Reading and Writing As/if: US Literary Criticism and Identity

by

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Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

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Wahneema Lubiano

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2019

ABSTRACT

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Dedication

To Isidore, for being warm and good.

Abstract

As/if: US Literary Criticism and Identity turns to early queer and third-wave feminist scholarship to identify a unique strategy and style of literary criticism, which I name *as/if criticism*. As/if criticism is both born of and resistant to two conflicting imperatives in the US academy, which first come to a fore during the 1990s. The first is the demand to write "as": that is, the institutional demand that critics use their gender, race, sexuality, etc. as credentials of authentic knowledge. The second is the demand to write "as if": that is, the post-structuralist demand that critique suspend the idea of knowable or stable identity. Challenging both of these demands, as/if criticism employs four different strategies—*recognition*, *qualification*, *intimacy*, and *interruption*—in order to disrupt identity as it is produced and valued as a knowable category within literary criticism. Taking five authors as case studies, I examine Eve Sedgwick's compendium of queer critical essays, *Tendencies* (1993); Deborah McDowell's debut work of black feminist criticism, *The Changing Same* (1995); Barbara Johnson's deconstructive take on race and gender, *The Feminist Difference* (1995); and Robert Reid-Pharr's innovative critical essay collection, *Black Gay Man* (2001). Over the course of its chapters, *As/if: US Literary Criticism and Identity* makes the case that as/if criticism is well-suited to describe fraught social bonds, experimental allegiances, and unintuitive cross-identifications because its style mirrors the substance of its argument.

Contents

Abstract v

Acknowledgements viii

1. Introduction: Reading and Writing As/if 1

    1.1 Becoming a Critic 1

    1.2 Modes of As/if 4

    1.3 As-slash-if 9

    1.4 Negative Bonds 14

2. Gay-Male-Oriented and Now 17

    2.1 *Tendencies'* Tendencies 17

    2.2 Ass/if 20

    2.3 Homosexual Reading, Perverse Reading, Queer Reading 33

    2.4 White Slashes 45

    2.5 Queer Bonds 51

3. Miscarrying On 60

    3.1 Newborn Disciplines 60

    3.2 "For McDowell Read Black Feminist" 69

    3.3 Qualifying Conditions 77

    3.4 Passing Over (and Over) 91

    3.5 "Smith Does; McDowell Does Not" 98

4. Barbara Johnson's Passing 105

    4.1 Double Mourning in the Academic Sphere 105

    4.2 Hearing in Tongues 109

    4.3 Takes One to Know One 115

4.4 Lovely College Words 120

4.5 Lesbian Reading Glasses 126

4.6 The Death of the Critic 136

5. The Living End 152

5.1 Uses of the Pornographic 152

5.2 The Beat Goes On 161

5.3 Shock Value 172

5.4 Gender Trouble 177

5.5 Citing As a Lesbian 185

6. Conclusion: I Probably Think This Essay is About Me 197

References 207

Biography 218

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Because I am fascinated by the social space of the academy, and because it gives me a thrill to trace genealogies of intimacy and influence, and also because I love campy melodrama, the Acknowledgements are usually my favorite part of any academic text. If these acknowledgements run long (and they do), it is because I have a lot of people to thank, but it is also for this reason. I love the Acknowledgements. If you do not, you can behave as if they did not exist, and skip this part.

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Originally, I was going to write that going through graduate school with Carolyn Laubender as a mentor, interlocutor, and confidant was best analogized by Dorothy’s relationship

to the Scarecrow ("I think I'm going to miss you most of all"). The analogy is imperfect, because Carolyn, in the most generous and powerful way imaginable, has a brain.

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1. Introduction: Reading and Writing As/if

1.1 Becoming a Critic

I first encountered queer criticism in an undergraduate class called "Becoming a Critic." As its title suggests, the course focused on writing by various literary critics. Though these authors ranged widely in their style, argument, and objects, they all had one thing in common: every article or book on the syllabus theorized through and with the personal. We read, among several other works, Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951), Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love* (2000). Each text mixed autobiography with critique, anecdote with literary and cultural analysis. It was here, halfway through the semester, that I first read Sedgwick's "A Poem is Being Written" (1987), a complex, personal essay that links Sedgwick's childhood obsession with poetry to her adult fascination with spanking, male homosexuality, and close reading.

I was a nerdy 19-year-old, grappling with my own complicated relationship to gender, race, and sexual identity in the (still relatively alien, to me) space of the Northeast liberal arts university. My new home demanded all sorts of new identitarian claims from its self-advertised politically conscious student body. Thirsty for any helpful articulation of my own position, but made uneasy by the limiting identity terms with which campus politics expressed themselves, I fell in love with Sedgwick's meditation on the complicated and chiasmic identifications that reading can produce. Here was someone describing, with what felt at the time like bizarre accuracy, my own familiar tendencies: an adolescence spent composing poems, a longstanding identification with gay men, a perverse affinity for both long sentences and anality, and a reflexive narcissism that I hoped others found charming. My identification with Sedgwick felt

relatively unproblematic; I recognized in her multiple confessions something like my own identity.

What strikes me now is the irony of this primal scene: “A Poem is Being Written” narrates a process of queer critical identification that is far *less* straightforward than the identification I experienced upon first reading it. Sedgwick’s essay is not interested in identity formation via direct identification; instead, it explores complex and messy identifications *across* identities as a method of queer reading. Its author’s identification with gay men/as a gay man is famous and infamous within queer and feminist critical circles; she becomes a critic, and her criticism becomes queer, via “tortuous,” “alienating,” and perhaps unrealizable cross-identifications (131). The irony of my initial attachment to and identification with “queer criticism,” then, is its initial ease, for the thing that is precisely queer about Sedgwick’s criticism is her own uneasy relationship to identity.

Because it foregrounds this unease, “A Poem is Being Written” is a superlative example of what this dissertation names *as/if criticism*. Like Sedgwick’s 1987 essay, as/if criticism performs identity studies criticism in ways that unsettle the very identity categories into which its authors are interpolated. In this way, as/if criticism aligns itself with a wealth of post-structuralist, feminist, queer, and critical race work that seeks to re-think rigid notions of identity, while still attending to identity’s effects. To be sure, a class called “Becoming a Critic” already seems aware of this history, as its title cheekily echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s famous declaration at the start of *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283). Such a nod to Beauvoir not only raises interesting questions about the connections between criticism and gender; it also points to a long history of feminist thought that makes the dismantling of identity categories its

primary objective.[1] The force of Beauvoir's sentence comes from her bold rejection of a broadly accepted assumption (that "woman"-ness is a natural, inborn state, rather than a constructed identity); its shock value depends on the entrenched certainty of "woman" as a natural category. Unlike Beauvoir's famous sentence, the declaration that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a critic" seems obvious: "critic," unlike some conceptions of the identity "woman," holds little claim to the natural. And yet, the absurd (even flippant) obviousness of this fact is nonetheless provocative. How does one "become" a critic? How is "the critic" constructed? And what is it about the critic that led my professor to make this connection to Beauvoir's intrepid deconstruction of gender identity in the first place?

These questions motivate my project. Concerned with how academic fields produce and delimit critical and intellectual identity, I examine moments of complicated intellectual identity in feminist and queer literary criticism in order to figure out what happens when a critic's identity performance does not properly align with academic identitarian imperatives. To that end, each of the four chapters in "Reading and Writing As/if: US Literary Criticism and Identity" focuses on the work and reception of a specific literary critic in the American academy. In order, these critics are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Deborah McDowell, Barbara Johnson, and Robert Reid-Pharr. All four critics exemplify different strategies of as/if criticism, and so each chapter serves as a case study. Ultimately, I show that these critical approaches perform the fraught social bonds, experimental allegiances, and unintuitive cross-identifications that occur between different subjects. In other words, as/if criticism effectively models how literary criticism can also perform, in its style, the substance of its argument.

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[1] For some examples of this vein of feminist theory (as well as a detailed look at how many narratives of the move from "Women's Studies" to "Gender Studies" sidestep, ignore, or erase these examples) see chapter one of Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* (2014), particularly "Doing Justice with Objects: Or, the 'Progress' of Gender."

1.2 Modes of As/if

As/if criticism operates in four modes: *qualification, recognition, intimacy,* and *interruption*; for each mode, the slash in as/if signifies multiple ways, and works to foreground multiple itineraries, aims, and desires. As/if criticism stages *recognitions* that are not straightforward. It produces *qualifications* that simultaneously use and productively discredit the authorial credentials granted by identity. It performs *intimacies* that disrupt typical assumptions about critical acumen, lived identity, and object of study**.** Finally, it employs *interruptions* that highlight the difficulty of the cross-identifications these authors seek to enact.

My first chapter, "Gay-Male-Oriented and Now," names *recognition* as a mode of as/if criticism, taking as its example the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Because as/if criticism is invested in the ways recognition disrupts ways of relating or affiliating that might seem obvious, I am most interested in recognition that is unexpected, strange, or shocking. When a critic performs her own self-extensive recognitions for her readers, she troubles readers' assumptions about her own affiliations, allegiances, alignments. In her work, Sedgwick tells multiple stories about recognizing herself in gay-male authored texts (and, later, about recognizing a part of herself in the selves of the gay men with whom she forges deep communal bonds), in order to rethink ways of reading, identity, and forging political coalition.

Chapter two of this dissertation, "Miscarrying On," explores *qualification* as a mode of as/if criticism through the work of Deborah McDowell. Of the four terms I use to describe as/if critical modes, qualification is the term with the least critical circulation. As such, there are comparatively fewer theoretical conversations to cite here. My concept of "qualification" plays on the word's double-valence: qualification can mean both "a quality or accomplishment that makes someone suitable for a particular job or activity" and "a statement or assertion that makes another less absolute" (*Oxford Dictionary of English,* 1451). A search for "qualification + gender

studies" in Duke University's library database yields mostly sociology studies that understand qualification in the former sense. In general, these studies take an intersectional approach, and are concerned with how various identity categories—i.e. race, gender, sexuality, and class—influence employers' hiring practices; most of these studies implement "qualification" as a quantifiable rubric against which to judge job market biases. But as their shared root *qualis* suggests, qualifications might also include more qualitative criterion. Indeed, those very same categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. might in some contexts serve as qualifications that grant knowledge authority, the right to speak for a certain group, or claims to authenticity. Insofar as qualification is understood broadly as one's credentials, it can be both quantifiable (number of degrees, years of experience, sales made, etc.) and much more abstract (job listings that require qualifications such as "a good sense of humor," or "a team attitude," for example). When I use qualification in this dissertation, I want to maintain all of these attendant associations: associations with hiring credentials, with quantifiable experience, and with qualitative attributes based on one's character or identity.

The second valence of qualification makes more obvious the work that the term performs in this dissertation. When it means the act of revising, limiting, complicating, or otherwise amending an assertion, qualification names critical practices that are resistant to universalization. In a text, qualification can take many forms: discursive footnotes, modifying adjectives, parenthetical asides, couched claims, asterisked phrases, or punitive edits all have qualifying effects. I hold the two meanings of qualification tenuously together in order to describe a mode of as/if criticism that, through repeated and performative revision, makes visible the way identity can both discredit and authorize a critic. In chapter two, I highlight McDowell's strategy of performative self-correction to illustrate qualification as a mode of as/if criticism. Repeatedly revising her own assertions as well as the assumptions other critics make about her based on her

interpolated identity (as black feminist critic, non-lesbian, or critical theorist), McDowell fights back against the critical identities categories into which she and her work are pigeonholed.

My third chapter, "Barbara Johnson's Passing," reads the work of this well known feminist deconstructionist as a case study in *intimacy* as an as/if critical mode. Like qualification, *intimacy* has multiple meanings, and I want to preserve these meanings in my use of the term. Intimacy can all at once denote insider knowledge, sexual activity, erotic desire, close friendship, or an ease of association formed by habit. Intimacy is also extreme familiarity; this familiarity can produce critical ease or capability born of an intimate knowledge of one's subject. Parenthetically coming out to her readers as both a lesbian who does not read "as a lesbian" and a white feminist working on black-authored texts, Johnson exploits this assumption, strategically revealing critical loyalties and aptitudes that seem inappropriate or unobvious. Bearing the multiple understandings of intimacy in mind, this chapter argues that Johnson performs various forms of intimacy in order to challenge the over-determinacy of critical identity categories. By rehearsing and insisting on her own critical intimacy with her objects and audience, Johnson refuses to shy away from that might be embarrassing, politically undesirable, or deeply unsettling. Chapter three tracks Barbara Johnson's parenthetical asides as moments of this difficult intimacy, moments that produce the disruptions of identity integral to as/if criticism.

My fourth and final chapter, "The Living End," turns to the work of Robert Reid-Pharr as an example of *interruption* as a mode of as/if criticism. Chapter four takes up Reid-Pharr's use of explicitly sexual language to think through interruption as a critical strategy. This strategy, I argue, allows for the possibility of coalition based on something other than identity—what Cathy Cohen, in a recent revisiting of her landmark 1997 article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," calls a "queer politics of positionality" (143). Interrupting his claim to living as a

lesbian with "pornographic" anecdotal interludes, Reid-Pharr acknowledges embodied difference while simultaneously insisting on his lesbian identifications.

These four chapters cover roughly one decade of scholarship; the literary criticism with which they are primarily concerned is all authored between 1987 and 2001. Given the appearance and proliferation of as/if criticism in the 1990s, we might well ask what it is specifically about this decade that provides the ideal environment for these critical practices to flourish. There are several ways to answer this question. In the 1990s, post-structuralism's popularity within humanities departments put new pressure on the identity claims of newly-institutionalized disciplines such as Women's Studies or Ethnic Studies, and therefore necessitated new ways of dealing with identity critically—this is a possible origin of as/if criticism.[2] The 1990s also bore the brunt of the culture wars—the conservative government's anti-intellectual backlash against the humanities might well have forced literary critical scholars to think of themselves as an identitarian group under attack. The 1990s also saw the peak of the AIDS crisis, and the rise of AIDS activisms that sought an alternative to ineffectual identity politics. These political experiments, including the reclamation of "queer," might also have inspired critics to rethink their own relation to identity. Refusing to settle on just one answer, "Reading and Writing As/if: US Literary Criticism and Identity" aims to show how various factors contribute to the rise of as/if criticism during the period in question.

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[2] Versions of this story abound. Consider, to take just one example, the explanatory blurb of the "Description" section of the website for the esteemed Duke Press journal *d i f f e r e n c e s*:

> *d i f f e r e n c e s*: *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* first appeared in 1989 at the moment of a critical encounter—a head-on collision, one might say—of theories of difference (primarily Continental) and the politics of diversity (primarily American). In the ensuing years, the journal has established a critical forum where the problematic of differences is explored in texts ranging from the literary and the visual to the political and social. *d i f f e r e n c e s* highlights theoretical debates across the disciplines that address the ways concepts and categories of difference—notably but not exclusively gender—operate within culture. (n.p.)

In this rendition of the story, too, the strand of feminist criticism with which this dissertation is concerned emerges at the end of the 1980s at the crossroads of post-structuralism and identity studies.

I take seriously Kadji Amin's assertion that "the future of the field of Queer Studies—as well as its relevance for scholarship on prior historical periods, racialized populations, and areas outside the United States—requires a reckoning with the field's affective haunting by the inaugural moment of the US 1990s" (177); my choice of objects clearly indicates that I too see the academy in the 1990s as a privileged site for the production of new intellectual identities. As Robyn Wiegman points out, these "knowledge identities" or "intellectual identities" are the result of disciplinary structures and the discourses of the field.[3] As/if criticism is thus born out of the shifting disciplinary structures and changing discourses of the 1990's academic scene.

With this in mind, this dissertation not only rehearses those disciplinary discourses within each chapter; it also stages conversations between disciplines through its structure. Though all of the chapters in this dissertation speak to each other, their ordering is intentional and significant: chapters one and two are in dialogue, as are chapters three and four. Chapters one and two together illuminate similar problems of identity navigated in different ways. Both Sedgwick and McDowell run into trouble because they are not lesbians, but their troubles resolve differently. Called out by white lesbian feminists for her attention to gay men, Sedgwick builds a theory of reading across gender, an effort that eventually leads to the founding of a new discipline. Publicly criticized by black lesbian feminists for rebutting Barbara Smith, McDowell revises her reading methods, writes a widely circulated piece on lesbian desire in *Passing* (1927), and curries critical favor later on. In addition, both McDowell and Sedgwick find their respective racial identities to be roadblocks to their critical scholarship, and offer different as/if strategies for confronting or addressing these roadblocks. Interpolated as a white woman, Sedgwick finds her attempts to "smuggle" black identity into view are cut short by her own embodiment. Interpolated as a black

[3] See Wiegman: "Within the disciplinary apparatus of knowledge production, one does not simply study literature, politics, or social organization. One is constituted as belonging on an identitarian basis, where the imperative to be a biologist, philosopher, political scientist, even a critical theorist is to partake in an identitarian project" (130).

woman, McDowell finds her scholarship over-determined and limited by both white feminist and black literary critics. The fact that Sedgwick and McDowell handle these impasses via recognition and qualification, respectively, is related to their critical identities as queer theorist and black feminist critic.

Reading chapters three and four together reveals complementary structures of desire and critical identity. A white lesbian who primarily reads texts by black women, Johnson attaches to objects that allow her to pass as black to readers who are not in-the-know. A black gay man who identifies with both black lesbian scholarship and black lesbian community, Reid-Pharr fails to pass despite his identifications across genders. As with chapters one and two, chapters three and four lay out two very different strategies for dealing with these schemas. Attempting to attach to objects that more properly align with her real-world identity, Johnson tries to "read as a lesbian," only to fall up short and abandon her project. Identifying with improper subjects by "living as a lesbian," Reid-Pharr encounters embodied difference and nonetheless insists on the leap between "as" and "as if." Just as the as/if critical strategies laid out in chapters one and two reveal the differences and overlaps between the critical identities "black feminist critic" and "queer theorist," so too these differences speak to Johnson's critical identity as a feminist deconstructionist critic, and Reid-Pharr's critical identity as a black queer critic. All four of the literary critics examined in the chapters to follow employ qualification, recognition, intimacy, and interruption in various capacities and to varying degree, and the division of my dissertation into four different modes of as/if criticism does not at all mean that these modes are mutually exclusive. Indeed, that the contrary is true is testament to how complicated identification can be.

1.3 As-slash-if

I understand "identification" and "cross-identification" in much the same way Biddy Martin and Judith Butler understand the two terms in their 1993 "Cross-Identification" special

issue of *Diacritics*. “The notion of ‘cross-identification’ may seem paradoxical, for every identification presumes a crossing of sorts, a movement toward some other site with which or by which an identification is said to take place,” they write in their preface to the volume. “But it is because this ‘crossing’ is not well understood that we underscore it through redundancy here” (3). Not insignificantly, the “Cross-Identifications” issue of *Diacritics* begins with an invitation for Martin and Butler to co-edit an issue on gay and lesbian studies, the identity-based field that, in the 1990s, metamorphoses into “queer theory,” the field whose tenuous and paradoxical relationship to identity initially inspired my dissertation project.[4] (Cross)identification and resistance to authentic identity exist in a paradoxical relation to one another: identification cannot occur without some concept of fixed identity, but the act of identification highlights the constructed-ness of identity. Cross-identification relies on the idea of an identity that one ostensibly moves across or between, while simultaneously calling into question the stability or political efficacy of identity claims. As Martin and Butler explain: “To take cross-identification as a site of departure is precisely not to take for granted the pre-given status of the terms that identifications are said to relate” (3).

Insofar as as/if criticism, in its style and method, makes visible the displacements, de-familiarizations, and mis-recognitions of identity categories, it shares an affinity with the “disidentification” later theorized by José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1994) marks an important intervention into these debates: in this influential text, Muñoz shows that identification, like identity, is itself complicated,

[4] Butler and Martin: “*Diacritics* graciously asked us to edit an issue on gay and lesbian studies, and we took the occasion to broaden the scope of that request to include work that interrogates the problem of cross-identification within and across race and postcolonial studies, gender theory, and theories of sexuality. We chose to expand our emphasis in order to avoid static conceptions of identity and political alignment. ‘Queer theory’ has promised to complicated assumptions about routes of identification and desire. We wanted to test that promise by soliciting essays that analyze critical, even surprising, boundary crossings” (3).

difficult, and always incomplete. *Disidentifications* moves away from earlier understandings of identity that reduce subjectivity to "either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self" (5). Instead, Muñoz focuses on queer strategies of performance and attachment that trouble both conceptions of subjectivity. Citing Sedgwick, he notes:

> Identification…is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history; political ideology; religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world. (8)

Interested in the limitations of both identification and identity, Muñoz describes disidentification as strategy by which "minoritarian subjects" must "negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects" (6). His approach is avowedly intersectional, focusing on cultural subjects who are queers of color, and whose performed identities and identifications "emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere" (7). The practice of this difficult and incomplete identification is, for Muñoz, a queer critical and cultural survival strategy.

Read as a slant or a suture, the slash in *as/if* denotes critical modes, like modes of cross- or dis-identification, that move across or link together desperate identity categories. Within identity studies discourse, these critical modes may seem unexpected, inappropriate, or impossible. Like a mark of poetic scansion, the slash in *as/if* both divides and binds together.[5] Read as a dividing line or a strikethrough, the slash in as/if stands for the impasses or divisions that make identification, recognition, qualification, or attachment difficult.

The slash read as an impasse also denotes the difficulty of ever writing "as" a coherent identity. In her essay *"L'Esthétique du Mal*" (2003), Barbara Johnson uses "as if" to explicate the

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[5] I am grateful to Carly B. Boxer for providing me with this metaphor.

impossibility of either full belief in or full identification with the authors or texts one encounters as a critic. Aligning herself with the anti-identitarian critiques of the subject found in poststructuralist feminism, Johnson argues that one can never read (or, for that matter, speak and write) "as" a certain authentic subject at all. In this way, the slash is comparable to the recalls the split subject "*$*" in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic work, the slashes through "*j/e*" and "*t/u*" in Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1973), and the multiple strikethroughs meant to denote concepts *sous rature* in Jacques Derrida and other post-structuralist thinkers (to name just a few examples).[6] For Johnson, reading "as if"—that is, all critical reading—constitutes "thought as a break rather than thought as a chain," because there is always a cognitive leap to be made between reading "as" oneself and inhabiting an author's objects, ideas, or position. For Johnson, reading "as if" allows for "a heuristic transference and for a transformative double consciousness at once, even though these two processes draw on the contradictory energies of belief, critique, and defense" (38). "As if" reading thus relies on a suspension of disbelief that allows for temporary suture between one's own reading position and one's object of study.

It is axiomatic to this dissertation that all literary criticism, including that which claims to write "as," constitutes writing "as if" in the Johnsonian sense. This is the case regardless of whether or not an author has a sincere or dismissive relationship to identity categories. There is no writing "as": there is simply the imperative to write "as," the performance of writing "as," or the impulse to characterize certain forms of writing as more authentic than others. The academic fantasy of writing "as" is informed by historical frameworks that produce categories of identity, and these categories attach to authors. This is simply because identity categories are historical and

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[6] Interestingly, in English, this argument can also be made on the grammatical level. The syntactical work of "as" in the construction "to read as *X*," is already ambiguous. "As" is both a preposition used in reference to a thing's function or character ("I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar") and an adverb used to compare two different but similar things in a simile ("Hop in my Chrysler, it's as big as a whale"). Put another way, any invocation of "as" also entails the already-present figurative, "as if."

structural, not personal. Individual identification is, thus in many ways, always a cross-identification. There are many ways that literary critics negotiate and perform their relationship to the identity categories into which they are interpellated. Some authors might employ strategic essentialism; others might write with unironic authenticity; some might adopt a conspicuous silence. I add *as/if criticism* to this list of options.

Distinct from these other ways of negotiating identity categories, as/if criticism seeks to make obvious that reading and writing "as" is always reading and writing "as if." Indeed, the authors I examine here in often write explicitly "as themselves"—that is, they write with a claim to the categories of race, gender, or sexuality that most frequently attach to them. This is the case, for example, when Johnson writes "as a lesbian." This writing "as" becomes writing *as-slash-if* in the moments where what should be an easy identification becomes difficult. Attempting and not quite succeeding to identify with the categories into which they have been so often hailed, Johnson casts doubt on the idea of any easy identification. At other times in this dissertation, the featured authors adopt a different, complementary, tactic. In these cases of as/if criticism, writers explicitly adopt identity categories that are counterintuitive. This strategy is more recognizable as writing "as if," in that the identifications rehearsed in the text require a greater suspension of disbelief. This is the case, for example, when Robert Reid-Pharr writes "as a lesbian."

A major claim of my project can be summarized thus: when Johnson writes "as a lesbian," and when Reid-Pharr writes "as a lesbian," their relationship to the term "lesbian" is similarly ironic, fractured, and unresolved—this despite the fact that Johnson is a woman who fucked women, and Reid-Pharr a man who fucks men. Both authors write *as/if*, which is to say that both write in a way meant to deliberately highlight that irony, fracture, and impasse. In this way, as/if criticism is more analogous to drag or blackface than it is to other types of gender expression or racial performance. As is the case with these two non-literary examples, as/if

criticism often accentuates the distance between the author/performer and the identities they perform. At the same time, this type of performance can also open up new avenues of cross-, dis-, or self-identification. Most often, it does both at once: a politically ambivalent outcome.

1.4 Negative Bonds

The slash in as/if criticism indicates neither stasis nor indifference; rather, it indicates a tenuous union of incompatible categories. In this way, the bond between "as" and "if" is, in the words of Jacob Weiner and Damon Young, a "queer bond." For Weiner and Young, what makes queer bonds queer is "a *simultaneous* adhesion and dehiscence, a centripetal pull toward the social and a radical centrifugal drive away from it" (236). I find value in remaining attentive to the ways in which this impossible simultaneity operates. Queer bonds "come into view through the isometric tension between world-making and world-shattering, naming a togetherness in failures to properly intersect, the social hailing named by recognition as well as its radical occlusion" (224). More interesting than the existence of this tension is its paradoxical mechanism: in all of these cases, it is the very impossibility of the persistence of queer sociality that is its driving force.

As/if criticism holds two opposing things—"as" and "as if"—in tension. This opposition recalls, among other things, the deep ambivalence of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's reparative mode (like other critics interested in negativity, I am more compelled by the depressive version of Klein's reparative than by its redemptive or utopian iterations, because it allows for a vision of politics that is not constructed around amelioration or repair). If the unstable join between "as" and "if" recalls depressive ambivalence, it also recalls "unbearable" sociality, what Lauren Berlant calls "that muddled middle where survival and threats to it engender social forms that transform the habitation of negativity's multiplicity, without necessarily achieving 'story'" (5).

By making visible the trouble represented by the slash, the as/if critical strategies that this dissertation names might move us toward a way of doing feminist and queer theory that, as Elizabeth Wilson writes, "offers no plans for repair except through the interpretation of our ongoing, anxious implication in envies, hostilities, and harms" (179). Much as the "unbearable" social relation is paradoxically structured around the failure of the social, so too is the queer bond between "as" and "if" propelled by "a force, at once, of incapacity and creativity" (224). Elizabeth Povinelli, in her contribution to *Queer Bonds*, puts it succinctly: "We meet where we are divided. But we are divided in a way that we can never meet" (301).

In my initial time writing and thinking about critical modes within queer theory, I was inspired by a repeated pattern, in queer criticism in particular, of persistence despite impossibility. One sees this persistence in "fractured and therefore militant" (265) politics (Sedgwick's *Tendencies*), in the mechanistic persistence of the death drive (Lee Edelman's *No Future*), in the repeated frustrations of queer failure (J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*), or in the unreasonable insistence on utopian futures (Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*). Indeed, I want to remain attentive to the ways in which the "impossible" relation has long been an important concept for both queer and feminist theory.[7] In the terms of this dissertation, persistence despite and because of impossibility manifests in the continual movement across the slash in as/if—the repeated oscillation I observe between "as" and "if" in all four of the critics I examine.

It is my hope that this negativity remains attached, like a vestigial limb, to the new version of my project as it expands beyond its queer theoretical inspirations to account for this phenomenon throughout a wide scope of feminist and queer literary criticism. Like the critics examined here, I find the kinetic energy between "as" and "if" both illuminating and invigorating.

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[7] See Jacob Weiner and Damon Young's special issue of *GLQ*, "Queer Bonds," pages 234, 235, and 239 in particular, for some further examples of the way "the impossible" remains a shared thinking point for these two often-opposed camps.

I am particularly inspired by Kadji Amin's call for a "de-idealized" version of queer studies, one that, in his words,

> adopts a form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage, refuses the repudiating operations of idealization, and acknowledges the ways in which complicity is sometimes necessary for survival. It names a form of queer inquiry, which I understand to be already under way, that offers a less binary, less repudiating account of the constitutive entanglement of queer and deviant cultures within a range of modes of social power. (11)

We can look to the 1990s for modes of critical writing and reading that perform this work. Though as/if modes of writing and reading have fallen out of favor and are harder to spot in the present moment, they might offer a blueprint for queer and feminist literary criticism moving forward. Rather than either embrace the authenticity and authority of reading "as" or an innocent and un-problematized "as if," this dissertation argues that literary criticism's greatest potential lies in its ability to linger in the difficult space between the two.

2. Gay-Male-Oriented and Now

2.1 *Tendencies'* Tendencies

Like many Duke University Press books, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Tendencies* (1993) boasts a striking cover. A photograph takes up most of the book's front matter. In it, we see a closed ticket booth fashioned out of chicken wire and unfinished wood. The setting of the photo is ambiguous, though it appears to be a rural fairground; there are pink and white trailers in the background, and a hand-painted sign announces admission prices for adults, children, and children under six. These details fade into the background in the presence of the photo's remarkable focal point, a large, flat piece of plywood propped up on the wall of the ticket booth. The painted image on the plywood is arresting: four people, absent any context, lean sharply slantwise; from left to right, a man leans in a severe diagonal line towards a child, a woman, and a man, who recoil backward at an angle complementary to their aggressor. Their mutually slanting bodies, which defy both the laws of physics and the conventions of realist painting, underscore the strange comedy of the image, and the man's and the family's exaggerated tilt contributes to the painting's absurdist, folk art charm. At the same time, that exaggeration is uncanny, even slightly unsettling. The title formatting of the book on which this photograph appears reinforces both the man's aggressive forward slant, and the family's hyperbolic withdrawal—above the image, the word "*TENDENCIES*" appears in all-caps, harshly italicized, in slender sanserif. Crack the spine, and this pattern repeats: on the inside cover, a gigantic slanting *T* towers over the rest of the title, its stem a bold black slash mark. Just in case readers did not quite pick up on the motif, on the first page of each chapter, Sedgwick's block paragraphs are justified obliquely, so that their edge forms yet another slant.

Were readers of *Tendencies* to eventually shift their focus from the book's style to its substance, they would find that these proliferating diagonal lines hint at thematic motifs throughout the collection. The diagonal lines in Sedgwick's book gesture towards chiasmus and coalition as much as they gesture towards as resistance and aversion. Like the slash mark that both divides and sutures *as/if*, these diagonal lines at various points connote rupture, barrier, or movement across, and from the first page of *Tendencies* onward, Sedgwick both theorizes and performs scenes of recognition that create fracture, reveal an impasse, or enact a crossing. Indeed, instances of recognition in Sedgwick are most often what Rita Felski calls recognition as "self-extension," rather than "self-intensification" (39). In contrast to recognition as self-intensification (that is, recognition as a one-to-one correspondence in which a reader sees her own identity reflected back unproblematically in a text), recognition as self-extension involves "coming to see aspects of oneself in what seems distant or strange" (39). In other words, the diagonal lines that repeat throughout this influential volume of queer criticism visually gesture towards Sedgwick's own repeated self-recognition across categories of analysis and identity.

Tendencies is rife with examples of "anecdotal theory": that is, it is full of literary criticism that theorizes through and with personal experience. As Jane Gallop writes in her book by the same name (1991), anecdotal theory theorizes by way of "the uncanny detail of lived experience," producing critical writing that is "both more literary and more real" than other types of criticism (2). This dual quality of anecdotal theory makes it the cousin of as/if criticism: it is both literary (as if) and real (as). Indeed, the writing in *Tendencies* often fits Gallop's description to a T; Sedgwick's prose lingers on the uncanny details and muses on the consequences of (to use Sedgwick's own phrase) the "uncanny effects" that her lived experience produces (256). The anecdotes found in *Tendencies*, however, have a more specific valence than the anecdotes that fall under Gallop's broader category, and this specificity is crucial to their status as as/if critical

strategy. Crucially, rather than stage simple or straightforward scene of recognition, Sedgwick instead arrives at her avowed identity or identifications through scenes of embarrassment.

Often, Sedgwick employs personal anecdotes to reveal both how she comes to recognize herself in text via (embarrassingly) circuitous routes, and how others (to her embarrassment) fail to recognize her the same way. Motivated by both a masochistic and sadistic pleasure, the embarrassing anecdote does something more than simply open the real world up to its readers. By calling these anecdotes "embarrassing," I do not mean to imply that the author herself is embarrassed by the stories that she tells—as will become clear, it is much more complicated than that. Rather, I simply mean to mark anecdotes that might elicit embarrassment: stories, for example, that share something over-personal, traffic in shame or humiliation, or recount an awkward failure.

In these anecdotes, Sedgwick foregrounds the rupture or barriers that she encounters in order to complicate and make more visible her attempts at critical and personal cross-identification. At times, Sedgwick makes her leaps of recognition with ease; at others, she comes up against what she calls the "aching gap in the real" (129). That Sedgwick encounters this aching gap more forcefully when she attempts to recognize herself (and be herself recognized) across race and gender speaks to how sexuality, gender, and race are differently structured. But Sedgwick's aim is not to mask these differences; rather, her aim is to bring them to light. As such, *Tendencies* provides an example *par excellence* of as/if criticism. In this first chapter, I will track how recognition, brought into the limelight by *Tendencies'* embarrassing anecdotes, works to highlight both the transitivity and the difficulty represented by the slash in as/if. The frequent occurrence of such anecdotes in *Tendencies* and elsewhere in Sedgwick's work constitutes a pattern that, when tracked, reveals a strategy of performed, calculated self-exposure that troubles

the notion of personal anecdote as authentic. Such authenticity is a key feature of the academic fantasy of reading "as"—a fantasy that as/if criticism disrupts.

2.2 Ass/if

Nowhere is Sedgwick's anecdotal as/if strategy clearer than in "A Poem is Being Written," an essay published in 1987 and later reprinted as chapter fourteen of *Tendencies*. "A Poem is Being Written" catalyzes this dissertation project not only because it holds a cherished place in my heart as my queer critical primal scene, but also because it is a textbook example of literary criticism that makes visible the difficulties of critical identity and identification. In this highly personal, theoretically ambitious article, Sedgwick analyzes several poems she herself wrote as a child in order to tell the story of her own self-extensive recognition as "homosexual reader" (more on what this means later). At first, Sedgwick's early essay might register as a simple example of reading "as." In her piece "Untitled Work, or, Speaking as a Feminist…" (1991), Nancy K. Miller's coins "reading as" to describe an uptake in so-called personal criticism that she observes in feminist writing in the decades following the 1970s. As Gallop herself acknowledges, "reading as" is a close cousin of anecdotal theory: both rely heavily on the personal. Taking her own early work and personal experience as her object, Sedgwick extends her analysis beyond and through the personal, positing literary critical and feminist theoretical conclusions alongside her own self-diagnoses. Sedgwick's essay begins with a story from childhood and moves to a story from adulthood, an organizing principle with classical psychoanalytic implication. Aware of her own essay's structural similarity to a clinical case study, Sedgwick echoes the passive grammatical construction of the title of Freud's 1919 essay "A Child is Being Beaten" in her own title. The reference frames her own essay as another case,

one that offers an explanation both of her entry into criticism and her entry into queerness.[1] The essay's psychoanalytic bent aligns it with Gallop's characterization of anecdotal theory—Gallop not only cites Freud as an early anecdotal theorist; she also directly names "A Poem Is Being Written" as an example of both Miller's "reading as" and an example of anecdotal theory (10; 164). But despite the connections between psychoanalysis, anecdotal theory, and reading as, the author of "A Poem is Being Written" often does not write "as" anything. Through a mix of the personal, the performative, and the critical, Sedgwick's embarrassing disclosures perform both openness and aggression, both breakdown and mastery, in order to expose the storyteller as also always writing "as if."

"A Poem is Being Written" is embarrassing on several levels. Sedgwick's essay showcases her juvenilia—namely, the lyric poems that she wrote as a preteen—and readers quickly learn that the young Sedgwick, though precocious, simply is not that good at writing. At the very least, she does not write from the position of "professional success and hyperconscious virtuosity" that Sedgwick attributes to herself in 1987, and her flagrant display of such bad writing reveals a vulnerable childhood self, one prone to melodrama, lyric verse, and hyperbole (110). The essay's subject matter thus already threatens its author's position as an expert. As "A Poem is Being Written" progresses, it shifts its narrative focus to Sedgwick's early experiences with disciplinary spanking. In turning to this new, no-less-embarrassing subject, Sedgwick explicitly theorizes a link between her childhood fondness for enjambed poetic verse and her childhood experience of being spanked. Sedgwick's exposed poetry parallels the exposed ass of a

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[1] This is not the only reference to the scene of psychoanalysis in Sedgwick's essay. Notably, we get one more, fictional, theatre of embarrassment, a scene from a poem Sedgwick composed in graduate school. The poem tells the story of a teacher who accidentally observes his pupil (also named "Eve") naked in her therapist's office, submitting her exposed backside in a sadomasochistic whipping scene. As fiction, the poem's pornographic tableau doesn't "properly" count as anecdote; nonetheless, that Sedgwick's imagined scene of S&M takes place in her psychoanalyst's office reveals a connection between psychoanalysis and anecdote.

beaten child, and both exposures provide the background for Sedgwick's explorations of her own current poetic and critical proclivities. In a final, spectacular pivot, Sedgwick confesses the essay's greatest scandal: by Sedgwick's own psychoanalytic self-diagnosis, her memories of corporeal punishment and poetic enjambment later manifest in her own unnamable (because gravely under-theorized) female anal eroticism.

Unlike Gallop's anecdotes, whose primary purpose is to open up theory to the "real" world of lived experience, Sedgwick's embarrassing tableux are first and foremost *scenes* that she wants to be recognized by an audience. By Sedgwick's account, the scene of spanking—a scene saturated with the excruciating libidinal excitations of humiliation, exhibitionism, pain, and pleasure—serves all at once as a site of embarrassment, vulnerability, and aggression. Writing that "[f]ortunately, the visibly chastised is by now my favorite style" (177), Sedgwick creates a theatre of embarrassment. Staging her own embarrassing stories, Sedgwick makes a scene. (I borrow the phrase "theatre of embarrassment," as well as the idea of "making a scene," from Joseph Litvak's "Making a Scene: Henry James's Theater of Embarrassment," an essay that profoundly influences Sedgwick's later work on shame).[2] In an essay published sixteen years later, Sedgwick will describe shame as *always* performative: "shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is *performance*. I mean theatrical performance" (38). The theatricality of shame complicates Gallop's notion that anecdote is always "pointed towards or rooted in the real" (3), challenging the authenticity tied to anecdotal theory's real origins. Shame is not the only affect in the background here: indeed, the temper-tantrum implications of the phrase "making a scene" additionally serve as a reminder that the original motivation for Sedgwick's piece was a call for papers for a conference at Columbia University whose theme was the "Poetics of

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[2] In particular, Litvak's chapter on James inspired Sedgwick's essay "Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel" (2003).

Anger."[3] Reading these anecdotes as staged scenes, readers are not really catching Sedgwick doing anything *but,* perhaps, acting; she is caught in the act of acting embarrassed or angry.

Shame and aggression inform Sedgwick's theories of sexuality, her literary critical practice, and her own claims to sexual and critical identity. "A Poem is Being Written" is the story of how Sedgwick becomes a critic, but more specifically, it is the story of how she becomes a male homosexual reader, in more than one sense. By her telling, this story begins with several scenes of surprising and unexpected recognition. In "A Poem is Being Written," Sedgwick narrates a process of self-discovery that begins with a sneaking suspicion, felt at age twelve, that both childhood authorities, and the authors of texts she was reading as a child, were purposefully omitting things:

> Nothing—no form of contact with people of any gender or sexuality—makes me feel so, simply, *homosexual* as the evocation of library afternoons of dead-ended searches, "wild" guesses that, as I got more experienced, turned out to be almost always right. Why, when I ask the *Britannica* about the crime of Oscar Wilde, does it tell me about "offenses under the Criminal Law Amendment Act," nowhere summarized? If information is being withheld (and to recognize even that is a skill that itself requires, and gets, development), must it not be this information? I don't know whether there can be said to be for our culture a distinctive practice of "homosexual reading," but if so, it must surely bear the fossil-marks of the whole array of evasive techniques by which the *Britannica*, the *Reader's Guide*, the wooden subject, author, and title catalogues frustrate and educate the young idea. (208)

Noting poetry and spanking's shared rhythmic and theatrical qualities, Sedgwick links her anal erotic attachments to both a cross-gender affinity with gay men, and a penchant for what she calls homosexual reading. Insofar as Sedgwick's homosexual reading consists of rooting out hidden gay male subtext (the unmentioned act of sodomy in Wilde's *Britannica* entry, for example), it constitutes a specific practice of paranoid criticism, but also of alliance: her own homosexual

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[3] See "A Poem is Being Written" acknowledgements (137).

feeling stems from her recognition of a shared suspicion.[4] Importantly, the primal scenes described in “A Poem is Being Written” thus sow the seeds for later adult symptoms, sexualities, *and* critical methods and styles.

