desire of the three main characters in *Memoriam*. Yet each suffers from relationships that internalize the dynamics of mastery, distrust, and violence that permeate the outside world. Despite V's promises of love and devotion to R and his attempts to escape his bourgeois life, V repeatedly returns to his family, walled in by privilege from the wars outside their house (27). In the “Japanese Interlude,” Tomomori and Uneme love and yet also intensely distrust one another--so much so that Uneme desperately fears Tomorori, and he repeatedly fantasizes about murdering her (54). Airplane escapes the control of

her father, “the judge,” only to be trapped in a psychic prison made, in part, by her pimp “the rapist” who “got off on sleeping with those he thought the lowest manifestations of humanity” (147). Capitol and her brother Quentin love each other and have sex, yet Quentin hates and wants to manipulate Capitol’s sexuality out of his own insecurity. All of these relationships are characterized by a dynamic of patriarchal mastery, with one partner (always a man) attempting to control the other’s body, sexual desire, and mind (except for R, all women). As Ellen G. Friedman argues, “In Acker’s works, sadistic men victimizing slavish masochistic women represents conventional sexual transactions in society, the underlying paradigm for normal relationships in patriarchal culture” (“Now” 41). *Memoriam* underscores, more than Acker’s earlier work, the tense insecurity experienced by the dominating, sadistic male figure. In this respect, the novel highlights that patriarchal structures are detrimental to both men and women--these structures prevent V and Tomoori from enacting the escape for which they yearn, keeping them tied to the marriages and nuclear family structures that they loath.

It is true that Acker’s representation of “bourgeois domesticity” is more of a caricature than a robust critical analysis. Yet, as a satirical shorthand, bourgeois living stands in for the hegemonic social relations that Acker’s narratives critique; this lifestyle buttresses patriarchal kinship and inevitably demands the subjugation of women and homosexual characters--namely, anyone who challenges the gender roles and order of desire that patriarchy demands. The key terms for satirizing and critiquing bourgeois life in *Memoriam* are affective. For example, R states, “Living is fun if you have adventures,” but “since a choice has to involve viable alternatives, there was no choice. There never is. Adventure is the state of living affairs and so is change” (57). In contrast to adventure, bourgeois life is “boring.” R states, “Most of the people I know, especially the married people, do everything out of boredom” (35).

Boredom carries special valence in *Memoriam* insofar as “*boring is valueless*” (57, original emphasis). Bourgeois domesticity denies life’s immanence (“the state of living affairs”), and it does so for the patriarchal reasons that Rimbaud proposes later in the novel when he attempts to control Capitol’s sexuality:

So the only thing for a man to do is to settle down with a wife and have children, the most rigid setup possible, to counter his natural tendencies toward disorder even suicide. ‘Sure,’ Rimbaud said aloud, ‘that’s what I’m thinking about. Flesh. It’s her goddamn flesh. There’s something the matter with it. It’s hot. Like nuclear energy run wild. 178

Rimbaud’s logic echoes the dynamics of patriarchy that Acker critiques, namely the denial of flesh, sexuality, and desire. In the novel’s view, the “most rigid setup possible” not only contradicts the order of life itself, but the setup’s justification—to “counter [these] natural tendencies toward disorder even suicide”—actually seeks to place men as the center of patriarchal control. From R’s perspective, Capitol’s sexuality represents complete dissolution, which he claims is a drive to death. But what Rimbaud fears is the “nuclear energy run wild” of Capitol’s “flesh” as a threat to his power. Catherine Rock aptly suggests that Rimbaud’s altered perspective later in the novel, from feminist to patriarchal, demonstrates the possibility of “unethical becomings” (220). Indeed, the narration tells us when Rimbaud reappears that he had “ma[d]e himself into a businessman. He was still a poet. A dead poet” (183). Of course, Rimbaud’s transition from poet to businessman recalls Acker’s critique of the commodification of radical aesthetics. But his *valueless* attitude to embodiment is expressed primarily through his “weakness, his insecurity, his inability to do anything but attempt control” (192). Thus *Memoriam* positions the denial of women’s sexuality and the devaluation of art as the fundamental strategies of those complicit with forces of death, those who seek to disavow any immanent forces that imply the dissolution



of their own egoistic power.

Yet the concept of a relationship based on “mutual love” nonetheless remains an abiding site of hope for the three protagonists even as they suffer the manipulation and betrayal of patriarchal lovers (216)<sup>33</sup>. R states that he’s “waiting for”

A certain type of life which I call *life*. So far I haven’t been able to get there because I need another person, V, and what’s happened and is still happening between me and V is nothing, shit. Leather rubs against leather. I want blood....I need V because together we can get to life; life is something other than shit. I’d rather suicide than live in this bourgeoisie or shit. 28, original emphasis

Despite R’s explicit rejection of utopianism (“utopianism is absurd”), he expresses *Memoriam*’s desire for a set of social relations outside of “this bourgeoisie or shit.” Crucially, R links the type of life that he wants to “blood,” signaling the flesh as a possible basis for this “type of life.” Indeed, the narration states, “only flesh is value” (27). Yet despite the fact that their love is an “atrocious violent noise,” a “torture rack” in his psyche, R remains tied to the belief that he “need[s] another person,” that V serves as “his only hope in what seemed to be an otherwise unbearable society, a society of families and strict marriages” (62). In direct contrast to R’s desire for mutual “love,” FF, the sadist German teacher, instructs R that “People poison other people because they don’t know how else to do what they want to do” (11). Thus, he advocates violence and death as a response to the social order (15). While the motorcycle gang shares FF’s solution, their preference for violence is predicated not on nihilistic sadism but rather on a “Hegelian argument” that violence can transform the social world by subjugating the weak and poor to the will of the powerful and rich (19). Their leader, Dubois, explains to R, “Today violence is the fastest and the only

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<sup>33</sup> For a convergent reading, see Douglas Shields Dix on *Don Quixote* “To make love possible, she must create the necessary conditions for mutual human respect and love to exist” (56).

way possible [to repair “social inequities”]” (20). Yet R refuses this logic on the basis that “he want[s] a new world,” one that does not recapitulate the control, violence, and mastery of that which already exists.

Note, for example, that R explains in his letter to V. that “human freedom and independence, which Kant Schiller and other idealists unreservedly accepted and extolled, are in actuality questionable, tenuous, because our natures are deeply animal. Yet you are repeatedly demanding that there only be this ideal freedom and total independence between us” (38). Here R critiques the V’s abstract absolutism, attempting to convince him that dependence is not necessarily inimical to freedom. Yet R’s dependence--his yearning for an absolutely mutual and reciprocal relation--also leaves him unfulfilled. He is incapable of obtaining from an other what he needs for his self. Therefore, *Memoriam* critiques those, like V, who “don’t have any values” as well those, like R, who, frustrated in their search for reciprocity, declare themselves “no one—the opposite of bourgeois identity,” stalled as the mirror opposite of what they hate, existing as “no one” or a negation, incapable of articulating and affirming new values.

Consonant with Acker's turn to the languages of the body, *Memoriam* thus pivots to sexuality as the site of value. For example, Capitol discovers that “the conjunction of sexuality with need and heart is what perhaps according to actuality cannot ever be said ‘I will not be nothing’ simply and naturally refused to place her sexuality next to anyone or anything again besides the simply doing of it” (260). Capitol's broken grammar performs her fear that sexuality and love cannot be “spoken” together within patriarchal discourse. Her double negative (“I will not be nothing”) is less an affirmation of the “I” becoming something than a refusal to subordinate her own sexuality to “anyone or anything again.” The phrase, “simply doing it” evokes a seeming self-evidence and lack of meaning characteristic of

Acker's languages of the body. Yet the lack of pretense is itself key to Acker's recuperation of sexuality as an excess that is not yet fully co-opted by the patriarchal order. Thus, Airplane dis-articulates sexuality from "need" and "heart," from an Other, and claims it as a force that enables her to assert that she will be *something*, something outside the controlling terms set by the patriarchal other. This affirmation of sexuality culminates in the final paragraph of *Memoriam* when Capitol similarly embraces her sexuality as an outside:

It was five years since Harry had left [Capitol]. She knew that since she had killed their love, she ought to suicide. She had fought for this nothing. So. It's time to suicide. It's time to lop off the consciousness of memory. Memory is deathless and inescapable as long as alive.

"Fuck you," said aloud [sic]. "The waste isn't just me. It's not waste. It's as if there's a territory. The roads carved in the territory, the only known, are memories. Carved again and again into ruts like wounds that don't heal when you touch them but grow. Since all the rest is unknown, throw what is known away.

"Sexuality," she said, "sexuality." 264

The inability to achieve a "symbiotic relationship" with Harry leads Capitol to the conclusion that the "time to suicide" has arrived. Here Acker's perennial use of "suicide" as a verb is revealed as the triumph of nihilism, an act that embraces the "nothing" that Capitol has won in her fight to sustain love. As Mintcheva argues, "Entangled in the structures she is protesting against, Acker's subject can only reject them if she rejects herself: her very subjectivity is formed within these structures" (50). Hence, a common trope of Acker's fiction lies in her protagonists considering suicide as a response to an oppressive patriarchal world—a path that Airplane's and Capitol's mothers (like many of Acker's protagonists' mothers) have taken (100; 183).

(Acker's own mother committed suicide in 1974 when Acker was 30.) Yet here Capitol rejects suicide for "sexuality," a path that leads to an "unknown" beyond the known territory of memory.

I disagree, then, with Rock's reading that, for Acker, "the quest for something new involves the mimetic repetition of the old, participation in what they defy" (225). Instead, *Memoriam* affirms "throw[ing] what is known away" because memory only repeats the "ruts" and "wounds" of the past. Memory signals the resentment of a consciousness that remains passively and melancholically tethered to the immobilized "habitual self" of subjectivity which must instead be "broken" (16). Capitol therefore "learn[s] she must be several, if not numberless, parts because there was a black hole dividing these parts. No memory. But afterwards remembered pain, so destruction of memory is no cure for the wounds of pain" (260). Inasmuch as the novel suggests that destroying memory cannot assuage pain, the disposal of the "known" does not achieve transcendence over the body. Indeed, sensations, such as pain, remain the condition of embodiment. Thus, the turn from suicide to sexuality arrives with a non-transcendent affirmation: "Fuck you," a statement that is not, in fact, made by Capitol; it is enunciated, "said aloud" by an unspecified voice. In this way, *Memoriam* emphasizes the necessity for a subject to say "Fuck you," to reject the nihilism of "waste" that leads to suicide and, alternately, to step towards self-overcoming, letting go of the known for the unknown. "Fuck you," then, is not directed *at someone*, an Other within a scene of address where recognition is at stake. Rather than a *reactive* statement, it is an assertion of active force, a becoming-active that turns toward the unknown, to "sexuality," as the ground of value as such.

Suicide and sexuality thus provide two alternative forms of writing a "memoriam to identity." Suicide embraces the nihilism of self-destruction, cutting away the "consciousness of memory" to die. By contrast, sexuality attempts to find

new “territory” for living that identity tends to stabilize into habitual ruts. As Airplane realizes in the second section of the novel, “Identity must be a house into which you can enter, lock the door, shut the windows forever against all storms” (118). While both suicide and sexuality break apart the stasis of identity, only sexuality presents a viable alternative, in Acker's symbolic economy, because it stands for the creation of alternate structures for living. Hence, R describes himself as a “pirate brat” and claims he “is seeking real pirate treasure in the dirty recesses of being. Women wear lost pearls. Maps whose territories are named in languages which are no longer understood show where the passions are hidden” (6). Here “pirate treasure” echoes Acker's vision of the languages of the body as a language that is “no longer understood,” which can consequently reveal the value embedded in the body's passion. In *Memoriam*, then, sexuality is a strangely inhuman, un-codified reserve for becoming otherwise. “Our sexuality isn’t human” R explains, “This is the deepest secret. Being allied to wisdom, it’s torn from the material bowels of the flesh” (36).<sup>34</sup> Hence, the greatest threat to Airplane is the possibility that she “had become too polluted, not down there, but socially, as everyone becomes, to be pure *even down there in the blood*” (133, original emphasis).<sup>35</sup>

On its own, this overcoming of the human and affirmation of the sexual is no solution to the “boredom” of valueless bourgeois life. This is because “boredom comes from the lack of correspondence between the desire of the mind and body and the society outside that mind and body. From impossibility of any desire’s

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<sup>34</sup> The narration suggest that this concept of sexuality serves as a provocation to theory itself, which has not yet provided a paradigm that can think outside the “absolute models” of the Enlightenment or “mechanistic determinism” that underpins Marxism and psychoanalysis. In assuming determinism, these models cannot account for “the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, nontrivial novelty. In the world of time there is only ex-nihilo creation simultaneous with causality” (52).

<sup>35</sup> This line is critical to Clune's critique of Acker as positing a naturally liberated subject. But I argue it is clear, in this context, that the “purity” of the blood is directed at a critique of patriarchal codifications of feminine (and other forms of non-Oedipal) sexuality.

actualization” (10). As a result, *Memoriam* suggests that affirming the flesh achieves nothing unless it is coupled with an actualization of desire *in the world*. So although the “infinity and clarity of desire in the imaginative [sic] made normal society’s insanity disappear,” the concluding line of the “Rimbaud” section makes abundantly clear that “*The imagination is nothing unless it is made actual*” (5, 95, original emphasis). In an extended scene reminiscent of Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, *Memoriam* clarifies the role of the imagination in relation to actualizing desire. As a European-looking doctor interrogates a “girl” (possibly Airplane who nicknames herself “Halo” for Halitosis) before a sex show audience, he berates her by asking repeatedly what Halo wants while she masturbates and “fake fuck[s]” him (130-40). Afterwards, Halo tells the doctor “If the world in which you live is sick, you have to live in the imaginary” (141), and he replies, “Do you think it’s possible to destroy poverty or any other social ill or rejection by an act of the imagination?” When the girl “bow[s] her head” admits “no,” the narration explains that “The doctor was beginning to control her. As control always works, through the imagination” (141). To be sure, the narration’s claim that “*The imagination is nothing unless it is made actual*” seems to confirm the doctor’s implicit critique of the imagination as useless in combating social problems. Yet *Memoriam* maintains the imagination’s capacity to elaborate desires, as well as its vulnerability to control through the doctor’s skeptical critique. The imagination thus possesses a dual status in the novel. On the one hand, it may be a site for “Women’s interiorization of male hatred [which] appears as women’s fear especially of their own blood” (47). But it may also be, on the other hand, a resource for becoming beyond the terms of repression: “Surely pleasure resided in dreams, for actions came from there. All other actions were reactions, taught by human society.” As such, imagination must be made actual to create the correspondence between the mind’s and body’s active desires and “the society outside that mind and body.” This is

the path *Memoriam* charts in accordance with Acker's concomitant claim that the languages of the body can be a visceral, sensuous creation of desire, not merely an imaginary representation.

“Writing is one method of dealing with being human or wanting to suicide,” *Memoriam*’s narration tells us, “cause [sic] in order to write you kill yourself at the same time while remaining alive” (174). Writing is therefore defined by the tension between overcoming and becoming in the “dangerous search” that Acker advocates. In *Memoriam*, Acker offers one example of language that rides these edges of overcoming and becoming at the same time that it animates these processes for a reader. R explains, “Since language and flesh are not separate here, language being real, every vowel has color... The form and direction of each vowel is instinctive rhythm. Language is truly myth. All my senses touch words. Words touch the senses. Language isn’t only translation, for the word is blood” (89-90). I strongly disagree with Clune’s reading of this line when he claims, that “[Cathy] Caruth’s argument that meaning is reducible to the impact of an event is identitcal to Acker’s claim that ‘words touch my senses.’” For Caruth, the impact of an event in literary language signals its actual repetition, and she insists on that the traumatic breakdown in reference indicates the force of history as it strives be narrated. Acker, by contrast, does not index the sensual word to any actual event. Rather, this fantasy of language as *pure communication* that is also meaningless is linked to non-referential becoming. It is not an indication of the force of history. Rather, it is linked to the reality of the body, which is paradoxically material and immaterial insofar as it remains perpetually open to becoming otherwise.

At stake here, then, is a concept of language which divorces itself from the subject and, at the same time, carries a literal force or imprint of the materiality of the body—“the word is blood” (256). Writing in the language of the body dissolves the

subject (or “initiator”) and materially transmits corporeal experience (“action”) into an impersonal sensation (“Words touch the senses”) that touches readers, viscerally.<sup>36</sup> Such language thus retains a vital relationship to the body through sensory intensity. But it also contributes to *Memoriam*’s ideological sponsoring of “feeling” as the only thing that “made sense.” “I don’t mean sentimentality,” Capitol explains, “I mean sensations” (158). By “making” sense, *Memoriam* embodies language and its rewrites words as sensuously creative. To accomplish this creative and erotic relation, however, the words must become increasingly akin to non-sense, to an unreadable force that intimates social possibility without, in fact, naming it. As long as Acker perceives herself as bereft of an artistic and political community, her narrative of aesthetic critique is intrinsically defined by this tension. As such, we must be willing to read Acker’s language of “feeling” as, ultimately, pointing toward something much larger, and much harder over to overturn, than a single body--namely, a body politic.

### **Queer Experimental Desire and the Political Economy of Art**

I have argued that Acker’s conceptual “turn” to a language of the body should be read, on the one hand, as a performative reframing of her fiction. Indeed, neither the style nor the content of her fiction significantly changes. Yet Acker’s framing of the fiction changes dramatically and insistently. This framing is compelled, I have suggested, by Acker’s concern that conceptual writing and “deconstructive” aesthetics have become commodified, de-politicized, and internalized by the art market. Therefore, her representation of the text as a literal, sensuous body must be read specifically against the abstractions she fears in conceptual writing, which become ironically complicit with a consumer value system. On the other hand, I have argued

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<sup>36</sup> Acker writes, “To write is not to record or represent a given action, but to lose one’s capacity to be the subject or initiator of that action.” Deleuze offers an intriguingly convergent description of writing in “Literature and Life,” stating, for example, that “Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience” (*Essays* 1).



that the languages of the body should be read on its own terms, as a perverse conceptual collage that extends some of Acker's long-standing feminist and queer projects. It also, I contend, enables Acker to imagine a narrative in which "values" can be constructed that do not mirror the cultural and political orders she critiques. These values are specific: embrace of non-hierarchical social relations; refusal to disavow the material body; affirmation of the taboo and the abject; and insistence on the autonomy, plurality, legitimacy, and plenitude of women's (and other non-oedipal subjects') desire.

These values constitute a kind of "utopianism" in Acker's representation of sexuality. While she critiques the utopianism of the sixties, her work undoubtedly implies that sexuality has a "higher purpose," linked to a "struggle for freedom," to use Grosz's words (*Space* 227). To an extent, Acker's writing participates in the representation of queer sexuality as an experiment.<sup>37</sup> Much as Grosz describes experimental queer desire, Acker posits sexuality as a "fundamentally provisional, tenuous, mobile" force that, in its "fluidity and transformability" can have "often unsettling effects." Yet Acker rhetorically links these queer effects to a direct challenge to social order. For example, she proposes that "Every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of putting into question the established order of society" (Friedman, "Now" 39). All the ambiguity of this proposition rests on the phrase "capable of putting into question." Does this mean that desire itself *undoes* the social order, or does desire merely contribute to the undoing by rendering that established order questionable? Admittedly, Acker's writing suggests, and then negates, both possibilities. In this respect, Acker's temptation to "affirm" is matched by a deep-rooted, even crushing, sense of skepticism regarding social change in the absence of

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<sup>37</sup> Making a characteristically Deleuzian argument about Acker's experimental desire, David Brande argues, "A book and a sexual practice have the same ontological status as machinic assemblages through which desire flows—whether desire is impeded or augmented," and thus Acker's writing "maps a set of practices; it is 'oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real'" (207).

an aesthetic and political community to receive it.

I propose to table, then, the conventional questions about sexuality, which are frequently raised in Acker criticism and queer theory more generally. There is ample evidence in Acker's fiction that she depicts sexuality as essentialist *and* constructed, primordial *and* produced, feminist *and* queer, and so on. Her work truly can be read as a 'greatest hits' of post-structural theory, especially if one is willing to surrender the conventional battle-lines that shape its conversations. Yet, as I suggested at the outset, such an approach does an unjust violence to Acker's work. It subordinates the singularity of her writing. But it also problematically generalizes the desires behind her aesthetic concepts--it conflates Acker's concepts, in other words, with those of post-structuralism and, in the process, misses the motivating forces and contexts behind her creation of new concepts.

Allow me, then, to conclude with a brief narrative, which strikingly reveals these motivating forces. It also underscores Acker's acute self-awareness about the limitations of the languages of the body as a long-term conceptual "solution" to the political economy of art. Published after *Memoriam*, *My Mother: Demonology* (1993) also takes up the project of the languages of the body within an extended rewriting of Charlotte Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Colette's memoirs. In a short narrative, Beatrice tells us about her father, an artist who is commissioned by the Mayor of New York to paint a portrait of the city. The artist-father is totally devoted to his art, and he decides that, to be able to paint the horror of the city, he must experience the horror himself: "To paint horror, I have to eradicate all distance between horror and me: I have to see/show my own horror, that I'm horrible" (109). Therefore, he decides to bind his daughter in a car, set her "cunt on fire," while homeless men and art patrons enjoy the "spectacle" (114). Although she escapes, Beatrice's experience recalls many of Acker's protagonists: she believes she is responsible for her victimization; she is

sexually abused by the Mayor; and she is passionately and lovingly devoted to her father, despite his manifest violence. Yet this narrative of art is also crucially framed by the changing economic context of New York. The Mayor gentrifies the poor neighborhoods of the city, so that white artists can move in and displace the Puerto Rican and black communities. Thus, New York

was on its way to becoming the City of Art, not the City of Refugees and Renegades. As soon as white artistic gentrification was established, the real estate moguls sold these spaces for fortunes. The white artists had to become more interested in profit than in art to hold on to the spaces they had gentrified and from which they had excluded the poor, not poverty. Never poverty. 91

Art has become, at once, a force for displacing the poor, for perpetuating debt, and for masking that violence in an spectacular, violent performance. Characteristic of Acker's work, one does not know how seriously to read the satire. In the novel, the public is horrified, and the artist commits suicide, but the painting is ultimately viewed as a masterpiece, aptly rendering a "century in which totalitarianism vied with humanism" (115). In my view, this satire underscores how central the context of aesthetic critique is to Acker's anxious, conceptual re-framing of her own writing. In effect, this narrative recalls Harvey's bleak view that the postmodern can "judge the spectacle only in terms of how spectacular it is," and indeed, the artist-father constantly ratchets up the violence, hoping to find the pinnacle that will render the 'true' horror of the city. Of course, the fact that the work becomes a masterpiece captures Ngai's point that the "ineffectuality [of art] as a mechanism for dissent and change" is embodied in its being "tolerated." In fact, the tolerance of the aesthetic here becomes indicative of the "humanism" vying against "totalitarianism."

The most important aspect of the satire, however, is reflexive. Note that the artist-father is, in essence, putting Acker's own aesthetic principles into action. Recall

her insistence that "Writing must break through the representation or fictional mirror and *be in equal force to the horror experienced in daily life*" (*Bodies* 68, my emphasis). Certainly, Acker does not define "horror" as the artist-father does. Yet the very fact that he so easily appropriates this principle and rhetoric reveals the desperate stakes for Acker's conceptual re-framing. She is, I would suggest, deeply aware that the "languages of the body"-- like her "deconstructive" writing-- can become consumed and de-politicized within the postmodern political economy of art. Moreover, it can be deployed in the service of any number of retrograde, non-feminist causes--in this case, sexist objectification and the masking of class and racial exploitation. Perhaps, then, the questions we should draw out of Acker's fiction should focus less on whether or not her representation of sexuality is truly as subversive as she claims. Rather, we must ask why Acker used sexuality to subvert the codes that had previously, and even positively, made her work both readable and political. If her particular definition of sexuality fails to achieve the unreadability she imagined, then we should ask whether the satire of *My Mother: Demonology* is more prescient than Acker realized. If this is the case, one can imagine that Acker would not mourn for dead concepts. Instead, she might, as she always did, begin again, perversely re-framing, borrowing, and rewriting, always with an eye toward constructing and affirming a society made of more than disgust. After all, failure was not an endpoint for her but a spur toward becoming otherwise; it was a threshold that must be crossed again and again, with a willingness to confront that chaos that exceeds our efforts to control it. If the unreadability of Acker's writing has any consistent meaning, this is surely it.

