ATTITUDE PROBLEMS:

LATE CAPITALIST DESIRE AND THE PSYCHOPOLITICS OF QUEER AMERICAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that early twenty-first century queer American fiction gives form to an anti-capitalist aesthetics and politics of desire. The project asks, what can queer fiction tell us about the obstacles facing a radical cultural politics in the contemporary United States? My tentative answer is that a new queer cultural politics is already coming into definition through critical and creative attention to the psychopolitics of desire. Queer experiments with the form and function of fiction at the turn of the millennium take shape around historically-specific ideas about desire. Queer fiction interprets desire as simultaneously determined by our environments and also resistant to social conditioning; as disruptive to our participation in political life, and also the very force that makes politics possible. The dramas of self-constitution, the messy, politically inconvenient desires, and the experiments with aesthetic form that populate twenty-first century queer fiction, I argue, indicate the formation of a new consciousness, from within queer artistic and political circles, attuned to the historical processes of subjection that distinguish late capitalism from earlier periods of global political and economic development. I take up the work of Saidiya Hartman, John Keene, Derek McCormack, Bruce Norris, and Hanya Yanagihara, demonstrating how the political stakes of their aesthetic production revolve around a fascination with desire as an enduring problem for late capitalist politics, art, and theory. Generating an anti-capitalist language of desire takes on great urgency as these writers grapple with the seeming intractability of the political present, the fraught position of minoritarian knowledge production within U.S. empire, and the earth-sundering crises punctuating our descent into an increasingly unlivable world. At the intersection of Marxist, psychoanalytic, and biopolitical theory, the project offers a psychopolitical foundation for a queer cultural politics that can upend our formation as desiring subjects, or late capitalist subjects of desire.

To my mom and dad

the first queer theorists I ever knew

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INTRODUCTION

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The last story in John Keene's *Counternarratives*, "The Lions," takes the form of a dialogue between the dictator of an unnamed African country, known only as the Deliverer, and his prisoner, known as the Prophet. The Deliverer usurped the Prophet, his predecessor, and now holds him captive. Gradually, through dialogue, Keene reveals the nature of their relationship. The Prophet was once the Deliverer's mentor. He taught him the ways of war and state propaganda: how to out-maneuver opponents, manipulate a population, stifle dissent. The two dictators were also childhood best friends. As boy-soldiers, they fought in the same war of national liberation. They went to school together; they plotted the overthrown of their country's former regime together, as friends do. And they were, for a time, lovers.

Chained, disfigured, and stewing in his own feces, the Prophet listens as the Deliverer recalls the night twenty years ago when they first had sex. "The smell of death" lingered near, "nearer than the tips of our noses."[1] The sound of their bodies slipping against one another mixes with the blare of "intermittent gunfire, later mines going off, the rockets, the ground a rattle beneath our soles."[2] In the Deliverer's descriptions, the ecstatic release of satisfying long-held desires through sexual intercourse mingles with the heat of artillery, the invigoration of domination, and the pristine hygienic fantasies of ethnic cleansing. Muddying the boundaries of desire from its strict assignation in the intrapersonal and interpersonal, public and private—

[1] John Keene, *Counternarratives* (New York: New Directions Books, 2015), 281.
[2] Ibid.

swimming through the individual body up to the body-politic—the eroticisms of sex and postcolonial nation-building suffuse one another. Sexuality, the categorization of one's sexual attractions, fantasies, preferred objects and acts, or lack thereof, into a discrete set of functions—or a set of desires closed off from, say, your politics or your aspirations for work—dissolves. Keene leaves us with something much more amorphous. Its expansiveness is what blurs its politics. We are left with desire: unruly, expansive, totalizing.

By placing "The Lions" at the end of *Counternarratives*, Keene ends his triumphant 2015 short story collection on a pretty bleak note. The stories collected in *Counternarratives* are tales of subaltern subjects mostly defying, not recapitulating, colonial power. Each of the thirteen short stories in *Counternarratives* is set at some point in the history of transatlantic Euro-American colonization and slavery. Almost exclusively, they are narrated from the perspectives of queer Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic people. Occasionally drawing from real historical events—and occasionally blurring the lines between what is historical fact and what is fiction—*Counternarratives* offers speculative retellings of colonial histories of oppression that seek to move beyond the historical record as the authority on what happened, why, and how. Reconfiguring the standpoint of history from the position of the oppressed, Keene's collection represents a critical-creative engagement with the histories of colonialism, white supremacy, and slavery that upends the ways of knowing that are imbedded in the archive and that are reproduced by the narratives we use to talk about history in the present. The result is a powerful collection that confronts the very epistemological foundations that sustain colonialism's legacies.

There is a distinct pedagogical force to Keene's stories, as Matt Brim observes in his

account of *Counternarratives* as a "Black queer reader."[3] Brim, who teaches *Counternarratives* in his classes on Black queer literature, offers up Keene's collection as a useful foundation for literary scholars to teach their students, not just Black queer texts, but Black queer *reading methods*. He makes this argument by describing the effects that Keene achieves through his experiments with form. Throughout his collection, Keene experiments with the form of the short story, drawing on conventions from poetry and academic scholarship, and infusing his prose with wildly different stylistic, technical, and generic choices. The events of one story in *Counternarratives*, "Gloss on a History of Roman Catholics in the Early American Republic, 1790-1825; or the Strange History of Our Lady of the Sorrows," occurs mostly in a seventy-plus-page footnote. In that story, Keene explodes the conventions of the footnote, deploying the method of citation normally used to bury claims or advance minor ideas subsidiary to the larger text to create a striking contrast between the "central" text, a review of a history of the early United States, and the fugitive histories of struggle richly unraveled in the much larger subtext. As Brim argues, Keene's confrontations with colonialism and its legacies are not just thematic but formal and epistemological as well. The form of the stories themselves seems to direct the reader's attention in ways that demands a closer inspection of hegemonic interpretative practices, reading methods, and hierarchies of value, knowledge, and taste that inculcate us into accepting the current world on its anti-Black, anti-queer terms. Through formal experimentation, Brim argues, *Counternarratives* makes certain hermeneutical demands on its readers: "to read in the service of black knowledge practices, including black thought, teaching, intellectualism, and genius, and thereby connect black knowing and black being."[4]

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[3] Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the* University (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 177.
[4] Ibid.

Let's look at another story in the collection as an example. In the seventh story, "Rivers," Keene challenges the white liberal tendency to concede to the centrality of white supremacy within our moral and ethical paradigms. "Rivers" is narrated by James Alton Rivers. Rivers is a reimagined version of Jim from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Keene renders Jim/Rivers as a free person of color and former Union Army soldier. A reporter comes to talk with Rivers about his travels before the war with Huck. In a startling revision to Twain's original novel, Rivers reveals that Huck enlisted during the war to fight for the Confederacy. Rivers recalls the moment when him and Huck came face-to-face on the battlefield. He describes how Huck's rage toward the possibility of slavery's abolition deindividuated him among the masses of other enraged white Confederates. Huck's face, Rivers recalls, was blurred among "a hundred of that face, those faces, burnt, determined, hard and thinking only of their own disappearing universe, not ours."[5] In Brim's reading of "Rivers," Keene's description of Huck represents white supremacy as an ideology that anonymizes and compromises the individual subjectivities of *white people*. In this way "Rivers" echoes Frantz Fanon's suggestion that the colonizer's identity becomes dependent upon the colonized. For Rivers, however, the circuit does not run the other way. Rivers acts with the independence, agency, and conscience that Twain once assigned to Huck over-and-against Jim as his fumbling sidekick and servant. In Keene's story, Huck's sense of self is entirely dependent upon his version of reality distorted through the lens of white supremacy. This reality, Keene instructs us, is a minor and "disappearing" one separate from the greater fabric of human history, of which white supremacy and colonial are a tragic aberration. By granting Rivers the "choice to kill," Brim argues, Keene displaces the sympathy that we are commonly solicited to grant toward racists and instead reassigns that sympathy to Rivers.

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[5] Keene, *Counternarratives*, 236.

Entering readers into an alternate version of Twain's story where whiteness is not central to how to live or be, Keene creates a new narrative that works "in the service of blackness."[6]

"Rivers" illustrates how Keene's experiments with the form of fiction allows for radical epistemological reorientation. Playing with tropes, canonical texts, genre conventions, and norms of violence and hierarchies of value, Keene enacts a kind of narrative subterfuge. Keene pushes his readers to throw off assumptions about how to live or act that reaffirm the general acceptance of racist violence as an inevitable dimension of the political present. But how, then, does "The Lions" fit into a project that wants to open up our sense of possibility for what the present and future might hold? Set in the near-future twenty-first century, "The Lions" seems to suggest that we are only hurtling toward a world that is more drenched in violence, more apocalyptic and horrid than the one we have now. A story about two gay genocidal African dictators is not likely to inspire much optimism about the futures of Black queer struggle. If anything, Keene's transfiguration of the trope of the postcolonial dictator into a queer figure—queering dictatorship?—seems like nothing more than a cynical joke about the repressed homosexuality of authoritarian macho-men.

"The Lions" befuddles our attempts to situate it within a celebratory account of *Counternarratives* as a compendium of tales about Black queer resistance *alone*. But could it be that "The Lions" is actually a work of resistance—just not the kind of resistance that looks like heroism, like fugitives kill their oppressors or stealing into the night, the kind of representations of defiant resistance that populate our collective imagination of *what it means to defy power?* Maybe the act of resistance that Keene commits in "The Lions" is to reconfigure what we mean

[6] Brim, *Poor Queer Studies*, 170.

by resistance itself: what it takes to truly transform the world we have now, lest we want to end up like the one we see in "The Lions."

Like the other works of contemporary queer American fiction studied in this dissertation, "The Lions" refuses the common queer critical gesture to recuperate subaltern, colonized, or oppressed peoples as the agents of more just, beautiful alternatives to the ways we live now. Contemporary queer fiction, including "The Lions," refuses what Kadji Amin calls queer theory's "romance of the alternative."[7] Instead of providing us with moral, ethical, and political exemplars who we can hold up as the forebearers of an idealized world-to-come, the characters in "The Lions" force us to grapple with the more inconvenient parts of studying people and their relationships to oppression: the simple fact that people are complex, messy, and often do things that do not make them easily available to use as profiles in virtue. The Deliverer and the Prophet may have endured colonial violence, but they also reproduce those same systems. They are both the victims of Western imperialist oppression and morally reprehensible. This combination, of being in a structural position of subjugation and also being cruel, manipulative, and maybe even just downright evil, usually dooms an object to fall outside the realm of interest of Queer Studies.

For good reason, of course. Queer Studies already exists in a disadvantageous position in the academy, culture, and society. When Queer Studies scholarship is widely dismissed as unserious and under vicious legislative and administrative attacks for being "woke," and when institutions do everything in their power to distract Queer Studies scholars from the very reasons they do their work in the first place—to make the world better for people who live on its margins—it helps to have objects of study that make the case for our work for us. When queer

[7] Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

and trans people are under constant threat of being wiped out of existence, there seems to be little good reason to spend precious time drawing lines of affiliation between trans and queer people and rapists, abusers, murders, pedophiles, and dictators. Why, then, does a story like "The Lions" exist? What is it doing as the bookend to the tales of resistance collected in Keene's *Counternarratives*? Why should "The Lions," and similar stories like it that raise potentially uncomfortable representations of queer people, deserve the attention of Queer Studies scholars?

I want to suggest that "The Lions," rather than being inconvenient to the work of Queer Studies, actually tells us something about potential directions for queer cultural politics. "*Queer cultural politics*" is my way of describing strategic interventions in the libidinal economies that organizes and sustain the uneven distribution of life and death under late capitalism. Such interventions could take the form of art, organizing, media, education, or any variety of cultural practices. A queer cultural politics is set apart from other forms of cultural practice by their foundation in a grounded analysis of the historical processes of oppression and a keen awareness of potential sites of intervention, with the goal of bringing about a world where the possibilities for life, labor, and the human imagination are freed from their stuffocation in the inefficient and cruel capitalist mode of production. Queer cultural politics is an indispensable tool in what Fredric Jameson describes as the mission of Marxist critical inquiry: to assist "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity."[8] As I will argue later in this introduction, however, queer theory's insights cannot and should not be subsumed beneath a greater umbrella of Marxist analysis. Queer cultural politics is primed to offer contributions distinct from that of a Marxist cultural politics, as also described by Jameson, because of queer

[8] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981/1982), 19.

theory's position at the intersections of many different theoretical fields, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Foucauldian discourse analysis, and the critiques of libidinal economy it can offer as a result. [9] Queer theory provides critiques of society, culture, and politics that improve upon the failures of Marxist analyses that fail to consider the primacy of identity, desire, and the psyche in the constitution of modes of production and subjection. If anything, it is the strains of anti-identitarian Marxism that needs to catch up to queer theory, not the other way around.

For right now, I want to show how "The Lions" reveals and remediates late capitalist processes of subjection. I will develop a brief reading of "The Lions" to introduce this project's interest in the production of subjects under twenty-first century late capitalism as "desiring subjects," or subjects of desire.[10] In this short story, I argue, Keene's continued practice of revising canonical works of Western literature allows him to elevate concerns about desire and power from the source material into a postcolonial context. "The Lions" develops a critique of the affective, symbolic, and libidinal orders that linger from colonialism and their enduring hold on the political present. At the same time, Keene represents desire as something that is both structured by historical processes and yet snags and tears as we go down the path history has seemingly laid out for us. The story points toward the necessity of critical methods and political movements attuned to desire's fundamental and antagonistic position within the political. Failure to do so may deliver us a world that we do not want and yet cannot help but usher into being.

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[9] My favorite working definition of libidinal economy that I have found comes in a footnote in the introduction to *Afropessimism: An Introduction*: "Libidinal economy—the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification, of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revolutions, and phobias—the whole structure of psychic and emotional life–that are unconscious and invisible but that have a visible effect on the world, including the money economy." See "Introduction," in *Afropessimism: An Introduction*, eds. Anonymous (Minneapolis: Racked and Dispatched, 2017), 7.

[10] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1984/1990), 5.

"The Lions"

There is a historical significance to the way Keene represents desire in "The Lions," particularly the way that he builds dramatic tension around desire as a field of overlapping problems. Keene represents desire as something that crosses over the boundaries that typically delineate sexuality from other forms of desire. It is hard to summarize what social, psychic, and bodily functions make up sexuality, or sexual identity. In 1991, Eve Sedgwick rightly observed that "sexual identity" is meant to organize so many different parts of ourselves that its precise use is effectively impossible. Much of what Sedgwick wrote then remains true today. When an American in 2024 talks about someone's "sexual identity," they could just as easily be referring to someone's chromosomal composition ("biological sex"), their preferred sexual acts or fantasies, the "masculinity or femininity of your preferred partner," "your self-perception as gay or straight," and/or "your community of cultural and political identification," just to name a few.[11] In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes sexuality as "a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another."[12] Interpersonal attraction is just one minor component of sexuality; and indeed, the phrase "interpersonal attraction" could itself obscure how the discourse of sexuality tries to reason the gender of our chosen objects with our fetishes, neuroses, fantasies, and other patterns of behavior that are not necessarily particular to our attraction to individual objects or even broad characteristics shared among people, like being attracted to the

[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press), 7.
[12] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978/1990), 105-106.

same sex. But "The Lions" seems to render desire in a way that seems to respond not just to the idea of sexuality broadly, but the recuperation of sexual desires and political identities predicated upon them as necessarily radical or defiant of an oppressive social order. In short, Keene represents desire in a way that throws into question the politics of queer sexuality.

Keene achieves this through his representation of a particular form of desire: attachment. Attachment, as I describe in Chapter Two, refers to enduring bonds that connect a subject to an object that plays a significant role in the subject's identity, sense of purpose, and their very ability to make meaning out of their lives.[13] Our attachments can be anchored in any kinds of objects, real or abstract—actual people, colors, works of art, ideas about the family or the nation—and we organize our lives around these objects because retaining proximity to them—either real physical proximity or imagined proximity—affirms something central to our self-constitution. These objects of heightened significance are what Lauren Berlant calls "objects of desire,"[14] and what Ben Anderson, building on Berlant, calls "promissory objects."[15] An object of desire is a "cluster of promises," Berlant writes. Our attachments are necessarily "enigmatic:" our desire for the object of our attachments exceeds the qualities of the object as it may appear to another person, not because we are irrational, but because objects come to represent things that we want for ourselves and that we believe our proximity to the object may ultimately provide.[16] My attachment to the color blue, which fills my wardrobe and home furnishings and covers my

[13] The work of Donald Winnicott and Judith Butler are particularly influential to my understanding of attachment as a psychopolitical structure. See the introduction to Chapter Two for my full definition of attachment and relevant sources. See the section "Interdependence in Subjection" in Chapter One for my discussion of Butler and Winnicott on attachment.
[14] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 23.
[15] Ben Anderson, "Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises," Dialogues in Human Geography 13, no. 3 (October 2022), 3.
[16] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 23.

walls and jewelry, may be because it helps me identify myself as mysterious, ineffable, and regal, and I so desperately want to seem those things because being above it all will make me feel safer and happier. Our attachments give shape to our lives insofar that our proximity to them makes us feel like us: continuity of our attachments "provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world."[17] We need to have attachments in order to have selves at all. And yet, at the same time, our attachments can actively prevent us from doing things that would ensure our survival or flourishing. In some cases, giving in to an attachment that we are better off not acting on—like, say, our attachments to an abusive partner or claustrophic hometowns—may actually compromise the mature identities that we fight so hard to constitute over the course of our lives.[18]

Hard-fought identities constituted through the pursuit of political ideals—or, as Berlant would say, "the desire for the political"[19]—comes into contradiction with the attachment to the object of desire that both inspired, sustained, and also proves inconvenient to that same pursuit in "The Lions." For the Deliverer, that object of desire is the Prophet. The Deliverer's sexual attraction to the Prophet is formed through, not alongside, his desire for power, organized within a fantasy of the liberate, postcolonial, culturally pure nation-state as a political horizon. Now, with the Prophet as his prisoner, the Deliverer has no tangible reason to keep the Prophet alive. All of the Prophet's family members, friends, children, and allies are dead. His image and legacy

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[17] Ibid. 24.
[18] This is a key point that I draw from Butler, and which I use in Chapter One to establish a connection between Butler's concept of attachment and Winnicott's concept of regression. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 8-9.
[19] Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 224.

have been meticulously purged from public record, media, and discourse, except for brief mentions in the Deliverer's speeches, as an object of critique. "You are not even the ghost of a recollection anymore," The Deliverer tells him.[20] If anything, keeping the Prophet alive is a liability, a potential crack in the Deliverer's carefully-orchestrated narratives of his total authority over the truth. But he decides to keep him alive anyway, tucked in a room at the end of the world where only the Deliverer can access him.

Eventually Keene reveals that the Deliverer has intended to kill the Prophet and yet has struggled to do so for months, if not years—it is not clear how long the Prophet has been held captive. The Prophet has the supernatural ability to hear things that normal people cannot, like the type of watch someone is wearing or their emotional state. As the Deliverer approaches to kill the Prophet at long last, the Prophet reads the Deliverer's mind. "I hear you thinking that having to do this distresses you more than anything," the Prophet says, "disgusts and dismays you, I hear you thinking this distress won't even kindle into rage, you will transform it somehow into indifference."[21] In their dialogue, the Deliverer expounds on the virtues of fearlessness. He claims the Prophet's own demonstration of fearlessness when they were boys is what solicited his political loyalty and his erotic desire at once. Even the Deliverer must admit that fear is a necessary precursor to fearlessness, however. The Deliverer admits a range of anti-colonial figures, citing Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Toussaint Louverture. and Patrice Lumumba as some of his inspirations. What they all shared was fear at the possibility of death and perseverance in the face of it: "Of course they were frightened," he says, "but they were fearless nonetheless."[22] The Prophet reveals that the fear at the center of the Deliverer's own principled

[20] Keene, *Counternarratives*, 299.
[21] Ibid. 302
[22] Ibid. 298

fearlessness is the fear of having to kill the Prophet. At the very same moment he became so attached to the Prophet as an expression of his desire to be fearlessness, the core of this fearlessness, it's very precondition, would take root in his being as that very same desire for the Prophet, and the fear that he would one day have to destroy the very object of desire that organizes his identity in the first-place. The Deliverer "knew it would come to this," the Prophet continues, broadcasting the Deliverer's thoughts, "I would have to rid of you, I would have to destroy you, eliminate you," and this made the Prophet "almost painful" to look at that night twenty years ago, as now.[23]

If the Deliverer's desire for the political (his ideal political horizon and his imaged place within it) is constituted through his attachment to the Prophet, his desire for the Prophet is both the precondition for and an impediment to the realization of that same desire.[24] This psychic impediment manifests in the material present as his hesitation to kill the Prophet. For all we know, this same hesitation/fear could have had determinative effects in his rise to power. In fact, the only thing ensured the Deliverer's victory over the Prophet—who are equally matched in skill, strategy, and their different supernatural abilities—is that the Prophet hesitated himself to stop the Deliverer in his rise to power. Both of Keene's dictators are fascists, yet the only thing that distinguishes one more vicious form of fascism from the other is the Deliverer's ability to momentarily suspend the contradictions that his desires present to his political ambitions. He wins, and the Prophet loses, for the simple reason that he was able to push through the illogic desire, to deny the opacity of himself to himself. Perhaps this is a minor but important point

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[23] 304

[24] I define "politics" or "the political" in the simple, elegant terms offered by Caroline Levine: politics is "what gives shape to collective life." See Caroline Levine, "Three Unresolved Debates," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (October 2017), 1239.

about fascism's demand for transparency: embracing the irrationality of desire may be the antidote to the fascist imperative to see the world as objective and never mediated by representation, identification, and language.[25]

Attachment is a useful way to think about what exactly is happening in "The Lions." Despite everything the Deliverer has done to secure power for himself, his attachment to the Prophet—again, an attachment that also galvanized his rise to power, long serving as the Prophet's right-hand—presents itself as the formative desire he must disavow, bury, and rationally distance himself from in order to maintain the identity he has constituted in the social and political realm. The form of "The Lions," structured around the disavowal and revelation of this desire that both organizes the Deliverer's identity and must be stifled to sustain that identity, builds on its source material in this way. While retaining the original text's similar focus—what I will simply call its focus on attachment, even if the authors would not use that word—Keene also transfigures the meaning of the dramatic tension in the original through his choice both to place the story in a contemporary postcolonial context and to make his two dictatorial, male characters sexually bound to one another. The philosophical underpinnings of the source material can be elaborated here to draw out a useful comparison.

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[25] Also in "Queer and Now," Sedgwick draws comparisons between the New Right's campaigns against art education and the Nazi's demand for "the instant, unmediated, and universal accessibility of all the sign systems of art." In Butler's work on fantasy, which I discuss in Chapter Three, and which just so happens to be on the work of much-banned artists Robert Mapplethorpe, they come to the paradoxical but enlightening conclusion that the only way to truly ensure the safety of queer people and women is to relinquish control of the ways those categories are represented, in order to "safeguard the uncontrollability of the signified." The unpredictability of signification is what provides the grounds for subjectivity to break from the repetition of the Symbolic, and therefore, to create opportunities to reconstitute the real through its mediation in fantasy. See Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 17; and Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1990): 121.

I have it on good authority that "The Lions" is inspired by "The Grand Inquisitor" in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*.[26] Similar to "The Lions," "The Grand Inquisitor" is designed as an exchange between two characters, one a captor and one a prisoner, though in Dostoevsky's story the character in the prisoner role never speaks. "The Grand Inquisitor" also has a different frame narrative than "The Lions." While Keene's short story is a discrete text, bound unto itself—the only frame it has, implicitly, is the greater frame of Counternarratives as a collection—Dostoevsky's tale is actually a prose poem spoken by one of the titular brothers, Ivan, to his brother Alyosha. The story is not totally separated out from the rest of the novel: it is framed within Ivan's speech, and Alyosha and Ivan regularly interrupt the story to discuss its contents, which Ivan has not actually written down by committed to memory. Still, the essential components of the two stories, including the implicit ideological messages imbedded in their material, remain the same.

In Ivan's story, Jesus, longing to be among humanity again, decides he will momentarily return to Earth. He lands in sixteenth-century Seville. He is instantly recognized by the people of the city as the Son of God and begins performing miracles. Only a few moments pass, however, before he is imprisoned by the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition, without so much as a word of protest from the crowd, who solemnly back away from Jesus under the Inquisitor's command.

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[26] As of March 2024 there is no publicly-available document confirming the connection to Dostoevsky. It is factual, however, that "The Lions" draws from "The Grand Inquisitor." I know this because Keene told me himself in personal correspondence I had with him over email in February 2024. He also cited the work of Ralph Ellison, Robert Bolaño, Jon Fosse, Harold Pinter, Maryse Condé, Caryl Churchill, Frantz Fanon, and Amílcar Cabral. He suggested that I was the first person to point out the connection between "The Lions" and "The Grand Inquisitor" to him. For that I must share the bragging rights with Vanita Neelakanta, who first introduced me to this famous excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov* when I was her student in college.

The Inquisitor admonishes Jesus for his decision to return. While the irony of a Church authority punishing Jesus for coming back to Earth is rich, Ivan is quite clear that the Inquisitor's rationale is, in fact, quite solid. The Inquisitor reasons that Jesus greatly misunderstands the nature of humanity. He refers back to Satan's temptations of Jesus depicted in the Gospels. Each of the temptations represented an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate his divinity, which, both Satan and the Inquisitor reason, would lead the people to bow before him unquestionably, allowing him to establish a heavenly kingdom on Earth. But Jesus refuses. He does not want obedience from humanity, but love won through their faith. Demonstrating his power would remove the need for faith. The Inquisitor, however, argues that Jesus places too much faith in humanity himself. People are fickle, he argues; the only thing that they want is for their basic needs to be met. People will bow before whoever provides for their basic needs. In coming back to Earth, Jesus threatens to undo the important work of the institutions that have been established in his absence to provide people an infrastructure for how to live. Apparatuses like the Church provide people with arbitrary confines within which they can live their lives. Most people, he reasons, are incapable of handling the burden of true freedom—the weight of consequences borne from the ability to make real decisions—so such tasks should be left to the few who can handle those gargantuan responsibilities, like the Inquisitor.

The Inquisitor intends to prevent Jesus from disrupting the work of the Church. At the end of his long speech, however, Jesus, who has not said a word, rises from the floor of his cell and kisses the Inquisitor on the lips. "'That is all the answer,'" Ivan says. "'The Grand Inquisitor shudders. There is a convulsive twitch at the corner of his mouth."[27] The Inquisitor opens the

[27] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. H.P. Blavatsky (Project Gutenberg: 1880/2010), n.p. Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8578/8578-h/8578-h.htm.

door to Jesus's cell and tells him to leave, never to return. The story ends with Ivan's observation about the Inquisitor's efforts to bury what Jesus' kiss as stirred within him: "The kiss burns his heart, but the old man remains firm in his own ideas and unbelief."[28]

Within the story-world of Dostoevsky's novel, "The Grand Inquisitor" is an expression of Ivan's struggle atheism. Seeing the widespread suffering in the world around him, Ivan finds it hard to retain his faith. The Inquisitor's philosophies about humanity's need for material and not spiritual salvation is not so far from Ivan's. But, like the Inquisitor, there is still a dormant thread of desire that tethers him to his faith. He narrates the story to his brother Alyosha in part because he wants to communicate his own internal struggle with his faith to his more optimistic, devout brother. The act of narrating the story is itself an expression of desire for his brother as a object who represents Ivan's lingering hope that he might rediscover his faith one day—his brother as the promissory object, his story a mechanism to draw his brother close.

Within Dostoevsky's novel as a whole, "The Grand Inquisitor" might also be read as an expression of Dostoevsky's skepticism toward Russian socialism. In a passing reference to "The Grand Inquisitor" in his essay "On Ideology," Louis Althusser points to the "anti-socialist theme of the 'Grand Inquisitor'" as an early form of anti-socialist class struggle that makes socialism out as a form of totalitarianism. Dostoevsky does not necessarily render The Inquisitor/Ivan as a parody of socialism so much as an expression of socialism's well-meaning but nonetheless spiritually bankrupt philosophy.[29] Ivan's description of Jesus' kiss stirring a fire within the Inquisitor expresses his own buried investment in his Christian faith. The Inquisitor must quell the feelings that Jesus's kiss raises for him because they contradict everything that he has tried to

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Louis Althusser, "On Ideology," *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 1995/2014), 177.

build over the course of his life. Yet desire—the formative attachments that compelled the Inquisitor to join the Church, or the sense of injustice and hope that continues to endure in Ivan—persists. Attachment's place at the core of the identities and principles that Ivan and the Inquisitor try to maintain, and the antagonism that attachment presents to those very identities/principles, are Dostoevsky's way of suggesting that no matter how persuasive or effective socialism is, people truly cannot live on bread alone.

"The Lions" is not an expression of anti-socialist philosophy, to be clear. But, like Dostoevsky, Keene also represents the disruptive appearance of a formative attachment from within the hard-fought political identity it organizes to make a point about the dangerous organization of the political present. Socialist rhetoric is also a subject of critique in "The Lions," but only insofar as Marxist critique can and has been co-opted to guarantee the enduring oppression of postcolonial subjects through colonial technologies.

Keene has cited Robert Mugabe as a source of inspiration for the character of the Deliverer. Like Mugabe, the Deliverer rails against the evils of Western colonialism from a Marxist-Leninist perspective.[30] He decries the "American and European master devils" who "rain bombs down upon us," and he declares his intentions to create a nation free of Western economic, military, and cultural influence.[31] While his rhetoric may address legitimate concerns about Western neocolonialism, however, his critique is distorted through colonial epistemologies. He admits that he only offers truncated, de-fanged critiques of colonialism to his people as a way of energizing the population to keep himself in power. "Patriotic dramas,

[30] Jeffrey Allen Renard, "An Interview with John Keene," *Big Other*, April 5, 2022. Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://bigother.com/2022/04/05/an-interview-with-john-keene-by-jeffery-renard-allen/
[31] Keene, *Counternarratives*, 281.

documentaries of the colonial wars" populate television programming, while his speeches include gratuitous critiques of "the British and French," as well as "Louis XIV. King Leopold. Dead kings. You."[32] The "dead kings" are affectively-dense symbols of European influence, while gestures toward the abstracted "British and French" similarly animate the collective feelings assigned to such generalizations without actually substantiating a critique of specific material or economic circumstances. He furthers his propaganda strategies by making appeals to "our own indigenous cultures and traditions," which he claims Western media has stifled "like drought,"[33] and he sprinkles a little bit of "attenuated religion"[34] into his speeches to suggest that his regime will provide his people with a return to a mythic, pure, pre-colonial past. Such mythologies of Indigenous, cultural, and ethnic "purity," however, are themselves vestiges of colonialism, a product of European efforts to dominate Indigenous populations by producing ethnic and racial divisions and then classifying, regulating, and stirring conflict across groups.[35] The Deliverer, in short, knows how to exploit the *affective* and *libidinal* economies of colonialism.[36] Offering up recognizable, affectively-saturated icons like King Leopold as objects his critique allow him to position himself as a mouthpiece for the legitimate economic and political concerns of his country. The convenience of this rhetoric, the easy affective gratification that it may offer his subjects, however, betrays the vacancy of his anti-colonial socialist politics

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[32] Ibid. 290
[33] Ibid. 283
[34] Ibid. 290
[35] For critiques of postcolonial appeals to non-existent romanticized Indigenous pasts, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," *Critical Inquiry,* 17:2, Winter 1991, pp. 336-357; and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and the Colonial Politics of State Nationalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.
[36] On the concept of "affective economy," see Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117-139.

as a decidedly anti-liberatory project imbedded, in the same way that his desire for power at all costs betrays his own individual conditioning by the libidinal economies of colonialism.

"The Lions" thus points its readers toward desire or libidinal economy as pillars that uphold the current order of things. In order for critique and their corresponding movements to meaningfully break from the oppressive structures of the past, they need to build up analyses that deconstruct our individual and collective investments in images, symbols, grammars, logics, and objects that make this cruel and unusual world so difficult to resist. Noting the discordance of "The Lions" with the rest of *Counternarratives*, Yogita Goyal rightly observes that despite the incredible tonal departure of the last story from the rest of the collection, it represents a logical extension of Keene's project in that it "refuses to separate the political dystopia of postcolonial Africa from the rest of the story."[37] As a "chilling warning about our collective future,"[38] "The Lions" indicates that if our reckonings with past injustices do not cut down to the desires that organize the very ways we live, think, and act, our efforts will only be artificial at best.

National boundaries of literary and cultural formation are also challenged in "The Lions." At the same time that "The Lions" moves beyond the geographic setting of the United States, its thematic and formal concerns are still very much in conversation with trends in American art and politics. "The Lions," and *Counternarratives* more broadly, can also be read as a contribution to ongoing critical and artistic renegotiations of the collective political imagination, of *what it takes to transform the present*, particularly, from within queer communities. If the speculative form of "The Lions" is expressive of a kind of postcolonial realism, it is a realism distinctly queer postcolonial realism, as well.

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[37] Yogita Goyal, "An Abstract Architecture: John Keene's Counternarratives," *Post-45*, October 6, 2023: https://post45.org/2023/10/an-abstract-architecture-john-keenes-counternarratives/.
[38] Ibid.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that early twenty-first century queer American fiction turns its attention toward a political present pervaded by a feelings of intractability, immobility, and collective and individual resistance to change. Within queer art and politics more broadly, the absorption of gender and sexual minorities into the machinations of empire and capital forces a crisis of reconstitution. The early twenty-first century bears witness to a tremendous birth of radical queer organizing and art-making that connects trans and queer identity to global struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Rather than simply accepting similar terms of exhaustion or defeat, queer artists and activists engage in committed struggle, giving birth to what Sarah Schulman has called a "queer international."[39] Generating such a consciousness has necessitated concerted efforts to produce narratives, forms, media, art, and social and cultural theories that can speak this radical internationalism into being.

I have offered a brief reading of "The Lions" here as a tentative exploration of some of the key concerns that emerge through my engagement with contemporary queer American fiction. The Lions" engages the central role of desire within the maintenance of the global political order while simultaneously challenging the neat coordination of desire, act, meaning, and identity within the vector of sexuality. Keene's decision to revise Dostoevsky's tale with two genocidal dictators as former lovers elevates the original tale's concerns with the endurance of attachment. This decision also reflects an important contemporary radical queer consensus that homo/sexuality in-and-of-itself is not disruptive to the status quo. Without swinging far the other way into homophobic self-castigation, Keene draws out how same-sex desire is not resistant to its structuration by colonialism. In forcing our attention to these two reprehensible figures and

[39] Sarah Schulman, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

the centrality of (same-sex) desire to their horrible deeds, "The Lions" defies an overarching queer theoretical impulse to recuperate subaltern subjects as ethical or political exemplars. The objects in "The Lions" defy our desire for moral affiliation even as they recognizably bear the brunt of colonialism and function as a key site for colonialism's examination. "The Lions," like much contemporary queer American fiction, trades in tales of heroism or resistance for the darker, messier, and harder-to-handle dimensions of subjectivity. It does so in the hopes that we might arrive on the other side of its formal experiments with a renewed desire for another world and a revitalized ability to act on them.

The History of the Experience of Desire

"Attitude Problems" examines the aesthetics and politics of desire in twenty-first century queer American fiction. This dissertation asks what the forms, techniques, themes, and politics of twenty-first century queer fiction can tell us about the production of desire under late capitalism. The political, economic, and cultural changes that punctuate the early-twenty-first century United States affect not only what people want but *how* they want. I read works of fiction to consider how the imagination of the subject as a "desiring subject,"[40] or the discursive construction of a *subject who desires* and whose desires must be *interpreted, problematized, and brought* or not brought *into line,* organizes formal experimentation in contemporary literature.

I am choosing to take up desire, not sexuality, as the frame of reference for this dissertation. Though the two are hardly separable in the contemporary period, this is a significant choice that I will take some time to explain. I view this project as an extension of Michel

[40] Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. II,* 5.

Foucault's efforts in *The History of Sexuality* (henceforth *History*) to historicize the ways people experience desire in different historical contexts. This project thinks about the production of desiring subjects in the twenty-first century United States, and adopts late capitalism as the broader historical or periodizing frame. The choice to combine a Foucauldian analysis of desire with psychoanalytic and Marxist grammars may also seem like quite a strange, potentially contradictory, combination of approaches. After describing the Foucauldian dimensions of this project, I will turn to a discussion of my choice of late capitalism, and how I see late capitalism and desire functioning as complementary objects that might advance Queer Studies at the intersections of these different traditions.

Readers familiar with the first volume of Michel Foucault's *History* may find my choice to study *desire* rather than *sexuality* contradictory to Foucault's work. At the end of the first volume, Foucault calls for scholars to turn away from what he calls the "sex-desire" system as a way of thinking about sexual oppression and toward methods attuned to "bodies and pleasures."[41] Foucault opposes bodies and pleasures to sex-desire as a way of throwing off the naturalized link that discourses of sexuality sometimes draw between the sexual functions of the body and the subject's desires. Under the modern regime of sex-desire, sexuality comes to represent a scientific production upon the body that, in tying together many discrete bodily functions, promises to elucidate the truth of the subject through its analysis. Foucault sees psychoanalysis, for instance, as one form of modern sciences that takes historical and socially constructed ideas about the body and presents them as natural and eternal. Reading the Oedipus Complex into someone's behavior promises to tell us the full truth of the subject; in reality, the Oedipus Complex is itself an idea fashioned through the emergence of science whose

[41] Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, 157.

development Foucault attributes, in part, to the necessity for bourgeois societies to come up with new ways to regulate populations and maintain strong kinship networks that strengthen property relations. “Bodies and pleasures” is Foucault’s pithy suggestion of a turn away from such ahistorical forms of analysis and toward a consideration of the ways power is multiplied through the formation of technologies, sciences, and discourses that take the body as its object. The shift from sex-desire to bodies and pleasure is thus an extension of the critique of the repressive hypothesis Foucault famously introduces at the beginning of Volume I. Sexuality is not something that control societies repress; sexuality is imagined, produced, projected onto the body, and its availability as a site of social control is intensified as people and institution’s become obsessed with accessing the truth of subjectivity through the inspection of this fabricated concept.

As Judith Butler argues, however, Foucault’s attempt to rebut ahistorical forms of analysis by shifting away from the body as *a thing that has a sex* is itself an ahistorical gesture (and a convenient way to retreat from feminist analysis of sex and sexual oppression). To shift toward an analysis of “bodies and pleasures” without also attending to how such discourse is internalized and rebutted by the body risks organizing analysis around an abstract body denuded of sex. Here, Butler cleverly co-opts Foucault’s suggestion that a “bodies and pleasures” paradigm would actually expand opportunities for analysis while drawing us back to sex-desire in a Lacanian vein.

There can be no bodies, no pleasures, Butler argues, outside of language. Language’s hold on the body is also only ever a partial one. Language can never fully determine what we think or feel, even as our thoughts and feelings are only ever accessible through language. Because language has such a determinative *thought still tentative* hold on the body, the

production of the subject as a sexed subject is never complete. Our status as sexed subjects must continually be reconstituted through our participation in the Symbolic. What this means, for Butler, is that the process of becoming a sexed subject, as an always ongoing process, is rife with opportunities for interruption, disruption, revision, and play. Because the process of sexual subjection is contingent and endless, it is always forthcoming with opportunities to light up this process as contingent, to reveal the contradictions within the process of sexual subjection.[42]

Foucault himself eventually realizes that a turn away from sex-desire is untenable to his own genealogical project. In the second volume of the *History*, published in 1984, the same year as Foucault's death, Foucault jettisons his original plans for the project He previously envisioned the *History* as a six-volume work that would trace sexuality's development as a modern object of scientific knowledge. Foucault explains his reasons for changing the project's direction in the introduction to Volume II. While researching for the second and third volumes, Foucault realizes that he can no longer claim that sexuality is a uniquely modern form of knowledge. The invention of sexuality certainly breaks with previous ways of thinking about the body. Knowing oneself as a subject of sexuality is a "historically singular experience" that occurs through the confluence of three distinct developments: "(1) the formation of sciences (*savoirs*) that refer to [sexuality], (2) the systems of power that regulate its practice, (3) the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects of this sexuality."[43] Each of these developments leads to the production of sexuality as a framework through which people are led to interpret their actions, habits, wants, and needs. In turn, the establishment of "religious, juridical, pedagogical, and medical institutions" attuned to the regulation of *sexuality* changed

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[42] Judith Butler, "Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999), 11-20.
[43] Foucault, *History, Vol. II*, 4.

the ways that individuals "assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, their dreams."[44] All of these historically-specific developments around sexuality as an object of knowledge led to changes in the very experience of life itself: the ways that people interpret their psycho-somatic functions, and the ways that institutions organize life around ideas about the body, changes the very epistemological and phenomenological ground of being.[45]

And yet, Foucault realizes, the forms of subjection and hermeneutics of the self that he originally argues are specific to modern discourses of sexuality are, in fact, not. Sexuality, as a lens through which one comes to know the self, does not magically appear out of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. The hermeneutical practices people use to analyze themselves and others as subjects of sexuality descends, in fact, from a much longer history of practices attuned to *desire*. Before sexuality came to be in the records of Enlightenment Western Europe, the "notion of desire, or of the desiring subject" already constituted "if not a theory, then at least

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[44] Ibid. 3-4.

[45] As many critics of Foucault have noted, Foucault's inattention to race and colonialism leads him to produce a very Eurocentric (really Francocentric) understanding of sexuality and its development as a form of knowledge. Technologies of social control used to produce and regulate sexual subjects were developed and perfected in colonial contexts. Institutions, fields of knowledge, scientific practices, social norms, assumptions about nature, culture, and animal and human behavior, and subject forms attuned to sexuality were formed through the simultaneous colonial production of race, Indigeneity, and gender. See: Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's* History of Sexuality *and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Anjali Arondekar, "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1-2 (2005): 10-27; Greg Thomas, *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power: Pan-African Embodiment and the Erotic Schemes of Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); *Kadji Amin, Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); T.J. Tallie, *Queering Colonial Natal: Indigeneity and the Violence of Belonging in Colonial South Afric*a (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); and William Pietz, *The Problem of the Fetish*, eds. Francesco Pellizzi, Stefano Geroulanos, and Ben Kafka (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

a general accepted theoretical frame."[46] The "desiring subject" is Foucault's shorthand for the discursive imagination of the subject through their bearing a thing called desire. In records, documents, and art stretching back to Greek and Roman Antiquity, the desiring subject comes into being as people take fascination with desire as an object of self-knowledge. This is not simply to say that people have been thinking about desire for a long time. More specifically, the practices of interpretation and formation of moral problems organized around sexuality under modernity (like, for instance, analyzing what one wants and why as revealing some kind of inner truth about yourself, your upbringing, your moral or ethical constitution, etc.) are long anticipated in similar habits, discourses, theories, and technologies attuned to desire. Foucault realizes that it would be a mistake to insist on the epochal novelty of sexuality when the distinction between discourses of sexuality and discourses of desire are much muddier than he previously imagined.

The transition from Volume I to Volume II (and subsequently three and four) of thw *History* sees Foucault turn from bodies and pleasures back to desire. He reorients the *History* away from his original efforts to write an account of "the history of the experience of sexuality"[47] in order to give a more thorough treatment to desire as sexuality's epistemic precursor. He is clear that he is not interested in conducting a genealogy of "the successive conceptions of desire" over time, however. To write the history of the "desiring subject," one must analyze "the practices by which individuals were led to focus attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire,

[46] Foucault, *History, Vol. II*, 5.
[47] Ibid. 4.

the truth of their being, be it natural or fallen."[48] Instead of simply tracing the development of abstract ideas about desire, Foucault wants to understand how people *experience themselves as desiring subjects*. More than an intellectual history, Foucault intends to write a history that examines the transformation of experience itself: the transformation of the subject's orientations toward themself, others, and the world as a result of shifts in the epistemic production of subjects as subjects of desire.

In studying "how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire,"[49] Foucault continues to elaborate his understanding of power as multiplicative and diffusive rather than top-down imposition of violence by authorities. Of course, direct applications of violence and the threat of violence play an important role in the maintenance of the order of things. But systems of power are also reconstituted through seemingly innocuous practices that look nothing like outrightly brutal, cruel, and genocidal forms of violence. Systems of power are also maintained—and, Foucault would argue, their maintenance is far more dependent upon—the production of subjects, or people's transformation into self-regulating members of society who take responsibility for managing their own behaviors, practices, and so forth. This is why Foucault insists that an analysis of power cannot stop at simply describing evident imbalances in the distribution of resources or explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic rhetoric. We are acclimated into society through our adoption of practices, ideals, and norms that gradually become backgrounded in our consciousness. Practices of self-regulation that reinforce power do not necessarily even have to be outrightly restrictive, confining, or prohibitive. In fact, Foucault suggests that subjection occurs through the subject's adoption of practices that satisfy

[48] Ibid. 5.
[49] Ibid. 6.

their pursuit of meaning, that "give one's personal life a form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, or perfection."[50] Some prohibitions, laws, and technologies of social control may make us feel bad or hurt us, but subjection, or subject formation, also involves our internalizing ideals, expectations, and imagined ways of being that make us feel good. Subjection gives us a sense of what it means to live a good, beautiful, happy life, and extends to us bundles of self-making techniques that allow us to pursue those ideals, all the while we believe that we are exemplary, extraordinary, or uniquely individual for doing so. The total arrangement of these systems of subject constitution are what Foucault calls a given context's "mode of subjection:" "the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice."[51] To do the history of desire—the history of the experience of desire—means seeking out the truth of the mode of subjection, which is accessed by examining how people are solicited to fashion themselves as subjects (good, happy, responsible, healthy, clean, attractive) subjects.

Now, Foucault is quite explicit that his turn to desire is also a turn back to periods in time that precede the formation of sexuality. There is no reason to think that Foucault would sanction a continuation of his project into the contemporary using the language of *desire* rather than *sexuality*. The fact that I also draw from psychoanalysis, of which Foucault was a tremendous skeptic, may seem doubly blasphemous. Why, then, write a project about *desire*, and not sexuality? What is the analytic purchase in extending Foucault's shift from *sexual subjects* to *desiring subjects* out of antiquity, straight past modernity, and into the contemporary, when the contemporary is indisputably the time of sexuality?

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[50] Ibid. 27.
[51] Ibid.

I believe that an analytic focus on *desire* has the potential to bring Foucault's insights on subjection, discourse, and experience into contemporary cultural theory in ways that can expand the horizons of queer theory. Choosing desire as my object of study enables me to unite insights from Foucault, Marxism, and psychoanalysis to push forward queer theory's radical critique of power from the margins of society. More specifically, thinking about the production of *desiring subjects* under *late capitalism* has the potential to tie together different critical impulses that have infused the history of queer theory while also advancing recent efforts to conjoin queer critique with global anti-capitalist struggle. In the next section, I will elaborate further how I synthesize Foucault's desiring subject together with Marxist psychoanalytic, and queer critiques of subjection. I organize my efforts to bring together these traditions through my selection of late capitalism as the project's historical framework, or period designation.

Late Capitalism, Subjection, and Psychopolitics

This dissertation periodizes its concerns within the development of late capitalism. *Late capitalism*, in my usage, refers to the period in which the capitalist mode of production becomes a world-system, i.e., when capitalist becomes the global, dominant mode of production. When capitalist hits its planetary limit—i.e., there are no parts of the physical, geographic landscape of Earth for capitalism to impose itself on local markets—capitalism's search for surplus-value does not diminish but in fact intensifies. Late capitalism turns inward: not just in a geographic sense—reconfiguring markets, redrawing relations between nations and populations, creating new divisions of labor–but also in a *subjective* sense. Late capitalist subjection sinks its teeth into desire. To satisfy its demand for surplus-value, and new surplus populations that constitute the outside and always-exploitable underclass of capital, late capitalism intensifies desire's

production, identification, classification, and regulation. New subject forms organized around the moral problematization of the subject's desires are produced with rapidity and intensity. These changes in the organization of desire befuddle radical sexual politics in particular: while sexuality seems to be rapidly absorbed into the machinations of capital, compromising claims to its radicality, desire, sexuality's phenomenological base, also seems to become newly central to the logics of the market, law, morality, culture, labor, and the very struggle against capitalism itself. But desire, while always structured by its environment and by language, also resists determination by the imperatives of capital. Contemporary theory and art hones itself to desire as both structured and irreducible to structure: the simultaneous historicity and anti-historicity of desire comes to represent a potential point of intervention into late capitalist subjection. I argue that desire should likewise be considered a point of intervention for articulating a queer cultural politics, which I believe can be achieved through what I call a *psychopolitical* method.

My understanding of late capitalism draw directly from Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation is central to Ernest Mandel's original definition of late capitalism. Following the second World War, a litany of world-historical developments signal, for Mandel, a tectonic shift in the capitalist mode of production. He comes up with the term late capitalism to describe what he sees as capitalism's progress into a new stage of its development. Among the developments that Mandel incorporates into his definition of late capitalism, he cites: the emergence of fascism; the decimation of organized labor in Europe and the United States; dramatic expansions in the military arms economy, and a growing financial reliance of former and current imperial nation-states on the sale and innovation of weapons technology; and the "systematic organization of research and development as a specific business organized on a

capitalist basis," which "fully came into its own only under late capitalism."[52] All of these developments suggest a global political economy that is defined by interdependencies between imperial metropoles and their former/current colonies that are starkly different from their relationships under the imperialist stage, which Mandel, like Lenin, traces up to and through the first World War.[53] Building on Lenin's analysis, Mandel argues that the post-1945 period sees an unprecedented development in financial speculation, debt, and information circulation on a planetary scale. Far beyond Lenin's original analysis of monopoly capitalism and the development of tentacular, mystifying systems of finance hasted by imperialist expansion, the technologies of social control, militarization, and production in the post-1945 reach such a level of efficiency and ubiquity that it becomes difficult to describe capitalism before and after the World Wars as the same animal.

However, Mandel is explicit that the single development that truly defines capitalism's transition to its "late" stage is the arrival of the world economy "the absolute limit of the capitalist mode of production."[54] This "limit" could be understood in many different senses. Capitalism stretches across the entire world, becoming the mode of production that characterizes just about every market, even markets, like in the Soviet Union or in mid-twentieth-century China, where states theoretically attempt to resist (and ultimately cannot) participation in systems of capital.[55] In one sense, capitalism hits a geographic, planetary limit. This limit could

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[52] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: New Left Books, 1975), 249.
[53] Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in Selected Works (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1916/1963). Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/.
[54] Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, 207.
[55] In strictly Marxian terms, the Soviet Union and Maoist China could not be considered communist countries because, as Marx and Engels argue in manuscripts of *The Germany Ideology*, communism can only ever be achieved on a world-historical scale. The presence of capitalism anywhere necessarily undermines the possibility of communism everywhere because

also be understood in strictly material or economic terms. The world economy has reached such a saturation point in its dependence on speculation, and production has become so efficient, the only way that capitalism can reasonably generate more surplus-value is to actively sabotage itself: creating new problems, abandoning technologies, and arbitrarily redrawing markets and divisions of labor, not because such changes necessarily have anything to do with satisfying people's needs, making their lives easier, or creating a more equitable distribution of wealth, but simply because new opportunities for capital accumulation need to be made from within capital itself.