The result of this confluence is that “A Poem is Being Written” refuses to separate the corporeal and the textual. Sedgwick devotes as much time to detailed description of her personal erotics of the ass (spanking, anal sex) as she does to describing her personal erotics of writing and reading (enjambment, criticism). Sedgwick refuses to take the parallel development of these two erotic sensibilities as pure serendipity.[5] As “A Poem is Being Written” makes abundantly clear, Sedgwick first comes to her own queer consciousness at the scene of reading, and acts on this consciousness through published critical writing:

> Along with, at any rate, my practice of homosexual reading—a well-taught skepticism about the representative adequacy of language, consorting perhaps not oddly with a pressing sense that there was something somewhere else for it to be adequate to, and with a (to me now) most imposing deferral of the question what any of this had to do with *me*—there was developing something else too, which I did not at the time think of as a practice of homosexual writing. (208, emphasis original)

“A Poem is Being Written,” in addition to being a work of criticism, is also a coming out narrative. The multiple comings out in “A Poem is Being Written” proliferate a myriad of sometimes conflicting, sometimes shifting identities. But unlike may conventional coming our stories, Sedgwick’s confessional, psychoanalytic mode allows her to “come out” as multiple identities to her readers, each time using the “[verb] as a [noun]” formula. She reads “as a poet”

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[4] The term “paranoid criticism” here describes a strain of literary criticism concerned with uncovering, extracting, or revealing something hidden about a text. For more, see Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” in *Novel Gazing* (1996). See also conclusion.

[5] Sedgwick is not the only one of her contemporaries to theorize the ass alongside paranoid literary tendencies. In *Strange Gourmets* (1997), for example, Litvak tracks the ass as it appears in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), writing that the ass in Proust functions as “a privileged site of meaning-laden involuntarity,” noting that “it is the gay ass in particular, of course, that seems most temptingly to arouse a hermeneutics of suspicion” (101). By not restricting his narrative gaze to the asses of homosexual characters, writes Litvak, Proust effectively expands the field of suspicion and ridicules in an act of critical and authorial revenge on straight society (101).

(113), needs and loves “as a woman” (129), and enjoys a sex act—anal penetration—that, she points out, is commonly referred to as “being used as a man” (129).

Sedgwick comes out in these moments, undoubtedly. But as what? As a poet? As queer? As “a feminist” with an “intensively loaded male identification” (133)? In perhaps the most climactic coming out moment in “A Poem is Being Written,” the “as a” trope proliferates, and these different ways of being, recognizing, reading, writing, and desiring become increasingly difficult to distinguish:

> In among the many ways I do identify as a woman, the identification as a gay person is a firmly male one, identification ‘as’ a gay man; and in among its tortuous and alienating paths are knit the relations, for me, of telling and of knowing (133).

Recognition, too, “is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and about how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self” (Felski, 49). The word “tortuous,” which also appears in her parenthetical explanations of her male identification (“femaleness is always (though always differently) to be looked for in the tortuousness, in the strangeness of the figure made between the flatly gendered definition from an outside view and the always more or less crooked stiles to be surveyed from an inner” [134]), makes its second debut in this coming out scene. The extra emphasis afforded by the echo of “tortuous”/”tortuousness” drives home the complicated, sometimes painful relationship to recognition that Sedgwick seeks to elucidate in “A Poem is Being Written.”

The critical method born of what Sedgwick later calls her “aggressive will-to-narrate and will-to-uncover” is not only a paranoid reading practice, but also a practical and reparative survival strategy. This point becomes apparent in one of her many parenthetical asides:

> (A will-to-live, per se, has seldom in me been more than notional, often aggressively absent: its place taken, when it is taken at all, partly by an also aggressive will-to-narrate and will-to-uncover, each with a male homosexual siting. That this is a vulnerably off-centered psychic structure—dangerous to itself, but, potentially, homophobically dangerous as well—is clear to me. The clarity of that particular danger is, I sometimes think, the most homosexual thing about me). (133)

Faced with an "aggressively absent" will to live, Sedgwick finds animating force in the process of textual detection routed through male homosexual siting (in the sense of both her critical position and her backside), a theme that resurfaces throughout *Tendencies*. In this way, the recognition Sedgwick describes squares with Felski's description of recognition through reading that offers comfort or validation: "Reading may offer a solace and relief not to be found elsewhere, confirming that I am not entirely alone, that there are others who think and feel like me. Through this experience of affiliation, I feel myself acknowledged; I am rescued for fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen" (33). What Sedgwick calls "homosexual reading" is also recognition of danger—that of homophobic violence. This shared knowledge of a particular precarity informs her cross-identification with those others for whom that danger is obvious.

In moments of greatest threat (the threat of death by suicide, for example), Sedgwick expands the category of "homosexual," opening up the possibility of a lived experience that reads more lesbian than gay male. Directly following the confession of her absent will-to-live, Sedgwick writes, "The depression of these teen years, at any rate, I survived through passionate and loving relationships with—have I mentioned this? —women" (133). Notably, Sedgwick acknowledges that the female homo*social* provides a similar psychic salve that male homosexual reading also seems to provide. Sedgwick immediately couches her potential lesbianism as a missed opportunity, even "failure":

> I have spent—wasted—a long time gazing in renewed stupefaction at the stupidity and psychic expense of my failure, during that time, to make the obvious swerve that would have connected my homosexual desire and identification with my need and love, as a woman, of women. (133)

Here, shame is a psychic expense: Sedgwick recounts her stupefied embarrassment at failing to notice the obvious. Embarrassment, here, is about her own failure to recognize something in herself.

As Robyn Wiegman and others have pointed out, the fact that Sedgwick was largely recognized as a married, heterosexual woman, and *not* as a lesbian, made her particularly susceptible to feminist criticism. Sedgwick's open admission—at conferences, in her writing, and elsewhere—that she was not a lesbian already put her at odds with many leading feminist academics at the time. In her article "Eve's Triangles, or, Queer Studies Beside Itself," Wiegman repeatedly rehearses a refrain once lobbed at Sedgwick—"*Are you a lesbian?*"—in order to draw attention to the complicated modes of allo-identification at work in her criticism. Wiegman writes specifically about a conference Sedgwick attended at Yale, recalling that

> Eve's triangulated identification as a married woman who loved and studied gay male life in the context of Western cultural organization was taken as a political as well as professional threat to feminist and lesbian feminist audiences… In the early days of institutionalizing identity-oriented knowledges, when discerning an identity object of study from the vantage point of 'being it' was what identity studies meant, Sedgwick understood well the dicey terrain in which her first book, *Between Men*, maneuvered. (58)

Sedgwick's vocal and academic interest in gay men at times exacerbated this friction, especially because she was working in a moment where lesbian feminists increasingly had to grapple with the presence of gay men in their social and intellectual milieu. And yet, in 1987, Sedgwick does not waste more time on this regret. Though she may actually regret the psychic expense of not making the lesbian connection (precisely what that would entail, she does not say), and regardless of her essay's possible annotative alliance with lesbians, Sedgwick's main goal is to plumb the rich and provocative implications of those sexual and critical recognitions that lead her to her identification with gay men.

Two qualifying moves complicate Sedgwick's already less-than-straightforward recognition rehearsed in "A Poem is Being Written." Though they are different, both betray the

complications of Sedgwick's cross-gender alliance with gay men. The first qualifying statement complicating her conjectural link between her own anal tendencies and male homosexuality comes during an explanation of why she reads "anality" as male. (Indeed, the year "A Poem is Being Written" debuted was a big year for theorists of gay male anality: Leo Bersani's field-shaping article, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," was also published 1987). As she explains, anal sex in the popular imagination is first and foremost coded male, and then almost always male homosexual:

> The same anal eroticism will propel the subject into an area of our culture where the gender dimorphism of discourse is almost un-thinkably extreme […] Aside from the well-rehearsed though controversial asymmetries between the cultural importance of (the regulation of) male homosexuality and that of lesbianism, there is the further obvious asymmetry, more important here, that female anality hasn't, to put it mildly, the representative relation to lesbianism that male anality has to male homosexuality. In fact, one of the few topoi in which the female anus ever becomes sexually visible is that of a woman's 'being used as a man,' as a receptive homosexual man or a man who is being raped. (129)

In this remarkable passage, Sedgwick insists that reading the eroticized asshole as *male* is crucial to the project of her essay.[6] At the same time, Sedgwick brings up the ever-present possibility of a lesbian anal erotic, if only through a kind of paralepsis, by telling her readers that a lesbian anal erotic is not what she is going to tell them about. She follows the above paragraph with a telling and rather teasing extra-textual annotation: "Though interestingly, it is almost only in contemporary lesbian writing (of a particular, 'politically incorrect' libertarian stamp) that there is anything informative or engaging at all about women's anuses and their pleasures" (141). Here, Sedgwick still leaves open alternate interpretations of her own sexual proclivities, even if she relegates these possibilities to the endnotes.

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[6] In doing so, Sedgwick also dismisses the possibility, for example, of cultural imaginings of the female anus as a second vagina, rather than simply a substitute of a gay man's anus. I am grateful to Calvin Hui for this observation.

Sedgwick's other major qualifying amendment in this story of anal affinities brings her otherwise muted meditations on racial or ethnic difference into sharper relief. In yet another lengthy footnote, Sedgwick muses on the difference race makes:

> I understand that there are strong cultural differences in these perceptions: for instance that Afro-American eyes find it easier to see women's bodies—and through them, women's character, their sway, their sexuality, these not being figured either as minimalness or as tight muscular control—as being strengthened, not discredited by their substance. Still, "the sexual politics of the ass are not identical to the sexual politics of the asshole": I am told, though I can't make a generalization of my own about this, that a high valuation in Afro-American culture of women's substance including the rear end coexists with an attitude toward anal eroticism that is as severe as the Euro-American. "You've got the right church," Bessie Smith sings, "but the wrong pew." (141)

Again, Sedgwick gestures towards different possible interpretations of her case study. Though she holds that the "sexual politics of the asshole" might be largely the same across race, Sedgwick nonetheless acknowledges that the "sexual politics of the ass" might be different. It is telling, here, that Sedgwick's own experiences with the pleasures of the ass, as well as the pleasures of the text, do not lead her to cross-identify—at least, not fully—with the differently-oriented, double-entendre wielding blues women to whom this footnote refers. Indeed, one might also wonder why Sedgwick only briefly touches on the possibility of black female anal pleasure.[7] Instead, Sedgwick's exploration of the ways in which her whiteness influences her understanding of her sexuality and gender hides in an annotation rather than living in the body of the essay. The result of her addendum is a small, whiplash-producing sortie into the possibility of identification across race, a dip into an imagined alternative alliance.

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[7] Though it has been a long time coming, scholarship is now pushing back against this dismissal, most notably in the work of Jennifer Nash, whose article, "Black Anality" (2014), most explicitly and directly takes up the problem of black women's anal pleasure via an analysis of contemporary pornography. Kathryn Bond Stockton, in a chapter of her book *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (2007) entitled "Bottom Values," also discusses black female anality, this time through an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1987).

Like the exposed ass, Sedgwick's possible but unfulfilled identifications themselves seem to be a site of shame or embarrassment, visible only in the endnotes or in parenthetical asides. In another enclosed parentheses, Sedgwick not only outs herself as a male-identified feminist woman writer, but also as someone who took embarrassingly long to come to that conclusion:

> (Perhaps I should say that it is not to me as a feminist that this intensively loaded male identification is most an embarrassment; no woman becomes less a woman through any amount of "male identification," to the extent that femaleness is always (though always differently) to be looked for in the tortuousness, in the strangeness of the figure made between the flatly gendered definition from an outside view and the always more or less crooked stiles to be surveyed from an inner. A male-identified woman, even if there could thoroughly be such a thing, would still be a real kind of woman just as (though far more inalterably than) an assimilated Jew is a real kind of Jew: more protected in some ways, more vulnerable in others, than those whose paths of identification have been different, but as fully of the essence of the thing) (134).

Sedgwick justifies her proudly feminist male identification via the loaded analogy of the "assimilated Jew," indirectly wiling her audience to recognize another aspect of her own identity in the process—another kind of subtle coming out. She alludes to her own Jewish identity twice in her essay, both times aligning her Jewish roots with an American middle-class "urbanity" that contributes to the particular set of childhood fixations she describes. The first mention appears in a description of childhood spanking;[8] the second, in a description of the first time she learns about male homosexuality, when her elementary school French teacher is arrested for soliciting sex from men at a local YMCA. In this later passage, especially, Sedgwick's assimilation into urbanity is, in part, brought about by *both* her language education *and* her education in matters of sexuality: "In fact, 'urbanity' itself must have been, for reasons you can already gather (secular Jewishness, the Cold War era siting, the premium on the rendering unrecognizable of violence) a

[8] "Still at times certainly, at the most memorable moments of our childlives (except that we barely remember them), suddenly within the quiet and agreeable space of the Biedermeier family culture of upwardly mobile assimilated American Jews in the 1950s there would constitute itself another, breath-holding space, a small temporary visible and glamorizing theater around the immobilized and involuntarily displayed lower body of a child" (114).

potent though not uncontested value in this family—and a badge of it, of course, the learning of French" (131). Again, the author comes out via twisted routes; she is Jewish only insofar as she recalls her family's particular journey toward assimilation into secular American urbanity/whiteness.

Beyond serving to complicate her white identity, Sedgwick's meditation on the figure of the assimilated Jew in "A Poem is Being Written" also foreshadows her later discussion of Esther in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), published three years later, in which she uses a similar analogy to describe the mechanisms of the (gay) closet. The connection hints at the ways in which "A Poem is Being Written" sets up Sedgwick's later coalitional critical strategies, and foreshadows her later embrace of the term "queer." Ahmed, in a talk-turned-blog-post titled "Sensitivity to Stigma: Eve Sedgwick and Queer of Color Critique" highlights the political and critical potential of "queer" understood this way. Drawing on Sedgwick's own passing remark, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, that her own "sensitivity to stigma" growing up as a Jewish American in the wake of World War II opened her up to identify with other stigmatized groups, and in particular with homosexual men (xviii), Ahmed argues that by conceiving of "queer" as a shared, and sometimes voluntarily assumed, identity allowed Sedgwick to forge alliances with stigmatized identities that might also be called "queer." Here, Sedgwick recognizes similar patterns of interpellation based on identification.

Sedgwick's long parenthetical also reveals her genuine anxiety regarding her own malaligned critical loyalties. Though the paragraph reports a lack of embarrassment on Sedgwick's part, the fact that she double-couches her assertion in a parenthetical aside bespeaks the same hesitation performed in her previous qualifying notes. The entire explanation is, in typical Sedgwickian fashion, verbose, and her sentence structure quite complex; there are not one, but two sets of parentheses, nestled inside each other. These stylistic choices speak to a different

kind of shame: not the staged shame of declaring an interest in spanking or anal sex, but rather the shame of not being a woman-identified feminist woman. Indeed, the phrase "male-identified woman" inverts the title of the famous manifesto, "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), that had rocked the second Congress to Unite Women with its radical lesbian message just seventeen years prior.[9] The allusion to the Radicalesbians gestures towards the greater legacy of second-wave 1970s feminism that Sedgwick finds both stifling and at the same time admirable. Following what Wendy Brown calls the "expressly political" struggle to establish and legitimize identity-based knowledges within university departments (7), the eventual legitimization of various modes of criticism which emphasized and granted more credence to a critic's experience and position opened the doors for forms of critical knowing, writing, and reading previously excluded from the academic sphere. Sedgwick is quite familiar with these modes. In her 2008 preface to *Epistemology of the Closet,* she acknowledges that her personal writing style, as well as her perspectivist critical method, stems from her feminist training: "Another aspect of *Epistemology of the Closet* that stands out on rereading is its insistent perspectivism. Along with the ready use of the first person, this may have been something learned from 1970s feminist writing" (xv). Some of the modes of feminist reading that come out of this period also greatly inform Gallop's anecdotal theory. These political struggles of the sixties and seventies ushered in the new trend of personal reading and writing that Miller tracks, Gallop celebrates, and Sedgwick appears to exemplify.

Interestingly enough, Gallop notes in her writing on Miller that this particular brand of "seventies feminism," on which many academics of her generation cut their teeth, remained quite invested in an author's avowed sexual preference as a determinant of their feminist legitimacy—a

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[9] See Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970).

litmus test which Sedgwick by her own admission would perhaps not pass. "The temptation to identify Miller's textual preference as feminist recalls the urge to identify a feminist sexual preference," write Gallop. "That tendency was all the rage in the seventies feminism that was formative for Miller and me. Many feminists (both lesbian and heterosexual) now feel that it was a mistake to attempt to label as feminist what anyone did 'in the flesh of practice'" (159). Gallop's wry observation hints at how Sedgwick's embarrassing admissions of self-recognition in gay-male-authored texts might confound the idea that reading is as straightforward as many second-wave feminists would have it.[10] In fact, Sedgwick uses the personal—the very writing "as" that certain feminist circles demanded at the time—in order to admit her own failures of personality. What she confesses in "A Poem is Being Written" does not bolster her credibility with other feminists—if anything, it places that credibility in jeopardy.

2.3 Homosexual Reading, Perverse Reading, Queer Reading

"A Poem is Being Written" complicates the idea that one could write from a stable perspective at all: the act of critical reading and writing, for Sedgwick, is an act of both excessive and perverse cross-identification, and ambiguous and paradoxical subject position. Indeed, Sedgwick's narrative blurs the distinctions between "critic" and "homosexual" precisely by treating both as tortuous identities. Even Sedgwick's self-identification in general as a "critic" is twisted and tricky: only once in "A Poem is Being Written" does Sedgwick identify as a writer of criticism, and she does so by way of fiction (in a quoted excerpt from her poem *The Long*

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[10] In addition to Sedgwick, Miller also mentions Barbara Johnson, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Smith, all of whom this dissertation features. Though she groups all of these critics and others together as examples of "personal criticism," Miller also takes care to note the differences in their approaches: Christian's "Black Feminist Process: In the Midst of…" demonstrates how Christian "thinks aloud, so to speak" (10); Sedgwick's "A Poem is Being Written" constitutes "an academic (degree-zero) anecdote from the authorizing groves of campus life" (1); Johnson's "Gender Theory and the Yale School" includes a "third-person cameo" (2); Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" involves "self-representation as political representivity," and constitutes a plea for more representation of "women… like herself—members of the black lesbian community" (2).

Decembers [1972], the self-referential character "E" is described as both a critic and a poet, but only in the wake of a telling typo: E is "'an important writer of fiction and poetry,' / of criticism and poetry, of course it is meant to say" [270]).[11] The link Sedgwick makes between literary criticism and queer experience has important implications when the essay is retroactively read as a work of queer criticism—and when its author is retroactively read as a queer critic. By specifically naming her paranoid impulse to read between the lines "homosexual reading," and subsequently labeling her own forays into both poetry and criticism "homosexual writing," Sedgwick sets the stage for her own queer literary critical practice.

About halfway through the first chapter of *Tendencies*, titled "Queer and Now," Sedgwick bombards her readers with a non-exhaustive though quite extensive list of categories that may or may not fall under the heading "queer." She writes:

> The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedoes, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or… people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such. (8)

The long list of names-that-might-mean-queer all at once signal Sedgwick's infectious deconstructive enthusiasm, her childlike eagerness, and her paranoid impulse to uncover and name—critical affects quite familiar to those who have read "A Poem Is Being Written."[12] By also naming "people able to relish, learn from, or identify with" this long list of persons as also

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[11] Throughout "A Poem is Being Written," though she identifies as a poet, reader, writer, graduate student, teacher, feminist, and critic, we might note that Sedgwick never identifies as a "theorist."

[12] It is possible to view this list in particular as a symptom of a more suspect objective, an obsessive need to get it all down, to categorize, to classify. Read this way, Sedgwick's criticism participates in the kind of naming that Foucault warns against in *History of Sexuality*: here, the long list is the tool that fixes, that controls, that polices identities via an ever-more-vigilant taxonomy. The results of such an accounting might run counter to the very anti-identitarian politics with which Sedgwick seems to align. Though it may well be the case that Sedgwick's wordiness might be motivated by a slightly troubling taxonomical impulse, this chapter focuses on how the formal qualities of such lists suggest that they are doing other, more interesting work.

queer, Sedgwick makes readerly recognition not a precursor to, but an aspect of, queer experience. In the same essay, she reiterates this point: "At any rate, becoming a perverse reader was never a matter of my condescension to texts, rather of the surplus charge of my trust in them to remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary. And this doesn't seem an unusual way for ardent reading to function in relation to queer experience" (4). When Sedgwick names herself a "perverse" reader, she reiterates the link between "queer experience" and the "ardent reading" that "A Poem is Being Written" also describes. (After all, what better image of ardent reading than young Eve scouring her *Britannica* and *Reader's Guide*?). The Pride Parade of disparate and deviant identities that Sedgwick presents to her reader performs a similar deviant pleasure to the one that "A Poem Is Being Written" narrates: that is, homosexual reading; the critical pleasure of naming, rooting out, or guessing at gayness.

The shift from the language of "gay male" or "homosexual" to "perverse" or "queer" is notable, and the use of "queer" in both the Introduction to *Tendencies* and "Queer and Now" marks Sedgwick's full embrace of the term. "A Poem is Being Written" foregrounds topics that are near and dear to queer theory's heart: sexuality, gender, pleasure, pain, shame, and performativity, to name a few. It also deconstructs the identities to which these topics attach, as is often queer theory's want. Even so, Sedgwick doesn't use the term queer in her first two widely celebrated works, *Between Men* or *Epistemology of the Closet*. This aspect of the story of queer theory's early days is well-known, and often repeated in its origin stories: the word "queer" doesn't show up really at all in these early works; it is only later, as queer theory develops into a legible field, that Sedgwick fully embraces the term. *Tendencies* is, in this regard, a turning point in Sedgwick's work.

Sedgwick writes "Queer and Now" at a time of crisis. She writes as someone worried about the precarious lives of her students and friends; she writes, too, as someone invested in

maintaining queer life. In the political climate of 1993, the stakes of "queer" are life and death. The first sentence of "Queer and Now" makes this clear enough: "I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents" (2), she writes. Citing a survey by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Sedgwick bears witness to the "indelible, but not astonishing" knowledge that gay and lesbian teens are two to three times likelier to commit suicide than their straight counterparts. Confronting these grim statistics, as well as the growing crisis of AIDS, Sedgwick invests in queer criticism and pedagogy as a survival strategy.

At the moment of Sedgwick's writing, to attach oneself to gay and lesbian criticism is to attach oneself to sexual identity categories that are stigmatized and oppressed by legal and social institutions outside and within the academic sphere. Sedgwick's pithy opening to "Gender Criticism," a short essay written for Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn's introductory compendium, *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (1992), makes this clear:

> "Gender criticism" sounds like a euphemism for something. In practice it is a euphemism for several things and more than that. One of its subtexts is gender criticism. There can be no mystery why that highly stigmatic label, though increasingly common, should be self-applied with care—however proudly—by those of us who do this scholarship… To ask students to mark their transcripts permanently with so much as the name of the subject of study could have unpredictably disabling consequences for them in the future. (271)

Here, Sedgwick slyly implies, the euphemism "gender criticism" stands in for sex and sexuality as it is lived beyond the course handbook. By Sedgwick's account, a mere interest in gender criticism *marks one* as gay—or, at least, as part of the queer-coded academic elite vilified by the Reagan-Bush culture wars, wars whose battles included both those over humanities budgets and funding for AIDS research.

In "Queer and Now," Sedgwick links her own showy, over-personal academic writing to the backlash against the university. This backlash is complicated. Sedgwick notes that antagonism

towards the humanities often stems from a resentment of an exclusive academic class. Open displays of pleasure in academic writing flaunt a rare class privilege: relatively un-alienated labor at a time when the majority of working people "struggle to carve out—barely, at great cost to themselves—the time, permission, and resources, 'after work' or instead of decently-paying work, for creativity and thought that will not be in the service of corporate profit, not structured by its rhythms," Sedgwick writes (19). "The flamboyance with which some critical writers—I'm one of them—like to laminate our most ambitious work derives something, I think, from this situation" (19). This "flamboyance" is problematically attached to Eve's (guilty) class identity, as a white-collar academic.

An exploration of class-as-identity becomes tricky in context of the history of the US academy (in which queer theory emerges as one of many "identity knowledges," granted academic legibility and status in the wake of the student movement) precisely because of the ways in which class fails to materialize as one of the identities taken up by the rise in identity studies in the 1980s. To quote Wiegman's observation, "The status of class as an object of academic inquiry is an interesting one, as it has never accrued institutional attention as an identity knowledge. In fact…identity knowledges were crafted in the divergence of race and gender from class analysis, primarily through the critical figure of Marx, giving rise to a split within left political theory that remains animated, if not at times quite toxic for understanding how structural inequalities and identities are formed today" (328). Moreover, class, as an arguably more quantifiably measurable economic category, functions slightly differently than race, gender, or sexuality in a US context. Nonetheless, class definitely also functions as a category of identity and identification. Litvak, in *Strange Gourmets* (1997), offers a critical exploration of cross-class identification very similar to Sedgwick's. As Litvak points out, a majority of critics who came of age in the 1980s were from middle-class backgrounds; writing about contemporary literary

criticism in 1997, Litvak describes the right-wing resentment of the academy as an upper-class repulsion at "middle-class sophistication" that "vulgarizes mere (i.e. aristocratic) sophistication and sophisticates mere (i.e. lower-class) vulgarity" (29). For Sedgwick, as for Litvak, the emerging criticism of the 1990s also carried with it a specifically queer stigma that fueled both homophobic and anti-intellectual political campaigns (4). Right-wing elites of the early 1990s mobilized legitimate class resentment against the academy, and as a result the rhetoric of conservatives begins to explicitly link an anti-intellectual agenda with an anti-gay agenda in debates about what and how critics should write, and what and how they should read. Indeed, open, potentially embarrassing displays of pleasure in academic writing might not even be necessary to accrue queer stigma and political backlash.

Because she remains invested in the ways representations of homosexuality are actively repressed by conservative administration, it is possible to misinterpret Sedgwick's argument as a version of what Nancy Fraser, in her well-known article "Rethinking Recognition" (2000), calls the "identity model" of the politics of recognition (108). Fraser forcefully and convincingly argues that political projects that focus on recognition often mischaracterize the mechanisms of capitalist oppression, and in so doing displace imperatives for material change. A call to focus on the ways in which specific oppressed identities are culturally misrepresented or misrecognized, writes Fraser, "equates the politics of recognition with identity politics and, in doing so, encourages both the reification of group identities ad the displacement of the politics of retribution" (113). To be sure, Sedgwick insists that cultural representation is a major part of the problem. In "Queer and Now," she argues that the attack on English and Comparative Literature departments in the 1980s and early 1990s constitutes part of a wider societal system that "wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it is getting what it wants" (3). Consider the excerpt

Sedgwick quotes from a 1990 *Newsweek* article, in which Jerry Adler laments that "under the reign of multiculturalism in colleges, 'it would not be enough for a student to refrain from insulting homosexuals… He or she would be expected to… study their literature and culture" (20). But Sedgwick's argument extends beyond crude identity politics. By Sedgwick's reckoning, such a system of invalidation and ignorance is responsible for the attacks on close reading, the defunding of AIDS research, *and* for the proliferation of gay teen suicides. In "Queer and Now," links the "anti-PC" rhetoric of books like Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (in which she appears) to "the brutality of society's big and tiny decisions, explicit and encoded ones, about which lives have or have not value"; though these decisions might *seem* immaterial, Sedgwick makes clear that such valuations apply both to the literary and to the literal, carrying "not only institutional and economic but psychic and… somatic consequences" (16). During a period when the government repeatedly denied funding to both humanities departments and FDA researchers (often justifying both decisions with the same homophobic rhetoric) media representation, economic distribution, and bio-politics appear inexorably linked.

As such, Sedgwick is not invested primarily in a politics of representation: on the contrary, she maintains that the most pressing and thought-provoking intellectual work in "gay and lesbian studies" takes place not on the level of identities, but on the formal level of language. She writes: "For me, a kind of formalism, a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhythm, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects" (9). Drawing on J.L. Austen as well as on other queer theorists (notably Judith Butler), Sedgwick writes that language, particularly the language of coming out, "can be said to produce … effects of identity, enforcement, seduction, [and] challenge." Simply put, for Sedgwick, to say "I am queer," is to become queer. Far from merely describing a politics of individual determination, though, this

formulation is much more complicated and rooted in negative repetition rather than positive affirmation:

> Both the act of coming out, and closeted-ness itself, can be taken as dramatizing certain features of linguistic performativity in ways that have broadly applicable implications. Among the striking aspects of considering closeted-ness in this framework, for instance, is that the speech act in question is a series of silences! (11)

Sedgwick's postulation is that silence can be a speech act, an astonishing assertion that retreats almost as soon as it appears. Her use of "silence" to denote the closet echoes ACT UP's famous formulation "SILENCE=DEATH," an equation which, transitively, complicates the place of death in "Queer and Now." By implicitly giving death/silence/the closet the power of a speech act, particularly alongside discussions of speech acts that declare and create one's own queerness, Sedgwick's rhetorically and critically links death with queerness, even as she explicitly and politically offers strategies to prevent queer death. Nor is close reading far behind: directly after this, Sedgwick writes, "I'm the more eager to think about performativity, too, because it may offer some ways of what *critical* writing can effect (promising? smuggling?)" (11). The immediate transition from the gay experience of closeting/outing to the experience of critical reading and writing betrays the links between death, close reading, and Sedgwick's as/if critical strategies.

To understand these links, it is important to recognize that this pleasure in finding is pleasure born of and resistant to an impending fatalist doom. Faced with the growing crisis of AIDS in the 1990s, the founders of what we today call queer theory invested in literary criticism as a means of enduring through dangerous times, and homosexual reading became a strategy of survival. It is no coincidence Sedgwick's scholarship emerges in the aftermath of the 1980s, in a climate of continued right-wing social, economic, and political attacks on women, gay men, and racial minorities. As Ellis Hanson notes, "Queer theory itself might be said to have begun as

disability studies, sparked as it was with activist energies around the AIDS crisis" (113). At the time of Sedgwick's writing, state violence blatantly relied on the invocation of certain identities (consider, for example, the Center for Disease Control's early "four H's" campaign, which warned that AIDS manifested primarily in the "high risk" groups "Haitians, hemophiliacs, homosexuals and heroin addicts").[13] As such, the term "queer" proved useful for activists in multiple instructive ways: as a reclaimed slur, it sided with perversion and pleasure rather than respectability and assimilation; as a uncertain descriptor, it disavowed identity categories while still invoking specific stigmatized sexualities.

When Sedgwick is diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991, she finds herself part of another stigmatized, precarious identity set: she, suddenly, is unwell and dying. The ever-encroaching fatality that motivates Sedgwick's breathless, eager wordiness is driven by the crisis of AIDS, but also by Sedgwick's personal encounter with her own impending death. Sedgwick's unrelenting clauses leave readers gasping, asthmatic, plagued with a literary fatigue that echoes (in a small way) the very fatigue Sedgwick discusses with regard to her own cancer. Consider, for example, the end of "Queer and Now"—a breathless list of grievances, whose semicolons stitch together what might otherwise be seen as disparate problems:

> A thousand things make it impossible to mistake the verdict on queer lives and on woman's lives, as on the lives of those who are poor or are not white. The hecatombs of queer youth' a decade squandered in a killing inaction on AIDS; the rapacious seizure from women of our defense against forced childbirth; tens of millions of adults and children excluded from the health care economy; treatment of homeless people as unsanitary refuse to be dealt with by periodic 'sweeps'; refusal of condoms in prisons; persecution of needle exchange programs; denial and trivialization of histories of racism; or merely the pivot of a disavowing pronoun in a newspaper editorial: such things as these are facts, but at the same time they are piercing or murmuring voices in the heads of those of us struggling to marshal 'our' resources against illness, dread, and devaluation. (16-17)

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[13]Eric Washington, "The AIDS Epidemic Has Always Been Defined by What We Don't Know," *Colorlines.com* (December 10, 2010).

Here, Sedgwick describes a vast network of different but interrelated vectors of oppression. In doing so, Sedgwick models what Fraser names the "status model" of the politics of recognition, one that "understands social justice as encompassing two analytically distinct dimensions: a dimension of recognition, which concerns the effects of institutionalized meanings and norms on the relative standing of social actors; and a dimension of distribution, which involves the allocation of disposable resources to social actor" (116). As such, the status model of recognition "also avoids reifying group identities: as we saw, what requires recognition in this account is not group-specific identity but status of individuals as full partners in social interaction (116). Sedgwick's list also supports Ahmed's claim that *Epistemology*, but also Sedgwick's more generally, "helps us to realize that a critique of the universalizing of stigma, a critique of the assumption that stigma provides a common affective horizon, does not mean that we have to think of histories of racial and sexual stigma as being apart" (n.p.). Such a strategy not only critically challenges the political power structures invested in keeping these phenomena separate, but also (in its excessive and unabashed style) challenges the political power structures leading the "anti-PC" campaign of the 80s and 90s.

Sedgwick's own terminal illness allows for another node of shared identification with many of the gay men she knows, who are diagnosed with AIDS around the same period. Her recognition of mutual suffering at the hands of the state recalls the politics of solidarity-via-impending-death that Jeff Nunokawa, in his essay "Queer Theory: Postmortem" (2015), somewhat nostalgically describes:

> What I learned best from ACT UP was detached as much from the traditional wisdom, so routinely impeached now, which prefers reproduction as the instrument by which societies defy the ontological fact of death, as from the more obviously admirable coalition that did battle with the political causes of how many unnecessary deaths, that noble coalition under whose banner so many different kinds of people gathered (561).

Caught in a double-bind—that is, wanting to push back against an identity-specific government AIDS discourse, while still addressing the fact that the vast majority of those dying of AIDS were gay men—AIDS advocates could employ "queer" both as a universalizing and minoritizing term of address.

Though they may seem unrelated, the fact that AIDS and the academic rise of pose-structuralism temporally overlap has implications for US queer literary criticism. Sedgwick's exhaustive style recalls what Sedgwick calls "the phenomenology of life-threatening illness," a phenomenology she links, also, with the critical practice of deconstruction (13).[14] Writing that "it's hard not to think of this continuing experience [of breast cancer] as, among other things, an adventure in deconstruction," Sedgwick explains in a footnote that "I came to my encounter with breast cancer not as a member of a creedal sect of 'deconstructionists' but as someone who needed all the cognitive skills she could get. I found, as often before, that I had some good and relevant ones from my deconstructive training" (12). In "Queer and Now," though she disavows it in this footnote, Sedgwick nevertheless marks herself as one of a number of queer close readers who came of age in the moment of US deconstruction, as someone who trained at Yale in the 1980s. She thus reminds us that, in addition to belonging to the generation hit hardest by AIDS, Sedgwick also belongs to the generation that witnessed firsthand the US academy's so-called "turn to theory."

Just as the AIDS epidemic worked to change academic ideas of identity—particularly with regard to the rise of queer literary criticism in the American academy—so too did post-

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[14]Wiegman, writing about *Epistemology of the Closet*, echoes this point, arguing that *Epistemology* betrays "an appetite for contradiction, incoherence, and the political double-bind—all figures of thought that demonstrate Sedgwick's investment in a deconstructive methodology that confounds, even as it invites, speculation on the agency of criticism as a political practice" (51).

structuralist thought influence the AIDS activist movement.[15] Nunokawa describes the ways in which poststructuralist thought informed and electrified queer AIDS activism:

> [W]hat came to be called "queer theory" didn't begin with ACT UP, but man did it get a major jolt there. Anyone around for those weekly meetings at the New York Gay and Lesbian Community Center from the late 1980s to the early 1990s will recall the spectacular charge the fervid energies of political activism gave to the (already) late deconstruction that was the going theoretical thing then. Those of us who flocked there from college libraries and classrooms will remember the buzz of phrases like "an epidemic of signification," and the train of poststructuralist thought heralded by them, a train of thought whose electrification during the state of emergency that drew us all together was so well advertised in academic circles and journals that their mention even at this late date is probably enough to recall all the excitement that surrounded them. (554)

Faced with the crisis of mass death, activist groups attempted to build solidarity amongst disparate identities by uniting under the very stigma that allowed for government dismissal of mass death. The strategy is not unlike what Felski describes in her analysis of recognition as facilitated by modernist novels, in which "acknowledgement is oriented not around a sense of shared identity, but an apprehension of a negative commonality based on a parallel history of interpretive misteps and mishaps" (42). Seeking to combat the right's effort to label AIDS a "gay disease," groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation employed "queer" as a strategically anti-identitarian term (one that universalized AIDS as a disease anyone, not just gay men, could contract) while simultaneously encouraging a cross-identificatory coalitional politics (in which various minoritized groups together via their mutual vulnerability to the Reagan and Bush administration's genocidal AIDS policies). In short, the lessons learned from the different kind of coalitional politics presented by AIDS activism informed queer theory's anti-social, anti-reproductive, and anti-identitarian sensibilities.

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[15] For more on the relation between queer criticism and AIDS activism, see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996), and Erin J. Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (2014). See also chapter four of this dissertation.

2.4 White Slashes

The final chapter of *Tendencies*, “White Glasses,” preemptively memorializes Sedgwick’s then-dying friend Michael Lynch, while also laying out a theory of the cross-identificatory politics of recognition that the AIDS crisis engenders. “White Glasses” is but one example in myriad of Sedgwickian memorials. As Ellis Hanson has recently pointed out, “for a literary critical publishing with university presses, [Sedgwick] has offered us a surprising number of academic yet very personal elegies, and queer ones at that, for men who had little or no future: for Divine, Michael Lynch, Craig Owens, and Gary Fisher” (107). So prevalent is this pattern that, Hanson later quips, “Most of *Tendencies* could easily have been published under the title *Let Us Now Praise Dead Gay Men*” (107). Unlike these other examples, however, “White Glasses” contains an important shift in Sedgwick’s language: whereas previously Sedgwick had written of her identification, in “White Glasses,” she writes about her identity:

> The stubborn magical defiance I have learned (I *sometimes* feel I have succeeded in learning) in forging a habitable identity as a fat woman is also what has enabled the series of uncanny effects around these white glasses; uncanny effects that have been so formative of my—shall I call it my identification? Dare I, after this half-decade, call it with all of a fat *woman*’s defiance, my identity?—as a gay man. (256, emphasis original)

Insisting that her audience recognize her asserted identity, Sedgwick writes *as/if*. Writing as a fat woman, but also as a gay man, Sedgwick defiantly dares her audience: I too am a gay man; just try to contradict me.[16] This important critical move, made early on in the essay, both enacts the queer performativity outlined in “Queer and Now,” and makes a claim to recognition (as a gay man) that disrupts the identity category that she is most likely be recognized as (a fat woman).

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[16] For more on fat, identity, gender, and sexuality, see chapter fifteen of *Tendencies,* “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” written with Michael Moon. See also Lucas Crawford’s recent article, “Slender Trouble: From Berlant's Cruel Figuring of Figure to Sedgwick's Fat Presence” (2017).

Stopped short by both her own gendered female body *and* her own racialized white skin, as well as by the histories of subordination and domination they both cite, Sedgwick confronts the limits of her own self-recognition in the imagined misinterpretation of her white frames. By no coincidence, "White Glasses" also traffics heavily in anecdote. Ruminating on the white glasses she and Michael both wear, Sedgwick, explores the "uncanny effects" of their shared fashion choice (256). For Sedgwick, Lynch's flashy white frames symbolize both the possibility of coalition based on unexpected self-recognition, *and* the rupture of misrecognition. Put in terms of *as/if*: the frames are both slash-as-connection and slash-as-barrier. While on the one hand her glasses constitute a shared point of identificatory connection between her and Lynch—to the point where, in her words, "It sometimes amazes me that anyone can tell us apart" (257)—on the other hand this identification is nonetheless made problematic, even rendered invisible and impotent, by the constraints of social context, connotation, and lived embodiment. In the same breath, Sedgwick both notes that white glasses mean something different on a woman than on a man ("In a place where it doesn't belong, on Michael, that same pastel remains a flaming signifier" [255]), and also observes that it is not just on a woman, but on a *white* woman in particular, that white glasses appear particularly boring ("White the pastel sinks banally and invisibly into the camouflage of a femininity, on a woman, a white woman" [255]). Though she refers to Lynch simply as "a man," Sedgwick uses the phrase "a white woman" to describe herself twice. The first is quoted above. The second, from the following paragraph, elaborates her frustration with the way her whiteness erases the subversive power she wants to grant her fashion choice.[17] White, Sedgwick explains, is also "the zero-degree no-color of (not the skin of

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[17] "A white woman wearing white: the ruly ordinariness of this sight makes invisible the corrosive aggression that white also is: as the blaze of mourning, the opacity of loss, the opacity loss installs within ourselves and our vision, the unreconciled and irreconcilably incendiary energies streaming through that subtractive gap, that ragged scar of meaning, regard, address" (255).