## Chapter 4:

### “Permeable We!”

#### **Eve Sedgwick's Ethics of Intersubjectivity and the Queer Turn to Positive Affect**

In the previous three chapters, I argued that writers have turned to experimental writing to queer predominant conceptions of literary critique, hermeneutics, and reading. I have mapped their aesthetic politics against significant moments in postwar sexual politics, such as Stonewall, AIDS, and postmodern feminism. While queer theory has been central to my arguments, it has mainly existed on the margins of the each chapter. This is a consequence of my attempt to broaden queer theory beyond its disciplinary formations. My goal is to show how queer aesthetic forms, such as experimental writing, critically bridge theory, fiction, and politics in ways that have not yet been acknowledged within queer theory. More importantly, I have argued that these hybrid texts perform (through their forms) concepts that can push queer theory to overcome some of its current impasses, such as those centered on relationality (Burroughs), paranoid reading (Delany), and performative subversion (Acker). Hence, I have positioned Burroughs' fiction as proleptically queer, and I have demonstrated how Delany's and Acker's fiction perversely redefine institutionalized concepts in queer and critical theory alike.

This chapter continues the project of rethinking the boundaries of queer theory through experimental writing. However, I will now turn to one of the foremost theorists in queer theory itself, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. I will demonstrate that Sedgwick's “turn” to experimental writing informs her more influential (and more famous) “turn” to affect. Placed alongside the previous chapters, Sedgwick's mutual turns to affect and experimental writing should be read as part of a queer aesthetic history that Sedgwick does not explicitly acknowledge. Yet I argue that this history is

central to understanding Sedgwick's experimental writing. At the same time, I underscore the singularity of Sedgwick's hybridization of memoir, haiku, *haibun*, and theoretical discourse—that singularity lies Sedgwick's construction of a queer “ethics of intersubjectivity.” Sedgwick's ethic is “represented” through her experimental bridging of these forms. However, its values are primarily articulated through the rhetoric of positive affect. Although largely discounted as uncritical in queer theory, I recover positive affect and demonstrate its centrality to Sedgwick's revision of queerness as an ethic of reparative care. By reading her experimental writing and theoretical work together, I demonstrate how Sedgwick's ethic responds to the post-AIDS need for queer theory to explore new definitions of relationality. This chapter therefore demonstrates how experimental writing condenses broader political possibilities for Sedgwick. Consequently, I conclude that experimental writing is no mere supplement to institutionalized queer theory; it has had a direct and generative, if as yet unrecognized, impact on contemporary queer theories of affect.

### **Queering Positive Affect**

In one of her last published essays, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick registers a concern about the affective relations that animate contemporary LGBT and queer movements. Echoing the sentiments of many queer theorists, Sedgwick fears that “mainstream gay and lesbian culture and politics” has enacted a “programmatic disavowal” of the formative traumas of the AIDS crisis (“Melanie” 640).<sup>1</sup> What has resulted from this disavowal, she suggests, are cultural and political “venues [that] have become affectively hollowed out, brittle and banalized.” At the same time, Sedgwick worries that subsequent generations of queer theorists have not provided a sufficient alternative to the mainstream’s collective forgetting. Instead, queer theory

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<sup>1</sup> See Crimp, Butler (*Psychic*), Edelman, Warner, (“Something Queer about the Nation-State,” *Publics*).

has retained the projective affects of paranoia with less and less grounding in the context from which these feelings emerged and were necessary as motivators of activism and community formation. Indeed, Sedgwick laments that queer theory perpetuates these affects in excess of a “palpable purchase on daily reality” and suggests that paranoia has perhaps, for the moment, outlived its usefulness as an organizer of queer relationality.

Why do the affective undercurrents of these cultural and political projects matter to Sedgwick’s critique? At stake, I argue, is an assumption central to Sedgwick’s late-career turn to theories of affect that she never made explicit — namely, that specific affective states contribute to qualitatively unique intersubjective, ethical, and political relations. It is for this reason that Sedgwick urges queer theory and culture to access and offer a broader palette of affects beyond paranoia, and that she is compelled to search for ways to connect our affective dispositions and relations to the exigencies of the contemporary moment. In this search, Sedgwick is unique among her contemporaries. While other queer critics share Sedgwick’s analytic investment in affect, few urge the cultivation of positive affect as she does.<sup>2</sup> Despite their methodological divergences, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, Douglas Crimp, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Heather Love each consider positive affects with suspicion. Their work strives to depathologize the negative affects of unhappiness, melancholia, trauma, self-shattering, or shame and to define these feelings as constitutive of queerness. Consequently, they suggest that the

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<sup>2</sup> I use positive and negative as descriptors of affective states to denote Silvan Tomkins’s influence on Sedgwick and his division of affects into positive (interest/excitement, enjoyment/joy), resetting (surprise/startle), and negative (distress/anguish, fear/terror, shame/humiliation, anger/rage, contempt, and disgust). Thus shame is technically a “negative” affect in which Sedgwick finds much positive ethical value. On the other hand, I use negative to highlight Sedgwick’s critique of the affects associated with Melanie Klein’s paranoid/schizoid position insofar as they obstruct ethical intersubjectivity.

counternormative force of queerness lies in its capacity to contest the redemptive futures mainstream gay liberalism affirms in the discourses of positive affect.<sup>3</sup> By “clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury,” Love suggests, queers defy “the call of gay normalization” and thereby “refus[e] to write off the vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead” (30).

Without a doubt, Sedgwick also insists on the psychic and social significance of negative affects to queer communities. Yet she ultimately questions the conflation of counternormative critique with negative affect and, conversely, of mainstream assimilation with positive affect. In the process, Sedgwick seeks out an alternative ethical model, distinct from those underwritten by self-consolidating paranoia or self-shattering jouissance.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I argue that Sedgwick’s turn to positive affect is motivated by an attempt to envision a model of ethics premised on permeable intersubjectivity, based in the nonfoundational selves of post-structuralism and Buddhism — Sedgwick’s “Permeable we!” To map Sedgwick’s ethics, I focus on her experimental memoir, *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), as it represents a significant effort on Sedgwick’s part to cultivate the affective space that she values for queer theory and culture. It also offers a privileged site from which to glimpse the lexical, formal, and conceptual models that she uses to articulate the ethical values of affect in her theoretical writing. To be sure, a fine line cannot be drawn between Sedgwick’s critical and creative writing. Each displays her singular blend of lyricism, metaphor, speculative discourse, and narrative condensation. Yet *Dialogue* is unique in the extent to which it employs nonnarrative literary forms to model its conceptions of affect,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, note the title of the gay-marketed show *Glee*, which braids together positive affective discourse with a message of liberal tolerance and self-celebration.

<sup>4</sup> For the former, see Sedgwick’s critique of D. A. Miller and Judith Butler in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching*, 123-51. For the latter, see her interview with Michael D. Snediker, “Queer Little Gods: A Conversation.”



intersubjectivity, and reparation. These forms locate subjectivity within a network of contingent and reciprocal affective relations. In doing so, *Dialogue* provides us with an ethical model of intersubjectivity based in a set of feelings more capacious than paranoia and more welcoming to possibilities for relations of mutual nourishment.

The memoir's use of *haibun* and its construction of typographic space manifest reparative affects without relying solely on a first-person narrative to express these feelings.<sup>5</sup> *Dialogue*'s manifestation of pedagogical permeability through these forms is central to its structuring an ethical relation between self and other. Never naive about pedagogy's political connotations, Sedgwick admits that it may signal "evasion, as the notion of the Aesthetic is now commonly seen as functioning" ("Melanie" 642). Yet Sedgwick's conception of the pedagogical does not imply a retreat from the social. On the contrary, pedagogical permeability models an intersubjective dynamic of "holding" that affirms the inextricability of the self from a field of impersonal others. As a specific "mode of relationality," pedagogy aims to mitigate projective affects and, alternately, to cultivate reparative care for the other (640). The pedagogical is thus an inhabited, intersubjective relation, as well as an ethical practice that endeavors to "offer" a "radically, ever newly unpreempted space" for the attenuation of negative affect ("Teaching Depression").

Since Sedgwick represents the pedagogical as a relation one can choose to inhabit, *Dialogue* carves out a space for agency within permeable intersubjectivity. Sedgwick's conception of agency is premised on embodied affective negotiations and seeks to sidestep Michel Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," which has been

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<sup>5</sup> A key influence on Sedgwick's *haibun* is her reading of *Japanese Death Poems*. Hoffman's introduction provides an insightful analysis of the haiku form and situates its usage within the cultural history of Japanese death practices and poetics. Sedgwick's use of the *haibun* is not unique to American literature. For American appropriations of the form, see *Journey to the Interior: American Versions of Haibun*.

foundational to queer theories of agency. Sedgwick's "middle ranges of agency" are defined by the ability to engender change for a self through affective negotiations that do not conform to the polarities of liberation or the reinscription of repression (*Touching* 13). Such affective negotiations underwrite *Dialogue*'s exhibition of Sedgwick's sadomasochistic masturbation fantasies and contribute to her representation of sexual confession as a performative solicitation rather than a technology of repression or subversion.

Finally, *Dialogue* casts the contingency and necessity of intersubjective reparation in the discourse of positive affect, specifically happiness. Locating happiness within the temporal horizon of mortality, Sedgwick's ethics of intersubjectivity offers one way to expand queer theory's affective modalities to include a conception of durable and impersonal relations of "holding" that extend beyond any one individual life.

### **Writing Feeling without a First Person**

"What kind of a narrative . . . are we trying to construct — or do we think we need to construct — about Eve's history?" (60). When Sedgwick poses this question to her therapist, Shannon Van Wey, she foregrounds the conflicted status of self-narrative in *Dialogue*. Van Wey wants to construct a narrative that enables Sedgwick to "turn out different." Though his goal is for her to see herself as "more continuous," Sedgwick qualifies that this self will not be "identical" but "just flowing onward." What kind of narrative form can produce this alternative mode of being? *Dialogue* suggests that the answer might not lie in narrative at all; indeed, the text shares Sedgwick's own "non-narrative" view of people, weakening the drive to plot in favor of "a kind of cubist three-dimensionality" that recursively accumulates perspectives of an object rather than its changes over time (109). Despite its diminution of plot,

*Dialogue* nonetheless depicts a series of legible events within a clear context: it begins in 1992 after Sedgwick has been diagnosed with breast cancer and has undergone chemotherapy and a double mastectomy; she is forty-two and suffering from a resurgence of the depression she experienced in her youth. Throughout the treatment, Sedgwick confronts her fraught familial relations, her difficulty with emotions and sexuality, and her mortality. By *Dialogue*'s end, substantive change has occurred for Sedgwick: her anxiety abates, her poetry returns, and she discovers a nourishing interest in textile crafts and Buddhism.

Yet the conceptual content of *Dialogue* lies less in its narrative than in the formal means by which it destabilizes conventional structures of memoir. These forms include the discursive moves Sedgwick outlines in "Teaching 'Experimental Critical Writing'" (115). Above all, *Dialogue* relies on the interpenetration of haiku and prose and the alternation of voice, which it effects by integrating Van Wey's session notes in different fonts.<sup>6</sup> Because of Sedgwick's and Van Wey's constant ventriloquizing of one another, the reader is confronted by a subtle vertigo when trying to distinguish between their uses of "I." Sedgwick describes this focal oscillation as creating a "permeable first person" such that "there are times when even I can't tell whose first person it is" ("Teaching Depression"). *Dialogue*'s sometimes-indeterminate "I" counters the "bumptious narcissism" that subtends autobiography's "primordial first person singular." Moreover, this polyvocal "I" is central to Sedgwick's creation of a pedagogical form that has the capacity "to aerate, expose, and ideally to disable or 'burn out' the potency of certain violent defenses." Sedgwick's understanding of these defenses is based on Melanie Klein's conception of the psyche's paranoid/schizoid position. In this position, the ego sadistically projects its own negative, persecutory

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<sup>6</sup> *Dialogue* is inspired by James Merrill's poetry, particularly "The Prose of Departure" and "The Book of Ephraim." For other influences, see Edwards, *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick*.

affects onto the other as a way to manage its own anxiety. It is precisely these defenses that Sedgwick sees motivating political memoirs by Alberto Gonzalez, John Edwards, Condoleezza Rice, and Clarence Thomas, and that she seeks to counter with a pedagogical form of life writing.

However, Sedgwick does not explicate the alternate ethical and political utility that adheres to memoir crafted with pedagogical motives. We lack the critical tools to answer her reticence because our notions of the ethical and political value of narrative continue to discount the force of affect. If not consigned to the “affective fallacy,” then the affective dynamics of reading are cast as inadequate to narrative’s representational powers for social intervention.<sup>7</sup> In her analysis of *Dialogue*’s value for disability studies, Cynthia G. Franklin invokes this critical bias against experimental writing. Though she affirms its depiction of “complexly structured moments of empathy and identification,” Franklin laments that the memoir does not represent a “full exploration” of “how institutions and individuals interact” (242-43).

Rather than critique the indeterminacies of *Dialogue* as a solipsistic denial of social context, I argue that Sedgwick’s memoir effects its intervention by reimagining the relation between self and other in ways that mitigate the intersubjective violence of paranoid defenses, which it does through — not in spite of — its opaque, nonfigural affective spaces. *Dialogue* accomplishes this project by manifesting affect through formal means that are more capacious than plotted conflict or first-person narration. When Sedgwick considers what genre can represent her encounter with Van Wey, she becomes intrigued by the seventeenth-century Japanese *haibun*, particularly its combination of haiku and travel narrative. “It comes to me as a possible form for writing of Shannon and me,” she writes, because it challenges “bathetic” forms of “complaint” as well as the teleological plot of psychoanalysis that “fixate[s]” on

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<sup>7</sup> For a succinct overview of the critique, see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 39.

“truths uncovered, the excavated past” (194). These revelatory plots tend to recuperate “the Western / heroic thrust for / individuation” that Sedgwick rejects in favor of Buddhism’s insistence on interconnectedness (210). Not only does individuation consolidate an ideology of autonomous selfhood that *Dialogue*’s permeable first-person critiques, such individuation is typically realized through narratives of cathartic resolution underwritten by the triumph of normative values — values that look suspiciously akin to heteronormativity. For example, when Sedgwick’s estranged sister, Nina, reconnects with the Kosofsky family, Sedgwick resists Van Wey’s hope for the family’s happy reunification, because the fantasy is premised on the values of “blood and law” that privilege the biological and nuclear family as the only family that matters (130).

As alternatives to the psychoanalytic plot, Sedgwick considers “Platonic dialogues” and “novels” (194). The value of the novel in particular, she writes, is its epistemic opacity:

you needn’t know in advance what the subject is: a love? A failure? A mess? A bliss?

But that’s — prose.

To notate our strange

melody, I have some use

for all the white space.

On the one hand, the *haibun* shares the novel’s immanence — not knowing the subject at the outset — and as a form of travel narrative, *haibun* expresses the movements between Sedgwick and Van Wey that lead both to altered senses of their selves. On the other hand, the *haibun* is not “ — prose.” Sedgwick’s strident punctuation of “prose,” dashed aside and stopped short by a period, underscores the novel’s insufficiency to

“notate our strange / melody” because it risks sapping the estrangement of an experience that cannot be solely rendered through language. Thus the *haibun* does not dispense with affect; it enables a more capacious expression of feeling — it “sweep[s] into and through the arias, silent impasses, the fat, buttery condensations and inky dribbles of the mind’s laden brush.” Here form becomes, at once, aural, savory, tactile, and visual. To disregard this synesthetic interpenetration of the sensory and the textual as simply metaphorical would miss the significance of the translation that the haiku effects in this passage. Converting the kinetic energy of their “strange / melody” into the potential energy of “all the white space,” the haiku underscores the capacity of form — even empty space — to express affect without a subject to channel its feelings. In short, Sedgwick employs the *haibun* to express the “inky dribbles of the mind’s laden brush” because it does not require a first person to possess that mind.<sup>8</sup>

But why is the first person an obstacle to be overcome in aesthetic form, and what significance does the *haibun*’s affective texture have for Sedgwick’s vision of relationality? According to Van Wey’s notes, writing in “the first person is both labor intensive and felt to be constraining, . . . there were emotional registers that weren’t available while generating first person” (207). We should appreciate the ambiguity in Van Wey’s paraphrasing here. Are these emotions unavailable because they are unconscious to the “I,” such that it cannot recognize these emotions as its own? Or are these feelings unavailable because the “I” is too narrow to render emotional registers that are not solely its own? Although both dynamics are at play in *Dialogue*, the latter helps us understand why Sedgwick comes to engage in “the nonlinguistic work of textile art” over the course of *Dialogue* (*Touching* 3). In Van Wey’s words, “A texture book wouldn’t need to have a first person at all, any more than weaving itself does”

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<sup>8</sup> For helpful formal insights into the *haibun*, see Edwards 131 and Katy Hawkins, “Woven Spaces: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*.”

(207). The focus on texture de-emphasizes the constraints of personhood and concurrently expands the possibility for expressing “emotional registers” unavailable to an “I.” It is in the “indiscriminate realm [of textiles], that conscience has no foothold,” and Sedgwick can savor “materials in my hands; seeing, at an instant of pause and speculation, whether there’s something satisfying, something surprising to me, that they almost are” (199).

Following Renu Bora’s suggestion that “how one feels matter seems to invite comparisons with how one’s own or someone else’s matter can be shaped,” Sedgwick’s relief in textiles provides a clue to the affective transformation enable through her perception of *Dialogue* as textural (123). Flowing between prose and poetry, and between Sedgwick’s and Van Wey’s words, the *haibun* provides a correlative subjective orientation to the textiles’ ontological immanence, one that contrasts her previous poetic genre, the lyric. The lyric provided Sedgwick a potent combination of discipline and authority through the rhythms of enjambment.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a sensual “Kristevan semiotic” that outstrips the regulation of patriarchal syntax, lyric’s enjambment corresponded to what was “most abstract and cognitively under control in the poem” (*Tendencies* 186 – 87). In *Dialogue*, by contrast, the transitions from prose to poetry signal, in Katy Hawkins’s words, a “relaxing [of] the beat of intellectual and emotional working through” such that the “‘plot’ is slowed to set in motion the play of ideas” (255). These dislodged moments of cognition are not necessarily revelatory; they merely offer moments of “pause and speculation” for meditative consideration. In this respect, the *haibun* and textiles equally provide access to what Sedgwick calls “the sky-like nature of mind, where clouds can scoot across it, but it still remains just the sky. When your mind is occupied in conversations among bits of you, where is the conversation happening?” (Sedgwick and Snediker

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<sup>9</sup> See Sedgwick, “A Poem Is Being Written,” in *Tendencies*, 177 – 214.

198). The *haibun* figures both these “bits” of the dialogic self as well as the underlying “emptiness that isn’t constituted by any of the parties to the conversation.”

This figure of spaciousness leads Sedgwick to represent affect and subjectivity as inherently relational. Van Wey inspires this conception when he suggests to Sedgwick that timidity is not “a trait that lives inside a person, but instead, something relational” (105). Sedgwick relishes this insight as “just plain true! / Like going to a party / where no one knows you — // excruciating / by yourself, effortless when / a friend will come too — ” (105). Counterposing “excruciating” estrangement to “effortless” friendship, Sedgwick suggests that affects are contingent on our relational circumstances — their weight may suddenly become light with the presence of another. This is a significant realization for Sedgwick because, as Van Wey explains, it was difficult for her “to have emotions [as a child], a sense of their claims or weight,” because her parents “preemptively discredited” the “emotional field” (204). Part of the process of therapy, then, involves their accessing positive affects because, as Sedgwick explains, “if anything can bring me through to real change, it may be only some kind of pleasure” (8). Rather than a “grim process” of “masochistic” self-surrender, the relational cultivation of positive affect with Van Wey becomes central to Sedgwick’s alleviation of depression.

*Dialogue* itself is a material expression of the “pleasure” Sedgwick feels in therapy and in constructing a “record” of the experience (116). As such, the memoir indicates the complex relationship between affect, texture, and language that defines Sedgwick’s late-career resistance to what she calls deconstruction’s “analyzing apparently nonlinguistic phenomena in rigorously linguistic terms” (*Touching* 6). Beyond the “vast pleasure” Sedgwick feels in creating haiku and crafts, she describes the experience as “floating downstream with a current that’s so resolutely wordless.



As though in all its modesty, its refusal to generate propositions, selves, ideas, this might be a cataclysmic change disguised as an unassuming indulgence” (205).

If words are a dialogue’s condition of possibility, its matter of exchange, how can *Dialogue* express this wordless current? Here “current” echoes an excerpt from James Merrill quoted earlier in *Dialogue*: “Our state is exciting as we move with the current & emotion becomes an element of its own force” (137). If emotion is a central element in the current, how should we conceive the relationship between wordlessness and emotion? Affect theories that insist on a strict demarcation between affect and emotion would suggest that a worded affective wordlessness is a paradox. Brian Massumi famously disarticulates emotion from affect by reading the latter as the presignified and presubjective modulation of a body’s constantly varying sensation.<sup>32</sup> Emotion, by contrast, is a “qualified intensity” that is “owned and recognized” by a self in language — in “semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning” (28). To specify an affect, in language, is to have already depleted its virtual challenge to subjectivity by freezing intensity into “subject-object relations” (61). From this perspective, Sedgwick’s wordless current cannot have an emotional quality as such, and it remains a current of becoming only insofar as it remains unarticulated.

Yet Sedgwick suggests that language and affect need not be opposed to one another on the axis of subjectivity; instead, language might contribute to, rather than obstruct, the becoming of both affective and emotional intensities. The critical readings in Sedgwick’s late work are thus premised on the assumption that “the line between words and things or between linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena is endlessly changing, permeable, and entirely unsusceptible to any definitive articulation” (*Touching* 6). Sedgwick presents this claim as a counter to

“deconstructive” analyses of “nonverbal aspects of reality [as if they were] firmly under the aegis of the linguistic.” One might object that deconstructing the dichotomy of matter and signification need not inflate the purview of the latter over the former — it grasps precisely the permeable tension between the two that Sedgwick seeks. Yet Sedgwick is nonetheless concerned that certain forms of deconstruction prioritize the signifier’s nonreferentiality to “the world” and thereby obscure the relation that language has “to its own reference” (*Touching* 7). Casting this relation in affective terms — as “torsion” between reference and performativity — Sedgwick suggests that the reflexive twists of utterances to their contexts and toward other performatives provide one way to grasp the “textures and effects of particular bits of language” (*Touching* 6). Note that language here, like the dialogic self, becomes disarticulated into “bits” so that its phenomenological specificity and efficacy can be digested. Because she also values the affective motivations that underlie these utterances, Sedgwick rejects Freudian sublimation for studying affect’s relation to its means of conveyance. In Sedgwick’s polemical phrasing, “The nature or quality of the affect itself, seemingly, is [for Sigmund Freud] not of much more consequence than the color of the airplane used to speed a person to a destination” (*Touching* 18). The drawback of conceiving affect as autonomous from a homogenous libidinal drive is that it does not allow queer critics to expand the field of sexuality — to see culture, at large, as underwritten by sexual desire. However, it encourages us to account for how affects “saturat[e]” aesthetic objects beyond their sublimation into linguistic content and to evaluate the qualitative force of specific affects on their own terms (*Touching* 23).

The benefit of affect’s autonomy for Sedgwick is primarily ethical; it enables her to valorize the affective qualities of distinct intersubjective relations, and it

enables her to craft — and offer — these nonsublimated affects to others in writing. Take, for example, *Dialogue*'s configuration of typographic space. Though the text's graphic aspects are not linguistic, they contribute to the memoir's manifestation of the affective relationality underlying Sedgwick's and Van Wey's interaction. For this reason, I depart from Jason Edwards's metaphorical reading of the text's white space, because it subordinates Sedgwick's investment in demonstrating how nonsubjectified, yet qualified, affects can be expressed through texture. For Edwards, *Dialogue*'s white spaces evoke "the cancer working its way through Sedgwick's oeuvre"; concomitantly, he reads the eight blank pages that follow the memoir as representing Sedgwick's dissipation into death (131).

Read more literally, the blank pages foreground the materiality of the text itself. After all, the space of the page is the texture holding together Sedgwick's and Van Wey's words. We see each page's negative space anew as the haikus linguistically reference and graphically redraw the emptiness around them. In the absence of words, the page's materiality is highlighted as the condition of possibility for the preceding print and for its (re)emergence in the form of the reader's notes. There is no guarantee the reader will respond, but the space creates the possibility for readerly participation in a temporality akin to *Dialogue*'s nonsimultaneous postsession written dialogue. It is no coincidence that a recurring word in Sedgwick's lexicon is "interleaving." To "interleave" denotes the process of *Dialogue*'s production — the collation of two different perspectives, the literal binding together of and oscillating between Sedgwick's and Van Wey's words. This is why *Dialogue*'s cover image presents two white spaces separated by a gray line that bleeds into each space, reminiscent of a photocopied book with the spine in the center. It indicates the binding that holds these pages together, enabling a textual relation between Sedgwick and Van Wey.