I prefer to think about the limits that define late capitalism in the terms of primitive accumulation set out by Marx, as Mandel does. Marx defines primitive accumulation as the "historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production." More specifically, primitive accumulation involves the expropriation of laborers from the means of production, particularly collective access to and use of land, and the absorption of productive processes into the generation of surplus-value.[56] "Accumulation" does not refer to the hoarding of resources, but the reorganization of productive processes through their seizure by larger producers or bureaucratic agencies like regional or federal governments. Marx's classic example of primitive accumulation is the dispossession of land through the English Enclosure Acts.[57]

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capitalism requires its extension into new markets where it is not already hegemonic. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Unpublished manuscript, 1846). Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/.

[56] Karl Marx, "So-Called Primitive Accumulation," in *Capital, Vol. I.*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin), 875.

[57] Silvia Federici builds on Marx's account of primitive accumulation to argue that the process of expropriation in the English countryside occasioned the development of a division between the public and private sphere. Through this division, Federici argues, capitalism spurs a shift in the division of labor through gender, where women are relegated to roles in the private, domestic sphere. Primitive accumulation as a production of gendered labor divisions; the oppression of

Neither does "primitive" designate primitive accumulation as a process that only occurred in some prehistoric, precapitalist past. Rosa Luxemburg offers a clarifying expansion upon Marx's original theory to this end. Luxemburg argues that capitalism does not form simply through the dispossession of land within imperial metropoles, but that colonization and imperialism were crucial components of the accumulation process. Primitive accumulation, Luxemburg observes, is not something that precedes capitalism, but a process of continual expropriation of Indigenous land that remains central to capitalism's endurance.[58] The generation of surplus-value demands that there always be an "outside" to capital that can be separated out and exploited for new raw materials. Just because capitalism stretches over the entire world, then, does not mean the accumulation process ends. If primitive accumulation ended, so would capitalism. Instead, "the international development of capitalism" actually leads to the *intensification* of processes by which people are made surplus to capital, as the production of surplus-value becomes "ever more urgent and precarious, and the substratum of constant and variable capital becomes an ever-growing mass."[59]

When I write "late capitalism," I am not using the term "late" to mean that this stage of capitalism is its final stage, nor that capitalism is necessarily coming to an end.[60] Late capitalism

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women, Federici argues, is central and not subsidiary to the development of capitalism. See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

[58] See also Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[59] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Reproduction of Capital and Its Social Setting," in The Accumulation of Capital, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (London: Routledge, 1993). Accesible via this link as of March 2024: https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1913/accumulation-capital/.

[60] Marx suggests that human history proceeds in a linear fashion through modes of production that are increasingly more efficient in the distribution of labor, quality of life, and freedom of human action and imagination: from feudalism to capitalism to socialism and communism. Amy Allen has elaborated a persuasive critique of this teleology as a central component of Marx's critique of political economy, arguing that it constitutes an "imperialist metanarrative." See Amy

designates capitalism's capture of the entire world. The conditions that ensue as result are borne from capital's ever-desperate demand for surplus-value despite it hitting an economic as well as literally *planetary* limit.

For Mandel, the period of late capitalism begins at the end of the second World War. However, I think the developments of the late-twentieth century offer some useful benchmarks for thinking about the characteristics of late capitalism and its modes of subjection. Fredric Jameson suggests that late capitalism really begins "around 1980 or so."[61] Jameson cites the formal imposition of neoliberal economic reorganization, and the intense cycles of recession, economic contraction, dissolution of public infrastructure, and ever-increasing austerity that occur as a result, as a definitive condition of late capitalism. Late capitalism, for Jameson, is inaugurated with the Thatcher/Reagan era, a shift away from the welfare state to a market-driven state and, in the United States, New Right moralism. Meanwhile, Petrus Liu points to China's adoption of the 1976 Beijing Consensus as a starting point for global late capitalism.[62] China's embrace of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" alongside the collapse of the Soviet Union shook up American hegemony and transformed cost-point production across the entire world. It also signaled the demise of any legitimate socialist, state-backed alternative to capitalism, as the two leading socialist nation-states fully embraced state-run capitalism. Differing fixations on different phenomena aside, there is no question that the by the early twenty-first century,

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Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017): 4. See also Amy Allen, "Dripping with Blood and Dirt from Head to Toe: Marx's Genealogy of Capitalism in Capital, Volume 1," *The Monist* 105, no. 4 (2022): 470-486.

[61] Fredric Jameson with Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue, "Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson," *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (2016): 144.

[62] Petrus Liu, *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023).

capitalism is in an unprecedented position of global hegemony. Capitalism's modes of subjection change to reflect the new privileges and challenges it faces when there is no world left to conquer.

How do modes of subjection change when capitalism reaches its "internal limit," becoming *late* capitalism? Undoubtedly, the new economic and political imperatives of maintaining an unequal and precarious world-system coincide with changes in morality, ethics, and culture, including the ways that people are invited to identify, classify, interpret, and regulate their desires. Wendy Brown argues that far-right capture of state power and the insurgence of new ethnonationalisms in the contemporary Global North (represented in the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President) can be attributed to a shift in the imagination of the citizen as a private individual. Western antidemocratic politics, Brown argues, are the product of neoliberalism as a way of life under late capitalism. When Brown writes about neoliberalism, they are referring to a late-twentieth century economic philosophy typically associated with the subsumption of the state to the demands of the market, an emphasis on the rights of the private individual, a turn away from emphasis on the "public good" in politics and society, and the erosion of public infrastructure through the diffusion of their functions into private corporations and interests.[63] Shifts in state economic policies do not precede changes in the imagination of the citizen, however. Instead, they occur concurrently. This is why Brown, using Foucauldian terminology,

[63] As in Brown's account, there is a general consensus among scholars of contemporary fascism, particularly those who work in trans studies, that the rise of Euro-American far-right politics is attributable to neoliberalism as a wider shift in the moral, political, and ethical organization of life. See in particular Mikey Elster, "Insidious Concern: Trans Panic and the Limits of Care," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2022): 407-424; Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, "American Fascism: Fourteen Deadly Principles of Contemporary Politics," *symploke* 28, no. 1-2 (2020): 181-205; and Sophie Lewis and Asa Seresin, "Fascist Feminism: A Dialogue," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2022): 463-479.

refers to neoliberalism not as a form of "governmentality," or a mode in which life is organized and governed.[64] Neoliberalism, for Brown, represents a complete transformation of the organization of society in which "market principles become governing principles applied by and to the state, but also circulating through institutions and entities across society–schools, workplaces, clinics, etc."[65] The result is the destruction of the public good as an organizing principle for society and the reorientation of subjectivity around endless competition: "entrepreneurializing the subject, converting labor to human capital, and repositioning and reorganizing the state" for the simple purpose of expediting the operations of the market.[66] Democracy, and the practices, institutions, norms, forms of education, and technical knowledge that make it possible, gets gradually washed away in the new primacy of the market.

In many ways, contemporary queer theory has defined its aims, methods, and priorities by counterposing itself against neoliberalism. A sustained urgency to think queer theory in opposition to neoliberalism largely has to do with queer theory's opposition to an increasingly conservative strain of gay and lesbian politics that was formed within neoliberal paradigms of citizenship, respectability, productivity, and responsibility from the 1980s through to the 2010s. Lisa Duggan argues that assimilation gay and lesbian politics in the late-twentieth century–in contrast to similarly assimilationist predecessors like the mid-twentieth century Homophile movement–adopted a distinctly neoliberal emphasis on privacy as its terrain of struggle. At the turn of the millennium, gay and lesbian politics adopted a minoritizing view of homosexuality.

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[64] See Michel Foucault, "1 February 1978," in *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collége de France*, 1977-1978, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 87-113.
[65] Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics In the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 19.
[66] Brown, *In the Ruins*, 20.

Homosexuality, gay and lesbian activists argued, is strictly biological, and requires protection from the state precisely because it is a "prepolitical" condition.[67] Abandoning a liberationist ethos in order to secure their participation within "normal" American society, assimilationist activists appealed to the normalcy of proper gay and lesbian subjects by adopting a growing consensus shared by both conservatives and liberals that the rights of the private individual trumped ideologies concerned with the public good, or the collective betterment of society through collective means. An over-emphasis on nefarious queers colluding with the nation-state, however, can obscure how late capitalist modes of subjection came about in ways that far exceeded the actions of gays and lesbian activists. Gay and lesbian activists did not turn into the embrace of neoliberalism through sheer will alone. Such pathways were extended to them, and sexual minorities were solicited to reconstitute their subjectivities through avenues that were constructed through larger social, cultural, political, economic, and juridical transformations.

Changes in gender and sexual norms do not occur on top of changes in the economic base. Rather, gender and sexuality play a central role in the transformation of the modes of subjection to meet the new demands of late capitalism. For Christopher Chitty, late capitalism leads to the formation of a new "sexual hegemony." Sexual hegemony, Chitty writes, occurs when sexual norms "benefiting a dominant social group shape sexual conduct and self-understandings of other groups, whether or not they also stand to benefit from such norms and whether or not they can achieve them."[68] Under late capitalism, Chitty argues, homosexuality becomes newly-politicized, leading to the recognition of gays and lesbians as identifiable,

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[67] Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 187.
[68] Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World-System,* ed. Max Fox (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 25.

protected groups. The newly-produced homosexual subject, invited to see themselves as a member of society through their homosexuality, gets folded into the modern nation-state's framework of rights for the individual citizen: the right to marry, to serve in the military, to get an education, and to participate as an equal and free laborer in the market. For Chitty, the transformation of homosexuality into a politicized, self-claimed, and depathologized identity plays a major role in the development of late capitalism. In the same way that the criminalization of sodomy, the pathologization of sexual habits, and the development of bourgeois norms to maintain kinship and property lines was central to the development of capitalism as a world-system, under late capitalism, sexual hegemony—the norms regarding what kind of sexual subject is and is not surplus to capital—adjusts itself in order to feed its drive toward accumulation at the moment it hits its internal limit. Politicized sexual identity is just one facet of bigger changes in sexual and gender normativity: new investments of capital into creating a "highly disciplined and rationalized laboring body normalized the reproduction of labor power within family units, allowing for the adoption of technologies that made the production process far more efficient."[69] As Melinda Cooper has demonstrated, neoliberalism goes hand-in-hand with a resurged investment in the family unit as the primary site of social reproduction. Increasing significance is assigned to the individual as someone who is responsible for supporting their families through the creation of tax incentives, the readjustment of insurance benefits to privilege familial and marital status, and the imposition of filial responsibility laws. Alongside Cooper, we can think about the ascendance of gay marriage as the central focus of mainstream American gay politics from the 1990s to early 2010s as a dimension of the

[69] Ibid. 173.

development of a "neoliberal ethic of family responsibility."[70] And yet, as Cooper and Chitty both point out, gays and lesbians get invited to partake in neoliberal society and the market through marriage at the very moment that the final vestiges of the Fordist welfare state start to collapse. "Gays and lesbians got a shot at dreams of the good life precisely at the moment of its political-economic liquidation," Chitty writes.[71] Contemporary LGBTQ+ subjectivities are constituted through a late capitalist emphasis on the responsible, entrepreneurial, properly coupled individual. Yet such subjectivities are necessarily constructed through fantasies of the good life whose organization through neoliberal political economy means that such fantasies will be consistently frustrated and impossible to achieve.

The reason why I am interested in *desire* is because late capitalism feeds its desperate need for more surplus-value through its exploitation of desire, while desire itself remains both deeply entrenched in the pathways capital constructs for it and almost frustratingly resistance of any efforts to direct it.[72] Desire also seems to describe functions that sexual identity is constituted through and also functions that exceed their categorization in the terms of auto- and interpersonal eroticism alone. Contemporary sexual identities are constituted through late capitalism's production of subject forms that are bound up in fantasies of a good life that late capitalism itself makes unattainable. The language of desire exceeds sexuality's association with the imposition of sexual norms, or norms regarding eroticism and its expression both on the self and between

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[70] Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017): 211.
[71] Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony*, 173.
[72] I am thinking here of Jacques Lacan's understanding of desire as constituted by lack, as well as Todd McGowan's discussion of desire as the privileged object of late capitalism. I discuss McGowan's Lacanian interpretation of desire vis-à-vis late capitalism in Chapter One. See Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

individuals. This is not to say that sexuality is not a concern of this project. This is to say that the language of desire helps me articulate how late capitalist modes of subjection lead people to attend to their desires in ways that blur, mess up, and undermine the neat delineations between sexuality and other forms of desire, other kinds of object-choices, that organize people's identities as subjects.

I am specifically interested in the psychic and affective dimensions of late capitalist subjection. Like Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*, I am captivated by the endurance of a profoundly inefficient and cruel global political economy. There has to be a better way to live together, and most everyone seems to know it. But actually enacting widespread change on a collective level seems near impossible. Why does it seem like people desire their own subjugation? Is there a way out of our desires for the current world, even and especially as those desires endure, persist, and break up our simultaneous desires for a new one? Is there something about late capitalism in particular that entrenches those "desires for the political,"[73] those desires for existing national, identitarian, and economic formations that betray the very possibility of political life itself? If political transformation cannot simply be a movement of rational consciousness but requires concerted engagement with desire, what would that look like, and is such a program of action attuned to desire even possible–or desirable?

These questions are what bring me to my interest in what I call *psychopolitics*. Psychopolitics is not a new term in itself, nor is it necessarily a novel concept. Twentieth- and twenty-first century Marxism and post-Marxism have long taken shape around the relationship between political-economic conditions and the psyche, psycho-somatic experience, and desire. Byung-Chul Han's *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* is one of the

[73] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 224.

more recent instantiations of this tradition. Han uses the term "psychopolitics" to describe forms of exploitation that seize on the subject's emotions, sense of satisfaction, and desires for self-transformation as a way of reaffirming the imperatives of the market.[74] Contemporary critical theory that is psychopolitical in nature might more broadly be understood as theories of subjection, power, and oppression that trace the maintenance of the political order to the diffusion of self-regulating practices among the population. Such theories tend to emphasize, like Foucault, that late capitalism technologies of the self may not feel oppressive, but indeed often gratify our desires. The problem is that late capitalism extends to us subject forms and orientations toward objects that will never totally satisfy us. Instead, late capitalism leads us further and further away from a world where we might actually find some semblance of sustainable harmony and peace.[75]

The increasingly dire circumstances of twenty-first century global capitalism have justifiably turned many theorists, as well as artists and activists–particularly queer ones–toward questions of desire. Thinking after the role of desire in politics, how it functions, how we might observe those functions in culture, and develop out of our observations modes of analysis that might actually get us toward that seemingly impossible better world, is one of the primary orientations of this dissertation. Desire may be a particularly useful category for thinking about late capitalist subjection in particular. Side-stepping Foucault's stated aversion to studying desire after the emergence of sexuality as a paradigm, we begin to see that desire is becoming an object

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[74] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (New York: Verso, 2017). For a survey of scholarship that uses the term psychopolitics, see Manuel Cruz Ortiz De Landázuri, "Psychopolitics and power in contemporary political thought," *Journal of Political Power* 12, no. 1 (2019): 4-15.

[75] This includes, among others, the work of Foucault, Butler, Berlant, Todd McGowan, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Tim Dean, Leo Bersani, José Muñoz, Rosemary Hennessey, Kevin Floyd, Calvin Warren, and Saidiya Hartman.

for Marxist, Foucauldian, psychoanalytic, and queer and feminist theorists alike because its functions seem so amorphous, so expansive, so central to our constitution, and therefore so ripe in being exploited or undone to either submit or free subjectivity from the imperatives of capital.

Before I move on to talk about how I go about studying subjection–through culture-let me tie this back to Foucault. I am joining other psychopolitically-oriented scholars in their suggestion that late capitalism produces new modes of subjection that might be organized in particular around the production and exploitation of desire. Attention to desire in the process of subject formation could very well reveal historical processes related to the maintenance of the political order of things around the imperatives of capital. But what exactly does that look like? How does one attend to something like "subject formation" and "desire" within it? Where would we even know where to look?

Here, I want to join Butler in reading Foucault against himself. A single word in Foucault's explanation of the formation of desiring subjects in the second volume of the *History* has the potential to throw off unproductive analytic oppositions between Foucault and psychoanalysis. That word is "recognize."

Subjection, for Foucault, depends on the subject's recognition of themself *as a (desiring) subject,* meaning their recognition of themself within the practices, norms, laws, mandates, and expectations that organize hegemonic subject forms. Describing his efforts in his newly-revised plans for the *History* series, Foucault writes that he wants to trace "how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to *recognize* himself as a subject of desire."[76] Butler takes Foucault's suggestion that subjection depends on the subject's recognition of themself within the process of subjection as a potential point of convergence between Foucault and psychoanalysis.

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[76] Foucault, *History, Vol. II,* 6, emphasis added.

Recognition of the self, after all, is only ever partial and ongoing. All identifications are also misidentifications: the subject's recognition of themself in the mirror is also the recognition of the other, the not-me. Recognition's imprecision leads us to generate ego-ideals that are forever unattainable, which we nevertheless spend our lives pursuing through the fact of their non-existence.[77]

The ability to recognize oneself as a subject of desire is also discursively determined, i.e., our very ability to even go through the process of recognition or identification depends on our position within discourse as a subject. By virtue of our emergence as subjects through language, we come into subjectivity–in our identities, into ourselves–through our submission to the Symbolic, and the confining gender and sexual norms that constitute it. Yet the adoption of norms is never "only a moment of naturalization and idealization," Butler observes.[78] Identification of the self through the adoption of norms or subject forms is also always an instance of misrecognition, misalignment, and maybe even conscious awareness of becoming one's gender as a never-ending process.[79] In other words, the process of subjection as it is predicated on recognition is simultaneously determined by the conditions of our emergence in discourse–how we are interpellated within codes of social difference like gender or race, for instance–and also never fully overdetermined by discourse, either. Power unevenly distributes the means of recognition: how, when, and where women came to "see themselves as subjects of sexuality," or whether lesbians or gays can even recognize themselves as subjects of sexuality when "one is so fully sexualized, so determined in and as the sexuality that one is," are questions

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[77] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrit,* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006): 75-81.
[78] Butler "Revisiting," 19.
[79] Ibid. 20

that require specific and not generalizable answers based on the histories of oppression faced by these groups.[80] Whether or not someone will find themselves warmly beckoned by the subject forms extended to them depends on conditions that precede their emergence. At the same time, there is something about the psychic process of identification itself that further complicates subjection as the sleek, inevitable march toward subjectivity that Foucault's universalizing account sometimes makes it out to be. As I discuss in Chapter One, through my further discussion of Butler alongside Donald Winnicott, it's more likely than not that people will actually fail to become the subjects they are supposed to be.

The inevitable failures of subjection as an identificatory process indicates a potential site of psychopolitical transformation. Identification is itself a psychopolitical process: -political in the sense that the subject's identifications are shaped by their emergence in language, discourse, and the world as it is organized, and are exploited to usher their participation into systems that may or may not work in their favor; and psycho- because identification is psychic, meaning it occurs at the level of the individual body, and includes all the messy and unpredictable contingencies entailed in embodiment as a result. Because such processes cross over the social, political, and psychic, the individual and collective, and the body and its surrounding environment, such processes are doomed to be incomplete from the start. This is where Butler sees tremendous potential for a politics that intervenes in that partiality, or the need for power and norms to constantly be reconstituted through their repetition. We can unite Butler's insights on Foucault here with their famous claims in *Gender Trouble*, where they write, "[t]he subject is not determined by rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act,*" or a founding act *alone*, "*but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals

[80] Ibid. 19.

itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects."[81] Late capitalism may exploit our desires to its own ends, but such exploitation is always incomplete. Every pocket of partial identification, every moment where the psyche disrupts our acclimation to idealized subject forms–which is happening all the time–may also represent a kernel of radical potential for queer cultural politics to exploit to liberatory ends.

Out of the failures of sexual identity and politics, queer artists and theorists are increasingly staging a return to desire as the "phenomenological ground of sexuality,"[82] the nexus of attachments, identifications, fantasies, and other psychic processes that extend throughout every dimension of the subject's being and the functions through which people become subjects of the political. I want to suggest that by attending to processes of subject-formation or identity constitution that cross the psychic and the political, what I call *psychopolitical structures*, that we can begin to observe the operations of late capitalist modes of subjection. How subjects are produced and to what ends under late capitalism is illuminated by psychopolitical structures because such structures are necessarily fraught, contingent, impacted with failures and lapses and gaps and dissonances. Psychopolitical structures reveal that subjection is not a linear, easy process. The subject's continual efforts to discover themselves through their adoption and breakage from hegemonic subject forms are more like never-ending *dramas of self-constitution* that are simultaneously individual and suffused with social meaning and consequences. The dramas of late capitalist subjection that populate early twenty-first century queer American fiction give form to a burgeoning queer critical consciousness that

[81] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990/2006), 198.
[82] Butler "Revisiting" 19

pushes the boundaries of the contemporary political imagination in its concerted attention to subjection as a contingent and incomplete psychopolitical process.

Queer Cultural Studies/Theory/Politics

The goal of this dissertation is to propose new directions for queer cultural *politics*. The project itself is a work of queer cultural *studies*. I choose to take up fiction as a form of cultural production that, I argue, tells us something about late capitalism and the conditions of struggle against it. The phrase "queer cultural studies," like "queer cultural politics," is a neologism on my part. Though I do not imagine most people would bat an eye at my inclusion of "cultural" within the more commonly-accepted phrase "Queer Studies," this difference is important because my phraseology seems to specifically situate my work as a queer form of cultural studies. Cultural studies, in turn, is usually seen as an outgrowth of Marxism; and queer theory and Marxism usually are described as having a tense, even combative relationship. Part of the reason why I like to have *cultural* with my *queer studies/politics/theory* is because I want to insist that my approach to queer theory is a Marxist one. More broadly, I want to insist that queer theory is itself a Marxist project, and can only fully realize its potential as a critical project when it sees itself as *an improvement upon Marxism* through its simultaneous adoption of psychoanalysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Current scholarship in Queer Studies seems interested in pushing queer theory into a more intimate relationship with Marxism. The now-ritualistic state of the field essays that have come out in every few years for the past three decades generally always include some call for

queer theory to be more thoroughly materialist.[83] One of the more recent ones, David L. Eng and Jasbir Puar's edited collection *Left of Queer,* makes an urgent demand for queer theory and Marxism to finally share a bed. The title of the collection itself is a play on the apparent vacancy of bourgeois, Western sexuality studies amid the world-ending devastations of capitalism, the victory of homonationalist bids for inclusion in American military, police, law, and marriage, and the shifting far-right fixation on trans people, which some gays and lesbians, secure in their position within the ethnonationalist horizon of the nation, gleefully throw themselves into. Transfiguring the title of Eng, Muñoz, and Jack Halberstam's 2005 essay "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," the editors chop off the frame of a question. They leave us instead with the ambiguous-yet-somehow-bleak suggestion that we need to consider what is *left* of queer: left as in the remnants of a dying husk, and/or left as in politically *further to the left* than Queer Studies as it stands now.

There are three primary trends that Eng and Puar see in contemporary Queer Studies: examinations of the formation of "proper" queer subjects and identities at the expense of people on the margins of empire, or the revivification of "subjectless critique;" critiques of Queer Studies' institutionalization "as its own particular brand of U.S. area studies;" and attempts to parse "long-standing debates on materialism concerning the incommensurability of queer studies

[83] See Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen, "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender," *Social Text* 52/53 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 1-4; David L. Eng with Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (2005): 1-17; Jordy Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo, "Queerness, Norms, Utopia," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2012): 1-18; Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 151-171; and Rana M. Jaleel and Evren Savci, "Transnational Queer Materialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 1 (January 2024): 1-31.

and Marxism that arose in the early 1990s with the inception of the former field."[84] On this later point, Eng and Puar join the efforts of other queer Marxists like Petrus Liu–who has an essay in *Left of Queer*–as well as Rosemary Hennessey and Kevin Floyd. Floyd's 2009 *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, alongside Hennessy's 1999 *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, represent two of the most concerted efforts to blend the critical vocabularies of the two fields to break through the unfortunate consensus of some Marxists that fields like Queer Studies express "merely cultural" concerns.[85]

Floyd dedicated much of his career to arguing for a critical synthesis of queer theory and Marxism. In his co-authored introduction to the collection *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital*, Floyd notes that fields of "identity politics" like queer theory came about as a response to the stifling universalisms that doomed mid-twentieth-century Marxist analysis. He takes up György Lukács' theory of totality as an example of a Marxist analysis that unproductively assumed a universal subject at its center. Lukács argues that the proletariat occupies a privileged standpoint within the flow of history: the submission of the working class to capitalism simultaneously enables them to see in their surrounding world symptoms that express the totality of social relations.[86] However, Lukács's definition of the "proletariat" is fitted to describe the position of a white working class man in an industrial workplace. His definition of the proletariat does not consider Indigenous people displaced through colonization, enslaved people, domestic laborers, and the many other forms of labor, dispossession, and

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[84] David L. Eng and Jasbir Puar, "Introduction: Left of Queer," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 2.
[85] Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text* 52/53 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 265-277.
[86] György Lukács, "The Standpoint of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1967). Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07_1.htm.

exploitation that exist beyond white able-bodied steelworkers in a factory or working on a car automation line. In other words, his vision of the proletariat as a revolutionary vanguard and capita's production of surplus populations does not consider the vast majority of peoples whose subjugation, expropriation, and exploitation is necessary to the constitution of capitalism. "[T]he universalization of the socioeconomic realm that sits at the center of orthodox totality thinking carries through to the false universalism that marked much of the twentieth-century anti-capitalist politics, which, like Lukács, identified the industrial working class as the only subject capable of challenging capitalism's domination," Floyd writes.[87] This inattention to wide swathes of people expelled and subsumed through primitive accumulation suggests that Lukács' view of totality is "rigorously corroborated with a standpoint immanent to capitalist social relations themselves."[88]

Identity politics as articulated by the Combahee River Collective and other feminist, Black, Indigenous, Chicané, and queer activists came about due to the inefficacy of twentieth-century anti-capitalist politics. The inability of Marxism to galvanize revolutionary change—to prevent the ascendance of late capitalism—can be attributed to Marxism's own identitarian attachments. Marxism's "universalism that was itself a form of identity politics that pretended not to be."[89]

Importantly, the analytic inadequacy of twentieth-century Marxism is also what drove the turn to cultural studies. Alan Sinfield describes the popularization of cultural studies as a

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[87] Kevin Floyd with Brent Ryan Bellamy, Sarah Brouillette, Sarika Chandra, Chris Chen, and Jen Hendler Phillis, "Introduction: Totality Inside Out," in *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Capital*, eds. Kevin Floyd, Jen Hendler Phillis, and Sarika Chandra (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022): 6.
[88] Floyd et al., "Introduction: Totality Inside Out," 4.
[89] Ibid. 9

response to the failure of twentieth-century Marxism to prevent the emergence of the late capitalist world we live in today. It became apparent in the mid-to-late-twentieth century that the revolution was not coming any time soon. Despite the worsening conditions of life for everyone except a narrow privileged few, the world seemed entrenched in the rhythms of capital. This is what galvanized the turn to the Marxist study of culture, pioneered by figures like Theodor Adorno and, later, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Sinfield's argues that cultural studies came about because it became clear that "the continuing oppression of ordinary people was being obscured" by purely economic explanations of capitalism[90] The study of culture, as Williams argues, does not simply describe the symptoms which rest upon an economic base, but challenges the division of base and superstructure entirely. Cultural studies comes about through the revelation that the true conditions of the world can only ever be accessed through the ways such conditions are represented and remediated in language, practice, and art.[91]

My own investment in fiction, and cultural and aesthetic objects more broadly, carries forward this faith in the linguistic, formal, temporal, and affective play involved in aesthetics to transfigure meaning and, in doing so, giving us access to historical conditions and processes of subjection. A growing number of Queer Studies scholars, in fact, are renewing attention to form *specifically* as the site where queerness is constituted. Like the attempts of Amin and other scholars to excavate the attachments that have shaped queer theory, and both inform and delimit its analyses of power, violence, identity, and capital, the recent turn to "queer formalism" is

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[90] Alan Sinfield, "Art as Cultural Production," in *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading* (London: Routledge, 1994/2005): 22.

[91] Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review* 82, no. 1 (November/December 1973): 3-16.

couched in an attempt to move away from an indeterminacy model of queerness where what makes texts "queer" is their capacity to disrupt meaning, language, or signification.[92]

The queer formalist moment is best encapsulated in Ramzi Fawaz's recent work *Queer Forms*. Queer formalism, Fawaz writes, "intentionally undermines a reigning common sense that has emerged at the nexus of queer theory and some feminist, queer, and trans* social justice discourse, which assumes that queer critique of LGBTQ identity politics is an argument for understanding all categories of gender and sexuality in formless or fluid terms."[93] Rather than figuring queerness as the disruption of all solid categories, boundaries, norms, or genre conventions, queer formalists take up formal innovation in aesthetic objects to think about how new configurations of gender and sexuality are achieved through a reliance on form, or through form's generative capacities to make meaning. The very idea of queerness as a recuperation of sexuality, sexual politics, and desire as a force of radical anti-bourgeois critique, after all, depends on queer's construction through the manipulation of narratives, images, hierarchies, norms—forms. In thinking with form, then, queer formalists make the case for formal innovation as something that actually enables queerness, that "helps us feel and experience gender and sexual nonconformity in new and surprising ways."[94]

I agree with Fawaz's claim that "queerness," or the negativities, potentialities, and disruptive gaps in hegemony that queerness has come to represent, can only ever be accessed through its construction in form. In fact, this project started as an explicitly queer formalist

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[92] See Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (Winter 2013): n.p.; Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violence of the Social," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (May 2017): 227-239; and William J. Simmons, *Queer Formalism: The Return* (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2022).
[93] Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2022): 39.
[94] Fawaz, Queer Forms, 5.

project. I saw, and still see, attention to form as a useful way to think about the construction of "queer" as a project in the contemporary United States. I wanted to understand how queer came into being, how it was being fashioned through aesthetic and formal play, and how, in historicizing such formal innovation, we might see other possibilities for queer critique cracking through form. This is obviously still a major dimension of this project, and in Chapter Two, I am explicit about the need for Queer Studies to think about the forms of contemporary LGBTQ+ literature as enacting excavations of the attachments of contemporary sexual politics. Form, I argue, enables queer artists to play with existing understandings, not only of gender and sexuality, but the orientations of queer politics and critique. In turn, examining the manipulation of meaning through form leads to insights about queer critique and politics that may push it in new directions.

An attention to form is only useful insofar that we accept that the capacity of aesthetic objects to do something to us lies in the ways that the play of structure, sequencing, and other building blocks of meaning leads us to have experiences that access the ineffability of subjectivity, or the failure of subjectivity to ever fully be captured in form or language. There is something about the aesthetic, as the product of formal innovation, that plays with the arrangement of subjectivity by unearthing, bringing to light, reformulating, or even challenging the ways that we desire, including the forms our desires take in narrative forms, like fantasies or attachments.[95] The focus of this project began to shift away from a strict emphasis on formalism as I began to realize that Queer Studies still lacks a vocabulary for talking about literature in a way that attends to the capacity of form and aesthetics to touch not just on gender and sexual

[95] I discuss theories of fantasy that explicitly describe fantasy as a linguistic and narrative phenomenon in Chapter Three.

experience but to illuminate and transgress at once the historical structuration of desire. This became all the more pressing for me to figure out once I started to realize that queer fiction was already trying to express this in language—the language of form—that queer theory did not have.

This is in part why I am so persuaded by Todd McGowan's suggestion that late capitalism is a hewed specifically to the exploitation of desire. McGowan argues that capitalism feeds on the pretense of satisfying our desires. Commodities, for instance, as mystical, "queer" objects that seemingly appear out the vast networks of production, are extended to us as the answer to something that we presumably lack. But lack, McGowan argues, following Lacan, is constitutive of desire itself. This is what makes late capitalism so pernicious: the intensified mystification of the lines of production and the conditions of the world through capital's huge, planetary expanse disorients us to such a degree that we become more desperate for objects that can ground our sense of hope and purpose. Beyond the literal exchange of commodities, late capitalism is a system that pushes us to feel ever-more dissatisfied with ourselves and the world. It intensifies, through toying with, the dissatisfaction that is imbedded within subjectivity itself. "Paradise lost is the speculative equivalent to paradise regained," McGowan writes. "That is to say, loss doesn't represent a disruption of the subject's initial satisfaction but the emergence of the possibility of satisfaction."[96] The idea that we might one day become satisfied is paradoxically escalated through the extremely dissatisfying conditions of late capitalism, including its exploitation of desire's constitutive lack to draw us into desperate searches for new ways to make ourselves happier, healthier, and better.

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[96] Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 28.

McGowan's answer to how we might go about contesting capitalism at a psychic level—I would say at various levels that are psychopolitical in nature—is something that I think contemporary queer American has already perceived, and is already doing, through form. If we finally manage to embrace the finality of loss, the inevitability of dissatisfaction, and the forever unfinished business of desire, McGowan argues, we might learn to develop modes of being that can lead us toward forms of social organization beyond capitalism, or beyond modes of production that exploit the idea that such total satisfaction is possible. The rejection of ultimate satisfaction "alone does not topple capitalism, but it is the necessary condition for revolutionary politics."[97]

Aesthetic objects lead us to confront the expansiveness of human subjectivity through their rearrangement of the Symbolic, representation, and the chains of signs and signifiers whose linear associations we gradually construct, reify, and naturalize to background certain aspects of the experience, to drown out the noise of phenomenon, and therefore to make life livable. Formal experimentation remediates historical processes—allowing us to observe their operations through the text—precisely because it provides something excessive or external to the arrangement of meaning in power. I choose to focus on aesthetics, fiction, and the forms of fiction in this study of late capitalist desire because, like José Muñoz, I believe the representational practices and formal techniques of art can provide us access to the "not-yet-conscious:" the realm of possibilities, potentialities, affects, and modes of being that already exist in the world in excess of what is made legible by the present sociopolitical order.[98] While the not-yet-conscious represents what is external to the subject, or what power makes external to

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[97] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 40.
[98] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (10th Anniversary Edition), (New York: New York University Press, 2009/2019): 3.

subjectivity, it is never beyond the reach of the self. The dimensions of the self that refuse subjectivity—even though, again, the self can only be known through language—can lead us to things that we never *thought* or *felt* were possible.

Contemporary queer American fiction acts through the capacities of form to represent and illuminate late capitalism's manipulation of desire, or the delimitation of the subject through the extension of ways to think about desire, which contemporary queer fiction both enacts and struggles against. Like Lauren Berlant, I see the affective dramas of self-constitution that populate contemporary, late capitalist art as evidence of the mode of subjection. As Berlant writes, "the aesthetic or formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes," evidence which does not amount exclusively to "a record of writerly/readerly cleverness or ideology as such."[99] The representation of subjects struggling with certain desires in certain ways reveals the production of desiring subjects in a given context. Such dramas also suggest a refusal of desiring subjection on certain terms. Authors undertake experiments with form in part because formal experimentation makes it possible for them to rearrange contemporary subject forms and make them newly available to us through the dissonances, discordances, and gaps that are illuminated in their restaging in new ways. At the same time that aesthetic objects reveal something about history, then, they also disprove the confinement of subjectivity to historical symptom.

The faith that Queer Studies already invests in literary and cultural objects to tell us about historical processes of oppression is suggestive of Marx's, not Foucault's,[100] formative influence

[99] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 16.
[100] My phrasing here has flipped Floyd's suggestion that queer theory attends too much to "Foucault's not Marx's formative influence on queer theory." See Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press): 2.

on the field. Marxism and queer theory also share an aspiration to totality. The self-reflexivity that famously characterizes Queer Studies as a field, Floyd writes, suggests that queer theory is always pushing itself to achieve a standpoint that can grasp the totality of social relations—and in ways that Marxisms that are averse to studying social difference and identity fail to do.[101] And yet, at the same time, Eng and Puar and Floyd are not wrong in their separate assessments that queer theory does not commonly narrate itself as a Marxist project. While queer theory has not necessarily avoided discussions of capitalism (especially neoliberalism), queer theory often approaches critiques of capitalism from a non-scientific perspective. Queer theorists tend to talk about capitalism in the register of entrepreneurial subjects, commercialism, or the fetishization and commodification of bodies. While these analyses are still useful, their utility is limited by queer theory's lack of engagement with well-worn analytic concepts at the center of Marxism, like reification, primitive accumulation, or totality. In order to unite queer theory with Marxism–and with psychoanalysis, and with Foucault–Queer Studies will need a grammar that ties together its separate intellectual strains and that seeks to describe the production of desiring subjects under late capitalism as it happens.

Overview of the Project

"Attitude Problems" orients the project of Queer Studies around the production of a queer cultural politics attuned to the challenges and conditions of late capitalism. The dissertation configures queer cultural politics as a form of psychopolitics. I argue an effective psychopolitical method of analysis can achieved by examining how subjection works in the appearance of *psychopolitical structures* in cultural production. Psychopolitics, and attention to psychopolitical

[101] Floyd, *Reification*, 9.

structures–regression, attachment, fantasy, and trauma–is my way of advancing desire as an object for contemporary queer theory. Taking up a conception of desire that transgresses the boundaries of the psychic and the social–desire conceived as both always structured by power and radically resistant to structuration–the project conjoins strains of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Foucault to offer an account of subjection under late capitalism.

I develop this project through my readings of twenty-first century queer American fiction. Contemporary queer American fiction gives form to the psychopolitical dramas of self-constitution that characterize late capitalism, which necessarily requires formal experimentation to express. I demonstrate the necessity of a psychopolitical method for queer theory by making a historical claim about contemporary queer American fiction as it remediates the production of desiring subjects in late capitalism. In the second chapter, I offer the term "postqueer" as a way of periodizing contemporary sexual minoritarian cultural production that struggles to extricate a politics of desire from within the crises that punctuate capitalism, empire, and gender and sexual politics at the turn of the millennium. My examination of postqueer literature's estrangement of queer politics' own attachments leads me to reconceptualize *queer*. I suggest that Queer Studies should use "queer" to describe texts that disrupt the production of late capitalist desiring subjects, giving way to confrontations with the potentialities normally buried beneath the political present. Postqueer texts can certainly be queer in this sense, but I also try to expand queerness beyond its conflation with legible LGBTQ subjectivities. I would like to see a Queer Studies that can take up texts by queer and non-queer artists alike whose explorations of desire give way to strange, discordant, if not startling confrontations with late capitalist subjectivity.

Each chapter of the dissertation is grounded in a different psychopolitical structure. My justification for characterizing these structures as "psychopolitical" is borne out alongside my

general understanding of desire and libidinal economy in Chapter One. The first chapter also contains my engagement with queer theory's infamous anti-social divide—which, I argue, does not actually exist. My use of the term "postqueer," and why I believe it is useful, occurs in Chapter Two. The second chapter also offers more thorough justifications for my attention to form, and the form of fiction in particular. My interest in the queerness of form as disentangling late capitalist subjection carries over into Chapter Three and the Coda. Here I will offer more thorough summaries of the contents of each chapter.

Chapter One begins the project by examining the mode of subjection under late capitalism. I try to describe what I see as one of the primary forms of the moral problematization of desire that characterize the production of desiring subjects. To do so I take up two wildly disparate works of contemporary queer fiction: *Castle Faggot,* by the Canadian-American writer Derek McCormack, and *A Little Life,* by the American writer Hanya Yanagihara. Despite the stark differences in their forms, themes, artistic lineages, and textual politics, both texts demonstrate a concern for the endurance of formative desires that both constitute the subject's identity and simultaneously impede their development toward mature subjectivity. Attention to both texts and their critical reception helps me demonstrate the utility of a Winnicottian concept of regression, and more broadly, a psychopolitical model of subject formation, as foundational critical tools for thinking about the historically-specific conditions that define subjection under late capitalism. I then elaborate on this point by turning to Douglas Crimp's *Melancholia and Moralism*. Crimp's analysis of art, culture, and politics in the first decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States assists me in distinguishing subjection under late capitalism as a shift in the material and moral-ethical conditions of interdependence, which I understand to be a crucial dimension of subject-formation as a psychopolitical process. Late capitalism, in other

words, is distinguished by a shift in the ways people depend on one another. Regression, I argue, may play a particularly important role in the articulation of queer cultural politics as a psychopolitics that unravels the construction of false selves and pushes subjects, instead, toward genuine forms of interdependence and more fully-realized subjectivities.

Chapter Two argues that Queer Studies could productively reimagine itself by reconstituting its aims and methods around questions of attachment. I begin with a literary-historical claim: as twenty-first century LGBTQ+ American authors grapple with the political changes of the twenty-first century, including dramatic shifts in the material and cultural positions of sexuality and desire within the projects of nation-building, ethnonationalism, and capitalism, they turn toward representations of dramas of self-constitution organized around problems of attachment. In the same way that queer theory has turned toward interrogations of its own attachments to free up itself as a critical project, contemporary LGBTQ+ literature takes on the form of attachments as a way to work through the desires that sustain us and yet keep us "stuck" because of their stubborn endurance. Contemporary LGBTQ+ literature works through its attachments to renew the possibilities of queer subjectivity amid a world that seems resistant to every effort to change it.

Turning to Andrea Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, I demonstrate how Lawlor's novel excavates the attachments that propel their protagonist in his pursuits of sex, style, solidarity, and identity. While the novel's appeal to fantasies of uninhibited freedom, fluidity, and sexual choice generate noticeable limits to the narrative around questions of race and class, I argue that the form of Lawlor's novel also disentangles these same attachments, exposing the flaws and the limitations they place on the possibility of achieving the kinds of community that the protagonist so desperately wants yet fails to attain. I close the chapter with a

broader argument about how Queer Studies might shift its understandings of textual queerness, or *what makes a text queer,* through a consideration of the role of attachment in contemporary LGBTQ+ literature. I propose a tentative distinction between *postqueer,* as a historical designation that earmarks LGBTQ+ American literature's struggles to pursue more radical, intersectional, and global forms of sexual politics, ethics, and identity, and *queer,* as a critical designation that can be used to describe how texts (any kinds of texts) challenge the hegemonic organization of political-libidinal economies. This renewed definition of queer (critical) in contrast to postqueer (historical) provides Queer Studies with a way to conceptualize queer cultural politics as a form of psychopolitics attuned to desire while also thinking with the endurance of queer's linguistic and affective histories.

Chapter Three extends the previous chapter's focus on attachment by considering the role of desire in queer historical inquiry. I take up Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* as a paradigmatic text of what I call the "new queer historicism:" a method of historical inquiry that foregrounds the desires motivating the author's return to the past through an interrogation of those desires *in the composition of narrative*. I argue that Hartman's method of close narration elevates her desires for history to the level of historical knowledge itself. Hartman transforms desire from an impediment to inquiry into a starting point for radical knowledge production through her embrace of historical writing as a form that requires reimagination. I rebut criticism of Hartman's method by charting her development of her philosophy of historical writing from the beginning of her academic career up to *Wayward Lives*. *Wayward Lives* represents a logical progression in Hartman's long-standing critique of the desires that motivate present-day scholarship on slavery and anti-Black violence. Drawing together Hartman's critical writings with psychoanalytic theories of fantasy, I read the form of

Wayward Lives as the application of a phantasmatic mode of writing that rearranges the "building blocks" of the archive to arrive at new and startling insights about the past and present.

Lastly, the Coda ends the dissertation with a consideration of queer theory's relationship to sexual violence. More specifically, the Coda considers how U.S.-based queer theory's enduring Americanist biases and its embeddedness within the U.S. political climate has prevented it from developing a critical vocabulary that can adequately describe the psychopolitical structure of sexual violence and, more broadly, the expansion of American mass incarceration, policing, and technologies of social control around the figure of the sex offender. American Queer studies, I argue, has failed to act on what may be the field's most intuitive and potentially powerful contribution to anti-capitalist, -colonial, and -racist struggle—the deflation of punishments for sex-based crimes, including the abolition of the sex offender registry—because it lacks language for analyzing the exceptional self-shattering violence of sexual violence without also gratifying carceral impulses.

To examine the inadequacies of both juridical and reparative discourses surrounding sexual trauma, I turn to Bruce Norris's *Downstate*. *Downstate* helps me demonstrate how radical critiques of the justice system that do not simultaneously find a way to address the permanent effects of sexual violence on subjectivity will ultimately fail to offer viable alternatives to existing carceral logics. Only a psychopolitical grammar of sex and sexual violence has the potential to construct new cultures that trade silence, exile, and punishment for justice and liberation.

In my attention to the psychopolitics of contemporary queer fiction, I am trying to describe what I see as dramas of self-constitution that already exist out in the world—i.e., the problems of subjection, identity-formation, and self-making that people already face under late

capitalism. My suggestion that queer cultural politics should approach itself as a psychopolitical project is built on my observations regarding the historically-specific relevance of psychopolitics to subjection under late capitalism. I ultimately believe that Queer Studies cannot simply be critical of the normativities that already exist. Queer theory, and by extension queer cultural politics, must also be a reconstructive project. It must simultaneously labor to understand the world as it is, develop analyses and ways of articulating such analyses that make the conditions of the world available for people to transform them, and even, I would dare, work to create new, more sustainable, more beautiful ways of living. I fervently hold to the idea that there is no revolution coming that will set the world right. We cannot wait for a Messiah to come and bring about paradise, whether that Messiah be a person, a movement, or a world-historical event. We can only endeavor to build a new world out of the one we have now.

Constructing the new world will also be a never-ending process. Part of the reason why I am interested in psychoanalysis is because I truly believe, like Raymond Williams, that the human imagination is inexhaustible: that "no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts human practice, human energy, human intention."[102] There are parts of ourselves that will always run away from our efforts to make ourselves into subjects. The flip side of this endless potential for creation is the fact that people will always be people: stubborn, passionate, finnicky, inconvenient, incorrigible. Desire dictates that we never fully step into the world on its terms. Any critical, political, or creative movement that wants to not only *critique* the world but *change* it must grapple with this fact: even a more perfect world will still be full of people whose desires pull them away from its institutions, pathways, and technologies of the self. We cannot construct

[102] Williams, "Base and Superstructure," 12.

modes of analysis that do not consider that people will always exceed our efforts, like the Inquisitor, to create a perfect little world in which they can play.

Desire's centrality to the political and its inexhaustible antagonism from within politics is a historically-specific way of thinking about desire that comes forward through people's struggle against the intractability of late capitalism. For that reason, I am convinced it is also a good way of understanding desire, theorizing upon it, and working through it to construct critical and political programs that harness its antagonisms from within the political. Through this project, I hope I can make the case that there is historical and theoretical value in framing queer cultural politics as a project that exploits those fissures to free up signification, to free up the possibilities for what the world might look like, which to me is a more exciting and realistic path to liberation than trying to dictate what the world *must* look like.

I feel fortunate to live in a world where people will always defy the expectations we set for them, whatever they may be. A queer cultural politics worth its name will unshackle the self from the mystifications of those expectations only so we may rediscover the self again.

CHAPTER ONE

Transgressing the False Self:

Queer Regression and Neoliberal Responsibility

What characterizes the mode of subjection under late capitalism? What role does desire play in late capitalist subjection? Is it produced and reproduced, directed and oriented, contorted and weaponized? Does it throw a wrench in the machine: instead of lubricating the gears of power, capital, and violence, does desire slip between them, spill out on the floor, hold up operations, and get all over our shirts in the process? Does desire prevent subjects from acting in perfect harmony with the process of primitive accumulation and the endless generation of surplus-value? Or, does desire make the conditions of life under a global, mystified regime of exploitation possible in the first place: keeping us tethered to cruel objects that represent false ideas of the "good life," entrancing us with promises of power and wealth, or sabotaging our ability to act in concert with others to achieve meaningful political transformation?

I want to argue that the role of desire in late capitalist modes of production, social reproduction, and subjection cannot be reduced to either symptom or negation. Neither symptomatic readings of desire as overdetermined by historical processes, nor anti-social insistence on the psyche's refusal of social determination, adequately describe the dramas that people move through on the path to mature subjectivity under late capitalism. Queer theory is better off thinking about desire as something is both structured—and only knowable through language—and yet also resistant to structure—there are dimensions of psyche-somatic experience that do not exist in a linear, neatly causal relationship to power and capital.

I will demonstrate the suitability of this concept of desire for a queer critique of late capitalism. To do this, I look at two wildly different works of contemporary queer literature. In both texts, I observe that their forms take shape around dramas of self-constitution that are best described using a particular psychoanalytic concept: regression. The theorists who I find most useful for explaining regression in relation to late capitalist subjection are Donald Winnicott and Judith Butler.

Although I will discuss both theorists at length in this chapter, I will offer a brief explanation of regression in Winnicottian terms here. Regression, for Winnicott, describes the subject's withdrawal into previous psychic states that correspond to a formative traumatic event that occurred sometime in the subject's past. With the assistance of a medium–a third party that provides the subject with the support or reassurance they lacked during that original traumatic event–the subject transforms this withdrawal into a regression. A regression is distinct from with a withdrawal. In a regression, the subject comes out of the adopted psychic state having learned something about their needs. These are needs, the subject realizes, that they have denied in some way since that original traumatic event. In contrast, a withdrawal marks an instance where the subject learns nothing. Eventually, the subject will emerge from a withdrawal after some period of time. But, without anyone to "hold" them during the withdrawal—to provide for their needs in a way that they originally needed during that formative, traumatic event—they learn nothing. As such, when they are inevitably confronted with similar circumstances in the future, they will withdraw again. Through regression, meanwhile, the subject manages to undermine the possibility of future withdrawals, because they have managed to overcome their construction of a false self: a sense of self maintained through habits, practices, and techniques that defer potential confrontations or discomforts required to satisfy their genuine needs.

As I will describe below, I am drawn to Winnicott's theory of regression because of the central role it plays in his broader theory of subject formation and emotional development. Winnicott's model of psychic development is also highly social and, I would argue, political. In Winnicott's model, the subject's ability to pass through the normative path of development—the stages of emotional development that most people will go through "naturally"—is highly determined by their environment. In fact, Winnicott believes that most people will probably not follow the abstract, normative path he describes. Though there is a normative model at the center of his theory of subject formation, it is more a guiding path intended to elucidate how people will depart from it and not, in actuality, something people follow.

This is because Winnicott's model is organized around the gradual frustration of the subject's needs and their ability to adapt to such frustrations. As the subject gets older, they will be faced with moments where the instant fulfillment of their needs does not happen. For the ideal subject, these frustrations are incremental. The subject is met with challenges that push them appropriate to their stage of development, allowing them to gradually adapt and grow more independent without facing any true catastrophes that they cannot overcome.

But Winnicott knows that very few people actually receive the kind of consistent, structured care that would enable such a gradual and appropriately-inclined path to independence. In reality, we live in a world in which our needs are not only regularly denied but often catastrophically so. By virtue of the world we live in, Winnicott knows, most people will go through an instance in which their needs were failed horribly, where someone or something that should have been there to assist them was not. People are more likely than not going to develop false selves that allow them to "hold" themselves in these instances where no one is there to hold them. The result is a population where the majority of people are living through

identities that make it hard for them to work with others, in a genuine and honest way, to fulfill their needs and live happy lives.