Europeans themselves but) the abstractive ideology of European domination" (255). The fact that "white glasses" can signify both flaming radicality and complicit normality is testament to the fact that position, identity, material condition, history, embodiment, and social interpellation complicate and at times undermine the coalitional or cross-identificatory politics most celebrated by Sedgwick's brand of queer theory and queer activism.

Perhaps because Sedgwick experiences the frustrations of misrecognition in this way, "White Glasses" also conceives of and identifies possible catalysts of recognition that are not bound to reified identity categories such as gender, sexuality, or race. Consider, for example, Sedgwick's discussion of the mutual ways she and Michael connected:

> …[O]ur most durable points of reference were lesbian. My favorite picture of Michael was taken in Willa Cather's bed. We are both obsessed with Emily Dickinson. Tokens, readings, pilgrimages, impersonations around Cather, Dickinson, and our other lesbian ego ideals shape and punctuate our history. The first thing Michael did after my diagnosis in February was to bundle into the mail to me a blanket that has often comforted me at his house—a blanket whose meaning to him is its association with the schoolteacher aunt whose bed he used to lie in in childhood, sandwich in the crack between her and her lifelong companion, wondering whether (after all, he was adopted) it might not be this Boston marriage whose offspring he somehow really, naturally was. If what is at work here is an identification that falls across gender, it falls no less around sexualities, across 'perversions.' And across the ontological crack between the living and the dead. (257)

The inclusion of these various other forms of connection also hint at the ways in which Sedgwick's project extends beyond queer criticism and into other identity knowledge fields. The proliferation of possible opportunities for recognition in Sedgwick parallels the proliferation of sexual identities and ways of thinking sexuality beyond object-choice that can be found throughout her work, and in turn lead to partnerships that cross "perversions" (lesbianism, gayness); that cross states of health ("healthy," sick); that cross terminal illnesses (breast cancer, AIDS); and even that cross states of being (living, dead).

Even still, Sedgwick's work at the time of *Tendencies* persistently reminds its readers that attempts at coalitional connection via mutual recognition is very often thwarted by the failure to

be recognized. Sedgwick theorizes the perils of recognition as a political strategy in an essay published in a multi-authored collection the same year as *Tendencies*, and later re-published in a part in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003). The essay, titled "Socratic Raptures, Socratic Ruptures: Notes toward Queer Performativity" (retitled simply "Interlude, Pedagogic" eleven years later) recalls a rally Sedgwick attended during her time at Duke University. Once more employing embarrassing anecdote, Sedgwick recollects how she and some of her colleagues gathered alongside members of a local Ad Hoc Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, along with allies from the ACT UP-Triangle chapter, to demonstrate against a local PBS news station for censoring a scheduled airing of Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989), a documentary on black gay men in the US. The protest aimed to address the urgent need for black queer representation in the media at the moment of AIDS, and more specifically in a moment where willful ignorance of already hyper-vulnerable populations amounted to the state-sanctioned murder of black gay men at an unprecedented rate. As Sedgwick notes, the strategy of the protest was twofold: first, to "shame" University of North Carolina PBS into airing the documentary, and second, to "smuggle" black queer bodies into the daily news cycle by virtue of the media spectacle of the protesters themselves:

> With the force of our bodies, however, and in that sense performativly, our object was not merely to demand representation, representation elsewhere, but ourselves to give, to *be* representation: somehow to smuggle into the prohibitive airwaves some version of the apparently unrepresentably dangerous and endangered conjunction, queer and black… Smuggling, performatively: 'Present! *Ecce homo*'—a self-validating, hence self-referential form of meaning guaranteed by its relation to embodiment. (127)

The strategy of "smuggling," for Sedgwick, is a quintessential example of the performative; it is also an example of the kind of politics of recognition that Sedgwick argues for in "Queer and Now." As such, it holds for Sedgwick the potential for queer resistance to the censoring and

genocidal regimes of governmentality that seek to erase not only representations of certain identities, but the people to whom those identities attach.

Despite the resistant performative potential she attributes to such strategies of recognition, Sedgwick soon finds, again, that the gap between the "as" and the "if" is harder to bridge than she and her fellow protestors might yearningly hope:

> At the same time, our 'smuggling' activity of embodiment, however self-referential, could boast of no autonomy from the oblique circuits of representation. *At least* because the majority of our smuggling-intent bodies were not themselves black, many of us who had so much need to make a new space for black queer representation were haplessly embroiled in the process of reference: reference to other bodies standing beside our own, to the words on our placards, to what we could only hope would be the sufficiently substantial sense—if, indeed, even *we* understood it rightly—of our own intent (126).

Sedgwick's anecdote ultimately demonstrates that the different but mutually informed visual coding systems used to enforce race and gender (in the US; at the time of Sedgwick's writing) make Sedgwick's easy jump between recognizing a part of herself in the black gay men for which she advocates, and being recognized as one of them much more difficult. Once again, the gap occurs on the level of Sedgwick's own embodied, socially positioned race and gender. Her white female body, to the reporters and the general public, marks her status as a white straight woman, which throws a wrench in her plan to performatively "smuggle" images of black queer bodies onto the airwaves.

The haplessness of identity's reliance on reference becomes abundantly clear when, after standing for some time in Durham's stifling summer heat, Sedgwick faints and creates a separate spectacle of her own. Reflecting on the event, Sedgwick imagines the reporters and medical responders trying to understand the sight of a white, fat, "weirdly bald" female cancer patient laying unconscious in the middle of the rally with an angry sign, an "African hat," and a black "SILENCE=DEATH" t-shirt (32). The scene, and the confusion of those responding to it, condenses the complications and confusions that trouble both identity and cross-identification.

Sedgwick calls these complications "displacements," listing them in an extended parenthetical that names the ways in which her attempted identifications fail to line up with her perceived identity:

> (Displacements: the white skin of someone to whom black queer invisibility had come to feel—partly through representational work like *Tongues Untied*, partly in the brutalities of every day's paper, partly through transferentially charged interactions with students—like an aching gap in the real; the legible bodily stigma not of AIDS but of a 'female' cancer whose lessons for living powerfully with I found myself, at the time, learning largely from men with AIDS; the defamiliarization and indeed the gaps of de-recognition toward my 'own' 'female' 'white' body, experienced under the pressure of amputation and prosthesis, of drugs, of the gender-imploding experience of female baldness; the way in which, whatever one's privilege, a person living with a grave disease in this particular culture is inducted ever more consciously, ever more needily, yet with ever more profound and transformative revulsion into the manglingly differential world of health care under American capitalism). (129)

Interestingly, the last extended clause of this long sentence ("the way in which, whatever one's privilege, a person living with a grave disease in this particular culture is inducted ever more consciously, ever more needily, yet with ever more profound and transformative revulsion into the manglingly differential world of health care under American capitalism") also appears, word-for-word, in one of the last sections of "White Glasses" (261). This suggests a stronger connection between the "displacements" theorized in "Socratic Raptures, Socratic Ruptures" and the recognitions theorized in the final chapter of *Tendencies*. Sedgwick's "displacement," experienced in the space of the gap between racial and gender identification and racial and gender identity, refuses to gloss over the differences identity discourse produces. This is, somewhat counter-intuitively, Sedgwick's coalitional strategy: the very differences she highlights are the result of and therefore reveal violent systems whose effects, though felt differently, are felt by everyone.

2.5 Queer Bonds

While researching an early version of this chapter, I was caught by surprise by the dedication at the start of Gallop's *Anecdotal Theory*, a dedication that made me laugh out loud: "To Joe Litvak—*mon semblable, mon frère,* my ideal reader—who gave me in advance the dream response that made it all worthwhile." It also made me blush. The sudden appearance of my former teacher—not just a former teacher, but the very person who had introduced me to Sedgwick's work in the first place, in the "Becoming a Critic" class mentioned in my Introduction—occasioned both immense pleasure and acute embarrassment. My mortification, no doubt, stemmed in part from the fact that I was slightly blindsided by the strength of my own feeling, that is, the heady rush of nostalgia and delight the familiar name occasioned. But my discovery of Gallop's dedication was also embarrassing because it betrayed the extreme claustrophobia of my own discipline. When they reveal themselves without warning, such tightly-knit attachments can be powerfully disorienting: Gallop's short dedication pitched me suddenly into the vertigo of queer theory's disciplinary and erotic structures, a quasi-incestuous field of circulating reference. At the same time, such moments are profoundly orienting, in that they bring my own cathexis starkly and embarrassingly into focus. The jerk of the heart that reading my past professor's name in Gallop's book occasioned in me served as a reminder that this first chapter, and the chapters to follow, are motivated and informed by my own complicated recognitions, identifications, and attachments.

The story that begins this dissertation—that is, the story of my own first encounter with Sedgwick's "A Poem Is Being Written"—is not an origin story; it is not necessarily about the root of these recognitions, identifications, and attachments. But it is one of many primal scenes, and as such reveals some things about the conditions under which such recognitions can and do take place. Along with many other reasons, I suspect part of my early enthusiasm for "A Poem is

Being Written" resulted from the thrill of discovering that "queer critic" was something one could be, and my subsequent desire to occupy that position. As Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young observe in their introduction to the 2011 *GLQ* special issue, *Queer Bonds*:

> The two of us came of intellectual age a time when queer theory did not name a radical repudiation of—but rather had carved out a more or less prestigious place within—the academy… For all the sexism, racism, and occasionally overt homophobia we still face in the academy, there do exist spaces (*GLQ* included) where leading an explicitly queer intellectual life in print as a mode of professional advancement names an institutionally viable and socially intelligible path across the profession. (230)

I am in much the same boat as Weiner and Young, and because of this, I first read Sedgwick within an institution that wholly recognized queer theory as a legitimate field of knowledge production. Presented with the identity "queer critic," in the context of Professor Litvak's undergraduate class, I could read myself into Sedgwick's text without feeling too much displacement, save that of the unbridgeable gap of generational difference.

It is now clear to me the initial recognition I felt reading Sedgwick's essay was in part predicted on my (and my professor's) recognition of her as a queer literary critic. But this label also occludes Sedgwick's initial self-identification as a *feminist* critic and scholar. Indeed, Sedgwick's first book dealing primarily with homosexuality, *Between Men* (1985), bills itself as first and foremost a work of feminist literary criticism.[18] Its author, likewise, identifies herself as a feminist critic. Sedgwick forges these identifications via both personal and critical recognitions: in *Between Men*, she both identifies "[a]s a woman and a feminist writing (in part) about male homosexuality" (20), and claims that her project addresses "a dialectic within feminist theory

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[18] In a new preface to *Between Men* in 2003, Sedgwick confirms that she had originally conceived of the book as a feminist project. Sedgwick also envisioned a primarily female audience, comprised of primarily feminist scholars, as her book's main audience: *"Between Men* intended two main interventions. The most immediate audience I had in mind was other feminist scholars" (xviii).

between more or less historicizing views of the oppression of women" (13).[19] As this chapter has taken pains to show, Sedgwick's refusal to perform an academically and politically viable identity within feminist theory is the very thing that troubles her relationship to the field, and to the identity "feminist critic." My identification with Sedgwick was not only made *queer* because her critical identity had been recast from that of feminist critic; it was also in some part made *possible* by that very recasting. The non-coextensive nature of feminist literary criticism and queer literary criticism is significant, and has by now been rehearsed in numerous and various iterations.[20] The fact that I came to know Sedgwick as a queer critic and not—at least, not primarily—as a feminist critic speaks to how her multiple and cross-identifications are somehow illegible or otherwise incompatible within the field of feminist theory.

As several scholars have by now reiterated, the turn from "gay male" / "male homosexual" to "queer" in Sedgwick's work had consequences for both queer theory and Sedgwick's reception within the academy. Wiegman points out that, in a climate quite suspicious of Sedgwick's non-lesbian identity, the self-assigned identity designation "queer" functioned "*as a defense* against the charge of appropriation, inauthenticity, and heterosexual complicity" (56). The term "queer" thus takes on an anti-identitarian charge.[21] In an angry and illuminating

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[19] Although *Between Men* lays out a theory of homosociality and is no doubt an influence on queer literary criticism to this day, queer theorists typically cite Sedgwick's subsequent book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), as signaling the advent of their field (along with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, published the same year). See my next chapter for more on the status of this work, as well as Sedgwick's subsequent book *Tendencies* (1993), with regard to feminist theory.

[20] Consider, for example Gayle Rubin's disarticulation of gender and sex in "Thinking Sex" (1984), or, Axiom #2 in Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*: "The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry" (27).

[21] I specifically use "anti-identitarian" here, and not "anti-normative." Only later does anti-identitarianism become so fiercely wed to the anti-normative. Ironically, a new identitarian litmus test has calcified within queer theory. Now, Wiegman and other argue, one's political legitimacy relies on one's "anti-normative" credentials. This has important implications for the field today, and for how the field understands Sedgwick's work. Writes Wiegman:

> If, today, we consider [Sedgwick] to be a foundational figure in the field *and* if we consider queer studies to be premised on an opposition to identity-oriented thought, this twin billing is possible only because the struggles over Sedgwick's identity have been largely muted by casting the early demand on her to be a lesbian as decidedly different from the demand the field now exerts on practitioners to claim antinormativity

contribution to the first annual "Honoring Eve" conference (held just after Sedgwick's death from breast cancer in 2006), Lee Edelman argues that one effect of the switch from "gay male-oriented analysis" to "queer theory" has been the elision of specific differences of gender and sexuality. Edelman characterizes Sedgwick's continued attention to, theorization of, and orientation toward gay men and gay male structures of desire as a substitution: her theoretical focus replaces her own desire, figure, and name with the desires, figures, and names of gay men. This substitution allows her to become a knowing and powerful subject, despite her claim to a methodology that resists the mastery of "knowing." Similarly, Edelman argues, the substitution of "queer theory" in place of the earlier and more specific formula "gay male oriented analysis" allows feminism and queer theory to exist in a more peaceable relation:

> The rubric assigned to this panel, 'Feminism and Queer Theory,' performs, in its blandly copulative way, a violence against which the passion—and not just the keen *intellectual* passion—unleashed in *Epistemology of the Closet* takes aim from the very outset. The snugness of relation in the pairing that lets these two, or perhaps these multiples, here called 'feminism' and 'queer theory,' a term that never appears in the book, for what Sedgwick calls a 'gay-male-oriented' or 'antihomophobic' analysis positioned explicitly in a troubled and troubling relation to feminist discourse. There are reasons, of course, why fminism can couple more comfortably with queer theory than with a 'gay male-oriented' analysis. The latter would foreground divisions (between male and female, between gender and sexuality) while the former suggests more pacific or even reparative encounter. (185)

Edelman's valuable, if vitriolic, essay illuminates a troubling tendency of queer theory to mythologize its inception, and I agree with his assessment that Sedgwick's older phrase, "gay-

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as the epistemological and political value of the designation *queer*. As strange as it might now seem, *queer* amassed power in Sedgwick's work *as a defense* against the charge of appropriation, inauthenticity, and heterosexual complicity, providing the framework for distinctions that would be as important to her own position in the field as they would become to the field's institutional self-definition as an anti-identitarian and antinormative project. For in "valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with one another," Sedgwick was able to distinguish her identificatory relations with gay men from the institutions of marriage and heterosexuality to which the question, "Are you a lesbian?" worked to keep her bound. (56)

male oriented analysis," does more to heighten divisions that the new and more capacious formula, "queer theory," sometimes elides. In many ways, "queer theory" establishes itself precisely as a break from feminism, or at least as something related to but distinct from feminism.[22] Replacing the earlier formulas "gay male oriented analysis," "antihomophobic reading," and "homosexual reading" with "queer theory," the genesis story that queer theory tells itself often runs the risk of erasing the specificities of the field's arrival.

Rather than chastise Sedgwick for an appropriative or closeted critical desire, though, I am much more inclined to take seriously the implications of the genealogy that Edelman lays bare. What would it mean to take seriously a genealogy that names the phrase "queer theory" as not the salve for, but the inheritor of, reading strategies that bring difference and division to the fore? In other words, I question whether the "queer" that Sedgwick invokes in *Tendencies*'s first chapter is the same "queer" that Edelman is thinking of, the "queer" that is employed today: that is, as either a stand-in for anti-normative or radical identity, or as a universalizing catch-all for perverse or stigmatized sexualities. Though these valences of "queer" are undoubtedly present in *Tendencies*, Sedgwick also uses "queer" to mean something quite different. As the start of this chapter has already pointed out, *Tendencies* is also interested in the "queer" that shares its etymological rooms in *crossing*. "Queer," in *Tendencies*, does not replace, cover up, or substitute Sedgwick's problematic gay-male orientation; rather, it precisely names the discomfort felt in this relation. This more or less abandoned version of "queer," so prominent in Sedgwick's 1993

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[22] For perhaps the most famous contemporary articulation of these divides, see Ian Halley's *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (2008). For a response to Halley and another argument outlining how queer theory and feminism diverge, overlap, and inform each other, see Wiegman, "Telling Time: Where Feminism and Queer Theory Diverge," (*Object Lessons*, 2014). On Sedgwick's deliberate attempts toward a more "pacific" relation between the two, see Ellis Hanson's take on Sedgwick's memorial to Craig Owens (another chapter of *Tendencies*): "She also allegorizes the academic breach that she and Owens are notable for trying to repair, the one between feminists and gay men, or in a more institutional sense, the disconnection between women's studies and gay studies that found a powerful degree of resolution in queer theory. Here was a queer man into feminists and a feminist into queer men. They did not just write about it, they embodied it together, a reparative aspiration to a certain wholeness and community that did not exist before" (108).

collection, revitalizes a way of doing feminist and queer criticism that does, in fact, privilege division.

In her book's forward, "T Times," Sedgwick defines queer as rooted in the same kinds of cross-identifications that structure her readerly recognition in "A Poem Is Being Written." She gets at this definition with yet another anecdote:

> At the 1992 gay pride parade in New York City, there was a handsome, intensely muscular man in full leather regalia, sporting on his distended chest a T-shirt that read, KEEP YOUR LAWS OFF MY UTERUS. The two popular READ MY LIPS T-shirts marketed by ACT UP were also in evidence, and by the thousands. But for the first time it was largely gay men who were wearing the version of the shirt that features two turn-of-the-century women in a passionate clinch. Most of the people wearing the version with the osculating male sailors, on the other hand, were lesbians. FAGGOT and BIG FAG were the T-shirt legends self-applied by many, many women; DYKE and the more topical LICK BUSH by many, many men… And everywhere at the march, on women and on men, there were T-shirts that said, simply: QUEER. (xi)

Throwing her audience directly into a bustling and angry crowd, Sedgwick underscores the violent immediacy of the moment—the crisis of AIDS—at the same time as she describes the coalitional politic engendered by that crisis. As Sedgwick goes on to explain, the cross-gender, cross-sexuality identification that she observes at the gay pride parade in New York epitomizes an aspect of "queer" that she means to focus on in *Tendencies*. "Titles and subtitles that at various times I've attached to the essays in *Tendencies* tend toward 'across' formulations: *across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across 'perversions,'*" she writes. "The word 'queer' itself," she observes at one point in her introduction, "means *across"* (xii, emphasis original). By beginning with a memory of the t-shirted ACT UP activists (of which she was one), Sedgwick links "queer" as an political rallying cry to "queer" as an individual identification to "queer" as a theoretical rubric, enacting yet another crossing: this time, across activist, personal, and academic spheres. The contradictions and tensions of queer, exemplified by as/if criticism of the AIDS and post-

AIDS era, thus provide an alternative strategy to both reductive identity politics and politics that ignores identity.

As the threat of AIDS has—at least, in public perception—shifted from immediate death to long-term illness, conceptions of queer that emerged in the 1990s have also shifted.[23] In "Eve's Triangles," Wiegman reminds her readers that when "the normalization of AIDS remained a cogent and much needed political goal, Sedgwick renewed the call for a 'queer analysis, not a strictly gay one,' to address a 'disease that respects no simple boundaries of identity'" (202). Attempting to delink antinormativity from anti-identitarianism, Wiegman reads this particular invocation of "queer analysis" not as a renewed commitment to anti-normative" political projects in the post-AIDS-crisis moment, but rather as "confrontation with convergences" (50). As this chapter has sought to show, Sedgwick stages those very confrontations by theorizing recognition through her own embarrassing anecdotes. Writing *Tendencies* in the moment of reactionary rule, Sedgwick defines and implements a critical practice. This critical reading practice, which she names "homosexual reading," exemplifies recognition as a mode of as/if criticism. In a present stagnated both by identity politics and its backlash, Sedgwick's as/if criticism offers a critical approach that acknowledges the difficulties produced, but that is not immediately foreclosed, by what or who we supposedly are. A straight woman who nonetheless self-identified with the desires and struggles of gay men, Sedgwick sought to "smuggle" queerness into the texts she read, oscillating between being read in the world as a straight woman and reading and theorizing as if a gay man. By making space for queerness in her objects of study, in her classes, and in her scholarly work, Sedgwick championed a literary critical practice that fought back against the

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[23]The "public perception" part of this sentence is crucial. For a good treatment of how the ongoing AIDS crisis has faded into the background of queer theoretical debates, see John Petrus, "Discussing the Undiscussable: Reflecting on the 'End' of AIDS" (2019).

silencing violence of both popular media and the state. Her embarrassing anecdotes rely on the assumption of a personal writing position, while also revealing the messy business of identity.

Sedgwick ends "White Glasses" with a meditation not on Michael's fashionable frames, a symbol both intimate and personal, but with the AIDS quilt, a symbol both gut-wrenchingly colossal and quite explicitly political. Just as Sedgwick will describe the AIDS quilt as one representation of "a mill of identities crossed by desires crossed by identifications," so too does her own "personal criticism" represent these multiple crossings in the name of a coalitional politics. In Sedgwick's view, the individual memorials on each square of the quilt, rather than representing specific identities, instead represent a myriad of shifting occupations of identity and voice ("in the panels of the quilt, I see that anyone, living or dead, may occupy the position of the speaker, the spoken to, the spoken about" [264]). The personal ability of "anyone" to occupy the position of speaker translates to a political ability to militarize across difference: "Churned out of this mill of identities crossed by desires crossed by identifications is, it seems—it certainly seemed in October 1987—a fractured and *therefore* militant body of queer rebellion" (265, emphasis original).

On the one hand, Sedgwick's "deferral" of the question of her own identity is not unlike the suspension of belief crucial to Johnson's "as if" reading, and has similar effects. On the other, the "fracture" that Sedgwick names is not unlike Johnson's "break"; it is the slash that both holds together and divides the "as" from "queer" as a term that highlights both the necessity and the limits of that deferral—in other words, as a term that points to the perverse but productive difficulty of difference—Sedgwick draws her readers' attention to the impasses produced by her circuitous routes of recognition, and the repeated failure of her audience to recognize those routes as valid. Working to expose the ways in which her own identity is recognized and misrecognized, Sedgwick challenges the stability of identity and allows for the possibility of coalitional militancy

that refuses to ignore the difficulties of difference. Whether this militancy holds the utopian promise with which Sedgwick's prose imbues it remains to be seen.

3. Miscarrying On

3.1 Newborn Disciplines

Deborah McDowell's debut monograph opens with a striking metaphor. In the first sentence of the preface to *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995), McDowell writes: "This book has been a long time coming, and has had at least two conceptions and one stillbirth" (xi). As her initial figurative language indicates, McDowell's authorship—her own critical position—is personal, even painful. It's also a bit playful: her use of this particular metaphor slyly alludes to sex ("long time coming," "conception") and also defiantly figures the book as child, replacing motherhood with literary critical production. The highly gendered comparison, far from being arbitrary, not only disappoints expectations for a preface (readers probably expect a proper beginning, and not a series of false starts) but also draws attention to the figurative and literal links between sex, bad or failed motherhood, and literary and academic production that McDowell traces throughout her critical examination of black female novelists. In doing so, they clue her readers in to the restrictions placed on black female authors, and, more specifically, on black feminist critics, that her book will go on to describe.

But these tongue-in-cheek bodily metaphors also draw attention to McDowell's own embodiment. McDowell remains hyperconscious not only of the limiting ways in which literary criticism relegates the authors/works she discusses to one stable and homogenous category ("black women's fiction"), but also of the similarly limiting disciplinary regulation of her own categorical position (namely, as a writer of "black feminist criticism"). As she notes in her Preface, the fact that "black feminist critic" and "black woman writer" overlap means that she identifies with the women she is reading. It also means that—as a black woman and a writer—

McDowell is identified straightforwardly with her objects of study. Moreover, because McDowell writes as a black woman, she writes as an identity that all-too-easily stands in as a figure for the mythical monolith of "black feminist criticism."

This slippage often over-determines how her work is read by others, particularly in the academic climate of the mid-1990s. In other words, because McDowell is a black woman writer, she often finds herself and her work characterized in ways that erase her multi-disciplined approach and rob her work of its capacity to speak to and across various theoretical frameworks. In many instances, McDowell finds her criticism predetermined and over-determined by an assumed identity position. This chapter highlights three moments of meta-critical discourse particular to McDowell that evidence this phenomenon: multiple times, McDowell's academic peers invoke her name and work publically as an example of "black feminist criticism." In the first instance, lesbian black feminist critics read McDowell as an example of criticism that dismisses or mischaracterizes lesbianism; in the second, a black male literary critic reads McDowell as a threatening agent of white critical theory; in the third, white post-structuralist feminists read McDowell as the literal embodiment of black feminist criticism.

The discourses surrounding McDowell's work, and her response to those discourses, illuminate how her critical strategies combat the fixity of her position as circulating referent or stand-in, and complicate her all-to-easy interpolation by other critics in various fields. Specifically, the structural and stylistic strategies of a-chronological organization, self-conscious framing, and performative revision demonstrated in *The Changing Same* constitute strategies of as/if criticism, and as such play with, resist, and make visible the identity categories that McDowell so often finds herself pigeonholed into. While my last chapter focused on recognition as a mode of as/if criticism, this chapter draws out the multiple ways in which qualification functions as an as/if critical mode. Wary of being read "straight" as a black feminist critic—wary,

in other words, of the over-determined-ness of raced and gendered subject positions—McDowell employs various strategies of qualification to maintain a more dynamic and complicated idea of critical position. McDowell's first book provides a clear example of how qualification works to make visible, and thus denaturalize, the ways in which a critic's identity informs how literary criticism is received and classified. Produced at the crossroads of black feminist criticism, post-structuralist criticism, and African American criticism, *The Changing Same* offers a unique case study in how an author might employ as/if criticism as a method of negotiating between overlapping and contesting fields.

Significantly, the "aborted conceptions and one stillbirth" that McDowell describes in the Preface to *The Changing Same* are the result of an encounter with what she calls "theory." Her preface's opening anecdote, occasioned by the stillbirth metaphor, describes how her original dissertation, at least in its initial conception, could not survive the cataclysm of the theoretical turn brought on by French-influenced post-structuralism on the US academic scene. *The Changing Same*, by McDowell's account, is the result of a struggle and collaboration between three ways of doing criticism: trendy "critical theory," defined as criticism driven by a desire to move from identity to difference; "black feminist criticism," defined as criticism driven by a desire to investigate "how categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality all figure into literary analysis and critical inquiry"; and "feminist reading strategies, more generally," defined as criticism driven by a desire to "seek to expose ideologies of male dominance, question traditionally masculinist standards of evaluating literature, and critique the sex/gender arrangements that exclude women from symbolic activity" (xviii). These three methods correspond with three academic camps, which in turn produce their own critical identity categories: critical theorist, black feminist critic, and feminist critic, respectively. According to McDowell, all three schools of thought prove helpful tools for the political aim of her critical

project: that is, the project of pushing against flat, racist, or sexist portrayals and theories of black womanhood by exploring "patterns and ruptures in the history and interpretive history of fiction by African American Women" (xvii). But all three critical schools also, importantly, run up against each other, produce anxiety, and carry with them limiting rubrics and associative baggage that *The Changing Same* continually navigates and performs.

As her beginning metaphors make clear, McDowell is quite conscious of having undergone both a shift in critical method, and a shift in professional position, in part because of her own partial embrace of post-structuralist methodology. McDowell positions post-structuralist theory as an "outside" force, one that disrupted the validity of her original dissertation project (proving generational influence and thematic continuity for novels authored by black women). In doing so, she places her own experience in the context of a conflict and collaboration between black feminist criticism and "critical theory" (more specifically, between black feminist criticism and the post-structuralist theory employed by white feminists). On the one hand, McDowell finds in critical theory new, useful rubrics for understanding "that self 'identity' always gives way to 'difference,' thus making difficult any easy and clear-cut identifications and alliances" (xviii). At the same time, throughout the preface, McDowell performs and recounts her anxiety, even physical discomfort, with this paradigm shift, writing that the academy's turn to theory was for her a mixed blessing, one that also occasioned "convulsions and, quiet as it was kept, occasional paroxysms of rage" (xi).

McDowell's anxieties and deliberations mirror the anxieties of the larger academic climate during the so-called culture wars. Her preface speaks to a generation of critical theorists who completed graduate school in the late 1970s, and received tenure in the late 1980s/early 1990s. These theorists experienced the rapid rise of, and successive backlash against, "critical theory" in the academic sphere. The generation she describes witnessed the eventual creation of

full departments named for identity-based disciplines such as Women's Studies and Afro-American studies, and thus witnessed firsthand the ways in which identity becomes shaped by and bound to disciplinary method and object. The institutionalization of such disciplines quickly met resistance from all sides of the political spectrum. On the right, the Reagan and Bush administrations capitalized on legitimate class-based resentment of academic work, launching an anti-intellectual campaign against "political correctness" by way of debates about what and how critics should write, and what and how they should read. On the left, a growing "critical theory" movement, one that questioned assumptions of whole or knowable subjecthood, was also often positioned as jeopardizing those hard-won gains of new disciplines that relied, in part, on identity-based knowledge.

McDowell's ambivalent relationship to critical theory not only defies the conservative anti-theory crowd, but also breaks ranks with the first generation of black feminist theorists, among them Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Christian. In her polemical piece "The Race for Theory" (1988), Christian in particular finds the timing of the rise of critical theory particularly suspicious, cogently outlining how new disciplines are both legitimized and delimited by their object choice and their critical method. In Christian's assessment, the turn to "critical theory" was in part embraced by, and in part toxic to, new, hard-won departments that had only just formed around identity-based disciplines such as women's studies or ethnic studies.[1] "I feel that the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world it attacks," she writes. "I see the language it creates as one that mystifies rather than clarifies our condition… that language surfaced, interestingly enough, just when the literatures of peoples of color, black

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[1] Christian: "In other words, the literature of blacks, women of South America and Africa, and so forth, as overtly 'political' literature was being preempted by a new Western concept which claimed that reality does not exist, that everything is relative, and that every text is silent about something… Inevitably a hierarchy has now developed between what is called theoretical criticism and practical criticism, as mind is deemed superior to matter" (73).

women, Latin Americans, and Africans began to move to 'the center'" (71). Staging a fundamental antagonism between the two camps, Christian argues that the delineations between "high" and "low" theory often reproduce hegemonic hierarchies, and that these hierarchies are almost always racialized.

Unlike Christian, McDowell refuses this neat dichotomy. Confronted with the clash between what Christian dryly describes as "theoretical criticism" and "practical criticism" (73), she wants to highlight the differences within black feminist criticism and African American criticism more broadly, focusing on the heterogeneity of discourses subsumed under these disciplinary categories. For McDowell, reflecting on the meaning "black feminist criticism" in the cultural moment of 1995, the most pressing critical task is not to ask "appropriate and necessary questions about what it is and who has the authority to speak and write in its name," nor "to determine once and for all whether black feminist criticism has validity as a discrete, coherent category of knowledge," but instead "to speculate about how that category has served, even when it has snagged, those who are self-described 'black feminist critics'" (18). Black feminist critics, she argues, push back against a long history of white critical racism and dismissal by insisting on the validity and complexity of work authored by black women.

As her preface's title, "Speaking to You about The Changing Same," would suggest, McDowell often structures her criticism as a dialogue, driving home her thesis that polyvocality is not detrimental to, but rather constitutive of, "black feminist criticism" as she and others understand it. McDowell's tendency to cite verbatim other critical authors often and at length means that her text is particularly polyphonic, relying on a bevy of critical interlocutors to articulate its theoretical frameworks. "I want to suggest something of a round table, moving from place to place, the mode of dialogue and discussion that surrounded the study of black women writers in the 1980s," she writes. "These essays are not only in dialogue with each other, but they

also record parts of a continuing dialogue among a variety of critics and critical perspectives" (xiv). McDowell's obsessive in-paragraph citation practice serves to qualify her criticism in two senses: in the first sense, the constant name-dropping raises her critical chops; in the second sense, her frequent citations expand on, limit, or otherwise amend her claims.

On the one hand, McDowell's citational qualification ups her credibility as a critic who 1) has read a diverse and robust canon of criticism 2) holds a stake and claim to the debates she rehearses and 3) is affiliated with the major thinkers she cites. This affiliation can be explicit quotation or implicit reference. For example, the phrase "the changing same" first appears in a 1964 article "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" by Amiri Baraka (then still writing as LeRoi Jones). The callback to Baraka also invokes his arguments. In the original essay, first published in the book *Black Music,* Baraka argues that black music, though different in different historical and material circumstances, carries with it "consistent attitudes within changed contexts" (153). "The changing same," for Baraka, is a continuum of resistance, an "outsider" status in black music that cannot be assimilated by and continues to be repellent to white musicians, critics, and listeners. McDowell's title also references other scholarly articles which draw their title from Baraka's provocative phrase, including Nathaniel Mackey's essay "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka" (1978), published seventeen years before McDowell's book. This influential essay uses Baraka's concept of the changing same to argue that there are overlooked continuities in Baraka's own work and poetry. In taking her title from Baraka, McDowell aligns herself with his argument, extending his critique beyond black music, and instead applying ideas of the changing same to "Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory," as her full title indicates. This reference places McDowell in a longer genealogy of black criticism and literary production, and as such strengthens her hereditary credentials as a young scholar.

On the other hand, though they may at times bolster her claims to expertise, McDowell's many citations also work to undercut her authority. In the second sense of "qualification," the many names and their attendant quotes also resist one universal argument. In other words, the inclusion of other critics from various fields qualifies McDowell's argument as *not the only one*. Here, McDowell's copious citations allow her both to displace herself as critical theorist, and to inhabit the theorists she is citing, enacting a dynamic and de-centered critical position. Long and frequent quotation allows her to speak through and as these critical theorists; it is an example of a kind of cross-racial, cross-gendered critical ventriloquism. McDowell's affiliations are various. They are sometimes lateral, sometimes vertical, in their arrangement. She sometimes addresses contemporaries (Henry Louis Gates, Michael Awkward), and other times her predecessors (W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes). Her theoretical frameworks sometimes come from the fiction authors whose creative work she interrogates (Alice Walker, Toni Morrison). She also engages, and frequently cites, feminist literary critics working with "critical theory" (Barbara Johnson, Nancy Miller). McDowell's reliance on such a diverse critical canon both opens up the definition of "black feminist criticism" and calls its very existence as a viable category into question. Her critical cross-identifications with both black lesbian feminist critics and French (white) post-structuralist critics are part of a strategy meant to trouble the fixity of both. This is again in line with *The Changing Same's* meta-argument: namely, that black feminist criticism comprises a myriad of heterogeneous methods, objects, and styles contained in one name.

The non-teleological arrangement of the chapters in *The Changing Same* constitutes another way in which McDowell performs the inconsistency of her identifications and critical loyalties, and further unsettles McDowell's endings, in turn reflecting her own aversion to a "settled" critical position. *The Changing Same* is comprised of nine chapters divided into four parts, and contains essays written over the span of a decade and a half, many of them previously

published. By design, McDowell presents these chapters out of chronological order (a strategy, she tells her readers, meant to thwart a narrative of progression) and instead dates each chapter with the year of its original publication. Four of the chapters include italicized afterwards, written for the 1995 collection, that revisit and amend the essays to which they are attached. In these afterwards, McDowell-of-1995, writing in the wake of deconstruction and the turn to other poststructuralist "critical theory," revisits and often revises her claims. McDowell's decision to present her essays out of temporal sequence, by her own admission, also allows her to "avoid any teleological coding, to avoid any implication that this development constitutes a progressive unfolding toward some analytical completeness or conceptual resting place" (xiv). Each chapter ends with a beginning: that is, with a look back that is also a springboard for other possible "new directions." McDowell thus participates in an active self-editing, and also in a repeated self-memorializing, continually writing and re-writing herself. Instead of formatting chronologically, McDowell presents her pieces out of order (with their original publication dates provided at the end). Though "taken together, [the chapters] chronicle something of [McDowell's] own intellectual development," their achronological arrangement allows her to hold interpretations in tension, as well as to avoid status as a monolithic Author.

The qualifying post-scripts at the end of nearly every chapter of *The Changing Same* are part of a larger qualifying tendency in McDowell's work: her signature method of doubling back, re-reading, re-writing, and amending. In much of her literary criticism—in fact, so often as to establish an easily observable pattern—McDowell first writes as if she has one unchangeable argument, only to undermine her position of authority via self-correction, false starts, or refusal of linear progression. In this way, her as/if criticism contradicts the idea of a single critical position or intellectual identity. In the pages that follow, I examine McDowell's multiple reads of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and repeated re-publication of her essay on Nella Larsen's *Passing*

(1927), to argue that, in arguing with herself, McDowell both solidifies her critical credentials, and, ironically, interrupts the fixity of the categories into which she has been placed.

3.2 "For McDowell Read Black Feminist"

In the final chapter of Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller's edited collection *Conflicts in Feminism* (1991), three white post-structuralist feminists—Hirsch, Jane Gallop, and Nancy Miller—participate in a roundtable titled "Criticizing Feminist Criticism." The issue on the table is the personal and political consequences of internal debate within feminist circles. Discussing her own critical transference, Gallop asserts: "I realize that the set of feelings that I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women" (364). I'm hardly the first to invoke this moment; Gallop's candid declaration of her psychic and professional shift enjoys some notoriety, and the provocative sound bite continues to circulate widely in texts of feminist literary criticism.[2] The scandal of Gallop's remark, in part, has to do with its direct and confessional tone, which in turn has to do with the format and circumstances of its publication. Unlike most of the other chapters in *Conflicts in Feminism*, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism" takes the form of a literal dialogue, but her statement's notoriety cannot only be chalked up to blunt delivery alone. The quote's recurrent citation, especially in the five years immediately after the publication of *Conflicts in Feminism*, indicates that Gallop's claim illuminated something important about the trajectory of feminist criticism at the turn of the decade.

In the final chapter of *The Changing Same* ("Transferences: Black Feminist Thinking: The 'Practice' of 'Theory'") McDowell, too, takes Gallop to task for her remarks. Unlike any of

[2] This quote also appears, for example, in Barbara Johnson's *The Feminist Difference* (1995) (11), Elizabeth Abel's "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Reading," (1995) (102); Bette Lynn London's *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* (1999) (87); Pamela L. Caughie's *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (1999) (91); Kathleen Daly's "Different Ways of Conceptualizing Sex/Gender in Feminist Theory and Their Implications for Criminology" (2004) (44) and Jeffery Gray's "Identity Cards: Autobiography and Critical Practice" (2011) (24)—and this is an incomplete list.

the other writers who reflect on this rather infamous quote, McDowell has a more personal relation to it: Gallop explicitly names McDowell as the figure that triggers this critical and psychical transformation. McDowell's involvement is only clear if Gallop's quote is situated in the larger anecdote in which it appears. (Like McDowell, I quote Gallop "in detail, perhaps in unseemly detail," (172) in order to register the full effect of her story):

> I was telling this guy in Syracuse that I thought in *Reading Lacan* I had worked through my transference both onto Lacan and onto things French in general. And he asked, 'So who do you transfer onto now?' My first thought was to say 'no one.' And then one of the things I thought of was a non-encounter with Deborah McDowell. I read work from my book last February at the University of Virginia. I had hoped Deborah McDowell would come to my talk: she was there, she was the one person in the audience that I was really hoping to please. Somebody in the audience asked if I was writing about a black anthology. I answered no and tried to justify it, but my justifications rang false in my ears. Some weeks later a friend of mine showed me a letter from McDowell which mentioned my talk and said that I was just doing the same old thing, citing that I was not talking about any books edited by black women. I obsessed over McDowell's comment until I decided to add a chapter on Pryse and Spiller's *Conjuring*. As powerful as my fear of not finishing is, it was not as strong as my wish for McDowell's approval. For McDowell, whom I do not know, read black feminist critic. I realize that the set of feelings that I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women. Those are the people I feel inadequate in relation to and try to please in my writing. It strikes me that this is not just idiosyncratic. This shift, for me, passed through a short stage when I felt like what I was saying was OK. The way McDowell has come to occupy the place of Lacan in my psyche does seem to correspond to the way that emphasis on race has replaced for me something like French vs. American feminism. (364)

Instructing the roundtable and its imagined audience to read McDowell as "black feminist critic," Gallop precludes any option for McDowell to read as anything else. I turn to McDowell's response to Gallop, published in the final chapter of *The Changing Same*, as the first example of her as/if critical strategy. Employing citational reference and grammatical ambiguity to qualify her critique, McDowell both invokes her authority as one black feminist literary critic among many, and resists the ready signification and simplification that Gallop's anecdote imposes.