*Dialogue*'s foregrounding of binding has significant implications for its ethics of intersubjectivity. As noted above, it becomes difficult to determine when one writer is paraphrasing the other or expressing her or his own feelings. What makes this indeterminacy so disorienting is that Sedgwick interleaves the notes in different fonts: her narrative sections are in center-justified Times; her haikus are in Arial; and Van Wey's notes are in a capitalized font set nonjustified and ragged-right. It should be clear who is speaking because of the obvious graphic distinction between their words. But it is not. *Dialogue* thus visually crystallizes the affect of "besides." Being beside, Sedgwick explains, is an experience of "noncontradiction" — hence *Dialogue*'s permeability of perspectival relation (*Touching* 8). Yet "besides" does not succumb to a "fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or pacific relations." To understand how *Dialogue* balances these two polarities — nondualistic relation and individuated conflict — we must first understand Sedgwick's permeable intersubjectivity.

### **The Pedagogy of Permeability**

Sedgwick's conceptions of affect and pedagogy intersect in their intersubjectivity, which is an ethical relation she inflects as specifically queer. Critics have long recognized the relationality of Sedgwick's definition of queerness. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark suggest that, for Sedgwick, queer denotes "a force, specifically a relational force" (7). Nancy K. Miller notes, "The surprises of kinship . . . lie at the core of Sedgwick's body of writing and shape her role as a cultural critic" ("Reviewing" 219). However, Berlant worries that Sedgwick's work emblemizes queer theory's problematic "orientation toward interiority" (74). In elaborating Sedgwick's queer permeability, then, I address the broader problem Berlant identifies when she asks, "Must the project of queerness start 'inside' of the subject and spread out from there?"

Berlant's interpretation of Sedgwick's "interiority" rests partly on a reading of *Dialogue* that perceives Sedgwick as surrounded by "a crowded world of loving family and friends in which she thrives partly by living in the fold of her internal counter-narrative." Not only does *Dialogue* depict the nonloving ambivalences that underlie Sedgwick's familial relations, it reveals the fraught nature of the crowd that surrounds Sedgwick and the difficulty of her producing any narrative within it, both normative and queer. At stake here is not merely contesting Berlant's reading of *Dialogue* but, rather, the ideology she perceives in Sedgwick's self-narratives and in "reparative reading" more generally. Berlant concludes that Sedgwick recuperates a "mode of self-reflective personhood" symptomatic of liberalism, capitalism, certain strains of psychoanalysis, and "cultural and national modernity" (73-74). The keystone of Berlant's critique is that Sedgwick lacks a conception of "impersonality" that would more adequately contest "the march of individualities toward liberal freedoms" (104).

Based on Buddhist conceptions of pedagogy, *Dialogue's* impersonal intersubjectivity is premised on a relation between self and other quite contrary to liberal individualism. Liberal individualism requires a clear demarcation of the cogito, enabling self-determination and the pursuit of one's own, typically economic, interests in competition with the social collective. The pedagogical values that Sedgwick draws out of various Buddhist traditions, by contrast, undermine these premises. First, Sedgwick values the Bodhisattva's "pedagogical imperative": subordinating her attainment of enlightenment to enabling others', thereby inverting the liberal value of individualistic self-fulfillment (*Touching* 160). Second, Sedgwick valorizes both the Mahayana Buddhist "refus[al] to differentiate at the level of identity between teacher and learner" and the Tibetan Buddhist "mobility of teacher-student

positioning”( *Touching* 162, 159). Though the latter “thrives on personality and intimate emotional relation,” Sedgwick notes that its pedagogical scene also “functions as a mysteriously powerful solvent of individual identity” ( *Touching* 160). What persists despite loosening the self, however, is the “dissolvent relationality of pedagogy itself,” which leads Sedgwick to conclude that “it is as though relation [in Tibetan Buddhism] could only be pedagogical — and for that reason, radically transindividual.” In short, Sedgwick’s pedagogy of Buddhism relies on the singular qualities of personality while also de-individuating self and other to reveal the intersubjective nature of relationality. The dispositions that derive from such relatedness are “tenderness and gratitude (not Oedipal-style envy, lack, violence)” (215). These affects are symptoms of perceiving the other relationally, but they are also ethical orientations that mitigate violent affects central to liberal individualism’s aggressive self-interest.<sup>10</sup>

*Dialogue* entwines these two modes of relationality in its representation of intersubjectivity as a network subtended by positive affect. The “tension” of this model, Van Wey notes, is that it is “intersubjective (e.g., teacher/student) but nondual” (215). Yet Sedgwick merges both relations in her “favorite pronoun: the dear / first

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<sup>10</sup> For a helpful introduction to these divergent traditions, see de Bary, William Theodore, ed. *The Buddhist Tradition: In India, China and Japan*. New York: Random House, 1972; Thurman, Robert A.F., ed. *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. The classic Tibetan text on the Bodhisattva is S’ a<sup>ntideva</sup>, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, trans. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997. For an introductory gloss on this text, see Dalai Lama, *For the Benefit of All Beings: A Commentary on The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group. Boston: Shambhala, 1994. Key Mahayana texts that inspire Sedgwick’s interpretation of Buddhist pedagogy include *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti: A Mahayana Scripture*, trans. Robert Thurman. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976; Chang, Garma C.C., ed. *A Treasury of Mahayana Suturas: Selections from the Maharantnakuta Sutra*. Trans. Buddhist Association of the United States. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983. Sedgwick’s argument about Tibetan Buddhist pedagogy is most heavily influenced by her reading of Rinpoche.

person plural,” which *Dialogue* announces in one of its most significant haikus:

“Promiscuous we! / Me, plus anybody else. / Permeable we!” (106). How does permeability replace promiscuity by the last line, and what significance do these terms have for Sedgwick’s queer relationality? Promiscuity implies the movement of an object among other objects, hence Sedgwick’s affirmation of additive relation (“Me, plus anybody else”). Permeability goes farther — the object itself, the “me,” is riven and open to movements within and through it. The redefinition of love in *Dialogue* is thus premised on an expansive network of relations that precede and exceed the self without a definable limit. This network comes into relief when Sedgwick contrasts the “narrow sexual triangle” of “adulterous romance” with “post-Proustian” love (113).

The former has

a circuit small enough  
that its allure was, you would  
eventually

get back all of the  
erotic energy you’d  
sent around it (so

that the point of this  
fantasy was *nothing is*  
*ever really lost*) —

in post-Proustian  
love, on the other hand, the

circuit could be big.

Imagine it big

enough that you could never

even *know* whether

the system was closed,

finally, or open. So

the point could only

lie in valuing

all the transformations and

transitivities

in all directions

*for* their difference, trans-i- ness,

and their skilled nature. (114)

This decentralized network of love represents a “vastly more spacious and inviting field of queerness” for Sedgwick because it explodes the Oedipal triangulation of desire (115). While imagining this “circuitry was a vital self-protective step” for her, this is only a defensive spur toward participating in queer relationality as an open system. Therefore Sedgwick’s queerness is discovered, and inheres, in the network of permeable relation itself, the transpersonal field so large it confounds epistemology modeled on the scale of a single consciousness.

*Dialogue*’s queer network undermines the self’s narcissistic desire for infinite



reciprocity. The self cannot calculate a return on its investment, nor can it “know,” finally, whether the system is open or closed; yet this knowledge is irrelevant to “valuing all the transformations,” the dynamic movements within and among subjects and beyond them. (This is why Sedgwick coins the word trans-i-ness, lowercasing the “I” and placing it within a prefix and suffix of unspecified becoming.) “Falling in love” in this network is therefore not “sexual” but rather an experience of

suddenly, globally, “knowing” that another person represents your only access to some vitally

transmissible truth

or radiantly heightened

mode of perception,

and that if you lose the thread of this intimacy, both your soul and your whole world might subsist forever in some desert-like state of ontological impoverishment.(168)

Here the other is a window that clears a line of sight to the ontological fiber of impersonal relationality. The “impoverishment” of nonrelation signals Sedgwick’s displacement of reciprocity within the post-Proustian network of love. While the circuit is not symmetrical or calculable, it requires mutual participation. Hence Sedgwick’s personal “image of hell” is glimpsed when she nearly abandons her cat, Harpo, in a graveyard (96 – 98). Likewise, one of her most painful experiences of breast cancer occurs when she is “ignored for a couple of hours in the hospital . . . and couldn’t get the attention of the horrid nurses” despite weeping (88). These experiences haunt Sedgwick as representations of abandonment in which one has abdicated, or been severed from, a nourishing relation with the other. Although Sedgwick admits it is “easier for me to feel [abandonment] than ‘I am afraid,’ ” her

dread at images of desertion suggests that abandonment condenses the existential fear she has of “los[ing] the thread” of relational intimacy.

The counter to abandonment, in *Dialogue*’s lexicon, is “holding.” As Van Wey explains, Sedgwick experiences a “warm and quiet environment as part of therapeutic transference instead of the anger, suspicion, mortifying self-loss she had imagined” (83). Sedgwick specifies this environment by comparing therapy to a

— Bath into which I  
slowly lower my great bulk,  
to be supported

in some medium less human than “holding” (in Winnicott’s famous image of the therapeutic relation) would suggest.

That is, there’s something about being impersonally held; (66 – 67)

Here Sedgwick’s “great bulk” — a fraught metaphor because of the Kosofsky family’s denigration of her weight — is “supported.” But Van Wey does not hold her; rather, it is the impersonal relation between them that enables Sedgwick to access “support like buoyancy in water — there, unfailing, not caring” (139). Holding is the correlative affect of Sedgwick’s permeable and impersonal network of relation. To be sure, the passivity of holding is fraught with potential violence. One might be dropped and abandoned. Yet *Dialogue* affirms holding as a way to produce a mode of recognition wherein the self is successfully held in the other, embracing the self as it is but not so tightly that it arrests becoming otherwise. Indeed, Sedgwick takes pleasure in figures from Buddhism that produce “the recognition of personally specific things” in another while also “deindividuat[ing]” them (215).

Held in this way, the self can experiment with inhabiting the other’s reparative perspectives. With Van Wey, Sedgwick experiences this “circuit of reciprocity

between these holding relations: your ability to hold me inside you, and mine to hold you inside me” as “nourish[ing]” (164 – 65). Sedgwick is pleasantly unsettled, for instance, on hearing that she “exist[s] on weekends” for Van Wey when he admits to thinking about her (38). This “ontological / net” comforts Sedgwick because she finds relieving the prospect of living on in others after death. But in *Dialogue*’s present, intersubjective holding enables Sedgwick to internalize a voice that mitigates the anxiety she feels about dying. *Dialogue*’s final lines intone both valences when Van Wey observes that Sedgwick has “come to be able to hear a voice like my voice inside herself when it is quiet that she can trust and have confidence in. I can imagine the voice telling her she can stop” (220). Note the mise-en- abyme layered within this line: Sedgwick has chosen this moment from Van Wey’s notes to conclude the memoir, giving him the last word; yet these words perform his imagining her imagining a voice “like” his, but not his. And this voice says what Sedgwick has yearned to hear since childhood — that she can die (16). That Sedgwick reads Van Wey’s words in the abbreviated version of this material presented in her Kessler lecture evidences her desire to performatively inhabit a compassionate voice like Van Wey’s, even if only for a moment.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than represent Sedgwick’s inhabitation of Van Wey’s position within a unidirectional model of transference, *Dialogue* highlights the extent to which the therapist shares in the patient’s experience. By doing so, the memoir underscores the potential for holding to produce transformation for both participants. Thus Van Wey echoes Sedgwick’s own yearning to be held by him. He admits that “being really seen by you is something that matters to me. Not that I just get narcissistically recirculated back to myself through your eyes, which happens all the time — but that I’m changed to myself in some way as I see that you see me” (163). While *Dialogue* depicts the

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<sup>11</sup> See Sedgwick, “A Dialogue on Love.”

intractability of projection — particularly in Sedgwick’s initial disparagement of Van Wey’s intellect — the memoir affirms overcoming these dynamics in favor of mutual holding, in which both subjects become recognized and, through recognition, “transfigure[d]” (38). Of course, therapy provides such durable relations because it is premised on the therapist’s financial and medical commitment to the patient. In nontherapeutic exchanges, the need for durability is no less present, though it is far less guaranteed. Holding is thus a relation that must be chosen, cultivated, and sustained — in short, practiced as an ethic. As I show, Sedgwick stresses the stratified conditions under which queer communities enact such commitments, but she insists that a homophobic environment only amplifies the need for queer modes of collective holding.

*Dialogue* extends impersonal holding to its readers, soliciting us to hold Sedgwick and Van Wey. *Dialogue* frames the stakes for our response when Sedgwick requests Van Wey’s session notes. The risk, Van Wey paraphrases, is that her reading will be “sadistic” and consequently “spoil me as a source of nurturance for her” (200). We can see the roots of Sedgwick’s reparative reading here. But far from sponsoring “better” reading, as Berlant puts it, reparative reading simply offers a different motive for reading — specifically, focalizing the other (74). Indeed, Sedgwick finds Van Wey’s notes reassuring because they attempt to inhabit her point of view, reparatively reading her.

Sedgwick enacts a similar focalization when, in the course of writing *Dialogue*, she edits the writings of Gary Fisher, her former student who dies of AIDS. Sedgwick literally dreams “as” Fisher, nightly inhabiting “world[s] clothed in the restless, elastic skin of his beautiful idiom” (“Afterword” 291).<sup>12</sup> We should take pause at Sedgwick’s metaphor here, inasmuch as it risks effacing Fisher’s racial

<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick’s use of idiom is informed by Christopher Bollas.

difference. Without disavowing this problematic intonation, I wish to point out that it is characteristic of a premise valorized throughout Sedgwick's work — namely, that the “paths of allo-identification are likely to be strange and recalcitrant” (*Epistemology* 59). Indeed, *Dialogue* notes Sedgwick's confusion around her nourishing identifications with gay men, as well as her ambivalence about being a white woman “patronizing” Fisher's racially and sexually charged writing (179). Acknowledging she might be “the wrong person to be promoting this [Fisher's] material,” Sedgwick nonetheless feels an “investment in making that work, or in demonstrating the interest of that border-crossing position” (179). This is perhaps why Sedgwick compares reading Fisher to falling asleep while reading and dreaming one's own “mental semantics into the sentence structure of the author” (“Afterword” 291). Given up in such an experience is the illusion that our idioms are ever truly extricable from those that inhabit us. Sedgwick thus affirms the unruly circuits of identification as a potential source for relationality, and possibly solidarity, across social boundaries.

*Dialogue* consequently embraces difference as productive for holding relations. For example, Van Wey's gender initially poses a problem for Sedgwick. She describes him as looking like someone “for whom, maybe — unlike me or most anyone I love — his entitlement to exist, the OK-ness of being who and as he is, has never seemed very seriously questionable” (9 – 10). At stake in Sedgwick's desire for a feminist, nonhomophobic therapist is not a “laundry list or a litmus test” of personal preference (9). Rather, these are political values that underwrite the possibility of their having an ethical encounter in which Sedgwick can learn from Van Wey. Male privilege, buttressed by the affect of “entitlement,” presents an obstacle to their intersubjective relation insofar as it forestalls the focalization required for holding. Sedgwick wonders, “How could someone like that have learned to think or feel?”

(10).

However, Van Wey's sexual difference ultimately presents an "opportunity" for focalization (202). First presuming he was "like a stereotype [sic] male with easily accessible and quickly on-and-off sexual feelings," Sedgwick later focalizes Van Wey, wondering if he identifies with her confusions around sexuality (195). Precisely because social difference never leaves *Dialogue*'s exchange, the memoir affirms permeable identification as enabling an ethical insight similar to one Sedgwick values in Mahayana pedagogy — namely, that the other is "not other than oneself" (*Touching* 168, 179). Here Sedgwick echoes Francisco Varela, who also draws from Buddhism and psychoanalysis for an ethical pedagogy. Central to the analytic scene, Varela underscores, is "learning to see ourselves and others as inescapably transitory and fragmented" (65). Sedgwick stresses, though, that one cannot eternally inhabit this space of fragmentation. Doing so sacrifices the nonidentical reintegration necessary for one to offer a pedagogical relation to others. This is why *Dialogue* carves out a space for subjective agency within permeable intersubjectivity.

### **The Middle Ranges of Agency in Flesh and Fantasy**

Insofar as *Dialogue* insists on the self as permeable, it would seem to sacrifice a recognizable conception of agency. Of course, agency has been a long-standing problem for queer theory. As Butler summarizes, "Some would say that to be a split subject . . . is precisely not to have the grounds for agency" (*Giving* 64). Butler's solution, however, ultimately troubles Sedgwick. Butler famously claims that "the agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination. Any effort to oppose that subordination will necessarily presuppose and reinvoke it" (*Psychic* 12). For Sedgwick, this formulation hews too closely to a constricting understanding of Foucault's repressive hypothesis. If one cannot study and critique repression without

contributing to it, Sedgwick fears that critique becomes dualistic — compressed into the polar limits of acceptance or refusal. While Sedgwick does not yearn for a utopian outside to power, she affirms “ways of understanding human desire that might be quite to the side of prohibition and repression” (*Touching* 10). Indeed, a significant realization for Sedgwick in *Dialogue* is that “agency may not lie in extremes of grandiosity or abjection” (203). This realization underwrites Sedgwick’s subsequent affirmation of the “middle ranges of agency,” which perceive power as a “form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win-win negotiations), the exchange of affect, and other small differentials” (“Melanie” 631-32). These embodied exchanges allow for “effectual creativity and change” that fall between the extremes of repression or liberation (*Touching* 13). More significantly, Sedgwick’s redefinition of agency challenges the location of queer agency in the performative subversion of norms and places it instead in affective embodiment.

*Dialogue* crystallizes the negotiation of embodiment as a mode of agency when a foot pain leads Sedgwick to fear that her cancer has returned. The terror evacuates Sedgwick’s “interiority,” making her feel that her “whole materiality has flattened” (92). As a solution, Van Wey suggests that they push against one another: “So up rise I, in lieu of answer; and up rises Shannon. And planting our feet and ourselves about a yard apart, we place hand against hand, his and mine, and push with our little might to force each other a step or two backward” (93). Afterward, Sedgwick feels “embodied in quite / a new way; dimensional, / powerful. / Not scared” (94). At stake in this scene of reciprocal touching are two polarities of agency. Their hands evidence Sedgwick’s point that the sensation of touching undermines any “dualistic understanding of agency and passivity” (*Touching* 14). Both touch and are touched, reciprocally. Yet their touching nonetheless creates a site of agency for Sedgwick.

That agency does not result from an exercise of conscious self-determination. On the contrary, it emerges from an experience that prioritizes affective embodiment over conscious thought. As Sedgwick and Adam Frank insist, following Silvan Tomkins, “inefficiency” exists among cognition, affect, and the drives (“Shame” 14). This “productive opacity” is the locus of “learning, development, continuity, differentiation” as well as “freedom” (13-14).

Since Sedgwick has “no idea what to expect” from this embodied encounter, subjective change emerges for her (93). She cannot intellectualize, and thereby tame, the “dangerous threshold” of embodied relation that she initially perceives as “out of bounds.” Afterward, Sedgwick is “disquieted at this tectonic shift in what I’ve presumed were the fixed zones of permission and prohibition” (94). This shift underlies *Dialogue*’s affirmation of opacity as a condition of subjective possibility. But more specifically, it demonstrates that some prohibitions are, in fact, only presumptions that can be turned into opportunities for relation. After all, Van Wey has not “articulated . . . a rule that sex talk is inevitable. Any more than he’s told me — what? that we can’t touch” (43). What emerges in their affective encounter is a surprise, a loosening of Sedgwick’s projective assumptions; she discovers that what she thought was fixed is open, what appeared to be a prohibition was only a habit that can be worked around.

To articulate the ethical significance of these affective negotiations, Sedgwick turns to Klein to suggest that these small differentials point toward reparative modes of agency. But in doing so, does she sacrifice the social constitution of power that queer theory values for its political critique? After all, Butler incisively critiques Klein for ignoring the social nature of psychic violence. Diverging from Klein’s conception of an “innate desire to triumph,” Butler argues that “certain forms of love entail the



loss of the object” because they “fail to qualify as objects of love” (*Psychic* 26-27). These objects are “marked for ‘death’ ” by social forces antagonistic to their persistence (*Psychic* 27). Because Butler insists on the inexorability of prohibition as the structuring force of subjectivity and agency, her performative politics are based on the immanent contestation of the norms that mark certain groups for death, exclusion, or abjection. This is one reason that Butler finds the conjunction of Freud with Foucault so productive, because Freud enables her to claim that internalizing prohibition is constitutive of psychic life. Yet Sedgwick wishes to turn from precisely this premise of psychoanalysis, and she looks to Klein to do so. After all, repression and the Oedipal complex are secondary mechanisms in Klein, subordinate to the primary defenses of splitting, introjection, and projection. Thus a key factor in Sedgwick’s turn to Klein lies in her desire to elaborate non-Oedipal accounts of psychic life and agency that circumvent the foundational role of prohibition.

Without minimizing this motivating force, I wish to highlight Sedgwick’s somewhat inconsistent reading of Klein to demonstrate the ethical insights into queer politics she derives from Klein.<sup>13</sup> My point is not that Sedgwick is “wrong” in her interpretation of Klein but that she has a specifically ethical investment in her reading. That investment is most clear in Sedgwick’s preference for Klein’s description of the psyche in terms of positions. “Positions” signal for Sedgwick an alternative to structural, developmental, and essentialist models of psychology. Sedgwick equates positions with “critical practices” insofar as both offer “changing and heterogeneous relational stances” (*Touching* 128). At some moments, Sedgwick acknowledges Klein’s description of the positions as progressively developmental, yet she tends to de-emphasize this interpretation in favor of a less “fixed” model (“Melanie” 638, Sedgwick, Barber, and Clark 247). However, as Meira Likierman notes, it is not at all

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<sup>13</sup> For a reading of Klein’s positions that supports Sedgwick’s, see Britzman.

clear that Klein saw the depressive position as her followers do — namely, as a “more permanent feature of adult mental life” that we reinhabit (116). More fundamentally, it is not clear that Klein saw the position as one we can choose to inhabit. Yet Sedgwick clearly does. At stake in doing so is Sedgwick’s desire to access affective motives for queer critique that attenuate the collective anxiety that instigates paranoid defenses.

In Sedgwick’s view, the “intense dread” that structured queer communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s “imprint[ed] a paranoid structuration onto the theory and activism of that period” (“Melanie” 639). This is unsurprising, she notes, because of the collective repression enacted by a homophobic nation. Precisely because paranoid modes of being were “enforced,” Sedgwick perceives them as “impoverishing, and humiliating,” even if paranoia was constructive for queer activism. Though Klein does not link paranoia to a specific historical context, she describes it as a reaction, a primary defense against the ego’s fundamental endogenous anxiety, and she counterposes the paranoid/schizoid position to the anxiety-mitigating, reparative strategies of the depressive position. By aligning long-term political commitments with the “mature ethical dimension of the depressive position,” then, Sedgwick aims to carve out a space for queer activism that does not prioritize the impoverishing paranoid/schizoid defenses (“Melanie” 638). These defenses obstruct intersubjectivity because their fantasies of extreme abjection and omnipotence disable, in advance, a reparative focalization of the other.

Though Sedgwick’s theory might suggest that she wholly rejects the paranoid/schizoid position for queer sexual politics, *Dialogue* draws on its space of fantasy for intersubjective negotiations of social power by displaying Sedgwick’s masturbatory fantasies of sexual violence. *Dialogue* affirms the performative exhibition of sexual fantasy as a way to negotiate social power because fantasy is productively, if

painfully, pitched between intrapsychic and external reality. In this respect, *Dialogue* is inspired by Klein's view of the psyche as "populated, not with ideas, representations, knowledges, urges, and repressions, but with things, things with physical properties, including people and hacked-off bits of people" ("Melanie" 629). By insisting on the literality of psychic objects (and again, their bits), Sedgwick conceives fantasy as an active negotiation of reality. We see the implications for this concept in *Dialogue* when Sedgwick grapples with the sadomasochism of her masturbation fantasies. Their dynamics include, among other elements, an institutional setting with a "hierarchy," a spectator to the scene of punishment, and "some speech or action of coerced consent from the person being punished" (172). Sedgwick tends to identify with the latter figure, "at that fold of wanting to withhold consent but being forced to perform it." While she experiences "Warm. Golden. / Intoxicating" affects during masturbation, the fantasies that accompany it are suffused with "Violence and pain. / Humiliation. Torture. / Rape, systematic" (45 – 46). Sedgwick is quick to insist that these "fantasies stay in their place. . . . They don't connect with real life" (47). Yet they become displaced, and disappear as sources of nourishment, when Sedgwick undergoes breast cancer treatment. The treatment undermines the otherwise stable line between fantasy and reality. These "two, utterly separate worlds" touch when a nurse gets irritated at Sedgwick while attempting to draw her blood (48). With the muted cries of another patient in the distance, Sedgwick, as she lies on the bed in pain, can "feel every pulse of her [the nurse's] impatience" (49).