It is for this reason that Winnicott sees regression as both a pivotal mechanism in subject formation and a primary point of intervention around which analysts must organize their treatment of analysands. Regressions enable the subject to break through the false self. Once the analyst provides the subject with what they needed in that formative moment, that instance of catastrophic failure, they can reemerge into themselves with a better understanding of what they really need from their environments—self-knowledge that they have closed themselves off from in order to preserve in a world where they unconsciously or consciously believe such needs will not be met. Regressions enable the subject to get closer to achieving the forms of independence that, for Winnicott, characterize fully mature subjectivity. As I describe below, the independence that Winnicott sees as representative of mature subjectivity is really better understood as a kind of *interdependence*. For Winnicott, the mature subject is distinguished by their ability to both advocate for their individual needs, and, simultaneously, act in concert with others to ensure the fulfillment of collective needs. Astoundingly, Winnicott explicitly states that part of being a mature subject is taking active interest in the public good and the improvement of the conditions of the world for future generations. I will argue this is a definition of subjectivity that operates in stark contrast to late capitalist subjectivities—hence why queer theory might be interested in taking up Winnicott and, specifically, his concept of regression.

I will argue that Winnicottian regression carries distinctly anti-capitalist psychopolitical. Regressions shatter the construction of false selves that are so central to late capitalist modes of subjection. A queer cultural politics counterposed to late capitalism could harness regression as a form of psychopolitical intervention. Queer Studies scholars could use regression as a framework

to identify how cultural objects represent the construction of false selves, the denial of genuine need, and the dramas that occur through the subject's inability to fully participate in social and political life as evidence of historical processes of subjection. In turn, exploiting the dissonances marked by a subject's withdrawal—the gaps between the false self and what they really need as elucidated through the subject crossing back into an earlier psychic state—might not only tell us more about how subjection works under late capitalism but how we might intervene in it.[1]

Regression is useful for studying and intervening in late capitalist subjection, I will argue, for two reasons: 1. At the same time that late capitalism rapidly and dramatically alters our access to the means of subsistence,[2] the biopolitical organization of the population, and *the ways that people depend on one another for survival*, 2. Late capitalism also introduces *distinctly ethical and moral forms of subjectivity*, i.e., modes of being that are framed as highly ethical and moral, *which nevertheless reaffirm the submission of life to the production of surplus-value*. New paradigms of morality and ethics emerge to ease our acclimation to the novel conditions of

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[1] There is, of course, a dimension of Winnicott's theory of subject formation that seems very anti-anti-social in nature. Winnicott suggest that mature subjectivity depends on the subject caring about the world as it will be inherited by future generations. Winnicott expects healthy subjects to feel a sense of responsibility to people who have not yet come into being. Is that not a capitulation to the logic of reproductive futurity described by Edelman in *No Future*? Would Winnicottian queer theory uncritically run toward the Child as the privileged object of sociopolitical organization? My short answer is no. Caring about the sustainability of the world is not in contraction to Edelman's rejection of the abstract Child as a repository of hegemonic fantasies about heteronormativity and racial purity as the foundations of the nation-state. If anything, learning to act and think in ways that actually make the world more livable for future generations is antithetical to ways of being that are built up through the rhetoric of the Child. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[2] Marx and Engels uses the term "means of subsistence" to describe the ways that people satisfy basic life functions like the need for food or the ability to reproduce. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Idealism and Materialism," in The German Ideology (Unpublished manuscript, 1846), n.p. Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm.

expropriation, exploitation, and oppression that are formed to satisfy late capitalism's ever-desperate need for surplus-value. We are led toward practices of self-regulation that we believe constitute responsible, even happy and prosperous ways to live. But the forms of responsibility that late capitalism solicits us to take up, and the forms of interdependence that would actually satisfy our needs and make the world better, do not line up. I will refer to this later in this chapter as the contradiction between false responsibility and genuine independence.

In what follows, I examine two works of contemporary queer literature that are preoccupied with the subject's inability to move beyond formative trauma. Wildly divergent in their concerns, relationships to genre, artistic milieu, and queer identity, and their methods and outcomes in experimenting with the novel form, Derek McCormack's *Castle Faggot* and Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* are nevertheless unified in their representations of dramas of self-constitution that involve the subject's continual withdrawals. In each text, the subject's inability to come out of the withdrawal with a renewed sense of self leads them to do things that compromise their own well-being. Despite their differences, the formal experimentation in each text functions as a way to express concerns regarding the subject's enduring attachment to objects that compromise their sense of self, enacted in their withdrawals. This gives rise to a portrait of desire as a psychopolitical function that I trace in the postqueer texts studied throughout this dissertation: desire as simultaneously structured by the social and also resistant, in the last instance, to imperatives place on it.

I will argue that the shared concern for (failed) regression exhibited by both *Castle Faggot* and *A Little Life* is indicative of the forms of "moral problematization"[3] that characterizes

[3] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1984/1990): 37.

the late capitalist production of desiring subjects. Adopting regression as an analytic framework can help us reconstitute our understanding of queerness and queer subjectivity to reflect these historical processes of subjection. Regression assists us in reconstituting queerness, in particular, in Marxist-psychoanalytic terms: queerness as a form of experience that occurs when the subject forms of late capitalism are refracted and undone through the sheer complexity and inventiveness of our desires. Analyzing queer subjectivity under late capitalism through the lens of regression not only enriches queer critique's potential to play a pivotal role in anti-capitalist resistance, I will argue, but reasserts queer critique's central role as an expansion and improvement upon single-axis Marxist critiques of capitalism.

"What it's like to be a premium"

At first glance, Derek McCormack's *Castle Faggot* might seem like a regressive choice of text for this dissertation. The intentionally repulsive anti-sociality of a text like Castle Faggot implies a retreat to a form of white gay politics that performs a radical recuperation of homosexuality from the margins of society through an adoption of homophobic rhetoric of abjection, death, and disease. The problem is that white homosexuality can hardly be said to operate on the periphery of empire in the twenty-first century—and indeed, scholars like Kadji Amin and Hiram Pérez have demonstrated how cosmopolitan, Euro-American white gay politics has long been constituted through a collusion with the Orientalist ideologies of colonialism. To say that the white, Western, educated, bourgeois, able-bodied homosexual is an emblem of social death seems to miss the queer critical mark.

I am less interested in passing judgements on McCormack's aesthetic priorities, however, and more in describing what I see the text doing. McCormack has constructed a text that

gradually deflates its hyperbolic anti-social aesthetics. If the text begins with the implication that McCormack is just leaning into an anti-social embrace of abjection, the text ends in a very different place. We arrive at the end of *Castle Faggot* with a representation of desire and homosexuality as collusive with homophobic, genocidal power. From within Castle Faggot's anti-social aesthetics, McCormack excavates a bizarrely sincere confrontation with the psychic scars of homophobia and how such scars lead subjects to behave in ways that undermine their own well-being and, importantly, lead them to align themselves with the very forces of violence that do not have their interests at heart.

Towards the end of the second half of *Castle Faggot*, Derek, McCormack's teenaged, self-insert namesake protagonist, huddles himself in a corner. Derek has just learned that his brief fling with Faggotland's most beautiful twink was a total con-job. The twink in question is Arthur Rainblo, one of the many caricatures of nineteenth-century French poets that populate Faggotland, the twisted theme park that serves as *Castle Faggot*'s primary setting. Derek is not a native of Faggotland (though it is, presumably, a park for faggots like him). He was brought to Faggotland against his will by the dictatorial Count Choc-o-log. The Count, believing Derek to be the Elizabethan mystic John Dee, conjures Derek and demands that he make a magic mirror that will let the Count see his reflection. (The Count is a vampire). Fulfilling the Count's request is the only way that Derek can get out of Faggotland.

Understandably, Derek is desperate to get out of Faggotland from the moment he arrives. Before the events of Rue du Doo—the name for the stop-motion cartoon that makes up the second half of the text, when Derek gets transplanted into Faggotland—the first half of Castle Faggot introduces us to Faggotland through a series of fake promotional materials: a travel

brochure, a "foto book" of the park ("© Walt Doody Productions"),[4] and an advertisement for a doll house modeled after the titular castle, the park's central attraction. The materials describe the park as a nightmarish hellscape decorated with shit, blood, guts, and the mutilated bodies of "dead faggots." Derek is dying to get out of Faggotland, lest he become of those dead faggots himself.

But Arthur's appearance makes everything turn around. Derek is hopelessly enchanted with Arthur. Even after successfully making the mirror for the Count, Derek decides to stay in Faggotland, only so that he can be close to Arthur. When it is revealed, then, that Arthur was put up by the Count's court to distract Derek from making the mirror–that Arthur was not genuinely interested in Derek–his world comes crashing down. Defeated, consumed with despair, and surrounded on all sides by fiends working against his best interests, it seems like there is no way out of Faggotland.

You would be hard-pressed to find a novel more pointedly offensive than *Castle Faggot*. Built around a twistedly homophobic negation of Disneyland, McCormack's novel is saturated from front to end with a relentless rhetoric of faggots and faggots and faggots. In conjoining the idyllic, happy-go-lucky tenor of the Disney brand with vitriolic tirades about faggots, McCormack exploits the contrast between American fantasies of childhood innocence and the abjection faced by those children who dare to grow up to become faggots–if, that is, they grow up at all.

There is a strange intimacy that McCormack seems to draw between the faggot, imagined as a figure of arrested development, and actual children. Though we never get an outright explanation of what a "faggot" is, McCormack gives us an idea by way of the appeals that the

[4] Derek McCormack, *Castle Faggot* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2020), 11.

park's promotional materials make to their reader, the imagined "faggot" to whom Faggotland supposedly appeals. Among the obvious jokes about faggots loving shit (because they also love anal sex), the Faggotland marketing team informs us that we faggots should be excited about visiting Faggotland because it features "Count Choc-o-log, Boo Brownie, Frankenfudge," and all the other "monster mascots of the breakfast cereals you faggots buy!"[5] The references to American children's media and consumer products compound on one another nonsensically: Faggotland is like Disneyland, and Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and friends are replaced by alternate versions of mascots of the General Mills "monster cereals."

The hodge-podge design of Faggotland substantiates the novel's overt critique of American commercialism oriented around children, or more precisely the figure of the Child described by Edelman. Disney is a paradigmatic example of both postmodernism—the aesthetic movement that Fredric Jameson distinguishes by its assemblage of many different images, styles, and traditions organized solely for the purpose of minimalizing the consumer's sense of wish-fulfillment—and postmodernity: the "cultural logic" of late capitalism in which the incredible affordances of information technology are exploited to infuse opportunities for consumption into everyday life.[6] Disney cannibalizes children's fiction, folklore, and fairy tales from around the world, absorbing them into its media empire through representations of their stories and

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[5] McCormack, *Castle Faggot*, 8.

[6] Jameson makes this helpful distinction between "postmodernism" as an aesthetic and "postmodernity" as the episteme through which this aesthetic emerges in his 2016 interview with Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue. Both postmodernism and postmodernity are central to Jameson's understanding of late capitalism and its "cultural logics." See Fredric Jameson with Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue, "Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson," *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (2016): 143-160; and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

characters. Beyond the discrete pieces of media they produce, those characters and stories also get reproduced through additional television shows and movies (often where characters from different shows or movies interact with one another) as well as merchandise, promotional materials, social media, hotels, restaurants, and, of course, theme parks. The Disney park functions as a physical manifestation of the universe Disney constructs through its circulation of these different symbols, which it frames as icons not just within its brand but within the imagination of Childhood writ large. Part of the reason why adults can justify spending thousands and thousands of dollars to take a trip to Disney parks—with or without children—is because Disney frames its parks as Childhood, the fantasy experience of an idealized, idyllic childhood, made manifest. The adult can invest in the Disney park knowing that Disney has gone to tremendous lengths to make the experience of a Disney park uniquely immersive and totalizing. As Umberto Eco describes in his essay on Disney as a "hyperreal" space, the appeal of Disney parks is not that Disney pretends that their parks are actually separate from reality, as if it were, say, a historical reenactment. Rather, the park space is constructed with such a massive amount of technological innovation and economic investment that the consumer finds themselves invited to "let loose" in the park because they know it is such a rarefied space. Disney promises consumers the opportunity to participate in a field of action that exists beyond the temporalities of the outside world, and the consumer, embracing the fact that only Disney could provide such an experience, allows themselves to indulge, mostly through participating in the near-endless opportunities for consumption in the park.[7]

[7] Umberto Eco, "City of Robots," in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1986): 39-48.

Although Disney goes to tremendous lengths to create a clear boundary between its parks as an internal "universe" and the world beyond its boundaries, the logic of escapism that constitutes the park experience reproduces a normative teleology of emotional development. At the same time that Disney frames its parks as a space where its media empire of Childhood is made manifest, it also advances a postmodern appeal to its consumers that the parks provide an opportunity for unfettered consumer indulgence (let yourself have fun here because it is the only chance you will get!). The implication is that there is a stark difference between the realm of Childhood provided by Disney and the realm of Adulthood from which the consumers descend into the park, and to which, depressingly, they must return once the park closes for the day (unless you are staying at a Disney hotel, of course).

McCormack exploits the "hyperreal" logic of Disney through his messy assemblage of different references to children's media. Disneyland and sugary cereals, as well as board games, video games, *The Wizard of Oz,* and the television special *Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer* all make appearances in distorted forms. In our reality, the Child is constructed through the circulation of media that is said to anticipate their particular needs and wants—the Child, that is, as a desiring subject. In Faggotland, the faggot is *only ever* described through its desires. Instead of getting an outright description of what a faggot is supposed to be, the particular meanings of "faggot" is constructed through claims imbedded in the promotional material about what faggots want. Although the reader may have a sense of the kinds of sexual, gendered, racialized, hygienic, and ableist associations usually invoked in calling someone a faggot, the text defamiliarizes the faggot and builds it back from the ground up through a frightening rhetorical strategy: the "faggots" that the park is built for includes you, the reader, who is figured in

second-person address as one of the faggots that the promotional materials are trying to persuade.

The first half of the novel indicates that Faggotland is constructed around an image of the faggot as a kind of near-child. The harsh, mean-spirited language of the promotional matters both position the reader as a "faggot" and bludgeon them with blunt, nonsensical descriptions of what the reader, the faggot, must want and why. The foto book, for instance, describes how the park is made out of Count Choc-o-log cereal, which is supposed to taste like chocolate," but instead "tastes like shit." Why? Simple: "Faggots love chocolate; faggots love shit." Hence, faggots love Count Choc-o-log. "What else do faggots love?," you might wonder? "Suicide!"[8] The circular nature of these descriptions induce a kind of solipsism, where descriptions of what faggots want justify other descriptions of what faggots want. The effect is a text that seems to perform an internalization of homophobic logics from which the park—and the reader—cannot escape. The logic of faggotry quite literally folds in on itself, making the park appear at once both frighteningly antagonistic toward anything beyond its boundaries and also totally consumed within its own world.

There are brief moments in the first half of the text where the park seems to acknowledge the ridiculousness of its rhetoric. In the passage below, the "Why?" that begins this section of the text offers a break from the relentless flow of descriptions that, so far, have been washing over the reader with no relief. It seems as if we might get a self-reflexive description of why the park exists, why it is constructed the way it is, or, at the very least, why the park seems to think that faggots are such vile little creatures. But again, the park only doubles back on itself:

Why?

[8] McCormack, *Castle Faggot*, 17.

> Why decorate a castle as a crypt?
>
> For faggots, fucking's a form of decoration. What do you call a dick in an ass? Décor. What do you call shit in an ass? Décor.
>
> What faggots did was to turn fucking into decorating. What faggots did was to turn decorating into fucking.
>
> What's Castle Faggot? Imagine a castle that's been fucked. Imagine a castle that's been flipped ass-up and fucked. Imagine a castle that's been flipped ass-up so that crap from the crypt—the bats, the rats, the cocksucker corpses—drops down through the rooms and adorns them.
>
> Who wants to live in a crypt?
>
> A vampire.
>
> A suicide. (McCormack 2020: 25).

The reason why Faggotland is decorated with the bodies of dead faggots is because faggots love suicide. Faggots love suicide because, well, they are faggots. McCormack's use of short, declarative sentences throughout the "promotional material" section of the text creates the feeling of a methodological insistence, thudding along with such determination it makes the text's homophobic rhetoric vibrate with a heated intensity, as if just below it sleek commercial surface a fist is about to jump out from the page and gay-bash us. Wading through these endless, circular descriptions, I feel myself plunged into a world that, like Disneyland, operates on its own logic. The illusion of Faggotland is so tightly constructed that I am left to simply make do with what I can while it plods along to its own rhythm. McCormack thus achieves a perplexing lack of exteriority: the park truly does seem to have its own kind of twisted "consciousness" which it struggles to justify on anything but its own terms.

As I suggested earlier, a reader would be justified in thinking that *Castle Faggot* may is the ultimate exercise in anti-social negativity. *Castle Faggot* seems to reproduce a kind of self-satisfied transgressiveness: Look at me! I am a faggot! Look at how much everyone hates me! In its parodic adoption of abjection as synonymous with homosexuality, *Castle Faggot* operates within a tradition of gay aesthetics and politics that Bobby Benedicto has called the "homoerotics

of death."[9] The homoerotics of death refers to cultural practices that stage a critical recuperation of homosexuality's associations with death, disease, and abjection as a basis for an anti-bourgeois politics. This tradition stretches over theory, art, and activism across the twentieth-century. Benedicto cites, for instance, Georges Bataille's proposal of a revolutionary ecstasy, Lee Edelman's lethal narcissism, and Leo Bersani's sexual negativity/self-shattering as an examples. I also think of the work of modern and contemporary gay artists like William Burroughs, Dennis Cooper, Gary Indiana, David Wojnarowicz, and Hervé Guibert. We could even stretch this tradition back to Decadents and Symbolist poets like Rimbaud, which McCormack seems to do through Rimbaud's inclusion in the text. All of these thinkers/artists have contributed to a tradition of gay politics that positions homo/sexuality against bourgeois propriety, normality, respectability, and even the modern subject itself.

As Benedicto points out, this tradition's association with white gay art and politics has earned it a reputation as being *solely* the province of white gays. Holding death so close to one's identity, or death as the occasion for identity's dissolution, appears to be "the proclivity of those who would find relative security in the gap between psychic dissolution and physical death, between the figurative and the literal: a matter, that is, of (white) privilege."[10] Part of the problem is that artists who work in this tradition tend to only care about homosexuality. They regurgitate tropes of homosexuality as deathly, sick, twisted, and so forth without any attention to sexuality's imbrication with race, gender, or class. Oftentimes, many of these artists—like Cooper, as I will discuss later in this chapter—position themselves against "identity politics," "political correctness," "wokeness," and other efforts by queer artists and thinkers to think

[9] Bobby Benedicto, "Agents and Objects of Death: Gay Murder, Boyfriend Twins, and Queer of Color Negativity," GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies 25, no. 2 (2019): 278.
[10] Bobby Benedicto, "Agents and Objects of Death," 274-275.

sexuality as but one form of social difference among others. If anti-social negativity represented, as José Muñoz claimed, the "gay white man's last stand" against more intersectional forms of queer theory, the homoerotics of death is anti-sociality's aesthetic corollary.[11]

Perhaps more than any of the other artists I have mentioned, McCormack actively situates his text within the very lineage drawn out by Benedicto. *Castle Faggot* invokes French Decadent and Symbolist writers often held as predecessors or inspirations for twentieth-century gay politics and art. McCormack places his text within a very white French aesthetic tradition, if only through the distorting lens of satire. Similar to Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A., which is modeled after an American railroad town, Faggotland is modeled on Paris, and specifically Montmartre, the "faggiest" neighborhood of the "faggiest city."[12] Count Choc-o-log and his cereal mascot friends are accompanied by a cast of characters known as the Dookydents. Each member of the Dookydents represents a thinly-veiled caricature of a nineteenth-century French writer. Among them, there is "Marcel Pooroust," "Jean Profitelorrain," "Charles Baudéclair," "Stéphane Marshmallarmé," and "J. Kouign-amann Huysmans."[13] Georges Bataille also makes an appearance as Count Choc-o-log's pet bat, Bataille. McCormack seems to undercut any pretense of high-literary taste invoked through these esoteric references through his derision of the French language: "As Marshmallarmé says: 'French French French French French French French French French French French French…'"[14] Even still, getting the joke only works if the reader is at least somewhat moved by self-aware half-jokes about hierarchies of literary taste.

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[11] Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 825.
[12] McCormack, *Castle Faggot*, 8.
[13] Ibid. 31.
[14] Ibid.

Hardly at an anti-elitist distance from such rarefied literary cultures, everything about *Castle Faggot* suggests its position within the very white, male, European, art world scene. In addition to the in-text references, the text itself is marketed toward an artistic community affiliated with this same transgressive, anti-PC aesthetics-politics. The text is published by Semiotext(e), an imprint of MIT Press specializing mostly in avant-garde literature and translations of European works into English. The back cover of the text features quotes from Edmund White, Lisa Robertson, and Dennis Cooper, who also provides the afterword to the text alongside Zac Farley. Cooper's quote on the back cover declares *Castle Faggot* "really just one of the best books ever, and maybe the greatest novel ever written." *Castle Faggot'*s very binding seems to advertise the text within the "homoerotics of death" toward white queer Euro-American art communities with a certain transgressive edge. I want to suggest, however, that *Castle Faggot* upends its investment in the idea that homo/sexuality alone is a transgressive, anti-bourgeois site of resistance.

By inserting himself into the text as the protagonist of the second half of *Castle Faggot,* McCormack undermines the insular, immersive, circular logics of Faggotland by identifying his teenaged self with its hateful messaging about faggots. Without a hint of shame, Derek openly admits to liking the things that supposedly make faggots emblems of arrested development. When Derek tries to explain that he is not a wizard, he suggests that he was confused with John Dee not only because of his name—Jonathan Derek McCormack—but because he regularly eats Alpha Bits, and "there's a wizard on Alpha-Bits, isn't there?"[15] He does things that many kids *and* adults normally do: he has "played Wizard, the board game;" he owns "Merlin, the

[15] Ibid. 50.

Electronic Wizard."[16] When the Count remarks that he looks like "'a piece of shit puppet from *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*!'" Derek earnestly responds, "I love that show."[17] Although there is some obvious self-derisive humor occurring here, Derek's plainspoken and honest confessions come across as decidedly pathologized. The joke may be on Derek, but McCormack also reflects some self-effacing humor back onto his entire project, as well. All of the characteristics assigned to faggots, we realize, was McCormack's way of setting up a joke about himself. He constructs Faggotland's faggots through details from his own personal history, particularly his adoration for children's cereal and media in his adolescence, beyond the age that children are expected to stop behaving like Children. This form of self-parody is also, at the same time, an extension of grace to his younger self. Even if Faggotland insists that all faggot desires are pathological, McCormack gives his namesake protagonist to us in a way that actively undermines the park's insistence that all faggots are mindlessly bound toward death.

Deflation is an excellent way to think about Castle Faggot's narrative arc. In fact, throughout this project, I will suggest that deflation is a good way to describe a lot of the aesthetic strategies of contemporary queer American fiction. In *Sexual Hegemony,* Christopher Chitty proposes that deflation, or dedramatization, may be a good way for queer critique to imagine itself as a critical-creative project oriented against late capitalism. Late capitalism is punctuated by an endless sense of crisis, Chitty argues. The idea that we are living in a time of exceptional disorder justifies violation of the rule of law, democratic norms, and the imposition of executive over collective authority. An unending sense of alarm and crisis prevents us from truly being able to grasp the conditions of the world as it current exists. Chitty suggests that

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

instead of giving into high-flung aesthetics or rhetorics that slip toward grandiose claims or totalizing narratives about the arc of history—he implicitly critiques Munõz's utopianism here—Chitty proposes that queer critics try instead to "dedramatize[e] the kinds of stories we tell about the sexualities of the past" in our attempts to create historical analyses for the present.[18] Getting out of the crisis logic of late capitalism, Chitty suggests, may involve deflating our own sense of excitement, urgency, exceptionalism, or fatalism, instead stepping back to create accounts, narratives, and representations that momentarily cool things down.

Turning on Chitty's call for dedramatization and deflation, I want to suggest that contemporary queer American fiction is already putting into practice a kind of deflationary aesthetics. In *Castle Faggot*, we see deflationary aesthetics in action in McCormack's performance of a disidentification, in the second half of the novel, with the homophobic logics of abjection he constructs in the first. Disidentification, in José Muñoz's use of the term, describes a set of practices that move beyond simple rejections or recuperations of harmful, stereotypical, and politically suspicion subject forms. Disidentification involves a parodic adoption of "bad" subjectivities that plays at their flaws while still holding onto their utility as a source of inspiration, if not sources of identity formation. It is a performance of identification with compromising ideals, types, and beauty standards, but through their repetition "with a

[18] In the same passage, Chitty uses the term "deflationary" to describe the work of Bertolt Brecht, who he sees as a potential model for this critical-creative project. I prefer to use "deflation" instead of "dedramatize" because the latter could be interpreted as a desire for the elimination of drama itself, or as a way of insisting that the problems subjects face do not actually exist, i.e., are illusions of capital. Deflationary aesthetics is a way of describing an affective deflation that allows the subject to see a problem more clearly rather than eliminating the presence of problems altogether. See Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World-System*, ed. Max Fox (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 28.

difference."[19] In the artist's adoption of these compromising ideals, the disidentificatory performance opens up new forms of subject constitution at the cracks of various intersecting codes and subject forms.

McCormack's use of a namesake protagonist enables him to disidentify with the rhetoric of Faggotland. [20] In turn, the narrative of Faggotland starts to turn around just how well-adjusted Derek is compared to the rest of the characters in the park. It is through Derek's presentation as more even-handed, thoughtful, and cautious than Faggotland's violently homophobic cast of faggots that his decision to stay in Faggotland feels like a bizarre, unexpected miscalculation on his part. Derek does not seem to be himself. 'Have you lost your mind? This isn't your world!," Stéphane Marshmallarmé tells him. Even if Derek is in the Count's good graces, the very landscape of Faggotland is designed to kill faggots like Derek. Staying in Faggotland would mean certain death: not a question of *if,* but when and how. But Derek, who was once desperate to get out Faggotland, now awash in his love for Arthur, could not care less. It's not that he wants to stay in Faggotland; he simply does not want to be without Arthur. As far as Derek is concerned, "Arthur's ass is my world!"[21]

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[19] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 15.

[20] In a survey of McCormack's early fiction, Peter Dickinson (2001) observes how McCormack follows gay writers like Christopher Isherwood in using namesake protagonists to illustrate "the very constructedness of identity and sexual identity in particular." Rather than reading *Castle Faggot*'s Derek "in a reductive and vulgar Freudian manner, as a case of narcissistic and arrested ego identification, with the homosexual subject being unable to progress beyond a love of the same," we might read McCormack's identification of his protagonist with himself—and the conscious self-parody he engages in as a result—as an excavation of "difference" from within "sameness:" an excavation of the contingency of the self, "whose meanings… shift over time and space." See Peter Dickinson, "Derek McCormack: In Context and Out," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 73 (Spring 2001): 51-71.

[21] McCormack, *Castle Faggot,* 80.

Derek seems to have lost the level-headed attitude that enabled him to survive in Faggotland up until this point. Then, tragedy strikes. Cocoa Chanel, the Count's personal stylist, reveals to Derek that she instructed Arthur to distract him. Arthur's romantic and sexual interest in Derek was all a ploy to prevent him from making the mirror for the Count. Suddenly, his newfound sense of confidence comes crashing down. He sulks away into his room, where Arthur finds him, as I noted earlier, "curled up in a corner," i.e., in a fetal position.[22]

Without ascribing any intention to McCormack, I want to observe what is conveyed by this choice to have Derek immediately go from finding out about Arthur's false desire for him to him curling up in a ball. Derek has assumed the archetypal position of the infant: the fetal position. What does the fetal position convey? When a subject who is not an infant curls up in the fetal position, it typically broadcasts a sense of helplessness. The subject invokes the absolute vulnerability of the infant to their surroundings. The fetal position is a physical manifestation of the subject withdrawing into themself to protect themself from a hostile environment. Psychic withdrawal, incurred by the sense that the environment is inhospitable and the challenge facing the subject is insurmountable, is mirrored in the physical assumption of this position of vulnerability. Of course, the subject does not literally withdraw to an infantile state. The subject must be aware of the challenging environment in order to express their dissent at its conditions; an infant is incapable of conveying such dissent because they do not even conceive of themselves as separate from their caregiver, i.e., they lack an "I" which could protest in the first place. The fetal position is thus the subject assumed a kind of passive performance of dissent that signals both a sense of injustice and the subject's felt inability to communicate with the environment in a way that their needs could legitimately be addressed. The suffocation, insular

[22] Ibid. 81.

logic of Faggotland finally proves too much for Derek; his only true source of hope was proven to be a part of the plot against him all along.

As I will describe later in this chapter, it is the subject's sense that a challenge is insurmountable in the present, and the relation of this challenge to a problem that seemed insurmountable in the past, that leads to a withdrawal. Withdrawals occur when the subject faces a present problem that feels unconquerable because it mirrors, in some way, the traumatic failure of need that inspired the subject's construction of a false self in the first place. The present challenge is some way rubs against or invokes the false self created in a moment that bore similar conditions to the moment of its formation.

Derek's decision to stay in Faggotland because of his desire to stay close to Arthur—his intense attachment to Arthur—implicitly suggests that Derek is acting out of a sense of insecurity that he now believes Arthur's love will obliviate. Derek repeatedly admonishes his unexceptional looks and personality throughout the text. When Arthur, the most beautiful twink with the fattest ass in Faggotland, seems to fall in love with Derek, Arthur's love activates something in him. It is clear that Derek invests a degree of significance in Arthur that draws him out of reality, enough so that the promise of being with Arthur somehow negates his previously paranoid attention to the immanent possibility of death threatening him from all sides in Faggotland. Arthur's love seems to speak to some kind of past trauma or injury for Derek. This is only confirmed as the text proceeds toward its end, beginning with Derek's silent withdrawal into the fetal position. No longer is Faggotland simply terrifyingly violent: something about the ways that the park is plotting against him has struck a nerve.

Derek does not come out of this withdrawal in a way that signals any sense of triumph, either. He does come out his withdrawal, quite spectacularly—but the end result leaves me

rooting for nobody. Arthur finds Derek in the fetal position and begins taunting him. He shows Derek the comedically fat ass that made Derek so wildly in love with Arthur in the first place: "'Say so long to this—you'll never taste it again!'"[23] In a moment of inspiration, Derek instantly gets up and smashes Arthur over the head with a book. When Arthur wakes up, he finds himself chained to the ceiling of the eponymous Castle Faggot. Derek is standing beneath him, side-by-side with the Count, who just so happens to be Arthur's former lover, as well. Arthur instinctually understands Derek's double-crossing, and begins to beg for his life. "'You love me!,'" Arthur cries to Derek, seemingly trying to exploit whatever emotional residue of Derek's crush may linger. But Derek refuses to listen. The Count instructs his bats to fly through Arthur's body, cutting him to pieces, "like a shape shorter with only one shape: bat."[24] As Arthur's blood and the bat's shit rains down from the ceiling, Derek and the Count turn their heads up and stick their tongues out.

A strange mix of victory, envy, irony, and rage permeates the final moments of *Castle Faggot*. Derek has chosen to collude with the very source of power that he once feared and which may still threaten his life. He seems willing to make this concession if it means he can get revenge on Arthur. Even still, there is little suggestion that Derek has overcome anything in collaborating with the Count. The final line of the novel ends Castle Faggot, not with a sense of celebration, triumph, or achievement, but with a blunt and diffusely cynical sense of resentment: "What it's like to be a premium."[25]

The last line of the novel confirms *Castle Faggot* as a novel organized around McCormack's exploration of the endurance of psychic scars and formative attachments that take

[23] Ibid. 82.
[24] Ibid. 83.
[25] Ibid. 84.

shape in our childhoods and yet remain constitutive of our identities. In the final moment of the novel, when Derek uses the Count against Arthur, he achieves for the first time, if conditionally and only through another, a sense of power, authority, and access. Arthur had all of the access that someone in Faggotland could want: beautiful and beloved by everyone, including, at least at one point, the Count. Arthur is the "premium" in question. By virtue of his position within hierarchies of value (appearance, class, etc.), Arthur, Derek assumes, lives an idealized life. Whether or not this is true is less relevant to the fantasy that Derek has about what a good life must look like. In this moment, Arthur is emblematic of this good life: a life that Derek both feels shut out of and desperately wants to attain. Killing Arthur momentarily allows him to feel what it is "like" to live this kind of life—to be a premium. But this observation that what he feels is only a feeling, and not his assumption of premium status itself, suggests his continued distance from this position. He may feel like a premium now, but he fundamentally is not one. His attachment to Arthur is formed through an injured subjectivity that implicitly corresponds to some kind of neuroses, expectations, or feelings of inadequacy that formed before the events of the novel. The outsized significance he assigns to Arthur is due to Arthur's coincidental appearance at the intersection of many different attachments that Derek has things that construct his overall understanding of the world and his place within it. Killing Arthur does not eliminate this sense of inadequacy so much as briefly provide him with an ecstatic sense of revenge. But he has learned nothing.

The Doctor and the Saint

Withdrawal, as an organizing structure of the text, its narrative, and dramatic action, also occupies a central position in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life.* Rather than a single withdrawal,

however, withdrawal is a repetitive, constant fixture of *A Little Life*, so much so that it has inspired tremendous critical opprobrium and fascination with the text precisely for ways that it not only represents withdrawal but *feels like it is enacting* withdrawals. Both skeptics and defenders of Yanagihara's novel, however, seem to get something wrong. Critical responses to the novel largely divide their analyses into the novel's form as an expression of social or psychic phenomenon, where the psychic is opposed to the social and vice-versa. Applying psychopolitical framework that looks at subject formation as psychic and social at once, however, reveals more about the historical processes operating within the text than either of those opposing positions.

In a May 2015 article for *The Atlantic*, Garth Greenwell proclaimed that *A Little Life* is "the great gay novel."[26] *A Little Life* starts out as a chronicle of the lives of four former college roommates, but its focus eventually narrows to one, Jude, a brilliant and beautiful corporate lawyer with a horrific childhood. Jude endures a litany of abuses throughout his life; his suffering is so severe and consistent that it approaches the absurd. In fact, in a scathing takedown of Yanagihara's first three novels, Andrea Long Chu—who disagrees with Greenwell that *A Little Life* is a "queer" text at all—offers a perfunctory summary of Jude's "childhood of unrelenting torments: "he was raised by pedophiles in a monastery, kidnapped and prostituted in motels, molested by counselors at an orphanage, kidnapped again, tortured, raped, starved, and run over with a car."[27] Jude is so deeply traumatized that his adult life is punctuated with self-mutilation and contemplations of (and eventual attempts at) suicide. He is also dogged in his refusals to talk about his past, see a therapist, or believe that he is worthy of love. This creates a

[26] Garth Greenwell, "*A Little Life:* The Great Gay Novel Might Be Here," *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2015.
[27] Andrea Long Chu, "Hanya's Boys," *New York Magazine*, January 12, 2022.

vicious cycle that makes up most of the novel: Jude hurts himself or is hurt by someone; his friends rush into save him; Jude retreats into self-pity; rinse and repeat.

For Greenwell, the extremities of Yanagihara's novel—the extent of Jude's suffering, the narration's claustrophobic proximity to his self-castigating consciousness, the Herculean efforts of Jude's friends, and the sheer repetitiveness of the novel—make *A Little Life* a distinctly *queer* aesthetic achievement. Yanagihara's deployment of "aesthetic modes long coded as queer: melodrama, sentimental fiction, [and] grand opera" enable her to access "emotional truths" about the complexity of suffering and friendship that are "denied more modest means of expression."[28] Meanwhile, the novel's portrayal of care networks beyond the limits of the family "inevitably recall the communities of care formed by LGBT people in response to the AIDS crisis."[29] This is despite the fact that AIDS itself is absent from Yanagihara's strangely ahistorical depiction of turn-of-the-millennium New York City.

For Chu, these same qualities make *A Little Life* not only groan-inducing but artistically and ethically *suspicious.* Yanagihara's first three novels all feature themes of homosexuality and pedophilia, without much recourse to actual gay history, politics, or even identity. Chu accuses Yanagihara of a "touristic kind of love for gay men," effectively producing caricatures of gay men as "perfect patients" who she subjects to perversely imaginative torture in order to satisfy what amounts to a bourgeois victim complex: suffering, devoid of any political meaning, as the greatest form of dignity "that wealth and pleasure, no matter how sharply rendered on the page, simply cannot" provide.[30] This explains the dissonance between Yanagihara's construction of Jude as Mary-Sue-type protagonist—though irreparably damaged, he is also prodigiously

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[28] Greenwell, "*A Little Life*," n.p.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Chu, "Hanya's Boys," n.p.

intelligent, stunningly gorgeous, and adored by everyone around him—and the readerly experience. Jude, Chu writes, is a "a terribly unlovable character, always lying and breaking promises, with the inner monologue of an incorrigible child."[31] The cyclical nature of his suffering, rather than inspiring sympathy or compassion, inspires dread, if not boredom. "The first time he cuts himself, you are horrified," Chu writes; "the 600th time, you wish he would aim."[32]

The interpretations of *A Little Life* offered by Chu and Greenwell are the polar ends of discussion regarding the novel's aesthetics of trauma. Parul Sehgal reads *A Little Life* as the "exemplary novelistic incarnation" of contemporary "trauma lit." She situates Yanagihara's novel within a trend of contemporary fiction that treats trauma as the ultimate form of backstory, and backstory, rather than the protagonist's future, as the source of dramatic action. As such, she accuses Yanagihara of participating in a contemporary vulgarization of trauma discourse, turning trauma into a source of entertainment and self-mythologizing while evacuating it of any political meaning.[33] In sharp contrast to Sehgal—and, in particular, Greenwell—Sam McBean positions *A Little Life* within a different trend in contemporary literature: the "network novel." McBean critiques Greenwell's association of the novel's queerness with Yanagihara's depiction of Jude's suffering. She asserts that attention to Jude's suffering obscures attention to "the labor of the alternative kinship network of support that attempts (but ultimately fails) to keep Jude alive."[34] The central "queer aesthetic" of *A Little Life* is not its depictions of trauma, McBean argues, but its representations of relationality, networks, and care.

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Parul Sehgal, "The Case Against the Trauma Plot," *The New Yorker*, December 27, 2021.
[34] Sam McBean, "The Queer Network Novel," *Contemporary Literature* 60, no. 3 (2019): 430.

In contrast to Sehgal and McBean, Scott Herring reads Yanagihara's representations of suffering and relationality together. Herring reads *A Little Life* as an exploration of "the queerness of friendship—of nonmarried bonds—as a viable way of life."[35] Yanagihara, Herring argues, subverts the idea that queer relationships must conform to psycho-therapeutic norms of health, particularly the idea that good queer relationships ensure the subject's longevity. He grounds this interpretation of *A Little Life* in Yanagihara's personal aversion to psychiatry. In an interview for *Electric Literature*, Yanagihara takes issue with what she sees as psychiatry's insistence that "life is the meaning of life."[36] She finds it cruel that psychiatry insists on the subject's longevity despite the traumas they might have suffered; that "if one can't be repaired, one can at least find a way to stay alive, to keep growing older."[37] (Yanagihara also admits she did not research actual psychiatric science when writing *A Little Life*, nor has she ever seen a therapist, despite the insistence of her friends—just like Jude!) Herring reads this aversion to psychiatry into Yanagihara's depiction of Andy, Jude's long-time friend and personal doctor. Because of Andy's continual insistence that Jude should seek psychiatric care—even, at times, threatening to institutionalize him—Andy comes to represent, for Herring, the moralizing, pathologizing force of psychiatric normativity. The novel's depictions of friendship as an alternative form of care go hand-in-hand with a subversion of the idea that queer friendships must necessarily bend to normative models of emotional and mental health.

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[35] Scott Herring, "Never Better: Queer Commitment Phobia in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*," in *Long Term: Essays on Queer Commitment*, eds. Scott Herring and Lee Wallace (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021): 143.
[36] Adalena Kavanagh, "An Interview with Hanya Yanagihara*," Electric Literature*, May 21, 2015.
[37] Kavanagh, "Interview," n.p.

All of these approaches have interesting and important things to say about *A Little Life*. But they are also in want of each other. Sehgal's critique of *A Little Life* lacks attention to the novel as a work of queer literature—perhaps out of an abundance of caution, wanting to avoid an association between queerness and pathology. McBean reproduces a stark division between attention to sociality and the psyche, and in an idealizing register at that: queer aesthetics of trauma bad, queer aesthetics of relation good. While I agree with Herring's assessment that Yanagihara's aversion to psychiatry can be traced throughout *A Little Life*, his reading of Jude's relationship to Andy reproduces that same bias. In a similar yet contrasting way, Chu overlooks Yanagihara's very clear assignation of moral and ethical failure to Jude. Yanagihara actually refuses to excuse Jude's behavior; she does not let him off the hook as tenderly as Chu implies. And, like Chu, Greenwell eschews a historical reading of *A Little Life*: he celebrates the text's aesthetics as a mark of Yanagihara's singular genius, without discussing how the text is an expression of the problems that characterize queer subjectivity in the contemporary. I want to argue that *A Little Life*, like *Castle Faggot,* takes shape around a concern for the relationship between trauma and sociality. More specifically, both texts explore how formative traumas continue to shape and impede our participation in meaningful relationships with others.

Take Jude's relationship with Andy. Yanagihara does not make out Andy to be a villain like Herring suggests. At times, Yanagihara represents *Jude* as the bad actor in their relationship. Andy, out of all the characters, knows the most about Jude's past, his physical disabilities, and his patterns of self-harm. Over the course of the novel, Jude places Andy in a very difficult position. Jude regularly calls on Andy at odd hours to provide emergency care for him, yet he refuses to seek long-term care solutions. He also lies to Andy about the source and nature of his wounds. Jude gets Andy to communicate with his friends, coordinating Jude's care when he is

unable to care for himself. Yet Jude simultaneously forbids Andy from telling Jude's friends what, exactly, he is suffering from.

Shortly before Jude's first suicide attempt, Jude and Andy have a conversation where Andy reflects on the many years Jude has spent in his care. At this point in the novel, Jude is in the midst of his first committed romantic relationship with Caleb. Caleb is abusive: he verbally assaults Jude for using a wheelchair, beats Jude to a pulp, pushes him down a flight of stairs, and—yes—runs Jude over with his car. Jude is covered in wounds, but he lies to Andy about their source. He also lies about the fact that he is still self-harming.

Under false pretenses, Andy thinks Jude has made incredible progress. As a result, he begins to open up about the stress Jude has caused him over the years. "'I've tortured myself about this… I've let you go on cutting yourself year after year, and every year, every time I see you, I wonder if I'm doing the right thing by letting you do so, and how and if I should be pushing harder to get you help, to make you stop doing this to yourself,'" Andy tells Jude.[38] In response, Jude can only muster a meek, " 'I'm sorry, Andy.'"[39] His apology operates on multiple levels. He is sorry for the stress he has caused Andy—directly responding to Andy's statement—yet he is also offering a more coded apology: he is disappointed in himself for his continued dishonesty toward Andy. In a way this apology is also anticipatory. The reader can almost certainly expect that Jude's lies will soon see the light of day, either because Caleb will kill him (he nearly does) or because Jude will try to kill himself (he nearly does). Rather than confirming Herring's reading of Andy, or Chu's reading of Jude, the pathetic irony of this passage evokes the conflicting set of feelings organized around the question of Jude's agency. We know that

[38] Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), 377.
[39] Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, Ibid.

Jude is so traumatized that he compulsively behaves in ways that lead to grief for his friends and loved ones. The trouble Jude's behavior causes his friends is not forgiven with saintly magnanimity. Two things can be true: Jude can deserve grace and also be a bad friend.

Yes, Jude is traumatized. But he is not so deeply traumatized that he is unaware of the effects of his actions on others. In fact, most of the novel's sections that narrate Jude's consciousness follow his internal struggle against his compulsions and intrusive thoughts. Likewise, the dramatic action of the novel takes shape around the suggestion that Jude could one day get better: we get constant glimmers of self-awareness, light breaking through the self-hating rhetoric he has internalized, which are indications to us as readers that he is not entirely far-gone. As such, Jude does not excuse himself for his behavior. When Jude's best friends and eventual life partner Willem asks Jude to divulge, at long last, the events of his childhood, Jude reflects on the unevenness of his relationship with Willem: "Tears came to his eyes, then, for how lopsided he had let their friendship become, and for how long Willem had stayed with him, year after year, even when he had fled from him, even when he had asked him for help with problems whose origins he wouldn't reveal."[40] We can see in this passage a conscious understanding of the cyclical nature of Jude's behavior—the many, many withdrawals, retreats, and relapses that he undergoes over the course of *A Little Life*'s massive 800-page length. He knows that his continued distrust of his friends despite everything they do for him is not forgivable simply because those actions are informed by entrenched psychic scars. This remains true from the beginning of the novel up until its very end: Jude wants to be a better friend. He is never totally let off the hook for his actions; neither is the centrality of his trauma to those actions ever left out of the portrait.

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[40] Ibid. 472.

A Little Life thus functions as an exploration of subjectivity at the limits of normative understandings of agency: of what it means to participate in the world as a social actor when one's actions are the product of environmental conditioning. In this vein, I actually agree with Greenwell that A Little Life is a significant "queer" text of the twenty-first century. Not, however, because I think *A Little Life* rises above the "canons of literary taste"—that it transcends the trends and concerns of its historical moment—but because its aesthetics are so clearly an expression of the problems that constitute subjection in its moment: a growing concern, under late capitalism, for the subject's inability to be a good, responsible member of society due to psychic conditioning that feels, at times, insurmountable.

Interdependence in Late Capitalist Subjection

Why would withdrawal, or regression, have such prescience for thinking about subjection under *late* capitalism in particular? The answer lies in the ways that late capitalism redraws subjectivity through a particular form of desire's "moral problematization:" responsibility. Under late capitalism–and more specifically, through neoliberal economic restructuring and the reorganization of global circuits of production–subjects are increasingly solicited to view their actions through moral and ethical paradigms that tether individual responsibility, or the desiring subject as a responsible subject, to the imperatives of the market and an increasingly ring-wing state apparatus. At the same time, the material conditions of survival, the means and processes of subsistence, production, and social reproduction, change in such ways that what it would take for people to actually survive, grow, or thrive as healthy, mature subjects is dramatically out of line with the paradigms of morals and ethics held up by the nation-state, the market, and their supporting liberal institutions. In short, late capitalism is a period of tremendous dissonance, in

which subjects must necessarily construct false selves predicated on the denial of genuine need in order to survive into a world that continually gets worse at making life livable. This is why a Winnicottian framework of subjection is useful for identifying late capitalist subjection as entailing the production of false selves. Withdrawal, in turn, helps us identify instances where those false selves fall apart. Regression might therefore be recuperated not simply as a way of identifying historical processes of subjection but exploiting the failure of such subject forms to push subjects toward greater consciousness and *genuine* forms of interdependence.

Late capitalism feeds on the lack that is constitutive to desire. As I described in the introduction, following Todd McGowan, late capitalism exploits the dissatisfaction that is constitutive of desire and subjectivity itself.[41] Late capitalism erodes quality of life through climate devastation, increasing costs of goods and rent, inaccessibility of health care and education, and ever-intensified scarcity that forces people to compete with one another for what little amounts of the world's wealth become accessible to anyone but a small few. Late capitalism feeds its desperate need for more surplus-value by producing and extending to people subject forms that make them identify, classify, problematize, and interpret their own behaviors in ways that serve the ends of capital. Under late capitalism, one of the particular ways that subjectivity is produced—a framework through which subjection occurs—is through the lens of responsibility, and specifically private responsibility. Modes of subjection under late capitalism, and how subjection deals with desire in particular, can be understood in relation to neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a distinctly moral mode of subjection. Some Marxist critics like David Harvey have argued that neoliberalism is amoral, or does away with morality by bending

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[41] Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 28.

everything toward the market. Harvey points to the evacuation of the welfare state as a key example of neoliberalism's disregard for moral imperatives: the destruction of welfare signals the emergence of a mode of governance that quite literally does not care whether people live or die.[42] Other scholars, however, have persuasively argued that neoliberalism is actually a revolution in ethics and morality—just not a good one. Andrea Muehlebach, for instance, observes that the same effects Harvey reads as an evacuation of morality in the state often lead to an insurgence of moral fervor in the general population. In her study of neoliberal economic reorganization in early twenty-first century Italy, Muehlebach argues that the retreat of the welfare state and the privatization of public infrastructure were accompanied by an assumption of responsibility on behalf of private citizens. Without the state to care for one's community and family, individuals increasingly began to understand themselves as responsible for taking care of the other people in their lives.

Melinda Cooper makes a similar argument to Muehlebach: neoliberalism is not amoral, but, rather, depends on the ascendant hegemony of moral and ethical paradigms that erode a collective commitment to the public good. In particular, Cooper argues, neoliberalism becomes the primary mode of socio-economic organization in the United States through the formation of New Right Conservatism and its insistence on the family as the primary social unit. While many traditional economic accounts of the late-twentieth century usually view the politics of the family as a symptom of broader economic changes, Cooper persuasively demonstrates that neoliberalism only became possible through broad shifts in the politics of gender and sexuality from the mid-to-late-twentieth century. "[I]t was only when the liberation movements of the 1960s began to challenge the sexual normativity of the family wage as the linchpin and

[42] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

foundation of welfare capitalism that the neoliberal-new social conservative alliance came into being," Cooper writes. In other words, the challenges that radical social movements posed to mid-twentieth century capitalism, as it was organized around the white, heteronormative working-class family and stark racial, gendered, sexual, and ethnic divisions in labor, led both liberals and conservatives to come to the defense of the family. Cooper's history of neoliberalism forcefully unfurls contemporary anti-capitalist arguments that suggest that race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are only superstructural to neoliberalism. Cooper also demonstrates that changes in ethics and moral do not come after the imposition of neoliberal economic reorganization. Rather, neoliberalism becomes hegemonic only through a concerted effort by both major American political parties to maintain society's organization around the family.

The reassertion of the family at the center of American economic policy, politics, and moral imagination took shape through a new assertion of the private individual as a responsible citizen: responsible to their families, and responsible for themselves. The binding of health insurance to work status, and the promotion of family health insurance plans bound to one's employment, for instance, went hand-in-hand with the state's self-removal from home care, elder care, and other public health related welfare systems. In gay and lesbian communities, the responsibility of the private individual under neoliberalism took a particularly devastating form in the U.S. government's non-action on HIV/AIDS. Cooper read the effects of Ronald Reagan's ethos of voluntarism into the responsibility that HIV/AIDS activists had to assume in taking care of people with AIDS on their own, with little assistance from the state. HIV/AIDS activists had no choice but to take up practices of self-care. At the same time, "self-care also represented a practical capitulation to neoliberal social policy." Activists found themselves in a double-bind: while they knew that they had "no other choice than to take care of themselves," they "ended up

assuming responsibilities that might otherwise have been taken up by the state."[43] Neoliberal cuts to health care thus "reinscribe[d] limits to care along familiar lines of racial, gender, and sexual difference."[44] Those who already existed on the edges of state-supported systems of social support found themselves having to take up the mantel of their own health care at the same time that they were demonized for supposedly piggybacking off the truly hard working, "responsible" white middle class Americans. "Personal responsibility," Cooper writes, "was invoked nowhere more forcefully than at the margins."[45]

The centrality of personal responsibility to late capitalist subjection, and how this took hold in relation to desire and sexuality in particular, will be borne out in my discussion of Douglas Crimp's *Melancholia and Moralism* in just a moment. But first I want to pause to think more generally about the kinds of effects that this kind of paradigmatic shift in ideas about citizenship, morality, and the responsibility of individuals over-and-against the common good. I want to take up some theories about the general path of the subject toward mature subjectivity that I think can help us connect the ascendance of neoliberalism as a moral paradigm of private responsibility with what I see are the concerns of contemporary queer American fiction.