Unlike most of her contemporaries, McDowell does not emphasize "I realize that the set of feelings that I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women" in

her own reprint of Gallop's story. Instead, she lingers not on a moment of confession, but of instruction: the line *"For McDowell, whom I do not know, read black feminist critic*." The return to the literary brings attention, crucially, to the word "read" in "For McDowell… read black feminist critic." The directive "For McDowell, read black feminist critic" all at once collapses McDowell into one knowable category, makes McDowell stand in for the category at large, and as such makes McDowell's name and person interchangeable with any other black feminist critic's. Gallop's confession does more than just blur the line between her object and her method (both are something like "feminist literary theory"); it also, rhetorically, lumps object and method together with two distinct identity categories.

To McDowell, this pattern is depressingly all too familiar. "In that sense, the identity of black feminist criticism has so far been anything but fluctuating. It has been solidly fixed to a reference schemata and a racial stigmata in a history we've read before" (175), she writes. McDowell's specific invocation of reading in the phrase "history we've read before" sets the stage for her analysis of Gallop's anecdote. Gallop's own invocations of McDowell as figure are strikingly negative, framed in terms of a "non-encounter" (a phrase that echoes Gallop's remark that "my first thought was to say, 'no one'"). By shifting the focus from Gallop's personal confession to the multiple and variant valences of "read," McDowell sets the sage for her explicit and implicit citations of literary and literary critical texts, noting the ways in which the contemporary sound bite "For McDowell, whom I do not know, read black feminist critic" recalls a much longer history of "non-encounters" between black and white feminists in the United States. Specifically, she compares Gallop's remark to one made a century early by white abolitionist activist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe, in reference to black abolitionist activist and author Sojourner Truth: "I had myself often remarked the name, having never met the

individual." McDowell sees the rhetorical continuities between the two quotes as a repetition of the white feminist history of "pre-fabricating blackness" (174).[3]

McDowell names the chapter section in which Gallop's anecdote appears "Rememories," a sub-heading with multiple implications. The term "Rememories" foremost functions as an implicit citation of Toni Morrison. Specifically, the neologism "rememory" features prominently in Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. In case her audience doesn't quite grasp the connection, McDowell makes it doubly obvious, quoting *Beloved* directly in the epigraph to the chapter section: "It was not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 324). In Morrison's work, "rememory" functions as both a noun ("Some things go. Pass on. Some things stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know" [43]; "Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory" [222]) and as a verb ("I don't 'spect you rememory this, but Howard got in the milk pile and Red Cora I believe it was mashed his hand" [189]; "Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it" [226]). When McDowell uses Morrison's term in her section header, as when she uses Baraka/Mackey's phrase in her book's title, she also invokes a long history of black feminist thinkers and writers with whom her work engages. In every case, "rememory" recalls the trauma of slavery, while more generally describing the trauma of a repeated past that continues to return. "Rememories" thus harkens both to the subsection's doubly anecdotal structure (McDowell is recalling a story about Jane Gallop recalling a story), and to the history of racial sentimentalism that, according to McDowell, Gallop's own anecdote repeats. Though she doesn't go so far as to say this outright, her implication is that Gallop repeats this traumatic past. By naming her non-encounter with Gallop a "rememory," McDowell re-reads the post-traumatic reverberations of slavery into the mechanisms by which McDowell gets "read" by

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[3] McDowell: "Stowe's 'I had myself often remarked the name, having never met the individual,' has a striking ring or at least a structural similarity to Gallop's 'For McDowell, whom I do not know, read black feminist critic'" (174).

Gallop as a black feminist theorist. McDowell's work once again becomes polyphonic; her ventriloquism draws attention to the links between criticism, racial trauma, and the literary, as well as to her own strategies of re-reading.

The "pre-fabrication of blackness" McDowell names in Gallop is not just a reading strategy; it is also an erotically charged fantasy, as the very term "transference" (which McDowell and Gallop both use) suggests. Indeed, the spectacle for Gallop of McDowell in the audience proves at once galvanizing and anxiety producing. Gallop, imagining McDowell's disappointment or disapproval, is motivated by guilt, by fear, and by the imagined prospect of "pleasing" McDowell and the other black feminist critics she figures. The way Gallop "feels" about French men and black women is an erotic attachment—a cross-gender or cross-racial identification, a motivating guilt, or a driving compulsion to please. In naming her own desire, Gallop describes a structure of same-sex desire that repeats another legacy: that of a sentimental relation to scenes of black suffering, but also an eroticized relation to scenes of black suffering, exemplified by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1864), Stowe's most famous work. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has a long history as the example par excellence of white eroticization of the spectacle of black suffering (or of sexual violence in general), going back nearly to the point of its publication; it appears, for example, in Case #50 of Richard Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1894), and perhaps most famously in Sigmund Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten" (1919). Other theorists writing at the same time as McDowell explicitly discussed the relation of reader/spectator to scenes of sexual or physical violence against black people.(Of these theorists, the most notable is Sadiya Hartman, whose book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), published two years after *The Changing Same*, explores the ethical and political consequences of consuming circulating and repeated scenes of racial violence). To repeat these patterns is to rely on a structure of violence with its roots in

transatlantic slavery. Indeed, these high stakes might be why McDowell's critical methodology and stylistic strategy is deeply invested in precisely the two questions of *who* gets to be or identify as a reader of literature, and *what* (or who) is the literature to be read.

McDowell's focus on the phrase "For McDowell…read black feminist critic" also brings questions of language to the fore. On the one hand, the phrase "For McDowell…read black feminist critic" is a command to Gallop's listeners/readers: read McDowell this way, the way I read her. But in print, the word "read" becomes frustratingly ambiguous: because readers of *Conflicts in Feminism* cannot easily discern Gallop's pronunciation, they cannot easily distinguish whether she says "read" in the imperative present or "read" in the active past. In the former interpretation, Gallop commands her readers to "read" McDowell, as she herself has done. Gallop's demand and desire is undermined by the very verb she employs. But Gallop could also mean "I read McDowell to be a black feminist critic" with "read" working as a transitive verb taking "McDowell" as its object. "Read" can also be intransitive: if "McDowell" is the *subject* of "read," then Gallop uses a construction that the O.E.D. tells us is primarily reserved for cases when the subject is a text. The definitions for "read" used as an intransitive verb include: 1) "To be readable; to be pleasing to read; to make clear sense when read. Now rare;" 2) "To have a specified character or quality when read; to produce a certain impression on readers; to give rise to a particular interpretation;" 3) Of a language, piece of text, etc.: to admit of or require reading in a particular direction or sequence; to be understood by reading in a particular order;" 4) "To be able to be interpreted (in a particular way)." Because "read" can be both transitive and intransitive, and because McDowell is a reader herself, "read" can also be a verb in the past tense, with "McDowell" as the acting subject, so that the phrase "McDowell read black feminist critic" could mean something like "McDowell has read black feminist criticism" or "McDowell has read black feminist critics." The surprise of the singular "critic" retroactively changes the verb from

transitive to intransitive, effectively making "McDowell" into a work of literature to be read, rather than a reader of literature.

McDowell's reading of Gallop's reading of McDowell is but one piece of a larger chapter in *The Changing Same*. In fact, the majority of "Transferences: Black Feminist Thinking: The 'Practice' of 'Theory'" is devoted to rehashing (and perhaps reconciling) the debates between black feminist criticism and critical theory originally laid out in McDowell's Preface. Gallop's anecdote is helpfully illustrative of these divides. Though Gallop, in her story, describes feeling the "same" about both "French men" and "black women," her subsequent description of her anxieties and attachments in her two periods of academic consciousness in starkly different, nearly oppositional terms. For Gallop, McDowell/black feminist criticism is an antidote to Lacan, a reactive rather than active mode of thinking and criticism. She remarks, "If you are looking up towards Derrida, Paris, sophistication, you feel like you're too low and you're anxious about not having something that comes from a higher class, to use the word metaphorically. Now the situation is the opposite" (353).[4] Gallop positions black feminist criticism as "the opposite" of Parisian sophistication so that it might serve as its antidote.

McDowell is not content to reify the opposition upon which Gallop's analysis rests. "Transferences: Black Feminist Thinking: The 'Practice' of 'Theory,'" rather than directly oppose Gallop's 'bad' post-structuralist feminism to 'good' black feminist criticism, instead qualifies both terms. She writes: "Our narrative might then pause to ponder how these two reading strategies came to be perceived as antithetical, how their specific *units* of critical interest came to be polarized and assigned an order of intellectual value that drew on a racist and sexist

[4] Elsewhere in their conversation, Keller also notes a change within (white) feminist discourse, brought on by the backlash against critical theory: "In those days [the early eighties] I felt a certain anxiety about style, in the sense that it was considered more sophisticated, more elegant to be on the side of deconstruction than on the side of feminism. And I don't like to be thought of as a slob… Now, the pressure on mainstream academic feminism comes from the side—if you can put it that way—of race" (353).

schema with heavy implications and investments in the sociopolitical arrangements of our time" (169). Later on in her chapter, she expands on and elucidates the ways in which black feminist criticism and post-structuralist theory differ in a five-point list.[5] Having outlined the particular differences between black feminist criticism and critical theory, McDowell then writes of the similarities between the two schools of thought:

> Both black feminist criticism and deconstruction perceived the regulation and exclusion of the marginal as essential to maintaining hegemonic structures. Both described the structural and hierarchical relations between the margins and the center. (169)

McDowell's careful mapping is a reparative gesture, an attempt to find compromise and also hold differences in tension together.

Given her citation of Morrison, it is fitting that McDowell begins "Transferences: Black Feminist Thinking: The 'Practice' of 'Theory'" with a plea to take remembering seriously: "In this final chapter, I want to consider the implications of memory and remembering in the construction of 'historical knowledge' in general and of 'critical theory' more specifically" (156). But McDowell immediately qualifies this assertion. Anticipating a possible backlash against her poststructuralist rubric of "historical knowledge," McDowell theatrically writes as/if; ventriloquizing with gusto those poststructuralist theorists who see remembering as "inextricably bound to culturally contested issues," that is, as historically produced and contingent: "To speak

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[5] McDowell: "If we were to isolate the salient terms of black feminist criticism and poststructuralist theory for this historical narrative, they might run as follows:

1. While black feminist criticism was asserting the significance of black women's experience, poststructuralism was dismantling the authority of experience.
2. While black feminist criticism was calling for nonhostile interpretations of black women's writings, poststructuralism was calling interpretation into question.
3. While black feminist criticism required that these interpretations be grounded in historical context, deconstruction denied history any authoritative value or truth claims and read context as just another text.
4. While the black woman as author was central to black feminist writers' efforts to construct a canon of new as well as unknown black women writers, poststructuralism had already rendered such efforts naïve by asking, post-Foucault, 'What Is An Author?' (1969) and trumpeting post-Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968).
5. While black feminist critics and African Americanists more generally were involved in recuperating a canon of writers and outlining the features of a literary tradition, a critical vocabulary emerged to question the very idea of canons and traditions" (169).

of 'historical knowledge' at all is to stage or enter a vigorous debate between those who see 'history' and 'knowledge' as ontological givens and those who don't. I identify with those who don't" (156). As we might expect from a critic writing as/if—this easy identification is short-lived. Having staged her critical identification, McDowell immediately qualifies her identificatory loyalty as partial, writing that "we would do well to heed … [the] warning against the dangers of declaring historical knowledge constructed and simply ending the discussion there, for we must show in nuanced historical perspective, however difficult that is, 'how it was constructed, by whom, and with what consequences.'" (157). In so doing, McDowell refuses to pick a side, instead implementing and advocating a methodology informed both by critical theory's suspicion of an ontological past and by black feminist theory's suspicion of a de-historicized present.

3.3 Qualifying Conditions

Gallop's anecdote in *Conflicts in Feminism* is not the first time McDowell's name comes up in critical conversation. A dozen years before the publication of *The Changing Same*, the editors of the now-defunct lesbian feminist journal *Conditions* invited poet and critic Cheryl Clarke to curate a roundtable discussion of black lesbian critics, artists, and poets. The result was a 45-page special section titled "Conversations and Questions: Black Women on Black Women Writers" (1983). The exchange features five prominent black feminist thinkers—Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Evelynn Hammonds, Bonnie Johnson, and Linda Powell. Although the language of the initial talk has been curated by its participants, the published conversation among the five women retains the cordiality and improvisation one might expect of the original; the group remains casual, informal, and intimate, and interwoven with their analysis are jokes, anecdotal asides, and

the occasional awkward pause.[6] At some point in this "pentalog" (88), Clarke asks the group: "Is criticism merely the demand for a 'rigorous examination of the text,' as Deborah McDowell said. Or is it about looking at what's not there, what's lacking. And what about the search for perfection?" (107). Upon hearing McDowell's name, Gomez quickly brings up one of McDowell's recently published pieces, a reading of Morrison's *Sula* (a piece that will, twelve years later, become chapter one of *The Changing Same*). Without much hesitation, the group universally pans the essay. Clarke, in particular, offers this vicious takedown:

> By a rigorous examination of the text, I don't mean what McDowell actually did. I don't mean her style. As much as she was trying to put down the style and approach of traditional white male criticism in her piece in relationship to black women writers, she fell into the same trap. However, that's not the way McDowell proceeds. She is exceedingly vituperative in espousing her views. She is hard, biting, condescending, competitive, impatient, patronizing, and homophobic! (107)

Clearly, McDowell's piece has touched a nerve. In this section, I track two of McDowell's essays on *Sula*—the first paned by the women in *Conditions,* and the second panned by African Americanist Michael Awkward—as evidence of her as/if critical strategy of qualification via critical revision. A close look at McDowell's two pieces on *Sula* reveals how her interpellation as straight black woman effects the reception of her work as black feminist criticism. Their comparison also reveals how McDowell's willingness to revisit her objects resists reductive understandings of her own work that are predicated on her assumed or embodied identity.

The essay so reviled by the *Conditions* group, titled "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," is one of McDowell's earliest interventions into the conversation of black feminist criticism. First published in the *Black American Literature Forum* in 1980, "New Directions for

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[6] See also Clarke's take on the conversation, written as the introduction to the published version: "The urge to edit ourselves before the words hit air was ever-present, especially in our discussion of lesbianism. We laughed a lot, especially during our discussion of lesbianism. There was pregnant silence, particularly in our discussion of lesbianism. We were apprehensive, open, resistant, rebellious, 'nappy girls'" (88).

Black Feminist Criticism" responds to Barbara Smith's essay, "Towards A Black Feminist Criticism," which had debuted three years earlier in 1977. In her essay, Smith suggests and performs an experiential and erotic lesbian critical practice. The end of Smith's essay is a close reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), which, according to Smith's black feminist critical read, is "an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed" (142). Following this claim, Smith argues that black female authors have participated in an expansion and re-definition of the signifier "lesbian," writing, "the very meaning of lesbianism is being expanded in literature, just as it is being redefined through politics. The confusion that many readers have felt about *Sula* may well have a lesbian explanation" (142). Smith's essay is field-forming; her essay, at the time of its debut and afterward, proved both influential and controversial within black literary critical and feminist circles, and its thesis met with both outrage and appreciation.[7]

In a bold and curious move, McDowell's piece is quite critical of Smith's powerhouse essay. She takes issue with Smith for using a hitherto specific or minoritarian term (lesbian) to do broad theoretical work (namely, the work of all black feminist criticism). McDowell argues that the term "lesbian" loses its specific descriptive and critical power when Smith attempts to graph

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[7] Clarke, in 2010, gives a good gloss on Smith's centrality to the world of late-twentieth-century black feminist organizing:

> Barbara Smith is a crucial link to the practice of black women's studies and to changes occurring inside and outside the academy. She published her watershed article 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' (1977) and participated in the Combahee River Collective's writing of 'A Black Feminist Statement" (1982)—both works are reprinted in *But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982). She played a key role in organizing the black feminist retreats discussed above and, with Lorraine Bethel, coedited *Conditions: Five,* 'The Black Women's Issue' (Bethel and Smith 1979), which, along with the anthology *Top Ranking* and the magazine *Azalea*, was among the first publications that featured the writings of self-identified black lesbians. *Conditions: Five* inspired *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981)—which in turn inspired *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Smith 1983). Smith and Cherrie Moraga founded *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, which published *Home Girls* and reprinted *This Bridge*. Kitchen Table, for a time, modeled the work of a multiracial feminist movement with its all-women-of-color, mostly lesbian, collective (784).

As this quick summary shows, it is hard to understate Smith's importance to the black feminist critical field, especially at the time of McDowell's writing.

lesbian structures of desire onto a narrative that does not explicitly name itself as lesbian, although previously her critiques of the "reductive" (i.e., overly specific) nature of Smith's reading would seem to argue the opposite. She largely takes Smith to task for a "reductive" (9) reading, writing that "[t]his definition of lesbianism is vague and imprecise; it is, oddly, a desexualized sensibility that subsumed far more black women writers, particularly contemporary ones, then not into the canon of lesbian writers. Further, if we apply Smith's definition of lesbianism, there are probably a few black male writers who qualify as well" (9). At the same time, McDowell also sees as an ideologically motivated hyper-specificity in Smith's piece, one she sees as limiting black feminist criticism rather than allowing for critical openness. Even as McDowell casts "lesbian" readings as "reductive," she worries that "Smith has simultaneously oversimplified and obscured the issue of lesbianism and stripped it of any explanatory power." (9) "Lesbian," at least in Smith's work, presents a power problem for McDowell: it so specific as to wield reductive power (that is, the power to enact reductive violence on the text it reads, by virtue of a kind of critical tunnel-vision), and also so ill-defined as to forfeit its explanatory power (that is, the critical descriptive power that would connect it to "real-world" sexual practices, structures of desire, or identities associated with lesbianism).

Clarke and her compatriots see this aversion to the potentially universal signifying power of "lesbian" as at worst homophobic, and at best as enforcing systems that insist on a universal heterosexuality. As their conversation progresses, the group agrees with Clarke's original assessment:

> Linda: When I read ["New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism"], one sentence sort of leapt off the page which seemed to say, 'You lesbians don't say nothing to me till you make it easy for me, till you can make it a little easier for me to digest.' And the name for that I do believe is homophobia.
> Jewelle: For McDowell any relationships drawn between criticism and lesbianism are invalid.
> Cheryl: Or 'reductionist.'

> Linda: She said in her article that definitions of lesbianism were imprecise. She was asking for more precision of definition.
> Jewelle: She also took issue with Barbara's interpretation of *Sula* as a lesbian novel.
> Linda: Because if we say *Sula* is a "lesbian" novel, we'll have to say others are. I think it's wonderful.
> Cheryl: And that's exactly what she says. She also ridicules the criteria Barbara uses for assessing a novel to be a lesbian novel. She says they are 'vacuous.' I have reservations about the criteria Barbara Smith sets forth in her piece and also her use of *Sula* as a lesbian novel, because I think Morrison undermines the relationship between Sula and Nel. I think she develops the relationship between Sula and Nel's husband to avoid the lesbian issue. Even so I don't think Barbara's criteria are 'vacuous.'
> Linda: Well, the point is that by definition lesbian is fringe. What frightened McDowell was that she sees 'lesbian' can be broader than she is prepared to admit. It could be a way to talk about *Sula*. It could be a way to talk about Zora Hurston. It could be a way to talk about James Baldwin. And that's what she reacted to. She had quite an issue with the concept and term "lesbian." (109)

It is easy to predict this reaction: the conversation in *Conditions* comes out the same year as Christian's "The Race for Theory," at a time when identity knowledges were still vying for legitimacy and recognition within the academy. McDowell's refusal to grant "lesbian" the critical power and purchase it wields in Smith's original essay might easily be read as a sinister attempt to destroy the small gains that identity-based criticism had won in the previous decade; gains that these critics were still struggling to make permanent.

The panel participants who so vocally oppose McDowell's rejoinder to Smith do so out of a heartfelt appreciation for the groundbreaking work of Smith's essay, which is a classic example of identity-based criticism, and black feminist criticism specifically. The method that Smith's "Towards A Black Feminist Criticism" calls for is never divorced from the identity, experience, or desire of the critic, and necessarily and explicitly political; it is, put another way, concerned with authenticity and with the practice identity-based reading, or reading "as." Smith writes, for example, that the type of criticism she is calling for would involve "a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writings," would "work from the assumption that Black

women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition," would "think and write out of [black women's] own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women's art" (137).

Though their reasons might be justified, the identity politics employed by the contributors to *Conditions* is slightly ironic given that Smith, too, fought an uphill battle against reductive identity-based receptions of her own work. In an interview from the 2014 collection *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith*, Smith recalls the reaction she received when she first gave a partial reading of the paper at Howard University in 1978:

> I read excerpts from 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.' I also had written some specific remarks for a Black audience, because the piece had been written for *Conditions,* which was a primarily white lesbian feminist literary journal that was very anti-racist in its perspective. I wanted to say some specific things aimed at the Black community and Black writers. The first comment was from Dr. Frances Cress Welsing and she basically said, 'I feel sorry for the sister. It's too bad that you're a lesbian, because homosexuality will be the death of the race."…The atmosphere was so hostile, so volatile. …And because I was so hungry, I actually felt weak. After it was over, I was devastated. When I went to the back of the auditorium there was a Black male literary critic who wrote for mainstream publications like *The New York Times*. I was saying to him how horrible this experience had been, how devastating this was, how bad I felt. You know what he said to me? He said, "At least you weren't lynched." (130)

Smith's story speaks to the ways in which her own critical identity position, in a addition to her critical method, argument, and object, figures into her work's overall reception. It also speaks to the potential and actual effects of such reception on her own physical body. Like McDowell, Smith is at times painfully aware of how different audiences react to differently to similar critical arguments. In a bizarrely symmetrical moment, the women in the *Conditions* roundtable dismiss McDowell because she is not a lesbian, in much the same way Smith is dismissed for being a lesbian.

By setting up McDowell as a straight straw-woman, the published *Conditions* conversation misses the more interesting work performed in McDowell's quarrel with Smith. Noting the slippage between "lesbian" and "black feminist" in Smith's critical performance, McDowell sees Smith's "lesbian aesthetic" as both an "individual political persuasion" (9) and "ideology" (23), though not, interestingly enough, as a sexuality, or even as a category of identity as such. In this way, McDowell's piece articulates the very paradoxes with which much of early queer theory will also grapple a few years later. As Judith Butler argues in her piece "Critically Queer" (1993), the term "queer" is both specific and general:

> As expansive as the term "queer" is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions: in some contexts, the terms in some contexts, the term appeals to a younger generation who want to resist the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by "lesbian and gay"; in some contexts, sometimes the same, it has marked a predominantly white movement that has not fully addressed the way in which "queer" plays—or fails to play—within non-white communities; and whereas in some instances it has mobilized a lesbian activism, in others the term represents a false unity of women and men. (174)

For Butler, the signifier "queer"—like the signifier "lesbian" for McDowell—proves both too exclusive and too limited to be a proper analytical framework.[8] In her analysis of "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," McDowell rightly reads Smith as deploying "lesbian" in precisely this way.

Why, in 1983, is McDowell damned as "homophobic" for these observations, while Butler, ten years later, is not? It could be that, for all her melancholic hesitation around the term, Butler ultimately does not abandon "queer," whereas McDowell seems much more willing to reject "lesbian" on similar grounds: where Butler finds promise and possibility in the transitory

[8] Butler credits Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" (1984), for inspiring this line of thought. "Rubin's essay called for political attention to be paid to 'sexual minorities' who are not always women, and who constitute a class of sexual actors whose behavior is categorized and regulated by the state in invasive and pathologizing ways," Butler writes. "The expansive and coalitional sense of 'sexual minorities' cannot be rendered interchangeable with "lesbian and gay," and it remains an open question whether 'queer' can achieve these same goals of inclusiveness" (5).

power of "queer," McDowell dislikes the imprecision of "lesbian" as Smith employs it.[9] But there is also a much more obvious reason for the difference in the critical reception of McDowell's piece and the critical reception of Butler's: that is McDowell's perceived experience and position as a straight black woman, and Butler's perceived experience and position as a white lesbian. Like Clarke's distinction between Lorde and Walker, critics might make a distinction between McDowell and Butler on the grounds of their lived experience. Clarke and company hate McDowell's piece mostly on the grounds that its rejection of "lesbian" as both too narrow and too general stems from homophobic sentiment, one that their discussion implies is born of McDowell's lack of lived lesbian experience. As my previous chapter points out, even though Butler constantly makes moves to undercut her own perceived "lesbian identity" (indeed, doing just that has made her famous) the fact remains that, because the majority of her audience will first perceive her as a lesbian, she is, paradoxically, granted the authority to call into question the authentic lesbian position from which her authority is granted. McDowell, like Sedgwick, is perceived as straight, and therefore has no such authority.

In the last section of their discussion—which Clarke later titles "Naming: The Lesbian Aesthetic, the Lesbian Politic"—the five participants in the *Conditions* roundtable take seriously the concern that "lesbian" might be an inadequate term for either theoretical approach or political mobilization. In particular they focus on the distinction, made most famously by novelist and critic Alice Walker, between "lesbian" and "womanist" theory and practice. Their debate once again involves the same problems of capacity, specificity, and political efficacy engendered by

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[9] See Butler, "Critically Queer": "If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. This also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. Such a yielding may well become necessary in order to accommodate—without domesticating—democratizing contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated in advance" (173).

both terms. Again, their rubrics of legitimacy rely mostly on lived experience: like McDowell, Walker's ostensible straightness makes her dismissal of the term "lesbian" suspect. "If Audre Lorde said, 'I don't want to call myself a lesbian anymore, I want to rename myself 'womanist,' I might feel differently," Clarke tells the group. "Audre has been out for years. She's *lived as a lesbian*…But Alice—I love her, I think she's fabulous—but I don't think she should be telling me, as a black lesbian, to call myself womanist" (123, emphasis mine). This unease is not enough, ultimately, for the women to dismiss the term "womanist"; the productive generality of "womanist" is also intellectually seductive, and for Clarke and others, "womanist" embodies both a politically productive and politically impossible ambiguity.[10] Nonetheless, "living as a lesbian" provides the only acceptable credentials for being able to reject or modify the term.[11]

The group's read of McDowell, strategic though it may be, nonetheless has the effect of pinpointing McDowell as a scholar directly opposed to "lesbian" criticism, and in some senses, to "black feminist criticism" more generally. This chapter argues that McDowell's subsequent shift in reading and writing strategies constitutes a response to the initial critique in *Conditions*. Denounced as homophobic for voicing her concern over the specificity of "lesbian," McDowell must find other ways to challenge the fixity of identity categories in the name of expanding black feminist criticism. Her initial analysis of *Sula* and Smith in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," and its lukewarm-to-hostile reception within prominent black lesbian feminist circles, informs her return to Morrison's text in 1989. Nine years after "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," McDowell publishes a different an analysis, in a chapter called "Boundaries,

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[10] Clarke: "For me [Walker] embodies all that ambiguity and all the contradictions. She does it purposefully and consciously, working toward that clarity. Somehow, I still don't want her telling me to call myself a 'womanist.' Because until the world can deal with the word 'lesbian' and what that means, we cannot go to the next step. I don't think so. Just like I can't call myself 'bisexual' until the world stops oppressing homosexuals. That's the way I feel. That may be reactionary, though.
(Laughter.)" (123).

[11] For an example of as/if critical writing that disrupts "living as a lesbian" as a rubric for grading one's critical authenticity, see the last chapter of this dissertation, "The Living End."

or Distance Relative and Close Kin—*Sula*." It appears in Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond's edited collection, *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* in 1989, and later is republished as chapter six of *The Changing Same*, in a section of the book titled "The Reader in the Text." The piece, like McDowell's first essay on *Sula*, blends a close reading of the novel with more far-reaching commentary about the state of black criticism as a whole.

Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s includes two responses to McDowell's piece. In a short essay that appears in the pages following "Boundaries, or Distance Relative and Close Kin—*Sula*," Michael Awkward, a scholar of African American literary criticism, chastises McDowell for abandoning the blackness of black-authored literature, and compares her most recent writing on *Sula* unfavorably against "New Directions." Significantly, his attack names not black feminist criticism, but critical theory, as the reason for McDowell's unfortunate turn:

> For me, the two most troubling aspects of McDowell's arguments are their virtual erasure of race and culture in her reading of *Sula* and the striking difference her statements here about Afro-American female characters from even her most recently published assertions written before her apparent wholehearted adoption of contemporary critical theory. (74)

In several chapters of *The Changing Same*, Awkward serves as McDowell's primary example of the black male critic intent on criticizing black feminist theory, and it is no accident that he is one of two respondents to McDowell's chapter as it first appears in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*. (The other critic invited to respond to McDowell in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* is Hortense Spillers, who has a much more favorable review. Like McDowell's essay, Spillers's tellingly glowing review frames the work of black feminist criticism in terms of contradiction and ambiguity).[12]

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[12] Spillers's response offers a helpful gloss on McDowell's overall mission, as well as valuable insight into the ways in which the projects of Spillers and McDowell converge:

> The only difficulty I have with Deborah McDowell's essay is that I find nothing with which to quarrel in this writing… We might consider this problematic along three lines of stress that we might infer from

McDowell's return to *Sula*—a qualifying amendment to her previous argument—resists the idea of unchanging self by insisting not only that a critic's argument can change with time, but also that a critic's argument might change with audience. Addressing lesbian feminists as a (straight) black feminist critic, McDowell can push back against what she sees as a reductive read. Addressing male African American criticism as a (female) black feminist critic, but also as a critical theorist, McDowell can take a field to task for its sexist assumptions. In both cases, McDowell attempts to add nuance to fields she feels are over-determined by identity categories. For McDowell, both the critical turn and black feminist theory prove helpful tools for pushing against "representational ideals" of black womanhood, ideals tied to traditional sexist and heterosexist ideas about the woman's place at hearth and home. By McDowell's account, these representational ideals stem not only from the stereotypes of dismissive white theorists, but from black male critics as well.

By her telling, McDowell's status as a black woman and black feminist critic (the slippage here, again, is indicative of how McDowell's person comes to naturally stand in for her assumed critical practice) threatens a male-dominated tradition of African American literary criticism, personified in the figure of Michael Awkward. Indeed, in setting up Awkward as an opponent and interlocutor, McDowell might also be guilty of similarly reducing a field to a single person. This is indeed incongruous with the overall goals of her second essay, which praises *Sula*

McDowell's 'Self and Other.' (1) The need to develop an 'intramural' social and critical practice that indeed comes to fully regard those 'differences within' and 'between.' We are not aloof from that proliferation of gestures of empowerment that fracture an imagined unity of consciousness. (2) The urgency to perceive 'community' as an analogue on the shifting subject-position. The 'natal community' is a portable space, as movable a feast as oneself. We are in its midst wherever we are. Holding down, as it were, several spaces at once marks the dilemma of African-American culture, of a people, of individual ones of us, and out of it our practice of criticism, teaching, and writing arises. (3) We are called upon, then, to articulate the *spaces* of contradiction (72).

precisely because the novel resists the very idea of a coherent black self. Ultimately, McDowell argues that, just as *Sula* "complicates the process of identification in the reading process, denying the conventional Afro-American critic a reflection of her or his ego ideal" (105), so too does critical theory. In fact, McDowell's engagement with her contemporary interlocutors reveal that, by her estimation, alternatives to the world of heterosexual marriage and reproductive motherhood become possible not only through the complex sexual dynamics in *Sula*, but also in the "critical theory," and specifically critical theories of reading, that she applies to *Sula*.

McDowell positions black feminist criticism as a disruptive force within the black literary critical tradition, upsetting the bonds and obligations of black kinship and community both within and outside the academy. "Because the writings of contemporary black women indeed seemed to hold little sacred about pietistic views of family," she writes in her Preface, "they were read and loudly proclaimed to be threats to a unified black community, healthy and whole" (xvi). By her account, black feminist criticism resists black male critics who see black female authors as abandoning the project of racial unity. McDowell links this accusation to a greater anxiety surrounding bad mothering: "Metaphors of 'family,' 'kinship,' and 'community' structured these attacks [on black women novelists] that bordered on calls for censorship and attempted to demand that black women writers meet a representational ideal in the name of creating racial unity and wholeness" (xvi). She goes as far as to compare the conservative admonishments of black male literary critics to "injunctions…that seemed to echo those that the German National Socialists (Nazis) held for 'their' women—*kinder, kirche, kuche* (children, church, and kitchen)" (xvi). While McDowell vehemently denounces these attacks for their oppressive or silencing impact on black feminist criticism, she does not dispute the verity of their accusations. Instead, her work actively celebrates the ways in which black women's fiction offers its readers a glimpse of

alternatives to the world of children, church, and kitchen—that is, to the world of heterosexual marriage and reproductive motherhood.

By McDowell's estimation, Smith's own black feminist criticism "fails" because it is, by virtue of its self-avowed desires, at once too specific and too general, too political and too personal. But it is this very mechanism of paradox and contradiction that, later on, McDowell praises in Morrison. Though McDowell doesn't explicitly make this leap, her analysis of Smith's paradoxical use of the term "lesbian" in "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" and her analysis of Morrison's paradoxical formations of self prove quite similar. Here, McDowell celebrates *Sula* for not subscribing to traditional evaluative rubrics traditionally employed by African American literary criticism at the time of her writing. These rubrics, for McDowell, focus too much on an idealized black "SELF" (a term McDowell leaves capitalized each time), rely on a model of reading and identification that is too static, and thus fail to resist binary categories of "positive" or "negative," leaving no space for what McDowell promotes as a productive or complicating ambiguity. Initially evoking and ultimately rejecting W.E.B. DuBois's call for what she terms "idealized literary representation" in black literature, McDowell praises Morrison's prose for complicating and resisting too-easy, "positive" or "whole" idealizations. As *Sula* "teases the reader with various oppositions—good/evil, virgin/whore, self/other," it "avoids the false choices they imply and dictate," not only revealing those choices as false, but also as constructed around restrictive ideals (104). This, for McDowell, is the value of Morrison's work, and its black feminist project.

Unlike Smith, McDowell sees the sex in *Sula* as primarily *autoerotic*, as first and foremost about the sex Sula has in relation to herself: "It is in the realm of sensory experience and in the service of the self-exploration that leads [Sula] to self-intimacy. After sex, Sula enters that 'post-coital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in

matchless harmony'" (108). Sula's relationship to Nel, on the other hand, is a homosocial bond that is not of primary importance. Significantly, McDowell argues that this bond is strengthened by the occasion of the death of Chicken Little. By linking the same-sex friendship of Nel and Sula (friendship that Smith reads as "lesbian," but that McDowell hesitates to name by such specific terms) to the death of a child in their care, McDowell, despite her qualms with Smith, positions the two main characters in a "queer" position relative to reproduction, "good" motherhood, and the traditionally valued kinship structures of the old critics. Sula's own sexual self-pleasure similarly disregards these kinship structures. As a result "the narrative strongly suggests that one cannot belong to the community and preserve the imagination, for the orthodox vocations of motherhood—marriage and motherhood—restrict, if not preclude, imaginative expression" (108). To be sure, an argument for the connection between sexuality, reading, and the relationship of self to other garners further support from a telling typo halfway through McDowell's chapter on *Sula*: "The narrative is neither an apology for Sula's destruction nor an unsympathetic critique of Nel's smug conformity. It does not reduce a complex sex [sic] of dynamics to a simple opposition or choice between two 'pure' alternatives" (111). The seeming misprint, in which "sex" subs in for "set" in the intended phrase "complex set of dynamics," highlights the way in which "sex" remains, for McDowell, a principle way of thinking through Sula's ideological and narrative complexity.

Here, *Sula* "succeeds" as a generative creative opus precisely because it "glories in paradox and ambiguity… We enter a new world here, a world in which we ever get to the 'bottom' of things, a world that demands a shift from a dialectical either/or orientation to one that is dialogical or both/and, full of shifts and contradictions, particularly shifting and contractor conceptions of the SELF" (104). "Falling in step with recent developments in contemporary critical theory, some critics of African American literature have usefully complicated many

unexamined, common assumptions about the SELF and about race as a meaningful category in literary study and critical theory," she writes. "These recent developments have made it difficult, if not impossible, to posit with any assurance a 'positive' black SELF, always already unified, coherent, stable, and known" (102). In denying the reader a "central" character with which to identify, the novel "denies the whole notion of character as a static *essence*, replacing it with the idea of character of *process*…Whereas the former is based on the assumption that the SELF is knowable, centered, and unified, the latter is based on the assumption that the SELF is multiple, fluid, relational, and in a perpetual state of becoming" (105). For McDowell, this is a good thing: "The overarching preoccupation with 'positive' racial representation operates in tandem with a static view of the nature of identification in the act of reading," one that she finds too simplistic to allow for multiplicities of self and personhood (103).

In her revision of position, staged via a return to a common object, McDowell effectively reinforces the substance of her argument via the structure of her intervention, troubling the category of the black critic. Rather than repeat the structure of her previous essay—in which she responds directly to the imposing figure of Smith, in a one-to-one relation reminiscent of the structure hypothesized in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973)—McDowell fails to auto-identify, while simultaneously performing the autoerotic return to the self that she outlines in Morrison's novel. For here, in her important revisiting of *Sula*, McDowell also qualifies the claims made by her previous "SELF": she returns to the "self" named Deborah McDowell, the critic writing "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" nine years previously, only to fail to identify with that self.

3.4 Passing *Over (and Over)*

McDowell's return to *Sula* is not the only example of her tendency to qualify her previously held position or methodology. In 1986, she pens an introduction to a new edition of

Nella Larsen's *Passing* and *Quicksand* published in the Rutgers University Press "American Women Writers" series. Titled simply "Introduction," the essay offers a read of the two novels that highlights the sexual politics hidden beneath the overt racial politics of both works of fiction. In her analysis of *Passing*, McDowell runs into the same ambiguous entanglement of sexuality, identity, and reading that she encounters in her second reading of *Sula*. Despite her previous rejection of Smith's argument about lesbian relationships in Morrison's *Sula*, McDowell makes her own case for *Passing* as primarily a narrative of covert same-sex desire. But that is just the beginning of the story: in fact, three versions of McDowell's *Passing* essay exist. It makes its second appearance 1993 as an article in David M. Halperin, Michele Aina Barale, and Henry Abelove's edited collection *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (there, under the alias "It's Not Safe. Not Safe at All': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*"); and then finally reappears in 1995, in *The Changing Same* (now sporting the title "'The Nameless… Shameful Impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*"). McDowell's Larsen essay is a crossover hit, enjoying a readership across disciplines. The differences in each version of the Larsen essay betray McDowell's careful tailoring: in each piece, she writes "as" a critical theorist, a gay and lesbian theorist, and a black feminist theorist, and her editorial choices qualify her for each publication. Because of this, comparing the multiple iterations of this essay offers a unique opportunity to explore how a critical strategy of revising and qualifying brings to light the specific demands of each discipline in which the essay circulates. Furthermore, viewing McDowell's edits in each iteration as strategic makes clear how each iteration of the *Passing* article reveals both the possible alliances and difficult gaps between critical theory, black feminist theory, and gay and lesbian theory at the time of McDowell's early writing.