This bleeding of fantasy into reality instigates Sedgwick's desire to share her fantasies of abjection with Van Wey, and as a result of articulating them, she experiences a return of sexual desire. One could read her experience as a classic

example of the repressive hypothesis — a fantasized liberation from repression purchased through confession. After all, relating the narratives to Van Wey produces, in his words, “the sense of an enjoying subject with agency . . . here at the place of talking about the experience, the S/M fantasies, not within the fantasies” (189). Yet *Dialogue* forestalls the repressive reading by making explicit that the return of Sedgwick’s genitally based sexuality is predicated on the “place of talking,” the intersubjective scene of narration. By doing so, *Dialogue* reveals a key discursive technology by which sexual subjectivity is consolidated. Further, Sedgwick solicits her readers as participatory witnesses, thereby undermining our identification as masochists or voyeurs, the two positions that Leigh Gilmore suggests “autobiography about trauma forces the reader to assume” (22). Rather than being “superior, privileged eavesdroppers,” we are invited to — as Sedgwick once wrote of Henry James — partake in the “exhibitionistic enjoyment and performance of a sexuality organized around shame . . . [as] an audience desired” (*Touching* 54). That Sedgwick desires an audience, that the telling of her fantasies performs a sexuality, is key to *Dialogue*’s creation of a participatory space for the affective negotiation of sexual agency outside the polarities of abjection and omnipotence.

The performative sharing of fantasy results in the return of “sensual reality and sense of possibility . . . of the reality of my own [Sedgwick’s] body” (175). This return has feminist significance, insofar as Sedgwick is no longer defined as an “object for others to satisfy their touch needs, not mine” (206). *Dialogue* thus suggests that fantasies of masturbation can provide desperately needed nourishment for an objectified self, as they do in Sedgwick’s childhood, making her feel “safe — almost . . . held” (76). *Dialogue* also enacts a mode of queer performativity by exhibiting fantasies otherwise experienced as shameful; queer performativity is, after

all, a “strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect of shame” (*Touching* 61). Shame, for Sedgwick, is underwritten by the desire to “reconstitute the interpersonal bridge” that is frustrated when we fail to elicit another’s positive interest (36). *Dialogue*’s telling of Sedgwick’s fantasies is thus motivated by her desire to performatively reconstitute this bridge and to quell her humiliation without denying the experience of shame. Sedgwick’s exhibitionism is therefore not reductively narcissistic; rather, it exemplifies the ethic that Michael Warner defines as the basis for queer “sociability,” specifically the “acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself” (*Trouble* 35).

Sedgwick’s turn to therapy for this relationality is part of a broader queer project that seeks ethical insight within the psychoanalytic encounter. Despite their divergences elsewhere, Sedgwick’s depiction of fantasy converges with Leo Bersani’s recent suggestion that “perhaps the therapeutic secret of psychoanalysis lies in its willingness to entertain any possibility of behavior or thought as only possibility” (Bersani and Phillips 28). The virtuality of psychoanalytic narration illuminates why Sedgwick does not feel herself to be uttering “Gothic projectiles / into the long void” but instead “giddily welcoming / speculation of // what words may arise / and at what instant they may, / bubbling, between us” (184). Loosened from constraint, “suspended in the real,” Sedgwick’s discussion of her fantasies with Van Wey feels like an “experiment” that produces a relieving sense of being a “very routine / patient” (Bersani and Phillips 29, *Dialogue* 185). Their therapeutic relation engenders an experimental discourse that allows Sedgwick’s subjectivity to be, at once, pleasurably unsettled, comfortingly impersonal, and utterly ordinary. Both Sedgwick and Bersani insist that the relational modalities enabled by therapeutic encounters should not be “sequestered” from the world (Bersani and Phillips 30). For precisely this reason,

Sedgwick claims that the ethical value of sadomasochistic performativity is that it is not disjoined from the social. Indeed, Sedgwick critiques the “hygienic dislinkages” that seek to redeem S/M as pure fantasy, and she resists affirmations of its negotiation of “power, consent, and safety” as simply an alternative to mainstream sexual cultures (“Afterword” 282). Rather, Sedgwick values the “richness of experimental and experiential meaning in these scenes,” which is amplified if one concludes they are neither “simply continuous with, nor simply dislinked from the relations and histories that surround and embed them” (“Afterword” 282-83). Without these assumptions, one can see S/M dramatizing power dynamics and creating a space for the performative working through of those relations outside the institutional contexts of therapy. At stake in this analogy is not the sanitization of sex and fantasy as therapy. Rather, Sedgwick sexualizes therapy, framing it as an equally “potent, body-implicating, and time-bending representational [project]” as S/M (“Afterword” 283). These embodied representational spaces enact modes of agency that produce subjective change through the intersubjective negotiation of affect. To understand the ethical principle that guides the emergence and defines the values of these changes for queer communities, I turn to *Dialogue*’s location of intersubjective possibility within the transitional space of dying.

### **Queer Possibilities in Mortality**

*Dialogue* is steeped in a confrontation with mortality. By its close, Fisher has died of AIDS, Sedgwick’s doctor has an AIDS-related infection, her brother-in-law has metastatic melanoma, her mother has melanoma, Van Wey requires cardiac catheterization, and Sedgwick’s cancer has metastasized to her spine. As Sedgwick suggests, these “brutal foreshortening[s]” of life define the “deroutinized” temporality of queer relationality — lovers and friends die without “‘normal’ generational

narrative[s]” to organize their collective identification (Touching 148). The pressure of cross-generational mortality results in an ethical relationality premised on the present. “Whatever else we know,” Sedgwick states, “we know there isn’t time to bullshit. . . . It is one another immediately, one another as the present fullness of a becoming whose arc may extend no further, whom we each must learn best to apprehend, fulfill, and bear company” (149). In addition to Sedgwick’s Buddhism here, we can sense the skepticism about claims to the future that is central to queer theory’s post-AIDS structure of feeling.<sup>14</sup>

Where mainstream LGBT movements have sought to supplant the cultural equivalence of queerness with death, some see queerness’s negativity as its most critical force. Edelman, for example, argues that queers might undermine the ideological coherence of “reproductive futurism” and the social order it buttresses by embracing their figuration as harbingers of the death drive. In his framework, nearly all social appeals based on positive affect, particularly compassion, underwrite phantasmic interpellations of subjects into narcissistic identifications with conservative images of the future that perpetuate sameness. Sedgwick challenges the view that fantasy provides “narcissistic solace” that secures the ego’s “fix[ation] to fixity” (33). But she also suggests that the desire for future happiness need not be a “defense against the ego’s certain end”; it can enable the ego’s reconciliation with finitude, and its relational cultivation can produce the imagination of social possibilities foreclosed by the paranoid fear of contingency (34).

As *Dialogue* concludes, Sedgwick becomes interested in Buddhist thought that conceives death as an “ethical” skill (210). She values the idea that “some passage of discontinuity like death can be the occasion of enlightenment, if you do it right, i.e., if

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<sup>14</sup> A significant exception is José Esteban Muñoz, who persuasively defines futurity as constitutive of queerness.

you can be in a place to recognize a love that is you and is also toward you” (215).

While Sedgwick does not define the content of this enlightenment, she embraces Buddhist concepts for traversing discontinuity: “nondualism, spaciousness, an intimate and nonlinear relation to mortality, an alert pedagogical relationality free of projection, an emptying of the concept of the self, and at the same time a primary emphasis on happiness” (Sedgwick, Barber, and Clark, 259).<sup>15</sup> As the phrase at the same time suggests, Sedgwick wishes to balance a permeable relation to nonbeing with the subjective experience of felicity. The seemingly innocuous first sentence of *Dialogue* foregrounds both dispositions: “Apparently it’s as a patient that I want to emerge” (1). In a progressive temporality, one wants to stop being a patient as soon as possible. Here that desire is reversed; the locus of possibility lies in becoming a patient. “Patient” signals, on the one hand, Van Wey’s inflexibility. Despite the profession’s shift to “client,” he uses “patient” because “that’s the way they taught us, back in graduate school — seems like too much trouble to change.” Rather than focus on Van Wey’s intransigence, Sedgwick affirms “patient” as a disposition they share — an openness to the future without grasping at what is to come. This is why Sedgwick redefines patient as a

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<sup>15</sup> The greatest influence on Sedgwick’s conception of Buddhist happiness is the American Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman, particularly his introduction to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. Robert A.F. Thurman. New York: Bantam Books, 1994, which Sedgwick quotes at length in *Dialogue* (210). For a fuller account of the interdependence between Buddhism and positive affect, see Thurman, Robert. *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998; and *Infinite Life: Awakening to Bliss Within*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2004. Underlying Sedgwick’s emphasis on the solicitous discourse of happiness is her dissatisfaction with Stephen Batchelor’s contemptuous and judgmental rhetoric in *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997. While Sedgwick’s approach to Buddhist concepts is indebted to both Thurman’s and Batchelor’s agnosticism, which does not demand decisive beliefs regarding Buddhist dogma, Sedgwick’s aesthetics of Buddhism clearly contrasts Batchelor’s stricter “disdain for consolation.” See *Touching Feeling* 178-79.



word that makes no claim  
to anything but — wanting  
to be happier

and wanting, it's true, someone else to shoulder a lot of agency in the matter of  
my happiness. (1)

Patience expresses Sedgwick's desire for some future with happiness and for help in accessing it while she "learn[s] to unbecome a self" (*Touching* 179). The modesty of Sedgwick's "claim" lies in its contingency, evidenced in the statement: "I'm good, if I am, because I'm lucky enough to be happy (if I am)" (216). Sedgwick's conditional "if" captures the noncausal relatedness of each variable in this equation, in which happiness contributes to, rather than provides evidence of, one's goodness.

Sedgwick's contingent happiness forestalls the inverse proposition: "'I am lucky and happy because I am good.'" <sup>16</sup> *Dialogue*'s insistence on the immanent ethical value of positive affect anticipates Michael D. Snediker's theory of "queer optimism," which extricates positive affects from promissory and utopian temporalities allergic to contingency (2). Following Snediker's claim that positive affects are not given but "theoretically mobilizable," we might read *Dialogue* as redefining the ethical repertoire of happiness — happiness becomes a disposition realized through the reparative care of the other that enables the self to become "ungreedy, unattached, unrageful, unignorant" (Snediker 30, *Dialogue* 216).

Sedgwick claims that this relationality can incite the imagination of ethical and political change. Through reparative relations, one realizes that "the future may be

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<sup>16</sup> Insofar as Sedgwick insists on the fortuitous nature of happiness, she contributes to recovering the contingency at the etymological root of the term. Doing so, Sara Ahmed argues, is a queer project when it challenges the conflation of happiness, social virtue, and heteronormativity. For her incisive analysis of how heteronormativity coercively deploys the speech acts of happiness, see Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, especially 88-120.

different from the present . . . [and] that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (*Touching* 146)<sup>17</sup> This is why Sedgwick claims that “activist politics, even more than pedagogy,” straddles the threshold between the paranoid/schizoid and depressive positions (“Teaching Depression”). While she admits that her activism drew much energy from the former position, Sedgwick claims the latter is more capable of conceptualizing change. The depressive position provides resources to admit, “We, like those others, are subject to the imperious dynamics of resentment,” and then ask, “now how can the dynamics themselves become different?” Sedgwick’s ethics thus seeks to reimagine intersubjectivity as such, limiting projective blame and amplifying mutual preservation to engender the imagination of collective change. Sedgwick cautions that any point within the depressive position the psyche might succumb to thought-crushing depression, anticipatory projection, or “manic escapism” (“Melanie” 637). But she argues that the inaugural realization of the position also provides the resources for working through these affects — namely, a “guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care” (*Touching* 137). While Sedgwick’s ethic might inspire activism, it cannot be a model of politics as such — she does not specify the material conditions necessary for producing collective nourishment. Yet political commitment requires a durable investment in preserving a collective into the future and the ability to articulate the prospect of a future different from the past. In a world where queerness — rather than a sadistic culture of homophobia and sexism — is framed as an illness, Sedgwick’s ethics aims to repair the psychic violence enacted by heteronormative cultures. This violence prevents the imagination of queer change by eroding value in oneself and one’s

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<sup>17</sup> For a less sanguine reading of reparation, see Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*. For a reclamation of Klein’s negativity, see Jacqueline Rose, 137 – 90.

relations. By defining nourishment as the condition for imagining collective possibility, Sedgwick rewrites queerness as a project of cultivating intersubjective care.

Despite the hope in Sedgwick's ethics, I would qualify José Esteban Muñoz's correlation of reparation with utopianism (11-12). Rather than affirm a utopian temporality, Sedgwick locates reparative possibility in the eroding present of dying. The value of this transitional space, for Sedgwick, is that it offers a pedagogy that can contribute to queer activism. Sedgwick characterizes the space between life and death in terms of the Buddhist bardo, wherein one confronts mortality and recognizes the impermanence of life.<sup>18</sup> When asked whether a politics lies in the bardo, Sedgwick admits that it "doesn't, ideally, seem to involve mobilizing rage or grievance," affects conventionally congenial to activism (Sedgwick, Barber, and Clark 256).<sup>19</sup> Yet Sedgwick notes that this liminal state "potentiated AIDS activism" and remains a source of "potential for activism as well as reflection around other slow-acting diseases." The bardo's potential is that communities will recognize their impermanence as a common condition. This is why *Dialogue*'s final entry notes that another of Sedgwick's friends has breast cancer. Sedgwick is not alone in her confrontation with mortality, and the reparative work that *Dialogue* models will have to go on without Sedgwick or Van Wey. Though it affirms the contingency of

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<sup>18</sup> Sedgwick's understanding of the bardo is based primarily in her reading of Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Rinpoche explains that bardo "simply means 'transition' or a gap between the completion of one situation and the onset of another" (106). Sedgwick tends to employ the bardo in this expansive sense of being in-between, laying particular emphasis on the insights that can arise in this transitional space. See Rinpoche 106 – 114 for a brief gloss of the term and its history. In addition to Rinpoche's exegesis of the different bardo states described in the Bardo Thödol, or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, see Lama Lodü, *Bardo Teachings: The Way of Death and Rebirth*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1982. For an insightful synthesis of Sedgwick's interpretation of the bardo with queer theories of lesbian identity, see Melissa Solomon.

<sup>19</sup> Here Sedgwick suggests that we define "the bardo of dying" broadly "as the space between diagnosis and physical death."

relations, *Dialogue* insists on the need for durable reparative care extending into the future, beyond the bounds of any one particular life.

*Dialogue* crystallizes this affirmation in its concluding image, when Sedgwick trips on the “shrubby border” between the parking lots of Van Wey’s office and a gas station (218). As she walks back toward his office, Sedgwick glimpses Van Wey walking ahead of her. She writes, “I see him gather up from the pavement the clumps of pine mulch I kicked down as I was teetering on the brink. Then bobbling up gently, he pats it back into place, his hands briefly smoothing it in with the other mulch” (219). For Sedgwick, this scene is a “time-lapse graphic.” It enables “Shannon [to] occupy the place where I was, encountering my ghost without recognition, unmaking my mistake — me, turning back, seeing it.” Van Wey unknowingly inhabits Sedgwick’s position, offering, in her friend’s words, “an immediate, involuntary substitution” (220).

Undoubtedly, this narrative condenses *Dialogue*’s key tropes — contiguous spatiality, permeable inhabitation, corporeal negotiation, and impersonal care; indeed, Sedgwick “love[s] that his care for me was not care for me” (219). In this sense, the image evidences how “reparative work” persists when we are gone, performed by others related to us only in the queerest sense, others who may never realize who inhabits them or for whom they substitute. Sedgwick, whenever she feels “frustration or fear,” turns “inward toward” this “object of reflection” and “smile[s].” In its content, and as an experience held inside her, this image provides a tactical position for Sedgwick to experience nourishment, relationality, and the possibility for change even in moments of (un)becoming.

As I have argued throughout, *Dialogue* similarly offers these affective relations to its readers. Though it is a dialogue, the memoir insists that relations, inherently

social, always fan out beyond the two. Holding, nourishing, loving, touching; reparation, happiness, possibility — these terms constellate a series of relations key to the form and expressive content of *Dialogue*. But more fundamentally, they chart an ethical itinerary in permeable intersubjectivity, one that might teach us ways to realize life's possibilities for one another in the face of our ever-present endings.

## Chapter 5:

### Love in the Second Person:

#### Jeanette Winterson's Visceral Fiction and the Ethics of Queer Sentimentality

The title for Jeanette Winterson's most famous novel, *Written on the Body* (1992), is drawn from a moment when the narrator describes his or her lover's capacity to read the body. The narrator states,

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book. 89

This statement implicitly comments on the novel's experimental form--namely, that the narrator is never named, gendered, sexed, raced, or detailed in any other embodied specificity. He or she does not "tell the whole story," and consequently, readers have been left to speculate, interpellate, or otherwise ferret out the "true" signs of the body. But the body is revealed to be made of signs, accumulations of cultural and historical inscription encoded on a palimpsestic text. Thus, critics read *Written on the Body* as a fundamentally postmodern, queer fiction. Winterson suggests that gender and sexuality are written *on* the body from the outside, rather than existing as an essence on the inside of the self.

Yet there is another dimension at play in *Written on the Body*, which is indicated by this passage's definition of "reading" as an erotic, tactile relation to an embodied other. Note that Louise's reading overcomes the narrator's attempt to keep

his or her body "rolled up away." Translation into the other's language does not indicate a violation of ethical relations, as it so often does in the narratives of post-structural ethics. Becoming translated by the other here indicates an ecstatic love relation, one based in an embodiment that cannot be-- and must not be-- transcended. Even if the narrator is unnamed and un-gendered to us, his or her body has become productively *readable* to another, quite against his or her own desires. The question sparked by this becoming-readable, in the rest of the narrative, is whether or not the narrator can embrace this relational, tactile, and uncontrollable openness to other, or whether he or she will strive to repress it. This is the fundamental ethical choice in Winterson's fiction, and it is also the primary narrative trajectory of her work: the move from a fearful, self-enclosed refusal to "unfold" toward an ecstatic, visceral relation with the other.<sup>1</sup>

To articulate this ethical relation, Winterson avowedly embraces the discourse of "love." However, critics have been deeply skeptical about the political consequences to Winterson's lover's discourse. Nearly all critics acknowledge the specifically queer and feminist implications of Winterson rewriting romance narratives. For example, Laura Doan, Lisa Moore, Madelyn Detloff, David Nel, and Sonya Andermahr, among others, each praise Winterson's fiction for performing a postmodern subversion of heteronormative and patriarchal Romance traditions.<sup>2</sup> Yet these critics, like many others, also fear that Winterson's lover's discourse ultimately implies an anti-political, even solipsistic, retreat from social strife. Indeed, Elaine

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<sup>1</sup> For approaches to Winterson's ethics that diverge from mine, see Chloë Taylor Merleau and Andrew Gibson.

<sup>2</sup> On Winterson's reclamation of romance as an ethics, see especially Jean-Michel Ganteau and Andrea Harris. For the sharpest critique of Winterson's lover's discourse, see Lisa Moore. Julie Ellam provides the most comprehensive thematic analysis of Winterson's representation of love. For convergent approaches to Winterson and love, see David Nel, Laura Doan, Madelyn Detloff, Gemma Lopéz, and Sonya Andermahr.

Showalter famously laments Winterson's preference for "Cities of the interior" exemplified in the author's focus on "love instead of money... sex instead of power... [and] the past instead of the future" ("Eternal"). Even critics like Andermahr, who identify a "form of utopianism" in Winterson's fiction, insist that the "desire...for change and transformation" in her novels is specifically "personal, individual change rather than the social, collective change of political utopianism" (97). The primary problem with this predominant interpretation is that it obscures the complex conceptual role that affect plays within Winterson's own writing on aesthetics. Indeed, I will argue that Winterson's critics have read her appeal to love far too literally and narrowly, thereby missing the ways in which "love" condenses an ethical ideal, a dynamic conception of how art catalyzes these ethical relations, and a social critique of postmodern structures of feeling. At the very same time, Winterson's narrative of love is invariably sexualized, evoking queerly erotic relations even (and especially) when she does not represent sex directly. Therefore, this chapter will illuminate what I call Winterson's "queer sentimentality," and I will argue that her lover's discourse points toward a queer ethics that strives to de-territorialize and re-signify the associations of positive affect in postmodernism. Winterson's project does not suggest that the personal is the end-point of social struggle. Rather, I contend that her fiction reveals how rewriting emotion can be a starting point for mapping alternative, specifically queer and feminist values.

To do so, I first demonstrate how Winterson conceives of aesthetics as "visceral." I contend that her representation of affect as pre-personal and incipiently social derives from her dual critique of postmodern structures of feeling and the critical reduction of sexuality to identity. By framing her aesthetics as ecstatically visceral, Winterson creates a narrative in which her fiction can model the embodied



relational ethics that her novels idealize. Then, I turn to Winterson's controversial novel, *Art and Lies* (1994) to demonstrate how she draws on experimental form to performatively enact this ethical relation. Critics typically read *Art and Lies* as Winterson's most anti-social text, betraying a modernist elitism. For these critics, the novel recuperates the critical autonomy of "art" and, at the same time, retreats from the degraded, inauthentic social world into the imaginary.<sup>3</sup> I argue, by contrast, that critics have wrongly conflated Winterson's perspective with the voice of the primary narrator who, like so many Wintersonian protagonists, mourns for the disappointed ideals of modernity. *Art and Lies* counters this voice with an erotic, ecstatic "queer sentimentality," embodied in the character of Sappho. The novel thus reveals that Winterson's lover's discourse does not simply and reductively challenge the rationalistic lack of emotion in postmodernity. On the contrary, it specifically counters the appropriation of positive affective discourses by patriarchal, heteronormative, and consumerist forces. I conclude that Winterson rewrites sentimental discourse as an immanent ethical challenge, articulated in the grammar of the second person, to underscore that queer values must be taken up by a reader to come, if they are to have any worldly effect at all.

Admittedly, Winterson appears to be the least 'transgressive' of writers in this dissertation, the least 'queer.' Not only does she fully embrace the language of positive affect, she barely represents sex itself, preferring to focus on emotion rather than bodies. Her work offers little taboo breaking, in the vein of William S. Burroughs and Samuel R. Delany, nor does her representation of the body reclaim abjection or disgust to the extent that Kathy Acker does. Therefore, one could argue that Winterson is therefore a perfect analogue for "homo-normativity," the increasing de-politicization

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor.

of sexual politics.<sup>4</sup> After all, queer theory's narrative has been that neoliberalism has shifted the focus of LGBTQ politics from sex to love. As I argued in the previous chapter, this context has inspired queer theory's preference for negative affects such as shame and abjection. These affects certainly appear "critical" when read against the commodification of "love" and "happiness" by mainstream consumerism.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as my analysis of Eve Sedgwick showed, there are critical possibilities available within positive affects that queer theory has overlooked. This chapter will thus extend my effort to loosen the binaries of positive/negative and uncritical/critical affect in queer theory. However, by analyzing Winterson turn to affect and emotion, I will complicate this project by answering a question that, as yet, this dissertation has left unaddressed: Why, in this historical moment, does feeling, rather than sex, signify queer social possibility? If the representational "de-sublimation" of sex was so key to queer experimental writers in the sixties and seventies, why has emotion now become the critical analogue of queerness? Rather than see this transposition as merely symptomatic of neoliberalism, I will argue that, for Winterson, feeling becomes a means to "represent" queer relations as non-subjective and inter-subjective in a historical moment when sexuality has become increasingly commodified as the primary basis of liberal, consumer identity. Despite its rhetorical echoes of consumer discourses, then, Winterson's "queer sentimentality" poses a direct challenge to the values and relations embodied by the prevailing lover's discourse of postmodernity.