Responsibility, under neoliberalism, is necessarily a question of dependence. Under neoliberalism, a subject is considered irresponsible if they depend too much on others or the state for their well-being. The ethos of private responsibility demands that the subject do everything in their power to not be dependent on others. Depending on others is a taken as a sign of moral failure, if not of intellectual, professional, and interpersonal ineptitude. The state punishes dependence by removing once-robust social safety nets and public infrastructure; it demonizes,

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[43] Cooper, *Family Values*, 193.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

for instance, disabled people and poor people, denying any suggestion that it is the state's responsibility to provide care or support for those who need it.

And yet, at the same time, we depend on others to survive. As infants and children, we rely on adults to shepherd us into maturity, providing us not only with food, water, shelter, and clothes, but also education, entertainment, opportunities for play and creativity, and general activities that will help us become sociable and capable of living with others. I want to suggest that it is this severance between neoliberalism's ethos of private responsibility, the increasing austere and scarce conditions of late capitalism, and our need to depend on and live with others that makes regression such an apt framework for observing when and where subjection occurs.

Donald Winnicott's and Judith Butler's theories of subject formation are particularly attuned to dependence as a condition that links psychic development and environmental conditions. For Winnicott, dependence is the primary psychosomatic state that the subject grows out of into full maturity. As the subject develops the capacity for identification, learning to differentiate between themselves and others, or a "me" and "not-me," they also become conscious of their dependence on others, an awareness that is lacking in the first stage of development, what Winnicott calls *absolute dependence.*[46]

The second stage of development, *relative dependence,* begins when the subject begins to distinguish between internal and external reality. With this distinction established, the subject starts to interpret external phenomena through the lens of their inner life. This is not simply a process of incorporation, Winnicott tells us, but of the subject learning to see themselves as extensible with the world while simultaneously understanding that they may interpret

[46] Donald Winnicott, "From Dependence Toward Independence in the Development of the Individual," in *The Collected Works of D.W. Winnicott: Volume 6, 1960-1963,* eds. Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 84.

phenomena differently than others or how they actually exist. Subject formation for Winnicott is not a model of opposition—the subject valiantly charting their path into the world against which they are opposed—but involves the subject learning to be distinct within the world, a self-assured "I." The subject takes form as they "meet the world and all its complexities, because of seeing there more and more of what is already present in his or her own self."[47] The subject gains the capacity for creation: "Now the infant's growth takes the form of a continuous interchange between inner and outer reality, each being enriched by the other," Winnicott writes. "The child is now not only a potential creator of the world, but also the child becomes able to populate the world with samples of his or her own inner life."[48] Interpretation, as a function of subject formation, is not simply about the subject readjusting their inner reality to meet the external world, but also the subject learning to literally see themselves in the world, identify with others, and achieve a sense of harmonious coexistence with those around them. To see oneself in the world, for Winnicott, is not a function of narcissistic appropriation, but a vital component of our ability to stand on our own as subjects, which is simultaneously crucial to our ability to cohabitate with others.

This is realized in Winnicott's description of the third and final stage, what he calls *toward independence.* Here we can see how Winnicott's model of emotional development is also profoundly social: full maturity is defined not in terms of some inner psychic development, some mechanism of the brain clicking into place, but in terms of the subject achieving a balance between their needs and the needs of others. The subject reaches full maturity when they achieve a rich inner life, a "personal existence that is satisfactory," while also remaining "involved in

[47] Winnicott, "Dependence," 91.
[48] Ibid.

society's affairs."[49] The mature subject takes "some responsibility for the maintenance or for the modification of society as it is found;" they must have a sense of accountability to others.[50] "Independence is never absolute," Winnicott cautions. "The healthy individual does not become isolated, but becomes related to the environment in such a way that the individual and environment can be said to be interdependent."[51]

Maturity as independence really means interdependence: how we achieve a personal sense of self in correspondence with the changing conditions of the world around us, including the needs and wants of others. Interdependence, as the true condition of mature subjectivity, is something we must constantly rediscover as our "I," our "others," and our "worlds" grow up together. This is a profound understanding of subjectivity as something that rises up through the interchange between our psyche, the material conditions of the world, and their reinterpretation in the social. The subject is formed in none of these arenas on their own, but through the reformation of their contents in their continual and unending exchange. Although Winnicott maintains that all subjects are likely to follow a similar path of psychic development, the subject's succession through these stages can be assisted, impeded, and shaped by their environment. The subject's development is contingent upon the gradual frustration of their need and their ability to adapt in the face of environmental failure, which is represented in Winnicott's well-known model of the "good enough mother." At the same time, Winnicott maintains that most people will not actually achieve full maturity. Somewhere along the path to independence/interdependence, most people will experience failures to adaptation: obstacles to the fulfillment of their needs that they are not ready to overcome.

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[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid. 83.
[51] Ibid. 83-84.

Winnicott's belief in the central role of the environment and failed adaptation-to-need in subject formation is what leads him to take up regression as a foundational component of his view of subjectivity.[52] In two papers delivered to the British Psychoanalytic Society, Winnicott outlines his theory of regression to dependence.[53] Occasionally, Winnicott observes, subjects will withdraw into psychic states that return to the scene of a pivotal (traumatic) failed adaptation-to-need. To preserve the self in the face of the failure situation, the subject forms a "false self," or a sense of self built upon the denial of the actual need that the subject's environment failed to meet.[54] Winnicott describes this as the subject stepping into to "hold themselves" in response to the failure of the environment—or, in his example, a caregiver—to "hold" the subject, to help them in a time of great distress. The subject's construction of a false self—a self-constructed to concede their actual needs out of the expectation that such needs cannot or will not be met—comes to a head later in life. The subject inevitably faces obstacles that feel insurmountable because they threaten the false self: the challenge at hand reveals the self's foundation upon the denial of need, and therefore the subject's practiced inability to express or pursue what they need in a moment of difficulty. In response to the present obstacle, the subject regresses to the psychic state they occupied at the moment of the original failure/construction of the false self. Regression

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[52] Ofra Eshel, "Winnicott's Theory of Regression: A Radical New Opportunity Through the Fundamentals," *The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 69, no. 1 (2021): 173-174.

[53] See Donald Winnicott, "Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression within the Pyscho-Analytical Set Up," in *The Collected Works of D.W. Winnicott: Volume 4, 1952-1955,* eds. Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 201-218; and Donald Winnicott, "Withdrawal and Regression," *The Collected Works of D.W. Winnicott: Volume 4, 1952-1955,* eds. Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 255-261.

[54] See also Donald Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," *in The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965): 141-152.

is not a metaphor: Winnicott is quite clear that in the moment of regression, the subject quite literally becomes who they were in that past moment. In many cases, this entails the (adult) subject of the regression becoming a child again.

Although regression sounds like a quite dire circumstance, Winnicott's theory of regression actually reflects a quite hopeful understanding of subjectivity. The very fact that the subject "freezes" the failure situation suggests an "unconscious assumption (which can become a conscious hope) that opportunity will occur at a later date for a renewed experience in which the failure situation will be unfrozen and experienced, with the individual in a regressed state, in an environment that is making adequate adaptation."[55] Regression is a normal mechanism of subject formation that reflects inevitable mismatches between the subject, their environment, and the subject's continual efforts to rectify their environment's failures to provide for them. Put differently: Instances where our surroundings and/or other people fail to assist us on our path to subjectivity will remain central to our subjectivity, because those instances lead us to construct false selves as protective covers. But the fact that we construct those false selves, and that revisit those failures again and again throughout our lives, represents the ongoing efforts of healthy subjects to overcome falsehood and dependence and become more joyfully and genuinely interdependent with others. The very fact of a regression is an expression of the subject's enduring capacity—despite perhaps tremendously difficult circumstances—for growth, reconfiguration, rejuvenation, and happy coexistence with others.

Winnicott's theories of emotional development and regression offer radical conceptions of the psyche: the psyche as in constant dialogue with the subject's environment, and also foundation to the subject's participation, not just in the social itself, but the social's

[55] Winnicott, "Metapsychological," 281.

transformation, or the creation of a better world. *A Little Life* demonstrates the necessity of an understanding of psycho-social subject formation like Winnicott's: the central problem that preoccupies Yanagihara's novel is neither entirely psychic nor social but occurs at their boundaries. In fact, I contend that the reason *A Little Life* is so frustrating for so many readers—including all of the thinkers I have cited above—is because *A Little Life* plays with the reader's sense of hope. "So much of this book is about Jude's hopefulness, his attempt to heal himself, and I hope that the narrative's momentum and suspense comes from the reader's growing recognition—and Jude's—that he's too damaged to ever truly be repaired, and that there's a single inevitable ending for him," Yanagihara states in her interview with Kavanagh.[56] The novel continually plays with the possibility that Jude could get better. The reason why the reader might become frustrated with Yanagihara herself is precisely because she has written a character who, despite her intentions, does not seem to have an inevitable outcome. The way Jude is written actually betrays Yanagihara's stated intention to write a character who never gets better; it is only Yanagihara herself who seems to insist on the inevitability of his suicide.

To illustrate the political significance of Winnicott's theory of regression, I want to turn to Judith Butler. Butler provides a way to think about regression and our efforts to move from dependence (the elision between internal and external, the acceptance of the failure of need) toward independence (or interdependence) as a mechanism that enables our participation in the pursuit of social justice. For Butler, children's dependency on others for survival leads them to develop attachments. Those attachments "precede judgment and decision," yet they must necessarily form for the child to persist "in a psychic and social sense."[57] The formation of these

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[56] Kavanagh, "Interview," n.p.
[57] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 8.

attachments is crucial to the child's early survival, as their railing against these formative attachments necessarily constitutes their growth into subjectivity. Butler uses the example of a child who is embarrassed by their family members. In growing towards independence (interdependence), children necessarily learn to distinguish themselves from their parents or caregivers because their formative attachments to those figures are inextricable from the psychic, social, and physical state of vulnerability that the child was in when those attachments, out of necessity, were formed. Butler vocalizes the subject's growth into subjectivity as the development of an "I" that comes into form through denying desires that would cause the subject to retreat into the state of dependence, of which those attachments are emblematic: "'I' could not be who I am if I were to love in the way that I did, which I must, to persist as myself, continue to deny and yet unconsciously reenact in contemporary life with the most terrible suffering as its consequence.' The traumatic repetition of what has been foreclosed from contemporary life threatens the 'I.'"[58]

Here Butler (1997) draws out a startling double-bind with rich political implications. The subject grows toward independence/interdependence by continually counterposing their rational, conscious "I" against the state of psychic indistinction and prerational total vulnerability they experienced as an infant. But the subject nevertheless maintains the attachments formed during this state—they are, after all, the very foundation of their "I." As they grow more independent and interdependent, those attachments take the form of *a desire for dependence.* Throughout their life, the subject will seem to be pulled mysteriously back toward their own dissolution. "Desire will aim at unraveling the subject," Butler writes.[59] To persist in their growth toward

[58] Butler, *Psychic Life*, 9.
[59] Ibid.

independence/interdependence, the subject must thwart their own desire, which is fraught precisely because that desire back toward dependence is formative to the very subject "in whose name it operates."[60] In order to achieve mature subjectivity and its higher forms of personal and relational satisfaction—a personal identity, coexistence and interaction with others, fulfillment of responsibility toward society and higher ideals—the subject must reject the self-destructive pleasures of sinking back into a state where internal and external reality become indistinguishable, where the subject cannot articulate their own needs or act on them for themselves, and where they experience themselves as coextensive with the forces to which they rely on for total survival and therefore before their mercy. Dependence, for the subject, is synonymous with subordination. As Butler writes: "A subject turned against itself (its desire) appears, on this model, to be a condition of the persistence of the subject. To desire the conditions of one's own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself."[61]

Taking Winnicott and Butler together, we can start to outline a theory of late capitalist subjection. The late capitalist subject, by nature of the seemingly tentacular, homogenizing, multiplicative, and all-powerful nature of late capitalism, is destined to experience many self-dissolving regressions to dependence. Under late capitalism, institutions that uphold capital are fervently producing and reproducing different acceptable ways to be, think, and feel as a means of satisfying late capitalism's zombified prolongation of accumulation while also cannibalizing or quelling the antagonisms that emerge in response to late capitalism's increasing nonsensicality.

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

In so many words, late capitalism ensures the continual failure of other people and our surrounding conditions to "hold" us. And yet, every time we revisit *and reemerge from* our regressions to dependence, we rediscover what it means for us to recognize ourselves as entities that are distinct from (yet still reliant upon) others. We reencounter the separation of our inner life from external reality, and we learn to reapproach this separation with a renewed sense of what we need, because we encountered, for a moment, a previous version of our self that formed when our needs went unmet. In short, in regression, we rediscover our subjectivity, and—in reapproaching the limits we draw between internal and external, "me" and "not-me"—we learn again what it means to be interdependent.

I Call This Genuine Responsibility Queer

By the early 1980s, the capture of the entire planet within a capitalist world-system, and capitalism's breach of its "internal limit," is all but secured. Around this same time, the moral problematization of desire under late capitalism, or what some have called neoliberal sexual politics, takes shape through two major developments: the imposition of Reaganite neoliberal economic reorganization, and the global health crisis of HIV/AIDS. In elaborating this argument about late capitalist subjection in terms of regression, dependence, interdependence, and responsibility, it is worth dialing the clock back a little bit to substantiate my claim that late capitalist subjection and its development around differing interpretations and conditions of responsibility and desire really do have the kind of endurance and historicity I am describing.

In what follows, I take up Douglas Crimp's *Melancholia and Moralism* to consider how neoliberal subjection involves the production of false forms of responsibility. In particular, Crimp's critique of an art installation by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins demonstrates how

ostensibly radical, anti-bourgeois homosexual art could reaffirm neoliberal valorizations of the individual over the collective precisely by embracing a refusal of all forms of responsibility. Crimp also offers an astonishing observation that cuts right to the heart of the argument of this chapter: in contrast to neoliberal forms of morality and anti-morality, Crimp offers an early definition of queer politics as the pursuit of *genuine* forms of responsibility. I take this insight as a point of departure for the next chapter, where queer flights from responsibility rub up against the relational, ethical, and political demands that make queer life possible in the first place.

In "Good 'Ole Bad Boys," Douglas Crimp launches a critique of the artistic and political failures of *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, an art exhibition staged in 1988 by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins.[62] Crimp substantiates his critique of Cooper and Hawkins by divulging some delicious art work gossip. According to Crimp, Cooper and Hawkins staged *Against Nature* as a not-so-subtle response to an issue of *October* magazine on art and AIDS, which was edited by Crimp. The choice of the word "homosexual" to describe the all-male cast of artists featured in the exhibition, instead of gay, queer, or fag, for instance, was a direct response to an essay by Simon Watney. In Watney's essay, he argues that activists should abandon the word "homosexual" due to its bio-essentialist connotations. The "homosexual body" symbolizes a pathologized repository for discrete neuroses (including homosexuality) that are not present in normal, heterosexual bodies.[63] The art contained in the exhibition itself functions as a refusal of a call issued by Crimp in his leading essay for the same issue: his call for a politically-engaged form of art that would not seek to "transcend the epidemic," but to "end it."[64]

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[62] Douglas Crimp, "Good Ole Bad Boys," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002): 109-116.
[63] Simon Watney, "The Spectacle of AIDS," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 75.
[64] Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 7.

In "Parma Violets: A Video Script," included in a compendium of fiction and essays that accompanied *Against Nature*, John Greyson counterposes Crimp's now-famous words from that essay with a quote from Edmund White. "Parma Violets" takes the form of a script for a fake documentary about "'the Dandy,' or more popularly, the White Fag,'" described by Greyson as "a sub-group of the Homosexual species that used to proliferate in 19th-century European artistic milieu."[65] Greyson imagines a "Split screen of two maps of Africa, one negative, one positive (one black, one white)." The documentary's animated narrator, a green monkey, "appears in the middle of each." The two monkeys are supposed to read separate quotes from White and Crimp at once. White's quote is this:

> If art is to confront AIDS more honestly than the media have done, it must begin in tact, avoid humor and end in anger. Begin in tact, I say, because we must not reduce individuals to their deaths… Avoid humor, because humor seems grotesquely inappropriate to the occasion. Humor puts the public (indifferent when not uneasy) on cozy terms with what is an unspeakable scandal: death.[66]

And here is Crimp's, from his 1987 essay "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism:"

> …Art *does* have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible. But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.[67]

Then, Greyson writes, "two monkeys heads begin to superimpose," before again speaking in unison: "These two quotes, taken out of context, have been transformed by the culture into two opposing polemics, two prescriptions for cultural practice: the art of the Dandy vs. the art of the

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[65] John Greyson, "Parma Violets: A Video Script," in *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, eds. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988): 10.
[66] Greyson, "Parma Violets," 11.
[67] Ibid.

activist."[68] This quote—taken out of context—would make Greyson seem quite even-handed, a diplomat between two supposedly "inflexive, didactic, exclusionary, defensive" approaches to cultural practice. He advocates for artists to think beyond the "false opposition" represented by this dichotomy that he himself has constructed.[69] In truth, Greyson himself has chosen a side in this conflict: the side of White, the side of the Dandy.

The Dandy functions as a key referent for the art throughout *Against Nature,* both as an inspiration for the work's attitude toward the production of art, and as a historical antecedent to the "tradition" that these artists imagine themselves working within. For Greyson, and also for Cooper and Hawkins, the Dandy is an emblem of radical resistance to bourgeois society. The title of the exhibition is a citation of an 1884 novel by the French Decadent writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, which follows a young aristocrat who decides to retreat from society into a life of sex, leisure, and excess. In his editorial survey of the works gathered in *Against Nature,* Hawkins refers to Huysmans as well as Charles Baudelaire to describe the Decadent aesthetics of the contemporary work: all of the artists in *Against Nature* embrace "artificiality," "melancholia," the sublime or "ironic terror," and just plain "irony" to forward a critique of homophobic associations of gay men with illness and disease. The Victorian Dandy's refusal of moralizing, normative society provides a model of resistance for the artists in *Against Nature*. Yet implicitly, the Dandy functions as a refusal not just of moralism coming from the right, but from the left. It is for this reason that Joy Silverman, the Executive Director of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, where *Against Nature* was staged, lauds the exhibition in the compendium's

[68] Ibid. 12.
[69] Ibid.

introduction for focusing on work that is "confrontational rather than pedantic."[70] Greyson is slightly more explicit than Silverman. In *AIDS: The Artists Response* (Grover 1989), he would go on to describe the art in *Against Nature* in more revealing terms: the work in *Against Nature*, Greyson wrote, is "certainly not politically correct."[71]

But does this rejection of all forms of moralism, even moral critique from, ostensibly, people who are allies in struggle, necessarily lead to a radical aesthetics-politics? It is precisely this aversion to "political correctness" that leads Crimp to describe the work in *Against Nature*, damningly, as "tame and academic."[72] *Against Nature* hardly lives up to the "provocation Greyson attributed to it:" the promise of transcending (rather than ending) the epidemic through a practiced disregard for any and all moralism, even (maybe especially) the moral imperatives being spoken by other activists.[73]

To understand why Crimp regards *Against Nature* as a failure, we can turn to the critique of the art world that Cooper offered in his original 1987 essay—the same essay that inspired *Against Nature.* In that essay, Crimp critiques the art world's "traditional idealist conception of art," which reduces art's potential for social change to its supposed capacity to cultivate empathy, widen the circle of people whose suffering the audience is likely to care about, or to raise money.[74] Discussions of art related to HIV/AIDS largely privileged placated forms of art that could be neatly folded within the apolitical nexus of charity auctions and non-profit fundraisers, while ignoring activist art by groups like Gran Fury and ACT—likely because the

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[70] Joy Silverman, "Introduction/Acknowledgements," in *Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men*, eds. Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988): 3.
[71] Crimp, "Good Ole Bad Boys," 109.
[72] Ibid. 110.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Crimp, "Cultural Analysis," 5.

art of these groups, intended to make viewers uncomfortable or aware of their complicity in the status quo, were often interpreted by these same bourgeois audiences (rightly) as a critique of them. In their aversion to politically-engaged art, organizations, celebrities, pundits, and artists who were supposedly committed to the well-being of people with AIDS actually colluded with the retreat of the state and scientific institutions from their accountability to the people they govern. "Scientific research, health care, and education are the responsibility and purpose of the government and not of so-called private initiative," Crimp writes. "Raising money is the most passive response of cultural practitioners to social crisis, a response that perpetuates the idea that art itself has no social function (aside from being a commodity), that there is no such thing as an engaged, activist aesthetic practice."[75] In so many words, the artworld participates in the very conditions that made the epidemic possible in the first place. A view of art that centers its capacity to move, connect, generate sympathy or compassion replaces a sense of individual responsibility where there should be a public and political one; well-meaning individuals, their supposedly exemplary ethical (not political) commitments, and their feelings (feeling good about themselves as good people) take the place of a collective responsibility to support someone's life regardless of how uncomfortable they make you feel.

It is this call for a politically-engaged activist art that Cooper and Hawkins interpret as a form of "authoritarianism."[76] In reality Crimp is asking artists to free themselves from the confines of the liberal art world: to engage in art-making that corresponds to the actual needs of people with HIV/AIDS, rather than conceding to the fragile egos of bourgeois audiences. When Cooper, Hawkins, Greyson and family thus decide to throw off this call—and through an

[75] Ibid. 6.
[76] Crimp, "Good Ole Bad Boys," 114.

adoption of a referent of anti-moral resistance that is over a century old, no less—what they are doing is misrecognizing the real source of oppression and the actual conditions of struggle. After all, who exactly is benefiting from *Against Nature*, tucked away in an avant-garde art gallery in downtown Los Angeles? As Crimp writes, "I think the claim of a refusal to be politically correct is merely a deceitful way of carrying on the art world's business-as-usual, of pretending to be bad when what you're really doing is being good."[77] If anything, their anti-moralism finds less in common with grounded HIV/AIDS activist struggle and more with the rightwing moralism of the likes of Andrew Sullivan.

We can connect Crimp's critique of Sullivan with his essay on Cooper and Hawkins to bear out an understanding of the conditions of struggle that both parties, for Crimp, are united in misinterpreting. In the introductory essay to *Melancholia and Moralism*, Crimp recalls an op-ed that Sullivan wrote for the marvelously consistent anti-political correctness/anti-woke publication of record, *The New York Times*, called "When Plagues End."[78] Sullivan uses the occasion of a major shift in the fight against HIV/AIDS—the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's authorization of protease inhibitors—to advance yet another derisive narrative about gay men's supposed irresponsibility, and how the epidemic was a wakeup call for gay men to grow from the "maturity the plague brutally imposed" and step up into the ranks of respectable, propertied citizenship. Of course, Sullivan distorted the facts to fit his own narrative, which Crimp reads as symptom of Sullivan's melancholic internalization of anti-gay rhetoric. The plague would not end in 1996, as Sullivan himself acknowledges in his own essay: "The vast majority of H.I.V.-positive people in the world, and a significant minority in America, will

[77] Ibid. 115.
[78] Andrew Sullivan, "When Plagues End," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1996.

not have access to the expensive and effective new drug treatments now available. And many Americans—especially blacks and Latinos—will still die."[79] It's not that Sullivan is simply unaware that HIV/AIDS is not over; it's just that for Sullivan, some deaths are more important to him than others, and the deaths that do not fit into his Western, anti-gay complex are among the ones that do not matter. Another crucial mistake that Sullivan makes, Crimp argues, is that Sullivan misrecognizes how gay men built a "truly ethical way of life" for themselves both before and during the epidemic.[80]

This is the fundamental mistake that unites Sullivan's anti-gay, right-wing moralism with Cooper and Hawkins' anti-moralism: both parties operate on a false notion of responsibility. Cooper and Hawkins mistake calls for solidarity as a form of moral authoritarianism; Sullivan dismisses the forms of care that queer people constructed before, during, and after HIV/AIDS simply because they do not adhere to an image of bourgeois, private respectability that actually betrays the actual needs of people living on the margins of society, if not people more generally. Both the anti-moralism of Cooper and Hawkins and the moralism of Sullivan refuse the political urgencies of their moment in favor of ameliatory retreats into narratives that do more to comfort and sustain an existing sense of self than actually engage in struggle. Their refusals of calls from activists to be more responsible in a real way leads them to betray their own needs—to construct a false sense of self that misrecognizes the objective conditions of struggle in favor of a self-preserving impulse.

What then is the alternative? In contrast to neoliberal anti-/moralism, Crimp locates radical political and ethical potential in the practice of "genuine responsibility." For Crimp,

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[79] Sullivan, "Plague," n.p.
[80] Douglas Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002): 16.

queer peoples' existence on the margins of normative society provided the conditions for that "truly ethical way of life."[81] Although the precondition he is referring to has to do with the unavailability of traditional morals—particularly, gay men's living outside the moral paradigms of bourgeois respectability—it is worth observing that those "ethical ways of life" also included the construction of norms, institutions, and support networks that enabled people to pursue sexual pleasure, create art, and find communities that provided intellectual, social, emotional, and physical nourishment. In the absence of infrastructure for living—moral, material, and sociocultural—people not only find the means to survive, but create ways of living that, out of necessity, correspond more directly to what people actually need. In other words, the absence of false forms of interdependence creates the preconditions for people to invent meaningful forms of interdependence. Privatized, austere, and ineffectual forms of responsibility get replaced by genuine responsibility. "I will therefore call this genuine responsibility," Crimp writes, "queer."[82]

Queer life for Crimp is constituted through the pursuit of genuine responsibility: responsibility in the absence of and on the outskirts of power. Conversely, it is the rejection of such responsibility that makes the art in *Against Nature* a failure. Crimp's articulation of queerness is a profound one, and profoundly anti-capitalist at that. It provides a useful foundation not just for the theoretical exploration of transgression I want to offer in the next chapter, but my efforts, across this dissertation, to reimagine what we mean when we talk about "queerness" more broadly. For if the precondition of genuine responsibility is the evacuation of infrastructure for how to live—and, under the economic and political reorganizations of late capitalism, more

[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid. 16.

and more people become subjected to new divisions of labor, extreme wealth inequality, militarization, surveillance, the rise of fascism and ethnonationalism, and the retreat of the state—it follows that under late capitalism, more and more people end up in the kinds of moral, ethical, and political "vacuums" that force people to rediscover what it means to be responsible/interdependence. Under late capitalism, more and more people find themselves having to rediscover what it means to live responsibly among others; in turn, more and more people find themselves in positions that we might call queer.

Conclusion: Regression as Transgression

In "A Preface to Transgression," Foucault treats the emergence of modern discourses, sciences, knowledges, and technologies of the self in the terms of limits: subjects are produced through the imposition of boundaries between the self and the world that had not been imagined in these particular ways prior to modernity. "Sexuality," or the imagination of the subject as a subject of a thing called sexuality—a subject with unconscious desires, drives, neuroses, and orientations—is an expression of these boundaries. The regime of sexuality as a form of subject-knowledge does not actually provide greater access to some innate form of embodied experience, Foucault argues. Instead, the invitation for people to see themselves as subjects of a sexuality—and to be regulated and controlled through the sciences and technologies that emerge alongside its development as a paradigm of interpretation—transforms the subject's felt relationship to the external "world of animals."[83] People see themselves, others, and the world in new ways, and this changes how they actually experience those things. Experiences that were viewed as

[83] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977): 30.

evidence of the subject's "exteriority of being" or extensibility with the divine now only appear "interior and sovereign."[84] The account of sexuality that Foucault provides in this essay, as such, fits within a Nietzschean account of the Death of God: sexuality pulls the subject out of their correspondence with the divine and sacred and reproduces mystifying and disorienting experiences as evidence of interiority, not as a quality of the subject's being-in-the-world.

If this sounds bleak, Foucault reminds us that this imagined foreclosure between the modern subject and divine, transcendent experience is not, in actuality, a final foreclosure. The production of "limits" between the self and world also produces a new opportunity for resisting modernity's obfuscation of the relationship between subjective and objective experience: transgression. For Foucault, to transgress is to cross the limits that modernity imposes in its production of the subject: the divisions between what is internal to the subject (reason, the unconscious) and what exists in its excess. By crossing these limits—for instance, by performing actions that defy standards of propriety, hygiene, or bourgeois respectability—we are able to flash upon those limits, revealing them, how they operate, and their contingency. Foucault even playfully suggests that in a world which no longer recognizes the sacred, transgression might become "what dialectics was, for an earlier time, for contradiction."[85]

Transgression is useful for analyzing the production of "desiring subjects:" how power solicits people to understand themselves as subjects of a thing called desire, or, in modernity, sexuality. At the same time, in contemporary art, transgression is often associated with artists who have a rightwing aversion to "political correctness." A lot of art that aspires to transgress, like *Against Nature,* regurgitates outmoded models of resistance. Self-nominated "transgressive

[84] Foucault, "Transgression," 32.
[85] Ibid. 30.

art" often fails to say anything interesting about how people live now. For art to be *genuinely* transgressive, Foucault's model seems to suggest, it needs to correspond to the production of subjects as it actually happens.

Under late capitalism, regression, or withdrawal, may function as a form of transgression. Instances of withdrawal involve the subject's retreat backward into psychic states that correspond to a formative traumatic event in their past. In McCormack's *Castle Faggot* and Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, withdrawals occur in instances where subjects are confronted with challenges that feel insurmountable—insurmountable because they relate to an event that involve the construction of a false self. Not only do withdrawals represent an individual problem for the subject: withdrawals also pose problems to their ability to participate in socio-political life in a way that both fulfills their needs and those of others.

In *Castle Faggot*, the text is structured so that the text's suffocating homoerotics of death provide the basis for a narrative arc in which Derek, McCormack's self-insert protagonist, falls from rational detachment from the hellish landscape of Faggotland to throwing himself toward it because of the appearance of a promissory object, Arthur. Derek withdraws when he realizes that Arthur does not truly like him back. He comes out of his withdrawal lavishing in resentment for Arthur—and he colludes with the very agent that threatens to kill him, like all the other faggots in Faggotland, just to get a morsel of revenge. In *A Little Life*, meanwhile, Jude's inability to grow out of his self-abusive habits compromise his relationships with the people he cares about the most. Both texts deploy withdrawal as a psychic structure that conveys the problems that trauma and attachment pose to the subject's constitution as a social being, and the hard-fought identities they try to maintain, even as those same attachments they rail against remain fundamental to their identity.

I have drawn out the similar psychopolitical structure shared by these two very different to suggest that regression may be a good way for Queer Studies to think about the forms of subjection that occur under late capitalism. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that contemporary queer American fiction demonstrates a concern for the problems that desire poses both to the subject as an individual and to the subject's participation in the political. I have suggested that late capitalism extends subject forms that invite subjects to adopt paradigms of private responsibility, which actively undermines the subject's ability to attain the genuine forms of interdependence needed to sustain them. I want to suggest that attending to affective dramas of withdrawal and regression in queer fiction—and maybe more broadly in different aesthetic mediums beyond prose fiction—might elucidate instances where late capitalist subject forms are being *transgressed*. Withdrawal/regression may be particularly pertinent to studying subjection under late capitalism because such instances illuminate instances where subjection is failing to take hold: where the fractures of hegemonic subjectivities begin to unfurl as subjects realize that how they have been led to live their lives is predicated on the denial of genuine need.

Twenty-six years ago, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner laid out their "radical aspirations" for "queer cultural building: not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture."[86] My goal in this chapter was provide a historical and theoretical foundation for my own radical aspirations for queer cultural politics. In taking queer cultural politics to be an anti-capitalist project, my vision overlaps with Berlant and Warner's. Yet in some key ways, my approach in this chapter—and by

[86] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 548.

extension my vision of queer cultural politics—departs from theirs. Berlant and Warner's approach was highly influenced by the historical conditions that surround their essay: the "mainstreaming" of gay and lesbian politics into the American nation-state, new incorporations of sexual identity into consumer culture, and a crisis of identity for sexual politics occasioned by "gay politics mov[ing] steadily Rightward"[87] during and after the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Similarly, my approach is informed by the historical context in which I write: the aggressive extremes of austerity, scarcity, precarity, and fascism that have defined the late 2010s and early 2020s, and with that, the concerted efforts of people in and outside the U.S. academy to think queer and trans struggle more squarely in the terms of Marxism and psychoanalysis, discussed in the introduction to this project. Out of a desire to contribute to this growing field of thought, I am intentional about taking up and thinking through concepts that I believe cross over both of these fields of inquiry: regression in this chapter; attachment; fantasy; and trauma.

If I were to rewrite Berlant and Warner's conception of "queer social practice"[88] in the terms of the argument elaborated in this chapter, it would be this: Queer cultural politics unsettles the production of false selves that preclude us from achieving happy and productive interdependence with others—false selves being a key product of the reification of social relations—which more and more people find themselves experiencing through late capitalist processes of hyper-accumulation, organized abandonment, and ethnonationalist fascism. Queer cultural politics cuts through the subject forms extended to us by late capitalism, pursuing *genuine* forms of interdependence that satisfy both personal and collective needs. In the next chapter of this dissertation, I will expand upon the theoretical and historical foundation I am

[87] Crimp, "Melancholia," 17.
[88] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 558.

trying to establish for such a cultural politics by taking up attachment. What we will see is that the confrontations with false selves studied in this chapter pervades contemporary queer American fiction as it endeavors to rediscover what it wants and needs anew.

CHAPTER TWO

Strategic Estrangement:

Postqueer Literature's Attachment Issues

In their introduction to a 2018 special issue of *GLQ* on the state of LGBTQ+ literary studies, Shanté Paradigm Smalls and Ramzi Fawaz advocate for Queer Studies scholars to renew their attention to works of literature both by and about LGBTQ+ people. For some time now, they argue, the ever-expanding "methodological ambitions of queer studies" have gone hand-in-hand with a departure, not only from the specificities of LGBTQ+ history and culture, but from the specificities of cultural and literary texts themselves.[1] As Queer Studies has expanded its conceptual horizons to take on "the vast institutional structures of neoliberal capital, the war on terror, the carceral system, American racial formation, and more," the imperative for scholars to make claims about global systems of oppression has largely reduced the role of the text from a reservoir of knowledge in itself to a vehicle "for forwarding a much wider claim about the operating logics of large-scale social and political phenomenon."[2] In pursuing necessary shifts in political-critical orientation, literary and cultural texts remain central to queer studies, yet the analytic tools of these disciplines—primarily, close reading—have been traded in for projective claims about a text's significance to reading power, capital, or oppression. The specificity of the text, like LGBTQ+ texts as a whole, gets swept beneath the critical priorities of the new and

[1] Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, "Queers Read This!: LGBTQ Literature Now," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (2018): 175.
[2] Fawaz and Smalls, "Queers Read This!," 175.

improved Queer Studies—which is always, at the same time, looking to reconstitute itself by attaching its widening claims to new, transgressive objects.

Though this may sound oddly like calls for a "return to the text" that tend to echo in other, more conservative halls of the humanities, now dressed up in queer clothing, Fawaz and Smalls make a good point. Considering the trajectory of Queer Studies in the early-twenty-first century, a generous reader might look at its gradual acceptance of postcolonial theory, critical race theory, Indigeneity, disability, and trans studies as concerns that are central and not peripheral to the study of sexuality and find a shining track record of the field keeping its original commitments to critical self-reflexivity, to going where the margins go.[3] I certainly think so. At the same time, as Fawaz and Smalls note, the critical agenda of Queer Studies at the level of scholarship has outpaced the work that scholars are doing in the less prestigious realms of teaching, mentoring, and community-building. While students certainly appreciate learning how to read queerly, many of them come to our classes seeking to engage with the heterogeneity and sheer richness of LGBTQ+ life as represented in texts. "We have found that teaching such authors in the specific context of LGBTQ history and culture, not merely queer reading practices but actual texts by self-avowed or explicitly LGBTQ people," Fawaz and Smalls write movingly, "has a visceral impact on students that seem to override wide-reaching feelings of cynicism, political despair, and catastrophe, even if only for the duration of a class session."[4] Teaching LGBTQ+ literature helps students survive, while it seems that publishing away from LGBTQ+ texts helps scholars survive in the academic engine of innovation. Deeply-ingrained teacher-scholar bias against the rhetoric of relevance may cause some ears to prick up at Fawaz and

[3] Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 1 (1991): 17-31.
[4] Fawaz and Smalls, "Queers Read This!," 176.

Smalls' claims. This suspicion would be misplaced. If we acknowledge "how necessary reading and circulating queer texts is to the sustenance of LGBTQ life, hope, and resistance," that contemporary LGBTQ texts are themselves sites where LGBTQ life, hope, and resistance are being constantly re-theorized, then, like Fawaz and Smalls, rather than dismissing students for finding restorative power in the representation of self-identified LGBTQ+ people in literature, we might follow their cue.[5]

Given the tremendous changes that have wracked the global geopolitical order since the formal inception of queer studies, and the sheer continuity of threats to trans and queer life in spite of such changes, it may be a good time to revisit the specific concerns, representational strategies, and forms and modes of being that populate contemporary LGBTQ cultural production. In turn, we may find that the methods we use for interpreting LGBTQ+ texts–and texts more broadly–may need to change as well. Though Fawaz and Smalls do not touch on this explicitly, it goes without saying that the same conditions that drive students to LGBTQ literature classes, or motivate queer studies scholars to urgently excavate the exclusions and horizons of the field in perpetuity, also find their way into contemporary LGBTQ+ texts. It is hard to imagine, for instance, that the dizzying descent from the widespread feelings of optimism that punctuated the U.S. Supreme Court's recognition of same-sex marriage at the federal level in 2015, followed closely by the election of Donald Trump and a blazingly rapid (because think-tank driven) escalation of anti-trans laws and violence, did not in some ways provide structures of feeling for trans and queer writing and art released in the past decade. In fact, because literature emerges from the same contexts as queer theory–and even, at times, engages with queer theory, or is produced in contexts that blur the too-neatly-delineated boundaries scholars

[5] Ibid. 177.

sometimes draw between academic, art world, and activist circles–queer theory may find some of its critical purchase on the present threatened by art it would seek to fold into its agenda.

Maybe, to elaborate on Fawaz and Smalls' observation, this explains why Queer Studies has drifted away from close attention to contemporary LGBTQ+ cultural production. Taking literary and cultural texts on their own terms may force a reckoning with the critical priorities queer studies would rather keep to itself. Of course, the idea that literature offers some privileged vantage point onto the world that us poor, poor scholars could never access through inquiry alone is one of the sadistic attachments that wrestling with contemporary LGBTQ+ texts on their own terms–in all their messy blandness, clichés, and mundane disappointments–may force us to confront.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of scholarship that has taken fascination with untangling queer theory's attachments.[6] The brief history of Queer Studies has been nothing less than an endless series of revisitations to the question, "What's queer about Queer Studies now?"[7] Still, recent scholarship argues that while Queer Studies has meaningfully changed its content, its structural gestures, overarching affects, and material investments remain stubbornly

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[6] In addition to the work of Kadji Amin, discussed in this chapter, see also Jules Gill-Peterson, "Haunting the Queer Space of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Endemic," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 3 (2013): 279-300; Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Hiram Pérez, *A Taste for Brown Bodies: Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions," *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1-25; Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 151-171; Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); and Kris Trujillo, "Queer Melancholia," *Representations* 153 (2021): 105-126.

[7] David L Eng with Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz. "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (2005): 1-17.

fixed, curtailing queer scholarship from truly liberatory insight. Historicizing queer theory as a product of particular material, political, and geographic contexts is one way to elucidate the mismatch between the well-rehearsed moves of queer critical inquiry and the unique challenges of the present.

For instance, Kadji Amin proposes that queer studies scholars should perform what he calls "attachment genealogies."[8] Instead of abandoning objects of study that do not align with the affective orientations of queer studies–utopianism or idealization, in Amin's account–queer studies scholars might take up such objects precisely to excavate how our current sense of what is *queer*, or what deserves to be included in Queer Studies, came into being. "When a scholarly object or archive rubs against the grain of, rather than satisfyingly echoing, one of queer's affective dispositions,"[9] scholars could turn to queer theory's own histories of emergence as a way of thinking through how that disposition emerged in the first place. Doing so, Amin reasons, can enable scholars to narrate objects through its discordances with pre-existing field agenda, in turn "elaborating the alternate scholarly priorities and feeling states that object generates in order to both conceptually and affectively reorient queer scholarship."[10]

Attachment refers to the subject's enduring bonds to objects that play a significant and sustained role in the subject's very ability to make meaning, including and especially in the constitution of their identity. Attachments are not simply situational desires, occurring only in a

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[8] Amin explains "attachment genealogy" in two works: Kadji Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Genealogies," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, 3-4 (2016):173-189; and Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). His definition of attachment genealogy is most succinct in the former, while the latter provides an expanded account of its applications and its significance for Queer Studies.

[9] Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s," 185.

[10] Ibid. 186.

specific place and time. Nor does the object of an attachment need to be physically present–or even a material object at all–for its influence to be felt. Attachment, especially in contemporary political, social, and cultural theory, describes bonds that are so powerful, so central to the subject's very being, precisely because the nature of such bonds and the objects to which they adhere are to some degree ineffable. The object of an attachment is impacted with meanings that, to an observer on the outside of the attachment, exceeds the object's obvious, objective, or normative social/material value. This is not to say, however, that attachments are not informed by sociopolitical conditions, nor that attachments themselves cannot be to objects that are abstracted and valorized in the public sphere. But even when attachments are inflected by the object's correlation with certain signs or images–say, one's mother being known to the subject as a mother, within the grammar and values assigned to motherhood–the particular nature of the subject's relation to the object is informed by so many different factors, social and psychic, contextual and libidinal, that each instance of an attachment will itself be both highly social and highly individual at once.

The most famous example of an attachment in this sense–and the one from which much contemporary theory draws the meaning of attachment–is the description, in the object-relations theories of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, of the infant child to their mother.[11] To any person outside the mother-child relationship, the mother and child appear as entities without the filter of this particular relationship (because they are neither child nor mother in this instance). The observer may understand, in an abstract, generalized sense, the specialness of this shared

[11] See Melanie Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1975): 262-289; Melanie Klein, "Notes on some schizoid mechanisms*," The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 27 (1946): 99-110; Donald Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," in *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1989): 1-25.

bond—perhaps recalling their own bond to a child or caregiver and projecting this onto the mother and/or child. But even with this valence, this abstract impression of the attachment taking place, the observer cannot step into the affective experience of this particular bond itself.

For the infant and mother, meanwhile, the other in the relationship becomes endowed with such incredible significance as to organize their entire world. Once the infant establishes the capacity for identification, their reliance on the mother (or more broadly, their central caregiver) for survival establishes an unbreakable emotional bond, though the emotionality of this bond is, in the same turn, formed through the necessity of survival. The mother also develops an intense bond with the infant. Her daily routines bend around the care of the child, as does her psychic world and her relationships to herself and others.[12] For Winnicott in particular, it is the mutuality of this bond that guides his account of the subject's development through successive stages of attachments. The mother's special capacity to tend to the child's needs *must* be gradually lessened in order for the child to experience frustration, adapt to this frustration, and slowly progress outward into the world by developing relationships to new objects. He celebrates, in fact, the mother who can manage to attend to the child's needs just enough to be appropriate and yet not so much as to inhibit their ability to manage their own emotions, deal with frustration, and advocate for and attend to their own needs with recognition of the needs of others–his famous notion of the "good enough mother."[13] The good enough mother is "good enough" precisely because she provides the conditions for the child-subject to establish distance between themself and their mother. Yet even in ideal instances of normative development, the attachment

[12] My uncomplicated use of "mother" and "she/her" pronouns in this passage is less intended as an essentialist claim about the gendered dynamics of infantile-caregiver attachment and more to gloss these influential theories in the particular terms elaborated by Klein and Winnicott.
[13] Winnicott, "Transitional," 10.

to the mother never fully goes away. In fact, it retains a deep level of significance well into the subject's life, if not through to its end.[14] The good enough mother thus grants the subject a degree of freedom through which they can begin to enter relations with others as an interdependent subject–which is so difficult precisely because the subject's formative attachment always remains ready to be activated, reinitiated, and retreated toward, even when the mother is absent from the material world.

Attachments endure. They not only give structure to how we live but make life itself worth living. Attachments can be formed to people just as they can be formed to ideas; in fact in attachment the boundaries between people and ideas tend to blur, where people become suffused with ideological meaning and vice versa. Our attachment to a partner may have to do less with their personal qualities than what they represent to us: proximity to wealth, power, or beauty, an expression of sexual prowess. We may even look past their actual qualities as people–the way they treat us or the people around them, how they chew their food or smell–because this added significance makes their absence in our life too much to bear. Losing proximity to our smelly beloved partner would not just make us lonely but cause a crisis in our very identity.

Interrogations of queer theory's attachments are indeed informed by the conditions that Fawaz and Smalls seek to trace into contemporary LGBTQ+ cultural production. Amin offers attachment genealogy, for instance, as a contribution to ongoing efforts by "Queer of color, transnational, and area studies scholarship" to expand the epistemological horizons of queer studies beyond its foundation "on a politicized post-Stonewall gay, lesbian, and/or queer

[14] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (*Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997): 9.

culture."[15] While queer studies has counterposed itself to turns in Western LGBTQ+ politics toward respectability politics, homonormativity, and complacency with the projects of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism, queer studies still bears a certain aversion to non-normative cultures and practices that are themselves imbricated in colonial histories of violence, such as pederasty. Amin argues that such aversions are indicative of the field's "powerful redemptive impulse."[16] A tendency toward recuperation–or easily recuperable objects–is a product of institutionalization: queer studies nervously counteracts its own radical critiques of the mainstream with the promise that the alternatives it offers are even more just and beautiful than what we have now. But "the alternative and the nonnormative–those terms most valued within Queer Studies–*need not be politically desirable or affectively pleasurable*," Amin cautions.[17] It is a mistake to think that the purpose of queer studies scholarship is to traffic only in marginal objects that also reaffirm our pre-existing sense of moral righteousness. In calling for attachment genealogies, Amin pushes queer studies to confront how its emergence within U.S. frameworks of identity, respectability, resistance, and solidarity limit its ability to engage meaningfully with objects by imposing a false sense of integrity. By exploring how, why, and to what ends certain objects rub against queer studies' own attachments, scholars can begin to push queer studies closer to its contemporary ambitions as an effort to "amplify the ethics, politics, and inventiveness of marginalized cultures."

My radical suggestion is that this same aspiration described by Amin, routed through confrontation with attachments that place limits upon our critical, political, social, and emotional configurations, also permeates contemporary LGBTQ+ literature. In the same way that queer

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[15] Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 7.
[16] Ibid. 6.
[17] Ibid. 31.

theory has turned to excavate the deeply-historical bonds to gestures, affects, moves, and priorities that continue to shape its directions, contemporary LGBTQ+ literature has its own methods for mining attachments that sustain identities, cultural practices, politics, and other habits that give meaning to LGBTQ+ life. Attachment may not appear as explicitly in works of fiction, poetry, or drama as it does in academic scholarship by scholars who have a material investment in making claims about the history of queer theory in particular. But, as I will argue in this chapter, this is all the more reason why attention to attachment as a psychopolitical structure of contemporary LGBTQ+ literature may have profound implications for the way we think about the project of queer critique writ large.

In this chapter, I will argue that attachment is a particularly useful concept for interpreting the dilemmas and conditions that structure contemporary queer subjectivity through attention to turn-of-the-millennium LGBTQ+ literature. Though I will suggest how attachment could be read into a variety of contemporary LGBTQ+ texts, I hone my attention to one in particular: Andrea Lawlor's 2017 novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (henceforth *Paul*). Attachment helps me make sense of *Paul* at multiple levels. *Paul* features a protagonist whose desires both propel and actively complicate his continual efforts to rediscover identity and community across genders, milieus, affinity groups, and subcultures. In one sense, then, *Paul* is an unlikely story about attachment: it is the endurance of the protagonist's desires, in contrast to the novel's overarching fascination with freedom, choice, fluidity, and nonconformity, that ends up being the source of dramatic tension and the basis of the novel's transqueer bildungsroman. In another sense, Lawlor's attempt to push these distinctly queer attachments (freedom, fluidity, etc.) to formal and thematic extremes ends up turning, strangely, into an excavation of those attachments, or at the very least, an exposure of their inadequacies when they are expressed in

social relations. From within Lawlor's extremely "queer" novel, we encounter a confrontation with the very attachments that critics like Amin have pointed to as weighing down the conceptual horizons of queer as a critical project. An examination of the psychopolitics of (queer) attachment in *Paul* will lead us toward a broader consideration of how we might go about historicizing contemporary LGBTQ+ literature in a way that can reinvigorate the task of both LGBTQ+ literary studies in particular and queer reading practices more broadly.

Uncritical Utopianism

Andrea Lawlor's *Paul* is an example of contemporary LGBTQ+ literature's turn toward the attachments that animate queer American politics and aesthetics itself as an object of critique. In *Paul*, the protagonist's endless pursuits of sex and intrigue are framed within a utopianism that seems to mirror (but does not actually represent) the anti-capitalist critical utopian energies described by José Muñoz that characterized both gay liberation politics and contemporary queer and trans politics. I demonstrate how Lawlor's proximity to the protagonist through free indirect discourse generates a confining narrative-epistemological frame where the protagonist's evident moral, ethical, and critical failures are washed over by an uncritical utopianism. The protagonist's utopianism is revealed to be the product of queer American politics' collusion with capitalism through its valorization of freedom, fluidity, choice, and individual agency. The uncritical utopianism of Lawlor's protagonist is subjected to a passive critique through gradual confrontations with these attachments and the limits they place on his ability to achieve the very thing that he desires: genuine interdependence, or solidarity, with other queers. I read *Paul* as a drama about the desire for queer political community and the disruption of its fulfillment by the subject's attachments, which are both individual (psychic scars and corresponding withdrawals

that suspend their particular participation in the social) and collective (the collusion of early queer American politics with capitalism through its insistence on a refusal of normativity without a corresponding commitment to reconstructing new normativities).