McDowell seems much more willing to make her own identification with Larsen clear in the 1986 and 1995 versions of her piece, a move that speaks to the different status of "biography"

amongst various critical fields. The first version of the essay, published at the beginning of the Rutledge reprint of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, begins with a discussion of Larsen's relative obscurity, and subsequently uses biography as a possible way explanation. "Why a career with such auspicious beginnings had such an inauspicious ending has continued to perplex students of the Harlem Renaissance," writes McDowell in the introduction to *Quicksand and Passing*. "Many have searched for answers in the scattered fragments of Larsen's biography, which reveal a delicate and unstable person" (x). She also links Larsen's alleged instability with her notorious problems with finishing. As McDowell notes in 1986,

> Since the beginning of Larsen's career, critics have praised her as a 'gifted writer,' commending her skill a the craft of fiction—most notably, successful characterization, narrative unity and economy. However, they have constantly criticized the endings of her novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, which reveal her difficulty with rounding off stories convincingly. (x)

Rather than fully capitulating to the few acceptable female narratives available to a black woman writer in 1928, McDowell writes, Larsen in fact "wanted to tell the story of a black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms," (80) sneaking in sexuality "obliquely" while still remaining dedicated to a 1920s standard of "racial uplift" that hinged on a certain kind of sexual respectability that precluded other, non-marital or same-sex forms of desire (83). McDowell's efforts are a rejoinder to the limited "feminist perspective" that would take Larsen's endings at face value. "Although the endings of *Quicksand* and *Passing*… seem to be concessions to the dominant ideology of romance—marriage and motherhood—viewed from a feminist perspective, they are much more radical and original efforts to acknowledge a female sexual experience most often repressed in both literary and social realms" (80).

In the version of the essay that appears in *The Changing Same*, McDowell foregrounds Larsen's trouble with endings—a telling focus, one that draw attention to McDowell's own

strategies of performative revision. Indeed, McDowell's own aversion to neat and tidy endings, and her related affinity for qualification and revision, is key to the as/if critical strategy on display in her multiple re-writes of the *Passing* essay. The 1995 version of this essay begins by discussing Larsen's trouble with endings (a discussion made delicious ironic in the context of McDowell's own seeming inability to conclude).[13] In her 1995 version of the essay, McDowell writes that though both *Passing* and *Quicksand* "feature daring and unconventional heroines, in the end, they sacrifice these heroines to the most conventional fates of narrative history: marriage and death, respectively" (79). Via her own assessment and her gloss on the assessment of other critics, McDowell argues that Larsen's failure to suitably end her novels results from a tension between ideology and form (79). According to McDowell's explanation, Larsen finds endings difficult because she feels constrained by "the more acceptable demands of literary and social history," relegating her otherwise "independent," "strong," female protagonists to the societally irreprehensible fates (79).

The fact that the chapter 5 of *The Changing Same* is McDowell's third attempt at a finished product—the fact that she, like Larsen, can't seem to properly end her analysis—speaks to McDowell's identification with Larsen herself. At times, McDowell appears to invite her audiences to mark by a parallel between the era and author she studies (the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen) with the present moment (i.e., the moment of the "turn to theory"). This identification is made particularly clear in the first and final versions of her essay, in which a series of rhetorical questions (ostensibly about Larsen) frame McDowell's discussion:

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[13] McDowell's 1995 chapter opens with these lines: "Based on her treatment of the black middle class and her examination of the dynamics of racial passing, Nella Larsen is usually paired with Jesse Faucet in studies of the Harlem Renaissance, though most critics rightly find Larsen a more gifted writer than Faucet. Larsen demonstrates a poised facility with writing, a knowledge and mastery of the elements of fiction—especially narrative economy, effective language, focused characterization, unity, point-of-view—not always evident in Fauset's novels. While critics have commended these features of Larsen's writing since the beginning of her career, they have constantly criticized the endings of *Quicksand* and *Passing*" (79).

> To be writing about black female sexuality within this conflicted context, then, posed particular problems for Larsen. The questions confronting her might well be formulated: How to write about black female sexuality in a literary era that often sensationalized it and pandered to the stereotype of the primitive exotic? How to give a black female character the right to healthy sexual expression and pleasure without offending the proprieties established by the spokespersons of the black middle class? … We might say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of black women with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms. The latter desire committed her to exploring black female sexuality obliquely and, inevitably, to permitting it only within the context of marriage, despite the strangling effects of that choice both on her characters and on her narratives (xvi).

We can easily imagine that McDowell, a black woman writer writing for a middle-class, college-educated audience, also asks these questions of her own work. Notably, McDowell's choice of object for when she does attempt to read lesbian desire into a work of fiction—*Passing*—situates itself firmly in the world of the Harlem Renaissance's black middle-class. It is possible that McDowell's initial reluctance to embrace "lesbian" as a universal term also betrays a lingering class anxiety. The emergent class formation of the Civil Rights era, described by Roderick Ferguson as "regulatory," positioned lesbians and "bad" (single or failed) mothers as outside of and opposed to a heteronormative middle-class black subject. McDowell's characterization of "lesbian" as an inadequate term might partially be the result of her inability to separate "lesbian" from the lower-class identity to which it has been attached. While McDowell seems much more willing to recuperate "single mother" as an identity or identification capable of resisting a restrictive heterosexual order (in both her rhetorical gestures to failed motherhood in her criticism, and in her later characterization of Sula's autoerotism as a transgressive, anti-identitarian identity), she is much more reticent to name "lesbian" as an identity capable of the same or similar resistance. Her identification with the "repressed" Larsen may be a covert nod to her critics, a way of explaining some of the hang-ups for which she was so roundly criticized.

Indeed, the relevance of these questions to McDowell's own critical pursuits might well have been made even more obvious in the wake of Clarke's scathing critique in *Conditions*.

Chastised for not giving enough evaluative power to sexuality, McDowell tries again. Nearly thirty years after *Conditions* prints the black lesbian special section, Clarke acknowledges both that McDowell's later work reflects a more nuanced and effective understanding of sexuality. In a *Signs* article titled "*But Some of Us Are Brave* and the Transformation of the Academy: Transformation?" (2010), Clarke recalls her original dismissal of McDowell's work, and marks the original anger expressed by her and her fellow discussion participants as a manifestation of radical political lesbianism.[14] But in a footnote to her anecdote, Clarke registers her happy surprise at McDowell's later pivot towards a lesbian reading of Larsen.[15] In Clarke's assessment, McDowell's renewed attempt to recognize lesbian desire in *Passing*, and the trenchant close read it produces, qualifies her in the eyes of her black feminist peers. Through an attentive and engaged reading method, McDowell earns her lesbian credentials.

McDowell's attempts to find "lesbianism" in *Passing*, because they require acute attention to the visual, repeat the braiding of form, the literary, and the erotic that we also see in her analysis of *Sula*. In McDowell's analysis of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the texts themselves take on a character life of their own. McDowell's criticism often sounds like narration; by her account, Larsen's novels anthropomorphically interact with readers or ideas. The novel itself becomes desiring, flirtatious, and active: "It is no accident that critics have failed to notice the novel's flirtation with this idea" (88); "To be sure, her novels only flirt with the idea of sexual passion" (95). Furthermore, for McDowell, both racial and sexual passing rely on each woman's ability to read the other:

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[14]Clarke: "Gomez took up the lesbian banner again by slamming Deborah McDowell's article 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism' (McDowell 1980), an article that critiqued Smith's 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' (1977)" (785).

[15]Clarke: "In 'The "Nameless … Shameful Impulse": Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*,' McDowell (1995) writes a trenchant article on Larsen's novels. Yet the part on *Passing* is particularly stunning. What many of us had interpreted as a novel of racial passing, McDowell reinterprets as a novel of sexual passing" (785).

> From the very beginning of their reencounter, Irene is drawn to Clare like a moth to a flame. … Into Clare's 'arresting eyes' 'there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed.' At the end of this chance encounter, 'standing there under the appeal, the caress, of Clare's eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn't be the last. (91)

In her repeated use of "flirtation" as a rubric for understanding the way Larsen's novels operate, McDowell also conflates author and text: "Having established the absence of sex from the marriages of these two women, Larsen can flirt, if only obliquely, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them" (88). Like the oblique and unsettling queer relationships in *Passing*, this flirtation has no stable actor or referent, and yet propels the mechanisms of plot.

In a particularly judgmental moment, McDowell calls both the end of *Passing* and that of *Quicksand* "unsatisfactory and unsettling" (79). A look at *The Changing Same* reveals that McDowell's critical investments exist in tension with one another, but also how her own "unsettling" endings betray a "tension between ideology and form" (79) that is different, but similar, to the tension between ideology and form she notices in Larsen's work. McDowell's tone shifts throughout the chapter—at times, she is cool and distant, paraphrasing other critics ("While critics have commended these features of Larsen's writing since the beginning of her career, they have consistently criticized the of *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929)" [79]); at others, she directly ranks the texts she reviews, not quoting or glossing others, but reporting a personal appraisal; what is "obvious" about a text. Remarking on the disappointing endings of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, McDowell writes as if she is a feminist critic (who might condemn Larsen's failure to save her characters from marital gender subordination or death) or as if she is an African American literary critic (who might lament the limited radical potential of Larsen's middle-class respectability politics).

It is unclear which readers are "unsettled": if Larsen accedes to the conventional ending in order to assuage her contemporary reading public, it is unlikely that they will find the ending

"unsettling." Similarly, it seems unlikely that the critics of African American literature that McDowell has previously discussed—those champions of familial racial unity—will find Clare's death particularly objectionable. Is it "feminists," then, who might find the end of *Passing* unsettling? Is it McDowell herself? Like the novels she investigates, McDowell's criticism may leave us with more questions than answers. Such questions parallel the semantic trouble of the word itself: the very descriptor "unsettling" unsettles its referent. How, then, are readers of *The Changing Same* to know to whom "unsettling" refers?

3.5 "Smith Does; McDowell Does Not"

Because it is an early piece of critical writing that explicitly reads lesbian desire into a non-explicitly lesbian text, and also, undoubtedly, because it is included in one of the first compendia of gay and lesbian criticism, McDowell's essay frequently crops up in queer critical citations, and remains a crucial part of the early queer critical archive.[16] It is perhaps not very surprising that McDowell's essay on covert lesbian desire in *Passing* appears in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (right after Butler's contribution, it so happens). As we have now seen, it is also true that much of McDowell's other work, including especially her second reading of *Sula*, which uses sexuality to trouble ideas of selfhood *as well as* reproductive futurism and heterosexual marriage, can also count as also queer criticism. And yet McDowell is seldom if ever read as a queer critic.

Why is this the case? Perhaps it is because of McDowell's initial hostility to Smith's read of *Sula.* Smith's personal and detailed polemic predates the advent of the term "queer theory" by

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[16] The following queer literary critical texts, for example, cite the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* version of McDowell's essay: Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytical Challenge" (1993); Barbara Johnson, "Lesbian Spectacles" (1995); Katy Ryan, "Falling in Public: Larsen's *Passing*, McCarthy's *The Group*, and Baldwin's *Another Country*" (2004); Laura Doyle, "Transnationalism at our Backs: A Long View of Larsen, Woolf, and Queer Racial Subjectivity in Atlantic Modernism" (2006); Keguro Macharia, "Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" (2011); Rafael Walker, "Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in *Quicksand* and *Passing*" (2016).

a good fifteen years, but many queer theorists have since noted that her method, choice of object, and style often correspond with the methods, objects, and styles of queer literary criticism.[17] In his book *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique* (2004)*,* Roderick Ferguson argues that black lesbian criticism along the lines of Smith serves as an early example of the "queer of color critique" for which his book advocates. (In fact, his book's full title points readers in the direction of Smith from the start, echoing the "towards" in the title of her famous essay). Ferguson argues that Smith's criticism positions itself against restrictive orthodoxies espoused by both the capitalist state and by liberal liberation politics, and his book helpfully situates the emergence of black lesbian feminism such as Smith's within a moment marked by polarization as well as the inheritance of a racial discourse that "inherited the normative ideologies of civil rights, canonical sociology, and national liberation" (131). McDowell, writing nearly 25 years before the publication of *Aberrations*, identifies this same anti-identity politics in Smith, but with much more pronounced ambivalence.

At the same time, though she is initially critical of Smith, McDowell also performs the queer critical work of black lesbian criticism as it is understood by Ferguson; that is, as "a set of critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy" that "identifies a set of social relations that point to the instability of heteropatriarchy and to a possible critical emergence within that instability" (126). The most notable difference between the 1995 version of the *Passing* article and the article that appears in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* two years earlier is that, in both the 1986 and the 1995 version, McDowell includes an analysis of another Larsen novel, *Quicksand* (1928)—an

[17] See, for example: Linda Garber et al., *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (2001); E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Antholog*y (2005); Michael Hames-García, "Queer Theory Revisited" (2011).

analysis that rests on McDowell's cutting critique of marriage.[18] Her omission of heterosexual marriage from the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* version of this piece speaks to a disciplinary categorical gap between black feminist criticism and gay and lesbian studies: in gay and lesbian studies, anti-normativity is much more easily theorized through same-sex desire. In contrast to *Quicksand* (in which Larsen uses marriage as a safe space for her female characters to explore otherwise unsanctioned sexual appetites), *Passing* uncouples marriage and sexuality, opening up alternative routes for female desire. Because they are no longer contained within the marriage plot, Larsen must "hint" at the erotic lives of her characters, rather than name their desires explicitly. *Passing,* for McDowell, thus illustrates the "dialectics of desire and fear, pleasure and danger that define women's sexual experiences in male-dominated societies" (81), dialectics that Larsen disguises as the dynamics of racial passing. Choosing instead to focus on the "pleasure and danger" negotiated by black women and the negotiations of illicit sexuality necessitated by the conflicting discourses of the Jazz Age, McDowell omits *Quicksand* entirely in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* version of the piece, and thus omits her analysis of the failures of heterosexual marriage. Because she cuts this paragraph, McDowell (or perhaps her editors, or perhaps a combination of the two) also cuts her discussion how one might disrupt the marriage plot from the inside. McDowell thus reserves her more detailed critique of marriage for publications and fields outside of "lesbian and gay studies," reflecting, again, her sense that Smith's "lesbian" is too specific a rubric. The fact remains, however, that McDowell is also

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[18] McDowell: "It is little wonder that critics of Larsen been perplexed by those abrupt and contradictory endings. But if examined through the prism of black female sexuality, not only are these resolutions more understandable, they also illuminate the peculiar pressures on Larsen as a women writer during the male-dominated Harlem Renaissance. They show her grappling with the conflicting demands of her racial and sexual identities and the contradictions of a black and feminine aesthetic. Although the endings of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, like the resolution of *Plum Bun*, seem to be concessions to the dominant ideology of romance—marriage and motherhood—viewed from a feminist perspective, they are much more radical and original efforts to acknowledge a female sexual experience most often repressed in both literary and social realms" (80).

engaging in a subtle and interesting critique of heterosexist structures; in this way, it is much in line with contemporaneous queer critiques.[19]

Even though these conceptual and historical links exist between McDowell and her queer theoretical contemporaries, current queer critical boundaries (as delineated in "Queer Theory" syllabi, or in suggested reading lists, for example) leave McDowell for the most part conspicuously absent from the queer studies canon.[20] One small example of this occlusion occurs in Barbara Johnson's essay "Lesbian Spectacles"—an essay I will discuss at length in the following chapter. Johnson's essay, published the same year as *The Changing Same*, cites McDowell's work on *Passing* as its stimulus, and yet refuses McDowell the same kind of erotic relation to the text that Johnson, attempting to "read as a lesbian," initially wants to claim. In the first few paragraphs of her essay, Johnson writes:

> I took my inspiration for such a textual category from two readings of literary texts: Barbara Smith's reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Deborah McDowell's reading of Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*. I cite these critics not because they offer me examples of the act of 'reading as a lesbian' (Smith does; McDowell does not) but because of the nature of the texts they read. (158)

In the chapter to follow, I read this casual aside, "(Smith does; McDowell does not)," in the context of Johnson's strategy of as/if criticism: her parenthetical speaks to her attachments to

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[19] McDowell's editorial decisions reflect a more recent observation by James Bliss, in his 2015 article "Hope Against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity," that queer theory has not yet fully disarticulated "reproduction" from "normativity." Like Ferguson, Bliss wants to read black feminist theory alongside queer theory, but his strategy is very different. Bliss rethinks the queer negative through the lens of Afro-pessimism, turning to black feminist theory in order to decouple reproduction from normative futurity. Bliss's interest in black feminist theory stems not from a desire to denounce queer theory's claims—in particular, he is keen to hold on to the negativity espoused by queer theory's anti-social thesis—but rather from his desire to "offer a different orientation for thinking both sexuality and affect" (88). Drawing from several sources, Bliss rethinks the queer negative through the lens of Afro-pessimism, turning to black feminist theory in order to decouple reproduction from normative futurity. His article productively uses both strands of thought, but still relies on an initial dichotomy between the two.

[20] None of the top ten syllabi resulting from a quick Google search for "queer theory syllabus," for example, mention McDowell (the search results span a wide locational range: Wesleyan University, Pennsylvania State University, George Mason University, Southern Methodist University, Oregon State University, Agnes Scott College, Harvard University, Pitt University, the Maryland Institute College of Art, and Whitman College). A similar search for "queer theory reading list" yields the same result.

black feminist criticism, and to her personal knowledge of who "does" and "does not" live as a lesbian. In this chapter, with McDowell's greater historical relation to the queer critical canon in the background, I bring up Johnson's quote because it reminds us that biography proves harder to get rid of than Johnson might admit. According to Johnson, McDowell, though she practices "lesbian criticism," nonetheless does not write "as a lesbian." At other points in her essay, Johnson seems to define "lesbian criticism" as criticism that deals with lesbian subjects or lesbian desire. How is "lesbian criticism" different from "writing as a lesbian," which is different too from decoding "lesbian structures of desire"? And what does it mean that Smith "does" read as a lesbian, while McDowell "does not"? Really, the distinction is simple: McDowell does not identify as a lesbian, and therefore doesn't read as one. Smith openly claims a lesbian identity, and therefore does read as one; her work constitutes an example of the act. The lived practice of authors, deposited in Johnson's brief parenthetical, is out-of-line with the refusals of Authorship we might expect of the post-Barthesan literary criticism that Johnson distinguishes between "writing as a lesbian" and being a "decoder of lesbian structures" in her reference to McDowell.

In the Preface to *The Changing Same*, McDowell briefly chronicles her experience as young academic during the academy's critical theory sea change, retelling the story of her book's multiple false starts: "While I have held on to the subject, nothing of the dissertation remains, for between its completion and the product you now hold in your hand, literary studies underwent a wrenching upheaval, or, as we are now wont to say, à la Thomas Kuhn, a 'paradigm shift' from the 'Age of Criticism' to the 'Age of Theory'" (xi). The gerundive adjective "wrenching" here operates in an ambiguous relation to life and death, birth and rejection, and is our first clue to the queer valences of McDowell's critical performance. Indeed, McDowell's continual riff on the "wrenching upheaval" occasioned by the turn to theory and the professional pressures to write and theorize along poststructuralist lines suggests a possible connection between McDowell's

work and the work of critics who were, at around the same time of her writing, just beginning to articulate "queer theory" as an academic field. "Wrenching" along with its many associated synonyms (spraining, twisting, pulling, injuring, ricking, turning, tugging, jerking) and near-homophones (retching, wrecking) recalls the etymology of "queer,"—from the Middle High German root *terkw- "to turn, twist, wind" (Huffer, 34). The ambiguous violence implied by "wrenching" in the sentence "literary studies underwent a wrenching upheaval" is also not unlike the ambiguous violence Barbara Johnson describes in her work on Walter Benjamin, in which she points out that "[t]he scenario of suffering designed to lead to new life is suggested by Benjamin's text, but here he says merely 'die Wehen des eigenen' –… the proper translation of 'Wehen' would be neither 'birth pangs' nor 'death pangs,' but, rather, 'pains'" (60). Marking "Wehen" as *neither* aligned with birth or death, but rather with merely "pains," Johnson blurs the line between the two. The strategy serves to complicate metaphors of translation and motherhood, playing with the violence in both, and indicating a deft deployment of *différance*. Not only does Johnson's discussion of death and motherhood parallel McDowell's invocation of "at least two conceptions and one stillbirth;" it also reinforces what Johnson and many queer and feminist theorists have argued is a heterosexist and sexist idea of motherhood as unquestionably on the side of life, of good, of children, and of the future (see: Edelman, Bliss, etc).[21] In their polemical "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About *X*? " (also written in 1995), prominent queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner use "wrenching" not once, but twice, to describe the effect of queer theory in the academy: "Part of the point of using the word queer in the first place was the wrenching sense of recontextualization it gave, and queer commentary has tried hard to sustain awareness of diverse context boundaries" (345); "What does queer theory teach us about x? As

[21] In the following chapter, I take up these claims in more detail, examining how Johnson's work on abortion navigates the complicated relationship between motherhood, race, sexuality, and authorship.

difficult as it would be to spell out programmatic content for an answer, this simple question still has the power to wrench frames" (348). The powerful, "wrenching" force of the critical turn the McDowell describes, then, simultaneously connotes the pangs of a painful birth, the powerful sway of academic sea change, and the throws of a gag reflex.

McDowell wrenches her readers out of their easy assumptions. To be sure, the terms "black," "lesbian," "feminist," or "queer" all traffic quite differently, fasten themselves in various ways to the intensity marker "critic," are employed at different times in different ways and with different consequences, and attach to different bodies. McDowell, positioned as a straight black middle-class feminist critic, names her anxieties both about being read as a black feminist critic, and about writing too much as a critical theorist. She begins *The Changing Same* by addressing her own anxieties surrounding the tensions between critical theory and black feminism, via what she calls "a straightforward (and some would say shameless and unseemly) act of …'personal criticism'" (xxii). Similarly, in her critical amendment to "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," McDowell writes that "despite the power and appeal of Foucault, then, I would argue that it is not yet time to toll the death knell for the 'author' or for 'literary tradition'" (23). At the same time—relentlessly qualifying and amending her own authorial statements, while still holding up her reading ability and identity as qualifications and credentials for her critical authority—McDowell refuses a critical methodology that would rely on a static or essentialist view of authorship.

4. Barbara Johnson's Passing

4.1 Double Mourning in the Academic Sphere

Barbara Johnson died on August 27, 2009, after eight years of battling cerebellar ataxia. Her entire two-hour memorial service is on YouTube. The video, shot with one tripod camera facing a small Harvard stage, features seventeen speakers, one previously recorded lecture on *Walden*, two slideshows of family photographs, and one live musical performance. The event, according to an introduction by Johnson's colleague James Engell, follows Johnson's wishes "as closely as possible," down to the program illustrations. That the online video exists at all, and that the memorial it depicts is a blend of academic conference, wake, and revue, is strange enough. But at the start of ceremony, the detailed schedule suffers a slight hiccup: as the noise in the auditorium dies down and people take their seats, Engell informs the audience that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the first slated speaker, cannot attend. Smiling slightly, Engell asks the audience: "Please try to do something quite impossible: yes, imagine that I am Skip." Engell, who is white, proceeds to read a letter previously penned by Gates, who is black.

What is striking about this moment is not only the "quite impossible" cross-racial imagining it asks of its audience, but that such a context frames a *second* cross-racial imagining, as the content of Gates's letter soon makes clear. Gates (that is, Gates as voiced by Engell) begins his remarks with a parallel meditation:

> Let me begin with something light. I don't know if Barbara ever realized how many people thought that she was black. And many students encountering her work for the first time still think that she must be a black person.

In his eulogy, Gates gives two reasons for the "confusion" surrounding Johnson's race: one, that her surname is among the most common for black Americans, and two, that her reading of metaphor and metonymy in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was so

“stunning in subtlety and nuance,” that people could not imagine her as white. Speaking through Engell, Gates elaborates a difference between the Johnson that readers did not know personally, and the Johnson they felt they knew:

> It was not only her untangling of the words on the page that brought a number of readers—incoming graduate students and colleagues familiar with her work, but not familiar with her personally—to the conclusion that she must be black, but also her deep and intimate sense of Hurston’s language that left no question about who she was for these readers, leading them inevitably to the inevitable conclusion that this ‘Dr. Johnson’ was most black indeed. If Barbara didn’t know that, I wish she had. For Barbara, not only are we all constituted by language, but also language is constituted by us, and perhaps she would have accepted the invitation. ‘If my language says I’m black,’ she may have thought, ‘then black I may be.’ Or, more appropriately, she would have stated: ‘Then black I be.’

By Gates’s account, it is Johnson’s “deep and intimate sense” of Hurston’s language—a language that, the audience is meant to infer, typically does not get such nuanced and intimate attention from white readers—that leads students and professors alike to assume she is a black person. It is this intimate attachment to and knowledge of her objects of study that allows Johnson, in Gates’s estimation, not only to pass as black, but also to *become*, effectively, black as well.

A second tribute to Johnson, D.A. Miller’s essay “Call for Papers: *In Memorium* Barbara Johnson,” also meditates on her critical identity, albeit from another angle. Here, Miller discusses Johnson’s real-world lesbian identity in conjunction with critical considerations of her work, which largely fail to read Johnson as herself an embodied, desiring subject. Like the recorded Harvard memorial service, Miller’s eulogy is part biographical and part theoretical. Miller positions Johnson’s work in marked contrast to his own, in which he makes his own “gay writing position” very explicit (7). In “Call for Papers,” Miller turns Johnson’s method of close reading back on her own work, interpreting her essay “Bringing Out D.A. Miller,” itself an essay reviewing of Miller’s book *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (1992), as an implicit request to be “brought out” herself as an embodied author with an erotics of her own. Miller discusses

Johnson's lesbianism, and its seemingly tangential relation to her work, arguing that scholars ignore both the biographical and stylistic "queerness" of Johnson. Miller wants critics to take seriously the connotative language in Johnson's critical writing, language that might betray a more ambiguous, erotic, or linguistic Johnson—in a word, perhaps, a "queerer" Johnson.

The similarities between Gates's and Miller's eulogies are striking. Both men knew Johnson when they were graduate students at Yale. Both of their eulogies circulate within tight networks of academic friendship, and emerge very conscious of their place within an intimate "insider" network of reference and citation.[22] While neither eulogist addresses the late Johnson outright, both imagine themselves in conversation with her. Both pieces, in different ways, are structured around a man making a dead woman speak; as such, both enact scenes that themselves beg the same questions that Johnson asks in her theoretical explorations of voice, gender, and apostrophic elegy. Like Gates, Miller focuses on Johnson's use of language; for Miller, as for Gates, it is language and not biography that allows an audience to read identity. For Gates, it is not only Johnson's way of reading texts as a black feminist critic, but also her way of writing texts as a black feminist critic, that enables her to "pass" as black to those readers who have not met her in person; for Miller, Johnson's clear style and "abstracted" voice obscures the queer or lesbian erotics in her work (and, Miller makes sure to note, in her life).

Most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, both Gates and Miller characterize Johnson's work as marked by a performed but often unspoken intimacy. In Miller's article, as in

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[22] Miller's article, for example, was first published in the 2011 "Queer Bonds" issue of *GLQ* as one of a number of articles written for a subsection of the issue, "Critical Bonds," all of which follow a "[critic X] on [critic Y]" pairing formula (other titles from that issue include Carla Freccero's "Daddy's Girl—on Leo Bersani," Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's "Waking Nightmares—on David Marriott," and Heather Love's "'His Way'—on D.A. Miller," for example). The language of such pairings (of critics on critics, of the "bonds" which tie scholarship together) already gestures towards the tricky chiasmus of the personal and the critical, the erotics of friendship and familiarity that permeate much U.S. queer and feminist criticism.

Gates's eulogy, Johnson's posthumous identity politics revolve around a desire for an "intimacy" readable in the language and voice of the author:

> Though Barbara would certainly have welcomed being read with her own kind of rigor, her wish in 'Bringing Out D.A. Miller' is not a wish to be deconstructed; it is a wish to be *brought out*, to be disclosed as an embodied (sexed) author rather than an abstracted (neutered) analyst. Barbara wanted this, I think, not because she believed that her lesbianism was the key to her writing (she didn't) or because she was personally or politically in the closet (she wasn't). She wanted it because she felt that 'bringing out' might elicit, along with her already overt sexual orientation, an additional, more genuinely secret intimacy. (368)

Miller's phrase, "more genuinely secret intimacy," echoes Gates's phrase, "intimate sense," but while Miller says Johnson longs for intimacy, Gates says it is the thing she is known for. The echo hints at an under-theorized intimate connection between Johnson's failure to read/be read as a lesbian and her uncanny ability to read/be read as black.

As the repetition of the word "intimacy" in both Gates and Miller would suggest, thinking Johnson's blackness with and against Johnson's lesbianism illuminates her as/if critical strategies. Though a few critics have discussed Johnson's identity as it relates to her critical work, such discussions typically focus on *either* Johnson's lesbianism *or* on her critical attention to African American texts.[23] Just as it might be "quite impossible" for audiences to imagine Engell as Gates, so it seems, by Miller's account, quite impossible for queer critics to imagine Johnson as a lesbian—indeed, by these two accounts, it is easier for audiences to imagine her as black. Given that Johnson was a white woman, and gay, we might expect that her critical interpolation as a black feminist to be more fraught than her interpolation as a lesbian, but these two eulogies suggest a more complicated understanding of identity. Were we to trace the origins of Gate's

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[23] See, for example, the special issue of *differences*, "Difference: Reading with Barbara Johnson." Like the memorials of Miller and Gates, nearly all the essays in the "Barbara Johnson" section of the issue take up either Johnson's "lesbianism" or her "blackness" in some way. (The exception is Lee Edelman's closing essay, "Barbara Johnson: The Student of Metaphor." Edelman still focuses on identity, but takes a different tack: here, it is Johnson's position "as a student" that distinguishes her work [203]).

claims to Johnson's "blackness," or follow Miller's call and bring out the erotic body of the "Deconstructionist nun" (368), we would find, like Johnson herself sometimes finds, a recurring erotics of racial difference predicated on racial hierarchies of power.

When Johnson claims to read and write "as a lesbian," she enacts an as/if strategy that is almost always dependent on reading and writing as a black feminist critic; that is, with the tools and techniques of black feminist criticism. This is not simply a matter of giving black feminist criticism its historical due. In fact, the rhetorical and methodological strategies of Johnson's critical theory rest on her ability to write "as if" she is black, to temporarily and figuratively position herself as both desiring of black women and inhabiting the position of a black feminist critic, without naming herself as such. Johnson's apparent intimacy with black-authored texts, manifested in a stylistic clarity or directness, at once allows her to pass as both "black" and "straight." At the same time, this passing destabilizes her own critical position, and by extension destabilizes the critical identity categories "black feminist critic" and "white deconstructionist critic." This chapter argues that, rather than perform an intimacy invested in "tracking or expanding the borders of selfhood" (Vogal, 331), Johnson's intimate relations with both her objects of study and her readership unseat stable critical identity.

4.2 Hearing in Tongues

As the Introduction of this dissertation notes, intimacy has several definitions, among them insider knowledge, sexual activity, erotic desire, close friendship, or habitual familiarity. In addition to these definitions, intimacy might also denote attachment—the intimate attachments a critic has with their object of study, for example. In a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* simply titled "Intimacy," editor Lauren Berlant writes that intimacy might sometimes "generate… an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it" (285). Intimacy thus

also moves beyond the simple rubric of attachment, denoting closeness that in different instances can register as familial or erotic; discomfiting or monstrous; banal or extraordinary.

Intimacy also calls to mind intimation, a word Johnson herself sometimes used to describe her own critical method.[24] Berlant writes, “To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity” (281). Placing Berlant’s observation that intimacy is often marked by what is unspoken and yet understood alongside Miller’s and Gates’s frequent invocation of Johnson’s impressive critical lucidity, it stands to reason that much of Johnson’s as/if criticism would involve either interpreting what is unsaid, or leaving things unsaid for her audience to interpret. Her as/if criticism employs two main strategies. First, in her subtle and attentive readings of black-authored literature, Johnson employs a knowing ear in order to pass as a black feminist critic who is intimately familiar with African American vernacular and language. Second, breaking the fourth wall through strategic parenthetical asides, various comings out, and wry allusion, Johnson performs an intimacy with her readership that is based on assumed mutual knowledge shared between author and audience. These complementary intimations—both routinely manifested throughout Johnson’s criticism—work together and undermine each other, never fully allowing Johnson to pass as a black feminist critic while still temporarily allowing her to read as if she is.

Often, Johnson’s intimacy with black-authored texts makes itself known in her encounter with a gap.[25] Unlike the “aching gap of the real” (*Tendencies*, 129) that Eve Sedgwick experiences when she confronts her own racialized, gendered embodiment, the gaps in Johnson’s work most often serves to bolster the credibility of her identifications. Interpreting the literary

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[24] See, for example, Johnson referring to herself, in the introduction to *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994): “However, when in *The Critical Difference* she follows her *intimations* of a war within words into such pacific concepts as ‘the poetic,’ ‘cookery,’ ‘hair,’ and ‘syntax,’ these *intimations* might appear—in light of the subsequent book—as somewhat overdramatized by the canonical and aesthetic contexts in which they are discussed” (3).
[25] See chapter one for a more detailed analysis of this scene, and its implications for as/if criticism.

lacunae in the objects she reads, Johnson demonstrates her own critical understanding of language in a way that grants credence to her status as an adept reader of African American literature (and, following Gates, leads to her frequent interpellation as black, despite being a white woman). For first example of this critical strategy, I turn to the very piece of critical writing that Gates praises at Johnson's memorial service: the essay "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston." In the later half of this essay, Johnson discusses the final, un-glossed folk tale recounted in Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), in which a daughter attempts to transcribe a letter to her father, only to find there is no word for the sound he is describing. Hurston transcribes the sound as "(clucking noise)".[26] The story, writes Johnson, is neither an indictment of the literate, "educated" daughter, nor her illiterate father, but rather a parable whose "irony is directed both ways" (288). The father, here likely a stand-in for the southern black populations Hurston was anthropologically surveying, possesses knowledge of an oral sign that can't be captured in writing, while the literate daughter, likely a stand-in for Hurston herself, is the one for whom the joke of the story is accessible.[27]

The structure of address between the father and daughter in Hurston's story, the structures of address between Hurston and her ethnographic subjects, the structures of address in between Hurston and her white readers, and the structures of address between Johnson and her critical audience all prove intimately related. In fact, we might read Johnson as here saying something about her own critical position as well, by virtue of their shared position within two

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[26] For the full transcript of this story as Hurston records it, see *Mules and Men* (121-123).

[27] Johnson's analysis of "(clucking noise)" as that which cannot be translated from speech to writing anticipates, though doesn't entirely match up with, later work by Fred Moten on black performance and the sound where "words don't go" (42). In his analysis of avant-garde jazz in *In the Break*, Moten theorizes that

> Words don't go there: this implies a difference between words and sounds; it suggests that words are somehow constrained by their implicit reduction to the meanings they carry—meanings inadequate to or detached from the objects or states of affairs they would envelop. What's also implied is an absence of inflection; a loss of mobility, slippage, bend; a missing accent or affect; the impossibility of a slur or crack and the *excess*—rather than loss—of meaning they imply. (42)

The noise in the story Hurston documents might serve as another example of such a resistant object.

parallel structures of address. Though she ends with a scene that deconstructs the difference between "speech" and "writing" more generally, Johnson begins her chapter on Hurston by rehearsing her anxieties as a "white deconstructor" speaking and writing to a specific audience or specific audiences. Johnson comes out as a white reader by theatrically staging her own negotiations of identity and identification in the form of an ethical dilemma of address and conversation. "In preparing to write this paper, I found myself repeatedly stopped by conflicting conceptions of the structure of address into which I was inserting myself," she writes (278). Here, Johnson is "stopped," repeatedly, by her own lived identity. By performing her anxieties about reading as "a white deconstructor" (278), Johnson kick-starts an exploration about the difficulties of critical identity as it relates to both object choice and audience. The sentence that follows Johnson's initial confession of writer's block shifts the problem from one of authorship to one of address: "It was not clear to me what I, a white deconstructor, was doing talking about Zora Neale Hurston, a black novelist and anthropologist, or to *whom* I was talking" (278, emphasis original). The problem of address constitutes both Johnson's meta-critical framework and her analytic for discussing Hurston's work: she ends up analyzing Hurston through the same critical framework she first applied to herself.

While she begins by positioning herself as an "insider" within white academic Harvard and an "outsider" when it comes to African American literature, Johnson winds up somewhere in between. Johnson, a white outsider, nonetheless 'gets' the inside joke of the story at the end of *Mules and Men* by virtue of both her attention to Hurston's language and her own deconstructive strategies. In fact, it is Johnson's own ability to decipher the ellipses of meaning housed in the parenthetical "(clucking noise)" that grants her, for Gates and others, the ability to pass as black. Johnson's attempts to interpret "(clucking noise)" not only place Johnson in Hurston's position, but also place her more generally in the position that Mae Henderson reserves for black feminist

critics, in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," an article published in the collection *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (1990), a volume edited by Gates in which Johnson's article on metaphor and metonymy in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also appears. Henderson argues that black women writers employ both *heteroglossia* (the ability to know multiple languages) and *glossolalia* (the ability to speak in tongues). While glossolalia is defined by speaking a language that cannot be translated, heteroglossia is defined by the power to hear and interpret. Henderson concludes her essay with a proposition: "Might I suggest that if black women writers speak in tongues, then it is we black feminist critics who are charged with the hermeneutical task of interpreting tongues?" (138). Insomuch as she attempts to interpret "(clucking noise)," Johnson possesses an intimate knowledge that allows her to write as if the heteroglot black feminist critic Henderson describes.

Another way to think about this is in the context of translation, a subject dear to Johnson's heart. In her 2003 book *Mother Tongues,* Johnson describes "as if" reading as the suspension of disbelief necessary for both theory and translation. In Johnson's field of Comparative Literature, the deconstructive injunction "be as if" amounts to the "bad suture" between a word and its imperfect translation; in pedagogy and in reading, it is an abeyance of one's current theoretical position in the service of another, temporarily assumed position or perspective. Again drawing on black authors, Johnson links the idea of "as if" to Franz Fanon's writings on negritude, and to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness.[28] These two ideas are at odds. Indeed, Johnson calls the critical goal of allowing for "heuristic transference

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[28] Johnson: "When Franz Fanon says about his reaction of Sartre's reading of Aimé Césaires poetics of Negritude, 'I needed *not* to think I was just a minor term in a dialectic,' he is saying, in effect, I need to read *as if* I believed in the Negriude I now take a distance from, in order to get to the next stage in my thinking. *As if* is something that cannot happen right if it happens in the mode of *as if*" (36); "What has been called 'political correctness' is something I would prefer to call 'double consciousness'—the knowledge that one is viewed, not just viewing. W. E. B. Du Bois defined double consciousness, famously, as 'the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world.' The strength of those 'others' produces double consciousness" (37).

and for a transformative double consciousness at once" an "impossibility," precisely because "these two processes draw on the contradictory energies of belief, critique, and defense" (38). Despite this impossibility, the paradoxical mechanisms of "as if" nonetheless play out throughout Johnson's writing as she identifies or fails to identify with both named identity categories and critical positions.

Johnson's writing on Hurston is but one instance of her passing via her savvy critical ear. Frequently in *The Feminist Difference*, the connection between the heard/oral/spoken and the seen/literary/written becomes Johnson's primary frame for thinking about race. These two modes of figurative description contradict or complicate each other, in Johnson's work, when an author's racial position is at the forefront of the argument. Often, the binary splits along the black/white axis, where "black" is marked by the oral and "white" is marked by the written. In her discussion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for example, Johnson describes a scene in which protagonist Bigger Thomas pens a false ransom note to the father of the woman he has earlier killed. Her argument centers on the particular "blackness" of Bigger's rhetoric. "Like Richard Wright himself in 1940, Bigger is compelled to sign his writing 'Red,'" Johnson writes. "Yet the note is signed 'Black' as well: '*Do what this letter say*'" (65). The missing "s" at the end of "say"—an "s" Anglo-English readers might expect at the end of a verb with a singular subject—is the (omitted) letter that "signs" Bigger's letter "'Black'," that is, that produces the "sign" of blackness in the text. This "sign" is, crucially, not written; it is an elision, a blank space where the "s" might be. Johnson's language reflects this: "*Hidden* behind the letter's detour through communism is the unmistakable trace of its black authorship. Yet no one in the novel seems to be able to read it… Behind the sentence 'Do what this letter say' lies the possibility—and the *invisibility*—of a whole vernacular literature" (67, emphasis mine). Johnson's reading of blackness, then, depends on hearing and seeing what is not there. She is able to determine who is

speaking precisely by reading a gap. Here, Johnson (unlike the unwitting “white father” [65] who reads the note in *Native Son*) possesses the critical ear that allows her to hear the rhetorical cues that mark the text of Bigger’s note as “black.”