### **The Value of Affect**

Winterson's recent novel, *The Stone Gods* (2007), draws on science fiction and dystopian narrative to satirize the political codification of sexuality that underlies Winterson's transposition of queerness into emotionality. In the dystopian society of

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<sup>4</sup> For the origins of this narrative, see especially Lisa Duggan.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

the Central Power, the government has legalized all manner of perversions, fetishes, and desires. Pedophilia is acceptable. Translucents are the rage. (Translucents are people that, "When you fuck them you can watch yourself doing it") (19). The current struggle for sexual liberation centers on genetic Fixing, which arrests the aging process. As yet, children are not allowed to be Fixed. However, one proponent of the process, McMurphy, claims that "It's like every other Civil Rights and Equal Rights battle, OK? You had Blacks at one time. You had Semites at one time. You had mixed marriages, you had gays. All legal. No problem. We're just victims of prejudice and out-of-date laws" (21). The protagonist, Billie Crusoe, replies, "It's called paedophilia," but McMurphy insists, "That's just a word, like 'homosexual.'" Yet Billie insists, "No, it's not a word like 'homosexual,' it's a word like 'goat-fucker.'" Here Winterson seems to articulate a version of contemporary conservative fears about sexual freedom and equality. If gay relations are permitted, so the arguments goes, then incest, bestiality, and pedophilia must logically also be allowed. Clearly Billie rejects that slippery slope, distinguishing homosexuality from other perversions. At the same time, *The Stone Gods* initially appears to share a reactionary concern that other sexual taboos beyond homosexuality are a signifier of a degraded modernity.

However, the novel's dystopian satire makes a few points about sexuality patently clear. First, the legalization of prostitution and the lowering of the Age of Consent are, along with other technologies of pleasure, methods used by the government to "distract from" the erosion civil liberties by the surveillance state (130). Therefore, the novel critiques a certain bio-political codification of sexuality, a deployment of pleasure that narrows the meaning of *political freedom* to, simply, *sexual freedom*. Second, the supposedly permissive attitude toward sexuality masks patriarchal desires. Indeed, Billie notes that "The future of women is uncertain," since

they are not needed for reproduction nor desired as sexual objects. Consequently, women are Fixing at younger ages or desperately seeking to reverse their aging (22). Thus, Winterson's positive, indeed queer, representation of sexuality arrives in the form of dissidents who have established a pluralistic, semi-anarchistic heterotopia (temporarily) outside of the government's control. There, we see positive representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other specifically sexual relations, which do not mask patriarchal desires but manifest a queer pluralism that embraces the body's becoming, including its becoming older.

Yet the most significant indicator of 'queerness' in *The Stone Gods* is *not* sex but emotionality. Indeed, Billie appears strangely out-of-joint to other characters throughout the novel not because of her lesbianism but because of her sentimentality, succinctly expressed in her refrain throughout the novel "Love is an intervention" (205). Citing (implicitly) the final line of Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), Billie yearns for a "human society that wasn't just disgust" (182). Whereas Acker locates an erotic "language of the body" as the next step toward this affirmative society, Winterson characteristically privileges emotion. Billie insists,

Since the Enlightenment we have been trying to get away from emotionalism, the mother of all isms... For my part, I think we need more emotion, not less.

But I think, too, that we need to educate people in how to feel. Emotionalism is not the same as emotion. We cannot cut out emotion--in the economy of the human body, it is the limbic, not the neural, highway that takes precedence.

141-42

Undoubtedly, one could read Billie's discourse as a part of postmodernism's fundamentally anti-rationalistic ideology. In the next section, I will argue that Winterson complicates the binary between reason and emotion. After all, Billie insists

that we "cannot cut out emotion." Therefore, I propose that her true project is to oppose certain emotional discourses (melancholia, sadness, nostalgia) to others (ecstasy, love, care). For the moment, however, I want to stress that *The Stone Gods* implicitly frames itself as part of the project of "educat[ing] people in how to feel." In Billie's view, this education involves a certain humanistic pedagogy, revealing that "the value of the world" does not lie in "economic potential" but in "art" and other "invisibles never counted by the GDP and the census figures. It means knowing that life has and inside as well as an outside. And I think it means love" (167). Here sentimentality condenses a definition of non-economic value, vested in the personal. If read literally--that emotion can salve political problems--then Winterson is surely guilty of the utopianism that critics identify. However, I contend that the personal and emotional take on particularly queer configurations in Winterson's fiction and in her conception of aesthetics. I propose, then, to read the pedagogy of feeling intimated in *The Stone Gods* backwards, through Winterson's earlier discussions of aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, I will establish that the sentimental vision located in "art" is complexly opposed to a postmodern codification of feeling.

Of course, postmodernism has frequently been characterized as a historical moment in which the traditional meaning of "affect" has changed. The "waning of affect" that Fredric Jameson famously identifies does not imply a diminishing of affect but a dissolution of the subject as the locus of feeling. In Jameson's narrative of postmodernity, there is "no longer a self to do the feeling" (*Postmodernism* 16). According to Jameson, this dispersal of affect into "free-floating and impersonal"

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<sup>6</sup> Following Sedgwick, pedagogy need not refer "to the academic institution so much as to a mode of relationality" ("Melanie" 640). Sedgwick fears that pedagogy evokes "evasion, as the notion of the Aesthetic is now commonly seen as functioning" (642). I suggest here that Winterson's pedagogy of feeling and her understanding of the aesthetic must be read together to see how they complexly relate to engagement with, rather than evasion of, the social.

intensities often takes the form of euphoria, and it is the correlative of a generalized, schizophrenic expansion of the cultural simulacrum and a crisis in historicity. I contend that the dispersal of affect into intensities creates an opportunity for postmodern culture, particularly for writers who seek to construct structures of feeling that counter or defuse those that consumer capitalism requires. Rather than read the "waning of affect" as solely a symptom of postmodernity's loss of a centered subject, it should also be understood as a newly vexed and particularly urgent locus of critical, cultural, and even political struggle.<sup>7</sup> After all, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue, affect has become a primary locus of value in contemporary biopolitical labor and production.<sup>8</sup> They cite, for example, health care workers, flight attendants, fast food employees, and sex workers--and I would add teachers and cultural producers--as examples of affective labor. In each case, a central basis for the value that these laborers produce lies in the intangible but commodified dynamics of feeling that they sell to consumers. These examples capture quite clearly why positive affect appears so uncritical. Each of these affective forms of labor are meant to produce pleasure, positive feelings, pleasant impressions, and happy experiences. Negativity is not tolerated precisely because it is bad for consumption and, thus, bad for business.

If affect is now a crucial element of biopolitical production, then, following Hardt and Negri, we must expand the meaning of "political economy." As a part of that project, I suggest that we read the affective field as *both* a visceral relation and a discursive regime--the two are mutually implicated with one another, and the latter threads together affects with certain words, relations, practices, commodities, and bodies. In this respect, the affective field is literally a terrain of political struggle.

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<sup>7</sup> On postmodern affects, see Sianne Ngia's "Stuplimity" and Steven Shaviro's "The Life, After Death, of Postmodern Emotions."

<sup>8</sup> See Hardt's and Negri's *Empire*, particularly their conception of "affective labor" and "biopolitical production" (292-294, 22-41). See also the essays in Clough and Halley, *The Affective Turn*.

Insofar as contemporary regimes of biopower cultivate (and then extract value from) certain states of feeling, there are critical stakes in realigning those affective associations (in the social as well as semantic sense). It may very well be that the aesthetic forms unleashed by postmodernism, forms that embrace and utilize the dispersal of the feeling subject, can configure ethical dispositions and values that are counter to the prevailing political economy.<sup>9</sup> In short, visceral aesthetics might explore opportunities for new affective and political associations.

Despite the resurgence of interest in affect in critical theory, prominent theorists remain skeptical that there could be such a viable relationship between affect and politics, particularly when positive affects are at stake. As critical subjects, shouldn't we be cautious of political agendas that appeal to us through our capricious emotions and desires? After all, feelings undo, surprise, and overtake us; they can intensify in excess of their causes, possessing a residual afterlife, and they can also abate all too quickly. How can feelings be trusted for something as important as politics? It is precisely on these grounds that Judith Butler, in a brief essay she circulated after the 2008 election, cautions against the "politics of exuberant identification." "After all," she writes, "fascism relied in part on that seamless identification with the leader, and Republicans engage this same effort to organize political affect when, for instance, Elizabeth Dole looks out on her audience and says, 'I love each and every one of you.'" Butler opposes uncritical emotion to "critical politics" and is thus suspicious of attempts to "organize political affect," such as the Obama campaign's appeal to "Hope." However, Butler does not reflect on her own

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<sup>9</sup> I recognize the apparent disjuncture between my use of ethical and political. However, I prefer to use the ethical to underscore that Winterson does not represent emotion as a politics. Yet her representation of ethical relations is indelibly related to the political. Therefore, I use the term ethical to capture the variable distance implied in that relation *between* the ethical and political, which is a problem in her novels and in the criticism around her work.

reliance on affect to define critique. In her work, melancholy, grief, and sadness all stand in for critical, specifically queer relationships to the heteronormative social order. To be sure, positive affects are *constantly* territorialized by political campaigns. Prior to the Obama campaign, "compassionate" conservatism was the prevailing example of successful political rhetoric that exploited positive affect, leading Lauren Berlant to observe that compassion can "easily provide an alibi for an ethical or political betrayal as it can initiate a circuit of practical relief" ("Introduction" 11). I contend that this is potentially true for *any* discourse of emotion. Although negative affects are not usually emblazoned on campaign posters, they are also territorialized, sutured to political, cultural, and economic interests that are, very often, not coincident with the public interest at large. As Gopal Balakrishnan notes, "Empire is a society of the spectacle, seemingly powered by the pursuit of happiness—but in reality based on the mobilization of desires that are intimately wedded to the fear of failure, exclusion and loneliness."

My point, then, is that critical theory has too often relied on its own binary of critical and uncritical emotion, preferring negative affects because they more obviously contrast the prevailing discourses of the social order. Yet I believe it might be worthwhile to rethink this correlation of critique and ugly feelings. After all, as Wendy Brown suggests in "Resisting Left Melancholia," it might be that progressives are "caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past," an attachment which may inadvertently buttress conservative agendas (464).<sup>10</sup> To be sure, Brown acknowledges the very real erosions of liberalism, the welfare state, the labor movement, and the generally successful discrediting of any viable alternatives to capitalism (460). Yet she nonetheless suggests that

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<sup>10</sup> For an affirmative approach to melancholy see David L. Eng's and David Kazanjian's "Mourning Remains" in their *Loss*, which succinctly articulates the political work that depathologizing melancholia can enable.



the feelings and sentiments—including those of sorrow, rage, and anxiety about broken promises and lost compasses—that sustain our attachments to Left analyses and Left projects ought to be examined for *what they create in the way of potentially conservative and even self-destructive undersides of putatively progressive political aims*. 464, my emphasis

As anyone who has ever held a political conviction knows, feelings are hard to divorce from the work of politics—we feel rage, despair, indignation, hope, or righteous anger, and these emotions can just as easily enable as disable political action. Political actions themselves can live or die by the intensity of collective passions, rather than the relative merit of the values and issues at stake. As Brown implies, this is because emotional sentiments crystallize around or adhere to specific political projects. Concomitantly, emotional dispositions have some (minor) capacity to inspire political intervention. If melancholic sentiments have short-circuited more radical desires for social transformation, then perhaps new emotional dispositions are required.

Citing Brown's argument, Berlant disagrees with this reading, insisting that the real solution is to substitute

traumatic identity with a subjectivity articulated utopically, via the agency of imagined demand, [which] will take from pain the energy for social transformation beyond the field of its sensual experience. For this to happen *psychic pain experienced by subordinated populations must be treated as ideology*, not prelapsarian knowledge or a condensed comprehensive social theory” (77, original emphasis).

While I agree that "sensual experience" must not be an end in itself, I believe Berlant leaps too quickly over the forces unleashed by postmodernism. The call to reconstruct

a located subjectivity with agency and the capacity to represent demands may be worthwhile. But it might also be worth thinking through the ways that postmodern writers grapple with, and revalue, the dispersed, mediated relationship between feeling and the social. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the suspended space of affect has, at least within experimental writing, provided a zone to explore queer relations that could not be otherwise represented or narrated. I will suggest that this is true in Winterson's fiction--that her conception of the aesthetic as a non-representational, affective, relational "vector" transposes queer social desires into the seemingly apolitical discourse of affect. But to be clear: I am not claiming that Winterson articulates a (veiled) politics of the sort that Berlant might approve. In fact, I believe that Winterson's depiction of affect must be read as possessing symptomatic, regressive, and progressive tendencies, since the aesthetic is *always* riven with contradictory impulses and forces. I argue that the play between these tendencies (modernist, postmodernist, romantic, etc.) itself expresses Winterson's search for an aesthetic narrative that can recuperate the *critical* function of the aesthetic through positive affect. This search is, indeed, symptomatic of postmodernism's denigration of aesthetics and its narrowing of affective relations to consumer associations. Yet the queerness of Winterson's affective relations--embodied in her visceral aesthetics and in her narration of love relations--constructs alternative ethical values that oppose a political economy which equates happiness and desire with purchase power. My argument, then, is that sensual experiences, pre-subjective affects, and other forces unleashed by the aesthetic must be treated as ideology, as Berlant implies. But they must *also* be treated as *more* than (or, rather, *less* than) ideology, as creatively deforming and potentially reforming the discursive and bodily associations of affect.

### **Jeanette Winterson's Visceral Aesthetics**

Rather than offering an imagined demand for a subject to take up, Winterson suggests that literary affect is anterior to the subjectivity that would articulate such demands. In her narrative, the viscosity of art disperses the subject even further, enlarging emotional possibilities beyond those endorsed in postmodernism. In her essay collection devoted to aesthetics, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (1995), Winterson claims, “art works to enlarge emotional possibility. In a dead society that inevitably puts it on the side rebels” (108). For Winterson, rebelliousness does not connote unqualified opposition or the aestheticized resistance of “bohemians and bad boys.” Rather, she states polemically, “[t]he rebellion of art is a daily rebellion against the state of living death routinely called real life.” As we will see, Winterson attacks “real life” from a series of angles—conceptual, representational, and economic—but in this case, the living death of real life is ideological, constituted by the “tragic paradigm of human life [which] is lack, loss, finality, a primitive doomsaying that has not been repealed by technology or medical science” (19). Throughout Winterson’s fiction, the ideologies of lack and loss underwrite capitalist and patriarchal social relations, which are predicated on “fighting, killing, the lack, the loss, for power, for envy, for every stupidity that man can devise” (*Stone* 203). In Winterson’s argument, “Art objects” to this value system, and it does so primarily through an ecstatic, vitalistic dynamism that challenges the values predicated on lack.

This is, undoubtedly, a spiritualistic representation of art, one that critically generalizes “art,” leaving its content unspecified and seemingly irrelevant. For this reason, I argue it is the *aesthetic narrative* itself that matters to Winterson’s fiction, not whether this “concept” can be tested and applied as a system of aesthetics. Indeed, this narrative operates as a frame that Winterson deploys to valorize her fiction’s non-representational, un-specified viscosity as incipiently political. Hence, she claims

that art provides a coping mechanism in a "repressive society that pretends to be liberal... what is inability to cope except a spasmodic, faint and fainter protest against a closed-in drugged-up life where suburban values are touted as the greatest good" (113). For Winterson negative affects ("misery and breakdown") are the consequences of this repressive society and are "used as subtle punishments for what we no longer dare legislate against." Here she positions positive affect as the analogue of protest, and she claims that emotion has become a sublated terrain of struggle. Note that the true social "taboo[s]" are not sex or sexuality but rather the "potencies" of "complex emotion." Not only does this explain Winterson's transposition of transgression from sex to emotionality, it also underlies her distinction that art is "Creation" rather than mere "Consolation" (114). At stake in this distinction is precisely the suggestion that, by dynamizing "taboo" intensities, art enables its public to "re-evaluate what things matter."

Before we explore the specificity of Winterson's "re-valuation," we must note that she narrates this visceral aesthetic relation in terms of a "love parallel." She writes, for example, that the denial of an artwork based on its being "boring/pointless/silly/obscure/elitist" might result from a

work [that] falls so outside of the safety of your own experience that in order to keep your world intact, you must deny the other world of the painting. This denial of imaginative experience happens at a deeper level than our affirmation of the daily world. Every day, in countless ways, you and I convince ourselves about ourselves. True art, when it happens to us, challenges the 'I' that we are. *A love-parallel would be just; falling in love challenges the reality to which we lay claim, part of the pleasure of love and part of its terror, is the world turning upside down. We want and don't want, the cutting edge, the upset, the*

new views. Mostly we work hard at taming our emotional environment just as we work hard at taming our aesthetic environment. 15, my emphasis

Here Winterson combines a modernist appeal to difficult, potentially alienating work as “true” art with a postmodernist affirmation of the mutability of the real and the self.<sup>11</sup> Placing the “I” that art challenges in scare quotes, Winterson evokes her abiding suspicion of an essential and fixed self. What art reveals and elicits into becoming, she suggest, is a subject that was always already unstable underneath the narratives we use to “convince ourselves about ourselves.” Art offers a way to un-convince us of our selves by unleashing a bit of the chaos that subtends our provisionally tamed emotional and aesthetic.

We must immediately distinguish between the affective unsettling Winterson affirms via art and its political effect. Although Winterson substitutes the pleasures of art and emotion for the pleasures of sex, she nonetheless exemplifies a tendency in queer narrative to equate pleasure with political action. Too frequently, queer theory has, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, praised the “radicality of its sexual practices, their social transgressiveness and ability to break social taboos” (*Time* 194). Instead, Grosz urges queer critics to provisionally disarticulate politics and pleasure. “Engaging in whatever sexual and other pleasures one chooses may produce political effects,” she writes, “but it is not primarily the political that is at stake in this relation. It is instead a relation of production or assemblage, which may have political effects at particular moments, but is primarily productive or creative rather than critical.” In short, Grosz argues that pleasure and power are connected via their productivity, and their contextual linkage by certain regimes of power, but she insists that they are “not the

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<sup>11</sup> In some moments, Winterson expresses what Marianne DeKoven calls postmodernism’s egalitarianism. At other moments, Winterson reiterates a more modernist elitism, affirming the “priestlike power of the modernist artist, the transcendent greatness of imagination and highly evolved artistry” (*Utopia* 175). I grapple with these twin aspects of her aesthetic narrative in the following section.

same" (195). I would suggest that Winter's representation of visceral aesthetics can be productively read alongside the "creative," not *necessarily* political productivity Grosz identifies in sex and other forms of pleasure. Art, in Winterson's idiom, might be thought of as an affective experiment whose subjective, relational, and political effects cannot be predicted in advance.

At stake in Winterson's ecstatic, non-subjective definition of art-as-love-relation is her insistence that critics and consumers must approach art outside of the "narrow gate of subjective experience," which she suggests is "fashionable" again in this historical moment (133). Indeed, Winterson claims that that "If Queer culture is now working against assumptions of identity as sexuality, art gets there first, by implicitly creating emotion around the forbidden" (106). The "complex emotions" that art manifests are defined by their relation to the forbidden and their subsequent capacity to dynamize a "clash" between feeling and expectation that results in a failure of the "logical self" (113). Emotional "effrontery" works, then, to challenge the seeming stability of the subjective, the real, and the social expectations wherein the two converge. As much as Winterson invokes Romantic discourses here, she quite clearly frames art's "creativity" as a de-formation of the self and its values, not an authentic expression of subjectivity. One motivating reason for this narrative is that mainstream critics frequently collapse Winterson's fiction to autobiography. Indeed, Winterson rejects the tendency to reduce her narratives to her own sexual identity, critiquing the Queer world" for "collud[ing] in the misreading of art as [about the author's] sexuality" (104). Winterson argues that "[f]orcing the work back into autobiography is a way of trying to contain it" (106). In Winterson's aesthetic narrative, autobiographical reading narrows the creative ecstasy of art. But this concept itself should be read as part of Winterson's queer opposition to the cultural

conflation of sexuality with identity--the tendency to read the queer writer's cultural expression as merely "representing" his or her sexual identity.<sup>12</sup>

Winterson's challenge to sexuality as identity, and fiction as self-expression, is intimately bound up with her praise of non-representational aesthetics. Yet her visceral aesthetics do not simply target the structures of identity. Winterson positions them against "money culture [which] depends on symbolic reality" (144).<sup>13</sup> In this respect, Winterson exemplifies a fairly conventional cultural reduction of "realist" aesthetics that is characteristic of postmodernism and some strains of post-structural theory. This reduction implies that, as Michael McKeon claims, realist aesthetics repress literary "production in the same way that the mechanism of the market, of general exchangeability, represses production in capitalist society" (*Theory* 588).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Winterson suggests that realist writing buttresses "notional reality where goods are worth more than time and where things are more important than ideas" (138). In Winterson's narrative, notional reality stands in opposition to the "reality of the imagination," which she locates as the basis for her fiction (150). In the process, she claims the tradition of eighteenth-century fiction as her inspiration, a tradition that conceives of art as "play, pose and experiment" (29). She also praises the Romantics for being "emotional, introspective, visionary, and very conscious of themselves as artists." Together, these traditions enable her to side-step Victorian realism and its values, which she believes much of contemporary literature and popular culture

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<sup>12</sup> On Winterson's response to this context, see Leigh Gilmore's very insightful reading of *Written on the Body* in *The Limits of Autobiography*.

<sup>13</sup> As Winterson's media interviews reveal, she has an ambivalent relationship to class. She was a child of the working class and is frequently critical of middle-class ideology. Yet she voted for Thatcher in 1979 and her characters, as in *Art and Lies*, are often from the upper classes. See, for example, Angela Lambert, Libby Brooks, and Winterson's brief essay "Thatcher's Politics."

<sup>14</sup> See Michael McKeon's "Realism" and "Modernism" in *Theory of the Novel* for his argument that realism never had the transparency that writers like Winterson attribute to it here.

perpetuate. The Victorians narrowed the question of art to representation, to how it “corresponds to actual life,” which results in a conception of art as “rational, extrovert, didactic, [and] the writer as social worker or sage” (29, 28). The best of the Victorians (she cites Dickens) express the tension between the “dead weight of an exaggeratedly masculine culture valuing experience over imagination and action above contemplation and the strange authority of the English poetic tradition” (31).

At issue here is not the accuracy of Winterson’s literary history, which is explicitly binary in its aesthetic oppositions. Instead, I wish to underline that Winterson narrates this history to justify her use of experimental, non-representational aesthetic forms. Then, she opposes her visceral aesthetics to the structures of consumerism, exchange, and masculinity predicated on “symbolic realism.” In her narrative, the “realist” and the capitalist share the same values: the realist “thinks he deals in things and not images and... is suspicious of the abstract... A lover of objects and objectivity, he is in fact caught in a world of symbols and symbolism” (143). Likewise, “symbolic man” is produced as a consumer subject by “a confusion between the object and what the object represents. To keep you and me buying and upgrading an overstock of meaningless things depends on those things having an acquisitional value” (144). For Winterson, consumption is predicated on the unsatisfactory nature of objects. “In part they fail to satisfy,” she claims, “because their symbolic value changes so regularly” (145). The problem, however, is that value is immanent only with respect to market forces. Hence, Winterson claims that commodities are “illusion, narcotic, hallucination,” whereas art offers “energetic space.” In effect, Winterson’s mysticism and spiritual rhetoric *expands* the illusory, unraveling the sutures that tie desire to consumption.<sup>15</sup> As Sappho states in *Art and*

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<sup>15</sup> For a convergent critical affirmation of simulation, see Massumi, “Realer than Real.” Massumi argues that, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari provide a logic of simulation that does not recuperate the copy/model logic of



*Lies*, "I cannot accept that the yearning I feel is for goods and money" (145). Hence, Winterson frequently declares "Art is not Capitalism" (112). By this statement, she implies, on the one hand, that "what I find in [art], I may keep." In other words, art offers value that, unlike a commodity, has some stability, some as yet unspecified immaterial worth. It communicates with "living realities with the power to move" rather than "symbols" (145). On the other hand, she counters the reduction of art to a commodity-- art as "separate, Other, self-contained" (31). This is why she oscillates between describing art as both self and other, avoiding art-as-self expression ("only the image of ourselves that is affecting us") and art-as-commodity. Instead, she represents art as an energetic, reciprocal love relation, one that counters institutions such as "The state, the family, the way most of us are educated, [which] dampens down spontaneous feeling and makes us wary of excess" (97). This romantic aesthetic narrative frames Winterson's own art as opposed to the dispositions of consumer capitalism and, indeed, *any* institutions that narrows and restricts "feeling." At the same time, Winterson's narrative sanctions non-representational aesthetics and the investment in affect as an *authentic* locus of value, even as it undermines an essentialist conception of authenticity.