Paul is about Paul Polydoris, a white gay American college student in his early twenties who can change his body–importantly, his genitals, morphology, and gender presentation–at will. Beginning in Iowa City in 1993, the novel follows Paul as he uses his body-bending abilities to impress, regale, and seduce others. The sexual benefits of being able to become anyone you want will seem, to some readers, the most obvious advantage. Lucky for us, Lawlor knows this, too. Most of Paul, in fact, is organized like a pansexual picaresque, with Paul moving from bar to bar, city to city, in search of whatever piques his sexual interest at the moment. Also lucky for us, Paul is a self-described "omnivore, an orange-hanky flagger, an aficionado of all-you-can-eat buffets."[18] A true modernist, the only thing that stays consistent about his sexual appetites is that he wants to try what's new. One night, donning "501s and a faded black tee shirt," and transforming into a "taller, more muscled, and slightly hairier version of himself," Paul goes to The Eagle in Chicago, where he gets fucked in the backroom by one of the muscle daddy bartenders.[19] Lawlor does not skimp on the details: "[Paul] let his jeans fall to his boots and arched back, let the barman's rubbered cock plunge into him," Lawlor writes. "He clenched his jaw and his sphincter clenched, and he knew he could make himself bigger to accommodate but didn't. He wanted this feeling of being rent."[20] Similarly salacious descriptions populate the pages of Paul's adventures in Provincetown, in San Francisco, and at the 1993 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Given the gendered adventurousness of Lawlor's novel—including the

[18] Andrea Lawlor, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (London: Picador, 2017/2019): 33.
[19] Lawlor, *Paul*, 48.
[20] Ibid. 51.

stunningly ethnographic detail with which they seem to capture many different kinds of sex—there may be some appeal in *Paul*, particularly, for those of us whose bodies are not nearly as malleable as Paul's. Those of us whose shapeshifting is confined to the protocols of doctors and health insurance companies, the slow adjustments of hormones, diets, and exercise, the humiliations of chronic pain and the design of an inaccessible world, and the limited imaginations of our communities, families, friends, and ourselves, may find some degree of pleasure in Lawlor's transqueer experiment in the novel, and the multitudes of gender and sexual experience in can hold not just in one text but in one protagonist, as a form of wish fulfillment.

I am certainly one such reader. I sometimes wish that I could stand in the mirror and stare "down at [my] skinny chest until it obediently softened, grew," filling out into a 36C cup, growing "shaggy hair past my shoulders," a mix of "Ginsberg and Streisand and Kim Gordon;"[21] other days turning it out as a "more attractive version" of myself; and other days, like Paul, going default. But would having such powers, in rapidly intensifying the pace at which the body can undergo change, and making such changes instantaneously reversible, adaptable, and up to the conscious power of our will, effectively free subjectivity from its bondage to the material body, dissolving any pretense of a "default" identity? Would my very sense of identity shatter through the terrifyingly liberating force of expanded bodily freedom?

Lawlor does not seem to think so. For starters, Paul's powers are not that liberating. He cannot, for example, change himself into a dog or a chair. He is bound to the form of a human. Even then, no matter how radically he thinks he is altering his appearance, he usually just looks like varying shades of his default self. If he stays in one altered form too long, he starts to get tired, and gradually his body shifts back to what he usually looks like. His gender does not

[21] Ibid. 5-6

necessarily remain fixed–every new sexual and social experience he has while shapeshifting seems to introduce some degree of perplexity, confusion, and ambivalence, and Paul does seem less sure of who he is at the end of the novel than at the beginning–but he does not undergo a major, discernible shift in his gender identity, either. One long-term stint as a lesbian makes him momentarily wonder if he would be happy staying as a girl forever, but eventually he starts to worry he won't be able to turn back into a boy if he stays a girl too long, and he knows "He would probably want to change again at some point, maybe not back for good."[22] Even when other characters call him Polly and refer to him as she/her, Lawlor's narration, including their free indirect narration of Paul's consciousness, always refers to Paul as Paul, and uses he/him pronouns. For the most part, Paul begins and ends the novel in relatively the same form, not just physically but psychically. Despite his many transformations, his experiments with different genders and personalities, and all the ecstatic, self-shatteringly good sex he enjoys, Paul's desires–what and how he wants–remain relatively intact.

I want to argue that it is the consistency of Paul's desires, and the dramatic tension that emerges as a result of their consistency despite the novel's constant emphasis on freedom, fluidity, and choice, that organizes both the narrative arc of Lawlor's novel and the form of the narrative itself. Attachment, or desires formative to the subject's identity that endure with stubborn persistence, helps me describe the form of Lawlor's novel as it is primarily concerned with the limits that desire can pose to its own fulfillment. The utility of attachment for describing the form of *Paul* comes into stark relief in Paul's relationship with Robin, the only other shapeshifter in the novel. Across Paul's adventures, he regularly runs into a mysterious, unnamed youth, who Paul immediately recognizes as a shapeshifter much like himself. Only after Paul

[22] Ibid. 195.

serendipitously encounters the youth in a coffee shop in San Francisco–once again magically appearing in whatever city Paul is in–does Paul finally put a name to a face: the "youth" is Robin Suarez, a non-binary artist who everyone seems to know, admire, and want to sleep with.

Importantly, Robin occupies a social position at the end of the novel that Paul once had but gradually lost. At the beginning of the novel, Lawlor dedicates considerable time to elaborating Paul's sense of sexual possibility, particularly the satisfaction Paul experiences not only from having lots of good sex but–arguably more important than the sex–being an object of other people's desires. A self-described flaneur, Paul spends most of his free time donning cute outfits and wandering around town, carefully placing himself in positions where he can be seen in a flattering light. If he wants to attract someone, instead of approaching the person directly, he will orchestrate himself to be in places where his subject is likely to see him being desired by others while broadcasting a sense of disinterest. "He'd home in on the boy" he wants, "ask around for his job, what bands he liked." Then Paul would start to "arrange himself to be regularly just at the periphery of that boy's vision. He'd drop by the café or movie theatre or departmental office where the boy worked and he'd not say hi."[23] When Paul finally approaches the boy to casually ask for the cigarette, it is as if the boy has been delivered a sign: an object who always seemed to evade his immediate attention has spontaneously approached him. The boy will be unaware that Paul has carefully choreographed this moment, calculating how he can generate a mystique so that when he approaches the boy, the boy will already want him.

One of the reasons I find *Paul* (and Paul) so captivating is because of the painstaking detail that Lawlor provides to these seemingly hyper-specific, neurotic, and uncomfortably private forms of self-making. Reading *Paul* was the first time I ever encountered a description of

[23] Ibid. 62.

this strategy that I, myself, am guilty of doing. I can think of all the times I "took a walk" around campus, "spontaneously" stopped in on a friend's place of work, or stationed myself at just the right table at a café–the one directly past the bar, making sure I would be in my object's line of sight for as long as possible if they came in, which was not guaranteed. In retrospect, it was foolish of me to think I was exceptional for doing this. Reading Lawlor's descriptions of Paul's mystique-cultivating techniques shattered my sense that I was special for dedicating so much energy to just *creating the possibility of being seen* by a crush.

Lawlor also gives Paul this same confidence in his own ingenuity, which strengthens my identification with Paul and makes my encounter with Lawlor's descriptions of his techniques even more uncomfortable. Like me, Paul also seems to think that he is always out-maneuvering others. In one passage early in the novel, Paul reflects on his cruising strategies in terms of "attention." He attributes his relative success as a cruiser in his ability to judge whether or not someone would be open to a sexual advance, and what kind of advance, if any, based on their appearance. Of course, being able to guess someone's sexual preferences using limited information is something that many queer and trans people learn at an early age, like Paul. "By the time he was twenty-one," Lawlor writes, "he could fairly accurately tell which regular-looking guy in any given elevator would be up for a bitch of felching (active) or fingerbanging (passive), which shy girl was secretly dirty and which dirty girl was secretly shy."[24] Such judgements are not only about soliciting attention or paying it to the right people, however. More generally, Paul describes his acute ability to judge other people's attitudes and desires as a survival technique that has, at least thus far, guaranteed his safety over-and-against other, less perceptive queers. Attention to attention is about attracting "only the sorts of attention he

[24] Ibid. 32

desired:"[25] knowing when to come forward when an opportunity presents itself, and knowing when to hold back, disappear, lay low, or keep quiet when danger lurks. He credits his keen social awareness as the reason why he has "avoided the regular beatings he knew other sissy boys had endured, how he avoided the bashings, the police, the hall monitors, the store detectives, the teachers, the informants, the landlords, the bosses."[26] Paul upholds his own ability to carefully manage other people's attention as the reason why he has avoided the violence that other queers regularly face. His faith in his exceptional social savvy becomes a source of confidence for this reason; it does not cross his mind that perhaps it is his whiteness, his relatively good looks, and his relative comfort within the masculinity expected of white men that ensures his safety—i.e., the things that make him unexceptional rather than exceptional.

Paul's philosophy of cruising revolves around him always maintaining an advantageous position. He hunts his targets through relatively passive means until he is certain that he will strike with success. In short, Paul is somewhat risk-averse. His aversion to risk compounds upon the tremendous pleasure he derives from being perceived as desirable, of being in positions within social relations where he is figured as the object of want, and has the power to reject or accept people's attractions to him without having to go out on a limb. He distorts his own carefulness, however, interpreting it not as an aversion to risk so much as a sign of his intelligence. His relative confidence in his ability to avoid uncomfortable situations propels him through the first half of Lawlor's novel with a utopian sense of possibility, that the world is always waiting for him, *wanting* him, and he simply needs to meet it, if only on his own terms.

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[25] Ibid. 32
[26] Ibid.

Part of the reason why Robin is so enchanting to Paul, then, is because at the end of the novel it is Robin, not Paul, who is the apple of everyone's eye. Early in the novel Paul's best friend Jane begrudgingly observes that everyone in Iowa City, where they attend school, seems to not only be aware of Paul but have a crush on him: "Everybody knew Paul," she thinks to herself.[27] Clearly, the years that Paul has spent in Iowa City cultivating his public persona, posturing himself all over town and slowly nurturing the adoration of others, has paid off. By the time Paul gets to San Francisco, however, the tables have turned. He is broke, alone, and for a brief time, homeless. Nobody knows Paul and nobody seems to want him. What an incredible coincidence, then, that the shapeshifter who seems to have appeared in every place he has visited now also appears at the counter at a café in San Francisco, absorbing adoring comments from one of the baristas. In fact, when Robin first walks into the café, their aura of desirability precedes Paul's recognition of them as the mysterious youth from his adventures. A gust of wind blows in from the door and "everyone else in the café seemed to look over" to see who it is, including Paul.[28] Paul goes up behind Robin to try and catch their attention, but Robin leaves their number with the barista and then turns out the door, "no sign of noticing Paul." Robin's departure "drain[s] all the excitement from the room"—the same kind of excitement that Paul used to generate when he would walk into a room—and Paul limps back to his seat "in defeat," having failed to register as somebody Robin would reward with their attention.[29]

Never wanting to be outdone, Paul starts to deploy his recon skills to find out the identity of this mysterious figure. The last time Paul saw the nameless youth, they were both at a bar in Provincetown, where Paul, taking the form of a girl, was wintering with his then (now ex)

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[27] Ibid. 29.
[28] Ibid. 284.
[29] Ibid. 286.

girlfriend. At that time the youth was on the arm of Jack Manjoyne, who just so happens to be one of Paul's favorite gay porn stars. The youth's appearance with Manjoyne, absorbed in the company of important people, and Paul's position on the periphery–looking onto rather than participating in their relations–puts Paul in the position of being the observer and not the observed. He takes umbrage at the fact that the youth "never once lifted his gaze from Jack;" implicitly, Paul is offended that the youth never looks at him.[30] Even though Paul is in the company of "the coolest dykes he'd ever seen," he cannot help but feel a "free-floating jealousy."[31] Clearly this is someone of importance. Unfortunately, it is. Paul eventually finds out the youth's name from his older gay roommate, Ruffles, who Paul greatly admires: "'Oh, that's Robin Suarez,' Ruffles said, laughing at some private joke."[32] When Paul starts to ask around about Robin, the parallels between Robin's social status now and Paul's at the beginning of the novel–or, at least, his own sense of his social status–becomes ever more clear. "No one–not even the omniscient Ruffles–knew any hard facts about Robin," Paul learns, "but everyone knew Robin. 'Oh yea, *Robin Suarez*,' said everyone, knowingly."[33] Everyone once knew Paul, but not anymore; now everyone knows Robin. Paul is a spectator to Robin, submitted into the position of their admirer, and not the other way around.

Then, out of nowhere, Robin approaches Paul. While browsing at a record store, Robin taps Paul on the shoulder and states, perfunctorily, "'There you are.'"[34] In a rare moment of submission, Paul is rendered speechless. If the parallelism and implicit change in Paul's social station in comparison to Robin were not obvious enough, here, it becomes clear that Robin has

[30] Ibid. 157
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. 294
[33] Ibid
[34] Ibid. 296

been using Paul's own strategies against him. Robin knew this whole time that Paul was "following"[35] them, and therefore, implicitly, ignoring Paul, or at the very least not giving him their attention, though they knew Paul wanted it. Robin even recalls all of the instances where Paul was trying to get Robin's attention–chasing them through the streets of Chicago, staring at them at the party in Provincetown–and failed.[36] Robin then invites Paul back to their apartment, where they engage in a strange, stifled conversation directed almost entirely by Robin, who broadcasts a "royal generosity"[37] mixed with an off-putting indifference, before taking a phone call, during which Paul must see himself out. Their first real interaction involves nothing less than Robin's total, subtle domination of Paul, who is uncharacteristically nervous. Paul is now placed in the position of the hunted, not the hunter, and feels for the first time what it is like to be out-maneuvered.

The arc of Lawlor's novel leads toward this slow dissolution of Paul's confidence. After falling in love with his first girlfriend and living with her for a few months in Provincetown, his girlfriend, Diane, breaks up with Paul because she "knows" he will not want to permanently stay a lesbian. Such consistency is "'not in [his] nature,'" Diane instructs him; Paul is too eager to be "'everything at once.'"[38] Paul and Diane's breakup sends Paul into an existential tailspin, leading him to drop out of college and move immediately to San Francisco, for reasons that are unclear even to him. After struggling for a while to find work and stable housing, he starts to settle in. He begins to try cruising again when he finds out that his former lover and best friend, Tony Pinto, has died of HIV/AIDS-related complications. Having spent the entire novel not answering

[35] Ibid
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid. 297.
[38] Ibid. 194.

Tony's calls, Paul finds out about Tony's death only after he finally calls back. However, he is a day too late: Tony's mother informs Paul that Tony died the night before.

The scene immediately following Tony Pinto's death begins to provide some much-needed clarification about the direction of Lawlor's novel. For most of the novel we have been buoyed along by Paul's adventures, though his excitable affect seems to slowly drain from him after his breakup with Diane. Tony's death sends Paul into a spiral. His flippant nature, his abandoning his friends and jumping from place to place in pursuit of what is cool, new, fun, and sexy, his lack of commitment to others and his inability to stay with any one person, place, or personality start to catch up to him. He thinks about someone he deeply admired while he lived in New York City, Rainier, and how Rainier, unfathomably cool and beautiful, also stayed by his boyfriend who he eventually lost to AIDS "after a year of fighting with pharmacists and applying cold washcloths and lotioning bedsores. And Paul? Paul had abandoned his first love to the stinking deck of the beautiful plague ship, had fled in cowardice, had insult upon injury fallen in love with Diane, had not listened to his fucking messages."[39]

Paul's answer to Tony's death is to do what he always does: go out. He throws up "everything:" "He threw up his heart and his liver and some palm trees and a cowboy hat, widening his mouth to disgorge the brim… He didn't want anything."[40] The fabulative description of Paul "throwing up" may or may not actually suggest what is happening in the novel, given the novel's fantastical logic. What we do know is that Paul cannot stand himself, and his response at his self-disgust is to throw off what he takes to be the source of all his problems: wanting, and wanting everything at once. But the night continues regardless:

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[39] Ibid. 281.
[40] Ibid. 281-282.

> Paul went back in the house thinner, brushed his teeth, took a shower, and walked over to the Mineshaft before happy hour ended. Whatever there was for him tonight was outside, was another mystery, this mysterious universe with its mysterious purpose. He leaned his corduroy hips against the long wooden bar and ordered a Negroni, Tony's drink, adopted after watching the young Warren Beatty down them in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. Tony had thought Negronis classy and European. Paul savored the Campari as if it were Tony's blood, as if he were a vampire and could drink Tony to death. He understood that he had failed the test. What do you do after you fail the test and you're still alive?[41]

There is a startling discordance between this passage's heavy sense of grief and the jovial, self-effacing quality of Lawlor's free indirect narration. The image of Paul drinking Tony "as if he were a vampire" broadcasts both life-saving and deathly impulses: at the same time that it reads like a macabre expression of humor to cope in the face of devastation, Paul is overcome with grief and shame at letting the many opportunities to see or speak to Tony pass by without a care. The vampiric imagery suggests that Paul is something like a parasite, latching on only to others when it befits him, literally sucking the life out of those around him without a care for their well-being. To suck Tony's blood is also to suggest a desire for the circumstances to shift: he should at the very least be the one to contract HIV and die from AIDS, he seems to think to himself, not poor, sweet Tony. And yet, there is a glint of the novel's characteristically utopian language in this passage as well. Amid Paul's grief and anger we get one of the novel's most gorgeous lines, about the night waiting for him with all its mysteries, "this mysterious universe with its mysterious purpose."[42] The tremendous beauty in this grief glimpse of utopian potentiality rests uncomfortably amid Paul's melancholic acceptance of failure to be present for Tony. Paul goes out every night; he sees utopian potentiality everywhere; does he need to see it right now? Does he see it at all?

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[41] Ibid. 282
[42] Ibid.

Compare the above passage with one of the many instances where Paul heads out into the streets looking for action. In Chicago, Paul bounces out of the Eagle

> And into the feral night of Boystown, where beefy accountants and tender satyrs mingled on the sidewalks, on their way to the next wild time. Paul joined the wanderers' parade, alone and not-alone in the street-lit night, strains of deep house beckoning from the doors. He felt his ass as if for the first time, getting fucked the answer to make it new. Paul thought about his asshole opening up into a cathedral and the smell of the wall and this feeling of being a federation of so many particles suspended in skin.[43]

The above passage practically vibrates with a sense of potential that far exceeds the act of sex itself. Paul finds ecstatic pleasure in going out on the town, being among the parade of strangers walking from bar to bar, and in the very idea of being fucked amid all this newness and excitement. His pleasure is the utopian feeling of potentiality unleashed in queer relationality as described by Muñoz. From beneath the "devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment," being among others unleashes a sense of the possibility of *what could be* from the oppressive logic of *what is*.[44] Paul takes pleasure in relationality itself: the full exuberance of the world and our place within it shattering through the murky deluge of alienation. Swept up in the "wanderer's parade," reborn with anonymity among the masses of other pleasure-seekers, the infinite potential social and sensory arrangements suddenly coming rushing up to Paul in all their glory, breaking through "the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and 'the technologies of patience that enable a concept of the later to suspend questions about the cruelty of the now."[45] Now is no time for waiting for Paul; everything already exists here. It's time to go get it!

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[43] Ibid. 50
[44] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (10th Anniversary Edition) (New York: New York University Press): 12.
[45] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 28.

Lawlor renders their protagonist's pursuit of pleasures both erotic (sex) and social (looking and feeling cool) as bound up within desires for both limitless freedom and being-among-others. This is very much the register of critical utopianism described by Muñoz: the potentiality of the world and the possibility of social relations accessed through moments of individual pleasure, eroticism, or affective or sensory events that shock us out of the deadened present. Yet the sense of utopian possibility that drives Paul from place to place, person to person, locale to locate, and gender to gender is not always a critical one. At times his enchanted view of the world as full of limitless opportunities corresponds with him discarding his friends, cheating on his partners, or going on excursions and nights out without any care in the world for who he might be leaving behind. It is tempting to read the line about the "mysterious universe" as a mark of Paul's resilience: he finds beauty and promise in the world even as he suffers a tremendous loss. But this might be exactly the problem. After Tony's death, he goes back inside the house so he can prepare to go out again. "Whatever there was for him tonight," whatever he could possibly recuperate from this horrible evening, "was outside," *over there*. Paul always assumes that possibility is wherever he is not.

In this sense, Paul's utopianism is not a critical one. Muñoz's critical utopianism is not about differing the "good world" or the "good life" ever into the future, the over there, the otherwise or elsewhere. Quite the opposite. Muñoz insists that critical utopianism simply uncovers the possibility that already exists in the world, meaning it can be accessed in many different ways that do not necessarily entail us having to leave where we are or abandon what we have now. If anything, Muñoz's insistence on critical utopianism as accessed through collectivity is intended to strengthen our commitment to finding possibility in the worlds we already occupy. There's a reason why Muñoz also insists that his utopianism is a concrete one, emerging not as

an abstract optimism ungrounded in reality but from an "educated hope."[46] As a ground for his theory of critical utopianism, educated hope, for Muñoz, suggests the scholar's attunement to the sheer expanse of the world that can never fully be contained by power. It is the scholar's understanding that power, though seeming all-encompassing, ultimately fails. Hope comes through being studied in the historical realities of the world, which for Muñoz can only ever point toward the potentialities for what could be that are always cracking through the present.

Paul's utopianism is not that. His feeling of possibility may emerge from a sense of the possibilities latent in the world, but it only ever functions as a means for him to flee from the responsibilities or relationships that may keep him tethered to where he already is. It does not help that Paul considers himself to be incredibly intelligent. Indeed, Paul is quite well-versed in queer theory! Casual references to Foucault, Butler, Joan Nestle, and Roland Barthes populate the text. He prides himself on his ability to read not only situations but texts like songs, films, and novels through a queer lens. After Tony Pinto's death, in fact, his first instinct (after going out) is to go to the bookstore where he works and rip his way through a self-imposed syllabus of classic LGBTQ+ literature. After reading Samuel Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water*, Paul goes on to check out "*Borderlands/La Frontera*, then *Close to the Knives*, then *Sita*, then *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, then *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, then *The Devil Finds Work*, then *The Naked Civil Servant*, then *In the Life*, then *Violet to Vita*, and on and on through every queer life on the shelf."[47] Like many queers I know, Paul turns to literature seeking to understand the challenges that punctuate his life and looking for models that might guide his action. Even still, incredibly well-read, queer theory-versed Paul cannot seem to break

[46] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.
[47] Ibid. 283.

out of the habits that he knows are so self-destructive. He turns to books for answers, yes–but maybe his habit of reading, of how he approaches problems and interprets them, is itself the issue.

I choose to read Paul's character as representative of many distinctly queer critical attachments: attachments to ideas of fluidity, resistance, non-conformity, choice, and freedom that animated late-twentieth century queer aesthetics and politics and, in many ways, continue to give shape to queer activism and art today.[48] I am not suggesting that Lawlor is handing us an irredeemably corrupt protagonist whose very queerness is his fatal flaw. Lawlor has gone to great lengths to create a very intelligent, witty, charming, self-reflexive and even likable protagonist. But while we might be tempted to read Paul's flaws in spite of these things, Lawlor represents Paul's flaws as actually coextensive with his noticeably queer orientation toward the world.

In many ways, Lawlor's novel itself appeals exactly to the kinds of queer attachments I am trying to describe. The very premise of the novel, about a young, able-bodied, attractive gay shapeshifter who decides he is going to have a lot of hot crazy sex, promises readers exactly the kind of pansexual wish fulfillment I described earlier. The novel's marketing betrays the appeal of Paul for this exact reason. My copy of the novel features a hot pink cover with an androgynous model's face plastered next to quotes from a number of prominent queer writers.

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[48] See Biddy Martin, "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," *Diacritics* 24, no. 2-3 (1994): 104-121; Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3 (1997): 437-465: Hiram Pérez, *A Taste for Brown Bodies: Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015).; and Alison Reed, "The Whiter the Bread, the Quicker You're Dead: Spectacular Absence and Post-Racialized Blackness in (White) Queer Theory," in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016): 48-64.

"Tight," says Eileen Miles. "Deep," says Michelle Tea. These short, blunt quotes are really drawn from full quotes which can be found on the back cover, with the carefully-selected words bolded: "It's a *tight* satisfying masterpiece… seamlessly makes both what's out there and in here less lonely, less fixed and less fake." The joke is that the cover is being playfully licentious, while the back cover and its range of highly decorated authors (as well as a quote from the novel's review in *The New Yorker*, a mainstream prestige publication) inform us of the novel's actual, serious literary quality. The play on mass-produced smut novels is an ironic though perhaps unintentionally truthful display of the novel's aesthetics-politics, at least at face value: copping the conventions of erotica to appear scandalous, beneath which one immediately encounters something that takes itself far more seriously than initial impressions might suggest.

It is hard not to read *Paul* as a literary success story in this light. First published by Rescue Press, an independent publishing house, in 2017, Paul's initial print was just 500 copies. Lawlor suggests that they had no intentions of the book selling; Paul, at least on first release, very much appears like the kind of artistic passion project that will amass a cult following in niche queer and trans literary circles, and otherwise go unnoticed, until maybe it gets a mainstream treatment á la *Nevada* a decade or so later. But Paul is something of a literary unicorn in its uniquely rapid ascendance into the upper echelons of the publishing industry. *The New Yorker* review that is cited on the cover of the novel's 2019 re-release by Picador came out in 2018, shortly after the novel's original release. In interviews, Lawlor describes how that review generated such incredible attention toward the novel that it was quickly picked up by two major publishing houses, Picador in the United Kingdom and Vintage in the United States.

Just two years after its original release, *Paul* would get a mainstream re-release to thunderous applause. Among the many laudatory pieces about Paul includes an article published

in the New York Times. In that article, Lawlor is pictured standing next to their housemate, fellow novelist and critical theorist Jordy Rosenberg. The caption of the photo declares Lawlor and Rosenberg as "the vanguard of transgender fiction."[49] The novel was received both in the prestige press as an artistic achievement for *trans* fiction, while those in more niche queer and trans literary circles pondered Lawlor's novel as a potential watershed moment for trans literature's acceptance into broader literary spheres. Juliet Jacques observed that Paul's re-release made Lawlor's novel "one of the first novels by a trans or non-binary author to move outside smaller presses."[50] More recently, in 2023, a panel of queer and trans authors assembled by the *New York Times*, including Roxane Gay, James Ijames, and Edmund White, dubbed *Paul,* alongside the likes of *Giovanni's Room*, *Fun Home, Sister Outsider*, and *Angels in America,* one of the twenty-five most influential works of postwar queer literature.[51]

I do not think it is unreasonable to wonder whether *Paul*'s rapid ascendance both into the literary mainstream and into the contemporary queer literary canon was not occasioned in part by its appeal to certain fantasies that are more or less amenable to the production of queer and trans subjects as proper subjects of capitalism. The near-encyclopedic swath of different iconic places in the American queer landscape stirs in me a sense of beauty, of being a part of something greater than myself, stretching from New York to San Francisco–something close to patriotism. The novel's strict adherence to national borders recapitulates queer Americans' identification of

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[49] Peter Haldeman, "The Coming of Age of Transgender Literature," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2018.
[50] Juliet Jacques, "Andrea Lawlor's 'Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl,'" *The White Review*, July 2019.
[51] Kurt Soller, Liz Brown, Rose Courteau, Kate Guadagnino, Sara Holdren, Brian Keith Jackson, Evan Moffitt, Miguel Morales, Tomi Obaro, Coco Romack, Michael Snyder and June Thomas, "The Twenty Five Most Influential Works of Postwar Queer Literature," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2023.

themselves as Americans, and moreover of queer identity as something that is produced within and fixed to a wider and more all-encompassing frame of national identity under which forms of social difference (race, gender, sexuality), rendered as individual characteristics, are ultimately subsumed. Paul's distinctly queer and not gay identity is constituted not only through his assumption of many different genders and sexualities–his free movement between them and the consciously performative nature of his adoptions–but through the places he visits, which stretch from hyper-masculine muscle queen bars like The Eagle to the women's-only Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in its notoriously transphobic iterations in the early 1990s. The constitution of Paul's identity through place is more specifically a constitution of identity through his participation in spaces of consumption. He is legible as queer because his passage over genders and sexualities, his refusal of rigid gender boundaries and an embrace of the fluid passage of desire over bodies, leads him to cross into different spaces who extend services or appeal to clientele that cater to different demographics: lesbian music festivals and macho gay bars as well as bookstores, bars, clubs, bars, bars, bars… For all the feelings of beautiful expansiveness generated by Lawlor's cross-continental picaresque, closer inspection reveals that the novel is largely bound to Paul's passage through spaces that identify him through his cross-gender patterns of consumption.[52]

[52] Multiple scholars have written on the emergence of American gay identity through consumption. See Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1982); John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 467-476; Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World-System* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); and Cathy Cohen, "Punks," 1997.

It would be more appropriate to identify *Paul* not simply as a queer text, but a text of white queer working-class longing and alienation. Throughout the novel, Paul's identity is also constituted through descriptions of the distance he often feels from people who he deems to live more elite, rarefied, or class-privileged lives than himself. The very cool lesbians he goes out on the town with in Provincetown are cool because they are also intimidating, and intimidating because they are Wesleyan girls. Paul contrasts his attraction to the college girls with his attraction to Diane around a seemingly ambiguous point that the college girls "had something [Paul] would never have."[53] Whatever it is that Paul does not have that they do, Diane does not have it either, and that is why he finds her attractive. Paul reflects to himself what he thinks that "it" factor might be, though he struggles to place it: "Diane didn't have whatever 'it' was either (a trust fund, Paul thought, or maybe a childhood spent in Westchester), but she had something else, something different from other girls."[54] The effortless cool of the college girls, their ability to command conversation and take up space while actively not taking an interest in Paul (at the time Polly, in his girl form), reads to Paul as an expression of class privilege. The lack of precision in his analysis is indicative of an overfamiliarity with the behaviors of the wealthy: his inability to discern whether it might be a trust fund or a childhood spent in Westchester suggests that both of these things lead to relatively similar outcomes, and that it is less a single dimension of a person's life (a material thing they had or did) than the milieu from which they emerge that shapes their behavior.

Lawlor themself has described how Paul's character is partially drawn from their own experiences as a working-class queer. The many odd-jobs that Paul works throughout the novel–

[53] Ibid. 150
[54] Ibid.

fry cook, waiter, bookstore clerk, house painter–were jobs that Lawlor themself had too. Paul's methods of interpretation, the ways that he reads other people and the conclusions he draws from their behavior, draw not only from a reservoir of queer survival but queer survival shot through with feelings of inadequacy derived from being working-class. His careful manipulations of other people's expectations (attention) to get what he wants, to avoid risk, and to put himself in advantageous positions represents a kind of hustle. Shapeshifting transfigures gender's performative qualities (and Paul would know gender is performative, because he reads Butler!) into a literal never-ending performance, a constant exertion of labor that is maintained both through morphological effort (which, Paul frequently mentions, is exhausting) as well as hermeneutical effort, of constantly learning from social cues and adopting them not simply to be believable as a cisgender lesbian or macho man or frat boy (and the performance of an ontological masculinity that entails) but to actively solicit desire from others. The fact that Paul casually refers to attention in economic terms, as a "currency" and something one "pays" for "services," raises the class-based particularities of his identity as central to the constitution of his techniques of soliciting attraction, attention, sex, and desire.

Piercingly hilarious observations of Paul's are similarly shot through both with simultaneous attention to gender, sexuality, and class. When Paul reflects on his time in private school, where he was a scholarship kid admitted by virtue of his intelligence and economic need, he makes a wonderfully casual dismissal of the scions of wealthy professionals who attended his school, the "overgrown Nordic sons of judges and doctors," who Paul knew how to "scare the shit out of" by talking "like a kid from the projects."[55] This scene gives me the sense that Paul's ability to perform different gender tropes depends on and is infused with his ability to perform

[55] Ibid. 140

tropes of class, and to strategically deploy class expectations within and alongside expectations of gender and sexuality. The image of Paul frightening the legacy children of the rich, meaty blonde lacrosse players who vacation with their blonde families in Nantucket or the Hamptons (Paul is from upstate New York), configures his queer critical intelligence as shaped by his experiences navigating elite milieus where his presence was tolerated but not necessarily welcomed. A sense of class animosity pervade Paul's hermeneutics: in contrast to Paul, the rich are figured as extraordinarily dimwitted by virtue of their well-being never being dependent upon their ability to anticipate and service what others want from them. Gender, for Paul, is a constant exertion of physical, affective, and intellectual labor that is inextricable from one's class position.

Paul's sharp observations about heteronormativity and class, and Lawlor constantly positioning Paul in spaces where he feels like an alien to gender, sexual, and class norms that he must quickly identify, adopt, and improvise upon in order to survive, arranges Paul's search for meaning throughout the novel as a narrative about class alienation as much as it is about gender and sexual identity. And yet, Paul's animosity toward the rich and the precision of his observations about gender or class norms are still bound to a white queer American epistemology that does not contest the central role of fungibility, choice, and the individual's valorization about the collective as the foundation of the capitalist social order. While I think that Lawlor's novel is ultimately critical of the limitations of the world it draws, there are times where the novel nevertheless seems to struggle to place race within its fantasies of bodily expansiveness.

In one notable passage, Diane asks Paul if he can make himself look like a woman named Elena. Elena is described as "more stacked than [Paul,]" "a little darker, maybe Puerto Rican, and a lot shorter," with "curly hair, long lashes, and a pouty bottom lip." The fact that Elena is

only a "little darker" than Paul already suggests Lawlor's hesitancy about wading into the territory of racial transformation. Paul gives it his best shot, and looks in the mirror to see the results. "His skin was maybe a shade darker," his "lips were sort of puffier or maybe he was just holding them that way."[56] His experiment is a failure. Diane instructs Paul to try again, but at the same time she tells him this she "push[es] him against the bathroom wall" and starts "separating his legs with her knee."[57] Paul immediately pushes away in disgust, accusing Diane of asking him to transform because she is sexually attracted to Elena.

The above passage introduces the possibility of Paul's ability to change his skin color and then, almost as quickly, pivots away from the subject. Without Paul having another chance to test this skill, Lawlor has Diane interrupt Paul with a sexual advance. The focus of the scene shifts from Paul's potential capacity for phenotypic transformation to the growing tension between Paul and Diane regarding his powers, particularly the psychic distress it causes for Diane, who prides herself on being a gold-star lesbian. This turn to the subplot regarding Paul and Diane's relationship defers a potential confrontation with the racial limits of Lawlor's novel as a queer/pansexual shapeshifting fantasy that universalizes its appeal to a form of bodily freedom and unlimited sexual choice that is predicated on a white subject. An ungenerous reading of this scene could rightly position it as Lawlor briefly raising the issue of race simply so they can grant themself plausible deniability at the novel's overarching inattention to the whiteness it assumes at the center of its narrative of queer/trans possibility. The excitement that a reader may feel at the fantasies extended by the novel, then, depends in some way on suspending the novel's

[56] Ibid. 177-178.
[57] Ibid. 178.

idealization of bodily fungibility and the interchangeability of sexual partners from fungibility as the organizing logic of racial capitalist exploitation of queer and trans of color subjects.

I highlight these racial and class limitations to Lawlor's transqueer aesthetics of freedom, fluidity, and sexual choice in order to demonstrate how the novel depends on certain universalizing assumptions in its appeal to pansexual and transgender wish fulfillment. The novel's reliance on spaces of consumption as a way of articulating the protagonist's queer subjectivity and its extension of fantasies of bodily transfiguration that provide limitless opportunities for sexual encounters ultimately betray a superficial analysis of gender and sexuality–including its promotion of a distinctly *queer* notion of sexuality as a liberatory force that unleashes desire from within the confines of capitalist repression and identity–that does not think too deeply about queer or trans identity and cultures as products of anti-Blackness, colonialism, and class exploitation. Ultimately, Lawlor's novel never exceeds these limitations, at least explicitly. There is never a moment in the novel where Paul's whiteness, for instance, is ever truly reckoned with as enabling the kinds of queer freedom that propel Lawlor's use of the picaresque form (Paul is never weighed down by the possibility of racial violence or his dependence upon traditional communities or friends for survival) and the novel's aesthetics of sexual possibility as lurking uncomplicatedly around every corner and crevice of the world.

I do think, however, that Lawlor does elaborate a critique of these same limitations of their novel's queer aesthetics and politics. The novel's critical stance against the limited perspective of its own world, however, may never register as such because those limitations are never radically cast off, exceeded, or questioned at an explicit narratological level. I nevertheless want to suggest that a critique of the queer neoliberal aesthetics of Paul does occur from within the novel through Lawlor's subtle exploitation of the form of the novel itself.

Lawlor's critique of the queer aesthetics of their own novel is grounded in their manipulation of free indirect discourse. As Dorothy J. Hale argues in their sweeping and thorough account of the twentieth-century novel, the Anglophone novel as a form largely takes shape around Henry James' philosophy that it is the goal of the novelist to create characters who seem to operate with a unique consciousness separate from that of the author's. Hale describes James' philosophy of the novel as what she calls an "ethics of alterity."[58] Since James' influential writing on the novel as a form, the task of the novelist and the evaluation of the aesthetic quality of novels generally begin with the assumption that the author bears a kind of ethical responsibility to their characters. The novelist's goal, it is assumed, is to create characters with such vivid, in-depth, and complex consciousnesses that the reader, when encountering these characters on the page, feels as if they are coming into contact with something like a real person, or a consciousness that exists outside of both themselves and beyond control of the author's ideological priorities or distortions. Essentially, the goal of the novelist is to create novels that stage encounters between the reader and their text as something like an encounter between the reader and the consciousness of another person, or other people. This ethics of alterity has become so deeply ingrained in our collective understanding of the novel, Hale argues, that critics and scholars tend to assume that the novel simply is a technology that confronts us with other consciousnesses, without historicizing this assumption itself. Hale's historicization of this ethics and aesthetics of alterity has important implications for how we conceive of the task of literary criticism or literature more broadly: accepting the simple fact that this view of the novel is historically-constructed may finally free literary studies from the assumption that art is only good

[58] Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020): 48.

or worth defending if it adheres to a certain aesthetics grounded in imagined effects that might not actually be true, or even the most accurate or interesting account of what novels actually do for people.

I want to situate Paul within this tradition of the novelistic ethics of alterity in order to suggest that Lawlor figures the limits of their novel and its aesthetics-politics as also the limits of Paul's consciousness as the novel's privileged narratological position. This is not to say that Lawlor offloads the problems with their novel onto their character, or forgoes their responsibility as a novelist by uncritically imagining that their protagonist as actually a real entity who has their "own problems" separate from the novelist. Rather, Lawlor's adherence to the ethics of alterity means that their narration, including what does or does not rise to the level of narrative conflict, is bound to Paul's consciousness. The aesthetics of the novel and the dramatic action–what counts as a source of dramatic action–can be read as an extension of Paul's consciousness, or Lawlor's attempt to remediate Paul's consciousness in language. This means that the limitations of the novel's queer aesthetics-politics are broached in instances where Paul's ego organizations or ideals are also disrupted. When Paul comes up against a challenge that defies his understanding of himself or how the world works, the narrative does not break away into some high-level, philosophical elaboration of the problem that dictates to us how Paul is wrong and why. Even in moments of conflict, we never really get away from Paul's perspective. The novel's disruption of its own narrow queer aesthetics does not proceed through such spectacular breakages, but through contradictions that appear so low in affect precisely because they would not register to Paul as a legible problem he can wrap his head around.

Transqueer Dissonance

Dissonance enables Lawlor to introduce the suspicion that Paul is *attached* to the pleasures of queer critique. Of course, dissonance is not typically understood as something the author of a text can exert control over. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács argues that dissonance is the defining feature of the novel form: the contradictions, complexities, and idiosyncrasies of ordinary life which emerge through the novel's pretensions toward unity, coherence, and representation.[59] But I want to suggest that the literary-historical significance of Lawlor's text can be observed through the text's active deployment of *dissonance as a narrative technique*. Dissonance becomes a way for Lawlor to turn the very limitations of their own text into a source of narrative tension.

Lawlor all but avows their own intentions to introduce dissonance into their text; or, in other terms, to disappoint their readers' expectations, to strategically withhold epiphany, revelation, and narrative resolution. In an interview with Spencer Quong in April 2018, Lawlor describes these intentions in response to Quong's observation that Lawlor's text has already been held up as a significant piece of literary history: *trans* literary history. Despite the celebratory reception of their novel, Lawlor expresses their reluctance to being held up as "representative" of a new wave of trans or queer literature. Reflecting on their decision to not provide an in-world explanation for Paul's shapeshifting abilities, Lawlor describes their desire to defy narrative conventions that prove oppressive to queer and trans people: among them, the idea "that there would be a simple explanation for somebody's gender or sexuality." Lawlor goes on:

> The filmmaker Jules Rosskam has a documentary called—I love the title of it so much—*against a trans narrative* (2008). I have always felt like I am against the trans narrative. I

[59] György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, 1971): 70-72.

> don't want to be representative. I don't want to be the one voice. I don't want to be pinned down. I also don't want to speak for people. I don't want to write some anthem. I am happy if other people do that—as long as there are lots of them. I want to be one book among many. Let *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* be just one voice. With Paul's abilities, it's the same thing: what could be more boring than a single answer to why he can do what he can do?[60]

But Paul, Quong responds, still seems to search for an answer to his shapeshifting abilities. There is a constant tension between Paul's desire to figure out who he "is"—where his powers comes from, if he belongs at home in one configuration of his body, or one location, over another—and his fixation on finding pleasure in the present, refusing to settle who he might become or what he might want one day in advance. Lawlor likens this tension to their own indecision about undergoing medical transition:

> For twenty-five years or so I have been thinking "Am I going to medically transition?" every day, and I still keep not deciding. At different times it feels more or less urgent to know the answer, and sometimes I just think maybe this is my life, being in the question. And that is okay with me actually. There's a comfort to it. Things will be clear for a moment, then obscure again. There's something about that uncertainty which I think Paul expresses, but with a searching, with a constant seeking of clarity. I am interested in the seeking, in the question. It is always going to be messy.[61]

And then, a few moments later, in the same response, Lawlor says:

> I will always say that I've been close to people who are very concerned with ideological purity. I've seen the ways in which it is harmful for human interactions. I can't write an ideologically pure book because I'm not ideologically pure. I also don't know what ideologically pure fiction would look like, and, even if I did, it would change ten minutes after it was published.[62]

What does this aside from resistance to "ideologically pure fiction" have to do with not medically transitioning and writing a messy, searching, meandering novel? I would suggest that

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[60] Andrea Lawlor and Spencer Quong, "More Queer Writing, Please!," *The Boston Review*, April 12, 2019.
[61] Lawlor and Quong, "More Queer Writing, Please!," n.p.
[62] Ibid.

we can read into Lawlor's comments a resistance to cis-normativity as well as trans-normativity: the simplification of accounts of embodied experience for the sake of expediting trans assimilation into hegemonic gender and sexual regimes. Rather than resolving the question of Paul's abilities through some big, satisfying revelation, the continual deferral of epiphany keeps the reader in a constant state of questioning that carries over to the novel's end. This does not necessarily mean resolution becomes undesirable; neither does staying with uncertainty (or forever deferring the possibility of medical transition) become heroic or valiant. The potential satisfaction of resolution is simply suspended, pushed into a space of not-knowing, where we never know what it might actually feel like, but can only imagine within the present.

The funny thing is, the intervention of Lawlor's novel into contemporary trans cultural production is partially substantiated by 1. The fact that Paul never actually comes out as trans, and 2. Paul is transphobic. There is only one explicitly trans character in *Paul*: Franky, a coworker of Paul's, who appears for about five pages. "Paul had never met a transsexual guy before Franky," we learn.[63] Paul briefly wonders if "Franky was like him" but "somehow he thought not. Franky knew what he wanted forever, Paul thought. That was the difference between them."[64] After a short date, Paul and Franky start hooking up. Paul assumes that he magically knows "what Franky wanted, to touch something uncomplicated," and so he proceeds to push "into Franky hard and mannish, to be nice, thrusted like a high schooler, which he thought Franky would appreciate, the realness—until Franky jerked to standing, squeezing Paul's dick out of him."[65]

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[63] Lawlor, *Paul*, 247.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid. 249-250.

The desire for "realness" that Paul ascribes to Franky neatly unravels the series of assumptions that lead to Paul sexually assaulting Franky. Franky must have a desire for immature, boyish expressions of sexuality because he is a transsexual man; transsexuality indicates the sublimation of one's desires to the heterosexual gender binary, where manhood can only be understood through a series of caricatured, repressive norms; Paul is not like Franky because, unlike Franky, Paul's desire is fluid; his sexual and gender nonconformity, over and against Franky's transsexual, must necessarily indicate the freedom of his own desires, his enlightened capacity to want, against Franky's normative attachments; sexual desire determines/comes before the expression of sex and gender. Paul's interaction with Franky can be compared to a familiar opposition that has defined the relationship between queer theory and trans theory: diminishing sex, gender, race as sites of "fixity and miring," as Biddy Martin once described queer theory's valorization of sexuality as fluidity, movement, and freedom.[66]

Is it gauche to suggest that the conflicts in Lawlor's novel can be compared to tensions and problems in queer theory? While I generally think that one of the great affordances of reading literature is that it can help provide insights into philosophical and intellectual problems, in the case of Lawlor's novel, I think we cannot fully understand what Lawlor is doing without considering how the novel stages familiar tensions in queer discourse that also happen to manifest in queer and trans scholarship. The fact that Lawlor's novel seems to consciously straddle queer and trans imaginaries makes it amenable to readings that would seek to explore how it negotiates trans and queer's "problem of narrative," what Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager identify as the complicated, overlapping, and sometimes seemingly arbitrary

[66] Martin, "Sexualities without Genders," 105.

distinction between trans and queer.[67] In other words, it is not an imposition to trace queer and trans theory into Lawlor's novel, when these theories are so interwoven not only into the problems that face trans and queer people but into the contemporary discourses on queer and trans experience outside of the academy that inform Lawlor's composition of the text. What does this scene represent if not the occasional appropriation of trans people by queer theorists to make points about the ultimate constructedness of gender performance, over and against the actual explicit desires of trans people?[68] Doesn't Paul's articulation of "realness" mirror queer theory's appropriation of the term to describe a desire for convincing social performances of gender, which reduce trans ontologies, as Grace Lavery observes, to "intellectual or aesthetic patterns?"[69]

But we might still ask: What exactly makes Lawlor's novel a contemporary "trans novel" when it has no major trans characters, little discussion of trans identity, and, to top it all off, a transphobic protagonist? I would argue that what makes the novel trans actually aligns with what makes it queer: Lawlor's use of dissonance to highlight the provincialism of the scope of their own novel, rejecting the "ideological purity" of trans-normative (and queer-normative) narratives that would only try to gratify flatly affirmative ideas of resistance, resilience, and the beauty and joys of being trans/queer.[70] Lawlor's rejection of trans-normativity through this strategic use of

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[67] Chu and Drager also suggest that trans studies, and particularly the study of transsexuality, might be defined by its ability to break apart queer theory's romanticization of anti-normativity. "And it's no accident, I'd add, that the transsexual is the only thing trans can describe that queer can't," Chu says. "The transsexual is not queer; this is the best thing about her." See Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 107.

[68] On the division between queer and trans studies, see Cáel M. Keegan, "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?," *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 3 (2020): 384-397.

[69] Grace Lavery, "Trans Realism, Psychoanalytic Practice, and the Rhetoric of Technique," *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (Summer 2020): 722.

[70] In his essay on trans literary history, Alexander M. Eastwood makes a similar suggestion about how to determine what makes a text "trans." "Directing our attention away from revisionist

dissonance coincides with a greater rejection of affirmative affects in trans theory around the time of the novel's publication. Cameron Awkward-Rich, for instance, stages the depressive position as a potential mode of thought against what he calls "the affirmative project of trans studies:" the imperative to rehabilitate, recuperate, or make productive use of bad feelings.[71] It is this same externalization of bad affects that Hil Malatino locates as the primary drive of a trans "affective orientation to futurity." When trans people are expected to treat their bad feelings as either something to either assuage or militantly politicize (see: Crimp), it reinforces "teleological narratives [that] generate an inhibition of the present as a dwelling in lag—a form of being out of temporal sync, left behind, with the life one desires deferred (perhaps perennially)."[72] Like some queer theorists, trans theorists interested in affect seek to stay with bad feelings as a way to break apart conventional narratives about trans subjectivity. Might we also read the passage above as Lawlor's way of insisting on the bad feelings at the meeting point of queer and trans experience: how confusion about one's own desires, about whether or not one is trans, or comparing oneself to other queer and trans people, can lead us to deny our relations with others, or even worse, lead us to actively harm them?

In her pivotal 1987 essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Sandy Stone explicitly called for transsexuals to take up the "new and unpredictable dissonances

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reading strategies that excavate buried trans characters who supposedly need to have their interiority restored to them," Eastwood suggests that trans literature might instead be constituted through a relational approach to texts, where a text becomes trans based on "how certain problems, ideas, strategies, or aesthetics that structure contemporary experiences of transsexuality find expression in literary history." See Alexander M. Eastwood, "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read?: Notes Toward a Trans Literary History," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 595.

[71] Cameron Awkward-Rich, "Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading Like a Depressed Transsexual," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 823-824.

[72] Hil Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022): 20.

that the transsexual body poses to the "entire spectra of desire." Positioned by medical and feminist discourses as "a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of the ideal type," Stone sought for transsexuals to harness the "intertextual possibilities" of the transsexual body by rejecting the demand to pass—and to take up, instead, the mysterious, wild, and strange aspects of embodiment that the transsexual body brings to the surface of gendered existence for everyone as a productive force.[73] Stone located the power of her suggestion in the fact that it would be, for some, a very uncomfortable ask: "I could not ask a transsexual for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into discourses by which one has been written."[74] Lawlor's novel, I would argue, follows the tradition inaugurated by Stone in harnessing dissonance to disrupt reductive trans and queer narratives. Lawlor's novel is densely, consciously *intertextual*: Lawlor writes and reads upon scripts of trans and queer experience, including the very act of queer critique, demonstrated by Paul's own reading and writing upon other people and objects.[75] Rather than simply reproducing the pleasures of anti-normative, anti-social, anti-heteronormative queer critique for the reader, the text also actively points to the limited scope of the narrative as a way of generating dissonance within queer critical relations and their instrumentalization as a source of distraction from the

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[73] Sandy Stone, "The *Empir*e Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *The Transgender Studies Reader,* eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006): 231.
[74] Sandy Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 232.
[75] Julia Kristeva introduced intertextuality to describe the overall status of literary structure as an "intersection of textual surfaces:" "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another." According to Kristeva, a literary text is constructed through acts of interpretation. Meaning, in writing a "literary" text, the writer is not simply conveying information, but "reading" and "writing upon" other linguistic structures. See Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986): 36-37.

complexities of the now. That is, Lawlor's very queer novel presents itself as Barthes' "text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language."[76]

What is the crisis that Lawlor's generically queer novel poses to our existing notions of queer discourse, relationality, subjectivity, aesthetics and politics, critique, and literature? What conclusions can we make about the literary-historical significance of Lawlor's text based on its deployment of dissonance as a *transqueer* literary technique? And what can Lawlor's text teach us about potential future directions for queer literary studies?

The Promise of a Queer Life

This brings me back to Paul's relationship with Robin. Paul's attachment to Robin is an expression of ideals, fantasies, and desires that propel him through his adventures in the novel's in the first place. We can see this clearly in Lawlor's representation of Robin as a kind of promissory object whose very proximity to Paul seems to reignite the earlier habits that Paul gradually loses through the novel: his cruising tendencies, his desire to be out and among others, the utopian energies and wistful attitudes that draw him out into the world as an arena of limitless possibility. This is despite the fact that Paul's interactions with Robin are pretty miserable. Robin regularly blows Paul off; whenever Paul approaches Robin at parties or events, Robin broadcasts their disinterest in Paul, evidently looking for the right moment to ditch him to be with the coolest person in the room, which for Robin Paul never is.

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[76] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975): 21.