Similarly, in Miller’s knowing eulogy to Johnson, “queerness,” like “blackness,” can also be heard in a writer’s style; queerness, like blackness, also can be detected in a particular intimate reading method. To “see” Johnson as a lesbian, critics have to “hear” her as one:

> In acknowledging no rhetoric that could contaminate her knowledge, no connotations that might unsteady her denotations, we effectively deprived her of *language*. Nor were we any closer to heeding the stubborn presence in her writing of what Barthes would have called ‘grain,’ the irreducibly individual *body* in a voice as it speaks language. And so we muted that finely orchestrated erotic friction between language *and* body—and between the given and chosen elements within each—which is what we mean by a writer’s *style.* (368)

Miller’s analysis of Johnson’s style doesn’t address her race specifically, but the rhetoric of his essay nonetheless reveals the intimate relation between Johnson’s whiteness, her lesbianism, and her writing style and reception. For Miller, the collective critical failure to “bring out” Johnson is, importantly, about a failure to hear her. For Gates, Johnson’s own “blackness” comes not only from the way she sounds when she writes, but also the way her intimate reading attends to black authorial voice. So intimate is Johnson’s knowledge that it—at least, for Gates—grants her not only a critical ear, but a writerly voice that also reads as black, again by virtue of an omission: not “then black I may be,” but “then black I be.”

4.3 Takes One to Know One

A white critic who possesses a critical ear for racial difference, Johnson’s role is not unlike the role, cogently described by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, of the

knowing friend or foe who can name gayness even as it remains in the closet.[29] Just as, in Sedgwick's example, an outsider is wise enough to "know" her companion is gay (that is, she is an adept enough reader that she can decode gay male structures of desire), Johnson is wise enough to "know" Bigger is black (she is an adept enough reader that she can decode black patterns of address). Like Sedgwick's critical knowing, Johnson's critical knowing is born of an intimate identification with her subject.[30]

Miller, too, tropes on "knowing" and its relation to "bringing out" with his notion of the "*folie à deux*" (18). Partially due to the biographical "fact" of Johnson's own lesbian identity, Miller continually runs the risk of having his "call for papers" misheard as a call to "out," rather than "bring out." Miller is aware of this risk. "There is hardly a procedure for bringing out this meaning that doesn't itself look or feel like just more police entrapment," he writes in *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (18). But that statement is soon followed by a parenthetical, one that offers his readers another version of "bringing out" that stands in contrast to the paranoid "outing" his work risks repeating: "(Unless such [a procedure], perhaps, were a *folie a deux*—where 'two' stands for the possibility of community—that would bring it out in as subtle and flattering a fashion as, say, the color of a garment is said to bring out a complexion)" (18). Here, "bringing out" is a meeting of *two* mad minds, one that suggests community, or at least the identificatory formula "it takes one to know one." The mutual recognition Miller offers Johnson is tantamount to a gift, a fulfillment of Johnson's deep-seated desire to be known. His gesture, at least taken in the tone of the essay, is one of cross-gender critical collaboration formed on the basis of a shared homosexual identity. For Miller, one is "brought out" like a color or complexion; as such, Johnson's language, praised by critics for its "brilliance" but ultimately abstracted from its style

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[29] See Eve Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet," *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).
[30] See chapter one.

and voice, becomes effectively transparent, rendering her own body invisible. By contrast, Engell's joke and Gates's story work because Engell's and Johnson's "whiteness," to those who have met them, is able to be plainly seen and "known."

Johnson herself devotes most of "Bringing Out D.A. Miller" (the piece to which Millers "Call for Papers" responds) to analyzing the first sentence of *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*. Even more specifically, she devotes her analysis to eight words in the first sentence: Miller's affected aside, "long before I, how you say, *knew myself*" (3). For Johnson, Miller's "knew myself" is "passing" (5) as a shibboleth, acting a code with sexual undertones meant to "out" Miller to his already in-the-know audience ("The 'how you say' would indicate that a linguistic question was passing as a code word. If you speak this language, it implies, you know what it means" [5]). But the phrase "long before I, how you say, *knew myself*" not only denotes gayness, but also connotes a marked *French*-ness, the kind of French-ness that marks both "Roland Barthes" and the brand of poststructuralist theory he is associated with. "An English speaker would say, 'How *do* you say?'… The speaker is pretending to lack English, but *in a French way*," she writes (5). Just as Johnson racializes Bigger's style in *Native Son*, and as Gates racializes Johnson's style in his eulogy ("then black I be"), so too does Johnson nationalize and localize both the poststructuralist theory of Barthes and, associatively, the academic queer theory of Miller: both are very French. The missing "s" signs Bigger's note "Black;" so too does the missing "do" sign Miller's phrase "French."

It would be a mistake, though, to classify these various moments of critical intimacy as moments of complete mutual recognition or understanding. In his article "Unknowing Barbara," Lee Edelman points out the irony of praising a prominent deconstructionist thinker for her comprehensible style, writing that "By prizing Barbara Johnson too well we all stand at risk of blinding ourselves to the productively destabilizing ignorance with which the very texts we prize

remain capable of surprising us" (92). Much like Miller, Edelman cautions against the impulse to characterize Johnson's prose as straightforward, clear, or knowable. Instead, Edelman argues that the value of Johnson's work is its underlying incomprehensibility, an incomprehensibility that he links to an unknowable and untranslatable death drive, as well as to the stammering foreignness of deconstruction itself.[31] This insight indicates a link between Johnson's deconstructive method, her passing, and how intimacy works in her critical corpus.

As Clarance Vogal points out in her contribution to *Critical Inquiry'*s "Intimacy" issue (an article on heterosexual marriage counseling titled "Sex and Talk"), intimacy's relation to knowledge can be understood multiple and even opposing ways. The first would seem completely incompatible with the principles of deconstruction: this understanding of intimacy would be that of completely knowing a person.[32] Working with this understanding, it would be possible to unironically claim that readers of Johnson could fully comprehend both her prose and her person; likewise, it would be possible to unironically speak of Johnson's intimate ability to know a text. But a second understanding of intimacy, one put forward by Leo Bersani, Edelman, and others, is in fact all about the unknowable. This is what Vogal calls "strictly self-disrupting" intimacy (365), one more akin to Bersani's understanding of anti-social *jouissance*: this type of self-disrupting intimacy is related to the aspect of Johnson's work concerned with "questions of otherness, personification, and the all-determining gap that frustrates every attempt to make acts

[31] Edelman: "There's something you should know about Barbara Johnson. Something you *don't* know. Something you *can't* know. Something that's hidden in plain sight. And Johnson, though never possessing that knowledge, indicates, tie and time again, both its utter impossibility and the impossibility of ceasing to utter it—the impossibility that generates time as *already* time again, as allegorical temporality, as the compulsion (implicit in the phrase "you should know") to repeat our *failure* to know it and to call that failure knowledge itself… Like letters from an unknown woman, Johnson's texts, for all that they tell us, perform their own unknowability, while knowing that the lesson they're doomed to repeat is one we can never comprehend—and one we comprehend least when it seems most lucid and most clear. For the otherness, the foreignness, the stammer, the simplicity that Melville cannily personifies in Billy Budd, barbarian, translate 'into various senses of the word,' and allegorize so as to make knowable, the irony we always fail to read in what we 'know' as 'Barbara.'" (93).

[32] Vogal characterizes these as "intimacies that are entirely self-expressive… too much in the grip of an artificially solid sense of one's self (and its history and interests) and too attached to one's view of one's spouse's (equally solid, equally trackable) self" (365).

of reading and knowing coincide" (Edelman, 90).[33] Hesitant to accede to either extreme, Vogal posits a third option: intimacy that neither claims to know the other fully, nor completely shatters the self. Such an intimacy might take the form of an uncomfortable indeterminacy; it might manifest as closeness that blurs boundaries between self and other. It might also manifest as a partial, incomplete, or failed understanding: indeed, more often than not, intimacy makes clear the impossibility of any attempt to fully know a person or text. On the one hand, "intimacy… involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (Berlant, 281). When understandings of critical expertise are premised on the adage that "it takes one to know one," readers of criticism are quick to assume that a critic demonstrating intimate knowledge of a subject must be an insider. Later, though, Berlant notes that "romance and friendship inevitably meet the instabilities of sexuality, money, expectation, and exhaustion, producing, at the extreme, moral dramas of estrangement and betrayal, along with terrible spectacles of neglect ad violence even where desire, perhaps, endures" (281). Critical intimacy, too, can follow this pattern: what at first seems like an easy intimacy between text and critic, or between critic and audience, might soon be derailed by the same forces of material and affective difference. In this way, intimacy in criticism can make obvious the slash in as/if.

The differences laid bare in intimacy's breakdown hint to the fact that "knowing" is not without its own erotics, its own dynamics of pleasure and power. "After all, the position of those who think they *know something about one that one may not know oneself* is an excited and empowered one," Sedgwick writes (80). "In many, if not most, relationships, coming out is a matter of crystallizing intuitions or convictions that had been in the air for a while already and

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[33] For more, see Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1989).

had already established their own power-circuits of silent contempt, silent blackmail, silent glamorization, silent complicity" (80). These dynamics are inescapable: think, for example, of Miller's above-quoted parenthetical. Though Miller turns to the gentler analogy of fashion to put queasy readers at ease, his amendment's gentleness rests on a false divide between the terms it seeks to displace (the police, entrapment) and the terms it offers as alternatives (fashion, color, garment, complexion). The existence of such historical and current realities as anti-cross-dressing ordinances, gang-related legal dress codes, and various other forms of systemic gender and racial police profiling, for example, complicates this easy change in metaphors.[34] Johnson's criticism, too, is not divorced from the dynamics of power and history. The excitement and power of being "one who knows" is bound up in Johnson's reading of Hurston and Wright, and with her critical project; it is, also, the excitement and power born of an intimate relation.

4.4 Lovely College Words

In *The Feminist Difference*, Johnson presents her readers with another French-inflected intimacy, this time from a work of fiction. In her chapter "*Aesthetic* and *Rapport* in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," Johnson complicates her previous rubric of speech/conversation by attending to the visual as well, focusing on the tension between the seen/silent and the unseen/spoken. She begins by speculating on why *Sula* holds such importance for many African American critics ("How does *Sula*—a novel that holds up a mirror for black men, displaced Southerners, and black lesbians—manage to produce so strong a mechanism for recognition?" [75]). After a brief survey of various African American critics and readers, Johnson posits that the main draw of Morrison's work is its ability to produce a notion of "home" that is already lost. This idea of lost home,

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[34] See "Gang-Related Legislation—Gang-Related Clothing, Dress Codes, School Uniforms," National Gang Center (https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/legislation/clothing), and "Arresting Dress: A Timeline of Anti-Cross-Dressing Laws in the United States." *PBS NewsHour* (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/arresting-dress-timeline-anti-cross-dressing-laws-u-s/).

Johnson goes on to argue, is exemplified in the way Morrison plays with the tension between two (French) words, "aesthetic" and "rapport."

Johnson pulls these words from a pivotal scene in the middle of the novel in which Nel has just walked in on her husband, Jude, having sex with her best friend Sula. The scene, which is narrated from Nel's point of view, contains the following monologue:

> I just stood there seeing it and smiling, because maybe there was some explanation, something important I did not know about that would have made it all right. I waited for Sula to look up at me any minute and say one of those lovely college words like *aesthetic* or *rapport*, which I never understood but which I loved because they sounded so comfortable and firm. (105)

Nel watches and waits for Sula to look up, to see her and say something, so that Nel might hear it. As Johnson herself points out, the move from "aesthetics" to "rapport" is from seeing to hearing, from the surface pleasures of art to the pleasures of a trusting back-and-forth.

For Johnson, the strange associations of "aesthetics" and "rapport"—as seemingly arbitrary; as French; as denoting artistic pleasure and sincere communication, respectively—constitutes precisely the key to cracking the code of Morrison's novel. Johnson writes:

> The words 'aesthetic' and 'rapport,' in addition to coming from what could be called 'another scene'—both college and foreign—also both contain silent letters, signaling their status as writing, that is, as themselves silent letters. Silent because not oral—and in writing, the sign of the oral has conventionally been the missing letter rather than the silent letter, although the missing letter is marked by a diacritical mark like an apostrophe which is all the more obviously a sign of writing in its completely unphonetic dimension (83).

This second type of "apostrophe," a visual sign denoting an unheard phoneme, further confuses the relation between sight, hearing, reading, speaking, and writing. Ultimately, Johnson posits that the entirety of *Sula* is about the interplay between "aesthetics" and "rapport," and by extension, about the tension between the pleasure of artistic consumption and the danger of aestheticizing death or violence. "Aesthetic" and "rapport" are not only French words, but also

"college words," employed in universities (universities, perhaps, like the very "French" Yale of the 1980s, from which Johnson, Miller, and Gates all hail).[35] In *Sula*, Morrison frequently places Nel in the position of disinterested watcher, particularly in scenes of sex such as the scene above, or scenes of violence such as the accidental death of Chicken Little. In the latter scene, a young Nel looks on with detached pleasure as Sula swings a toddler into the river, killing him; later on, Sula will accuse Nel of "watching" while he drowned, a charge that, in making her a willing accessory to murder, strips Nel of any claim to innocence.

Though Johnson remains attentive to the differences between the visual "aesthetic" and the aural "rapport," she does not note how these academic words serve to mediate and therefore serve as a buffer not just to racial violence, but to illicit sexuality as well. If Nel is already linked to the white critic/reader by virtue of her voyeuristic position relative to Sula and Chicken Little, she is further linked to the white critic/reader by her voyeuristic position relative to Sula and Jude. Like Nel, the white reader takes pleasure in observing the pornographic scene of Sula and Jude. By Nel's account, Sula's adultery is the thing that the vocabulary of the academy would cover up, would make "all right." Nel never gets to hear the words "aesthetic" and "rapport." Sula fails to fulfill Nel's desire to be seen and spoken to; too busy fucking, Sula fails to narrate the scene in ways that would allow for impersonal detachment, distance, or analysis. An accidental but nonetheless "smiling" voyeur, Nel remains fixated by the scene of sex playing out before her. Because she is concerned with the aestheticization of traumatic violence, Johnson focuses on the death of the child rather than the death of a marriage, and thus leaves the link between the two scenes implicit. Unspoken in Johnson's exploration of *Sula* is the idea that the pleasure of

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[35] See Marc Redfield, "Theory, Deconstruction, and the Yale Critics," (19-61), and "Professing Theory: Paul de Man and the Institution of Reading" (125-157) in *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America.*

watching and reading she describes is itself an erotics; moreover, that it is a lesbian or queer erotics.

In Johnson's essay, this pleasure in watching, which is also a *guilty* pleasure, extends to the critic herself—particularly the white critic. Johnson waits until the end of her essay to name herself as a white reader, and to raise the question of white readership. Even then, her admission comes in the form of a collective pronoun, couched in an inquiry; even then, Johnson's essay raises more questions than it answers:

> And what about the white reader? Is there a greater likelihood that the white reader will merely 'watch'? Is this a form of racial voyeurism? What is the nature of our pleasure in contemplating trauma or racial injustice or the destruction of the 'home' of the other? What would be a response that would embody rapport rather than aesthetics? (86)

Here, Johnson expresses her anxiety about an interested disinterest, a "racial voyeurism" that, like Nel's own watching, entails standing back in silent contemplation of the scenes of "trauma, taboo, and violation" detailed in Morrison's prose (86). Saidiya Hartman, two years after the publication of *The Feminist Difference*, raises similar questions about the consumption of black scenes of suffering in her work *Scenes of Subjection* (1997).[36] *The Feminist Difference* is interested in many of these same questions, though Johnson mostly shifts them to specifically focus on white readership and late-20th century literary fiction. The "our" in of "what is the nature

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[36]Note that, like Johnson, Hartman frequently uses the first person pronoun—"we," for example, appears three times in this excerpt from the introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*: "Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are culled upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the "peculiar institution"? Or does the pain of the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection? At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator… In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?" (4).

of our pleasure" performs double duty: it outs Johnson "as" a white reader by way of the personal pronoun, and also links her to other white readers by way of the plural pronoun (in other words, it is working via mechanisms of both identity and identification).[37] Breaking the fourth wall and directly hailing a group of assumed readers, Johnson apostrophically brings them into being and, in so doing, makes her white self and her white readership visible. Johnson's "our" makes these rhetorical questions personal for white consumers of Morrison's fiction, particularly for those who both write and read criticism.[38] It also orients her question to the (presumed white?) readership of *The Feminist Difference*; here, the "our" becomes a gesture that directly addresses

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[37] Johnson's "our" very much invokes the same problems, complexities, and anxieties that Robyn Wiegman, in *Object Lessons* (2012), later describes with regard to the use of "we" in academic discourse:

> Yes, *we*, that towering inferno of universalism, that monstrous display of self-infatuation, that master stroke of white-woman-speech. Voices warn me away from the danger. Hit backspace. Rephrase. Take comfort in grammar's singularity. But how can I not want this tantalizing hallucination? Or more to the point, why must I ignore its pulsing heat when identity knowledges are nothing without the haunting specter and affective traction of *we*? If the protocols of critical speech have taught us to avoid the risk, it is just as true to say that identity knowledges rarely take political or critical aim without some measure of hope that *we* will struggle into existence—partial and contingent to be sure, but resonant and agential. In the taut space between the *we* that must be disciplined and the *we* that is desired, *I* presents itself as the desiring subject's safest bet. But how safe is any *I*—indeed, how safe am I?—when the descriptive content no less than the protocols in which I come to speech are bound to histories and scripts that are given credit for knowing me at the start? My strategy in the pages that follow is to inhabit the error, not to avoid it, and certainly not to take refuge in the small cave of the *I*, even as I mobilize it in order to help specify the tense and longed-for translations that mark the distance I am trying to travel from me to *you*—the preamble to whatever can be made to stand for *we*. (13)

Johnson, like Wiegman, refuses to shy away from the personal plural pronoun, though her use of "our" is perhaps more specific—here, she seems not to claim a universalism, but rather to identify as and name the specificity of a group of "white readers."

[38] Pamela Caughie, in an article published around the same time as "Lesbian Spectacles" titled "*Passing* and Pedagogy" (1992), reads Larsen's *Passing* allegorically to address the problems of authority and address that come with being a white critic writing about black-authored texts, problems with which (as we have seen) Johnson also actively concerned. Citing such theorists as Diana Fuss and Patricia Hill Collins, Caughie notes that authority in the classroom (and, by extension, the academic/critical sphere more broadly) often relies on personal experience as qualification of its claim to knowledge, especially when it comes to racial knowledge. Caughie also points out that, because pedagogical authority is structural, "as teachers, we are always 'passing' in the classroom… and if we are multiply positioned in a multicultural classroom, still, race may intervene in some of our classrooms to expose not simply the illusion of authority, but the illusion of whiteness as well" (788). Once again, the question of passing relates to the question of knowledge: "The pedagogical issue raised here is: who can speak, and with what kind of authority, in the multicultural classroom? Or, to frame this question in risker terms, how can we teach that which we do not know?" (776). (Interestingly, In yet another example of inter-textual/citational intimacy, Caughie writes about "Passing and Pedagogy" several years later in an article for the 2006 issue of d i f f e r e n c e s partially devoted to Barbara Johnson. In this article, titled "The Example of Barbara Johnson," Caughie describes the acute anxiety she felt as a young scholar upon hearing that Johnson would give a guest lecture at her university on Nella Larsen—anxiety born of the fear that her own article on Passing, then in the works, would accidentally say the same thing as Johnson's lecture. Caughie's anxiety is not just an anxiety of influence, but an anxiety akin to that felt when a relationship becomes so intimate that the line between self and other becomes difficult to distinguish).

not only white readers of *Sula*, but the imagined white readers of Johnson's critique of *Sula*, who may look to her as a critical authority or assume things about her identity that she seek to undermine.

As we have seen, this kind of direct address in Johnson constitutes a major stylistic marker of her as/if criticism. These asides are an example of intimacy as audience address; they are short, digressive turns away from the text and towards Johnson's readers. Often, they take the form of a parenthetical. Of the relatively few authors that specifically address Johnson's writing style, almost every one mentions penchant for parentheses; so frequently are they mentioned, in fact, that we might take them as a Johnsonian trademark.[39] Johnson's asides suspend the action of the sentence, acting as a kind of soliloquy to Johnson's readers. These asides change the terms of address, assuming an audience in-the-know and in on the joke.

Considering the lines of sight, desire, and identification that Johnson traces in her own reading of *Sula*, it becomes clear that Johnson's intimate relations extend beyond the identification she has with her white readership. Insofar as she casts herself in the position of desiring voyeur, Johnson identifies with the protagonist Nel, who looks on in scenes of sex and violence, adultery and murder. On the other hand, insofar as she plays the role of literary academic, Johnson identifies with Nel's counterpart, Sula—whose college degree alienates her from Nel and the other residents of The Bottom—and to Morrison, who herself is an academic

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[39] These authors include Corey McEleney: ("How do we read the brief parenthetical (and exclamatory) anecdote that interrupts Johnson's quotation of deJean's study?" (150) and "Given Johnson's insistence on her personal erotic life throughout the essay, it is intriguing to note the parenthetical 'my' in this sentence—especially because the two subsequent uses of the pronoun in the same sentence are not parenthetical" (157); Pamela Caughlie: "He does, however, discuss the meaning of the epigraph in some detail, nothing that 'yes and no' are 'three words that would be expected from a desconstrutionist'—though [the parenthetical] 'what else?' I would suggest is what we expect from Barbara Johnson," (180); Avital Ronnell: "Why does the writer parachute parentheses at the end of this description? … On the face of it, there may be no rhetorical justification for the parenthetical annexation, for it follows no quotation or recognizable expository reasoning" (133); and Jane Gallop: "Yes-and- (then) no is so frequent in this text that we might hear the parenthetic '(what else?)' as a recognition of predictability" (154) and "We should certainly connect this 'reading otherwise' with Johnson's preference for questions over answers…Which may be why in the anecdote that begins the book, when asked a question by Jeffery Nealon, she ultimately (if parenthetically) replies with a question: what else?" (160).

and who, Johnson observes, likely writes with the knowledge that her book will be taught to (mostly white) college students. Johnson's identification with white readers at the end of her piece displaces and thus stages the precarity of these previous identifications, which cross racial identities and are made on the level of Johnson's position as both a (lesbian) voyeur and (black feminist) critic. As we have learned from Johnson's dual readings of Miller and of Morrison, French-ness is on the side of the written, the academic, the white, the deconstrutive. But while this version of identity seems to line up in Johnson's analysis, both blackness and "lesbian-ness" prove much harder to pin down.

4.5 Lesbian Reading Glasses

Unlike much of Johnson's previous and later work, *The Feminist Difference* does not delimit its author's critical erotics solely to her passing asides. Late in *The Feminist Difference*, in an essay quite uncharacteristic of her typical writing, Johnson sets out to "read explicitly as a lesbian" (141). The essay, titled "Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula, Passing, Thelma and Louise*, and *The Accused*," is the closest Johnson comes to fully or un-ironically claiming a lesbian writing position, and even here, when the subject of her essay is her own lesbian desire, Johnson still makes sure to draw her readers' attention to the impossibilities of identity, to the vagueness of the category "lesbian," and to the ambiguity of identity categories in general. She accomplishes this by staging her (unsuccessful) attempt to read two novels, Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Morrison's *Sula*; and two films, *Thelma and Louise* and *The Accused*, as a lesbian. While Johnson explicitly performs the dramatic failure of a simple intimacy—one that ostensibly squares with her own erotic desire—unspoken in her failure is not only her attempt to read as a lesbian, but also as a black feminist critic.

In “Lesbian Spectacles,” Johnson takes inspiration from the work of Nancy Miller, whose essay “Untitled Work: Or, Speaking as a Feminist…” (*Getting Personal*, 1991) theorizes what it means to speak (and write) “as a feminist.” Writes (N.) Miller:

> It is the fashion in French literary circles—by which I am vicariously contaminated—to inquire of a speaker (or, if one is the speaker, to identify) the locus of one’s discourse, to name the place out of which one speaks; or, as they are said to say in California, to say where one is coming from… In fact, I would be hard pressed to determine whether I am speaking as a feminist, a woman, an academic, a writer, or your garden variety neurotic (33).

In Johnson’s words, Miller posits “speaking as” as a concept that “plunges the speaker into new questions of reliable representivity and identity” (141). Like Miller, Johnson first defines “reading as a lesbian” as a method of reading that reads alongside her own unconscious desire. She defines the project of “Lesbian Spectacles” as an attempt to “take account of my particular desire structure in reading rather than try to make generalizations about desire as such, even lesbian desire ‘as such’” (157). In this way, “Lesbian Spectacles” references the “spectacles” of lesbian desire that Johnson sees in the fictional scenes she analyzes—the spectacle of desire that readers and audience members need only to look for.

Johnson, dissatisfied with her initial characterization of reading as a lesbian as “simply” accounting one’s obvious lesbian desire, ultimately concludes that “reading as a lesbian” requires more than just looking. Reading as lesbian involves a kind of hermeneutics of lesbian suspicion. “I needed a way of catching myself in the act of reading as a lesbian without having intended to,” Johnson writes. “To accomplish this, I decided to look at novels or films that did *not* present themselves explicitly as ‘lesbian,’ but that could, through interpretation, be said to have a crypto-lesbian plot” (141). The verbal acrobatics of this sentence, Johnson’s amassing of qualifiers (“could,” “through interpretation,” “be said to,” “crypto-lesbian”), bespeaks her unease at such a reading project. Her title suggests as much: after all, “spectacles” can also mean “reading

glasses," and with the *double entendre* Johnson alludes to her own position as spectator and reader. One can imagine a playful pedagogical instruction that readers "put on their lesbian spectacles" in order to "see" the scenes Johnson describes as scenes of lesbian desire. "Spectacles" defined as reading glasses rather than as observable scenes places the emphasis back on the eyes, and on the spectator. This second meaning of "spectacles" intimates that even a critical project that professes to read from the perspective of "the personal" requires a supplement (an aid, a tool, a lens, a corrective) and is itself not adequate to the task of reading from an authentic individual perspective. Johnson herself, without the aid of the lesbian spectacles she assumes for her project of "reading as a lesbian," might not be able to see the very structures of desire she outlines.

"Lesbian Spectacles" ironically and knowingly explores the difficultly of reading "as." Johnson's claims about this difficulty not only rests on the deconstructionist premise that there is no stable identity, only difference, but also on the psychoanalytic assumption that there is no way of "reading as a lesbian" because there is no lesbian desire "as such," no category of fully knowable, conscious articulated desire. For Johnson, it is impossible to distinguish between "her own" lesbian desire and her desire to "own" her lesbian desire. Johnson is also unable to distinguish "genuine" lesbian desire from her own idea of what lesbian desire "should" be, especially in the context of an acceptable feminist politics: "If I tried to 'speak as a lesbian,' wouldn't I be processing my understanding of myself through media-induced images of what a lesbian is or through my own idealizations of what a lesbian *should* be?" (157)

Because the question of "lesbian" identity or desire already proves a doozy for Johnson, the question of what constitutes "reading as a lesbian" remains unresolved. Johnson's own meditation on "reading as a lesbian" recalls an earlier observation by Judith Butler, who quips in her article "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991): "To write or speak *as a lesbian*

appears a paradoxical appearance of this 'I,' one which feels neither true nor false" (13, emphasis original). With the melancholic ambivalence typical of Butler's larger *oeuvre*, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" admits not only the hazards of claiming identity, but the sometime necessity of claiming identity as well. Indeed, Butler notes early in her essay that she also finds "being" a lesbian sometimes necessary in the professional (specifically, the *academic* professional) scene:

> The professionalization of gayness requires a certain performance and production of a 'self' which is the *constituted effect* of a discourse that nevertheless claims to 'represent' that self as a prior truth. When I spoke at the conference on homosexuality in 1989, I found myself telling my friends beforehand that I was off to Yale to be a lesbian, which of course didn't mean that I wasn't one before, but that somehow then, as I spoke in that context, I *was* one in some more thorough and totalizing way, at least for the time being. (18)

The privilege of the claimed identity "lesbian" that Butler encounters at the "conference on homosexuality" shores up Butler's academic credibility and therefore, ironically, lends credibility to her critique of identity. In other words, Butler's avowal of the strategic provisionality of the sign is an as/if critical strategy: by her account, it is only because she theorizes "as" a lesbian that Butler can credibly dismantle the very category "lesbian" as a stable or knowable identity from which to write and speak. In an article titled "Reading Johnson as a 'as a': Yes and No," Gallop contends that Johnson—similarly aware of the political paradox of identity—performs a politics that is in favor of *speaking* "as a." Gallop contends that Johnson is in favor of claiming and declaring one's own critical position, as when she writes "certainly, *as a lesbian*" (Gallop, 40), but resists *being read* "as a" (that is, resistant to being interpellated as one readable identity). Johnson's strategy is one of resistance to imposed identity politics, and that Johnson's reading "as a lesbian" might connect with reading "with astonishment" (159), reading "otherwise" (160), and reading "as an 'other'" (161).

The significance of “Yale” in Butler’s anecdote should not be overlooked. As both a site of emergent identity-based student activism and the primary site of American deconstruction (so much so that “The Yale School” has come to stand in, synecdochally, for the school of US deconstruction writ large), Yale is in many ways a crucible for the type of criticism this dissertation interrogates.[40] In an article titled “Queer Theory and the Yale School: Barbara Johnson’s Astonishment,” Corey McEleny responds to both Gallop and D.A. Miller, expanding on Gallop’s analysis of the “as” in Johnson. Taking Miller’s plea for more intimate critical attention to Johnson’s style as a challenge, McEleney uses Johnson’s particular way of writing “as a lesbian” to issue a call for a more “astonishing,” deconstructive queer theory. McEleney explicitly credits the work of Gallop and Miller as the inspiration for his piece: “Gallop is interested in the idea of reading ‘as a lesbian.’ But what does it mean to read ‘*as a lesbian’*?” (153, emphasis original); “The following essay is a response to Miller’s ‘Call for Papers.’ I want to take a cue from his reading of Johnson and pay close attention to the ‘flesh of her prose,’ but I wish to question up front the notion that ‘the discipline of deconstruction’ is merely or purely antithetical to a more embodied reading of Johnson’s sense of style” (144). For McEleney, reading “as a lesbian” means reading deconstructively; it means, at various points, reading with not only with astonishment, but also with “interruption” (154), “irony” (154), “torsions,” “gaps,”

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[40] Several of the theorists who inform this dissertation attended graduate school at Yale University in its most de Manian moment, and as such unsurprisingly employ deconstructive or post-structuralist methods within their various identity-studies fields. These theorists include Barbara Johnson, Eve Sedgwick, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Lee Edelman, Joseph Litvak, and D.A. Miller. For more on this history, see my second chapter. See also McEleny, “Queer Theory and the Yale School: Barbara Johnson’s Astonishment” (2013), and Marc Redfield, Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America (2015). See also Robyn Wiegman:

> While we can’t fix our desire (and who would want to), we can follow its effects on the disciplinary apparatus, which means considering how … the political imaginary generated by queer critique becomes a disciplinizing apparatus, not simply because the critical authority we have amassed to proclaim in not-identity arises from our institutional location as experts in identity knowledges, but because the claim for being political in the process that everywhere underwrites left identity critique is the most heavily invested sign of our professionalization in identity domains. *You can’t get to Yale without it*, which means, Dorothy, we are really not in Kansas anymore. (125, emphasis mine).

and “snags” (160). In the terms of this dissertation, then, reading as a lesbian means reading in a way that attends to the slash between as and if.

Faced with these uncertainties, and wary of the political implications of reading with her desire, Johnson abruptly ends her essay on a note of failure. Having attempted “reading with the unconscious” (145), Johnson concludes by admitting that the pleasures of one’s criticism and desire can often clash with one’s political commitments. Realizing that what “works” for her about the two texts she identifies as lesbian (*Passing* and *The Accused*) is in fact the erotic appeal of a power dynamic that mirrors the inequalities of hetero-patriarchal systems of power, she writes:

> The project of making my own erotic unconscious participate in my reading process, far from guaranteeing some sort of radical or liberating breakthrough, brings me face to face with the political incorrectness of my own fantasy life… Any attempt to go on from this reading to theorize (my) lesbian desire would therefore have to confront the possibility of a real disjunction between my political ideals and my libidinal investments. (145)

The chapter ends just after this admission, as if criticism cannot continue in the wake of Johnson’s revelation. As she quips in a one-sentence paragraph before concluding: “So much for reading with the unconscious” (145).

Besides its quick and rather disorienting ending, there is something else that is strange about Johnson’s essay. Though she articulates her critical method as “reading as a lesbian,” Johnson cites two works of black feminist criticism as critical precedent:

> I took my inspiration for such a textual category from two readings of literary texts: Barbara Smith’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Deborah McDowell’s reading of Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*. I cite these critics not because they offer me examples of the act of ‘reading as a lesbian’ (Smith does; McDowell does not) but because of the nature of the texts they read. (158)

Given the heavy deconstructionist lifting she has already done to reveal the fiction of identity, why is Johnson reluctant to name her practice simply “reading as a black feminist”? The Smith

essay she references is literally titled "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," while the McDowell piece, "'That Nameless, Shameless Impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing,*" finds its home in McDowell's *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. In my previous chapter, I laid out how both of these pieces are conventionally understood as works of black feminist literary criticism. Granted, in the above sentence, Johnson does not categorize these articles as "lesbian criticism" per se. Nor does she label them "black feminist criticism." Nonetheless, readers are meant to infer that the "nature" Johnson refers to is *Passing*'s and *Sula*'s mutual status as "crypto-lesbian;" that is, they both have plots structured around a bond between two women that is close but not explicitly sexual.[41] But *Sula* and *Passing*, in addition to fitting this description, share important additional characteristics that Johnson leaves out: they are both written by black women, and each novel deals specifically with a bond between two black women who negotiate their blackness and woman-ness in different ways.

As the title of "Lesbian Spectacles" suggests and its content confirms, Johnson's essay is highly concerned with sight and visibility. My exploration of *The Feminist Difference* has already shown how Johnson's attempts to find "blackness" require attention to the oral/aural; "Lesbian Spectacles," however, is primarily interested in the seen and the unseen, in metaphors and narratives of looking and staring. The "protracted and intense eye contact" (143) that Johnson names as an identifying sign of lesbian structures of desire further emphasizes the visual (a theme that is indeed a trope of Larsen's text—as evidenced even on the level of the two protagonists' first names, which sonically connote "clear" and "eye"). For Johnson, the looks between

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[41] Johnson's elision is later repeated in other critics' commentaries on her essay; in almost every other discussion of "Lesbian Spectacles," critics (including, notably, McEleny and Gallop) writing about Johnson ignore her first two examples, preferring instead to skip to *Thelma and Louise* and *The Accused*. (The notable exception here is Caughie's "The Example of Barbara Johnson," which, remarkably, ignores the "lesbian" discussion entirely in order to mark Johnson's work on *Passing* as an example of criticism written by a white woman about a black-authored text).

Passing's two main protagonists, Clare and Irene, become the primary site of lesbian desire. The lesbian erotics of *Passing*, for Johnson, hinge on two factors: repeated negation ("It is erotic to me that Irene's 'no' constantly becomes a yes" [143]) and a description of a "long stare" between Clare and Irene.

Johnson's analysis of *Sula* in "Lesbian Spectacles" doesn't square with her previous analysis in "*Aesthetics* and *Rapport* in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." While Johnson focuses on the looks in *Passing*, she ignores the scenes of vouyerism she previously analyzed in *Sula*. Ultimately, for Johnson, *Passing* "works" as a lesbian text more than Morrison's text, at least according to what she terms her "inner lesbo-meter" (145). Despite naming it as one of her four main objects of examination, Johnson reserves no more than four sentences for *Sula* in her lesbian analysis, concluding that the novel does not, to her, read as lesbian because the friendship between Nel and Sula is both "overinvested" and "abundantly explained" (160). In an essay for *d i f f e r e n c e s* titled "Barbara Johnson, African Americanist: The Critic as Insider/Outsider" (2008), Mary Helen Washington notes that although "the chapters of *The Feminist Difference* on race, that is, the ones on African American literary texts and African American authors… comprise, I am surprised to discover, about seventy-five percent of the book… in most of her book on race… Johnson attempts to subvert the usual prominent place of race, seeing race as an overdetermined category" (171). We might think of the "overdetermined" category of race as relating or contributing to the "overexplained"-ness of lesbianism in *Sula*.

In "*Aesthetics* and *Rapport*," Johnson characterizes *Sula* as ambiguous, while in this second essay she characterizes it as anything but. In disavowing the lesbian erotics of *Sula,* Johnson implicitly draws a distinction here between the "eye contact" in *Passing* and the "voyeurism" of *Sula*. This is perhaps because "eye contact" assumes the (lesbian) structure of two women facing each other. Following this line of thought, *Sula's* visual and erotic structure of

triangulation (both scenes of watching involve a trio, either Nel/Sula/Jude or Nel/Sula/Chicken Little) would exclude it from lesbian erotics. But Johnson herself points out in her initial gloss of *Passing* and *Sula* that, in *both* novels, "the intensity of the relation between two women is broken by a fall into triangulation" (142). The fact that *Passing* still sets off Johnson's inner lesbo-meter suggests that a triangular structure doesn't necessarily preclude a text from lesbian erotics. If anything, this triangulation also informs Johnson's own critical desires: as Miller notes in "Call for Papers," her own literary criticism frequently constructs triangulations. Miller, reading Johnson's text for its underlying intimacies, claims that Johnson's (alleged) desire to be "brought out" constitutes a "perverse" wish to depose the triangle, in which she is plays the mediating third in a conversation between two prominent critics.[42]

Johnson's lesbian spectacles seem to momentarily blind her both to the possibility of a lesbian desire that still relies on either triangulation or critical voyeurism and to the racialized nature of such critical erotics. Johnson, performatively dismissing *Sula'*s lesbian erotics, also performs the elision of white consumption of aestheticized black suffering—what she earlier terms "racial voyeurism" (86)—and the "role of the patriarchal institution not in impeding those [lesbian erotic] fantasies but in enabling them" (163) that she theorizes in "Lesbian Spectacles." Attributing an erotics to the "watching" Johnson describes in *Sula* that is similar to, rather than distinct from, the "looking" described in her analysis of *Passing* implicates Johnson's attempts to read "as" a lesbian in structures of white supremacy.

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[42] Miller: "In that cognitively enviable third position, she could give the series a sense of completion, put forward a decisive-seeming last word. Johnson liked that position, and no one played it better. But this time around, more remarkably, she seems interested in provoking a series in which she would occupy not the third but the second position, after Miller's essay on Barthes, and before… You will have grasped the open secret harbored in the essay, the wish for a *third* essay to be called—inevitably—'Bringing Out Barbara Johnson,' in which Barbara would be granted, as opposed to the critical advantage of coming last, the writerly privilege of being primary" (368).

Undergirding Johnson's explicitly stated anxiety—that her personal erotic attachments to *Passing* but not to *Sula* betray a personal erotic preference for the power dynamics of patriarchy—is another, less easily acknowledged anxiety: namely, that her critical attachments to both *Passing* and *Sula* betray a personal critical preference for the asymmetrical power dynamics of white supremacy. The former, identified anxiety is that Johnson's desire betrays, in both senses, the politics of feminist criticism that works toward gender equality; the latter, unidentified anxiety is that Johnson's desire betrays the politics of feminist criticism that works towards racial equality. If *Passing* is a narrative of lesbian desire passing as a narrative of racial passing, Johnson's critique of *Passing* is a narrative of cross-racial desire passing as a narrative of lesbian passing.[43] Tackling these texts, Johnson obliquely explores intimate cross-racial desire in criticism, but doesn't name it as such. Johnson is allowed to question her motives "as" a lesbian reader, but only if the power differential is explained in gendered, not racial, terms. Indeed, it may be this unspoken intimacy that stops Johnson's criticism in its tracks. Perhaps distracted, perhaps relieved by her own problematic lesbian desire, Johnson backs away from the enterprise, embarrassed by her own unconscious desire.

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[43] Judith Butler's piece on *Passing*, published at the same time as *The Feminist Difference* (a footnote in "Lesbian Spectacles" acknowledges the Butler article's impending publication, and notes that Butler's article addresses many of the questions that Johnson's article also explores), serves an example of criticism that tackles some of these issues, but which does not employ as/if criticism. Notably, the essays by Butler and Johnson both cite McDowell and Smith; both, too, mention *Sula*. Though both articles employ psychoanalytic vocabulary, Butler's, titled "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytical Challenge," relies on formal psychoanalytic frameworks. Butler's analysis also pinpoints *speech*, not sight, as the chief analytic of the novel (124). Unlike Johnson, Butler uses "queer" as a term for her analysis. While Johnson is concerned to find "lesbian structures of desire" in *Passing*, Butler is concerned to show how the text "queers" both the norm of "racial purity" and the norm of heterosexuality. In this way, Butler's project echoes Henderson's proposal for a "model that seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity" (117). Butler attends more to the intertwined-ness of sexuality and race, asking "How might we understand homosexuality and miscegenation to converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction?" (123). For Butler, *Passing* "articulate[s] the convergent modalities of power by which sexual difference is articulated and assumed" (123).