Isn't the case that neoliberalism promotes and, in fact, necessitates "spontaneous feeling" which encourages "excess"? Returning to Butler's claim, don't we "jettison critical politics" when we give into "an exuberance whose phantasmatic dimensions will prove consequential"? First, I am not claiming that Winterson's aesthetic narrative offers "critical politics" in another name. It is intriguing, however, that Winterson feels the urgency to defend the critical legitimacy of her twin

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representation. Winterson likewise recognizes the way in which images/simulations always already produce the real. Rather than mourning the loss of the real in postmodernism, she likewise advocates non-representational modes of simulation to counter the territorializing resemblance (what Winterson calls the "actual") that capitalism exploits.

affirmations of non-representational aesthetics *and* emotionality. Who is the audience for this defense? Why articulate such a narrative at all? Unlike Acker and Delany, Winterson is not a para-academic writer; she is neither speaking to academics nor drawing on the discourses of critical theory. Indeed, she composes *Art Objects* at the height of her mainstream fame, at a moment when her fiction had become quite successfully commodified. On the one hand, Winterson challenges that commodification through her dual queering of fiction and sexuality as identity. On the other hand, she breaks the equation of *aesthetic* consumption with other forms of consumerism, appealing to her newfound audience to become more than consumers. (Indeed, *Art Objects* is very explicitly addressed to this public, positioned against reviewers, mainstream critics, and implicitly, literary critics). To do so, she invokes a series of very familiar discourses--a hybrid of Romanticism and postmodernism, a spiritualistic and vitalistic affirmative rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> Through its abstractions, Winterson clears a space for values and relations that are not consumer-based. Therefore, my second point is that Winterson configures an opposition between different emotional states and, crucially, between different *associations* of spontaneity and excess (i.e. those sutured to consumption and those, as we will see, sutured to a queer and feminist social imaginary). This is why Winterson strives to position emotion "outside" of capitalism, "happiness and love, both outside the money exchange" (*Art and Lies* 103). Such utopianism obscures the ways that late-capitalism produces Winterson's own configuration of the "imaginary." Yet the goal of this "utopianism" is *not* to locate emotion in a pre-cultural self. Rather, as we will see, Winterson speaks in the language of emotion to bring into being alternative, specifically queer and feminist social relations.

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<sup>16</sup> On Winterson as a religious writer, see Hannah Tennant-Moore's incisive essay, "On Jeanette Winterson."

To demonstrate this move, I now turn to *Art and Lies*, composed alongside *Art Objects*. At the time, *Art and Lies* was widely denounced as Winterson's most abstract text. The novel represented, to many critics, a hermetic and elitist vision of the aesthetic. Winterson herself admits that *Art and Lies* is her most “closed” work (“Art”). Indeed, the novel broke with her previous postmodern forms of historiographic metafiction in *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and of meta-fiction, reflexive autobiography in *Oranges Aren't the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Written on the Body* (1992). I argue that Winterson breaks with these representational frames to perform the relationship between abstraction and emotion that she touts in her essays. But more importantly, the novel enables her to link visceral aesthetics to an ethics of queer sentimentality. By doing so, the narrative reveals how the rhetoric of art and love might be re-signified to critically expand postmodernism's patriarchal structures of feeling.

### **Queer Sentimentality in *Art and Lies***

Given Winterson's claim in *Art Objects* that art creates “flight maps” of possibility, it is perhaps unsurprising that the three main characters of *Art and Lies* are named after artists—Handel, Picasso, and Sappho—and that each traces a line of flight from the degraded City to the rejuvenating sea. To the extent that the novel has a narrative in the present tense, it entails these three characters co-habiting an abstract, ethereal train “hosed in light” in “2000AD” (the novel is published in 1994) as it leads them to the Aegean coast. They reflect in eight individual monologues on the traumas, disappointments, and desires that led them to escape the city, and meanwhile, they unknowingly exchange a bawdy eighteenth-century pornographic satire (“The Entire and Honest Recollections of a Bawd”) that occasionally overtakes the diegesis. The novel concludes with the three characters’ recognizing one another and engaging in a

brief dialogue before Handel sings on the shore and Sappho and Picasso stand together, reunited as lovers. Then the text gives way to nine pages of untitled German musical notation from Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier*.

As this description indicates, *Art and Lies* is Winterson's most abstract and formally experimental novel: it lacks determinate historical context—it may be the year 2000, although Sappho's explanation that AD means "After Death" rather than Anno Domini has led some readers to argue that each of the main characters are dead and on journey to the underworld.<sup>17</sup> Further, the novel lacks determinate characters. Sappho, for example, may or may not be the Greek poet alive in 600BC, a woman named Nelson visiting friends at Christmas in 1997, or somehow both of these. Picasso may be, at once, Sappho's former lover and muse Sophia, as well as a woman escaping her oppressive family after her father attempts to murder her. Jameson's conception of postmodern texts as "holograms" aptly describes the shimmering Winterson effects between these characters and their historical referents (*Postmodernism* 23). Short-circuiting character individuation is one of the formal tactics the novel uses to collapse the distinction between the imaginary and the real in the novel. By proliferating interpretative possibilities regarding character, plot, space, and time, *Art and Lies* effects what Brian McHale calls "an ontological oscillation, a flickering effect" between the text's possible worlds. The novel does not "*choos[e]* between [these] alternative states of affairs" but instead leaves them properly undecidable (32, original emphasis). The novel configures this instability and indeterminacy as enabling. The symbolic excess generated by doubling the characters' names unmoors them from a determined place in the symbolic order. That excess, as their names suggest, is correlated with the artistic, thereby foregrounding the significance of art in Handel's, Picasso's, and Sappho's escape from the patriarchal

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<sup>17</sup> See Andermahr 94.

and heteronormative structures that oppress them.

Despite its undecidability, *Art and Lies* nonetheless implicitly addresses a postmodern and patriarchal structure of feeling. The novel's narrative arc (from city to sea, from alienation to reality) must therefore be read against this structure of feeling, which impels the characters' flights. By doing so, we can see that Winterson's ethics are based in a social, rather than existential or metaphysical, context. This context is implied through the novel's focus on urban space. In one haunting image, the novel describes "people [who] have begun to roam in posses, looking through the city skips for a part of their past" (44). Without "personal landmarks... they have no means to the past except through memory. Increasingly unable to remember, they have begun to invent." As we will see, *Art and Lies* invests real possibility in invention. But here invention is a weak bulwark against the deterritorializing forces of capital that liquidate personal and historical memory and reterritorialize itself in the "People's Architecture" (68). This architecture is produced by "little men who like to simulate," as Handel derisively claims, and it results in what the narration calls the "cemeteries of the Dead. The box houses in yellow brick, each fastened against its neighbor... Rows of scuffed couches identically angled towards the identical televisions" (12, 83). Rather than explore the immanent possibilities that lie in a multitude "fastened" together, Handel fears that the similarity of houses, couches, and televisions produces a "homogeneous people" (25). This is because, for Handel, consumerist homogeneity poses a fundamental obstacle to the individual. He laments,

It's awkward, in a society where the cult of the individual has never been preached with greater force, and where many of our collective ills are a result of that force, to say that it is to the Self to which one must attend. But the Self is not a random collection of stray desires striving to be satisfied, nor is it only

by suppressing such desires, as women are encouraged to do, that any social cohesion is possible. Our broken society is not born out of the triumph of the individual, but out of his effacement. 24

Here *Art and Lies* foregrounds the conflicted status of the postmodern “turn to the self”—namely, that it proceeds under the same discourse of the consumerist “cult of the individual.”<sup>18</sup> Affirmations of the self thus risk echoing the ethics of individualism, narcissism, and self-gratification that buttress consumerism. Yet Handel yearns for an alternative conception of a “Self,” one not purchased through the “satisfaction” (nor the sexist-inflected “suppress[ion]”) of desire. Although it remains unspecified by Handel, the novel's alternative is the *production* of desire(s) that counter this narcissistic and homogeneous structure of feeling.

Crucially, Handel cannot access this alternative because he is melancholically attached to eclipsed social orders. He yearns, for example, for the “systems and hierarchies” of the Medieval period that provided people with fixed position and “place” (23). He laments the loss of “self-distinguishing little shops, each with its own identity and purpose. Each with customers it knew and a responsibility towards them” that are lost to the “multi-national stores, that each sell the same goods, from the same markets” (23-25). Looking for “identity and purpose” and “place” in the postmodern, globalizing world, Handel turns back to social systems that are no longer available, systems that were *equally* oppressive. Therefore, Handel voices a dangerously conservative nostalgia that idealizes an older version of capitalism as more “responsible” and the “systems and hierarchies” of the past as comforting. As *Art and Lies* underscores, Handel's nostalgia is predicated on the erosion of his power as a priest in an age that has turned away from the institutions of religion: “Once upon a time I would have been listened to with respect, now, I am regarded with false

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<sup>18</sup> On the postmodern politics of the self, see DeKoven *Utopia Limited*.

suspicion" (184). Yet Handel is also mourning for, in Freud's words, "the loss of some abstraction...such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on" ("Mourning 164). Indeed, unlike Picasso and Sappho, Handel remains cathected to past definitions of "Progress. Love. Human nature" (106). He seems incapable of redefining these terms to embody new values. In Winterson's discussion of the novel, this is because Handel is "afraid of the brave new world as well as being conscious of it being the logical product of men like himself" ("Art," my emphasis). A more accurate description might be that Handel knows this unconsciously, but he cannot accept that the "new brutalism of the universe" is borne from his values (*Art and Lies* 144). Thus, he mourns the emergence of "the dreary Hobbes world, where religion is superstition and the only possible actions are of self interest" (13). Contrary, then, to Handel's desire for a "context, a perspective" to re-claim and ground "Progress" as "not one of those floating comparatives, so beloved of our friends in advertising," the novel conversely demonstrates (in a characteristically postmodern move) how the discourse of progress has veiled oppression.

Handel recalls the most consistent trope in Winterson's corpus--a melancholic (usually) male subject, railing against modernity. Too often, critics conflate the voice of these characters to the author herself. While these characters allow her to also express a critique of modernity, she simultaneously critiques the subject that is attached to a past that his value system has produced. Again and again, her novels narrate the awakening of this subject to his or her resentment. In doing so, Winterson dramatizes the shift from passivity to activity, from critique to affirmation, from mourning to ecstasy. Crucially, *Art and Lies* represents Handel's previous value system through his ambivalent relationship to feeling. On the one hand, he asks the reader, "Are you happy?" aligning the paucity of positive affect with the contemporary social

condition (109). Critiquing sentimentality ("Romance. Love's counterfeit"), Handel laments a world of "Apathy. From the Greek A Pathos. Want of feeling" (14). On the other hand, he represses his own feelings of compassion for his patients and parishioners, "kill[ing] in himself the starts of feelings he feared" (178). Thus, Handel is a uniquely split patriarchal subject. He can critique the Church, telling his Bishop that the "punishable sin is not lust...It is a failure of feeling. Not an excess of passion but a lack of compassion" (121). (For this opinion, Handel is labeled a Communist and a heretic.) Yet his definition of compassion is markedly sexist. He became a doctor, he notes, because "I like to look at women...they undress before me with a shyness I find touching. I try to keep my hands warm. I am compassionate. I do care. If a woman is particularly beautiful, I treat her as softly as I know how" (9). Here the discourses of compassion and care become sutured to objectification. The kind of "touching" Handel describes is precisely the opposite of the reciprocal touch that *Art and Lies* affirms. Indeed, Handel refuses the reciprocal touch that would imply *mutual exposure*. As he recalls,

The rallying cry of the operating theatre was [also] the jest of the brothel. We had to protect ourselves. We had to be careful of the body beneath. Protection always involves some sort of loss. Hold back, watch yourself, wrap up, look for cuts, mind the blood, don't exchange fluid, Now Wash Your Hands Please.

The riskiest thing you can do is to be naked with another human being. 9

Here Winterson critiques medicine as a particularly objectifying and patriarchal discipline, insofar as the doctors fear the "body beneath" for its capacity to "exchange fluid" (my emphasis). The proliferation of commands (hold back, watch yourself) expresses the intense desire to maintain (male) bodily integrity.<sup>19</sup> Handel recognizes

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<sup>19</sup> On the ways this fear of infection maps onto ideologies of embodiment, see Elizabeth Grosz's "Sexed Bodies" in *Volatile Bodies*.



that a "loss" results from this self-protection, but he nonetheless fears the ecstatic "naked[ness]" of erotic relation. Hence, when Handel falls in love, he rejects this unnamed woman who is practiced in the science of "Haptics" (111). He is "threaten[ed]" by her relationality, by the feeling that "*her* breasts were holding [him], safe, firm, sexed" (113, my emphasis). Being held by the other, reciprocally and erotically, is too risky for Handel.

Winterson's ethic of risk directly counters the patriarchal fear of exposure. *Art and Lies* transposes this ethical relation into the reciprocal energetics of "the Word." As Sappho affirms, "Out of our risk comes our safety, not the small sad life that will cling to anything because it has nothing" (148). The novel performatively instantiates this intimacy in Sappho's intersubjective, libidinal monologues: "Say my name and you say sex," she declares, suggesting that sex is not sublimated into discourse but charges it viscerally (66). In fact, her "Sexualist" discourse is the reason why the Church of Rome "had burned her poems and excommunicated her," never granting her a pardon: "The Word terrifies. The seducing word, the insinuating word, the word that leads the trembling hand to the forbidden key... The word that does not repent" (55). Sappho's discourse-- reciprocal, seductive, penetrative, infective, and unrepentant-- performs Winterson's narrative of visceral aesthetics, transposing sexuality into the affects of the word. The problem with modernist aesthetics, Winterson claims in *Art Objects*, is that they dead-end in a "private language" (83). Characterizing her alternative, Winterson states "Lover's talk? yes. Private language? no" (91).

Lover's talk aptly describes Sappho's monologues inasmuch as they work to intensify reciprocal "intimacy" rather than repress and control its infectious possibility. At one moment, Sappho demands, "Cut me. You do. You cut me down in

heavy trusses, profusion, exhaustion, and soak me in a stream of love” (61). At another, she insists, “Read me. Read me now. Words in your mouth that will modify your gut. Words that will become you” (144). The push-and-pull enacted between these commands exemplifies the way Sappho’s reciprocal discourse affects her and her addressee; the words become “you” and she is likewise “soak[ed]” in love. At the level of narrative, Sappho’s second-person address seems to imply that Picasso is Sophia, Sappho’s former muse and lover, and that Sophia is her true addressee. But on a formal level, the second-person address interpellates the reader, hollowing out a space in the shifter “You” for the reader to inhabit as the novel’s direct addressee. Sappho’s repeated injunction to “Read me,” for example, is a performative command that traverses the metaleptic space between the fiction and the reader’s world, and it underlines this dynamism by claiming that the words “will become you.” McHale argues that metaleptic discourses in postmodern fiction “seduce” readers by “reach[ing] across an ontological divide to become a force to reckon with in the reader’s world” (222). While “modernist aesthetics...all but eliminates the explicit *you*,” postmodern fiction frequently exploits it, “*modeling... erotic relations through the foregrounded violations of ontological boundaries*” (223, 227, original emphasis). Thus, the second-person performs love as “less an object of representation than a *metaobject*, less a theme than a *metatheme*” (McHale 223, 227, original emphasis). Sappho’s second-person address thus models and enacts a meta-ethics of relational intersubjectivity while implying a relation of queer and feminist erotic intimacy. Through the discourse of seduction, Sappho’s “You” crosses the divides of self and other, fiction and the real, to pose a direct challenge and incitement to (readerly) subjectivity.

This relational affection expresses *Art and Lies*’ vision of ethical possibility for

the otherwise enclosed subject. One could argue that the second-person merely gives the *appearance* of such immediacy and intimacy. After all, the second-person can solicit communion, coerce agreement, and, simultaneously, mystify its coercion as communion. Yet Winterson deploys the second person not to mystify coercion so much as performatively enact the ethical demand to break apart the priority of individualism. Thus, Picasso claims

The freedom of the individual is the freedom to die without ever being moved by anything. What can pierce the thick wall of personality; your voice, your hand, a picture, a book, the sweet morning air? Myself imprisons me... I think therefore I am. Does that mean 'I feel therefore I'm not'? But only through feeling can I get at thinking. Those things that move me challenge me. Only a seismic shock can re-order the card index of habit, prejudice and other people's thoughts that I call my own. 87-89

In a distinctly postmodern gesture, *Art and Lies* affirms the shock that re-orders the card index of the self, but it does not imagine this re-ordering as leading to a more authentic self. On the contrary, as Handel insists, "None of us is Rousseau Man, that noble savage, honest and untrained. Better to acknowledge that what we are is what we have been taught, that done, at least it will be possible to choose our own teacher" (184). Recalling Winterson's "pedagogy of feeling," *Art and Lies* echoes the postmodern critique of a melancholic desire to return to an origin. In Jacques Derrida's words, the "lost or impossible presence of the absent origin" often results in "the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play" (*Writing* 292, original emphasis). Yet the "other side [of play] would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without

truth, and without origin." Broaching this affirmation late in the narrative, Handel affirms: "Speak Parrot! ... I know that what I am is quite the opposite of an individual. But if the parrot is to speak, let him be taught by a singing master" (184). By claiming that the parrot's song is no less beautiful for being a reinscription, Handel begins to shake off the "nostalgic, guilty" feeling of loss for a non-existent and logocentric self-presence. While Handel no longer yearns for a more authentic self, then, he calls for a "teacher" that can inscribe alternative feelings, habits, discourses, and values. I would suggest that this logic underpins the novel's title. Rather than implicitly substituting "art" for "truth" as the binary opposite of "lies," the novel brackets truth. In its place, Winterson offers two different kinds of fiction: lies, which seek to control and silence the other, as in the historical revisionism of Sappho's life by patriarchal critics (52); and art, which, echoing Derrida, embraces non-authenticity as the condition of resignification and becoming otherwise.

*Art and Lies* locates "art" as one possible teacher for this non-original self-becoming in Picasso's narrative. Throughout her life, Picasso's family encapsulates her within their representations, telling her "This is you" and "los[ing] their temper" when Picasso does not "recognise" herself in their (literal) drawings (161-62, 43). Seeking to escape their representations, Picasso yearns to step "out of the stoked-up conspiracy to lie" that encloses her family. This conspiracy concerns her brother Matthew who, until Picasso is fifteen, uses her "as a cesspit for his bloated adolescence," raping her "night after night" (42). Within the madness of her childhood, it is the "strange vital yellows of Van Gogh that bore out a sane place in the babble of that overbright world" (155). And when Picasso's brother rapes her, she "clung to life through a patch of red" that is "on a Leonardo robe" (154). As these moments suggest, art provides a site for Picasso's self-preservation. But it also enables

her self-creation.<sup>20</sup> Art becomes a means for Picasso to configure a relation to her self and her body outside of the traumatic sexual violence of childhood. Although she has “learned to hate her body because he [Matthew] had loved it,” Picasso also “wondered if she would ever feel the acute sensuality she saw in pictures. Things of canvas and paint, not flesh and blood, they told her of a fire she did not know. She would find it or light it in herself” (82). Here art provides a *necessary* substitute for “flesh.” One way that Picasso begins to light “desire” is by taking up painting (40). Picasso paints at night in her father's Preservatives factory, appropriating the factory space and its objects. “Denied paints she painted in mustard...[a]gainst the blank crates, plastic-wrapped pallets and vinegar vats” (38). Though the “factory clock ticked factory minutes,” the “white disc of light,” created by the inspection lamp she uses to illuminate her work, wards off the “vampire dark” around her (39). Here Picasso appropriates the capitalist space of production, using its commodities against their purported value, to produce herself. Thus, “Colours became her talismans,” enabling a vital self-preservation for Picasso that challenges the embalming artificiality that the Preservatives factory represents and the living-dead of her family that it represents (40).

The form that Picasso's colors take also poses challenge to the realist aesthetics that Picasso's father adores. “My father often encouraged me to paint likeness,” Picasso recalls; and like his son, who “only ever draws himself,” Sir Jack's preference for (self) representational art extends to the fifty-five self-portraits that he

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth asking: does Winterson's narrative diminish the importance of sexual violence, exploiting violence to affirm the aesthetic? Without reducing fiction to autobiography, it is important to note that Winterson always positions “art” against a repressive and violent culture. This narrative begins in Winterson's autobiographical narratives, where she depicts the trauma she suffered as a lesbian in an evangelical household. Her recent autobiography, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) again places literature and cultural literacy as a central source of survival.

has commissioned, including the “oil portrait of [himself] in military uniform” that hangs over the family parlour as an ominous reminder of his authoritarian power (41). Where Freud infamously aligns narcissism with homosexuality, here Winterson realigns narcissism with patriarchy. In fact, *Art and Lies* suggests that the drive for “likeness” is the sustaining current of patriarchal dispositions that cannot permit difference. Countering both patriarchal and consumerist homogeneity, Sappho rejects sameness and proclaims “language is rich when it is fed from difference” (64). *Art and Lies*’ critique of “likeness” is aimed at patriarchy which persistently denies the specificities of sexual difference by modeling itself on only one body, one discourse, and one experience rather than two (or more). Crucially, the novel suggests that queerness itself must *also* embrace difference. Hence, Cardinal Rosso’s affirmation of castration as the utopian solution to sexual difference registers as an immoral denial of difference akin to the homogeneity of consumerism and the “likeness” of patriarchy. Rosso persuades Handel to be castrated as a young boy precisely because “the problem of Woman disappears” by “Return[ing] man to his femininity” (196). Therefore, *Art and Lies* values the specificity of sexed bodies as crucial to queer difference as such. This is why, to return to Handel’s experience of touching his lover’s breasts, Handel feels “safe, firm, *sexed*” (111, my emphasis). This is a positive moment because it temporarily re-sexes him, countering the castration which attempted to eliminate sex altogether.

One could argue that *Art and Lies* seriously maligns male homosexuality here and flatly positions it against a positively figured lesbianism (via the relationship between Sappho and Picasso). Yet I suggest that Winterson’s real satirical target of the Handel narrative is the psychoanalytic castration narrative, which *Art and Lies* rewrites to imagine sexual differentiation otherwise. First, as we have seen, rather than

securing sexual difference, Handel's castration de-sexes him. As a result, castration does not insert him into a heterosexual identification. Instead, it conditions the possibility of his (non-sexual) homoerotic love affair with Cardinal Rosso. Second, Handel's entry into the social order is purchased by the literal loss of his homosexual love-object. This movement is uncannily consistent with Butler's revision of the Freudian ego as melancholically attached to its foreclosed homosexual identifications. Significantly, Winterson does not resolve Handel's melancholic fantasies of lost love, marriage, and children with the woman he briefly loved. To do so would, indeed, affirm the heterosexual economy and the nuclear family as a reparative resolution to trauma. Such a resolution would deny the violence that these institutions themselves necessarily engender. This why the real 'reparation' for Handel arrives when he, like Picasso, can once again practice the art that he had disavowed. Singing represents Handel's affirmative embrace of his queer body, which was castrated to make him both a love-object for Rosso as well as a castrato. Thus, when Rosso and Handel are separated by Handel's parents, the narration asks, apparently in earnest, "Which cut did the harm? His or theirs?" (201).

By leaving this question unresolved, *Art and Lies* tentatively affirms the "enchanted space" of queer sentimentality that Handel experiences with Rosso. While a return to that space is impossible (he "cannot return"), *Art and Lies* nonetheless values the world of "invention" that Rosso enables for Handel. Poised between the "the world he could inherit or the world he could invent," young Handel looks into the water in Venice and wonders whether he should believe in "Truth or the image of truth?...What should he trust?...Actual life or imaginative life" (199). Here inheritance evokes the world bequeathed by patriarchy as well as the materialist world of actuality. By contrast, Rosso's world of invention echoes Winterson's praise of the

imaginary as the locus of value. Thus, responding to Handel's protest "But it isn't real," Rosso asks, "Darling Boy, do you know what is?" (202). At once, Rosso revises Seneca in a way that is reminiscent of the willful patriarchal misreading of Sappho; and he gleefully affirms an imaginary ungrounded from reference in a manner consistent with Winterson's theoretical articulation of her fictional project. In this way, Rosso is a doubled, politically ambiguous figure for the novel, echoing Sir Jack's and Matthew's desire for likeness and, conversely, celebrating the challenge to referential stability that Sappho advocates.