The parallels between early-novel Paul and later-novel Robin are striking for this reason: Paul now finds himself receiving the reckless abandon and disregard with which Paul treats his friends earlier in the novel, who he leaves behind or ignores so he can chase after the shiny object of the moment. This parallel should be obvious to the reader, but it never registers as obvious to Paul. In fact, the more Robin seems to demonstrate their disinterest in Paul, the more fervently Paul pursues them, and the more significance he invests in Robin and their interactions. At one point Paul, heading to a fashion show that he simply suspects Robin may be at, is overcome with such excitement at the idea of possibly being near Robin that he starts to wax poetically about the overwhelming beauty of the world, despite the fact that he was overcome with melancholia at Tony's death just twenty pages before. It is the kind of crush that is so suffused with fantastic (i.e. unreal) significance that Paul feels a superstitious cautiousness about even entertaining the idea that he might see Robin. "He didn't want to jinx anything or ruin a moment through expectation, but even the whisper-image of Robin was husky and thrilling, deeply meaningful in a completely obscured way," Paul thinks to himself.[77] This diffuse sense of possibility that Paul locates in Robin's "whisper-image" overcomes his sensorium and starts to bleed outward into his surroundings, which become suffused with Robin's beauty. "Oh San Francisco, land of treats and portals," Paul ponders with comedic grandiosity. "Robin was more a portal than a person; if Paul could get through Robin, he'd know something new on the other side."[78]

Lawlor could hardly be more explicit in their representation of Robin as a promissory object whose significance to Paul far outweighs the reality of their reactions, or even Robin's

[77] Lawlor, *Paul*, 304.
[78] Ibid.

actual personhood. Robin is clearly represented as an object that retains significance for Paul because Robin embodies something that Paul recognizes or identifies as a step on his path to the life he wants for himself–the object whose attainment would mean him continuing on his path to his own fantasy of the good life. Ben Anderson, building on the work of Lauren Berlant, offers a useful way of thinking about the manifestation of attachments in objects and the relationship of those objects to the ideals and ideologies that organize subject formation. Anderson differentiates between what he calls "forms" and "scenes of attachment." A scene of attachment is an instance where the attachments that organize the subject's everyday life suddenly come to the fore in a moment of intense expression. Our attachments normally operate in the background of our minds, giving our actions and identities shape through their subtle formative influence. Occasionally, however, an attachment "crosses a threshold to become part of the foreground of life and thought, becoming central to how everyday life is felt and social action thereafter proceeds."[79] Paul's interactions with Robin, or really any time he thinks about Robin or forms his actions based on being close to Robin, for instance, represent "scenes" through which Paul's attachments are expressed, around which his habits slowly become bent (like going out of his way to make sure he can be near Robin). A "form of attachment," meanwhile, represents the general nexus or landscape of promissory objects that give shape to the subject's fantasies of the good life.[80] Robin may only represent one promissory object within a greater "form of attachment" that organizes Paul's identity. To parse the relationship between Robin as an object that incites scenes of attachment and Paul's larger form of attachment is to parse how Paul's

[79] Ben Anderson, "Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13, no. 3 (October 2022): 13.
[80] Anderson, "Forms," 11.

desire for Robin is a component of a greater complex of desire that organizes the fantasies that give shape to and sustain his identity.

I want to suggest that the "form of attachment" that motivates Paul throughout Lawlor's novel–and thus the fantasy of the good life that organizes his ways of knowing and feeling and therefore gives structure to the narratological perspective–is what I will call the fantasy of the "queer life." The queer life is my shorthand for describing the form of attachment that comes into form through all of the readings of Paul's desires that I have elaborated in this chapter. Ultimately, Paul holds onto the idea that a *life lived queerly* will give him the sense of belonging, of constantly being wanted, that for most of the novel he lacks and therefore endlessly seeks. This is not just a generalizable desire for belonging, however, but a desire for belonging within realms of sociality that are alternative to the hegemonic, heteronormative world that Paul finds so oppressive. The queer life is a form of attachment consciously and explicitly staged against the neoliberal "good life" that organizes Berlant's concept of cruel optimistic attachments under late capitalism. While the queer life could itself be considered a version of the "good life" in the abstract sense–an idealized vision of life that is at a distance from the way one lives now–the queer life is a vision of the good life that is bound up in the promise of an alternative to the current order of things–the promise of alterity, that is, that organizes so much of queer theory, art, and politics.

In subtle ways, Lawlor's novel exposes Paul's fantasies of the queer life as the form of attachment that organizes his identity. Paul's ideas of the good life are bound up in the logics of freedom, flight, and choice, of getting away from the oppressive expectations of the current world and being able to live freely without such stifling norms. But, as I have suggested, Paul's fantasies, like the novel's, replicate capitalist attachments to freedom as freedom from

responsibility, freedom from being "stuck" with an identity or place that grounds one's life and gives shape to the realm of choices we can make, which are ultimately limited in some way. Paul's version of the queer life is a life that simultaneously exists outside of capitalism and yet behaves in ways that reaffirm capitalist logics of fungibility and individualism. It is precisely because Paul conceives of living a queer life as always getting away from other people, as being free of responsibility or the inconvenience of being stuck to a particular place, context, or community, that dooms his pursuits.

Lawlor exposes the flaws in Paul's fantasies of the queer life, and how Paul's fantasies and attachments give structure to the narrative, through his final, consequential interaction with Robin. Paul's final dialogue with Robin functions as the novel's anti-climax. For most of the novel, Paul has entertained questions about the origins of his powers. As the novel continues, he starts to question *why he is the way he is* in multiple senses: why he is a shapeshifter, why he struggles to sustain meaningful connections with others, and whether those two things are necessarily connected. He wants to ask Robin what he knows about their shared powers, but, fearing that asking such a question will make him seem too eager–too uncool–he waits. When the opportunity finally arises, the promised moment of revelation that has been teased throughout the entire novel comes crashing down quietly:

> "Robin?" Paul said. "Can I ask you a question?"
> Paul was immediately disgusted with himself. He sounded insecure, asking if he could ask–just the sort of dumb question he himself had so railed against. But Robin just nodded, seemingly unperturbed.
> "What are we?" Robin supplied.
> Robin turned the hammer around and began removing tacks from wood.
> "I mean…" said Paul.
> "You want to know what I really think?" Robin said.
> "Yes," Paul said.
> "We're like everybody else, only more so."
> "No, seriously," Paul said.

> "We're just what we are. You're asking the wrong questions, Polly."
> Robin disappeared into the hand-built closet in the corner and reemerged with a small box.
> "Do you like candy?"[81]

Robin's offer of candy to Paul bears striking similarities to a gesture included in a similarly pivotal scene in *Downstate*–published in the same year as Paul's re-release–which I read in the coda. Like in *Downstate*, the protagonist's speech, saturated with sincerity and dramatic significance, is casually undermined by the text through the protagonist's object of desire making an innocuous gesture–in both texts, an offer of food–that seems to pivot away from the discussion, as if the matter at hand actually has very little importance. Both instances are key examples of deflationary aesthetics.[82] A topic or issue that is assigned such tremendous importance in contemporary logics of gender, sexuality, desire, or identity that it is conveyed with the affective intensity of a crisis is subtly and swiftly undercut. The importance of the topic itself is undermined through a slight, subtle, and never ill-meaning gesture, suggesting that the subject who brought up the problem and gives it such weight has a poor understanding of what really matters, is trying to compensate for a false self that they are unwilling to concede–is, essentially, doing too much. Robin all but suggests that Paul is doing too much when they point out that Paul is "asking the wrong questions." His concern for what they "are" implicitly distracts from his ability to enjoy their powers. The idea that Paul is refusing himself easy pleasures is subtly broadcasted in Robin's commanding cool against Paul's nervousness.

Robin's deflationary gesture undermines Paul's fantasies of the queer life. Paul assigns such tremendous significance to Robin because they seem to occupy the privileged social position, the central position in queer libidinal economies of sex, attraction, and attention, that

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[81] Lawlor, *Paul*, 326.
[82] Chitty *Sexual Hegemony*, 28.

Paul once had and desires to achieve again. But we know that Paul's endless pursuits of pleasure, his constant quest for the attention and admiration of others, are derived from attachments to forms of queer relationality that he believes only ever exist in places where he is not. Above all, Paul is convinced that the good/queer life is something that always exists somewhere else. He is always missing some information, some code, some object that will lead him to the life he wants to live. His pursuit of a utopian form of pleasure through his listless wanderings and adventures pull him away from his commitments, responsibilities, and friendships. The losses and loneliness he feels as a result brings him into a tortured relationship with these desires, even as he ultimately continues to pursue them through his old habits.

And who can blame him? A lot of this world sucks. We are forced to submit to social norms, behaviors, and practices that acclimate us to ordinary suffering, if not occasionally breaking forward into outright distress. Queer sexuality, if it is tolerated, nevertheless remains perpetually on the outskirts of the institutions, protocols, and norms that structure everyday life. Paul, like many queers, is subjected to bullying, torment, and endless threats of violence if he should so much reveal any sign of gender nonconformity, i.e., if he were to fail in his carefully orchestrated performance of cisgender normativity. Like many queers, he has to work like a dog for long hours in prestigious, mundane, and at times physically punishing jobs to get by. Every morsel of erotic pleasure is a hard-fought victory. It is hard not to sympathize with the desire to, quite simply, get out, go somewhere else, or find the greener grass on the other side.

The problem is that we only have the world we have right now. Paul believes that Robin will reveal some piece of information that makes everything "click." Just the idea of being close to Robin bursts forward with revelatory, utopian promise, though for what reason Paul is unsure (and that is where the danger starts). But there is no magical piece of information waiting to be

unearthed. Here as in throughout the novel, Lawlor undermines the expectation that we will receive some kind of narrative closure regarding Paul's origins. Instead of providing us with the long-awaited answer, it is almost as if Lawlor themselves seems to be throwing into question any potential expectation that an answer would enrich—not diminish—the world of *Paul*. In rebuking Paul's search for answers, Robin implicitly rebukes ours as well.

What Makes a Text Post-/Queer?

Attachment is useful for reading contemporary LGBTQ+ texts like Paul because it helps us see how LGBTQ+ texts enact a reparative orientation toward the reader in a potentially unexpected way: by staging a confrontation with attachments that both sustain and impede our ability to live in the world with others. Building on my analysis of late capitalist subjection in this last chapter, here I want to offer some brief thoughts about how queer literary studies might expand its horizons by thinking further about attachment. I want to observe how contemporary LGBTQ+ texts like Paul complicate our sense of queerness. Like contemporary queer theory, contemporary LGBTQ+ American fiction struggles to think about queer as a sign that can organize a radical cultural politics and theory, while extricating it from the class, racial, ethnic, and gender assumptions that gave shape to early queer theory and politics. I want to suggest that queer literary studies, in turning its attention to contemporary LGBTQ+ literary and cultural production, pay special attention texts that attempt to do just this. As a shorthand, I will call these texts *postqueer*. Attention to postqueer fiction may help queer literary studies reconstitute itself as a project because such texts push us to think about how they invoke, trouble, and defy the critical orientations to contemporary American queer theory.

When I use the word "postqueer," I am not trying to suggest that some art or theory has moved beyond queer theory. Some scholars have used the term postqueer to call for the formal end to queer theory, a supersession of its concerns which have now been proven as irrelevant.[83] I hope this project makes it abundantly clear that I am interested in expanding queer theory, renewing it as a critical project and pushing it to new limits. If queer theory only has one fan, I am that one fan. But, as I have also argued, attachments and fantasies that motivate queer theory can sometime lead scholars and critics to ignore objects that complicate the idealized versions of the field that we want to enact. Returning to Fawaz and Smalls' questions about why Queer Studies avoids contemporary LGBTQ+ literature, I want to suggest that one potential reason is because contemporary LGBTQ+ literature—particularly postqueer literature—makes it difficult for queer theory to advance its time-honored agendas. Contemporary LGBTQ+ literature makes itself inconvenient to Queer Studies because it arrives at ways of thinking about the contemporary period that queer theory does not; and, at times, texts even push against theoretical paradigms in ways that make it difficult for scholars to either absorb them into their critical projects or to exert mastery over the text. It is quite difficult to read Foucault or Butler into *Paul*, for instance, when the text demonstrates knowledge about the very critical paradigms the scholar might want to use "on" the text.

Quite simply, using the term "postqueer fiction" is my way of flagging the preponderance of texts in contemporary LGBTQ+ literary production that push against the assumptions, norms, and social and psychic structures that organize contemporary queer politics and art. Often but not always, postqueer works are an expression of a desire for queer and trans politics to participate in global struggle against systems of power that some strands of trans and queer thought or politics

[83] See David V. Ruffolo, *Post-Queer Politics* (London: Routledge, 2009); and James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 2013).

either fail to critique or perhaps even collude with. Paul is not the only work that I could have drawn on to describe the uses of attachment in analyzing contemporary LGBTQ+ fiction. There is a small but growing pool of contemporary LGBTQ+ texts that conduct similar excavations of attachments to ideas of resistance, non-conformity, radicality, choice, identity, history, and community in ways I have described in my reading of *Paul*. Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* features a protagonist, Reese, who struggles to reconcile her desires for a normal life (particularly her desire to start a family) with her commitment to radical, anti-assimilationist trans and queer politics. Similar concerns come up in Maggie Nelson's extensive discussions of queer theory, particularly her sense that queer theory does not make a place for people who want to have children or live mundane lives, in *The Argonauts*. An extended draft of this chapter would have offered a reading of Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe*. In that novel, Glück remediates Margery Kempe's autobiography to discuss his enduring attachment to a partner whose wealth and beauty captives Glück despite his simultaneous sense of alienation from him (his lover as a kind of "promissory object"). Hazel Jane Plante's *Little Blue Encyclopedia* creates an entire fictional television show through which the protagonist describes her relationship to her best friend who has passed away, their mutual connection to this imagined show providing the material for a kind of biography-in-negation through a discussion of scenes from its episodes. Meanwhile, Andrew Durbin's *Skyland* revolves around the protagonist's pursuit of a mythical and potentially not-real painting of the late French writer Hervé Guibert. The protagonist's desire to see the Guibert painting, and his attachment to Guibert himself, start to unfurl as he begins to question his own motivations, desires, and identity.

I draw on each of these texts to offer a brief landscape of contemporary LGBTQ+ literature that specifically deals with problems of attachment, defined not simply in terms of

want but in the endurance of an object that organizes the subject's ideas about how to live and who they are and want to be. The reason why I think we need to move to categorize such work as "postqueer," and not simply queer, is because I fervently believe that calling a text queer needs to mean something more than just being synonymous with LGBTQ+. Rather than confining queer literary studies to the study of specific objects we might deem "postqueer," I offer "postqueer" as a historical designation to reveal and exploit the tensions that already exist within queer literary studies regarding its habitual conflation of LGBTQ+ literature with "queer literature." Such conflations undermine the possibility that the study of queer literature might reconstitute itself in the image of the grander ambitions of queer theory to use "queer" to seek out alterity on a global scale, or in the full view of the totality of social relations.

After all, there is no such thing as queer literature. Calling a text queer is less a taxonomical gesture and more a descriptive one: an observation not about what a text *is*, but what it *does*. What a text actually has to do to be queer, the criteria for textual queerness, is still up for debate. Teresa de Lauretis, for instance, proposes a framework in which texts become queer when they disrupt language through the force of the erotic. Queer texts, de Lauretis writes, work "against narrativity," disrupt "the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images," and expose the insufficiency of language because sexuality, itself, opens onto an unnameable realm of experience that occupies the chasm between language and the real.[84] Teagan Bradway, contra de Lauretis, proposes the exact opposite. "Narrative is a condition for the possibility of queerness," Bradway writes.[85] Alternative social formations, reconfigurations

[84] Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 17, no. 2-3 (2011) 244.
[85] Teagan Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form," *PMLA* 136, no. 5 (October 2021): 712.

of the experience of embodiment, and other deviant breaks from normativity are achieved through queer interactions with the tools of narrative—sequence, linearity, contiguity—as well as queer collisions between narrative and "social, corporeal, temporal, and other forms."[86] Defining the queerness of a text has to be understood in terms of relation: queerness is not in the disruption of meaning, but the new meanings that are forged through the interrelation of forms, i.e., queerness is contiguous with language, not beyond or beneath it.

Although both interpretations seem to occupy markedly different definitions of queerness, the arguments of Bradway and de Lauretis share something important. Both scholars deploy *queer* to describe the *effects* of texts. Though their accounts of these effects diverge based on how they understand the relationship between desire, sexuality, and the unconscious—the thesis of the "desiring subject" explored in chapter one—they both use queer as a way to describe the surprising reconfigurations that language and narrative can achieve against hegemonic notions of gender, nature/culture, interiority, emotion, ethics, and the Human. Queerness, in this vein, can be located in just about any text.

The practice of reading "queerness" into texts in this way, or performing "queer readings" of texts, serves an important strategic function. For generations of analysts, reading texts both inside and outside the realm of academic scholarship, revealing the ways that texts betray the messier ends of supposedly coherent conceptions of gender and sexuality—the latent meanings, paranoid disavowals, subconscious confessions, barely-concealed urges and impulses—has enabled more clear-eyed critical examinations of the sociopolitical organization of life through the transformation of gender and sexual categories, identities, and norms. Queer reading in this way is a "universalizing" practice, a mode of approaching sexuality that Eve

[86] Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory," Ibid.

Sedgwick famously described in *Epistemology of the Closet*. In contrast to a "minoritizing" approach to the study of sexuality that would describe the emergence of historically-specific knowledges, cultures, and practices, a "universalizing" approach demonstrates how all modern experience is shaped through the knowledge-regimes of sexual conduct, and simultaneously, how all experience is rich with queer meanings that undo the unsoiled, pristine surface of ideas like heterosexuality (and its neat separation from homosexuality) or sexual identity more broadly.[87] At the level of politics—again, if we take politics to mean, in the words of Caroline Levine, what organizes collective life[88]—universalizing reading practices throw wrenches into systems of power that precede through the pathologization and regulation of people via their separation into discrete categories.

They also tend to serve a more personal, though perhaps just as politically significant, function. In "Queer and Now," Sedgwick describes how her own queer reading practices began long before her cognizance of sexuality as a world-ordering idea, in childhood. Children may not have language for the paradigms that govern our world—race, ability, or Indigeneity, for instance—but they can feel their effects and perceive them quite sharply. This is emblematized, for Sedgwick, in the intense, proto-formalist attention that she lavished, as a child, onto books. Writing in the second decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and in the earliest years of queer theory as a recognizable academic formation, Sedgwick expresses hesitance at the idea that any one characteristic, motivation, or concern motivates all of the people who, in her time, are taking up critical analyses of sexual oppression, contributing to "a moment of unprecedented cultural

[87] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 9.
[88] Caroline Levine, "Three Unresolved Debates," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (October 2017), 1239.

richness, cohesion, and assertiveness for many lesbian and gay adults."[89] But she hazards to offer some generalizations:

> I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged.[90] (Sedgwick 1993: 3).

The "adult relation to cultural texts and objects," Sedgwick suggests, is "colored" by the analyst's perception in childhood that things are supposed to mean certain things all the time, yet do not. Social imperatives that disavow the intimacies, points of tenderness, dreams, shimmers, shadows, and yearnings that give the world it full vibrancy, which the child does not have the language to describe and is often not authorized to speak out against, manifests in the child's attachment to objects "whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us."[91] The allure of the beloved object, for the child-as-queer analyst, is that it nourishes a relation wherein the true breadth of experience, normally stifled beneath the dissonance-reducing mechanisms of power, pulsates. The shared mission of adult queer studies scholars is to bring the nascent desires for a fuller, more colorful world that animated those attachments into fruition, through an extension of this childhood practice of attending to the meanings that "the codes most readily available to us" would quell. In fact, it is this description of the mysterious quality of texts, their almost adamant refusal to deny us meanings that exceed those codes, that leads Sedgwick to her own, influential definition of what

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[89] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 3.
[90] Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," Ibid.
[91] Ibid.

the queer in queer theory could mean: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."[92] The ubiquitous power of texts to open onto meanings in spite of power's machinations seemingly finds its way into Sedgwick's connotation of queerness as the excess of gender and sexuality, the unfathomably large realms of experience that spill over the walls of these categories wherever they may appear.

Universalizing queer reading practices are a vital if not fundamental dimension of queer theory's worth as a critical project. Reading queerness in the ways described by de Lauretis and Bradway, as an idiosyncratic eruption of meaning that defies the coherence-making function of regimes of subject-knowledge like gender and sexuality, which can occur in just about any text where these regimes appear, provides a life-sustaining salve against the suffocating, fascistic insistence on transparency, that everything means exactly what it means. However, I want to suggest that the ability of analysts to deploy queer readings that effectively describe the conditions of sexual oppression are compromised by an inattention to the "queerness" of texts in a certain context—their being "queer" in a sense completely different than as defined by Bradway and de Lauretis. Though this sounds, at first, like a tremendous historical overreach—the queer reading of texts in one period has implications for readings across all periods—the texts in question that I am referring to are important because they refract the same conditions in which queer theory, as an analytic framework, has taken shape. Studying such texts through a historicist lens, excavating the histories of struggle that are variously avowed and buried within the act of narrative production, can not only tell us about the political conditions that shape the

[92] Ibid. 8.

discrete body of academic scholarship known as "queer theory," but serve as counterpoints to what queer theoretical scholarship of the same period also avows and disavows.

In short, what I am suggesting is that the study of "postqueer literature" might open up opportunities for us to reconstitute what it means to call a text "queer." The true potential of queer literary studies, to me, is that it will seek to organize studies of literature around the capacity for literature to suspend the formation of oppressive subject forms, of "false selves," whose construction sustains the naturalization of cruel libidinal economies and the unjust political-economic order of things as it exists. A queer text could be any text that in the moment in which it is read stirs or activates something that reveals something profound or unexpected about the machinations of power. A queer text may very well be queer because it rubs up against our existing fantasies of what it means to live a good, happy life; because it illuminates, suspends, shatters, or momentarily disorganizes the attachments that we as readers rely on in order to make meaning.

Part of the reason I am drawn to *Paul* is precisely because of its effects on me as a scholar. Paul was the first text I knew I wanted to write about for this dissertation. It seemed to offer a window into a world in which queer community truly meant something, that it was a real thing with real ambitions spatialized, momentarily, in the form of a novel. Only over time did I begin to realize that my identification with Paul was because I saw in him the same combination of boundless hope for the potential of queer politics and endless frustration with the lack of solidarity that I sometimes felt from queer spaces and communities. Like Paul, I wanted queer life to be everything. I held Lawlor's novel close because its expansive, frolicking, fun, and utopian explorations of a queer American landscape actualized in me my broad visions of queer politics as a repository for all my hopes about justice, diversity, equity, and happiness; while

Paul himself functioned as a medium through which I could live out my fantasies both of being among people, people desired, and also being morally indignant toward them not sharing my same sense of possibility.

To me, the way forward for queer cultural politics seems to be through exploiting the lapses in signification, meaning, and representation that between the psychic and the social—lapses that, as I have suggested, are intensified under late capitalism and made more ripe for exploitation. One potential way I think we might do this is by turning our critical attention as literary scholars toward postqueer texts. Our task is not only to read such texts, but to create modes of reading and criticism that activates postqueer fiction, as I see it, in its radical capacity to disorient the ways we think, feel, and act now. The remediation of late capitalist subjection in aesthetic objects as we live through these same disorienting conditions means that there are countless possibilities for those objects to be taken up and harnessed to rediscover the historical processes that are pulling us in their undertow. For a moment, postqueer fiction creates a landing to rest. The struggle to generate a truly radical queer cultural politics might be charted through the psychopolitics of postqueer fiction; our challenge is to find ways to approach and write about these texts in ways that draw out the contradictions of late capitalism that they expose.

CHAPTER THREE

Are You My Archive?:

Fantasies of a New Queer Historicism

What does it mean to conduct a queer study of history, to study history queerly? Is there a distinct method of historical inquiry that could be called a queer historicism?

Since the late 1980s, literary and cultural studies scholarship on the history of gender and sexuality has largely defined itself in relation to a mysterious and ill-defined entity called "New Historicism." As described by Jonathan Dollimore in his introduction to *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, scholarship working in the vein of New Historicism is "concerned generally with the interaction… between State power and cultural forms, and, more specifically, with those genre and practices where State and culture most visibly merge."[1] New Historicism is commonly counterposed to New Criticism, which placed heavy emphasis on the technical workings of texts, or the specific ways the text produces meaning. While New Historicism does not necessarily abandon attention to the formal intricacies of texts, it is less interested in asserting authoritative interpretations of what the text means–a common accusation leveled against the New Critics–and more in studying how the meanings of the text are shaped by the historical circumstances of its production. The New Historicist approaches the text not as an island of meaning unto itself, but as a participant within wider networks of cultural production, or cultural practices that participated in the production of meaning. Reading a text

[1] Jonathan Dollimore, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): 3.

becomes less about examining its singularity as an aesthetic achievement, or wrestling from it some transcendental knowledge about the human experience presumably imbedded within its contours, than attending to the text's mediation of its broader socio-political circumstances, particularly how it codifies, enacts, or restages dominant cultural meanings (along the lines, say, of race, gender, and class), and/or how it gives shape to cultures that were on the periphery or only just emerging through structural antagonisms imbedded within the social, what Raymond Williams calls "emergent" or "residual" cultures.[2]

Perhaps what is most appealing about New Historicism is that it is, in fact, less a prescribed set of theoretical implements, and more a general orientation toward certain imagined ends of literary and cultural studies. New Historicism is not actually a method at all, so much as it is a commitment to literary and cultural studies as a field that produces knowledge about the nature and functioning of political conditions. Knowledge about the political from within the text is accessed, in turn, through an acceptance of contextualization as a primary mode of engagement. What methods a scholar actually deploys to get there–Marxist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, formalist–ultimately falls before the broader goal of contextualization itself.. When we think about Heather Love's suggestion that queer studies is a field that sublimates loyalty to discipline before a loyalty to making the world better for people who live on its margins, it is hard not to see, at least in theory, the appeal of New Historicism for Queer Studies.[3] Queer Studies may find affinity with New Historicism because it extends principles at

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[2] Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, Emergent," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 122-123.

[3] "Queer theory as it emerged around 1990 was a natural heir to rhetorical criticism; like literariness, sexuality resisted thematization, and demanded a familiar askesis on the part of critics. At the same time, queer critics were committed to transforming the real conditions of existence for sexual and gender minorities. The centrality of this paradox to the field of queer criticism may help to explain the otherwise puzzling centrality of queer critics in the

the expense of foregrounding a prescribed set of analytic tools. Those principles—asserting the contingency of meaning, placing political-ethical pursuits before territorial claims to disciplinary supremacy—neatly reflect goals usually ascribed to queer theory. One might even argue that the widely-accepted principle of queer theory as a project bent on denaturalizing categorizations lends itself, historically, from the currents of New Historicism that accompanied its ascendance.[4] Notably, New Historicism and queer studies share a common ancestor in Foucault. Foucault's approach to discourse, genealogy, and "epistemes" as the basis for historical periodization was a major influence on Greenblatt as it was on D.A. Miller and David Halperin, whose *The Novel and the Police* and *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, respectively, might be considered some of the most formative influences on early "queer theory" proper.

Even still, when intensive historical contextualization, or "thick description,"[5] becomes not simply an approach but a disciplinary expectation, market demand, or dominant *style*, New Historicist paradigms can just as easily limit the political and epistemological aims of queer studies. It would be wrong, too, to narrate queer theory as but an extension of New Historicism, when queer studies scholars have been struggling against New Historicism for just as long as both academic formations have been around. Although Greenblatt's egalitarian vision of New Historicism as a field of cultural poetics open to many different modes of reading is enticing,

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promulgation of new reading methods. Scholars in queer studies have been willing to do without traditional methods, frameworks, and objects of study and have resisted the very conception of explanation. But at the same time they have pursued this 'negative knowledge' in the service of social transformation." See Heather Love, "Strange Quarry," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 162-163.

[4] Kris Trujillo notes that Queer Studies as a discipline in the U.S. academy emerges mostly out of scholarship done in literary studies. See Kris Trujillo, "Queer Melancholia," *Representations* 153 (2021).

[5] Clifford Gertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 310-323.

New Historicism is often associated with a commitment to deep contextualization that refuses any suggestion of the *transhistoricity* of certain phenomenon, or a refusal to engage with phenomenon as anything other than the products of their historical context and context alone. Foucault, whose genealogical critique was a formative influence on New Historicism, is a key example of this ultra-constructionist tendency. Yet even Foucault would eventually come around to the limitations of historical contextualization as the end-all of analysis. As I've discussed elsewhere in this project, Foucault is forced to pivot the direction of *The History of Sexuality* in Volume II precisely because he realizes his claims about the exceptionality of sexuality as a modern subject-knowledge are to some degree untenable. People have been fascinated with themselves as desiring subjects long before modern science produced sexuality as a site of subject formation. Desire's perplexing persistence across the ages troubles Foucault's ability to historicize sexuality as a radical departure of European modernity from previous epochs. That there might be dimensions of the body that are taken up so consistently throughout history as sites of knowledge precisely because desire is partially transitive, unbounded, and messy in its relation to one's environment forces Foucault to reconsider his entire genealogical project.

Queer Studies scholarship has repeatedly broken with New Historicism for similar reasons. For one, New Historicist insistence on deep contextualization and thick description can sometimes prevent us from understanding the conditions and nature of identity formation. Eve Sedgwick critiqued *The History of Sexuality* alongside David Halperin's Foucault-inspired work in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* for trying to construct a "unidirectional narrative of supersession."[6] Halperin and Foucault both frame a modern conception of homosexuality in

[6] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 46.

contrast to earlier conceptions of gender and sexuality. At the same time, Sedgwick points out, the two authors have entirely oppositional understandings of homosexuality, with Halperin viewing it as a form of gender intransitivity (embodied in the "straight-acting and -appearing gay male), and Foucault as gender transitivity ("in the form of the feminized man or virilized woman").[7] Foucault and Halperin frame their different understandings of homosexuality "'as we understand it today'" as an entirely "coherent definitional field" that emerges wholesale out of a discrete historical context. Both scholars, Sedgwick argues, subscribe to a view of sexual history as a march of different models of same-sex relations, never overlapping in their boundaries and neatly contained in distinct historical "periods," with one superseding another, "which may again be superseded by another."[8] For Sedgwick, this model of supersession is itself a product of the modern homo/heterosexual divide, which denies the slippages between "coexisting minoritizing and universalizing, or gender-transitive and gender-intransitive, understandings of same-sex relations."[9]

In one sense, then, Queer Studies has tried to break from New Historicism in its refusal of strict periodization as a way of organizing knowledge production. Refusal of strict periodization has also gone hand-in-hand with a complication of the New Historicists tendency to see texts as products of an epoch or episteme with distinct historical characteristics. Some critics have taken up "queer temporality" as a way of resisting these kinds of strict delineations of historical phenomena. In the work of scholars like Heather Love, Annamarie Jagose, and Carolyn Dinshaw, the formation of identifications across historical periods are not attributed simply to circumstantial coincidences but the endurance of social positions, subject forms, desires, and

[7] Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, Ibid.
[8] Ibid. 47.
[9] Ibid.

conditions of identity-formation that cannot be easily boxed into previous historical epochs.[10] Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon have called for an "unhistoricism" that negates New Historicism's periodizations by insisting on sameness rather than difference across historical periods, "challenging the methodological orthodoxy by which past and present are constrained and straightened."[11] By the middle of the 2000s, Valerie Traub notes, scholars working at the intersections of queer, literary, early modern, and postcolonial studies had thoroughly upended the New Historicist suggestion that the past only existed on its own terms–that it did not necessarily share those terms with us, that the problems, conditions, modes, and forms of the past are not neatly segregated to another time but may recur into today.[12]

Some scholars have also challenged the uncomplicated primacy of the "archive" as a reservoir of knowledge about history. Building on the critiques of the archive elaborated by Derrida, Spivak, and other deconstructive and postcolonial scholars, Anjali Arondekar has written on the limitations that traditional European and colonial archives present to our understanding of the history of gender and sexuality. What happens when the abundance of historical materials that scholars often marshal to substantiate their contextualization of texts ultimately fail to tell stories whose truth is affirmed in the very fact of their absence from the historical record?[13] Christopher Chitty has gone so far as to suggest that scholars must

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[10] See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[11] Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History," *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1609.

[12] Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," PMLA 128, no. 1 (January 2013): 21-39.

[13] Anjali Arondekar, "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1-2 (2005): 10-27; and Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

thoroughly deconstruct the primacy of historicism and historical inquiry to contemporary sexual politics as a byproduct of sexuality's construction within colonialism and capitalism. "The homosexual desire for history is itself historical," Chitty writes, "the product of a specific social valorization of historical knowledge in the nineteenth century, the emergence of a dominant bourgeois class presenting its demands as universal, and a supposed opposition between the 'timeless' sexual cultures of traditional peoples and the 'historical' ones of the metropoles and settler societies."[14]

To be fair, these challenges to the role of the archive in gender and sexuality studies seems to have only further ignited queer studies' "archive fever." A recent anthology edited by Daniel Marshal and Zeb Tortorici, *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies*, takes up a stance very similar to Chitty's in calling for queer studies to question its own "archival turn." In the mid-2000s, Marshal and Tortorici argue, queer studies was coming up against some of the presumptions that were formative to the field in the 1990s and early 2000s–the attachments that I have been discussing in this dissertation: the queer subject as an "unstated default, a presumption of a white, able-bodied, cis-normative, middle-class subject of Eurocentric modernity, whose 'queerness' nonetheless falls outside certain norms."[15] The impetus to "reshape the boundaries, subjects, and methods of queer studies" led to a growth in queer studies scholarship that sought to theorize queer subjectivity in archives that did not necessarily reflect "proper" Euro-American queer subjects. While this expansion of queer studies to include work more readily on subjects who fall beyond the legibility of contemporary

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[14] Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World-System* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 150.
[15] Daniel Marshall and Zeb Tortorici, "Introduction: (Re)Turning to the Queer Archives," in *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies,* eds. Daniel Marshall and Zeb Tortorici (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022): 3.

LGBTQ+ subjectivities is undoubtedly a good thing, the editors are self-reflexive in pointing out that contemporary queer subjectivity, queer theory, and queerness as projects have largely been constituted through this turn to the archives, or this process of excavation alternative models of subjectivity through a look backward. Things are made "queer" through this turn to the archive, while the archive is made queer through continuous returns to constitute the past, present, and future through the lens of queerness. In response, the editors call for queer studies to turn in on its own archival impulse, to "closely track the diverse notions of queerness and the archive that are iteratively produced through our turns to them."[16] In other words, they want scholars to question how the archive has been used to constitute queerness, distinctly, as a critical, political, historical, ethical, and cultural paradigm. Without abandoning the archives–such a task would be impossible, it seems–our goal instead is to unpack the fantasies, attachments, and desires that drive us to the archives in pursuit of queer and feminist politics. They call their efforts to create a "postarchival tendency in queer and feminist studies:" not postarchival as in after the archive, but postarchival as in reflecting critically on the uses to which the archive–like queerness–is put.[17]

And there is, of course, the question of the text as an aesthetic object–the fact that aesthetic objects and the effects that they achieve are not necessarily reducible to the transmission of knowledge about history. Not long after her critique of New Historicism in *Epistemology of the Closet,* Sedgwick would advance her famous distinction between paranoid and reparative forms of reading, partially as a way to rebut what she saw as the reduction of literary objects to case studies where scholars flatten their specificities in order to prove their

[16] Marshall and Tortorici, "(Re)Turning," 11.
[17] Ibid.

larger claims about politics or oppression.[18] The reparative orientation of contemporary LGBTQ+ (particularly *postqueer*) literature, as Shanté Paradigm Smalls and Ramzi Fawaz observes, undoubtedly befuddles queer critical efforts to perform a symptomology of texts, if only because the texts themselves already outpace the critic in that regard.[19] Although Heather Love's suggestion that literary critics should make an effort to describe texts instead of always defaulting to close reading is positioned against New Critical strains of literary studies, her investment in description also moves forward from a dimension of Sedgwick's critique: that scholars have a tendency to seek out the deeper meanings of text, to demystify their historical conditions and the ethical imperatives they place on readers, rather than simply observing what the text as a technology is *doing*.[20]

Along similar lines, Rita Felski argues that an overemphasis on historical contextualization overlooks the importance of the aesthetic dimensions of texts.[21] When we box texts into historical periods, and claim that they are totally knowable to us unless accessed through deep historical inquiry—or, when we assume that we know more about the text by virtue of our position in the future, able to introduce context that it may or may not consciously reflect—we deny the affective and aesthetic dimensions of texts that make them mean something for us as readers far removed from the time of their creation in the first place. Texts require a relation from the reader, and marshalling context to dim the light of the text, to enforce our

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[18] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching/Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 123-152.
[19] Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls. "Queers Read This!: LGBTQ Literature Now." *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (2018): 175.
[20] Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41 no. 2 (Spring 2010): 371-391.
[21] Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," New Literary History 42, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 575.

power over it as critiques and to diminish the text's necessity to work on us, prevents us from seeing it clearly. "Could we conceivably come to terms with the implications of our attachments to particular objects?," Felski writes. "Can we wean ourselves of the longstanding impulse to discount or empty out such attachments in order to discover, yet again, the subterranean structures that determine them?"[22]

At the intersection of each of these developments in queer historical inquiry—a defiance of strict periodization, a reflective turn toward the iterative use of the archive to constitute critical projects (like Queer Studies), a recognition of the desires and affective bonds that tether us to objects, and an embrace of extra-historical quality of aesthetic texts—I want to situate Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (henceforth *Wayward Lives*). In *Wayward Lives*, Hartman synthesizes her decades-long critique of the role of fantasy in archival study into a sweeping account of the lives of young Black women living in northern industrial cities at the turn of the twentieth-century. In what follows, I offer an account of Hartman's text that situates her at the development of a new queer historicism that places the desires that motivate our returns to history as legitimate starting points for historical knowledge. I draw together different theories of fantasy to show how Hartman's method of writing in *Wayward Lives* turns the process of historical inquiry into a performance of critical fantasies. Thinking about Hartman's text as a psychopolitical text will help us get past some of the theoretical impasses that have prevented a full reckoning with the significance of her contributions for *queer cultural politics* over the course of her career.

[22] Felski, "Context Stinks!," 585-586.

"A Note on Method"

In the first section of *Wayward Lives*, called "A Note on Method," Hartman describes close narration as "a style which places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text."[23] This sounds a lot like free indirect discourse, a convention of fiction writing. Indeed, *Wayward Lives* occupies a strange relationship to genre. When it came time for awards season, for instance, *Wayward Lives* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism; the Publishing Triangle's Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Nonfiction, tying with Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House;* and it was a finalist for Lambda Literary's award for Lesbian Memoir/Biography. There are also some borrowings from drama: Hartman refers to all of the figures who appear throughout the text as "characters," and she lists them in the front of the book right after the "Note" in a section resembling a *dramatis personae*. All things concerned, by the time Hartman tells readers that "All the characters and events found in this book are real; none are invented," the structure of the text already begins to indicate that it is a departure from the conventions of historical nonfiction writing (xiv).[24] Likewise, Hartman's explanation of close narration raises more questions about genre than it answers.

In the following passage, we can see how the tone of authority that Hartman sometimes deploys in her narration disorients any expectation of a conventional piece of historical nonfiction. At the beginning of a chapter titled "An Intimate History of Slavery and Freedom," Hartman describes the journey of Mattie Nelson, a fifteen-year old girl traveling from Virginia to New York City in the fall of 1914 aboard a steamer named Old Dominion. Hartman goes into

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[23] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: Norton, 2019): xiii-xiv.
[24] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiv.

detail about what Nelson felt during this journey: "Deep gulps of the salt air calmed the lurching hollow feeling in her stomach," and "Pier 26," the dock on which she will disembark on Manhattan's West Side, "echoed in her head like a refrain."[25] And what is Nelson thinking?:

> She hoped 294 nautical miles was sufficient distance to create a new life. Mattie wanted something else. It was as simple and elusive, as vague and insistent as that. Something else was never listed as one of the reasons people left home, only the appalling and the verifiable—the boll weevil, lynching, the white mob, the chain gang, rape, servitude, debt peonage; yet the inchoate, what you wanted but couldn't name, the resolute, stubborn desire for an elsewhere and an otherwise that had yet to emerge clearly, a notion of the possible whose outlines were fuzzy and amorphous, exerted a force no less powerful and tenacious. Why else pick up and head off to a place where you were a stranger, tolerated at best, but most often unwanted and reviled?[26]

What material is Hartman using to render Nelson's inner thoughts with such detail? Is she pulling from Nelson's own language, perhaps in a diary or a letter? Probably not: as Hartman discloses in the "Note," she only knows about most of the subjects featured in *Wayward Lives* based on their appearance in the records of disciplinary authorities and reform institutions: "journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators…"[27] To find out more about Nelson, the reader might flip to the endnotes at the back of the book. But the endnotes only raise more questions. Any attempt to make an exact match between the sources cited and the portrayal of Nelson's consciousness—was Pier 26 really "echoing" in her head while on this trip?—is confused by the endnote's sheer lack of information. We are informed that "This is a speculative account of Mattie's journey from Virginia to New York." We learn, too, that the events described in the passage above precede all of the documents Hartman has on Nelson. Hartman then goes on to

[25] Ibid 45.
[26] Ibid. 46-47.
[27] Ibid. xiv.

cite a bulk of documents that cover more general information about the Old Dominion Steamer, which "was the primary mode of transportation from Norfolk and Richmond," she writes.[28] She does not say it outright, so the reader needs to glean the truth: everything in the passage above is made up. Though it is *likely* that Nelson took the Old Dominion, even that is not confirmed.

Below, I have pulled a section from Nelson's Bedford Hill case file (Figure 1), generously shared with me by the archivists at New York State Archives. (A) is an excerpt from the case file that mentions Nelson's night out with Hugh Harrison. The document jumps from Hawkins and Nelson's walk in the park to Nelson experiencing morning sickness, without any mention of them having sex. (B) is an excerpt from the five-page-long section where Hartman writes into this gap: it reimagines Nelson's first sexual encounter with Hawkins "inside the rented room of a lodging house:"[29]

> A. SEXUAL DELINQUENCIES: Patient says she "went wrong" when 14 with a man of 23—"the first man I ever became acquainted with after coming to Staten Island". The mother was south at that time. Patient worked in the day-time. They were in Allan Park going home from a party that night. Patient says "He never said anything like that before". She "didn't think it right, but not so bad either" but did not tell her mother anything about it.[30]

> B. Perhaps, what mattered most to Mattie was that she had found the way to her own pleasure, had learned to enjoy the smell of herself on her hands and in his hair, found a way to lessen the boredom, and diminished the hours spent waiting and trying to find a way out. Whether her lover valued her as a prize or took advantage of a gullible young woman matters less than what Mattie discovered in that room—what she wanted might actually matter. *Or that "I want that" becomes a way to cleanse the stench of "ain't got," "can't get," "don't."*[31]

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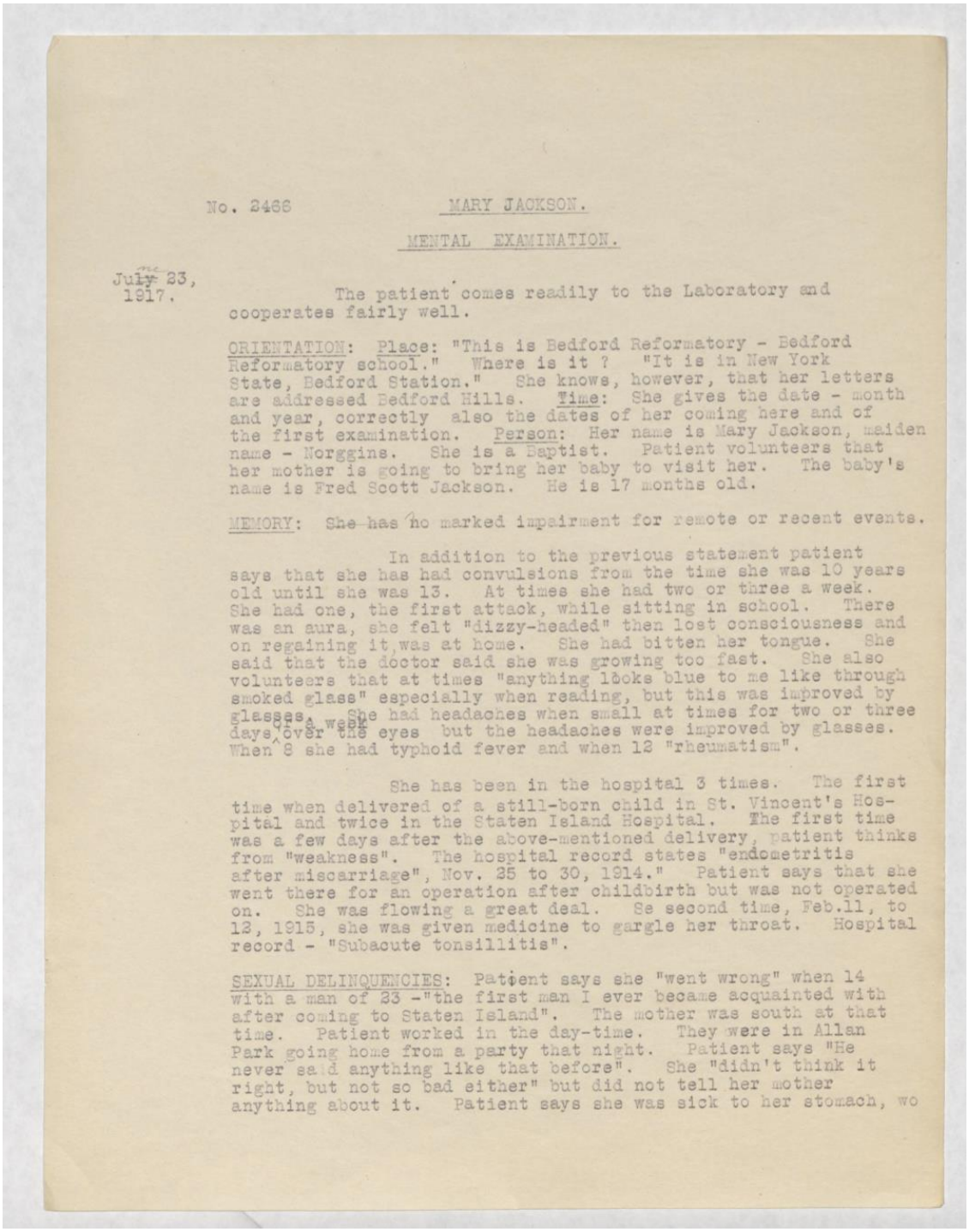
[28] Ibid. 360-361.
[29] Ibid. 51.
[30] Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Collection 14610-77B, Case File #2466, "Mary Jackson. Mental Examination." June 23, 1917: 1.
[31] Hartman, Wayward Lives, 58-59.



No. 2466 MARY JACKSON.

MENTAL EXAMINATION.

July 23, 1917.

The patient comes readily to the Laboratory and cooperates fairly well.

ORIENTATION: Place: "This is Bedford Reformatory - Bedford Reformatory school." Where is it ? "It is in New York State, Bedford Station." She knows, however, that her letters are addressed Bedford Hills. Time: She gives the date - month and year, correctly also the dates of her coming here and of the first examination. Person: Her name is Mary Jackson, maiden name - Norggins. She is a Baptist. Patient volunteers that her mother is going to bring her baby to visit her. The baby's name is Fred Scott Jackson. He is 17 months old.

MEMORY: She has no marked impairment for remote or recent events.

In addition to the previous statement patient says that she has had convulsions from the time she was 10 years old until she was 13. At times she had two or three a week. She had one, the first attack, while sitting in school. There was an aura, she felt "dizzy-headed" then lost consciousness and on regaining it, was at home. She had bitten her tongue. She said that the doctor said she was growing too fast. She also volunteers that at times "anything looks blue to me like through smoked glass" especially when reading, but this was improved by glasses. She had headaches when small at times for two or three days a week over the eyes but the headaches were improved by glasses. When 8 she had typhoid fever and when 12 "rheumatism".

She has been in the hospital 3 times. The first time when delivered of a still-born child in St. Vincent's Hospital and twice in the Staten Island Hospital. The first time was a few days after the above-mentioned delivery, patient thinks from "weakness". The hospital record states "endometritis after miscarriage", Nov. 25 to 30, 1914." Patient says that she went there for an operation after childbirth but was not operated on. She was flowing a great deal. Se second time, Feb.11, to 12, 1915, she was given medicine to gargle her throat. Hospital record - "Subacute tonsillitis".

SEXUAL DELINQUENCIES: Patient says she "went wrong" when 14 with a man of 23 -"the first man I ever became acquainted with after coming to Staten Island". The mother was south at that time. Patient worked in the day-time. They were in Allan Park going home from a party that night. Patient says "He never said anything like that before". She "didn't think it right, but not so bad either" but did not tell her mother anything about it. Patient says she was sick to her stomach, wo

Figure 1. Record of Mattie Nelson's mental examination from her case file at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

The declaration about "what Mattie *discovered*" seems to invoke a tone of objectivity that is immediately undone by the lack of evidence regarding Nelson's actual desires or motivations. There is a temptation to read the "intimacy" between narrator and character as a form of free indirect discourse. As Dorothy Hale suggests, Henry James's influential view of the ethics of narration in novels—what Hale calls the "novelistic ethics of alterity"—has become the single most commonplace way in which writers, readers, and literary scholars tend to view the imagined relationship between character, narrator, and reader in any given literary genre, not just novels. According to James, it is the goal of the novelist to construct characters who exist as independent, autonomous actants separate from themself. In deploying free indirect discourse, the novelist/narrator creates a distance between themself and the character, "lending" their language to the character in order to dignify their worldview while maintaining their separation.[32] If we flatly pasted this novelistic ethics onto Hartman's narration of Nelson, above, then we might assume that Hartman imagines herself as supplementing the language of Nelson, who exists as an autonomous agent outside of Hartman.

The problem with this conflation of the ethics of close narration and the novelistic ethics of alterity is that it presumes that both techniques share the same goal: to dignify an autonomous, unique, individual subjectivity that exists outside the narrator's consciousness. This is a moot point if we attend to one particular formal aspect of close narration. Throughout *Wayward Lives,* Hartman recurrently insists on the *generic* quality of her portraits, i.e., her reliance on typification, generalization, and approximation.

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[32] Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020: 64-65.

In passage (B), the affirmative declarations about what Nelson "discovered" or "wanted" are surrounded on both sides by language that speaks in far more general terms. The "Perhaps" that begins the first sentence signals to us that Hartman is about to offer a series of speculations. The inclusion of subtle details piques our interest about whether or not Nelson actually did those things. Did she really smell herself on her hands and learn to enjoy it? Did sex or masturbation really become a way to pass the time? Even though the conditional grammar of this passage suggests that these are really just speculations, there is a lingering sense that they *may not* be.

I might turn to the endnotes at the back of the text to see if these details correspond to a part of the historical record. But there are no citations for page 58, and only one for page 59: for the last sentence, the italicized quote, attributed to Tonya Foster's *A Swarm of Bees in High Court.* Maybe Hartman's invocation of Foster's words to make sense of Nelson's imagined experience makes us realize that those speculations really were just generalities. People in general do smell themselves on their fingers, they do find ways to pass the time, and maybe Nelson did those things, too. It is this push and pull between the implication of fact and the realization of the generalizations being made that pull the reader out of the text. It is a continual cycle of the expectation of "real" evidence being raised and, more often than not, disappointed.