4.6 The Lesbian Gap

Both the voyeuristic pleasure and the analytic obsession that Johnson describes at various points in *The Feminist Difference,* referenced in parenthetical intimations to her readers, speak to the links between intimacy and desire. As Christina Sharpe writes in an endnote to the introduction of *Monstrous Intimacies*, "Intimacy is always about desire—perhaps specifically about what Ann Laura Stoler (1995) calls the 'education of desire'—and the structures that organize and constitute the relationships between past and present and possible futures" (190). Sharpe is here talking specifically about the desire bound up in what she the "monstrous intimacies" that are the result of transatlantic slavery, intimacies that show how the "fundamental, familiar, sexual violence of slavery and racialized subjugation have continued to shape black and white subjectivities into the present." If intimacy is always about desire, and desire is always about history, it is impossible to separate textual obsessions and the "racial voyeurism" at work in the literary analysis performed in *The Feminist Difference*. Put simply, the intimacies rehearsed in Johnson's literary criticism are never divorced from the "monstrous intimacies" named and theorized by Sharpe. Johnson's intimations—what is said, and what is strategically left unsaid—betray how structures of racial power inform critical desire.

The unspeakably embarrassing obstacle of racist desire that Johnson abruptly runs up against when she attempts to read "as a lesbian" recalls a critical dynamic the explicitly glosses in the introduction to *The Feminist Difference*, when Johnson discusses white feminism's obsession with black texts. Here, Johnson discusses *Female Subjects in Black and White* (1990), a volume of feminist scholarship published five years earlier. Her gloss of *Female Subjects in Black and White* notes the recurrence of such psychoanalytic terms as "anxiety," "obsession," and "the return of the repressed." As her primary example of white feminist "anxiety," and "obsession," Johnson cites not herself, but her contemporary Jane Gallop. More accurately, she cites others

citing Gallop, in another instance of quotes-within-quotes: "Several contributors [to *Female Subjects in Black and White*] allude to Jane Gallop's controversial formulation of her transferential relation to black feminist critics: 'I realized that the set of feelings I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women'" (12). In the previous chapter, I explored the multiple implications of Gallop's infamous quote for feminist theory; Johnson, like many others, finds the quote particularly provocative. Beyond citing Gallop, Johnson offers a parenthetical confession of her own: "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* comes to stand as a test text for both the value and the limits of a psychoanalytic perspective, but also for the question of 'white feminist critics' obsession with African American women's texts'—an obsession which, clearly, I share" (12). This fleeting appearance of the first-person singular constitutes another Johnsonian passing aside, and its instance is so momentary that it is easy to miss, despite it being already "clear."

In her book's introduction, Johnson specifically marks the relationship between deconstructive, "French" feminist theory and black feminist theory as primarily articulated through speech and conversation. Though Johnson points out many possible ways of drawing the line of feminist differing (among them "feminists for and against the anti-pornography ordinance, the difference-versus-equality debates, the essentialism-versus-postmodernism debates, the black feminist critiques of white feminism, the Marxist feminist critiques of bourgeois feminism, the international feminist critiques of first-world feminism" [2]), she devotes most of her introduction to the difference "race" makes. Johnson links the quotes around "race" in Freud's work to literal quoted speech, staging these differences by way of an imagined conversation between feminist camps. Citing Hortense Spillers's groundbreaking work "'All the Things You Could be By Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," Johnson writes:

> When Freud puts 'race' in quotation marks, his gesture anticipates one of the breakthrough moments in African-American criticism in the last decade: the publication

> of the volume '*Race,' Writing, and Difference*…This expression of epistemological ungrounding does not make 'race' into a 'mere' fiction, but signals its political status: 'People were beginning to say.' The word 'race' is in quotation marks because it is in other people's mouths. (11)

Johnson's shout-out to '*Race,' Writing, and Difference* (1986)—a volume edited by Gates, and in which her essay on Hurston is reprinted—subtly indicates her own affiliations with "African-American criticism," even as it sets "race" up as something "other people" are talking about.

When Johnson's repeated references to Spillers's rich and multiplex article, published two years prior to *The Feminist Difference*, already points to the overlaps between Johnson's brand of feminist deconstruction and Spiller's black feminist criticism, even as her Introduction sets these two categories up as distinct from one another. Spillers's piece already anticipates many of the issues raised in *The Feminist Difference*, including questions of speech as a matter of power, "speaking for," ownership, and intra-gender critical conversation:

> *Within* genders, the black intellectual class is establishing few models of conduct and social responsibility, but perhaps change is in the making. Relatedly, we appear to be at a crossroads in trying to determine who 'owns' African-American cultural production as an 'intellectual property,' who may 'speak' for it, and whether or not 'possession' itself is the always-exploitative end of kinds of access, even when the investigator looks like me (77).

Spillers's article informs and prefigures much of Johnson's work. Her emphasis on quoted speech later leads Johnson to similarly articulate racial identity in terms of what is spoken or heard, rather than what is seen. "'All the Things You Could be By Now" calls for a "process of self-reflection" (108) that takes into account desire—a program, as this chapter shows, that Johnson adopts nearly word-for-word in the chapter "Lesbian Spectacles." Spillers also anticipates the relation between sight and the desiring unconscious that "Lesbian Spectacles" theorizes: "It would be useful to know, however, how bodies in general, respond to bodies not like their own, and what it is that 'sees'—in other words, do we look with the eyes, or with the psyche?" (79).

The connections between Spillers and Johnson's ideas make clear not only a intellectual intimacy between Spillers and Johnson, but also once again links desire, race, reading, and writing (108). In both her introduction and her later chapters, Johnson enacts her own intimacy with and desire for black feminist texts, even while she explicitly makes the argument that identity differences within feminist theory create moments of identificatory, theoretical, or experiential impasse.

Johnson's as/if criticism, employed throughout *The Feminist Difference,* works to make obvious these structures of power; time and time again, Johnson couches this in terms of what is said and unsaid. In later chapters of *The Feminist Difference,* Johnson again evokes the said/unsaid dichotomy to advocate for a postmodern feminism in which differences *among* women, rather than between women and men, is the main focus. "What goes unsaid here is an image of relations between women. What is said instead is the systemic obstacle to such relations," she writes (192). Johnson calls the space that would address differences among women "the lesbian gap." As her primary image for this "turn" in feminist thought and practice, Johnson imagines the structure of two women facing each other. The gap itself, she writes, "may not have anything erotic or sexual about it," but she nonetheless codes it as "lesbian" by virtue of this imagined structure. Labeling this gap "lesbian" also points beyond this initially formalist analysis, naming sexual orientation as a possible point of practical and experiential divergence between feminists. The "lesbian gap" stands in for the indeterminacy "produced by material difference," an indeterminacy that is important to feminist practice because "the project of bringing about change on the basis of a category like 'woman' will eventually encounter the lack of fit between 'woman' and the heterogeneous reality of women" (193).

The lesbian gap is thus about the rifts in feminist politics and practice that only become visible when women face each other, but also about the systems of hetero-patriarchy and racism that produce the gap. In her chapter "The Alchemy of Style and Law," Johnson begins by writing

about blackness as a primary articulation of difference within feminist politics and theory, but once again gets there by way of another articulation of difference: lesbian sexuality. Johnson's chapter devotes most of its discussion to the negative critical reception of Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, a work of critical legal theory and autobiography. Discussing Williams's postmodern, ironic, academic style, Johnson explores the structures of racism and sexism behind the stylistic imperatives of legal theory, ultimately concluding that criticisms of Williams constitute a double bind. Noting that *New York Review of Books* critic Wendy Kaminar takes Williams to task for "failures of address" (175), Johnson asserts that the problem of address is closely linked to both style and subject position:

> The connection between style and subject position, between subject position and subjective discourse, is both manipulated and parodied by this opening… I cite Lacan's rewriting of Buffon: 'Style is the man, the man I am addressing.' If style is thus constructed out of the other, whom might we stay Patricia Williams is addressing? (175)

The problem of address constitutes a double bind for Williams. She is criticized both because her theory-laden, postmodernist vocabulary and style purportedly address a niche, *insider* academic audience, and because, as someone writing from the black female subject position, any attempt to insert "the personal" into her work falls *outside* the acceptable bounds of legal theoretical discourse. Her personal asides are edited out, on the grounds that the edits are "just a matter of style" (48). Again, these paradoxes arise in the context of address: who do the editors perceive Williams is addressing, and why does that assumed audience require a different style and tone?

Johnson gets at this question by way of an anecdotal detour. Turning away from Williams, Johnson goes on to tell the story of the death of her different critic and colleague: Mary Joe Frug, a law professor who is murdered while Johnson is teaching at Harvard. It seems this untimely murder and its aftereffects constitute a critical impasse for Johnson—she tells a different version of this story in an earlier essay, "Double Mourning and the Public Sphere." Johnson's

earlier essay, published in *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994), reads at various points as a eulogy for her former teacher Paul de Man, a recently murdered feminist law professor, and deconstructive theory itself. Linking the many declared "deaths" of deconstruction to the paradoxes of authorial identity after Roland Barthes's seminal essay "The Death of the Author," Johnson grapples with posthumous revelations that de Man wrote numerous anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi articles while he was still in living Belgium. "Should a theory be judged by the character of the theorist?" she asks. "How can such a 'character' be known? Which de Man are we judging? … As a literary theorist, I have come to regard 'identity' as a constantly shifting, discontinuous, ungrounded fiction" (22).

Despite this initial position, Johnson continues to discuss the various ways in which "identity" functions in literary criticism and the academy, particularly with regard to race and gender. "Double Mourning and the Public Sphere" focuses on a satirical piece published in a joke edition of *The Harvard Law Review*, on the first anniversary of the murder of Mary Joe Frug, a law professor and colleague of Johnson's at Harvard. The fictional opinion piece, penned by a group of anonymous law students, ridiculing Frug's initial article, speaking in the shrill, hysterical tone of a threatening and imagined feminist, "Mary Doe, Rigor Mortis Professor of Law." Like Gates and Miller, the editors of the *Law Review* issue employ prosopopoeia. In the ensuing controversy surrounding the piece's publication (a piece Johnson calls "prosopopoeia… with a vengeance" [18]), its authors apologized and wrote that they had intended no harm. The ethical imperative to name that harm, writes Johnson, creates yet another double-bind for feminists (46). Using this double bind as her example, Johnson writes that systems of oppression are most easily viewed and named by those who they most seek to silence. This oppressive mechanism powers two contradictory claims: one (from the right) that Frug's feminism enforces a stifling "political correctness" (feminism is about silencing men) and the other (from the left)

that Frug's postmodernism impairs identity politics by denying the coherence of identity (postmodernism is about fracturing that coherent feminist identity, "woman").

One year later in *The Feminist Difference*, Johnson tells the story of Frug not once, but twice: first in the chapter following "Lesbian Spectacles" ("The Alchemy of Style and Law"), and then in the chapter immediately following (an essay, we are told, that is Johnson's initial response to Frug's unfinished text). As she does in "Double Mourning and the Public Sphere," Johnson interrupts her analysis of one author (in this case, Williams) to tell a personal tale of her own**.** At first, this seems like a strange digression, but in the detour, Johnson returns to another gap (this time, her primary point of inquiry is how sexuality, rather than race, acts as a mode of difference within the category "gender"). As is the case in "Thresholds of Difference," Johnson dwells in this gap in order to draw out the complicated paradoxes at work in critical identity politics. In this short anecdotal deviation, Johnson tells the story of a difficult writing assignment: she must respond to an unfinished piece by Frug, commissioned by *The Harvard Law Review,* provisionally titled "A Postmodern Feminist Manifesto." The essay to which Johnson must respond is not only unfinished; it is unexpectedly posthumous—Frug, Johnson explains, was halfway through her *Law Review* piece when she went out on a walk and was stabbed to death by an anonymous assailant. Johnson is not only faced with the death of a friend and colleague, but also with the daunting task of interpreting and responding to her last work, a work that is only halfway complete. In both chapters, Johnson describes her encounter with a troubling dangling phrase:

> Not only was [Frug's] essay itself unfinished at her death; she got up to go out for her fatal walk in the middle of a sentence. Here is the sentence:
>
> Women who might expect that sexual relationships with other women could
>
> Then she gets up, she goes out, she dies. The sentence dangles in the middle of the essay, which continues for another nine pages. Now my assignment is to read the text. (173)

Faced with the literal death of the author, Johnson confronts a deManian "linguistic predicament" (81). How can she read the blank space? Johnson muses on what it might mean to try to read a structuring absence, particularly one left in the wake of Frug's murder, particularly one that has to do with the signifier "lesbian."

That Johnson gets to the "lesbian gap" through a discussion of Williams's style suggests a link between the subject positions "living black feminist," "dead white feminist" and "lesbian": the living black female law professor, the dead white female law professor, and the absent "lesbian" all share a postmodern, academic voice that reads to both the editors of the *Law Review* and *The New York Times Book Review* like a "foreign" (174) or "encoded" language (175). As Johnson explains in *The Feminist Difference,* the primary question Johnson raises—"How does this gap signify?"—fails to translate: "When it came back from its first reading, the editors had changed 'How does this gap signify?' to 'What does this gap mean?'" (174). Johnson refuses to make the edit on the grounds that is it not at all the same question. "'How does the gap signify' raises the question of what it means to mean, raises meaning as a question, implies that the gap has to be read, but that it can't be presumed to have been intended," she writes (174). In every case, something is lost in translation—either lost in the move between oral and written, between black and white, between postmodernism and feminism, between lesbianism and heterosexuality, between feminism "facing out" and feminism "facing in," between "inside" the academy and "outside" it. All this depends on address across a gap of material (and, in the case of death, ontological) difference.

4.6 The Death of the Critic

In her critique of *The Feminist Difference* that appears in "Reading Barbara Johnson," Mary Helen Washington focuses on Johnson's review of Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights,* praising Johnson for her contributions to the study of African American

literature, while nonetheless registering her own unease with Johnson's repeated emphasis on "the ideology of style," writing that such a focus ignores the "substance" of Williams's book, that is, "the way in which blackness and femaleness are constructed by, limited by, and coerced by the rhetoric of law and the ways in which race and gender are constituted by style" (172). For Washington, this emphasis on style ignores the "daily racial fare" that black people routinely face. Indeed, critical obfuscation or displacement of "black feminist" by "lesbian" mirrors an American political climate that repeatedly advances liberal, state-sponsored LGBT rights (gays in the military, marriage equality, etc.) while repeatedly denying the demands of black feminist and queer movements, primarily because a comparative analysis that places "civil rights" as analogous but separate from "gay rights" means that LBGT establishments code "as" white and gay.[44] "This is what drives my discomfort: the very people who have to think about race on daily basis in this country, the people who are consumed by race, dominated by race, affected by race are people of color, that is, black people," she writes. "It is our daily bread, not just a postmodern problem" (172). Here, Washington implies, Johnson's critical position as a white feminist and deconstructionist allows her to focus on "style" in a way that trivializes or casts to the side the lived experience of being a black woman.

But for Johnson, questions of rhetoric are never merely rhetorical questions. The systemic, oppressive "silences" Johnson discusses so often mean literal death, both for black women and lesbians, and this means these debates are (still) not merely rhetorical. Johnson links deviant sexuality, death, and female authorship often in her work, perhaps most famously in her 1989 piece "Animation, Apostrophe, and Abortion," an essay whose title seems to later echo in the title of Johnson's later essay on Plath, "Animate Alphabets." Like much of Johnson's work,

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[44] See: Andrea Lewis and Robin Stevens, "At the Crossroads: Race, Gender and the Gay Rights Movement." *Third Force*, vol. 4, no. 1 (22); Darren Lenard Hutchinson, "'Gay rights' for 'gay whites'?: Race, sexual identity, and equal protection discourse." *Cornell Law Review*, July 2000: 13-58.

"Animation, Apostrophe, and Abortion" takes the connection between real-world violence and rhetoric seriously, applying deconstructive techniques to grapple with the political stakes of language. In this chapter, Johnson's last two examples differ from her first two in a significant way. The move from Charles Baudelaire and Percy Shelley, a French Romantic poet and English Romantic poet, to Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and Adrienne Rich, parallels Johnson's own turn from French and de Manian deconstruction to psychoanalytic feminist, black feminist, and lesbian feminist theory, a turn marked by the publication of both *A World of Difference* and *The Feminist Difference*. Shifting focus in the last half of her essay to a range of abortion-related poems by female authors, Johnson notes that, in each of the poems she analyses, the speaker's address to aborted children complicates terms of address and loss in ways that echo but do not entirely mirror the losses at stake in the poems by Baudelaire and Shelley. In each of the poems Johnson analyzes, the violence is ambiguous: it is often unclear if the poem describes an abortion, a miscarriage, or simply menstruation. In other words, it is unclear whether the poems addresses aborted fetuses, or merely un-actualized ones. The lack of clarity in each of poem points to the underlying cultural imperative for women to be mothers: an imperative so strong that to use the flesh other than for childbirth amounts to a kind of murder.

In the second half of "Animation, Apostrophe, and Abortion," Johnson initially focuses on a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, titled simply "the mother" (1963). Here, because the distinction between self and other is less clear—the speaker's self is haunted and inhabited by the ghosts of those unborn fetuses who are ambiguously subjects—it is unclear to whom the apostrophe is really addressed. The "you" animated by the apostrophe in Brooks, Johnson explains, is all at once poet, speaker, reader, mother, and aborted child. In her analysis of Lucille Clifton's "the lost baby poem" (1987) in the same essay, Johnson explores how the apostrophic rhetoric of abortion may function differently within black motherhood. At the same time,

Johnson's assumption that the speaker is a black woman becomes apparent only after she makes several claims to abortion and "otherness" that could also be taken as universals.[45] Johnson ends her essay with an abortion poem about poetry addressed "To A Poet" written by a white lesbian poet. In this poem, Rich figures motherhood as "the death of poetry," and, conversely, the prevention or refusal of motherhood as the condition for poetic creation. Glossing this dichotomy in Rich, Johnson writes, "The word is not made flesh; rather, flesh unmakes the mother-poet's word" (196). Johnson's use of "flesh" strongly evokes Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," published eight years before *The Feminist Difference*. Carefully illuminating the ways in which rhetorical structures function with political, social, historical, psychological, and economic structures at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, this dense and multifaceted essay argues that the legacy of US slavery means that, for black women, "Motherhood as female blood-rite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment… In this play of paradox, only the female stands

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[45] Johnson infers that the speaking mother is black via context clues that invoke *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Vietnam war draft, and that a line that addresses black men ("the image of a child born into winter, slipping like ice into the hands of stagers in Canada, conflates the scene of Eliza's escape in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the exile of draft resisters during the Vietnam war" [195]). Johnson writes:

> The guilt and mourning occur in the form of an imperative in which the notion of 'stranger' returns in the following lines:
>
> > if I am ever less than a mountain
> > for your definite brothers and sisters
> > . . . .
> > … let black men call me stranger
> > always for your never named sake
>
> The act of 'calling' here coordinates a lack of name with a loss of membership. For the sake of the one that cannot be called, the speaker invites an apostrophe that would expel *her* into otherness. The consequences of the death of a child ramify beyond the mother-child dyad to encompass the fate of an entire community. The world that has crated conditions under which the loss of a baby becomes desirable must be resisted, not joined. *For a black woman*, the loss of a baby can always be perceived as a complicity with genocide. (195, emphasis mine).

Johnson's unqualified assertion that "the loss of a baby can always be perceived as a complicity with genocide" echoes the contemporary rhetorical strategies of many anti-choice activists specifically targeting black women. This is significant, considering that Johnson ultimately reads these poets to point out the duplicitous rhetorical trick of anti-abortion political rhetoric (simply by virtue of it being rhetoric, it assumes as an axiom the very thing it is trying to prove, i.e. the subjecthood of the unborn child to which it rhetorically makes reference). For more on this relatively recent strategic development, see: Janice H. Tanne, "US Pro-Life Groups Tell Black Women that Abortion is Genocide." *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, vol. 340, no. 7746, 2010, pp. 556-556.

in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed" (80). It is here, in the relationship between mothers, the dispossessed, and blackness, that we see the complexity of Johnson's work and the relationships it assumes and highlights.

D.A. Miller writes, early on in his eulogy, that Johnson "had no progeny—that too was the beauty of her achievement—yet she was midwife to a multitude" (365). Miller's praise of Johnson's non-motherhood as a beautiful achievement gestures towards a broader split between "queerness" and "reproductive futurism," a split often interrogated by queer theory's "antisocial" turn, and exemplified in Edelman's 1998 essay, "The Future is Kid Stuff." This essay echoes Johnson's not only in its subject matter—both essays address anti-abortion rhetoric—but also explicitly; in a footnote, Edelman credits "Animation, Apostrophe, and Abortion" as inspiration. In his footnote, Edelman writes that "[m]any critics, Barbara Johnson among them, have detailed with powerful insight how such anti-abortion polemics simultaneously rely on and generate tropes that animate, by personifying, the fetus" (22). His essay begins with an anecdote in which, walking through Harvard Square, Edelman sees an anti-abortion sign and believes it is directed at him.[46] The striking scene of interpellation, in which a white gay man feels himself addressed, in a way, as a "bad mother," and that itself takes place in Miller and Johnson's old academic stomping ground (both were employed at Harvard), bears much in common with Johnson's original essay: while one analysis begins, and the other ends, with a tableau of the aborted fetus, both deal with the apostrophe of the sign's direct address, and both dwell on the reproductive imperative contained within it. With this genealogy in the background, we might take Miller's assertion that

[46] "Not long ago, on a much-traveled corner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, opponents of the legal right to abortion posted an enormous image of a full-term fetus on a rented billboard accompanied by a single and unqualified assertion: 'It's not a choice; it's a child.' … As strange as it may seem for a gay man to say this, when I first encountered that billboard in Cambridge I read it as addressed to me. The sign, after all, might as well have pronounced, with the same absolute and invisible authority that testifies to the successfully accomplished work of ideological naturalization, the divine injunction: 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (23).

"she had no progeny—that too was the beauty of her achievement" as reinforcing queer theory's anti-social thesis. The fact that Johnson had no progeny is a testament, in many ways, to her queer credentials: the point of Miller's essay, after all, is to "bring out" Barbara Johnson, reading her as both a lesbian critic and a queer stylist. Again, there are layers of intimacy here: Edelman, Miller, and Johnson all went to Yale together, they all have ties to Cambridge, many of them also, importantly, have ties to UC Berkeley. An all-too-familiar constellation begins to form, one constructed of various ivory towers. And yet, something else is going on as well, and the connections and connotations grow still more complicated.

Miller's assessment that Johnson was "midwife to a multitude" (365) may be drawing a simple distinction between mothers, who give birth, and midwives, who assist them, but midwifery carries with it other obligations. Midwives not only deliver babies at the time of birth, but often act as teachers and coaches to expectant mothers, and might be called on to perform or be present at abortions as well. Muses have been figured as midwives in romantic and lyric poetry. The "midwife" in America is also associated with non-whiteness: before the systematic dismantling and discrediting of midwifery as a practice began in the 1920s, most midwives working in the U.S. were either "granny midwives," black women who served as community matriarchs, or newly-immigrated Europeans; by 1950, though midwife participation at birth had declined to less than 5% of all births nationwide, midwives were involved with nearly 25% of non-white births.[47] One can also, notably, earn a certification as a "death midwife," and many hospice nurses take on this extra degree in order to better assist those who are about to die with the dying process. The figure of the midwife, then, serves as a dense and often contradictory

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[47] See: Anitra Ellerby-Brown, Trickera Sims, and Mavis Schorn, "African American Nurse-Midwives: Continuing the Legacy," in *Minority Nurse* (46–49); "History of Certified Professional Midwifery and NACPM | National Association of Certified Professional Midwives (NACPM)"; Alicia D. Bonaparte, "Physicians' Discourse for Establishing Authoritative Knowledge in Birthing Work and Reducing the Presence of the Granny Midwife: Physicians' Authoritative Knowledge in Birthing Work," in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28.2 (166–194).

consort of many meanings, a link between birth, the legacy of slavery, abortion, pedagogy, poetry, and death.

Like McEleney, I read Johnson's work as an essential yet under-acknowledged influence on queer criticism, and particularly on academic queer criticism in the early 1990s. But in noting Johnson's contributions to both "Queer Theory" and "the Yale School," McEleney fails to mention Johnson's contributions to black feminist criticism, and thus misses an opportunity to interrogate black feminist criticism's relationship to both feminist deconstruction and the queer critical archive. Recent conversations in the field of queer theory reveal two parallel recuperative impulses: the first wants to rethink the queer critical archive to include black feminist theory, and the other wants to rethink the queer critical archive to include feminist deconstruction. "Queer of color critique" has long used black feminist theory as a genealogical forbearer of, foil against, and corrective to queer theory. Since then, various attempts have been made to think black feminist theory and queer criticism together.[48] Miller and, more recently, McEleny's work provide examples of a similar attempt to think feminist deconstruction alongside queer criticism, turning back towards early writing by Johnson and others in order to understand the debts queer theory owes to feminist deconstruction. A close look at Johnson's work tells us that this coincidence is not merely coincidental. In fact, it reveals a more intimate, ambiguous relationship between these two fields.

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[48] Ferguson, in his 2005 *SocialText* piece "Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality," writes that "In a moment characterized by the insistence of queer of color formations in and outside the academy, we must develop ways to put *The History of Sexuality* in dialogue with other histories and deployments of sexuality" (85). For Ferguson, returning to what he terms "women of color feminism" (and at other times, as in *Aberrations*, specifically "black lesbian criticism") emphasizes that sexuality "is not extraneous to modes of difference," but rather produced via historically specific, racialized gender and class formations. The advantages of adopting such a strategy thus are manifold, not only because they allow queer studies to account for race, or because they allow African American studies to account for sexuality, but because they allow for both to be thought together (88). James Bliss, in his 2015 article "Hope Against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity," offers a more recent instance of a critical attempt to read black feminist theory alongside anti-social queer theory.

In Gallop's contribution to the Barbara Johnson-themed issue of *differences* published the year of her death, she tracks instances in which Johnson purports to read or speak "as a ____." Her analysis revisits another anecdote that Johnson tells in "Double Mourning and the Public Sphere." In Johnson's story—which precedes her story about Frug—a fellow critic writes her a postcard asking if the title of her essay could be construed as a reference to the figure of death in deconstructive theory. Ignoring the provided boxes for "yes" and "no," Johnson responds, "Yes and no (what else?)." Seizing on this "odd phraselet," Gallop argues that "yes and no (what else?)" not only accurately describes the typical arc of Johnson's deconstructive argument, but also her relationship to identity politics.

But this is not the end of the story: Johnson's "yes and no (what else?)" also refers to the figure of Johnson herself. In the case of the anecdote, the critic who sends Johnson a letter is asking for permission to use her name as an example. Her answer responds to a question about her work, but also to the question of her place as a figure in a critical movement, to "Barbara Johnson" as an example, author name, and circulating signifier. As Caughie points out in "The Example of Barbara Johnson," Johnson is frequently evoked, but rarely read closely:

> At the risk of exaggerating, I am tempted to say that she may be more often invoked than read, although, of course, she is invoked only because she has been read. What I mean by saying she is invoked more than read is that Johnson's name carries a certain cachet that transcends the specificity of her writing, so that she is often cited even when she is not discussed; yet, it is the very specificity of her reading practice that allows her to be cited as an example of so many critical positions (181).

In the wake of her passing, especially, Barbara Johnson's name has become a laden signifier. Just as, one could argue, the name "Sedgwick" may serve as a stand-in for queer theory, and the name "McDowell" for black feminist theory, it is possible to argue that the name "Johnson" has come to stand in for feminist deconstruction. But Caughie and others point out—and as the eulogies that open this chapter demonstrate—Johnson's affiliations and associations extend beyond that of

feminist deconstruction. Indeed, the articles that do take up Johnson's name as a point of analysis touch on the uncanny ability of "Barbara Johnson" to slide between significations.

The fact that the signifier "Barbara Johnson" can mean multiply in this way uncannily reveals the messy intimacies between the fields in which Johnson finds herself both an insider and outsider. *The Feminist Difference* repeatedly refuses to shy away from these difficult intimacies, and in doing so Johnson highlights the links between "(clucking noise)," the "lesbian gap," and the "foreign" or "encoded" nature of postmodern feminist prose. Reading and writing as if a black feminist and as if a lesbian, while nonetheless rehearsing the gaps created by material and identitarian difference, Johnson again highlights the slash in *as/if* that stands for both suture and rupture. Does Johnson read and write as a black feminist critic? As a lesbian critic? The answer, I think, is yes and no. (What else?).

5. The Living End

5.1 Uses of the Pornographic

Robert Reid-Pharr structures his second book, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (2001), into three parts: "Black," "Gay," and "Man." The comically direct nature of both the book's title and its organization seems especially droll, given that *Black Gay Man* is a work of queer criticism, a genre not particularly known for straight talk. But though the specific identity markers in its title might lead readers to expect otherwise, *Black Gay Man* actually complicates and confuses the identity categories it names on its face rather than codifying them. Indeed, in his introduction to the book, the author acknowledges as much. As Reid-Pharr makes clear from the start, both his queer theoretical credentials and his lived experience mean that he approaches identity categories such as those listed in his book's title with ambivalence, if not outright discomfort:

> Perhaps the most difficult aspect of completing this collection has been coming to terms with the work's title, *Black Gay Man*. The reason for my difficulty is not only the rather obvious fact that one's identity cannot possibly be summed up by the phrase or any of its derivatives—Negro queer, colored sissy, nigger faggot—but also that every time I hear the designation, I feel almost as if I am somehow denying a basic reality of my intellectual temperament. (1)

Though he remains suspicious of the identity categories that make up his book's title, Reid-Pharr admits that strategies that dismiss identity altogether have proved frustratingly impotent within the academy.[1] Acknowledging that a purely deconstructionist approach to identity has proven to lack political efficacy, he describes his method as oscillating between explicitly naming and using identity categories, and attempting to undo them. "Much of my work, much of the work included within this collection, has been straightforwardly designed to help dismantle the American

[1] "I have become increasingly alarmed by the fact that, although remarkable strides have been made within queer theory and other recent theoretical trends with regard to what I will call the disarticulation of identity, there seems to have been precious little movement forward in our understanding of how to affect basic economic and social structures" (2).

identity machine, to break its hold on the collective imagination," he writes. "Yet, strangely, I find that, like many of my peers, I continuously use the mechanisms of that machine to affect its dysfunction" (1). Affecting "dysfunction" in the "machine" of American identity, the explicit moments in Reid-Pharr are also moments of interruption, shock, or rupture. Reid-Pharr rightly notes a paradox: in order to disrupt identity categories, and therefore perhaps render a political effect, he and others must name and employ these categories explicitly.

Black Gay Man is an explicit text in multiple senses. "Explicit" can simply mean direct or obvious. As its straightforward title and organization suggest, Reid-Pharr's collection of queer criticism concerns itself with plainly named identity categories: Reid-Pharr writes explicitly "as" himself, a "black gay man"—at least, his title suggests as much. But "explicit" can also often mean "obscene."[2] Reid-Pharr's book, tellingly, also does not shy away from explicit scenes of "actual" sex: Reid-Pharr knows and names certain aspects of his writing "pornographic," performatively zigzagging between abstract theory and blatant descriptions of fucking. Importantly for the purposes of this chapter, these two definitions of "explicit" writing are deeply intertwined.

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[2] Though George Carlin's infamous "seven dirty words" routine assumes otherwise (and despite the popularity, among some college radio DJs, of buttons sporting the Federal Communications Commission logo surrounded by the very same seven words), explicit or offensive language is notoriously hard to delimit. Current FCC regulations define "obscene, indecent, or profane" content three different ways, all predictably vague. Their website states:

> Obscene content does not have protection by the First Amendment. For content to be ruled obscene, it must meet a three-pronged test established by the Supreme Court: It must appeal to an average person's prurient interest; depict or describe sexual conduct in a "patently offensive" way; and, taken as a whole, lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.
>
> Indecent content portrays sexual or excretory organs or activities in a way that does not meet the three-prong test for obscenity.
>
> Profane content includes "grossly offensive" language that is considered a public nuisance. (Federal Communications Commission)

Additional broadcasting guidelines prohibit "profane" or "indecent" content to be broadcast between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., "when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience." This specific reasoning hints at the ways on-air profanity, and perhaps profanity in general, might carry with it its own queer stigma. For a longer discussion of why a threat to "children" might be linked to queer stigma, see the previous two chapters. See also Lee Edelman, "The Future is Kid Stuff" (1995).

Nowhere is Reid-Pharr's particular brand of as/if criticism more evident than in his chapter "Living as a Lesbian," a short, intensely personal essay situated two-thirds of the way through *Black Gay Man* (right between the end of the middle section, "Gay," and the final section, "Man"). Here, Reid-Pharr offers a loving appreciation of the community of black lesbian feminists he befriends while an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, in the late 1980s. The essay (first published in the anthology *Sister & Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men Write About Their Lives Together* [1995], and reprinted six years later in *Black Gay Man*) is a constellation of vignettes, and is comprised mostly of anecdotes concerning Reid-Pharr's many close friendships with black lesbian women, as well as tales of the myriad black feminist mentors and theorists who have shaped him as a scholar and teacher.

Interspersed among these various tributes are descriptions of a number of sexual encounters Reid-Pharr has with his gay male lovers, which interrupt the more measured, un-italicized prose of the rest of the chapter. At first, Reid-Pharr's insistence on including these interruptions in his criticism might seem to align him with a kind of reading and writing "as": if their inclusion constitutes a corrective to an observed lack of personal experience in academic writing, it implies a kind of "real world" authenticity separate from academic or theoretical abstraction. These pornographic ruptures interrogate the difficulty of navigating the (ever-shifting) embodied prerequisites of gender identification. Often, Reid-Pharr's self-interruptions curtly challenge Reid-Pharr's claims to full membership in the black lesbian community. In other words, these passages may be said to shock Reid-Pharr out of the "fantasy" of living as if a lesbian, and back to the "reality" of living as a gay man—though this description, I will argue, is an oversimplification of the effect of such interruptions. This reflects a larger pattern throughout *Black Gay Man*, in which Reid-Pharr interrupts the flow of his own prose, using text that is typically distinguished from his more "academic" prose by italics, quotation, or both.

Reid-Pharr's inclusion of descriptions of embodied sexual experience, as well as his explorations of what he later terms the "shock" of the explicit, function as another instance of as/if criticism. The interruptions I track here are paradoxical: they abruptly undercut Reid-Pharr's claims to inhabit identities beyond his own ("black gay man"), while simultaneously providing the tenuous link that allows for Reid-Pharr's ability to write (and live) as if a lesbian. In fact, ironically, it is their very nature *as interruption*—be it the interruption of shock, obscenity, violence, or citation—that allow these textual moments to facilitate Reid-Pharr's identification across identity categories, and particularly across gender. This chapter aims to show that these interruptions in fact trouble the distinction between practice and theory, academic and obscene, and "as" and "as if."

Reid-Pharr's interruptions mirror the violence that, in the era of AIDS, constitutes a point of fleeting, but nonetheless extant, connection across both gender and race. Put another way: the formal breaks in Reid-Pharr's work signal an interruptive and repetitive violence, the shared experience of which links the "black gay man" to the black lesbian feminists with which he identifies. The cross-identification that Reid-Pharr performs cannot be fully understood without the historical context in which it occurs, and without a wider understanding of the state racism and misogynoir that put both gay men and black lesbians at high risk. Not despite interruption, but *because* of it, Reid-Pharr's lesbian identification persists, and Reid-Pharr's repeated return to this particular performance—living and writing as/if a lesbian—provides a useful case study in the ways in which as/if criticism functions to both forge and undo critical cross-identifications. Neither fully accepting nor fully rejecting the possibility of his own lesbianism, Reid-Pharr rather insists on solidarity across identities in spite of the cognitive dissonance sometimes produced by lived experience.

In order to fully understand how the interruptions in "Living as a Lesbian" function as both rupture and suture, it is crucial to examine how sex scenes, obscene language, and academic citation traffic and are theorized in the other essays that make up *Black Gay Man*. Reid-Pharr loses very little time cluing his readers in to these themes: very early on, in the introduction to his collection, Reid-Pharr recounts his relationship with "Rick," an "ugly, poor, white trash southerner, with a scandalously thick Kentucky accent" (9). In the middle of a discussion about identity politics and the American left, Reid-Pharr interrupts himself to meditate on what fucking Rick is like:

> What attracts me to Rick is precisely how ugly he is— bald head, chin pointing out too far, thin body, pale skin, shocking red hair bunched around a stubby, oddly shaped, and uncut cock… The image of Rick is infinitely disruptive. He knows he is ugly, wears his knowledge like one of the fancy-dress uniforms left over from his days in the army. He loves sex, loves men's bodies, loves the sight of my face, loves to masturbate and moon over how beautiful I am, how fucking beautiful I am. When he comes, usually standing over me, jerking hard at his dick and making those strange moon faces, the liquid spills out almost by accident. He drawls, 'Goddamn, Goddamn,' as the goo hits my skin. (9)

Rick continues to be a "scandal" throughout the introduction, as scenes like this one punctuate Reid-Pharr's non-pornographic musings on the field of literary criticism; each scene appears suddenly in Reid-Pharr's prose, set off from the rest of the text by italic formatting. The interruption quoted above is designed to shock readers in a number of ways. Reid-Pharr's audience might simply be confused by what seems like a logistical non sequitur (why disrupt the flow of the argument?), disoriented by the shift in tone, or—as Reid-Pharr seems to not-so-secretly hope—scandalized by the explicit mention of uncut cock, dick jerking, cum, etc. But this scene also anticipates other possible "shocks": the shock of Rick's ugliness, his class position, his southern-ness, or his whiteness. Like the Rick scenes peppered throughout the introductory chapter, almost all of *Black Gay Man*'s explicit sex scenes are also, importantly, moments of cross-racial, cross-class desire. Here, identity is *felt* to be constructed in the moment of carnal

pleasure. As an intellectual whose work remains dedicated to questioning the assumed stability or inevitability of heterosexist and racist frameworks, Reid-Pharr is trained to be wary of identity categories like "man," "gay," or "black"; as an avowed lover of "a certain class of ugly, southern white boy" (10), Reid-Pharr asserts that he is hesitant to dismiss the myriad identifications he might make across race, sexuality, class, or gender. This too can shock: and as we can see, these many ways of reading the shock of Reid-Pharr's interruptions are all connected.

More than those in the other two sections, the three chapters in the middle section of *Black Gay Man* (the section titled, simply, "Gay") employ what might be commonly recognized as explicit sexual language. Reid-Pharr begins his "Gay" section with a chapter titled "Dinge." Here, and in the chapters to come, Reid-Pharr expands and expounds on two related issues raised in his Introduction: one, the issue of sexual language, and two, the issue of cross-racial desire. The title of "Dinge," a sophisticated pun, hints at the ways in which the sexually explicit and the racially abject might intersect. "Dinge" can all at once mean a quality that makes one dingey or dirty, a racial slur for a black person, or, pronounced a different way, the German word for "thing" (a definition that foreshadows an anecdote Reid-Pharr will tell about a gay club in Berlin, but that also recalls theories of the non-human, of sex/the Lacanian "Real," and of a history of continental philosophy beginning with Kant's "the thing in itself").[3]

As he does previously in his Rick interludes, in "Dinge" Reid-Pharr uses scenes of sex to think through race and class. This particular strategy leads Reid-Pharr to anticipate his larger discussion of the place of cross-racial sexual desire by first launching into a broader discussion about the place of "actual" embodied sex in queer theory as a whole, calling for a more explicit discussion of sex in queer criticism:

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[3] I am grateful to Carly B. Boxer for pointing out the German aspect of this pun.

> If there is one thing that marks us as queer, a category that is somehow different, if not altogether distinct, from the heterosexual, then it is undoubtedly our relationships to the body, particularly the expansive ways we utilize and combine vaginas, penises, breasts, buttocks, hands, arms, feet, stomachs, mouths, and tongues in our expressions of not only intimacy, love, and lust but also and importantly shame, contempt, despair, and hate. Because it is impossible to forget that we hold a tangential relationship to what Michael Warner calls heteronormativity, we often are forced to become relatively self-aware about what we are doing when we fuck, suck, go down, go in, get on, go under. (85)

For Reid-Pharr, queerness engenders a certain relationship to embodied experience, and in particular embodied sexual experience, characterized by a hyperawareness of one's own body and the consequences of one's bodily actions. It stands to reason, then, that individuals marked by the societal stigma of sexual deviance are more likely to, in Essex Hemphill's words, "think as we fuck" (85).