Ultimately, *Art and Lies* turns to Sappho's and Picasso's non-referential aesthetics to explicate how art counters the deadness of postmodern and patriarchal life. Sappho declares that she wants to "love the image and not the idol" (131). Sappho suggests that the image is "stamped upon the retina, repeated behind the eyelid, stored in the rhomencephalon, returned to the body in injections of emotion" (132). In other words, these images affect the body rather than signify the actual. Sappho's claim echoes Winterson's conception of art as viscerally affecting the limbic rather than the rational. Sappho distills the implications to this non-representational conception of art in one of the novel's most searching and reflexive passages when she proclaims, "I'm no Freudian. What is remembered is not a deed in stone but a metaphor. Meta = above. Pherein = to carry. That which is carried above the literalness of life. A way of thinking that avoids the problems of gravity" (136-37). Inspired by the transcendent lightness of metaphor, Sappho calls for "art, that never concerns itself with the actualities of life, neither depicts it as we think it is, nor expresses it as we hope it is, and yet becomes it. Not representations, but inventions that bear in themselves the central forces of the world, and not only the world" (137-38). We should take pause at the stark rejection of actuality pronounced here. To



articulate this vision of art, Sappho's troublingly opposes art to the political: "Art. The invisible city not calculated to exist. Beyond the lofty pretensions of the merely ceremonial, long after the dramatic conniving of *political* life, like it or not, it remains" (138, my emphasis). Here Sappho transforms the distressing social condition depicted earlier in the novel into a metaphor by making the "invisible" city of vanishing, abject people into the city of "art" that outlives the political world. In doing so, *Art and Lies* captures Winterson's modernist vision of Art as an escape from the political into the eternal. At the same time, Sappho's affirmation of the non-representational art insists that the aesthetic is primarily affective and that these forces take it contribute to its "becom[ing]." As Davide Panagia argues, aesthetic sensations "disfigure" or "disarticulate" the body's established modes of perception. He claims that "the first political act is an aesthetic one, a partitioning of sensation that divides the body and its organs of sense perception and assigns to them corresponding capacities for the making of sense" (9). Therefore, affective sensations that disorder sense shake us from the "slumber of subjectivity" and "invite occasions and actions for reconfiguring our associational lives" (3-4).

*Art and Lies* makes evident the specifically ethical possibilities that arise from aesthetic dis-articulation in the effects Picasso's painting has on her family. When Picasso paints on Christmas after the family has gone to sleep, the family, the mansion, and the landscape itself become suffuse with color. Her mother, for example, wakes up with dreams of a former lover, "infidelity colouring her cheeks" (46). Indeed, the entire family is affected by her painting: "Uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, all the weights and ephemera of family life, were dreaming in colour that night." And in the morning the family wears "their darkest clothes, their soberest expressions, they whispered like church wardens," though the "stain" of color remains on them. "They

were spotted with guilt, each could see in the other, the patterns of infection.”

Picasso’s painting unleashes the queer libidinal truths of the family, which they “collude” in denying despite seeing one another’s “infection.” Recalling the patriarchal fear of infection, the family seeks to repress the stain of color; they go so far as to deny the changed reality around them—the orange rain, the purple snow and clouds, the plum tea. Picasso’s painting dis-articulates their modes of perception and, in the process, opens up the possibility for the family to realign their association with one another, with themselves, with their narratives—to recognize rather than repress the truths to which the now crimson-stained bedding attests. With a great deal of effort, however, their collusion maintains the structure of power, perception, and association in the family. This is not the case for Picasso. “Paint[ing] herself out of the night” disjoins her, however briefly, from the strictures of the patriarchal family, making possible an act of self dislocation *and* creation: “Without thinking, Picasso ran into the parlour, into the newspapers, into the best clothes and the dead air. She was painted from head to foot. ‘Self portrait,’ she said to their astonished faces” (48).

The ethical possibilities purchased for Picasso by the aesthetic moment of disarticulation are not without their danger. In part, the dangers are physical, such as Picasso’s being committed to an asylum after the Christmas night of painting. When she says she’s “going to tell the police,” her father pushes her off the roof, possibly to her death. Clearly, dis-articulation poses a literal threat to Picasso’s father, who experiences the shock to the “slumber of [his] subjectivity” and the imminent possibility of “reconfiguring [his] associational life” as an existential threat to the self and the world he wants to maintain. Yet disarticulation also presents an ethical danger to Picasso, which arises in her response to her father’s attempted murder. She decides to kill her father in turn, stabbing, shooting, gassing, melting him, and feeding him to

dogs. As a result of these actions, Picasso feels

a numbness, new to my body. In my efforts to be rid of him, I was becoming like him, his rage, his misery, his methods, his pain circulating my veins. The more I hated him the better I pleased him. Not only would I become like him, I would become him, that is how the dead reproduce themselves. 163

I would suggest that the interpretative question—is Picasso dead or isn't she?—must not be stabilized here so as to maintain the narrative's point that Picasso's father is (emotionally) dead. "All this I did but he would not die. Impossible to murder the dead," At issue here is the danger that the moment of disarticulation will result in resentment which reproduces sameness. Picasso begins to become like her father, adopting his affective dispositions—rage, misery, pain—which counter-intuitively produce "numbness" in her body. Ultimately, Picasso realizes that to resist her father *and* to prevent becoming him, she must do "What already hurt him most of all," namely, to throw "life in his face," to insult "his morbidissima by refusing to be of his clan. The dead thrive only among their own" (164).

Refusing the "clan" of the dead captures *Art and Lies*' affirmation of alternative associations and ways of associating. Thus, when Picasso leaves her family's mansion and subsequently "recognise[s]" Sappho on the train, this recognition quells the fear that "[creeps] up beside her again" (164). The narration subsequently affirms that Picasso will have a "A beginning outside of hurt. A beginning outside of fear." The possibility here of a beginning outside of hurt and fear is not a nostalgic yearning for a utopian outside; it is instead an affirmation of a beginning outside of the patriarchal family and its violence. This affirmation of a beginning, instantiated through an affective relation, prefigures the conclusion of the novel (206). When Handel survives a car accident, he wonders afterwards, "For what?

Only to do again what he had done before but this time blunted by repetition?" At stake in the final sentence of the text—"It was not too late."—is precisely the possibility of not compulsively repeating the past. This possibility is affirmed in the novel's conclusion, when the three characters briefly talk to each other and experience a reparation of their grief and trauma. A great deal of memory and plot is quickly revealed in these few final pages. But rather than producing a narrative epiphany, the moment is anticlimactic, because so much of the novel remains incredibly, undecidably abstract. Although the narration suggests that the abstract figures of the broken beach, the cliff, and the man in the boat on the sea begin to make "single sense," we do not have interpretative access to that "sense" or a delineation of it (206). By keeping "sense" opaque, *Art and Lies* holds the possibility that visceral, non-representation aesthetics can, like Picasso's, make new associations possible. Sappho's playful, coy questioning ("Am I making any sense? No?") signals precisely Winterson's conceit that sense need not proceed through the rational nor the representational to make these new intimacies, associations, or values palpable.

Despite Winterson's insistence that "art is not therapy" but an "engagement with life itself," it may appear that her appeal here to the "emotional situation" of art and life represents a simple turn to the self (*Art Objects* 3). But note the hesitation in *Art and Lies*' concluding narration: "From the cliff-head, the two women standing together, looked out. Or did they look in?" (206). This moment demonstrates how the turn to the self and the turn to the social are irrevocably entwined in Winterson's fiction. The narration provides us with a Möbius strip: looking out, these characters look inward; looking in, they look outward to others. Of course, we cannot forget that the tentative relation among the three main characters is enabled by their escape from the City of actuality. Such an escape from the actual inevitably evokes of a turn away

from the social. Yet, as John McClure suggests, the “philosophical valorization of desertion, retreat, and loosely articulated communities of survival and resistance—a very weak politics—is by no means an exclusively conservative phenomenon” (22). In this light, I would suggest that Winterson imagines art’s work with emotion as one way to elicit, potentially, a becoming-relational along lines that counter patriarchal and postmodern values. While it offers a self-consciously “weak politics,” *Art and Lies* nonetheless affirms the necessity of constructing alternative relations to the self and to others, and it suggests that these relations may help to heal a self’s traumas, which are indelibly marked by the social. And, in insisting that “It was not too late,” the novel holds out the limited possibility for art to enable these relations in the broader social world while recognizing that its impact is partial, necessarily unpredictable, and always vulnerable to betrayal.

### **Queering You, or Reading in the Second Person**

I have argued that Winterson's understanding of emotion is not, properly speaking, utopian. Instead, I have demonstrated that Winterson constructs an aesthetic narrative in which the visceral transmission of affect can detach subjects from certain emotive and social associations. In her narrative, art also creates the possibility for realigning these associations. Certainly, Winterson hopes to achieve such a subjective opening through her writing. Yet, as *Art and Lies* illuminates, such re-associations must be actively affirmed--they are not guaranteed. Moreover, as we saw in Picasso's narrative, these ethical encounters can backfire or fail. While Winterson narrates these encounters through the discourse of emotion, I have suggested that their end-point is not in sensual experience as such. On the contrary, sensuality stands in for a set of ethical values--above all, the reciprocal, mutual exposure to the other. This ethic is central to all of Winterson's novels. *Art and Lies* draws on this ethic to critique

patriarchy, heteronormativity, and a certain reduction of "feeling" in postmodernity. Yet Winterson's more recent novels use the ethic to critique the ways that other structures of power seek to transcend reciprocal vulnerability.<sup>21</sup> As if in direct response to her critics, Winterson's novels are beginning to address contemporary political problems such as global warming, terrorism, war, debt, and neoliberalism.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, all of these issues are quite explicitly represented in *The Stone Gods*. Yet Winterson continues to draw on the discourse of queer sentimentality to articulate alternative values that might counter the structures of the postmodern world. And this discourse continues to frustrate even her most sympathetic readers. For example, Ursula LeGuin notes in her otherwise positive review of *The Stone Gods* that the novel is "distressingly sentimental," qualifying that "Sentimentality, the product of a gap between the emotionality of the writing and the emotion actually roused in the reader, is very much a matter of the reader's sensibility."

What if the "gap" that Le Guin identifies is a carefully constructed *effect* of Winterson's fiction? What if this feeling of emptiness is, perversely, the performative goal of Winterson's work? In Le Guin's view, Winterson's writing does not actually evoke the emotionality it so desperately praises. Of course, this response is, as she suggests, partly subjective -- a matter of "sensibility." It is also, undoubtedly, a matter of readerly expectations. Arguably, Le Guin implies that the emotionality should be dramatized through narrative rather than spoken about in breathless incantatory prose. However, as I have noted, Winterson relentlessly critiques realistic narrative, and the actual narratives in her fiction fizzle out or, as in *Art and Lies*, speed up in the last final pages in an utterly disappointing, anti-climax. Yet her novels are disappointing if

<sup>21</sup> This critique begins in *Oranges Aren't The Only Fruit*, where Jeanette notes that men "want to be the destroyer and never the destroyed" (170).

<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to imply that patriarchy or hetero-normativity are not contemporary political problems. However, Winterson's reviewers certainly imply that these issues are somehow less socially urgent.

the reader is seeking emotional catharsis, or a "rous[ing]" sensual experience, from the characters or plots. Winterson's purpose is, instead, to de-tach the conventional readerly expectation that emotion will arrive via narrative. In disappointing that association, she simultaneously disappoints the conceit that the text or artwork is an object that will satisfy our yearnings. The text thus retains a strange otherness, a certain irreducibility to our desires and yearnings. At the same time, as it clearly does for Le Guin, the disappointment itself produces a consciously reflexive attention to one's own emotional state. By doing so, the text asks us to consider what precisely would make us *feel* satisfied. Leaving the object of desire abstract is, therefore, crucial to Winterson's affirmation of desire as pluralistic and multiple.

This is why, I contend, Winterson's novels so frequently conclude with the grammar of the second-person. Indeed, her novels constantly lapse into extended passages addressed to "you." In most cases, the "you" appears in demarcated sections, such as Sappho's monologues in *Art and Lies*. ("Read me. Read me now. Follow the lines that thread you through the cave") (147). In her more experimental novels, such as *The PowerBook* (2000) and *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), long passages are addressed to a "you," which indicates a character in the novel that never actually appears outside of this address. In all cases, the "you" takes on many possible referents that are never stabilized. Recall that in Sappho's monologues, the addressee may be the reader, Sophia, the entirety of history, and a number of other possibilities. *The Stone Gods* is no exception. Much like *Written on the Body*, it ends in the language of the second-person. This is because the second-person is the grammatical correlative of Winterson's relational ethics and her visceral aesthetics. Indeed, the second-person has many queer possibilities. Few words so immediately and forcefully collapse the distance between reader and text as "you." At the same time, "you" does not represent

any specific person. This is due to the strange queerness of reading “you.” Used with frequency, you begins to rebound on the “I.” I and you begin to tremble and lose their distinctive referents. You becomes open to us, but you is also abstract, empty of content, more a placeholder than a person. After all, we cannot all fit into you, and you cannot possibly be meant for all of us. Reading in the second person, if it taken to such extremes, produces a grammatical solecism, where you and I begin to reveal their (our) transgressive impropriety as pronouns, and the reader is no longer certain where the textual bodies of you begin and I end.

If this performative project is the goal of Winterson's incantatory prose, as I believe it is, then it is not quite the case that Winterson *always* inscribes specifically same-sex desire within her lover's discourse. It is, rather, the oscillation between the specific and the general that is central to her discourse of love. The specifically erotic intonations of her lover's discourse critically rewrite a number of literary traditions, as Andermahr suggests. They also condense, as I have demonstrated, a series of queer and feminist ethical values. At the same time, the generality of the second-person projects these relations outwards, to the reader, to *any* reader. It offers these values to us as a possibility. Recall that becoming “readable” in *Written on the Body* meant, paradoxically, becoming readable in the hands of another, against the narrator's own avowed desire to remain illegible. By the end of Winterson's novels, we find that we are no longer holding a book in our hands. Instead, the book is holding us. We are, akin to Handel, held “safe, firm, sexed” in the text's “reading hands” (*Art and Lies* 113; *Written* 89). As it was for Handel and the narrator, the question posed to us is whether or not we will embrace the text back. Will we affirm the relational vulnerability of the aesthetic's viscosity, or will we “Hold back, watch [ourselves], wrap up, look for cuts, mind the blood, [not] exchange fluid” (9). The gap that Le



Guin identifies derives from this unresolved question. At the very same time, Winterson stacks the deck. Indeed, her rhetoric of the second-person offers us little choice, because it reads us into being before we have time to decide. In this respect, at least, Winterson's visceral aesthetics recuperate an affective and rhetorical agency for the queer, postmodern text. After all, it constantly frustrates Winterson that literary critics and mainstream reviewers feel so confident that they are "queering" her texts. What if all along, she counters, the text has been queering you?

## Epilogue:

### “Sensuous and Empty”:

#### The Queer Limits of Affective Art

Since I began this dissertation, more and more critics have claimed that a definitive "turn to affect" has occurred in the humanities. This turn has been periodized in a number of ways -- some claim it is coincident with postmodernism; a response to the "linguistic turn" in cultural theory; or indicative of more recent cultural shifts such as the emergence of digital technology.<sup>1</sup> As yet, there is no definitive agreement about the cause or ultimate meaning of this turn to affect. My purpose in this dissertation has been to demonstrate that there have been *many* turns to affect made by queer experimental writers. The performance of such a turn might be considered central to the genre and its framing, at least by the writers studied here. What these texts have shown us is that a "turn" to affect is also a narrative, a story that arrives at affect after (and against) some other set of relations, values, modes of representation, or ideologies. Critics would do well, then, to reflect on the limits of using the "turn to affect" as a master narrative, because, at its most reductive, a turn to affect can imply a final overcoming of reason or the logos. One place to begin that reflection, I contend, is by contrasting the ways that experimental and mainstream texts divergently narrate a character's turn to affect. Thus, this conclusion will look to two different, contemporary cultural texts, Tom Ford's *A Single Man* (2009) and Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2002). I will plumb the limitations of the affective turns narrated in these texts, arguing that the "affirmation" of affect must be immanently located within the changing, shifting contexts of contemporary queer politics and postmodernity.

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<sup>1</sup> See, Jameson, Leys, Heckman, and Hayles, respectively.

In the conclusion of Tom Ford's 2009 elegiac film, *A Single Man*, the protagonist, George Falconer, decides not to commit suicide when he realizes that the meaning of life lies in moments of feeling uncontaminated by thought. Based on the novel by Christopher Isherwood (1964), the film depicts a single day in Falconer's life. His existence is primarily defined by melancholy: his male lover of sixteen years has recently died, and Falconer is incapable of externalizing his grief within the heteronormative culture that shapes his historical moment. Set in 1962, the film returns us to the repressive context of pre-Stonewall America that similarly instigated William Burroughs' critical representation of melancholic, "spectral" homosexuality. Whereas Burroughs aggressively redefined the meaning of "expressing" a queer feeling, however, *A Single Man* initially suggests that self-annihilation is the only viable response to the censorship of emotion.

Of course, *pace* Foucault, we should be suspicious about the temptation to read the film's repressive past as a bygone era. Indeed, despite its wide-spread critical praise, audiences initially scorned *A Single Man* for its "de-gayed" marketing campaign. The film's trailer and its original poster— which was altered in response to the controversy— both foregrounded heterosexual contact and obscured homosexual intimacy. Indeed, the director admitted that some viewers may, on the basis of the advertisements, anticipate a heteronormative romantic comedy. We might delight at the idea of wayward viewers stumbling into a meditative film about gay loss, caught unawares by its homo-eroticism and complex portrait of melancholia. Yet the careful management of queer intimacy in the marketing campaign suggests an important fact about the contemporary representation of queer desire: however tame, conventional, and "homo-normative," queer desire remains subject to prohibitive censors that inform the creation and reception of its representation. The queer body in feeling—

particularly when it feels pleasure—remains a problematic body in the public sphere.

This social context makes the interpretation of Falconer's "turn to affect" all the more problematic, because *A Single Man* seems to represent an uncritical and symptomatic affirmation of "feeling." Throughout the film, Falconer experiences a number of moments that Virginia Woolf once characterized as "moments of being." These moments, much as Woolf conceived them, are immersive experiences, when the mundane world sparks an intensity of emotion. While these moments are intensely subjective, they also constitute a kind of revelatory and spiritual transcendence into a non-subjective communion with life. In Jeanne Schulkind's words, "the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole" (*Moments* 18). In *A Single Man* these moments of being derive from the vitality of bodies. For example, Falconer becomes fixated on his department secretary's hair as she tries to relate a message about a student, and he gazes intently at the athletic bodies of tennis players as a colleague lectures him on the importance of building a bomb shelter. In these scenes, the *mise-en-scene* changes from cold, granite hues to bold, bright, luscious colors which signify the vigor of these bodies as well as the aesthetic and erotic pleasure that Falconer derives from witnessing them.<sup>2</sup>

In the climax of the film, when he refuses suicide (before ironically dying of a heart attack), Falconer explains the significance of these moments:

A few times in my life I've had moments of absolute clarity, when for a few brief seconds the silence drowns out the noise and *I can feel rather than think*, and things seem so sharp and the world seems so fresh. I can never make these moments last. My emphasis

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<sup>2</sup> To be sure, these scenes also tread a well-worn trope of suicide narratives, wherein the suicidal subject's final moments are juxtaposed to the outside world's ignorance. Whereas the latter is invested in the mundane, petty details of the everyday, the former can pause, reflect, or enjoy these details for the last time.

Here *A Single Man* appears to verbalize, in stark terms, all the problems with the “turn to affect” that critics such as Ruth Leys identify.<sup>3</sup> The film opposes feeling and thinking in a sharp binary; it privileges the former over the latter in a manner that echoes a tradition of postmodern sublimity that valorizes contingency, irrationality, and emotion.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Falconer’s “revelation” is a purely aesthetic gesture. His “absolute” clear perception of the world as “fresh” *is* the content of his insight, an experience otherwise degraded by the “noise” of social life. Thus, affect is positioned as an aesthetic end in itself—it reconciles the individual to the world by transcending it, allowing him to simply *not think about the world*, however momentarily. As Falconer concludes, such moments “pull me back to the present, and I realize that *everything is exactly the way it was meant to be*” (my emphasis).

Of course, everything is not exactly the way it was meant to be, and *A Single Man* knows it. Indeed, the film powerfully documents the psychic toll wrought by a tacit culture of homophobia. Through its constant references to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the film also juxtaposes Falconer’s moments of being to a degraded modernity of violence, meaninglessness, and omnipresent dread. Thus, the cliché sense that everything is “meant to be” provides the modern individual with a necessarily vague sense of meaning and order in the context of this meaninglessness. From one perspective, then, the problem with *A Single Man* is that it attempts to reanimate a strain of modernism that positions affect (particularly the aesthetic transmission of emotion) as a transcendent bulwark against the bleak, unfulfilled promises of modernity. Yet this very concept is a product of modernity itself. As Mary-Ann Doan suggests, “meaning [in modernity] is associated with immanence and embodiment” precisely because “it is predetermined not in ideal forms but in a process of

<sup>3</sup> See Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique.”

<sup>4</sup> For a succinct overview of this critique, see Habermas, “Modernity — an incomplete project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

emergence and surprise” (10). However, capitalist modernity also seeks to capture and regiment the “vicissitudes of the affective” that it unleashes (specifically “the subjective play of desire, anxiety, pleasure, trauma, apprehension”). In Elizabeth Freeman's words, this is the force of “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies [as well as entire populations] toward maximum productivity” (3). Precisely because our affective structures of time *feel* natural, Freeman sees “bad timing”—performative and representational unbindings of the temporal order-- as a queer challenge to the rhythm that orients bodies for labor and profit. Therefore, the problem with *A Single Man* is precisely that it is about only one *single man* or, rather, man as a singular, individuated entity. Falconer's step outside of the temporal order is an individualist respite; the only hint of collectivity exists in a mystical, unarticulated form, and the collective structuring of “feeling” as an socioeconomic, historical, and political power relation, intimately bound to modern time, is occluded.

Or, I should say, almost occluded. After all, the Falconer is a “single” man not because he has transcended the social—he is single because the social world does not view him as coupled, as already in an affective and intimate relation with an other. But he is not single—his melancholy attests to a love relation that has not been recognized or valued, but persists nonetheless.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the moments of being Falconer experiences are representations of his own desire as well as figurations of his own pleasures. Indeed, these moments are poignant because they are rooted in Falconer's embodied desire—they are his last glimpses of the material world, prior to his anticipated suicide, and he savors their affective and aesthetic plenitude. Thus, *A Single Man* underscores a central implication of this dissertation—that affirmation of

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<sup>5</sup> On the issue of socially sanctioned grief, see Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification” in *The Psychic Life of Power*.

affect cannot be abstracted from its rootedness in a queer body. However problematic and restricted, Falconer's affirmation of feeling must be thought in relation to, and located within, his (and *A Single Man*'s) queer contexts.

Yet, as noted above, *A Single Man* is quite narrow in its representation of queer contexts, even granting that it is set prior to the sexual revolution, Stonewall, and the civil rights movement. Thus, it is worth noting all the ways that *A Single Man* fails to complicate the relationship between affect and its queer contexts: Can moments of feeling lead to “critical” forms of thought (the assessment that everything is *not* as it should be), as it does for Burroughs and Kathy Acker? Do queer networks of intimacy, within the sixties and after, generate new possibilities for affect and an ethics of care, as Sedgwick suggests? Does the intervening event of AIDS alter the predominantly “paranoid” modes of reading queer affect, as Delany argues? How can we differentiate, as Winterson asks, between the queerness of positive affect and its deployment in the discourses of consumer capitalism and so called “homonormativity”? If *A Single Man* fails to address these questions, it does, at the very least, elicit one important question that I have so far failed to address in this dissertation: What does it mean to place the concept of affect within such a narrative of “turning,” as Falconer does? And why are so many authors of fiction and theory “turning” to affect now? The film's answer to both questions is clear: moments of feeling can repair the traumatized, melancholic modern individual; the individual cannot “turn” to affect per se, only be overtaken by its unplanned, unthought emergence. For *A Single Man*, the turn to affect is a spiritually redemptive moment that locates feeling as a fundamentally individual replenishment.-- one that makes the self *more human* in an unfeeling modern world.