We see something similar in the first passage on Nelson that I cited. The passage begins with similarly declarative language that seems to indicate something that Nelson actually did: she "hoped" and she "wanted." The fact that Hartman is ascribing something to Nelson is relatively unambiguous: a subject, Nelson, is performing an action, hoping/wanting. These particular verbs (wanting/hoping) are affectively dense in their connotations of motive, intention, and design; they broadcast interiority. The sentences that follow depart from Nelson as an individual and speak more generally about what actual people said were their reasons for taking

the same journey: boll weevils, lynchings, white mobs. It ends with the presence of "inchoate" desires that might exist beneath the pretensions of transparency and authority of those records, which speak only in terms of the tangible, observable, inoffensive, and totally rational. Meanwhile the second-person address reaches beyond the desires of any one person, or even the historically-specific desires of people traveling during the Great Migration, to touch the incoherent nature of want itself, presumably shared by anyone who can be caught by that "you." Moving from Nelson specifically, to more general historical conditions, to universal gestures toward the messiness of desire, the passage slowly reveals the synthesis of contextual research and philosophical commitments that inform Hartman's portrait of Nelson. We become conscious of the fact that Nelson's hopes/wants are approximations, not definitive statements on what the real person, Mattie Nelson, thought or felt. And yet, Hartman chooses to lead with a definitive statement about Nelson, not the other way around. There is the possibility that we see Nelson's desires not as approximations, not as speculations, but as things that actually happened. For a brief moment, a glimmer of Nelson appears through the text—and then she vanishes, back into context, back into history.

I want to suggest that Hartman's movement between declarative or affirmative language and less literary, more epistemically humble, more "meta" language that pulls out of the close narration has an important effect on the reader: it repeatedly raises and disappoints the expectations of empirical, evidence-based claims about the text's subjects that is commonly associated with historical narration. My sense that the disorienting effect of the writing is an important part of *Wayward Lives* is only strengthened by other formal choices that intensify this confusion. Hartman's choice not to include footnotes (forcing the reader to search for "the evidence") confounds me as a reader, as does *the beauty of the writing itself.*

My sense that *Wayward Lives* disorients its readers by playing with their expectations regarding historical evidence are actually a crucial component of Hartman's "beautiful experiment." In this way my reading of *Wayward Lives* builds on an interpretation already set forth by Jennifer C. Nash. Nash situates the text within "a tradition of contemporary Black feminist scholarly work that insists that "the way we do justice to the felt lives of Black women requires a different form of writing–that is sensual and poetic, risky and vulnerable."[33] In "Writing Black Beauty," Nash called this tradition "beautiful writing." She counts among its adherents "Christina Sharpe, Nicole Fleetwood, Terrion Williamson, and Karla F.C. Holloway," and finds predecessors in the biomythography of Audre Lorde and the choreo-poetry of Ntozake Shange.[34] For Nash, each of these writers grapple with the complex emotional labor involved in thinking with the personal and collective losses that Black women have and continue to suffer. In doing so, they share "an aspiration to move the reader," using tactics like antilinear prose and self-disclosure to capture "the fundamental nature of loss to Black female subjectivity."[35] It is important to note that for Nash, the aspiration of Black feminists to produce emotionally rich writing and beautiful forms mirrors the felt experience of Black women's perpetual proximity to loss. As Nash writes, Black feminists have long insisted that innovative forms are necessary to capture the deep temporalities and affective and embodied experience of loss; that is, that the form of writing matters to the experience it attempts to capture, and that "loss is only knowable through a proximity to beauty."[36] The depths of terror, fear, melancholic grief, and longing that constitute Black women's daily lives and social worlds are inextricable from practices of

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[33] Jennifer C. Nash, "Saidiya Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval," American Historical Review,* 125, no. 2 (April 2020): 597.
[34] Jennifer C. Nash, "Writing Black Beauty." *Signs* 45, no. 1 (Autumn 2019): 103.
[35] Nash, "Beauty," Ibid.
[36] Ibid. 104.

remembrance, celebration, and care used to stay with, protect, hold onto, and act in accordance with the dead. Black feminist's beautiful writing seeks to think through this complex affective imbrication—to find language that can dignify the difficult labor of remaining close to those lost—by including the reader in this at-times paradoxical confluence: the beauty in loss, loss as it is known through beauty.

Nash's framework is useful for helping us make sense not only of the structure of Wayward Lives, but the disorientation Hartman creates in her readers through her play with the genre conventions of historical writing. In her efforts to hold her subjects "close," to occupy an intimate relation between their lives and hers, the evocative details that she creates about their desires momentarily produces the sense that we know them—that we *can* know them. But this is just an illusion. Their practices, dreams, wishes, and loves are lost to us, erased by the technologies made to make their lives impossible, including, paradoxically, the documents through which we momentarily capture a glimpse. Is that not the experience of engaging with archives constructed through loss: the glimmers that briefly promise a life that survived destruction, and the continual failure of that promise? And yet, in spite of such failures, the urgency of finding language for the injuries of the past and the ways they suffuse the present necessitate a return to this cruel object, the archive, again and again.

Dangerous Beauties

Understandably, historians have been skeptical of Hartman's interpretations of the lives of real people. Undoubtedly, *Wayward Lives* ventures into territory that flaunts normal standards of evidence-based, nonfiction historical writing. But there is something curious about the criticism on *Wayward Lives* that I want to observe. Critics seem to have a hard time reconciling

the structure and style of *Wayward Lives* with Hartman's Black queer feminist politics. In reviews of *Wayward Lives,* which range from praise qualified with slight hesitation, to full-on reproach, the bad feelings caused by the text's unsightly relationship to genre norms tend to be treated as unintended side effects of Hartman's aesthetics-politics, rather than as a dimension of Hartman's project itself.

A gloss of the reception of *Wayward Lives* shows that bad feelings are actually a recurrent part of the reading experience. Annette Gordon-Reed describes an otherwise pleasurable reading experience interrupted by a bothersome question that "lingers over" the entirety of Hartman's text: "Why a book of nonfiction and not a novel?"[37] While she lauds Hartman for "her daring, and often inspiring" portrayals, the text's ambiguous relationship to fiction generates a "nagging concern" about interpretative ethics, whether Hartman "captured the thoughts and feelings of a person who actually lived and had her own story." Martha J. Cutter has mostly good things to say about *Wayward Lives*. But, like Gordon-Reed, Hartman's decisions about the structure of the interrupt Cutter's reading experience. "The one frustration" Cutter expresses is about Hartman's decision to forgo footnotes and citations in favor of appendices.[38] This disjointed structure makes it hard to discern "where the historical archive ended and Hartman's own evocative re-creation of the past began."[39] Although she offers, I think quite generously, that the text's disjointed structure is actually necessary "to tell a compelling story," she ultimately calls the need "to flip back and forth between the narrative and the two

[37] Annette Gordon-Reed, "Rebellious History," *New York Review of Books,* October 22, 2020.
[38] Martha J. Cutter, "Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval by Saidiya Hartman (Review)," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 46, no. 1, (Spring 2021): 203.
[39] Cutter, "Wayward Lives," 203.

separate listings at the back" "cumbersome."[40] Even Kinohi Nishikawa, who has much stronger words for Hartman, seems to betray a low-level feeling of irritation toward academia's widespread endorsement of Hartman's "so-called lyricism."[41] His description of Hartman's writing techniques broadcasts a feeling not just of disapproval but *annoyance*: "The rhetorical flourishes, the wonderings and wanderings, the incessant use of free indirect discourse"—ouch![42]

According to Gordon-Reed, Hartman's otherwise illuminating chapter on Nelson is undercut by her tendency to attribute radical political motives to Nelson's actions. Like the other subjects in *Wayward Lives*, Hartman presents Nelson as a radical rather than someone who simply wanted to survive. Teenage Nelson's sexual encounter with an adult man becomes evidence of a desire to exceed the afterlife of slavery. "In that room she tried to slip away," Hartman writes, "elude the hold of the plantation and the police, and pry open time into an endless stretch of possibility."[43] Gordon-Reed argues that this depiction of Nelson as someone who was consciously or unconsciously trying to rail against organized abandonment, policing, and state-enforced racialized austerity through sex represents an ahistorical projection on Hartman's part. Since the days of slavery, Gordon-Reed argues, "love, stability, and companionship" for Black couples were constantly the subject of white supremacist scrutiny and attack.[44] If Nelson did have radical aspirations, they would have likely taken the form of a desire for the kind of long-term coupling that Hartman implicitly suggests Nelson defies. "We live after a sustained critique of bourgeois values and lifestyles, decades in the making" writes Gordon-

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[40] Ibid. 204.
[41] Kinohi Nishikawa, "pedagogy of description. projective reading and the ethics of interpretation." *on_education: Journal for Research and Debate* no. 9 (December 2020): 8.
[42] Nishikawa, "pedagogy," Ibid.
[43] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 62.
[44] Gordon-Reed, "Rebellious History," n.p.

Reed; "Nelson did not."[45] The problem with Hartman's portrayal of Nelson, therefore, is not so much the idea that she was a rebel, but the contemporary notions of rebellion against heteronormative, puritanical sexual standards that Hartman assigns to her.

Perhaps the most searing criticism of *Wayward Lives* comes from Kinohi Nishikawa (2020). Nishikawa accuses Hartman of distorting her objects of study in order to reaffirm her pre-existing ideas about Black women's resistance and agency. While many adherents of "identity-based modes of critique" are guilty of what he calls "projective reading," Nishikawa points to Hartman as the worst of them all.[46] What makes Hartman so reprehensible to Nishikawa is the poetic quality of her writing. The lyricism of *Wayward Lives*—or, more pointedly, what he calls its "so-called lyricism"—is like Hartman feeding her readers a lotus flower. She wants to enchant her readers with prose that distracts them from her unethical engagements with her objects. Interestingly, he builds this case against Hartman's style by critiquing the positive reception of *Wayward Lives among his own students*. He suspects that his students were not so critical of Hartman because "[t]he rhetorical flourishes, the wonderings and wanderings, [and] the incessant use of free indirect discourse" conceals Hartman's "ideological commitments by writing *as if* they emerge out of the deepest recesses of another's psyche."[47] Far from *undermining* the political project of *Wayward Lives*, Nishikawa sees Hartman's use of beauty as the sparkling shell that advances a solipsistic and ethically bankrupt form of reading that privileges "identity" as a source of unimpeachable truth. His students' reception of *Wayward Lives* as symptomatic of "the near-universal celebration of so-called lyricism in academic prose," which is really "a troubling sign of the psychologization of the ideology of aesthetic resistance at

[45] Ibid.
[46] Nishikawa, "pedagogy," 8.
[47] Ibid.

the level of style."[48] In other words, Nishikawa thinks his students are dupes. They have fallen prey to an academic culture that celebrates the aestheticization of resistance (maybe as a desperate way of justifying "the value of the humanities?") over and against actual politics.

I think these interpretations mistake the purpose of close narration. Nishikawa and Gordon-Reed conveniently overlook the various tactics that Hartman uses to qualify her speculations about her subjects. Beyond the fact that both critics couch their criticism of Hartman in a return to pre-queer theory accusations of historical projection, however, I want to observe another curious tendency shared by both of their accounts. I am drawn to the fact that their criticism is couched in *explicitly aesthetic terms*, even as they insist that a critique of anti-Blackness would be better served by separating out the artistic tools Hartman uses. For these critics, Hartman's writing style is disorienting, unnecessary, even *intentionally* distracting. Low-level feelings like irritation, confusion, and annoyance begin to emerge in their accounts of the text even as they seek to separate out Hartman's aesthetic choices from her commitments as a Black feminist historian. In the next section, I want to elaborate how it is impossible to separate Hartman's aesthetic choices from the Black feminist politics of her text.

A Note on Fantasy

Hartman's distinct contributions to historical inquiry in *Wayward Lives* might be better described not in terms of genre alone, but the exploitation of genre conventions through a psychopolitical method of writing: a method of writing, that is, that centers around the excavation of fantasies that motivate our return to the archive. At its core, fantasy in

[48] Ibid.

contemporary psychoanalysis describes the scenes in which subjects stage their desires. Fantasy refers to the subject's ordering of images and objects in the form of narratives that allow them to image and act through their desires. Fantasy has always been central to Hartman's critique of the afterlives of slavery and the endurance of anti-Black libidinal economies. In *Wayward Lives*, however, fantasy becomes an organizing component of the text itself. Close narration might be best understood as a manipulation of the narrative building blocks of the historical record as a way of arriving at a new account of history through the discordances, absences, and affective resonances that are uniquely achieved through aesthetic objects. Essentially, in *Wayward Lives*, Hartman takes her critical interrogations of the present-day fantasies that motivate historical inquiry and turns such interrogation into the aesthetic organization of the text itself. Her manipulation of the archive through the reordering of its materials from new epistemological and narrative positions acts upon not just our knowledge about history but the desires we bring to history itself, what I call her technique of *fantasy-work*.

Psychoanalysts from Freud up to present-day queer theorists like Butler, Lee Edelman, and Nash have described fantasy as the scene-setting of desire. Theories fantasy in contemporary queer and feminist theory descend from Freud's original writings on fantasy, or "phantasie," as the mediating function between the subject's desire, the satisfaction of those desires, and their enactment (or denial of their enactment by the subject) in reality. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud differentiates conscious phantasies, or day-dreams, from unconscious phantasies. Both conscious and unconscious phantasies are expressions of structures that organize our ego, but unconscious fantasies remain backgrounded because they give expression to desires that we

have repressed in order to protect our ego constitution.[49] Freud compares the function of phantasies to that of dreams. Like dreams, phantasies take the mysterious, ineffable dimensions of the subject's psyche, or the "latent material" of the psyche, and give form to them, effectively granting them structure and narrative content, what Freud calls the manifest content of the dream scenario.[50] Phantasy, as a structure for the organization latent into manifest content, provides the subject a way to mediate their desires and even satisfy them without necessarily having to act on them in reality, given that their enactment may compromise the subject's participation in social relations, or even potentially shatter the subject's ego through desires that they bear and yet necessarily cannot or should not fulfill. Freud's description of dreams as performing a kind of dream-work–his term for the work dreams do in giving structure to the amorphous base of the psyche–will appear later in this chapter in my description of Hartman's writing as performing a kind of critical fantasy-work.

Theories of fantasy after Freud have generally elaborated this idea that fantasies are the subject giving structure or *form* to their impulses, urges, wishes, and unconscious and conscious psychic material. Jacques Lacan harnesses Freud's suggestion that fantasy provides the subject with a necessary separation of reality and suggests that it is only through fantasy that reality, or the real, ever becomes accessible to us. Phantasy, for Lacan, is a linguistic structure, or a mechanism through which the subject enters into the Symbolic. Phantasy is not like language, but indeed is language: "phantasy is a sentence with a grammatical structure," he writes.[51] Phantasy takes on even more explicitly narrative dimensions in the Jean Laplanche and J.B.

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[49] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1899/1955): 496.
[50] Freud, *Dreams*, 497.
[51] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XIV: The Logic of Phantasy,* trans. Cormac Gallagher (Unpublished manuscript, 1966-1967): 165.

Pontalis' theory of fantasy and its relationship to infantile sexuality. Sexuality forms, in fact, they argue, in auto-eroticism, in which the child displaces sexual desire through the "non-sexual functions" of the psyche and imagination, "hand[ing] over" desire not to an object in the real world but to fantasy, which then "starts existing as sexuality."[52] Fantasy is not the object of desire itself, nor its replacement, but desire's "setting." Rather than pursuing objects through the form provided by fantasy, the subject sees themself as "caught up" in "the sequence of images."[53] Fantasy provides a literal linguistic structure within which the subject can imagine themselves within their desires. Through this scene-setting, the subject *articulates themself* through the fantasy. The fantasy allows the subject to imagine themselves within the sequence of images in which their desires become arranged, thus giving shape to their identities through positioning themselves within the grammar of their desires. How these grammars, images, sequences, and structures come about, Laplanche and Pontalis suggest, cannot be discovered through scientific inquiry into the functions of the brain, however. Insofar that we can only access our psyches through language–through the structure of fantasy–we can only access the truth of fantasy in its dialogue with the reality which it mediates. The structure of fantasy must be discovered through mining the subject's relationship with the world and their place within it. In this sense, the analyst cannot only be a scientist: they "must also become a philosopher."[54]

Feminist, queer, and Marxist philosophers have attempted to do just that: they have taken up fantasy in order to parse socio-political conditions as they are constituted through the repetition of fantasies. Hortense Spillers suggests that the epistemes of slavery recur through a

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[52] Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the origins of sexuality," in *Unconscious Phantasy,* ed. Ricardo Steiner (London: Routledge, 2019): 134.
[53] Laplanche and Pontalis, "Fantasy," 133.
[54] Ibid.

fundamental dynamic of the body and the flesh imbedded in the "dominant symbolic activity."[55] The tropes of Black women that she famously cites at the beginning of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"-- "'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny'"[56]--describes the various configurations through which an anti-Black grammar reconstitutes itself upon Black women being *made flesh,* in contrast to the liberated, coherent, autonomous "body" of the master.[57] We might think about such images as the narrative building blocks of what Lauren Berlant calls "national fantasy," or the arrangements of meanings, symbols, representations, scenes, and narratives that give form to the nation as an imagined realm of political action or articulation, the "National Symbolic." Berlant suggests that there is no one monolithic "National Symbolic," however: fantasy is central to the articulation of the nation as a realm of action, and fantasy, Berlant writes, is how "national culture becomes local," through its expression in "images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness."[58] But perhaps Spillers would contest Berlant's insistence on the ever-locality of national fantasy. Black women's position as the negation of the Enlightenment subject, for Spillers, forms the very foundation of the symbolic order that gives rise, among other things, to our sense of "America," and the national project of America as an ethno-nationalist, anti-Black country. As Spillers writes at the very beginning of her essay, the endurance and ubiquity of images of the Black women as always available for sexual exploitation suggest the centrality of Black women-as-flesh to the project of the American

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[55] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 68.
[56] Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 65.
[57] Ibid. 67.
[58] Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 5.

nation-state. “My country needs me,” Spillers writes, “and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.”[59]

Many contemporary scholars also locate the possibility of the symbolic reconstitution in the iterative nature of fantasy, in its potential to be changed through the modification in the sequencing, order, and inclusion of images within the personal and collective fantasies we repeat and circulate. Joan Scott observes that feminists have often reconstituted their critical projects over time through their adoption and revision of different fantasies about the role of women in society. Although she critiques feminists for often marshaling universalizing and essentialist fantasies about women as, say, perfect, warm, compassionate mothers, the fact that feminists must strain to “conceal or minimize” inconsistencies and differences that emerge in the repetition of such narratives about womanhood suggests that those gaps in meaning might be exploited to push forward new, radical understandings of womanhood that do not elide important differences across social positions like race or class.[60] For Lee Edelman, all politics is necessarily a fantasy. Politics is nothing more than the illusion of an order beyond ourselves that “assures the stability of our identities of subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form.”[61] For Edelman, politics is the “translation” of desire “into a narrative,” or its teleological determination by historical processes. The libidinal positions and psychic defenses and drives that refuse or complicate historical determination must necessarily occupy the outside of politics, which the fantasies/narratives of the political are used

[59] Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 65.
[60] Joan Scott, “Fantasy-Echo: History and the Construction of Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2, (Winter 2001): 292.
[61] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 7.

to defer, to place such mechanisms on the outside of political life.[62] Hence why Edelman argues that the homosexual's identification with the death drive could be the site of tremendously transformative political power. If the homosexual comes to embrace the projection of the death drive onto them, as a *sinthomosexual*, that same destructive power may be wielded to unravel the limits, orderings, sequences, and grammars constructed through the fantasies of political life.[63]

Butler, meanwhile, embraces a Foucauldian revision of psychoanalytic theories of fantasy forwarded by Lacan and Laplanche and Pontalis. Importantly, Butler builds up their understanding of the radical potential of fantasy through their engagement with anti-porn feminism. Where some anti-porn feminists have argued against porn for its occasional depictions of women in violent, compromising, or degrading situations, Butler argues that such arguments tend to mistake the real conditions of the world, or "the real," as something that exists beyond its representation in fantasy. Even though some media presents unflattering fantasies involving women or homosexuals, Butler argues that a bigger goal for feminist and queer critique is to actually free up fantasy from its suffocation in the real, or to free up practices of representation. Because the real is only ever accessible through fantasy, changing reality would require us to "contest the syntax" through which we make claims to reality.[64] Such syntax is the ordering process of fantasy itself. Rather than trying to restrict representations of women or queers, Butler believes that scholars must endeavor to observe how the contemporary is punctuated by representational crises regarding identity and then to "proliferate and intensify this crisis."[65] "In other words," Butler writes, "it is important to risk losing control of the ways in which the

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[62] Edelman, *No Future,* 9.
[63] Ibid. 45
[64] Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1990): 107.
[65] Butler, "Fantasy," 121.

categories of women and homosexuality are represented, even in legal terms, to safeguard the uncontrollability of the signified."[66] Insisting on the gap between the phantasmatic and the real–much like how Todd McGowan argues that anti-capitalist psychoanalysis must press on the gaps between desire and its fulfillment[67]–will retain the forms of linguistic, symbolic, and syntactical possibility that allow identity and politics to be reconstituted in new ways.

Although the circulation of damaging, harmful, and violent fantasies of minoritarian subjects continues to constitute the grammars of American empire and capital, there may be potentially transformative power in exploiting these fantasies: not recuperating them per say, but disidentifying with them, or puncturing and exploding the gaps between these fantasies and reality in order to free up signification. José Muñoz's theory of disidentification, which I discussed in Chapter One, has been formative to more recent Black feminist work in porn studies. In her ethnographic studies of Black female porn stars from the late-twentieth century, Mireille Miller-Young found that many Black women in the porn industry found minor ways to "confront and manipulate discourses about their sexual deviance while remaining tied to a system that produces them as marginalized sexual laborers," like strategically leveraging stereotypes or making small alterations in behavior or dress.[68] Forms of what Miller-Young calls "illicit eroticism" enabled Black women to negotiate and even push against the standards of oppressive environments through their gradual manipulation of the sexual fantasies projected onto them.

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Todd McGowan. *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 42
[68] Mireille Miller-Young, *Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 16.

Nash arrives at similar observations in her own work in porn studies, calling for a greater consideration of the centrality of fantasy to Black feminist politics as a source of power. Instead of limiting inquiry into Black women's sex lives as proof of their oppression by the circulation of sexual fantasies, Nash asks, "What if the black feminist theoretical archive were to imagine fantasy as a productive space of subject formation, a site where subjects (white and black alike) articulate longings, perform pleasures, and name desires in ways that both traffic in racial stereotype and transcend stereotype (and sometimes simultaneously both)?"[69] Nash thus proposes an expansion of the queer feminist archive, but with an important twist. At the same time she calls for scholars to attend to Black women's own fantasies and their derivation of pleasure from sexual fantasies, she also calls for scholars to reconsider their own investments in archives of Black women's sexual exploitation–the fantasies, that is, that motivate scholars as well.

This brief survey of some of the work on fantasy in queer, feminist, and Black feminist scholarship and its psychoanalytic origins demonstrates the broad contours of the general understanding of fantasy that critics of gender, sexuality, race, and class have adopted. In varying degrees, contemporary scholars working on fantasy in these fields recognize fantasy principally as a narrative structure, or a kind of form-giving function, that gives shape and expression to the content of the psyche, including the psyche's determination by the social and political. Fantasies are individual and collective: our individual fantasies are informed by the circulation of images, narratives, and grammars that direct our attention and libidinal investment toward apparatuses, ideologies, ideals, and the maintenance of unjust systems and the objects they are organized

[69] Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 150.

around. But there is rich potential in fantasy as a narrative structure whose divergences from reality can be exploited to reveal such injustice and to open up signification to new ends. Exploiting fantasy can be achieved through the manipulation of its syntax: by taking components of fantasies, the images or actors or symbols or scenes that compose them, and rearranging them to new ends. Beyond simply changing the content of our fantasies, true power lies in playing with the structure of fantasies, or the symbolic orders, sequential logics, and mimetic patterns that generate the linear chains of associations that propel us toward certain objects and away from others. Exploiting the structure of fantasy enables a new freedom in signification, in fantasy, and therefore in the real itself. It is with this in mind I will now turn to Hartman's own work on fantasy to demonstrate her position within these different scholarly discourses.

Performing the Impossible

A brief gloss of Hartman's writing on scholarly desire, projection, and identification, and how this focus develops across her career into the writing practice she deploys in *Wayward Lives*, will help me illustrate how her interest in the fantasies that condition historical knowledge is a major dimension of her influential work on pleasure, ordinary practice, and slavery and its afterlives.

Beginning with *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman's critique of liberal democracy, its empty language of progress, freedom, agency, and equality emerges from within her attempt to break away from the paradigms of pre-existing scholarship on slavery at the time. Domination under slavery was so extreme, Hartman argues, that even descriptions of pleasure and enjoyment among the

enslaved—depictions of dances, prayer meetings, singing, sex—are informed by notions of the slave's partial humanity, or unfitness for citizenship, which were grounded in suggestions of innate sensuality and seductiveness. Black flesh comes into being as a projection of white desire, and these projections overdetermine the descriptions of practice that historians today sometimes uphold as examples of resistance and agency. Scholarship that "simply celebrates slave agency" understates the degree to which practices of resistance were structured by the sheer severity of antiblack violence.[70] What emerges from *Scenes* is a conception of the archive as a site that is overdetermined, on one end, by materials designed to reaffirm fantasies of the enslaved as inhuman, and on the other end, by scholarly fantasies, or "the equally interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns."[71] Fantasies about the enslaved reverberate out of the past, out of the archive, and it is tempting to repeat sympathetic narratives of defiance without qualification precisely because it satisfies the pervasive antiblack desire to produce one's subjectivity by projecting onto black people—black flesh the surface upon which the image of the ideal citizen (compassionate, noble) finds its articulation.

In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Hartman seeks to understand the hold of the transatlantic slave trade on the present by thinking about the fantasies that animate its interpretation in the present—including her own fantasies. She reflects on the expectations she had for her trip to West Africa as a version of what could be called a fantasy of the lost homeland. Although Hartman's expectations end up being disappointed—traveling to Africa does not feel like a return but instead raises feelings of ambivalence, estrangement, and

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[70] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997/2022): 54.
[71] Hartman, *Scenes*, 11.

isolation—she nevertheless argues that these fantasies are the products of strategic necessity. Dreams of a forgotten homeland were a vital source of inspiration for black people during and in the wake of chattel slavery. It is an expression of the originary loss embodied in the production of the slave-as-commodity. Spillers describes this as a process of ungendering: the reduction of the captive to thingness and its perpetual availability for sexual violation is secured through the elimination of genealogical claims, both literal and figural severings of the child from their mother/father.[72] Likewise, for Hartman, practices that prevented the enslaved from claiming their lineage, inheritance, and genealogy produce the slave as perpetual stranger, belonging neither here nor there. "Slaves were the ghosts in the machines of kinship," Hartman writes.[73] "The transience of the slave's existence," therefore, "still leaves its traces in how black people imagine home as well as how we speak of it. We may have forgotten our country, but we haven't forgotten our dispossession."[74] *Lose Your Mother* shows Hartman continuing to articulate her approach to the archive as a prolonged *staying with* the fantasies that animate the codependent imaginaries of blackness, gender, slavery, motherhood, resistance, personhood, human, freedom, and event.

It is in her landmark essay "Venus in Two Acts," however, where Hartman's interest in fantasies of history turns explicitly toward the writing of history, or the task of the historian as a writer. The dilemma at the center of "Venus" is nothing less than the conflict between the scholarly desire to recuperate people deemed lost to history, the archive's rebuke of such desires, *and the persistence of these desires regardless*. When Hartman encounters the trace of two girls

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[72] Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 68.
[73] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2008): 194.
[74] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 87.

in the records of a slave ship named *Recovery*, she imagines herself writing what she calls "a romance," which she briefly indulges in the essay: "...if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls."[75] But actually writing such a romance, Hartman knows, would have contradicted "virtually everything I had ever written."[76] What is there to do with such fantasies? The desire to protect the dead, to dignify their lives beyond what the archive affords, to legitimize what is known even if it is not recorded—that they loved, found pleasure, fought, survived—such desires are the foundation of Hartman's work. Yet the archive and the academic conventions of history refuse such desires. All things considered, then: What is the point? If the only thing that historians can do is repeat the histories of violence found in the archive, then why "subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?"[77] Or, "If it is not possible to undo the violence that inaugurates the sparse record of a girl's life or remedy her anonymity with a name or translate the commodity's speech, then to what end does one tell such stories?"[78]

Fantasy is narrative-driven. Fantasy orders the chaos of the world into sequences, with clear links between disparate events and images; and it affirms the picture of the world it presents through its repetition. Hartman's solution is to play with *sequence.* If the archive will not offer up new histories, then historians can intervene in the reproduction of dominant narratives by enacting these same kinds of representational dilemmas in their writing. If history cannot be retold using the words of the enslaved, the subaltern, and the dispossessed, then

[75] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 8.
[76] Hartman, "Venus," 9.
[77] Ibid. 5.
[78] Ibid. 10.

historians might elucidate the interested nature of the archive "*by performing the limits of writing through the act of narration*."[79] In Hartman's definition of "critical fabulation," her interest in fantasy intersects with performance and aesthetics:

> Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and amplify the impossibility of its telling.[80]

There are two tactics that Hartman outlines for her critical fabulative method: the use of the subjunctive, illustrated in the quote above, and in the manipulation of narrative order. "Fabulation" refers to fabula, "the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative." Characters, events, settings, causes and effects, images, affects—the historian identifies how histories and fantasies are constructed through these building blocks. To fabulate critically means rearranging the fabula to new effect, "re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view," thereby throwing into crisis the transparent authority of the archive and its accounts of "what happened when." This intentional manipulation of narrative's "building blocks" goes hand-in-hand with the subjunctive, a grammatical mood that "expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities."[81] By inserting their desires for alternative histories and better futures into the writing itself, they "mime" the limitations that the archive puts on what histories can be told. Far from writing fiction, the historian performs their engagement with the fictions of history as a means of deconstruction. Mobilizing the full weight of their historical and critical expertise, their speculations break open the tone of neutral authority commonly assigned to

[79] Ibid. 13.
[80] Ibid. 11.
[81] Ibid. 11.

historical writing and turns such writing, instead, into a zone of questions, a space of inquiry which the reader is invited to imagine within.

It would be easy to read *Wayward Lives* as an extension of the critical fabulative method outlined in "Venus," or to treat close narration and critical fabulation as one and the same. A shocking number of critics do just this. But both terms have different definitions, and, as methods, they involve the use of different aesthetic tactics. Sarah Haley is one of the few critics who rightly observes that there indeed is a difference between the method outlined in "Venus" and what Hartman does in *Wayward Lives.* "Critical fabulation and close narration both 'strain' or 'press' at the limits of the archive; both practices amplify archival power and paucity, and both present history from divergent points of view," Haley writes.[82] But the intimacy that Hartman assumes with her subjects in *Wayward Lives* "immerses the readers in an otherwise repository of history, knowledge, and sociality." Readerly immersion in the inner lives of the women featured in *Wayward Lives* proves crucial: the bold, lively imagination of Hartman's subject, the entanglement of narrator and character in an too-close relation that exceeds the common sense of the archive, "resists modes of estrangement and alienation upon which the afterlife of slavery depends."[83] This is a crucial connection that I think Haley elucidates between the method in *Wayward Lives* and Hartman's study of the afterlife of slavery. If slavery and its afterlives have been secured through severing relation, denying genealogical ties, and disrupting the formation of communal bonds, then the creative risk that Hartman assumes in offering not just a speculative but an *immersive* reading experience is very much an effort to produce a text that defies the archive's foreclosure of black intimacy. We can extend this connection by

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[82] Sarah Haley, "Intimate Historical Practice." *The Journal of African American History* (Winter 2021): 106.
[83] Ibid.

thinking about the forms of creative risk that Nash suggests black feminists assume in their construction of "beautiful writing." If black feminists must necessarily seek out innovative forms and moving prose to dignify black women's proximity to loss (and loss's proximity to beauty), then we might conclude that in writing accounts that seem to defy the boundaries of the archive—that get "too close" to her subjects"—Hartman is consciously opening herself up to the accusations of projection, over-identification, and ahistorical fantasy leveraged against her by her critics. The confusion, the disorientation, the feeling that *Wayward Lives* doesn't-totally-make-sense is exactly the point.

Now that I have established the importance of *fantasy* in Hartman's approach to historical writing, I want to think about how the critical performance of fantasy-work that Hartman practices in *Wayward Lives* might serve as a potential model for a queer historicism attuned to the definition of queerness I set out in chapter one, as a disruption of fantasies and attachments to fantasies of the good life. My interest in *Wayward Lives as* a model for *queer* historicism, specifically, emerges within the long-standing critiques of Queer Studies as a multicultural, universalizing project, as well as critiques of historicisms that (maybe *because of* its careful attention to desire and identification) fixates on a view of history as a perpetual problem of irrecoverability. The latter critique has been developed substantively by Stephen Best in his description of what he calls "melancholy historicism." A dominant paradigm of cultural criticism in American Studies, Queer Studies, and Black Studies, melancholy historicism promotes the idea that the study of history is "at its core a fundamentally redemptive enterprise."[84] Organized around a view of the archive as a site of loss, injury, and pain that reverberates into the present,

[84] Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, and Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 12.

the task of the historian is imagined as an ethical responsibility to bear witness to these loses, to dwell on the impossibility of truly knowing the past, despite the non-negotiable assumption that the past is also the present. The danger of this view of history is that it can produce an uncomplicated sense of continuity between the struggles of past generations and the people who live today.

Best identifies this tendency squarely in Hartman's work in *Lose Your Mother* and "Venus in Two Acts." (Best's *None Like Us* came out before the publication of *Wayward Lives*.) Hartman's insistence on laying bare her "personal investment" in her subjects, lavishing in "the sense of being empathetically connected to the lives of those about whom she wishes to write," promotes a vision of the subject and scholar as mutually imbricated in one another.[85] While Hartman qualifies her attachment to her subjects as conditioned by their unknowability, the effect of this affective view of history is to promote a sense of affinity that, for Best, is "barely to be distinguished from the sense of community across time," or the production of a "we" between past and present that uncomplicatedly assumes shared identity.[86] As a corrective to this paradigm, Best suggests a historicism that "accepts the past's turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it," reframing "the jolt of the archive—its refusal its rebuff—as a call to sacrifice, seeing no reason not to put such failure to some use."[87] Rather than valiantly riding out to redeem those lost to history by attending to the pain of such loss, such a historicism would begin with the *denial* of such fantasies as an ethical precondition for inquiry.

In many ways, I agree with Best on the dangers of this kind of historicism. I think we see this today in the constitution of queerness through claims to a transhistorical "we." Queer is

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[85] Best, *None Like Us*, 19.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid. 20.

sometimes constituted through claims to cross-racial and cross-gender, if not cross-planetary, alliance with deviants of all stripes, degrees, categories, and kinds. A more specific example of this might be the empty claims to cross-racial coalition made by white queers, grounded in an identification with figures like Marsha P. Johnson as queer ancestors. As C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn observe in their essay on "trans necropolitics," homonormative narratives of privileged queers as members of a cosmopolitan creative-class are often couched in claims to solidarity with trans people of color, though only retroactively, often in the wake of their murders at the hands of police, judicial and medical systems, and gentrification and exploitation.[88] In death, trans people of color become a form of capital that privileged queers can claim as their own to ease their gradual assimilation into neoliberal circuits of capital. At the same time, Afropessimist scholars have offered a rejoinder to analogizations of anti-queer violence with anti-black violence. "Queer, as a conceptual term…" Calvin Warren writes, "...inappropriately applies the position of 'object' and 'nothingness' to a structure of oppression," anti-queer oppression, while anti-blackness withholds black people from the position of the human altogether.[89] Indeed, melancholy historicism might be understood as one of the central fantasy complexes animating queer discourse today: the irrecoverability of queer heroes of all races, genders, sexualities, nations, ethnicities, and religions functions as the central loss organizing contemporary queer cosmopolitanism. Embedded in queer theory's attempts to think about oppression across the historically-constructed lines of identity, to ally itself with people

[88] C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn. "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and Trans of Color Afterlife," *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2nd Edition) (London: Routledge, 2013): 73.
[89] Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ*: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies 23, no. 3 (2017): 403.

who have suffered from distinct forms of oppression across time, there is a dangerous tendency of turning cross-historical engagement into another form of extraction.

And yet: despite the complications embedded in this fantasy of queerness as a site of cross-historical intermingling, I ultimately hold onto the idea of queer studies as a project committed to disentangling the fictions that divide us, that enable systems of exploitation, classification, punishment, and death. The question is, what does it look like to engage in a critical reassessment of the fantasies that uphold such systems while consciously denying one's own participation in the extraction of value from the suffering of others?

I turn to WL for answers. I locate in *Wayward Lives* a model of queer historicism that *performs* exactly the kind of fantasy-work described by Best (2018). *Wayward Lives* immerses the reader not only in Hartman's fantasies about her subjects, but the continual failure of these fantasies. Indeed, I argue that the text's performance reproduces a tension that I have already described: the persistence of fantasies of resistance, recuperation, connection, and mutual struggle in spite of their perpetual rebuke by the archive, and the transformation of our relationship to history through that process of failure and return. The feeling of doing such work, of engaging in this push and pull between hope and rejection that the archive inspires, is a feeling of exhaustion. Yet it is a form of exhaustion that Hartman nevertheless treats as productive, or as a legitimate starting point for writing history. It is my goal to show how *WL*'s construction *exhausts* the reader through the continual repetition and disruption of fantasies, thereby denying a triumphalist mode of historical recovery in favor of a playful embrace of rupture and unknowing.

Exhausting Fantasies

"Muses, drudges, washerwoman, whores, house workers, factory girls, waitresses, and aspiring but never-to-be stars make up this company, gather in the circle and fall into line where all particularity and distinction fade away," writes Hartman at the beginning of the final chapter of *Wayward Lives,* titled "The Chorus Opens the Way."[90] On the opposing page, there is a picture of a group of young girls, dressed in coats and hats, dancing on a sidewalk. The accompanying endnote says the title of the picture is *Young girls dancing the Charleston in Harlem in the 1920s*, photographer uncredited.[91] It is uncertain who the girls in the picture are. Hartman never gestures toward the photograph specifically. Their image simply exists alongside the text; the relationship between photo and text is their shared sense of anonymity. The young girls in the photo could stand in for any of the "muses, drudges, washerwoman, whores" invoked, or vice versa. The cruelty of this suggestion is what lends it its power. We see these girls as individuals and just as quickly they begin to recede behind classifications. The flash of individuality recedes behind type, and we dwell momentarily in this loss, a loss incited as quickly as its sting begins to fade.

"[A]n apt reckoning with historical experience ought to require a failure of short-circuiting of the redemptive function," Best suggests.[92] In turn, we might suggest that in the slipperiness of Hartman's subjects, their fading in and out of focus, and their elusive relationship to the normally solid category of "character" or "actor," *Wayward Lives* does not offer up redemption nor cast down the fantasy of it altogether, but plays at its edges. The illusion that her characters might take form and then continually fail to do so in the text moves past a polemical

[90] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 345.
[91] Ibid. 423.
[92] Best, *None Like Us*, 72.

rejection or valorization of recuperation, redress, and recovery. Instead, the aesthetic mode of *Wayward Lives* gets at the *feelings* of those things. Subjects appear, glimmer, and fade away. Even if they come back, we do not get the pleasure of staying with them. Whatever scenes the text sets for us, they just as quickly get pulled back. The text therefore not only "short-circuits" the possibility for redemption but also manipulates the possibility for identification. Where fantasies must repeat and elide difference in order to cohere, the repetition of these fantasies, in *Wayward Lives* continually introduces difference. Indeed, the text makes it structurally difficult to identify with any one of Hartman's characters. They regularly bleed into one another; they slip back into the chorus before we can ground ourselves in their presence.

At the same time, the exhaustion of fantasy proves to be incredibly *productive* for writing a different kind of history. Fantasies that support identity formation do indeed fail throughout *Wayward Lives*, yet that continual failure becomes, paradoxically, the means through which Hartman is able to generate narrative. In my discussion of the chapter on Mattie Nelson, I described how the text shuttles between a tone of objective authority and more epistemically humble writing, playing with the expectation that Hartman's descriptions of her subjects' actions, desires, and motivations are grounded in direct evidence from the historical record. The feelings generated by this formal tendency are only exacerbated by the separation between text and the citations, regaled to endnotes: momentary flashes of a real person's thoughts or feelings are repeatedly dashed by the absence of a record. I likened this to the experience of engaging in black feminist historiography itself. In the archive, possibilities of recovery flash in brief encounters with the traces of Black women's struggle. But more often than not, those traces lead nowhere. It is up to the historian to wrestle from the scant information that actually tells her anything about what their lives could have been like.

The archive deindividuates. A person becomes a category, an image, a trace that excites the fantasies of the mind, all the possibilities of what they could have been based on the very little the archive lets on. *Wayward Lives* mimes this deindividuation. Hartman wields the same archival functions of classification, categorization, typification, and generalization to produce her accounts of her subjects. She repeatedly invokes the voices of well-known poets, critics, scholars, and thinkers to "speak" on the circumstances faced by her subjects, a polyvocal technique that she refers to as "the chorus." The "Cast of Characters" at the beginning of *Wayward Lives* provides the following definition for this chorus: "All the unnamed young women of the city trying to find a way to live and in search of beauty."[93] Although it may seem counterintuitive to wrap all of the young women she finds in the archive into one collective "we"—and to group them along with well-known figures like Gwendolyn Brooks, Bessie Smith, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Audre Lorde, whose words are invoked to voice this "chorus"—the abstraction achieved through the chorus plays a crucial role in extending the critical performance I described in the last section. It enables Hartman to fold this trick of the archive into the reader's experience of the text, its pull between inspiration and disappointment, astonishment and misery. Because we can only know these girls through generalization, generalization becomes a way to speak on their lives without pretending their absence can be reconciled.

Esther Brown, for instance, only appears through statements about what she did *not* do. "Esther Brown did not write a political trace on the refusal to be governed, or draft a plan for mutual aid or outline a memoir of her sexual adventures," Hartman writes.[94] Interspersed throughout these non-descriptions are excerpts from things others did do, like from Emma

[93] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xvii.
[94] Ibid. 229.

Goldman, whose essay "Anarchism: What It Really Stands For" is cited as an example of the "ruminations on freedom" that Brown "didn't commit to paper:" "*With human nature caged in a narrow space, whipped daily into submission, how can we speak of potentialities?*"[95] The colon that connects Brown's non-action to Goldman's writing ("ruminations on freedom: "*With human*…") generates plausible deniability. Hartman seems to attribute this quote to Brown, words she did think, yet the sentence's construction carefully withholds confirmation. The invocation of the chorus effectively creates a profile written back into negative space. Between the existence of Esther Brown, the real person, and the words of the chorus, an imagined Brown begins to appear, constructed in the reflection of these archetypes of radical resistance: anarchist philosopher, militant queer, truant saint, glamorous outlaw. She becomes known to us only through these projections of other people's actions and generalized ideas of resistance onto her real person; the Esther Brown contained in *Wayward Lives* is not the real person, but a phantom of her. The text qualifies any implication that this profile is anything other than speculation: "did not," we are reminded. The fantasy lingers instead.

The chorus is an outgrowth of Hartman's long standing examination of historical fantasies (including her own), as she describes in one of the first chapters, "A Minor Figure." Hartman discusses her initial adventures into the archive as she began to write *Wayward Lives*. Like in *Lose Your Mother* and "Venus in Two Acts," she offers a confession about the ideal that figured in her mind at the beginning of her project. "I had been searching for photographs unequivocal in their representation of what it meant to live free for the second and third generations born after the official end of slavery," Hartman writes; "I searched for photographs exemplary of the beauty and possibility cultivated in the lives of ordinary black girls and young

[95] Ibid.

women and that stoked dreams of what might be possible if you could escape the house of bondage."[96] "But they failed to appear."[97] Despite pouring over thousands of photographs, they *fail* to yield any direct evidence of the wild, free, and sexually vicarious lives that Hartman is looking for.

Instead, she begins to experience something that could be described—not to resort to a Morrisonian cliché—as a kind of haunting. After encountering one particular image, a portrait of a young girl, naked, taken by the painter Thomas Eakins, she begins to search for her image throughout the archives, hoping to confirm her identity. In this desperate search to recover the identity of this girl, to render her existence in proof beyond her reduction in this horrific image, Hartman ends up seeing her everywhere she looks. "I spotted her everywhere—on the corner, in the cabaret, on the boardwalk at Coney Island, in the chorus; sometimes I failed to notice her," she writes.[98] The perpetual failure of her search begins to shift into something stranger: the idea of recuperation dissipates outward into a kind of archival psychosis, where figures appear and disappear where they are not, where the subject at-large lurks behind every anonymous figure.

"I grew weary," Hartman writes at one point.[99] What she describes here is the kind of tension that I have suggested *Wayward Lives* enacts for the reader. The fantasies we bring to the archive are sparked by chance encounters, they fail miserably, and yet we keep searching for remnants in the aftermath; subjects appear, disappear, and we catch sight of them out of the corner of our eye; we connect and fail to connect, we are rebuked and come back, again and again.

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[96] Ibid. 17.
[97] Ibid. 18.
[98] Ibid. 33.
[99] Ibid. 19.

As a piece of "beautiful writing," we might understand *Wayward Lives* as including the reader in this pull of astonishment and exhaustion produced through the failure of the fantasies we bring to history. In one sense, this effect is achieved through the surprising and disorienting exploitation of grammatical moods and the sequencing of information that I have already described. We can see this as early as the very first lines of *Wayward Lives*, in the "Note on Method" that I referred to earlier. Though it would seem like this passage precedes the "beautiful experiment" of *Wayward Lives*—being placed before the "Cast of Characters" where Hartman introduces the figures who can be found throughout the text—closer inspection reveals that Hartman's attempt to shift the ground beneath us has already begun:

> At the turn of the twentieth century, young black women were in open rebellion. They struggled to create autonomous and beautiful lives, to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting them, and to live as if they were free.[100]

The use of past indicative ("were," "struggled") opens the project with a contradiction that now seems quite evident: the affirmative, even celebratory quality of Hartman's statements about young black women being in "open rebellion" defiantly clashes with the silences of the historical record. As Hartman addresses in the "Note," there are few records that speak to the ordinary practices, dreams, and wishes of young black women living at the turn of the twentieth century. But here, she assumes the voices of authority commonly associated with the discipline of history. In doing so, she grants her subjects the commanding, grandiose air usually reserved for those who ascend to the status of historical actor. If *Wayward Lives* is an exercise in fantasy-work, as scenes where desires are enacted, then the opening lines set the scene. They stage the text as a place where the limitations of the archive will not only be defied by playfully suspended. This

[100] Ibid. xiii.

forceful articulation of young black women as pioneering rebels—period—performs for the reader a different take on history, one that will run up against the suffocating regime of empiricism throughout the text.

In another sense, *Wayward Lives* immerses its readers into the exhaustion of fantasy because it is, quite simply, rather repetitive. Again, it is reasonable for the subjunctive, the speculative wonderings after the lives of her subjects, the disorienting mixture of affirmative and inquisitive tones, and the disjointed invocations of the chorus to substantiate the portraits of subjects who we know little about. But Hartman also extends this same method to "major" figures as well. Consider, for instance, her chapter on W.E.B. DuBois. As Hartman recalls DuBois's sociological studies of Philadelphia's Seventh Ward, her prose approaches that of an inventory or catalog. She lists the unending avalanche of problems that DuBois suggested were to blame for the poverty faced by free black people living in northern cities—the longer the list runs, the more each problem seems to be both non-specific and arbitrary:

> Poverty, crime, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of decent affordable housing, and broken families… the lax morals, promiscuity, children born out of wedlock, and the disregard of marriage for the social crisis or revolution of black intimate life that was taking place in the slum… He blamed the plantation and the city… The casual liaisons, transient marriages, and households that failed to conform to pattern daddy-mommy-child disturbed him; unwed mothers raising children; same-sex households; female breadwinners; families composed of siblings, aunts and children; households blending kin and strangers; serial marriages…[101]

It goes on. Keep in mind, this catalog of social ills is not traced to any one of DuBois's writings (i.e., no direct citation). The young sociologist's gaze parrots the classificatory voice of the archive; as such, the enumeration of wrongs turns into an indictment of the puritanical DuBois,

[101] Ibid. 90.

"guilty Victorian" he is.[102] But if Hartman's imagination of DuBois's reform-minded consciousness (his magical ability to find no limit to the faults in others) indicates the limits of his own sexual frustrations, his own projections of his traumas, repressions, and intellectual deficiencies onto the people of Philadelphia, Hartman might also be indicting herself in this move, as well. There is seemingly no end to the lists upon lists of generalities Hartman invokes. The "anarchy of colored girls" takes on any number of forms: "treason en masse, tumult, gathering together, the mutual collaboration required to confront the prison authorities…"[103] In any one scene, the people in the surrounding neighborhood think about "searching for the mother they would never find, wondering what happened to their uncle, was their sister dead, and was it true that someone had seen two of their brothers as far north as Philadelphia?"[104] And wayward comes to mean many, many things: "errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild."[105]

In the preface to the 2022 edition of *Scenes*, Hartman considers her own prose in the original text: "I am struck by the breathlessness of the prose, by its ardent desire to say it all, to say everything at once. If it were possible, I might have written it as a 345-page long sentence."[106] I imagine that the same can be said for the abundance of these list-like descriptions in *Wayward Lives*. The language that Hartman can use to describe her subjects is necessarily limited. Her tendency to write in dense catalogs only reasserts how her portraits are ultimately approximations. She is bound as much to the language of type as much as she tries to defy it. The same can be said of DuBois, or at least Hartman's rendering of DuBois. Which makes all the

[102] Ibid. 120.
[103] Ibid. 285.
[104] Ibid. 143.
[105] Ibid. 227.
[106] Hartman, *Scenes*, 5.

more curious his own dissolution into the deindividuated space occupied by the chorus. In what I find to be one of the most stunning passages in *WL,* DuBois himself becomes the subject of Hartman's close narration. Detailing DuBois's continual return in his writing to his first sexual encounter when he was a young schoolteacher—an encounter that, late in his life, he would reflect on as an instance of rape—Hartman seems to find in DuBois's condescension toward the sexual proclivities of his subjects a personal, deep sense of sexual shame. It is a compelling portrait precisely because it removes the presumption of objective authority assigned to DuBois-the-sociologist; what remains are his own projections and fantasies. And, like Hartman, we watch as he speculates, projects, typifies, classifies, and ultimately fails to arrive at a full picture through these types.

Subjecting DuBois to the same kind of close narrative speculation as her other subjects, the effect is to make DuBois one more desiring individual among the chorus, one whose particular desires, motivations, and intentions were buried not through the construction of the archive by others, but by an archive that he himself constructed. At the same time that DuBois finds a place among Hartman's other subjects, however, there is a degree to which Hartman's deconstruction of the inadequacy of the types that DuBois applies to others doubles back onto Hartman. Both ultimately come up against the limited language that systems of classification afford for describing the complexity of antiblack violence they write into; both find themselves grappling with the fantasies that animate their return to their subjects. In a way, I want to suggest that *Hartman's writing on DuBois is itself a performance of the failure of identification:* DuBois's own failed identifications with his subject as well as Hartman's own dis/identification with DuBois as a scholar whose subjects rebuke his fantasies about them.

I have tried to advance a reading of *Wayward Lives* that replaces skepticism toward the non-fictional status of Hartman's text—couched in neat divisions between history and literature, fact and fiction, good and bad feelings—with an emphasis instead on authorial performance. I have read *Wayward Lives* as a performance of the exhaustion of fantasies about history in the face of the archive, and a text that centers staying with the failure of these fantasies as a legitimate form of knowledge production, as a queer historicism. I have traced the disorienting feelings that emerge from the structure of *Wayward Lives*: it's shifting between tones of authority and humility, it's deindividuation of its characters, its repetition of language that fails to fully capture what it desires and constantly pulls us out of the text. I suggested such feelings can be read as coextensive with Hartman's examination of the archive as a site of present-day projection, identification, and desire.

The aesthetic mode of *Wayward Lives* is less about constructing authentic portraits of real people, and more about staying committed to the task of dignifying the people lost, injured, and erased by history, even as our attempts to do so are overdetermined by our own desires for them and their irrecoverability. I suggested that *Wayward Lives* marks a departure from other modes of queer melancholic historicism precisely because it embraces the past's discontinuity with the present. Yet the dynamic aesthetic mode of *Wayward Lives* allows Hartman to construct a narrative that turns discontinuity, rupture, and irrecoverability into something generative. Rupture is not the endpoint of inquiry in *Wayward lives* but its beginning. Therefore, I point to *Wayward Lives* s a potential model for a new queer historicism. Short-circuiting the extractive relationship that finds its way into melancholic historicisms of today, Hartman achieves a new queer historicism that stays with the exhaustion of our fantasies as the starting point for rearranging, not only our own relationships to history, but history itself.

Coda: Are You My Archive?

In the summer of 2021, I spent a week visiting two archives: Queer Archive Work in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Sexual Minorities Archive in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Two months before, I had defended the prospectus for this dissertation, and—following the advice of my committee, family, and other trusted advisors—spent the weeks afterward sunbathing, hiking, visiting friends from college, and altogether trying to not think about the project that would consume the next three years of my life. Admittedly, it was a relief not to think about it. In constructing the prospectus, I knew that what I was laying out was less a concrete path for an academic project and more an aspirational statement of ideas—a cloud of darts thrown in the general direction of a desired career in queer and literary studies, in the hopes that something would stick. Some things I knew for certain. I knew I wanted to write about *Paul*. I knew, too, that I wanted to write about *Wayward Lives*. And I knew, in very general terms, that I wanted to write something that would clear a space for myself, though I hardly knew what that space was shaped like. I still had a very shaky grasp of what queer studies was to begin with, or what it meant to "do" queer literary studies. I would hold onto these two texts as lampposts; unpacking the feelings they generated in me would itself prove the major task of writing this project, a task that would slowly take shape, a year later, as I was knee-deep in my Sisyphean attempt to teach myself everything ever said about queer theory. Anticipating the confusion that would consume me as soon as I started reading/writing, while writing the prospectus, I submitted a grant application to fund a trip to the aforementioned archives, under the pretense of doing exploratory, early dissertation research. Such research, I figured, would give me a chance to immerse myself in the real, on-the-grounds "work" happening in queer communities outside the academy, an insight into the flesh-and-bones world from which the field I would try to learn

everything about was but merely an intellectual simulation. Imagine my surprise when, at the start of my summer of rest and relaxation, I got the grant. The University of Virginia handed me a few hundred dollars, effectively telling me, *Time to figure out what you're talking about.*

And so I went to the archives. I did not figure out what I was talking about, of course, and would not for a long time after. (The jury is still out!)

I did not have a clear sense of what I was looking for—only that I wanted a revelation, a grand epiphany, confetti, angelic horns! I poured over everything I could get my hands on: zines, self-published poetry, pamphlets, posters, erotica, the records of activists and activist organizations, personal correspondence. I found myself captivated by the extent of other peoples' creativity, and yet their ingenious experiments with language, political organizing became—quite narcissistically—a source of self-consciousness. Here I was, seeking to connect to a history of radical struggle, wanting a place in it. And yet because of this want I knew in some ways it was not mine. I sulked away from this trip with hundreds of photos of exciting documents, a notebook full of observations, and no real thoughts to make of what I encountered.

For what reasons do queer critics make claims on different histories as queer histories? What is the effect of claiming divergent histories of racialization, un/gendering, dispossession, and exploitation within the political and ethical imaginaries that constitute contemporary queer identity, art- and space-making, organizing, community-building? Who benefits from making such claims? In the years (!) since this trip to the archive I rationalize it as my own confrontation with what Matt Brim calls the "aspirational mood" of queer studies.[107] The field coheres around and rewards an aspirational model of professionalization: what accrues prestige, what looks

[107] Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 85.

good, aspiring to write, think, and act like people at the top of the profession (i.e., in positions of professional advantage, security, influence) takes precedence over learning to think and act for oneself with intention and purpose. I turned to the archive because that is what I thought I needed to do. I brought to it aspirations that exceed any single professional endpoint; what I really wanted was to transform myself through my interaction with the archive, to absorb other histories into myself and become something else through this interaction.

I remain conscious of the fact that in connecting my own critical project to Hartman's, in making *Wayward Lives* stand in for my own attempt to realize queer literary studies, I am, in some ways, extracting value via proximity to Hartman's illustrious career, her might as a thinker and writer, and sublimating that to my own ends. Whether or not I am doing my due diligence to break away rather than benefit from anti-black desires for proximity to blackness, for staking my livelihood on the critical and aesthetic production of black writers, is, I would hope, an open-ended question. Only time will tell. In the meantime, I take from Hartman a valuable lesson, one which I have tried to chart and tentatively enact here and throughout this dissertation: unpacking the fantasies that we bring to the study of history—including literary studies—is a precondition of enacting the queer aspiration to undo our histories.

CODA

Trauma's Generic Excess

Do queer theorists still not like sex? In "No Sex Please, We're American," Tim Dean, rifting on the famous first line of Leo Bersani's "Is The Rectum a Grave?," reformulates Bersani's suggestion that most people don't like sex, making it a tad more specific: "There is an open secret about sex: most queer theorists don't like it."[1] Writing in 2015, Dean takes a retrospective of the past thirty years of Queer Studies scholarship and finds a dearth of writing about Queer studies' original "object of study."[2] In the thirty years since Gayle Rubin first introduced the project of Queer studies in her influential essay "Thinking Sex," Dean argues, *American* Queer studies scholarship in particular has largely avoided doing just that. U.S.-based Queer studies, he claims, does not think about sex. Dean earmarks this aversion to sex by contrasting it to the expansion of Queer Studies to include analyses once beyond its pale. While analyses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, nation, Indigeneity, and disability now find relative acceptance within the field, the efforts of generations of scholars to expand the terms of what constitutes *queer study* seems to have coincided with the abandonment of sex. The objects that critics once (and maybe still do) constitute queer theory's outside have strangely been given much more attention, and considerable energy has been dedicated to recuperating them as queer critical objects, than sex itself. Perhaps, Dean argues, "[t]here is something about sex–understood

[1] Tim Dean, "No Sex Please, We're American," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 614.
[2] Dean, "No Sex," 614.

not as anatomical difference but as erotic practice–that many scholars in Queer studies find oddly aversive."[3] Such an aversion may have to do Queer studies' ongoing bias toward American scholarship, its conflation with American studies, and the widespread acceptance of the United States as the basis of a universalized analysis for queer critical extrapolations about sexuality writ large.

I disagree with some elements of Dean's argument in "No Sex Please." I hesitate, for instance, about him drawing a teleology that enables Queer Studies to "abandon" sex, what he calls the field's "originary object,"[4] in the first place. Dean positions Rubin as the sole originator of the project of Queer Studies in order to justify his own imagined futures for the field and his present frustration toward its preoccupations. Although there is very little reason to argue against Rubin's tremendous influence on academic Queer studies, to assert her analysis of sex as the foundation of queer critical thought reasserts the very disciplinary, institutional, and geographic boundaries around what constitutes queer critique that Dean intends to critique.

However, I do think Dean's critique should lead queer theorists to seriously consider how Queer Studies' institutionalization in the United States has shaped the priorities of the field with regards to erotic practices in particular. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, whose jointly-authored *Sex, or the Unbearable* is an object of critique in Dean's essay, respond to Dean's accusation that queer theory has abandoned sex with what I take to be an accurate rebuttal: queer theory has not stopped thinking about sex so much as it has problematized what sex is supposed to mean.[5] Queer theory may look inattentive to sex only because it has developed by complicating the neat

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[3] Ibid. 615.
[4] Dean, "No Sex Please," 615.
[5] Berlant, Lauren and Lee Edelman, "Reading, Sex, and the Unbearable: A Response to Tim Dean," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 626.

categorization of the sexual from the nonsexual that Dean's career-long commitment to the negativity in "sex" proper holds so dear.

But if queer theory has done an adequate job of problematizing the discrete categorization of practices into the epistemic box of sex, American politics has jerked sex in the other direction. For all of queer theory's successes within and beyond the academy in shaping discourse around gender, sexuality, and liberation, Queer Studies' institutionalization in the U.S. academy has coincided with an unimpeachable galvanization of sex–meaning sexual acts–as a category upon which American nation-building now desperately depends. Sex, through an awe-inspiring expansion of juridical, political, technological, and cultural apparatuses organized around its criminalization, *gained new solidity* even as queer theorists labored to destabilize essentialized categories of gender and sexuality. Rather than losing its place in the Symbolic through a gradual dissolution of its clearly-defined boundaries, sex has only become *more* discreet, or identifiable as a thing called sex. Sex is more recognizable than it was before because of an unprecedented multiplication of technologies created to identify it. The time of queer theory has inarguably coincided with sex's ascendance in significance within the perpetuation of empire and the reproduction of surplus subjectivities.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued alongside other scholars that the transition to late capitalism entails a shift in the modes of subjection, including the production of subjects as desiring subjects, and the politicization and incorporation of sexual identity into the nation-state. For the most part, the historical argument of this dissertation–that desire does indeed take on certain forms, socially, psychically, and aesthetically, that correspond to the conditions of *late* capitalism–has been elaborated through demonstration of psychopolitical structures that are patterned across contemporary queer American fiction. Occasionally, I've supplemented this

analysis with references to the civic incorporation of gay, lesbian, queer, gender non-conforming, and trans subjectivities into capital and empire, and the anxieties and forms of critique that has inspired.

Frankly, I did the hard work first. Looking at the psychopolitics of (post)queer American fiction was essential for demonstrating how *desire* has gained new significance in the period of late capitalism. On the question of *sex*, however, I think the path is a little easier. The American legal system mostly does the work for me.

In the mid-1980s, capitalism began to finalize its hegemony as a world-system, Reagan's and Thatcher's neoliberal modes of governance were in full swing, AIDS ushered along a dramatic reconstitution of morality, ethics, material subsistence, and the meaning of interdependence, and figures like Rubin and Leo Bersani were revitalizing critical attention to the politics of sex through a concerted effort to break away from the heterosexist and gender essentialist assumptions of some feminist and Marxist theory. Sex also underwent a period of intense Symbolic reorganization through its articulation in American politics, culture, and law. Particularly through intensified attention to and criminalization of sexual violence, sex functioned as a privileged object with unprecedented expansions of mass incarceration, surveillance, and policing, reconfiguration of racialized ideas of childhood, innocence, and mental and emotional health, and insurgent grasps at respectability and normality from within gay, lesbian, and trans communities at the expense of pathologized others. Sexual politics, feminism, trans theory, and queer theory found themselves coming up alongside a specter that would serve as the whipping post against which the American empire would reconstitute its moral-political-legal paradigms well into the twenty-first century: the sex offender.

Intensified identification, classification, and regulation of sexual activity in American law is thoroughly examined in David Halperin and Trevor Hoppe's collection *The War on Sex*. Featuring essays from academics in university departments of sociology, law, history, and women, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as journalists, lawyers, and activists, *The War on Sex* offers an exacting and chilling account of the fervency with which American politicians, state agencies, and other actors have sought to eradicate people from social life through the criminalization of sexual and sex-adjacent acts. The essays include compelling analyses of the criminalization of sex work and HIV transmission in particular. For the purposes of this coda, though, I will only briefly engage with some of the writing that covers the formation of the archetypal figure of abjection in the contemporary United States, the sex offender.

The first sex offender registry in the United States was instituted in California in 1947. The idea of the "sex offender" as a particularly dangerous, pathological deviant takes form in a series of moral panics in the years surrounding World War II that warned against the "sexual psychopath." The Miller Law, enacted in the District of Columbia in 1948, made it so that any person convicted of a sex-related crime—including consensual gay sex—could be involuntarily detained in a psychiatric institution for up to twenty years. The formalization of the pathological sex criminal in law, and the severity with which such criminals were treated, paved the way for a widespread expansion both in the severity of punishments for sex-based offenses and, more broadly, the use of extralegal force to detain people considered to be dangerous or mentally-ill for indeterminate periods of time against their will. "Between 1937 and 1967, twenty-six states passed 'sexual psychopath' laws that authorized the indefinite detention of sex offenders, many

of them gay men, in state hospitals," Scott De Orio writes.[6] In many cases, it became unnecessary for people to even be convicted of a crime to be detained under the expanded jurisdiction of the police and state hospitals. The formation of the sexual psychopath as a pathological/medicalized category led to the expanded criminalization of non-normative sex and, at the same time, allowed medical and juridical institutions greater discretion in removing people from society. As Regina Kunzel writes, "[r]emoving the language and apparatus of criminalization at once erased and facilitated the enlargement of the scope of the law and expanded powers of the state."[7]

In the later twentieth century, gay liberation politics and its legacies began to intersect with the growing neoliberal and New Right moral consensus. Liberal gay activists played a minor but not insignificant role in the reformation of the sex offender registry as it exists in its current form today. Around the same time that conservatives were generating moral panics about the dangers of homosexuality, pedophilia, and serial rapists, gay activists were pushing for the depathologization of homosexuality in the DSM-III. Eve Sedgwick and Jules Gill-Peterson have both described how gay activists advocated for the depathologization of homosexuality by insisting that mature, gender-conforming gay male adults were a separate breed than gender non-conforming people, particularly gender non-conforming and trans children.[8] In a similar vein, gay and lesbian activists fought to disarticulate homosexuality from other sex deviants like rapists and pedophiles. Some gay activists in California were willing to endorse conservative

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[6] Scott De Orio, "The Creation of the Modern Sex Offender," in *The War on Sex,* eds. David M. Halperin and Trevor Hoppe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 249-250.
[7] Regina Kunzel, "Sex Panic, Psychiatry, and the Expansion of the Carceral State," in *The War on Sex*, eds. David M. Halperin and Trevor Hoppe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 234.
[8] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 154-164; and Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

efforts to spearhead "a campaign to make the registry entail much harsher punishments than it did before" in exchange for the decriminalization of "victimless crimes" like public indecency and lessened policing in gay neighborhoods and establishments.[9] In this instance, the trade-off for less juridical force upon certain gay communities was the institution of a sex offender's presence on the registry as a life sentence.

Which is not to say that liberal gay activists are to blame for the current legal system. De Orio rightly cautions against attributing too much influence to gay activists in these developments. Their advocacy played a relatively minor role in much larger trends, galvanized by the rise of the New Right, toward intensified criminal punishments across the border and the rapid expansion of prison populations.[10] Gay activists concede to the pressures placed on them by the far-right largely to avoid the social, legal, and material ramifications of the far-right's associations between queer people and child molesters. However, gay activists were not monolithic in their support of these reforms. The interests of gay activists seeking protection within the American penal system trumped a minority of feminists and queers seeking the abolition of the registry. The strategic concessions made over the course of late-twentieth century gay politics have undoubtedly been formative in the ways queer, trans, and feminist politics positions itself vis-a-vis the ever-growing mass of people who are classified as sex criminals in the early twenty-first century. Molestation and grooming panics also continue to plague queer and trans people in the contemporary United States, with rhetoric that mirrors almost exactly the panics of the 2000s, and 1990s, and 1980s, and 1970s. It is right to wonder whether those concessions in the moment ultimately long-term consequences for the ability of trans had, queer,

[9] De Orio, "Creation," 248.
[10] Ibid.

and feminist politics to mobilize against the expanded powers of an increasingly conservative state bringing its hammer down upon people through the vector of sex in particular.

In the contemporary United States, sex functions as an exception from the main principle of rational law: that punishment of a crime should be bound to a finite period of time. In his introduction to The War on Sex, Halperin conveys the sheerly carnivalesque brutality with which sex-based offenses are identified, persecuted, and punished. He cites the case of Daniel Entique Guevara-Vilca, who, convicted of possession of child pornography in Florida, was sentenced to 454 consecutive life sentences.[11] Such extreme punishments are not reserved only for people convicted of child sexual abuse-related crimes, Halperin notes. They also extend broadly to any instance where sex intersects with the law. In 2008, Willie Campbell was sentenced by a Florida court to thirty-five years in prison (a sentence which, as of March 2024, he is still serving) for spitting at a police officer while being HIV-positive.[12] Adolescents have also been registered as sex offenders for exchanging nude photos of themselves with other adolescents. "A quarter of convicted sex offenders," in fact, Judith Levine notes, "are minors, eleven to sixteen years old; 16 percent are under twelve."[13]

For Halperin, the expanded criminalization of sex exists within "all-out war on sex that permanently identifies sex itself with danger and with potential or actual harm."[14] Some historical developments have led people to believe that we are in a time of "sex emancipation:" widespread availability of contraception and access to abortion (which now, after the repeal of

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[11] David M. Halperin, "Introduction: The War on Sed," in *The War on Sex*, eds. David M. Halperin and Trevor Hoppe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 22.
[12] Halperin, "Introduction," 23-24.
[13] Judith Levine, "Sympathy for the Devil: Why Progressives Haven't Helped the Sex Offender, Why They Should, and How They Can," in *The War on Sex*, eds. David M. Halperin and Trevor Hoppe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 153.
[14] Halperin, "Introduction," 4.

Roe v. Wade, is in sharp regress), decriminalization of sodomy and other forms of non-genital sex, a technological explosion in the amateur porn industry and the availability of porn and sex over the internet, loosened tensions regarding nudity and even sexual intercourse in media, and the legalization of gay marriage. But this has also been accompanied by a growing conservatism toward the place of sex in public life. Halperin points to the national campaign against publicly-funded access to abortion and contraception, as well as "widening and diversifying opposition to sex education in schools," "a series of panics over sex crimes and sexual predators," new restrictions on access to pornography, "an expansion of the populations whose sexual behavior falls under state or bureaucratic control," a new consensus against human trafficking that has "often targeted all forms of commercial sex instead of focusing on forced prostitution, labor exploitation, coerced work, and other forms of trafficking," and "an explosion in the number of registered sex offenders, with a 35 percent increase from 2005 to 2013, by a conservative measure."[15] As of December 7, 2015, there were 843,680 registered sex offenders in the United States, which, Halperin notes, is "more than the entire population of states like North Dakota, Wyoming, or Alaska."[16] A narrative about growing sexual *freedom*–a neoliberal narrative by all means[17]–has diverted attention from "a less familiar but equally important story about the new war on sex, a war that in recent years has intensified in scope and cruelty."[18]

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[15] Ibid. 6-7.
[16] Ibid. 13.
[17] The expansion of the sex war in Europe and the United States is an expression of what Bernard Harcourt calls "neoliberal penalty." Halperin, citing Harcourt: "As the state retreats from regulation of the market, it vastly expands into other realms of regulation, control, and punishment, 'passing new criminal statutes and wielding the penal sanction more liberally because that is where administration is necessary, that is where the State can legitimately act, that is the proper sphere of governing.'" Halperin 10. See also Bernard Harcourt, "Neoliberal Penality: A Brief Genealogy," *Theoretical Criminology* 14, no. 1 (2010): 4.
[18] Halperin, "Introduction," 9.

We can see how the war on sex also organizes sexual politics beyond the law. Early-age education and the infantile health industry have boomed over the past few decades in part because of turn-of-the-millennium fears regarding the potential for children to become violent, pathological abusers, killers, or "super-predators" if they do not receive adequate emotional support and moral development from an early age. A hypervigilant focus on the psychopathology of individual children has taken economic and cultural precedent over approaches that would address social problems in the first place, such as gun control or better funding for public schools, welfare programs, and the arts. We could also just as easily trace the war on sex through the discourse on sexual violence, harassment, and abuse during the #MeToo movement in the early 2010s. There remain strains of statist, carceral feminism that link sexual violence to its resolution in the state, and call for the expansion of disciplinary institutions that identify sex offenders and remove them from civic life.

But before we get too close to what would just be a queer theoretical form of crying "cancel culture!," we should reconsider some of queer theory's foundational insights about the significance of sexual activity. On this point I find some additional agreement with Dean. For psychoanalytically-informed queer theorists, sex, Dean observes, continues to occupy an important position as a site of the self's undoing. Theorists who have appeared throughout this dissertation like Bobby Benedicto, Amber Jamilla Musser, Jennifer Nash, and Lee Edelman have taken up jouissance, for instance, as a potentially self-reconstituting experience that is accessed through eroticism as a mysterious realm of experience where the self is both made and undone. Queer theorists regularly suggest that eroticism and sex have a certain quality that make them more central to our identities, and perhaps more threatening to them, than other kinds of experience. Would queer theory potentially agree, then, that sexual violence is a particularly

exceptional form of violence—that sexual violence does more psychic and physical harm to the self and the body than we would necessarily equate with other forms of violence?

I wonder if queer theory's aversion to the sex offender as a figure may in fact be the result of its inability to parse the exceptional status it assigns to sexual activity (the centrality of the erotic, desire, and sexuality to identity) and the exceptional status of sex-based offenses in the law. De Orio suggests that contemporary queer theory should draw on the lessons of activists in the 1970s who did call for the abolition of the registry. Those activists pointed out that "sex offender registration illogically singles out *sex* crimes as deserving of exceptionally stigmatizing punishment," and that the abuse of women and children would not be solved through the incarceration of abusers but represented "social problems whose root cause was not deviant individuals but women's and children's systematic dependence on men in the institution of the family."[19]

The latter point on *dependence* strikes me as a particularly effective strategy. Making the case for welfare mechanisms or policy changes that would grant women and children a greater degree of financial independence, enable alternative social formations away from the family (cite Lewis), and strengthen the viability of innovative networks of genuine interdependence that queers, women, and children have struggled to develop on the margins of the state's valorization of the family unit, may indeed be actionable precisely because of the forced scarcity of late capitalism, inspiring broad social support. If such advocacy could be articulated in correspondence with a critique of the inefficacy of the sex offender registry at actually preventing violence, queer theory may actually get somewhere. But this does not answer the question of sex's exceptionality that psychoanalytic forms of queer theory have rightly raised. At

[19] De Orio, "Creation," 249.

best De Orio's quite clever strategic suggestion would displace the Symbolic significance assigned to sexual violence through diminishing its privileged place in the law. At worst it would only defer a confrontation with the radical negative force of sexual violence as a specter upon which the rational, linguistic, Symbolic order of the law must necessarily inflect tremendous resistance in order to preserve the subject at its center. "Sex remains exceptional in U.S. jurisprudence"[20] as it does in U.S. queer theory.

Psychoanalytic, materialist, and Foucauldian strains of queer theory thus might run aground precisely on this question of the psychopolitical significance of sexual violence. This is not to say, of course, that any form of queer theory worth the name would ever align itself with mass incarceration. What I am more so trying to point out is that queer theory currently lacks a language for holding together the exceptional violence of sexual violence to the subject and the imperative to resist criminalization, abolish prisons, reconstitute understandings of justice, and–a point that I have elevated as of central concern for queer theory–disarticulating the moral evaluation of people as virtuous from political struggle toward just and fair systems for the organization and management of life. Is there something exceptional about sexual violence that merits, even in a just society, intensive punishment?

In a brief and tentative elaboration of these questions, I will turn to Bruce Norris's *Downstate*. Downstate is not a work of postqueer fiction, in the sense that it is not a work of fiction that comes out of critical, political, and artistic LGBTQ+ communities and traditions grappling with the role of gender and sexuality within leftist politics. However, it is, I would argue, a work of *queer* fiction/drama, in the terms of queer textuality I outlined toward the end of chapter 2. *Downstate*, like other queer texts, unfurls the contradictions and antagonisms bound in

[20] Halperin, "Introduction," 20.

normative subject forms by pressing upon the inconsistencies, dissonances, and gaps that emerge between existing political structures and their remediation in psycho-social experience. In regard to the specific questions I have outlined above, *Downstate* reveals the affective complexities of traumatic experiences of sexual violence that neither the American legal system nor queer critical and abolitionist discourse at the turn of the 2020s are equipped to handle. In fact, *Downstate* reveals a juridical impulse animating abolitionist discourses that approach justice and social transformation as strictly political and interpersonal matters. The complications that sexual trauma's enduring legacies pose to genres of the law and of its abolition affirm the necessity of a psychopolitical language that can speak the unruly animacies of the sexual into being.

Ghostly Children

Downstate opens with Andy sitting next to his wife, Em, and across from his former music teacher, Fred. Andy is described as "*late thirties-forties, white, professional*."[21] Em is described, in blank non-detail, as the "*same as Andy*."[22] Unlike Andy's strictly morphological description, and Em's even more simple non-description–which seems to almost submit her personhood as secondary or supplementary to Andy's–Fred gets not only a description of his appearance but a peculiarly precise disposition as well. Norris' punctual descriptions of the character's bodies continues with Fred, whose details proceed in the same matter-of-fact inventory as Andy's: "*seventies, white, glasses, motorized wheelchair*." Then, in the same sentence, Norris adds, "*childlike, not unlike Fred Rogers*."[23]

[21] Bruce Norris, *Downstate* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2019): 8.
[22] Norris, *Downstate*, 8.
[23] Ibid.

Norris's description of Fred's nature as "childlike" exists in uneasy company with the double-negative comparison to Mr. Rogers. Sure, Mr. Rogers is jovial, playful, soft-spoken–but does that translate to "childlike?" Mr. Rogers' emotional intelligence is so famous it practically reaches the status of national memorial. Anyone on English-language social media feeds in the United States during the 2010s and early 2020s likely encountered online articles describing the frequent times when Mr. Rogers would explain national tragedies to children in easily-understandable-but-still-nuance-rich language, his widely-admired ability to bring children into the news by making its difficulty available to them on their terms–usually marshaled out as an example for parents in times of current national tragedy. "Childlike" seems to clash with the depth of intelligence required to speak to children, precisely, as intelligent beings, with a capacity to understand death or violence. Childlike is synonymous with avoidance, infantile for the sake of shrinking away from conflict or complexity, a regression away from the mature assumption of responsibility for children's well-being like Mr. Rogers (whose soft brilliance when speaking with children is slightly more famous than the righteous indignation he would express toward adults who sometimes leveled skepticism at the need for programs like *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*). The "not unlike" that conjoins "childlike" and "Mr. Rogers" in Norris's character description buckles under this contrast, leaving a trace suggestion that maybe Norris, through describing Fred, is also taking a subtle jab at Mr. Rogers himself.

Before the dramatic action even begins, we encounter a scene description that intensifies these suspicions. The setting of *Downstate*, we learn, is a "group home for sex offenders, downstate Illinois."[24] Andy's position next to Em and opposite Fred suddenly gains significance. Andy also holds in hands "some printed pages in his lap," and Em "looks at him expectantly,"

[24] Ibid. 9.

placing a hand compassionately "on his knee."[25] What we are witnessing, we realize, is not simply a conversation, but a formal and highly-orchestrated confrontation. Andy gathers his breath, and, after a shaky start, reads aloud from the pages a pre-prepared statement that immediately provides the audience with the play's precipitating events–the function of a Greek Chorus quite literally flattened to a fictional document on-stage.

It will be useful to reproduce the initial exchange between Andy, Em, and Fred, because the pacing and tenor of their dialogue–or, really, the many interruptions that transform Andy's intended monologue into a deflated dialogue–demonstrates how Norris's play quickly undermines the significance of the precipitating events, trading them out as the play's central tension for something else, though what, the audience is unsure:

> ANDY (*calm, measured*). For a number of years I told myself my life was good. And to the casual observer, this would appear to be true: I have a loving partner, I have a family, I have a home. And as long as I told myself this story, I believed it, too: Life was good and the past was the past and had no power over me in the present. (Beat.) But after my child was b–
>
> *His voice catches. EM touches him.*
>
> (*Very quietly*.) Sorry.
>
> EM (*whisper*). You're okay.
>
> ANDY (*whisper*). I'm fine.
>
> EM (*whisper*). Proud of you.
>
> *Another deep breath. He resumes.*
>
> ANDY. But after my child was born I started having panic attacks. At first I didn't want to make the association. I kept telling myself that fear and anxiety were *normal* responses to parenthood, what any adult would naturally feel when faced with the responsibility of caring for an innocent life. But then I started to notice that other parents were not anxious, on the contrary, they seemed happy and fulfilled. And it was only then I began to accept that we can never truly escape the past, and that evil exists in the world, and for me, at this moment, one part of that acceptance, is to look you in the eye today, and tell you to your face that you are a fundamentally evil person.
>
> EM *nods, gravely.*
>
> Fred (*gently*). Are you sure you don't want some coffee?[26]

[25] Ibid. 10.
[26] Ibid. 10-11.

What lies on the other side of the "association" Andy obliquely refers to does not need to be specified for us to understand what he means. The description of the setting, Fred's position as the recipient of Andy's monologue, and Em's as Andy's support buddy, help the audience arrange the players on the stage as victim (Andy) and perpetrator (Fred). The nature of the harm itself is also implicitly communicated through the gravity of Andy's speech. Beginning a totalizing evaluation of the quality of his life, the emergence of the trauma later in the monologue that such quality was really an illusion gains distinct force because it comes after his elaboration of all the things that supposed make his life good: having "a family" that includes a single "partner," their shared (presumably biological) child, and also, assumedly, property, a "home." Andy enjoys all the accouterments of the "good life." Not unknowingly immersed in the illusory naturalization of heteronormativity, Andy can speak about his fitting into the mold of the heteronormative good life from an abstract distance. Society has dictated that these things make his life good, and they do, indeed, he seems to suggest, make it good, as any "casual observer"—a stand-in here, it seems, for the "average American"—could attest. Andy invokes the trope of the good life in order to demonstrate both his material acquisition of its abstract form and his psychic and affective dispossession from it, his inability to full immerse himself in this fantasy-made-true because of the panic attacks that lurk up from behind, some strange devil to which he has come to this place to slay.

Andy's monologue is an almost-too-perfect reflection of Berlant's "cruel optimism:" from the invocation of the "good life" in all its abstract, sunlit, heteronormative glory, to Andy's felt sense of distance even from this fantasy that he assumedly has and yet must still seek to acquire somehow, down to the pristinely teleological arc of his comments, which close in on themselves like a perfect circle. His monologue seems to encapsulate his entire autobiography,

personal values, sexuality, class aspirations, and moral philosophy all in one. All of these things are organized around the central position of the family in the good life. The anxiety and fear Andy now feels as a parent are not natural responses to parenthood, which he determines based on the happiness he observes among other parents–whose happiness, he is sure, is not only real and genuine but the default feelings that all parents must necessarily feel. He is dispossessed from those normative feelings of happiness which he believes are rightfully his. There is no question as to what the source of this dispossession is. This is because–he argues–formative traumatic instances never leave our subjectivity. The only way he might begin to move past such instances is if he accepts Fred is evil and tells him that to his face. Presumably, the confrontation with this "evil" will have some kind of restorative effect, washing away the deeply-imbedded psychic impediments that prevent Andy from fully enjoying the pleasures of "caring for an innocent life." There is a remarkable solidity to Andy's monologue, tied together by the clear line that Andy draws between ideals of idyllic heteronormative happiness (a theory of culture), the nature of good and evil (morality), children's fundamental innocence (ethics), the inescapability of unresolved trauma's lingering effects in the present (history), and trauma's ultimate resolution through a dramatic confrontation between victim and abuser, as a bounded event (psyche).

But the pristine surface of Andy's monologue is punctured with interruptions that have a noticeably *deflationary* effect. At first it is hard to discern how we should read Em and Andy's brief exchange halfway through the speech. There is a temptation to read Em's preciousness with Andy as a sincere demonstration of care, an effort to hold and dignify the sanctity of his trauma and the difficulty of its articulation. We, the audience, would be right to hold this space as well, mirroring Em and Andy's moral seriousness. We sit tight-lipped, heads bowed, solemn

expressions on our faces–honoring his truth. Even those of us who might be skeptical about the uncomplicated pretense of happiness as the destiny of heterosexuals in Andy's speech will sit politely on our hands. No need to make a fuss here. We will even look past the fact that his voice catches right when he starts to bring up his child: we won't question why Andy's inability to enjoy raising his child inevitably has to do with Fred and not Andy. Andy's moral fury starts to swell, and it is our role, as a contemporary audience conscientious of the social cues surrounding the testimony of trauma, to pay it the expected reverence. It's only after Andy finishes on his powerful crescendo that Fred's comment, stunningly, turns Andy's grandiose summation of the enduring effects of molestation on his life into a moment of camp.

Em's intimacy with Andy does not prevent her from effectively becoming the stand-in for the witness-bearing audience member on stage. Reaffirming Andy's conviction when he falters ("'You're okay,'" "'Proud of you'"), providing a stiff air of formality as a counterpoint to Andy's emotionality to demonstrate her position as *someone who is listening* ("*nods, gravely*"), Em's supportive actions are nevertheless disruptions in their own right. Her performance of her role as the morally serious witness-to-trauma lends an added legibility to Andy's monologue as an act of truth-telling. She is performing a kind of affective labor: it is not only her presence but her demonstration of care that buttresses the authority of Andy's testimony. Watching Em, the audience is provided a model through which the gestures and emotional performance of bearing witness is choreographed.

When Fred "gently" asks Andy if he wants some coffee, then, it is primarily through the juxtaposition with Em's seriousness, or Em's flat formality as a buttress to Andy's grandstanding, that Fred's idiosyncratic response generates an uncomfortable though noticeable humor. His innocuous gesture of goodwill does not outrightly contradict any of Andy's claims.

Instead, it undermines the tenor of authority achieved through the sweeping claims he makes about his life story, the emotional force of its telling, and Em's presence as his observer. Fred's comment makes an affective intervention. Though it comes after Andy finishes his statement, it interrupts the elaboration of generic conventions around testimony that are set in motion by Andy and Em. Rather than affirming Andy's convictions with an apology—or defensively contradicting him—Fred's goodwill response derails the moment. Fred's comment effectively draws our attention to the actors' triangulation on stage as victim, abuser, and witness, revealing it to be not the primary dynamic of the play itself but the product of a staging with the play (a staging within a staging, arbitrary conditions within arbitrary conditions). As quickly as Norris introduces us to the action relationships between the characters within the play, he also subverts generic expectations for what a confrontation between abuser and the abused will look like.

Throughout *Downstate*, similar instances of *interruption* disentangle Andy's efforts to describe the sexual trauma he suffered at Fred's hands. To many readers, this brief description of Downstate may make the play sound like a horror show: a play that centers around a victim of child sexual abuse and his inability to narrate his trauma while face-to-face with his abuser may sound, at best, like a perverted exercise in reactionary anti-MeToo sadism. But these continual interruptions to Andy's speech paradoxically contribute to a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence that exceed the genres of victimhood, trauma, and liberal compassion that circulate throughout the play and form the basis of its dramatic action.

At the center of Downstate is a document called a reconciliation contract. In the first act of the play, we learn that Andy came to visit Fred to get him to sign a contract that he has drawn up on his own. The contract functions as an addendum to the legal testimonies that Fred and Andy gave in court during Fred's trial thirty years prior to the events of the play. The contract

contains Andy's summary of the abuse he suffered from Fred, though now with additional details that were not included in the record during the trial. Andy intends for Fred to sign the contract, effectively substantiating his account of the events in the eyes of the law. It is never confirmed whether signing the contract will have additional legal repercussions for Fred. However, Andy does say that part of the reason why he wants Fred to sign the contract is because he believes that he deserves to be punished.[27]

Although the contract is the inciting action of the play—the reason why Andy has come to talk with Fred in the first place—the full contents of the contract are never actually revealed. When Fred actually reads the contract aloud, he only gets part way before an argument begins between Andy, Fred, and Fred's housemate and caretaker, Dee. Andy originally tries to introduce the contract when he visits Fred earlier in the day, during the first act, but, for some unstated reason, he hesitates. Andy leaves Fred's house without taking the contract out, but he also leaves behind his phone, which gives him a reason to come back to Fred's house later that evening.

Throughout the play, Andy expresses frustration at the fact that his confrontation with Fred is not feeling as invigorating and triumphant as he originally expected. Mundane interactions and the inconvenient minutiae of everyday life continually interrupt Andy's and Em's efforts to castigate Fred about the long-term harm he has done to Andy. Andy and Em's child calls them from the hotel they are staying at right after Andy delivers his opening monologue; after Em gets off the phone, Andy and Em engage in an oddly polite conversation with Fred about their plans to take their kid to a local water park that afternoon. When Andy tries to start reading from his prepared comments again, another one of Fred's housemates, Gio,

[27] Ibid. 106.

interjects into the conversation, asking how Andy's day is going, and making overly formal compliments about Andy's new iPhone. Evidently, Andy had a mental image of what his confrontation with Fred was going to look like, and this is not it:

> *Toilet flush. DEE exists bathroom, heads toward kitchen, with barely a glance to the others.*
> ANDY. Lotta people.
> FRED. There's four of us.
> ANDY. Right.
> FRED. Including myself.
> ANDY. Right. It's just—Different from what I—
> FRED. Pictured?
> ANDY. –expected.
> FRED. What were you expecting?
> ANDY. I dunno. I dunno. Just—
> FRED. Something else.
> ANDY. –not this.
> FRED. They're not listening.
> ANDY. I know. I know that. I just—
> Through the kitchen door, we hear GIO and DEE bickering, quietly, but still audible.
> GIO (sotto). The fuck's this shit?
> DEE (sotto). Four dollars and seventy-three cents.
> GIO (sotto). I ain't paying for that.
> DEE (sotto). Four dollars and seventy –
> GIO (sotto). They're fucking green, bruh.[28]

Fred's housemates tiptoe around Andy, Fred, and Em's conversation, yet their lives go on in the background. Their respect for the situation combines with them going about their days to create the sense that it is Andy who is the intruder in this scenario. Meanwhile, Fred's gentle demeanor seems to deflate Andy's repeated attempts to confront him. Without necessarily saying anything to incite Andy or push back against him, Fred's innocuous comments make him seem like the soft receptacle of Andy's overinflated anger. While there are moments where Fred and

[28] Ibid. 16

Andy disagree over the events that took place many years ago, Andy's moral authority is much more subtly and effectively undermined by the relatively flat affect of the play, which makes his more forceful articulations of rage appear somewhat outsized. The seriousness of Andy's trauma sits unsteadily within the scene. Though the viewer may have the sense that Andy's trauma should be treated with tremendous gravity, the unmistakably ordinary, deflated affect of the play itself does not outrightly undermine Andy's claims to harm so much as it makes it seem like this is neither the time or place for such confrontations to happen. Whether or not the fault likes with Andy or Fred for this is never totally assigned; in fact it seems that the environment of the scene itself overdetermines what either could necessarily ask of the other in this instance. Eventually, Andy gets so thrown off that he decides "This is bullshit," and tells Em he wants to leave because "I mean, what's the point? It's fucking pointless and humiliating and he's not going to suddenly just—," expressing doubt that Fred is willing to change his account of the abuse.[29]

Although Andy does not say explicitly what he imagined his confrontation with Fred would look like, the setting plays a part in creating our sense of the potential dissonance that Andy is experiencing. Fred and his roommates live in a "group home for sex offenders," a dilapidated single-story house in "Downstate" Illinois, referring to the metropolitan sprawl surrounding Chicago. The play's title gives double meaning to its setting: the connotation of descending on a map of physical space–for some reason "Downstate Illinois" refers to Illinois' north-easternmost region–accompanies a dread-inducing feeling of descending into the actual state, that is, the nation-state. In *Downstate*, we find ourselves descending for a moment into the dark corridors of the continental U.S., where physical space is demarcated as a zone of moral and

[29] Ibid. 21.

juridical excess, the only place where this archetypal form of contemporary bare life, the sex offender, is authorized to live and free to die.

We find out during the play that Fred's group home registered on the Illinois State Sex Offender Registry. Though, even if it did not come up in the play, it would be hard to imagine their house was not on the registry. Like every state and territory of the United States, Illinois maintains an up-to-date registry of sex offenders. Given the sex offender's reliability as a near-endless resource of political capital in the twenty-first century, such registries are one of the few governmental services that are maintained with righteous punctuality. There is no limit to the state's capacity to innovate new surveillance technologies or rhetoric justifying juridical abuses of power when the bodies being experimented upon have committed sex-based offenses. In the state of Illinois, the state police allow visitors to their website to pull up a map and use GPS tracking to pinpoint any registered sex offender in a given geographic region. Clicking on one part of the map creates a circle populated with miniature red dots. Each dot represents a sex offender. Clicking on someone's dot pulls up that person's name, picture, address, their proximity to local schools, and the details of their conviction, including their age and the age of their victim at the time of the offense.[30]

In Norris's description of the setting at the beginning of the play, he creates a portrait of a run-down environment populated with thrift store furniture and desperately needing repairs. "[B]uilt in the 1950s or 1960s," the house is "now deteriorated. Superficial attempts have been made to make the place livable but they fail to relieve the general dreariness of the place."[31] The

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[30] "Sex Offender Mapping," Illinois State Police Sex Offender Register. Accessible via this link as of March 2024: https://isp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/nearby/index.html?appid=5d92613aa43b42e5be9db88b4aceb06e&sliderDistance=5.

[31] Norris, *Downstate,* 9.

living room itself is divided by a set of accordion doors where Félix, another one of the housemates, has made a cramped, makeshift bedroom. “One broken window, repaired with duct tape and cardboard,”[32] which Dee later reveals to Andy was broken by a shotgun.[33] The metal bat that sits by the door is intended to fend off potential intruders, who occasionally come by leaving gifts: “We get rocks. We get eggs. Spray paint. Death threats. Lotta death threats.”[34]

Norris’s insistence that the setting of *Downstate* broadcast a sense of destitution conveys a degree of sympathy toward the social and economic plight of sex offenders. Indeed, the back cover my copy of the play describes Downstate as a “provocative play” that “zeroes in on the limits of our compassion and what happens when society deems anyone beyond forgiveness.” In his review of the world premiere production of *Downstate* at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, in 2018, Kevin Greene suggests that Norris is in fact demonstrating an outsized compassion for sex offenders, sympathizing with characters like Fred and Dee to such a degree that it creates an imbalanced and unrealistic representation of power dynamics between abusers and their victims. Suggesting that Downstate skews toward pedantry, Greene cites Norris’s own statements in the program for the production. Norris writes, “Even positive social movements like #MeToo run the risk of tipping over into vengeance as those of us on the left attempt to purge ourselves of any strain of ideological purity… We’d prefer to luxuriate in our righteous hatred for each other right now, in a way that feels cruel and grotesque and tribal.”[35] Norris expresses caution about the role of vengeance in contemporary social movements. Greene, however, reads Norris’s statement as a fatal mischaracterization of such movements. Downstate

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid. 69
[34] Ibid. 70
[35] Kevin Greene, “I Believe You, Bruce: A Review of *Downstate* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company,” *New City Stage*, October 3, 2018.

is a manifestation of his misunderstanding: Norris chooses to create an arbitrary scenario in which a victim of abuse is confronted with the horrible living situation of his abuser, and, slowly becomes the violent one himself. Downstate, rather than bringing about a just world, expresses the author's own moral hang-ups about contemporary reckonings with injustice, creating a drama that is more regressive than progressive in its politics.

I want to contest Greene's reading, however, that Norris's goal in Downstate is to simply "humanize" sex offenders while making victims like Andy out to be hysterical and overstated in their sense of injury. *Downstate* certainly does go to pains to suggest that sex offenders are disproportionately punished for their actions; there is no doubt an impulse at the center of the play toward restorative rather than punitive means of justice. But it is a mistake to read the play as simply shifting the normative terms of injustice, where Andy is made out as the real villain and Fred is treated as the victim of a larger state and social apparatus. The dramatic tension of Downstate reveals the inadequacy of both punitive and restorative approaches to sexual violence through Andy's inability to ultimately articulate what he experiences during his visit with Fred. I want to suggest that Downstate is less about creating false moral equivalences than it is about disarticulating the endurance of sexual trauma from its manifestation in cultural, political, and legal scripts that overdetermine its expression.

The second act of the play begins later the same evening. Andy and Dee sit at the living room table, waiting for Fred to return home from his job as a telemarketer. Dee and Andy's conversation starts out polite and awkward, but slowly turns into a heated exchange about the severity of punishments faced by sex offenders, the tremendous cultural and legal significance assigned to sexual violence over other forms of violence, and the nature of trauma and justice. Their conversation begins to unravel in slight comments that Dee makes about the inaccessibility

of basic technology for the house's inhabitants. Andy asks if they have streaming services; Dee points out they cannot access the internet. Andy suggests that they could watch something through an app on their phone; Dee points out that they are not allowed to have smartphones.[36] Slowly the conversation builds toward the revelation about the broken window and the bat. Their banter starts out almost playful; Dee teases Andy and makes jokes to relax the tension, though they seem to go over Andy's head. The tone soon turns more serious and piercing.

Dee and Andy begin to broach the topic of trauma, and the trauma of child sex abuse, through a discussion of their own treatment as children, and their philosophies about parenting, children's behavior, and sexual violence. When they begin to discuss whether or not rape is worse than death, Andy begins to discuss some of the science around trauma he has learned in his survivor group. "There's research—the brain gets rewired and the connections, the emotional circuitry gets severed, but but but we know that you cab actively reset those neurochemical… pathways," Andy says.[37] Andy's repetitions, his pauses, and his struggle to connect his thoughts in this passage imply some difficulty in his speech. He is represented as experiencing a severe discomfort, the exact reason for his speech patterns is left open to interpretation. But there are few lines where he is not stuttering or struggling to get out his ideas, like in the passage above. His struggle to make a case for why he believes rape is worse than murder comes up against Dee's flat, skeptical responses. Dee, who is also a sex offender, refuses Andy's suggestion that the pain of childhood trauma is an uncontrollable and lasting dimension of one's being. At one point Dee begins to invoke the severe punishments for sex-related offenses to contest the idea that specifically sexual violence merits the kind of life-long attention that Andy clearerly feels it

[36] Norris, *Downstate*, 68.
[37] Ibid. 76.

needs. You can amputate your child's penis and get a lower sentence than sucking it, Dee points out: "—you'd be better off amputating that dick than sucking it. You say I'm sorry your honor I lost control of myself, I cut of my child's dick and put it in the food processor," Dee says, "Judge'd be like alright that's twenty months for criminal assault and it's a shame your child's gotta live without a dick the rest of his life, but thank god you didn't suck it—"

Dee and Andy's back-and-forth provides the kind of didactic exposition alluded to by Greene. Andy struggles to make incoherent defenses of his conviction that Fred deserves to still be punished for what he did to him thirty years ago, while Dee tries to illustrate the extreme cruelty faced by sex offenders and the disproportionate significance assigned to sex. In a way, it feels as if Norris is trying to place arguments about the unfair treatment of sex offender's simply out in the air, given that it is a losing topic in just about all quarters of American public life. Dee provides a sober counterpoint to Andy's often contradictory claims about the necessity for both justice, fairness, and punishment, suggesting in turn that victims of abuse like Andy may become dependent on their status as victims to organize their identity.

But I maintain that the play remains relatively agnostic about Andy. Norris never comes down on whether or not Andy is overinflated in his sense of self-importance or whether his traumatized subjectivity should be considered "legitimate." Indeed, this seems like the kind of value judgment that the play's jilted dialogue and emphasis on mundane interactions seems interested in undermining. When Andy finally presents the contract to Fred, and they begin to disagree over its contents, Dee poses a question to Andy to test how foolproof his memory is: "Is Fred circumcised?"[38] Fred tries to diffuse the situation, telling Dee not to press Andy on it, but Dee persists. Andy, without saying a word in response, "shakes his head in barely suppressed

[38] Ibid. 107.

rage," then "very slowly folds his contract and returns it to the envelope."[39] Fred "reaches out to [Andy] sympathetically," but Andy turns away and leaves.[40]

Of course, someone's car is blocking the driveway, so Andy needs to come back inside again. Dee provokes Andy again, and, in a fit of rage, Andy grabs Fred and throws him from his wheelchair. As Andy stands over Fred, he bellows, "(out of control)," "YOU ARE NOT THE VICTIM!! I AM THE VICTIM!!"[41]

Andy's hysterical insistence on his "victimhood" is both an expression of frustration with his speech being stifled throughout the play's action and also an acknowledgement of the significance that his abuse plays in his identity. Returning to his frustrated sense that his confrontation with Fred is not as it appears, the language of "victimhood" here figures as a site of affective investment that actually inhibits rather than enables Andy's ability to work through his trauma. This is not to say that his trauma can ever truly be extricated from his identity, nor that he is morally at fault for making himself out to be a "victim." In the moment when Andy makes a claim to his victimhood, he finds himself caught in a polarity where only him or Fred, at any given moment, can suffer. The problem is not necessarily that *Andy* sees himself as a victim and Fred as only his abuser so much that the discourses, apparatuses, and technologies that shape the action of the play have failed all of them.

Conclusion

The goal of this dissertation was to explore some potential directions for Queer Studies and queer cultural politics through an analysis of the psychopolitics of contemporary queer American

[39] 107.
[40] Ibid. 106.
[41] Ibid. 117.

fiction. Ending with this reading of *Downstate*, I have tried to suggest that contemporary Queer Studies still struggles to work through its Americanist biases, the oppositions it draws between its psychoanalytic, Marxist, and Foucauldian strains, and the fantasies and attachments that scholars bring to queer critical inquiry. An elaborated version of this coda would pursue the question posed in its first subsection—whether sexual violence represents an exceptional form of violence, and how queer theory should parse this relationship—in greater detail.

Although Norris is not queer himself, *Downstate* represents an example of a work of contemporary literature that rubs up against the juridical, moral, cultural, and political norms that impede our ability construct more livable futures. Through my reading of the tension that Norris creates between the impulses to honor the suffering of victims and to contest the injustice of the treatment of sex offenders in the United States, *Downstate* raises important questions about the endurance of sexual trauma in ways that exceeds its expression both in the law and in restorative or abolitionist discourses that understate the particularly destructive force that sexual violence can have on the subject's self-constitution. It is not even necessarily the case that we have to read Andy's breakdown in the play as either a symptom of his trauma or as an expression of his investment in the idea of himself as a traumatized subject. The greater point is that we would never know whether either of these things are true: we lack a language to describe trauma in ways that does not give into cliché's of the inherent moral superiority of the victims of oppression or violence. A language of trauma, suffering, and violence must be wrested from the conflation of morality with political oppression and the psychic endurance of trauma from the idea that trauma must necessarily be healed or moved past to achieve a good life.

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