If *A Single Man*'s “turn to affect” can be taken as a typically humanist

response, allow me to propose an alternative that strives to challenge the very relationship between feeling and the human in the context of modernity. Given that the preceding chapters have repeatedly turned to artists for answers to theoretical questions, let me turn one last time toward another elegiac aesthetic text about mourning, suicide, and the restorative power of affect—Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001). The risk in this turn is that I will be read as repeating the very unqueer binaries of *A Single Man*: opposing the human to the inhuman, the academic to the artistic, the critical to the aesthetic, male to female, homosexual to heterosexual, mainstream to avant-garde. Yet my goal is not to offer *The Body Artist* as the radical alternative to *A Single Man*. On the contrary, I want to demonstrate that the mainstream and the experimental are united by this common, intriguing, and troubling contemporary turn to affect. Yet I argue that *The Body Artist* provides a more nuanced representation of this turn, because it grapples with the paradoxical way that affect forms a threshold between human perception and an inhuman otherness that is, properly speaking, beyond our control.<sup>6</sup> I conclude that the contemporary turn to affect must do more than challenge insularity and privacy that adheres to modern discourses of feeling. It must, in addition, work to queer the relationship between affect and the individual—as so many experimental writers have done—by grappling with the way that feeling opens the human to the inhuman forces that constitute us.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, the "inhuman" is a complex term that deserves an entire analysis in its own right. I use the term to underscore the ways in which queer experimental texts represent affect as a non-human, pre-subjective "becoming." In doing so, I follow the well-tread path of affect theorists such as Brian Massumi and Gilles Deleuze. See the Introduction for my discussion of Antonio Damasio, who argues that affect reveals the relationship between humans and other species. My use of inhuman thus bridges these two fields of affect theory, and it does not imply any kind of reification of the binary between human and animal. My use of the term is particularly indebted to the work of Elizabeth Grosz. For an analysis of time and the inhuman that is relevant to my reading of *The Body Artist* see especially *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* and *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*.



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Like many of the experimental texts in this dissertation, *The Body Artist* seems designed to frustrate summary. Yet, on the surface, the novel has an incredibly simple plot. *The Body Artist* focuses on Lauren Hartke, a performance artist, who is grieving for her recently deceased husband, Rey Robles. Rey abruptly commits suicide after a lengthy first chapter, which documents, in extreme mundane detail, the couple's last breakfast together. The rest of the novel follows Lauren as she mourns alone in their rented house, returns to her masochistic body exercises, and ultimately develops a new dramatic performance entitled "Body Time." The primary narrative "event" in the text is the arrival of a strange, inexplicable male figure, who mysteriously appears in the house. Mr. Tuttle, as Lauren names him, is the primary fantastical element in the text: he appears to be, at once, young and old, and he speaks English but his sentences are utterly nonsensical and Beckettian in their subtractive, self-canceling nature. Through Lauren's confrontations with Mr. Tuttle, *The Body Artist* tempts readers with a range of interpretative "solutions" to the character's presence. In fact, Lauren experiments with each of these interpretations: that Tuttle is an uncanny projection of her melancholic grief; Rey's ghost from beyond the grave; an escaped patient with a mental disorder such as aphasia; or something truly "alien," from another order of reality altogether (83). Although critics tend to choose one of these solutions, *The Body Artist* remains fundamentally undecidable. However, the novel's purpose is not to affirm undecidability as an end in itself. Rather, as I will show, DeLillo uses the fantastic to explore the two incommensurable orders of reality—the human and the inhuman—and to locate affect as a threshold that passes between these orders, opening the human to an otherness that lies beyond its control.

Published in 2001, *The Body Artist* has generally been read as representing a

turn in the DeLillo's characteristic thematics and form. Unlike his acclaimed, massive, historically epic *Underworld* (1997), *The Body Artist* is a scant 124 pages that sidelines the social and historical to its margins. (The modern world, much like in *A Single Man*, is correlated with violence and seeps in through the newspaper and the radio in brief, wayward references.) The novel also adopts a compressed linguistic form, and it uses this style within a series of experimental narrative techniques, such as second-person address and an extended foray into the fantastic. Concomitant with this style, *The Body Artist* breaks with DeLillo's characteristically bleak irony about the nature of art—his sardonic and depressed sense that the aesthetic has been totally absorbed into the cultural industries of late capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, critics agree that the eponymous “body artist” represents DeLillo's revitalization of the aesthetic. Yet the meaning of this revitalization remains in dispute. For some critics, DeLillo has retreated from the postmodern into a nostalgic “modernism of form.” In Phillip Nel's view, DeLillo has turned away from the social and historical toward “truly eternal subjects—death, life, loss,” locating existential “salvation” in the “ameliorative power of art” (757, 755).<sup>8</sup> For other critics, DeLillo's turn to the aesthetic is, on the contrary, a turn *toward* the political. In their view, DeLillo aligns the aesthetic with the “material” body, and he presents the body as a site of resistance in an increasingly “immaterial” postmodern world.<sup>9</sup> Frequently citing Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic, these critics thus see DeLillo's representation of the body as, in Anne Longmuir's words, “the best hope for autonomy from the dominant culture of late capitalism” (530).

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<sup>7</sup> See especially *Mao II* (1991), although this theme is present in novels as disparate as *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *White Noise* (1985).

<sup>8</sup> For critics that similarly see DeLillo as turning from the postmodern, see Dewey, Maltby, and Bonca.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Tanner, DiPrete, Schuster, and Ingram. For key readings of the novel as paradigmatic of how mourning can resist the culture of postmodernity, see Tanner, Boxall, Keskinen, Schuster, and Dewey.

These critical positions should sound familiar. Effectively, they rehearse the approaches to the ambiguous “politics” of experimental writing that we have surveyed throughout the course of this dissertation. Either experimental writing is seen as a conservative “retreat” from the social into the philosophical or formal, or its retreat is endorsed as a radical aesthetic gesture that can challenge dominant culture through its negativity. My argument has been that these positions must be supplemented with a rigorous consideration of reader relations—the multifarious ways that experimental writing imagines and constructs affective relations with readers in specific historical contexts. My gambit has been that this critical shift displaces the hypodermic model of experimental aesthetics, wherein the work is praised or denounced, but the assumption of its *effectiveness* on readers is never seriously questioned or complicated.

Exemplifying this assumption, critics that praise the novel's “body art” as a political aesthetic or a moral salvation have failed to acknowledge how ironically *ineffective* Lauren's performance is on her audience. Modeled on Japanese Noh drama, her performance begins with a woman checking the time and hailing a taxi; she repeats these gestures countless times, slowing them to an excruciating pace. The performance then culminates in Lauren mimicking Mr. Tuttle's spectral voice and convulsing on stage. As a reviewer of the performance notes, “Hartke clearly wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully. This is what happened, causing walkouts among the less committed” (104). The concept of affective art—of the aesthetic “viscerally” impacting the spectator—has been central to many of the texts in this dissertation, from Burroughs' and Acker's violent assault on the readers' cogito (forcing us to “eat our mind,” in Acker's words) to Winterson's seductions of readers through an “energetic,” embodied poetics. Yet Lauren's annoyed audience

raises a key question: what good is a “visceral” aesthetic if it simply causes the audience to leave, if it fails to ignite any of the transformativ effects that critics and writers yearn to see in the material world? For many critics, including Lauren's reviewer, the walkouts might be the very evidence that the art has 'worked.' Yet *The Body Artist* is much more ambivalent about whether the experimental, despite its visceral transgressions of norms, can elicit social transformation.

What the experimental *can* do, however, is bring audiences into contact with otherness—one that spectators must choose to confront in non-subjective terms. When Lauren shifts into Mr. Tuttle's voice, for example, the reviewer is shocked: “It is speaking to me and I search my friend's face but don't quite see her. I can almost believe she is equipped with male genitals... Or she has trained her upper body to deflate and her lower body to sprout” (109). Lauren has disappeared into an “it,” a voice that speaks but has become de-personalized, not a friend, almost inhuman; at the same time, her body and sex seem to have metaphormized in impossible ways. Yet the reviewer is incapable of confronting this otherness in its otherness, insisting that, in Lauren's performance, “solitary otherness becomes familiar and even personal” (109-10). Lauren is similarly tempted to subjectivize her confrontation with the other. By the end of the novel, Lauren admits that Mr. Tuttle's appearance could be read as “all an erotic reverie. The whole thing was a city built for a dirty thought. She was a sexual hysteric, ha. Not that she believed it” (124). Lauren's laughter could be read as a defense against the true emotional referent of Tuttle—her melancholia and grief at Rey's confounding suicide. Yet, like so many of the texts in this dissertation, *The Body Artist* expresses an antipathy to psychoanalytic interpretation precisely because it reinscribes otherness within the realm of the subject.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in the final page of the

<sup>10</sup> Many psychoanalytic critics would undoubtedly disagree with this claim. One could argue, for example, that psychoanalysis actually reveals such an inhuman otherness, either in the realm of the unconscious (for Freud) or in the void at the

novel, DeLillo reveals that Lauren's mother died when Lauren was nine, and the narration insists “It wasn't her fault. It had nothing to do with her” (124). What does it mean, *The Body Artist* asks, to confront death in its otherness, without conceiving it in relation to us, as 'about' us? What if, the narration asks, “the thing's that's happening [is] so far outside experience that you're forced to make excuses for it, or give it the petty credentials of some misperception? Is reality too powerful for you?” (122). Here the novel points toward an interaction with the other that Lauren's audience and reviewer might have, but failed, to enact—one that would “Take the risk. Believe what you see and hear. It's the pulse of every secret intimation you've ever felt around the edges of your life” (122).

The performative command that articulates this risk is deceptive. Even as it implies an alternative relationship to the senses (accepting the misperceptions of seeing and hearing, intimating a reality pulsing beneath this one), it grammatically inflates subjective agency. This is deceptive precisely because the “risk” here is a becoming that is, in fact, anti-subjective. Mr. Tuttle is the novel's literalization of this anti-subjective otherness. In Lauren's words, “He violates the limits of the human” (100). Tuttle's violations of the human lie in his radical instability—his constant metamorphosis in age and especially his lack of language that coheres into a meaningful system of reference. Lauren strives to relate, confront, empathize, and focalize Tuttle. On the one hand, she fails to greet his otherness outside of her own temporal and discursive frameworks. She names him after a former teacher, making him familiar and personal, and then enjoins him to speak for himself in her own language.<sup>11</sup> “I will give you a chance to tell me who you are,” she explains, “But I will

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'heart' of subjectivity (for Lacan). For such arguments, see Dean, Edelman, and Žižek.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Lauren's greatest violation is to command Tuttle to speak in Rey's language and, at the same time, to frame this command in terms of friendship. “Talk like him [Rey]... Be my friend. A trusted person, this is a friend. Do this for

not wait indefinitely” (46). Although Lauren does not “want it [this command] to sound like a formal warning,” her request is a *formal* warning—a demand that Tuttle conform to her time, to respect the proprietary proscription of her space, and to declare himself in terms she can understand. Such a demand is of course, as Jacques Derrida notes, a fundamental violence, because the other “has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house” (*Hospitality* 15).<sup>12</sup> “If he [or she] was already speaking our language, *with all that implies*, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language,” Derrida asks, “would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him?” (17, my emphasis). *The Body Artist*’s response is an unequivocal “no,” and through Lauren’s inhospitality, the novel provides a wonderfully complex, unsettling picture of the truly incalculable debt that our commonplace sense of ethics has to the implications of a shared language.

Yet Lauren strives, on the other hand, to inhabit Tuttle’s discourse, to listen to his language, to find a way inside of it so that she can share his order of reality. To be sure, this contact also fails to translate into reciprocal community, but it produces a fascinating affective result in Lauren. When Tuttle speaks, in his incantatory chant, she

felt an easing in her body that drew her down out of laborious thought and into something nearly uncontrollable. She leaned into his voice, laughing. She

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me” (71). Her defining friendship here constitutes a radical violence, given the text’s conceit that Tuttle does not in fact understand reference. Thus, her use of the demonstrative “this” refers to her desires, her needs obviously not to an objective definition of friendship.

<sup>12</sup> *The Body Artist* image of the house is central to its staging of hospitality as an ethical confrontation. Yet I should qualify that Lauren is not technically the “master” of the house. She is renting the house and, in the end of the novel, when the landlord returns, she ironically asks, “Who invites who in?” (118). This is because the novel seeks to put into question the questions of mastery, ownership, and control through the metaphors of hospitality.

wanted to chant with him, to fall in and out of time, or words, or things,  
whatever he was doing, but she only laughed instead. 74

At first glance, DeLillo appears to echo *A Single Man*'s binary between "laborious" thought and feeling. Yet this affective encounter does not communicate meaning to Lauren. Despite her framing of Tuttle's discourse as ecstatic, his words merely "ran on, sensuous and empty" (75). The "ecstasy" they provide is marked by "some terror at the edge, or fear of believing, some displacement of self." Tuttle's words thus work toward a limit of language, aiming toward complete nullification, a total lack of signifying content. At this impossible "empty" limit, there is sensuousness, but this feeling is not a subjective projection of feeling. It is a becoming-inhuman of language—a stripping language of its recognizable, legible, communicative, subjective, semantic, and fundamentally *expressive* elements. All that remains, when Tuttle's words are thus stripped, is an incommunicative materiality. When Lauren mimics Tuttle's chant, her voice similarly shifts from a "generic neutered human" to a "dry piping sound, hollow-bodied, like a bird humming on her tongue" (101). At this non-human limit language becomes fundamentally, viscerally affective—it takes on sensual properties (dry, hollow, rhythmic).<sup>13</sup> It consequently strikes at the abstraction of the "generic," sexless, disembodied human.

Here *The Body Artist* echoes the conceit that experimental writing, by canceling its semantic content, pushes to some anti-subjective threshold (the unconscious, the maternal, the animal, the other).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Tuttle's discourse forms

<sup>13</sup> Although they do not go as far as Tuttle's discourse or experimental writing, some recent critics have argued that language is a transmitter of affects that are not expressive of a subject. See, for example, Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* and Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*.

<sup>14</sup> My point is not to conflate these very different forms of otherness. Instead, I merely point out that *The Body Artist* conflates them, mixing idioms of otherness in an anxious attempt to break the priority of the subjective. Of course, this may result in too strong an emphasis on the "inhuman" as opposed to the human, but the passage between these two orders, their threshold of indistinction, is my focus.

the queer limit that many experimental writers aim to cross, a limit of pure sensation that dispels the subject. However, I want to suggest that the novel's insight is to show that this “space” is ultimately uninhabitable by the subject. The other, here, is not merely outside human categories; it partakes of an incommensurable order of reality. Indeed, Lauren wants to chant with Tuttle, but she cannot. Lauren can only approximate with laughter. Laughter signals a desire for collectivity, for social communication; we never laugh alone, and our laughter is always responsive to and in dialogue with some semantic context. Thus, Lauren wishes for Tuttle to “laugh with her, to follow her out of herself” (75). His inability to do so bespeaks a lack of reciprocity with the other, to be sure. But more importantly, it signals the contradictory and incommensurable demand that Lauren makes on the other—to both laugh “with her” and, at the same time, to radically depersonalize.

The unarticulated possibility, of course, is that they would depersonalize into the kind of mystic communion that *A Single Man* affirmed. Yet *The Body Artist* repeatedly challenges this model of revelatory transcendence, reframing such 'moments of clarity' as a solipsism. At breakfast, for example, Lauren sees a blue jay on the feeder, and she believes “She'd never seen a thing so clearly... This must be what it means to see if you've been near blind all your life.” Yet the moment collapses after she tries to inhabit the bird's perspective. She wants to experience the shedding of every knowable surface and process” to achieve an *experience* of otherness, which cannot be, properly speaking, “experienced” (22). Thus, her imagination of the bird's perception circles back to the perception of herself. She imagines the bird “seeing her, a woman with a tea cup in her hand, and and never mind the folding back of day and night, the apparition of space set off from time.” Lauren wishes to disregard the incommensurability between their temporal orders by inhabiting an intersubjective



space outside of time. Yet *The Body Artist* refuses the appropriation of the outside world in terms of subjective experience. Although Lauren feels from the perspective of the blue jay, she admits that perhaps “She was making it happen herself” (22). After Rey's death, Lauren solipsism is even more radically broken because she can no longer perceive the sky “as she used to, as *soul extension*, dumb guttural wonder, a thing that lived outside language in the oldest part of her” (37). The problem with the perception of the material world as “soul extension” is precisely that it prevents an encounter with otherness outside of subjective terms.

More specifically, the problem with Lauren's humanist appropriations of the other is that she wishes to place the other *outside of time* (in an “apparition of space set off from time”). And, although affect lies at a threshold between the human and the inhuman, it is fundamentally within time. Indeed, *The Body Artist* recurrently foregrounds the body's subjection to time. Take, for example, the novel's cover image, which is a detail from Caravaggio's *The Musicians*. With its extreme closeness, the detail reveals the surface cracks in the painting and in the male body it depicts—their material surface is stressed by the wearing of time. When Lauren discovers a foreign hair in her mouth, she similarly confronts this inexorable and fundamentally non-subjective order of time.

Her mouth was still twisted from the experience of sharing some food  
 handler's unknown life or from a reality far stranger and more meandering, the  
 intimate passage of the hair from person to person and somehow mouth to  
 mouth across years and cities and diseases and unclean foods and many  
 baneful body fluids... this is how you live a life even if you don't know it and  
 then she scraped her teeth over her tongue again, for emphasis... 12

Lauren's mouth and tongue are disgusted by the hair's intimation of a corporeal

sublime—it evokes an entire social cosmology and temporality that inheres in the material body and is, paradoxically, beyond the knowledge of the self. This corporeal sublime exceeds the body's performative agency that critics affirm as well as the masochistic control that Lauren exercises over her body. Indeed, after Rey's death, Lauren can no longer master her body's time: her exercises fail to restore a sense of “tightly timed sequence, internally timed, an exactitude she knew in the bones” and, consequently her body is no longer a “little totalitarian society” that she controls. In one astonishing moment, Lauren even finds herself “forgetting how to stand” (37, 57, 33).

Given her previous refusal of an outside order of time, *The Body Artist's* conclusion marks a key shift in Lauren's affective relationship to the inhuman other. In the final moment of the novel, Lauren enters the bedroom she shared with Rey and “threw the window open. She did not know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and *the flow of time in her body*, to tell her who she was” (124, my emphasis). Rather than lament this being-in-time, Lauren now turns toward her embodied location in time, yearning for the force of time, intimated by the material world, to affect her body. Earlier in the novel, Lauren insists that wind “strips you of assurances, working into you, continuous, making you feel the hidden thinness of everything around you” (93). By contrast, the wind at the conclusion of the novel—sea tang felt on Lauren's face—indicates Lauren opens to the wind's undoing of the self's assurances, its (re)orienting of subjectivity through its external order of continuity.

Is Lauren's turn toward the sea, and to the forces of time, the transcendent modernist gesture that critics have claimed? I would suggest, to the contrary, that *The Body Artist's* ending is an affirmative return to the mundane and the subjective. To be

sure, Lauren has encountered the otherness of time, and she now allows it to “tell her who she [is]” rather than appropriate it into the scales of human time and subjective agency. Moreover, *The Body Artist* has replaced her sense of revelatory perception about the material world with a far more tentative self-knowledge. Yet Lauren is also no longer “maybeing.” Insofar as her narrative is a reparative working through of grief, Lauren has stepped back from the absolute inhuman and non-subjective threshold of otherness, most strongly associated with death. In this respect, *The Body Artist* positions affect as a force that passes, ambiguously, between a human and inhuman order, and it ultimately returns us to the human and the subjective, although with some crucial differences. Lauren is now open to the inhuman forces of time and thus to the complex, material relation between the human and the inhuman; she is also now able to access a feeling of futurity—a possibility for change and difference. Note, by contrast, that Mr. Tuttle cannot experience the relationship to time that Lauren does. As she explains, “Past, present and future are not amenities of language. Time unfolds into the seams of being. It passes through you, making and shaping. But not if you are him” (99). Indeed, Tuttle is “independent of the logic of time,” lacking its “narrative,” and he is thus incapable of making divisions, distinctions, and sequences out of time (91, 92). Consequently, he ‘experiences’ time as “overwhelmingly there, laid out, unoccurring” (77). But he does not ‘experience’ time because he “hasn’t learned the language. There has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and he is a stranger at this crossing, without words or bearings” (99). By insisting that time exists outside of language, *The Body Artist* foregrounds the incommensurability between the inhuman and the human. But it affirms the ambiguous relation between these two orders, the “imaginary point” that entwines subjectivity, language, embodiment, and affect and roots us in a relation

to the material world.

Returning Lauren to this human order might read as a less than radical gesture, a conservation of the human and of individual identity. Yet I believe the novel suggests that, without an affective relation between the human and the inhuman, there is no possibility of becoming otherwise, no hope of transformation and change. After all, Tuttle's future is "simultaneous, somehow, with the present. Neither happens before or after the other, and they are equally accessible, perhaps, if only in his mind" (77). In his extreme disjuncture from the human grammar of time, Tuttle slips backwards into another version of solipsism—stuck in his mind, profoundly incapable of perceiving or distinguishing difference and therefore change. By contrast, Lauren's opening of the window signifies an opening to the outside—a putting her body into relation with the outside and its shared, if different, temporal order. A window, like a body, inhabits a liminal threshold between inside and outside; it is a technology of choice and control, to be sure, a way of keeping out the wind when we want, so to speak. But, of course, this control is limited—a closed window cannot stop a hurricane, and likewise, we cannot barrier ourselves from all the elements that, like death, finally exceed human control. Yet, we can put ourselves in relation to these elements, partially, opening ourselves, and being opened by, what lies beyond the human and its subjective order.

Placed alongside so much postmodern philosophy and fiction—which strives to cross this limit once and for all, in a radical unbinding of self—*The Body Artist* might seem to offer a conservative logic of becoming. However, I believe the novel's insight is to reposition this limit as an immanent one. As long as we find ourselves in time, alive and embodied, then we cannot cross, finally, this threshold into otherness. However, a continual turn towards affect—an otherness that is both within and

without us, folding the body inside, outside, and back—might offer one way to be in relation to the inhuman structures that force, impel, shape and make us, even if they lie beyond our perception and control.

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Is *The Body Artist's* turn toward affect, ultimately, so different from Falconer's in *A Single Man*? After all, *A Single Man* and *The Body Artist* both provide narratives of loss in which the melancholic subject is spiritually and aesthetically repaired through a confrontation with feeling. In the case of *A Single Man*, these moments offer “clarity.” By contrast, *The Body Artist* rigorously qualifies and undermines moments that appear to provide such a clear vision on the world; it radically questions the stability of identity and perception, and it positions affect as a paradoxically queer force of instability and subjective becoming. The queer body of feeling in *The Body Artist* is a body not located in time. It is an otherness that, through a kind of “contact,” enables queer effects in the body of the artist and, potentially, the audience. Yet both narratives frame transformation in largely subjective, if not individualistic, terms. Although *The Body Artist* differentiates between the human and the inhuman, it nonetheless defines the meaning of becoming in terms of a single self. It is also worth asking whether *The Body Artist's* attention to the other similarly retreats from social and historical considerations. Note, for example, that Mr. Tuttle's voice indicates something “unconnected to income levels or verb tenses or what his parents watch on TV” (50). In this sense, neither text offers a complex consideration of the variegated relationship between affect and the social. Neither positions affect as a bridge toward collective politics, nor do they confront the ambiguous way that modernity has paradoxically unleashed affect as a signifier and correlate of futurity, becoming, and possibility.

Yet I argue, nonetheless, that the “turn to affect” represented in these texts—and in this dissertation as a whole—is a salutary gesture that places affect, feeling, and embodiment at the center of the critical analysis of becoming. *A Single Man* reveals how, against the film's manifest intentions, the discourse of feeling can flatten into a cliché that justifies the current social order, thereby preventing a collective becoming. *The Body Artist* underscores the obstructions to becoming presented by subjectivity, and it explores the possibility that affect forges a relation to the otherness that lies outside our perception and control. Perhaps it will take, as Samuel Delany suggests (in Chapter 2), a “radical reader” to narrate the affective disorientations of *The Body Artist* into history. Perhaps such a reader could link its affective art to a “bad timing” of modernity--a perversion and subversion and redirection of the profit-oriented body. Yet my goal has been different. I have shown how experimental texts, like *The Body Artist*, can, in their own language, direct an affective charge at readers, forcing us to consider such radical readings as possibilities. While I have illuminated these charges, it also true that they 'exist' as something unreadable in the letter of the text, something transmitted beyond its words and its “content,” something other that impels us without our knowing it. If we can turn with this force, then perhaps it can push us toward new paths for becoming other that cannot be plotted. Of course, we can always fail to turn or, rather, we can, like Lauren's audience, simply turn toward the exit sign. But there are possibilities and pleasures in turning toward the other. Although they cannot be predicted, they can be sensed indirectly, like the force of the wind as it flows across the surface of our body. The queerness of experimental writing lies in the windows it opens for us onto this limit and in the future turnings it thus makes possible.

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