If we accept this hypothesis, as Reid-Pharr does, then we might find it strange, as he does, that queer theory remains relatively quiet when it comes to "actual" sex. In Reid-Pharr's work, explicit or pornographic language holds particular disruptive power, even within the queer critical project itself. By Reid-Pharr's estimation,

> It is surprising… that so little within queer theory has been addressed to the question of how we inhabit our various bodies, especially how we fuck or, rather, what we think when we fuck. In the face of wildly impressive work on gay and lesbian history and historiography, gender roles and politics, queer literature and culture, we have been willing to let stand the most tired and hackneyed notions of what our sex actually means. (86)

Again, Reid-Pharr follows his own advice, interrupting his academic prose with personal anecdotal interludes. In italicized font, Reid-Pharr recounts a confrontation with a white American expat outside of a gay bar in Berlin. The white man, upon seeing Reid-Pharr, drunkenly relays his frustration that the German men he wants to have sex with are only interested in black Americans. Reid-Pharr is taken aback by the man's frankness, just as his acquaintance is surprised by the visibility (and undesirability) of his whiteness in the Berlin club scene.

This anecdote might catch Reid-Pharr's readers off guard: given the discussion of the pornographic just sentences earlier, we might expect this story to have more explicit genital or oral sex scenes. Instead, Reid-Pharr merely describes a conversation, and his retelling occasions a pivot in his essay's argument, launching a discussion about cross-racial desire. Using the story of his encounter with the disgruntled gay white man as a jumping-off point, Reid-Pharr takes white queer critics to task for their silence regarding racial difference, and in particular for their silence regarding white desire for non-white bodies. Reid-Pharr contrasts an established trend in the work of black gay critics and artists who confess and theorize their own cross-racial desire with the relative silence of white gay critics on the same subject. Once again, the juxtaposition between Reid-Pharr' two major critical beefs—that queer critics don't talk about sex, and that white queer critics don't talk about race—implies an intimate link between the two.

In "Dinge" and throughout most of *Black Gay Man*, the explicitly sexual writing Reid-Pharr calls for serves as a counter to academic "silence" about "actual" sex, but also to academic silence about politically problematic desire. At the end of his essay, Reid-Pharr reminds his readers that the call to "think as we fuck" is also a call to openly acknowledge that the circumstances of identity and embodiment influence desire:

> We must insist on a queer theory that takes the queer body and what we do with it as a primary focus, lest we allow for the articulation of a queer subjectivity that never recognizes the differences we create and carry in our bodies, including not only race but gender, health, and age, to name only the most obvious categories. We must not only think as we fuck but also pay close attention to all the implications, good and bad, of those sometimes startling thoughts. (98)

Reid-Pharr's use of "startling" here evokes the startling interruptions of the pornographic theorized at the beginning of his piece—the shocks of the obscene encounter in the text—but also the "scandal" of Rick, and with it the scandal of inappropriate desire (that is, desire for the things Rick stands for: the ugly, the white, the lower-class). These thoughts are startling, Reid-Pharr

insists, because they break through a code of silence imposed by academic discourse, which would refuse to acknowledge either the existence of dirty, embodied sex or cross-racial, potentially fetishistic and therefore politically problematic sexual desire. Here and elsewhere, Reid-Pharr refers to this discourse as “polite,” an adjective that carries with it classed and racial implications. His repeated use of “polite academic discourse” does not target the racism of right-wing whites—many of whom might not hesitate to use a racial slur—but rather calls out the more covert, and thus in many ways more sinister, racism of white liberal elites (Duke Press editors?) whose delicate language and insistence on politeness effectively represses the obscene reality of anti-gay, anti-black systems of power.

Moreover, the inclusion of “health” as an identity category in the catalogue of “differences” Reid-Pharr lists (“the differences we create and carry in our bodies, including not only race but gender, health, and age, to name only the most obvious categories” [98]) suggests that there is more at stake than just literary critical codes of conduct. Although “health” could undoubtedly mean many things, “health” as identity category perhaps most immediately brings to mind the AIDS crisis, and in particular the ways in which the AIDS crisis makes serostatus yet another a means of classifying persons; that is, an identity category of its own.[4] Such an invocation recasts Reid-Pharr’s initial use of “silence”: the word recalls ACT UP’s famous slogan, “SILENCE=DEATH,” a phrase that would still be freshly ringing in the ears of queer critics writing at the time “Dinge” was first published. That the chapter pivots to discuss a particular type of white silence—that is, white gay silence on the subject of interracial sex—

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[4] In the current moment, when medical advances have made it possible to live a nominally healthy life with HIV and when new work in disability studies has expanded ideas of “health” and/or ability as identity categories, the connection between “health” as it is mentioned in this quote and identity-as-serostatus may not be as apparent. In the years leading up to 2001, those directly after the peak of AIDS panic, this might have been a much more obvious connection.

implies a link between AIDS discourse and the discourse around cross-racial desire, though the specific effects of AIDS on cross-racial sexual encounter remain under-theorized in his piece.

For the most part, though, Reid-Pharr does not take this tack; rather, the threat of AIDS lurks just below the surface of this entire chapter, though he only mentions the disease once by name. In this singular instance, Reid-Pharr names the epidemic via the "community" it engenders: "The H.I.V./ A.I.D.S. community helped focus our thinking about issues of risk, disease, and decay" (86). Reid-Pharr suggests, by way of "the H.I.V./A.I.D.S. community," that "marginal" queer populations might move us away from the fantasy that all queer sex is liberatory. (Reid-Pharr's other example of a marginal queer sex practice, interestingly, is lesbian S/M, a favorite target of the anti-porn feminists—more on this later). What Reid-Pharr does not state outright is that the increased dangers of infection might also increase the self-awareness or self-reflection he posits as distinctly "queer" at the start of his essay. If this hyper-cognizance is already extant before AIDS, the new threat of HIV infection within the gay male community that surfaces by the time "Dinge" is published heightens both the stakes of sex and the awareness of these stakes.

5.2 The Beat Goes On

Reid-Pharr's exploration of the shocks of pornographic language continues on two levels in the second chapter of the "Gay" section of *Black Gay Man*. In an essay titled "Tearing the Goat's Flesh," Reid-Pharr analyses both the explicit language of his literary objects, and his own authorial voice. In this essay, Reid-Pharr looks at work by Eldridge Cleaver, Piri Thomas, and James Baldwin, reading autobiographic works by the first two authors with and against *Giovanni's Room* (1956), what he terms "Baldwin's 'gay' novel" (105). He does so in an attempt to make sense of the author virulently homophobic and misogynistic sentiment in both Cleaver's *Soul On Ice* (1968) and Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), but also to further

demonstrate how "queer" interruptive language can unmoor sexual, racial, and gender identity, even as other substitutive language seeks to fix identity. Reid-Pharr also includes a Preface to his chapter: the result is that both his literary critical analysis of the novels' language and his self-reflective analysis of academic language work toward this latter goal.

Though Reid-Pharr calls certain passages in Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* "homoerotic," at times even "deeply homoerotic" (108, 110), he reserves most of his discussion of "pornographic" language for his analysis of Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, which, unlike Cleaver's text, features explicit sex scenes between men. Reid-Pharr devotes his attention to a few scenes from the book, but devotes the most time to an extended scene in which Piri and his fellow, straight-identified gang members visit a home of some male prostitutes for sex and weed, and Piri has his cock sucked by a male prostitute named "Concha." Ultimately, Reid-Pharr argues, the moments of "fag bashing" (106) in both Clever and Thomas's work reveal the ways in which the black gay man becomes a figure of and scapegoat for the threatening queerness of black male homosocial space (Piri and other gang members solidify their own place in the pecking order as men by beating up many of the male prostitutes before they leave, for example). By Reid-Pharr's account, the homosexual becomes a figure that effectively straightens the worlds that both Cleaver and Thomas inhabit and describe. Such "straightening" is most successful when the gay man in the text is also re-figured as female. As Reid-Pharr himself notes, "It is Concha, a name that can be translated as either shell or pussy, who steps to the nether side of the phallic economy, allowing his mouth to be 'used' like the presumably (dis)empowered site of the vagina" (119).

Reid-Pharr's analysis, though, offers an interpretation of Thomas's text that leaves gender more ambiguous than fixed. His take on the explicit language in Thomas also problematizes what counts as pornographic. Along with the parts of the scene that feature

“actual” (that is, genital/oral) sex acts between men, Reid-Pharr also focuses on highlights the language that Thomas deploys when he describes smoking a joint:[5]

> Though this passage is taken from a scene that is heavily determined by the notion of profligate sex and sexuality, there is apparently no sexual activity at all. No penis, vagina, breasts, or buttocks are here to alert the reader that what we are experiencing is a type of sexual intercourse. There is neither blood nor feces to act as evidence of the all-important penetration. Indeed, the very fact that this passage lacks the normal markers of sexual activity is what produces it as a representation of profligacy. Here the erotic content is transferred from the sexual organs to the lips, a key site of homoerotic, homosexual pleasure. … Though he receives the stick of pot into his mouth, he does the penetration himself, plucking the stick from between extended fingers, fingers attached to a never visible face. (117)

The erotic pleasures described by Thomas expand beyond what we might call the explicitly sexual. Arguably some of the most erotically charged moments in Thomas take us not to the “vaginas, penises, breasts, buttocks, hands, arms, feet, stomachs, mouths, and tongues” mentioned in the previous chapter (85), but primarily to the lips, those secondary sexual organs so often associated with the feminine.[6] Just as Reid-Pharr does when he introduces “smell” into the mirror stage, so too does Thomas expand sexual experience to other sensory and erogenous realms.

For several critics in the fields of both queer criticism and black studies, oral sex scenes serve as a recurring place from which to theorize the intersections of race and sex. These scenes not only prove productive sites for thinking through ambiguity and violence, but also particularly for thinking through ambiguity and violence with regard to the potential perils and pleasures of cross-racial sexual encounter. Multiple critics, for example, have taken up the infamous “breakfast” scene from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), in which a white overseer orally rapes the character Paul D while he is imprisoned on a chain gang. In his 1997 article “The Part for the

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[5] The full quote from Thomas runs thus: “I opened my eye a little. I saw a hand, and between its fingers was a stick of pot. I didn’t look up at the face. I just plucked the stick from the fingers. I heard the feminine voice saying, “You gonna like thees pot. Eet’s good stuff” (58).

[6] For more queer theoretical work on lips, orality, and the feminine, see Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips A Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* (2013). See also Valerie Rohy’s chapter “Oral Narratives: ‘Race’ and Sexuality in Their Eyes Were Watching God” in *Impossible Women: Lesbian Figures and American Literature* (2000).

(W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of 'Race'," Lee Edelman argues that the scenes of oral sex between men in the work of both Morrison and Baldwin reveal how the twisted logics of homophobia contribute to the logics of racial oppression.[7] In his chapter "Slavery, Rape, and the Black Male Abject," in *Extravagant Abjection*, Scott focuses on the ways in which Paul D grapples with the aftereffects of his oral rape and abjection, shifting focus away from the actual scene of oral sex to its implications and after-effects on subjecthood and sexual/racial identity.[8] In both of these examples[9], a sexually explicit sex scene between men illuminates the complicated mechanisms of cross-racial sexual encounter and white supremacist violence. Reid-Pharr works in a similar vein and to similar ends. Like some of his queer theoretical contemporaries, Reid-Pharr acknowledges the violence of these scenes while still attempting to complicate already extant, and potentially homophobic, readings that might cast oral sex between men as being solely the scene of abjection, emasculation, or domination.

Crucially, the re-assertion of masculine/feminine gender roles in the scene between Piri and Concha takes place at the level of named genitalia. The "straight" Piri becomes straight by describing the pleasure of sex being his penis's pleasure, rather than his own ("If I didn't like the

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[7] Edelman: "While it is clear, in other words, that these textual moments put the fear and hatred of homosexuality strategically into play, only the particularity of a reading can determine if the passages are to be interpreted as homophobic themselves or, conversely, as subjecting homophobia to a much-needed critical analysis. The obvious answer, that these alternatives need not be conceptualized as mutually exclusive, suggests that in addressing homophobia, these figures both draw upon and speak to it at once, that they allow an analysis of its centrality in shaping our modern 'racial' discourse only at the risk of deploying, or even actively soliciting, it" (58). Edelman here focuses on the ambiguous nature of the fictional texts he analyzes; whether they "are" or "are not" homophobic depends on the specificity of the critical reading.
[8] Scott: "The scene troubles the dominant trope of black masculinity, 'emasculation' (the parallel to 'rape of black women') by attributing emasculation to the rape of men by other men. Its mode of rendering figures at once the sexual exploitation of men and silence about it—a silence enforced by the anger and disbelief that black audiences manifest toward this scene and that suggests that the horror the scene seems to provoke also signals a repressed memory of homoerotic domination. Paul D's road to healing, then, in embracing abjection in his quest to define 'manhood,' opens other, less-defended modes of being male in the world" (27). Here Scott argues that, rather than being a heterosexist foreclosure, *Beloved* constitutes a roadmap to alternative ways of dealing with the sexual and racial trauma of white supremacy.
[9] And others; see, for example, Scott's "Jungle Fever: Black Gay Identity Politics, White Dick, and the Utopian Bedroom" (1994).

scene, my pee-pee did" [61]). In these instances, explicit sexual language seems not to "queer" the narrative, but rather to enforce a heterosexual framework. The place of the pornographic here is complicated by the fact that, in the passage Reid-Pharr analyzes, Thomas's language is decidedly and bizarrely juvenile—he refers to his penis as his "pee-pee," for example. Reid-Pharr reads Thomas's recourse to the language of childhood as exoneration, a way of escaping the condemnation of homosexuality, even when receiving a blowjob from a man.[10] In this reading, it is precisely the omission of the more pornographic, sexually explicit or "adult" words ("dick" or "cock," say) that save Thomas from queer stigma. "By reasserting his genitalia as the privileged site of sexual pleasure, Thomas rescues himself from the never-never land of oral and anal eroticism," Reid-Pharr writes (116). As Reid-Pharr's use of "never-never land" suggests, the language of childhood at the scene of what classical psychoanalysis might regard as "regressive" oral/anal sex contradictorily rescues Thomas from queerness while at the same time producing its own queer resonances.

But this is not the first allusion to "never-never land" in the chapter on Thomas. In fact, the term appears much earlier. When Reid-Pharr republishes "Tearing the Goat's Flesh" in *Black Gay Man*, he includes with it a lengthy, five-page preface, titled "Prologue: Or, De-Queering Robert Reid-Pharr." In this prologue, Reid-Pharr shares the publication history of "Tearing the Goat's Flesh," and in particular his frustrated relationship with the editorial process:

> I also felt strongly that the editor had (dis)missed the fact that much of the essay is concerned with returning us to an understanding that black and gay identities have been creatively crafted out of the basest of insults. And, while this is indeed reason for celebration, this does not diminish the fact that a hint of that reality, our origins in *the*

[10] Reid-Pharr: "We can see, in this passage, the reestablishment of the line separating the inside from the out at precisely the moment at which the spectacle of homosexual intercourse is realized most fully. Thomas maintains a distinction between himself and his sexual desire, producing, for a moment, the former as the victim of the latter. It is his 'pee-pee' that refuses to allow him to exit this scene. Moreover, the word 'pee-pee,' with its connotations of childhood innocence, helps exonerate Thomas from any responsibility for the act in which he is engaged" (119).

> *never-never world* of niggers, coons, punks, faggots, and maricones is apparent in even the most positive articulations of race and sexuality. (102, emphasis mine)

Reid-Pharr's prologue occasions an important authorial gloss on obscene writing, one that reinforces the associations between queerness, blackness, and the sexually explicit. As he does at the start of "Dinge," Reid-Pharr also describes the process by which institutions (Duke University Press, Duke University, the North Carolina state legislature, etc.) censor or oppress a certain kind of radical sexual outspokenness. "I had used the words 'cock,' 'pussy,' and 'fuck' too often for [the editor's] tastes, and my work threatened, he argued, the relationship of the journal to the university and the state legislature," he writes (101). Again, the stigma attached to such language, and the subsequent censorship that such stigma allows, is a "queer" stigma—that is, a stigma specifically characterized by its association with illicit, depraved, or excessive sexuality. In Reid-Pharr's telling, that queer stigma also attaches to the racial slur; the repetition of "never-never" alerts us once again to the connection between sexually obscene language and what we might call racially obscene language.

Reid-Pharr's recap of the academic editing process brings together two understandings of obscene vocabulary: the pornographic description, and the racist or homophobic slur. Reid-Pharr eventually yields to the editor's objections, "deleting a cock here, a pussy there, and throwing up scare quotes around the odd 'motherfucker'" (101), but he is cognizant throughout the process of a second, less acknowledged deletion or repression. In his story about the editing and publishing process, Reid-Pharr describes how the constraints of "polite academic discourse" (101) demand both the silencing of pornographic language and the repression of what he terms "the incredible slippage in meaning that necessarily accompanies even the most progressive articulations of modern identity" (103). These two imperatives of academic discourse are related via their parallel structures of deletion and insertion. While editing standards require that he delete and replace the

cocks, pussies, and motherfuckers, Reid-Pharr also senses that the terms of academic discourse also rely on similar substitutions when it comes to identity descriptors that are labeled obscene because they are “the basest of insults” (101). “I still have to resist the impulse to flinch when someone refers to me as a queer and to positively run for cover when someone refers to me as a black queer, as I have not yet rid myself of the suspicion, left over from childhood, that I am being politely hailed as a nigger and a faggot,” he writes. “You say black gay. I hear nigger fag” (103).

This claim invokes, too, the historical trajectory of the word “queer,” and its own shift from insult to reclaimed identity category. Indeed, debates surrounding the use of “queer” in both political activism and academic criticism sometimes invoke the comparison between “queer” and other slurs. Consider, for example, this striking moment in Judith Butler’s early *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* article “Critically Queer” (1993):

> When and how does a term like “queer” become subject to an affirmative resignification for some when a term like “nigger,” despite some recent efforts at reclamation, appears capable of only reinscribing its pain? How and where does discourse reiterate injury such that the various efforts to recontextualize and resignify a given term meet their limit in this other, more brutal, and relentless form of repetition? (169-170)

Butler’s insistence on repetition as a possible means of re-signification here predicts Reid-Pharr’s treatment of violence and violent language throughout “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh,” along with other scholarship theorizing the connection between the sexually and racially obscene. Darieck Scott, for example, in his later book *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010), similarly argues that the repetition of the n-word in Samuel Delaney’s *The Mad Man* (1994) “brings attention to the process of interpellation, of power-making-its-object, a recognition it helps fix on some layer of consciousness by repetition—especially, it seems to me, for readers. The naming of interpellation, calling it out, that this repetition effects, makes it, like ‘nigger’ itself, amenable to various uses and

transformations" (256). Scott explores the multiple valences of the hate speech, arguing that the repeated and repetitive verbal assaults aimed the novel's protagonist carry both violent and sexually arousing force.[11] In his estimation, the interruptions of racial hate speech might similarly be linked to the interruptive and unmooring erotic language of pornography.[12] These parallels are not merely coincidental; in fact, Scott draws much of the inspiration for "Porn and the N Word" from Reid-Pharr's work in *Black Gay Man* (224).

We might assume, at least at first, that those who write pornographically (like Reid-Pharr) reinforce the claim that a text can be read "as" itself. But as Eugenie Brinkema and others have forcefully argued, pornography's alleged claim to and desire for immediacy, accuracy, and know-ability is more complicated than would first appear. The specifics of genre—brought to the fore by Reid-Pharr's specific choice, in his Introduction, to name his style of writing "pornographic"—yields further connections to the "never-never land" of oral eroticism, and its relation to language. These connections, in turn, bring us back to the academy and to debates

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[11] Delany, interestingly enough, writes the Forward to the first edition of *Black Gay Man*. The fact that Delany is the one to preface Reid-Pharr's book speaks to the common threads of both pornographic explicitness and empirical description that run through much of their writing. Delany's authorial presence in *Black Gay Man* also clues readers in to how his and Reid-Pharr's similar descriptive strategies can work to produce ambiguity, rather than resolve it. In her soon-to-be-published chapter "A Queer Method? Samuel Delany's Empiricism and the History of Deviance Studies," Heather Love makes a convincing case that Delany's painstaking, almost anthropological descriptions of sexual commerce in his book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) neither totally reinforce nor totally dissolve identity; instead, Delany's descriptive writing lends a specificity to his text reminiscent of the pre-poststructuralist, pre-queer theoretical "deviance studies" of the 1930s and 40s. Love's study of Delany is also a study of as/if criticism: though Love writes that "[t]he book is told in Delany's own voice—from a position he identifies elsewhere as *black*, *gay* and *male*—and he does not mask but rather foregrounds his desire" (emphasis original, believe it or not), she ultimately concludes that, rather than solidify these three named identities, the intense and heterogeneous 'typification' that occurs in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* proliferates and complicates identity markers beyond those over-determined categories of race, sexuality, or gender."

[12] Scott: "As this is consistently a component of his fulfilling sexual encounters—and as John never really objects to the word—'nigger' seems to be, or to become in the course of the novel, a powerful sexual incitement. It is inciting partly because of its meaning as a slur, or as a word that provides an expression of the domination/submission dynamic that gives him pleasure and that opens the way to his most powerful ecstatic experiences. In an overall sense, though not always explicitly in a given sexual act or encounter, the word 'nigger' dominates John; and domination excites him and gives him pleasure… 'nigger' is a highly important, perhaps even indispensable, part of Delany's written (i.e., consciously ordered and selected, rather than semispontaneously generated as in everyday fantasy) erotic scenarios, which, after all, we do not generate primarily to make ourselves laugh, and/or that its use takes on a political meaning. This is to say that, apart from being comedic, in *The Mad Man* as in *Equinox*, the word 'nigger' is erotic, and this eroticism has political meaning" (230).

about literary criticism more broadly. In her 2017 essay on gonzo porn and formalist reading, Brinkema makes a similar point about orality as it relates to the "obscene." Her essay on pornography begins with a meditation on the negotiable difference between *irrumatio* and *felatio*, a difference closely tied to how each term deals with questions of silencing, language, and willfulness. Brinkema invokes oral sex in order to make a larger argument against "surface reading"; ultimately, Brinkema's essay posits an essential link between form and how we understand "the things mouths do," insisting on the value of deep formalist critique. Sounding the call to take "surface as literal meaning," advocates of surface reading champion modes of criticism that reject a more "paranoid" hermeneutics of suspicion in favor of a variety of reading strategies (Best and Marcus, 12). Here, Brinkema draws a helpful connection between the rhythmic violence of irrumatio, the pornographic, and interrupted language:

> There is a transferential contagion to the violence of forced penetration at the site of the sonant: the orator borrows, or is loaned, or forced upon him is the overwhelming oral shame, and its affect pollutes the possibilities of making a verbal or juridical account of the act as such. In sum, irrumation is a problem for representation—both in language, as groaning and weeping replace the word, and in its political-designative sense, what multiply troubles logos, disrupting oratory, discourse, argument, advocacy.

Brinkema, like Reid-Pharr, sees orality as kind of "never-never land," a place of ambiguity and suspension.[13] She does well to note that this is not merely a difference in perspective; rather, as she quips, "there is no oral relation": these two concepts are non-complementary ways of thinking form.[14] Brinkema points out that pornography is, in many ways, a good test for the claims of

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[13] We might also consider the "oral" nature of obscenity as it is regulated by the state: in the US at least, most legal decisions about obscenity concern not print media, but radio and television broadcasts. Because the Federal Communications Commission covers broadcast, the spoken obscenity becomes the controversial obscenity. Notably, the FCC does not count racial, ethnic, or homophobic slurs that might constitute "hate speech" as "indecent" and therefore worthy of censure in its current policy. (For more, see Paul Farhi, "Wait, Wait—Can you Say that?" *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2015.)

[14] Brinkema: "What the differential terms of *irrumation* and *fellatio* refer to are not variations in perspective or orientation around a homogeneously defined act; they are not symmetrical inversions of a selfsame practice, they do not name a unary operation and mouth is not a singularity. There is no oral relation. Instead, if we linger with the specifics of practice on the level of brute mechanics, the absolute difference between a taking of sensation by force of

surface reading: pornography's perceived straightforwardness (in other words, its explicitness) is similar to the textual "straightforwardness" fetishized by surface reading. Both pornography and surface reading, then, derive from the demand for unmediated authenticity—famously, one knows the pornographic when one sees it.[15] Pornography and surface reading both purport to tell it like it is; or, perhaps more accurately, to show it as it is.

Such discussions also recall the questions of genre and academic discipline raised by Reid-Pharr at the start of his prologue. Reid-Pharr first notes the confusion generated by his early scholarship, and in particular by the piece his prologue introduces, which began as a chapter of his doctoral dissertation. He recalls how the seeming incongruity of his inquiry baffles his committee (and, later, how it baffles skeptical job interviewers): they are unable to tell whether his work is "on Black American literature" or "queer theory" (100). "Tearing the Goat's Flesh," figured as the "queer" chapter in a dissertation primarily focused on race, confused readers who sought to fix Reid-Pharr's critical identity within academic humanities subfields; to the academics and advisors assessing Reid-Pharr's work, the essay constituted a queer interruption. This "queer"

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insertion and gestures of milking and sucking pivots on matters of which distinct figure controls the pacing, depth, speed, angle, duration, nature, and quality of thrusting—which is to say that this difference hinges on dimensions and determinations of rhythm, the rhythmic assemblage of aggression and capitulation against the paratrophic rhythms of draining and tasting. Irrumation and fellatio are non-complementary matters of accent, tactus, meter, agogics—and their non-identity can be analyzed in terms of form. That the things mouths do must, in fact, be read in their formal dimension is the central claim of this article" (15).

[15] Because pornography is also defined by a relative immediacy to sex, some critics and theorists still use pornography as a limit point of media, ignoring or forgetting the fact that it is still a representational genre. Williams, in the introduction to *Porn Studies*, attempts to correct this assumption. Williams cites Slavoj Zizek as an example of bad porn scholarship: "Zizek effectively dismisses the texts of pornography as abnormal representations doomed perpetually to 'go too far.' By showing 'it,' pornography becomes simply a 'pretext for introducing acts of copulation,' instead of the sublime Thing, we are stuck with a vulgar groaning and fornication'" (33). (See also, as we saw in chapter one, this quote from Justice Potter Stewart in the 1963 pornography case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that" [emphasis mine]). Writing against the use of porn as a mere limit case, Williams writes, "How, in fact, do these performed acts construct the 'it' that they purport to reveal? Is it perhaps the critic who has not gone far enough in analyzing this construction?" (6).

interruption on the level of academic genre is akin to the "queer" interruptions that happen on the level of academic language theorized in Reid-Pharr's introduction and at the start of his previous chapter, "Dinge."

Combining Brinkema's insights about rhythmic violence and form with previous arguments about cross-racial violence and desire, both of which converge at the site of the oral pornographic, provides a useful way of thinking through Reid-Pharr's racial and sexual politics. Reid-Pharr's shocking interruptions betray the status quo in both senses of "betray," both revealing the scandal of the extant systems while simultaneously attempting to break from them. In the introduction to *Porn Studies,* Linda Williams coins the term "on/scenity." Her term is instructive, in that it points out the seemingly arbitrary or ambiguous nature of "the pornographic" or "the obscene," something Reid-Pharr fails to point out. Williams's argument is not simply that the distinctions between the obscene and the acceptable are contextual and constructed (though Williams and Reid-Pharr would certainly not contest this claim), but rather that artworks or other media can be deemed obscene and not obscene at the same time; moreover, it is this very ambiguity that structures legal and societal delineation and discussion of "the pornographic" in the first place. Applying this insight to Reid-Pharr's call for a more explicit critical writing helps illuminate Reid-Pharr's ultimate argument: the shock of both queerness and cross-racial desire is the shock of mutual implication, of the normalcy of obscenity.

Indeed, the title of Reid-Pharr's essay clues us in to the rhythmic violence that underlies it. He takes his title from an Abakua proverb, one that also serves as the epigraph for Reid-Pharr's essay: The proverb's meaning—"the goat who breaks the drum pays with his hide" (133)—provides the inspiration for the essay's title, as well as the intellectual fodder for its conclusion. Musing on the aphorism's brief but striking metaphor, Reid-Pharr writes:

> As Coco Fusco has suggested, even while the Abakua proverb points directly to the grave consequences of troublemaking, it demonstrates the necessity of the untamed "outsider"

> to the continued creativity of the rest of the community. As James Baldwin's Giovanni is slaughtered and as Thomas's effeminate gay men are fucked and beaten, a type of music is produced, a music that points the way to new modes of existence, new ways of understanding, that allow the community to escape, however briefly, the systems of logic that have proven so enervating to the black subject. The importance of the (scape) goat, then, is not so much that with its death peace returns to the village or that crisis ends. The point is not simply to expurgate all that is ambiguous and contradictory. On the contrary, as the kid is consumed and the drum is beaten, the community learns to gain pleasure from "the possibilities just beyond its grasp." It receives proof of its own authenticity and insider status while leaving open a space for change, perhaps even the possibility of new forms of joy. The boundaries are for a moment reestablished, but all are certain, even hopeful, that once again they will be erased. (134)

Reid-Pharr's explanation of his essay's epigraph thus conceives of the violent break or interruption of systems of logic as productive, even as they are also marked by a repeated and inescapable death, and his own text stylistically mirrors the substance of his argument, explicit language shockingly interrupting the flow of his polite, academic prose. Despite the fact that these rhythms are often literal deathblows, Reid-Pharr nonetheless maintains a faith in the power of these interruptions to open up into new possibility. At the same time, the violence of these rhythmic interruptions is ugly and persistent; innovation by no means equals innocence.

5.3 Shock Value

As we have now seen, much of *Black Gay Man* is devoted to describing how the sexually obscene is bound up in the racially abject. Nowhere is this clearer than in "The Shock of Gary Fisher," an essay that constitutes the last chapter of the "Gay" section of the book. The chapter examines *Gary in Your Pocket* (1996), a compilation of the work of the poet and theorist Gary Fisher, as curated by Sedgwick after his death from AIDS-related complications in 1994. In this chapter, Reid-Pharr argues with perhaps greater force than he does in the previous two essays that there is little difference between the polite academic discourse of identity categories and the obscene discourse of the racial slur. "The Shock of Gary Fisher" makes the case that the "shock" generated by Fisher's obscene and often limit-pushing poems, daily records, and essay drafts is

the shock of mutual implication: that is, on realizing the dependence of black identity on white supremacy.

Gary in Your Pocket is a difficult read: Fisher's text is rife with disturbing scenes and language meant to shock. His collection of poems, journal entries, and prose details his many sexual exploits with anonymous, domineering, and often violent white men while he is working as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Fisher's language, again, literally interrupts Reid-Pharr's own essay, in quoted italics. The shock of Fisher's work, according to Reid-Pharr, is not just the shock of the obscene lurking underneath the everyday (though that is undoubtedly part of the experience of reading Fisher) but also the shock of the obscene as a necessary mechanism of the everyday; in other words, the shock of realizing that the obscene is bound up with the way identity, identification, desire function. Reid-Pharr writes:

> What is more stunning, what shocks is that Fisher says, without flinching, that the black is not inculpable, that she is as much perpetrator as victim. As we will see, Fisher's constant return to the erotics of slavery and his insistence that the black is always an active and potent agent within these erotics not only places him among the most perverse of Black American authors but suggests a model of black subjectivity and black expression that at once masters and deforms some of the most cherished idioms of Black American vernacular tradition. (139)

At the same time as the relentless graphic language of Fisher might jar its readers, such repetition might also have the opposite effect: as scenes of abject racial and sexual violence repeat throughout *Gary in Your Pocket*, readers might become inured to their initial shock. Their repetition, like the repetition of violence theorized in "Tearing the Goat's Flesh" and the repetition of formal textual breaks throughout *Black Gay Man*, insists on the everyday-ness of white supremacy, and on the inescapable enmeshment of the history of slavery and racial violence with Americans' most personal and individual desires and actions.

Reid-Pharr is not the only one of his contemporaries to conceive of "shock" in this way. In his 1991 article "Looking for Trouble," Kobena Mercer tropes on the "shock effect" of the

Black Book (1989), a photo collection of black male nudes by the controversial white gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Like Reid-Pharr, Mercer connects the shock of Mapplethorpe to his controversial "obscenity"; also like Reid-Pharr, Mercer theorizes the obscene two ways: the obscenity of racial fetishism and the obscenity of sadomasochistic homosexual pornography. Both obscenities produce a shock effect that Mercer links to the shock of audience participation, desire, and implication.[16] In "Looking for Trouble," Mercer details the circumstances of a change of heart and mind: having previously panned Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* (1986) for its racial fetishism, Mercer revisits his conclusions to make room for an alternate reading:

> Once we accept the role of the reader, I should come out with regard to the specificity of my own subject-position *as a black gay reader* in Mapplethorpe's text. … Once I acknowledge my own implication in the image reservoir as a gay subject, as a desiring subject for whom the aestheticized object of the look represents an object choice already there in my own fantasies, then I am forced to confront the unwelcome fact that as a spectator I actually inhabit the same position in the fantasy of mastery which I said earlier was that of the hegemonic white subject! (191, emphasis mine)

Mercer examines the implications of his initial shock from his own embodied authorial position as a black gay man (a gay man who desires and eroticizes the subjects of *Black Book*). His own desire thus implicates him in the very structures he had previously critiqued, a realization that

[16] "Shock" is in fact Mercer's primary mode of relating to Mapplethorpe, and the word appears and reappears repeatedly throughout the text. See the following excerpts from Mercer (all emphasis mine): "To *shock* was always the key verb in the avant-garde vocabulary. Over the past year, the *shocking* eroticism of Robert Mapplethorpe's exquisite and perverse photography has been at the center of a major controversy in the United States concerning public funding of contemporary art" (184); "…we cannot assume that black audiences are somehow exempt from its modernist '*shock* effect,' although it seems black voices have been curiously silent and muted in the recent furor" (184); "… I can still quite vividly recall my first encounter with Mapplethorpe's black male nudes precisely because I was so *shocked* by what I saw!" (184); "Despite its value in cultural criticism, the residual moralistic connotation of the term fetishism tends to flatten out the affective ambivalence that viewers of Mapplethorpe's work experience as its characteristic '*shock* effect.' (189); "... he throws the binary structure of the question back to the spectator, where it is torn apart in the disruptive '*shock* effect.' The *shock* of recognition of the unconscious sex-race fantasies is experienced precisely as an emotional disturbance which troubles the spectator's secure sense of identity" (189); "But now I am not sure whether the perverse strategies of visual fetishism is necessarily a bad thing, in the sense that as the locus of the destabilizing '*shock* effect' it encourages the viewer to examine his or her own implication in the fantasies that the images arouse" (191); "I should emphasize that I've changed my mind about Mapplethorpe's *shocking* eroticism not for the fun of it, but because I have no particular desire to form an alliance with the New Right" (196).

leads him to a more complicated set of conclusions.[17] Crucially, Mapplethorpe's death from AIDS sparks Mercer's critical reevaluation.[18] Furthermore, and more interestingly for the purposes of the argument of this chapter, Mercer elucidates how the shared vulnerability occasioned by the threat of the AIDS crisis created a common ground of identification across race and class between Mapplethorpe and his subjects. Mercer speculates that *Black Book*, in the moment of AIDS, might serve as "a document of relations of mutuality under shared conditions of marginality" (194).

Just as the increased threat of death in the climate of the AIDS outbreak underwrites Mercer's re-reading of Mapplethorpe, the moment of the AIDS epidemic also informs the repeated interruptions both theorized and exemplified in Reid-Pharr's writing.[19] Moreover, these interruptions produce a shock effect that drives the spectacular moments of (difficult, partial, and temporary) cross-identification that crop up in Reid-Pharr's criticism. Consider, again, Reid-Pharr's claim that "What is more stunning, what shocks is that Fisher says, without flinching, that the black is not inculpable, that she is as much perpetrator as victim." Here, unlike in the rest of this chapter, Reid-Pharr uses the feminine pronoun "she" as a general or universalizing pronoun ("she is as much perpetrator as victim"). His choice may seem strange, given that the subject of his essay is hitherto identified as male. In this curious moment in the text, the specific individual

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[17] Mercer's first published article on *Black Book* resolutely pans Mapplethorpe's photos as racist and objectifying; he is stunned and appalled by the white photographer's blatant fetishization of his black male subjects. In "Looking for Trouble," his second article on the subject, Mercer makes a different argument. Here, he links the Reagan administration's dual crackdowns on national AIDS research funding and funding for artwork with homosexual or sadomasochistic themes: to condemn Mapplethorpe, in the wake of his death at the hands of an ignorant and hostile state, is in some ways to align oneself with those who wanted him dead in the first place. Mercer's reassessment comes in the wake of public hearings concerning state funding of Mapplethorpe's work, lead by the aggressive and moralizing congressman Jesse Helms—a wholesale rejection of Mapplethorpe's work, Mercer concludes, might do have the unintended and undesired political consequence of providing argumentative fodder for Helms's reactionary campaign.
[18] "It was the death of the author, and the sense of loss by which the AIDS crisis has affected all our lives, that made me reread the subversive and deconstructive dimension of Mapplethorpe's modernist erotica" (192).
[19] Though it is important to note that the academic text and the art photograph are different media, and thus work differently, I am interested less in the different ways these various objects come to be labeled obscene, and more in what can be gleaned from their mutual "obscene" designation.

author “Gary Fisher” expands into the capacious figure of “the black,” and in so doing becomes female. Perhaps this moment indicates a progressive feminist impulse to center black women and posit black womanhood as an alternative universal in the face of a white androcentric universal.[20] But the brief shift in gender pronouns also indicates not simply a corrective substitution (of female universal in the place of male universal) but a more temporary slippage, as if the shock of Fisher’s prose and Reid-Pharr’s argument is enough to briefly destabilize the identity categories of gender, much as the crisis of AIDS might destabilize the power dynamics of race in Mapplethorpe’s shocking photography. In other words, Reid-Pharr’s use of “she” here might also indicate a connection between the obscene shock of Fisher and the possibility of a more porous gender identity.

This trend (in which Reid-Pharr’s attempts to complicate racial identity carry with them a parallel attempt to complicate gender identity) continues in the paragraphs to follow. Again, this break with the black vernacular tradition moves away from writing “as” and in the direction of a more ambiguous, complicated authorial relationship to identity:

> The question that this leaves us with is, ‘How can we read Gary Fisher *as a black man*?’ Given my argument that Fisher repeatedly takes up the particularly shocking notion of a Negro racial identity not only produced in direct relation to white hostility but produced in a manner that takes sublime pleasure in the white’s domination, it taxes the imagination to place him neatly alongside Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, James Baldwin, or even the growing number of self-identified black gay writers. (139, emphasis mine)

Again, here are subtle moments of cross-gender alliance or affiliation. Why is Toni Morrison, for example, included in this list, which seems originally set up as a list of black male authors?

[20] Moving black women from margin to center has long been a hallmark of black feminist thought, and a footnote cannot do proper justice to the many varied works that emerge out of a critique of white andro-centrism. For a three very different but quite influential examples, see Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977), Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism” (1984), and Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989).

Something about Fisher's explicit and inappropriate desire makes him difficult to include in a cannon of black male writers, but also the very prospect of this inclusion seems to expand and explode the cannon at the very moment at which Reid-Pharr invokes it.

Rejecting the mode of criticism that would unambiguously label Fisher's work "black gay male literature," Reid-Pharr also, by way of his own close proximity to his subject, implicitly extends the argument to his own work, and even his own biography. At the tail end of "The Shock of Gary Fisher," Reid-Pharr doubles down on his rejection of a critical view of Fisher that would read him "as" a black gay author:

> Is this black gay male literature? Yes, if the quality of one's literature is simply a favor of phenotype and the reports of one's sexual practice. If, however, we mean to ask whether Fisher participates fully in the established idioms of Black (gay) American literary and cultural production, then I must express at least some doubt. (143)

Unspoken in this chapter is the fact that Reid-Pharr, who we might in some ways also count as one of the "self-identified black gay authors" he references, has much in common with Fisher. Moreover, unlike the other authors with whom he contrasts Fisher (Baldwin, Wright, etc.), Reid-Pharr closely matches Fisher in both "phenotype and reports of…sexual practice" and "idioms of…literary and cultural production." Like Fisher, he lived for a while in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; like Fisher, he has professional and personal connections to Sedgwick; like Fisher, he has an affinity for Southern white men; like Fisher, he holds an academic position in literary queer criticism and critical race theory. Reid-Pharr's biography, as the aforementioned examples indicate, is never far off, and permeates his work in numerous ways. What are readers to make of Reid-Pharr's own lived interpellation and self-identification as a black gay man?

5.4 Gender Trouble

To answer this question, let us return to "Living as a Lesbian," perhaps *Black Gay Man's* trickiest chapter, in order to highlight how Reid-Pharr's performative interruptions braid together

the effects of the AIDS crisis, the climate of the academy, and the notion of a racial and sexual obscene. In "Living as a Lesbian," Reid-Pharr's biography comes to the forefront; as a result, this piece exemplifies the kind of as/if criticism I want to highlight in this chapter. Several times in the nine pages of "Living as a Lesbian," Reid-Pharr describes moments where his otherwise unproblematic lesbian identification is thwarted, or at least made more complicated, by his encounter with his body or the bodies of others.

How and for what reasons does Reid-Pharr, a self-described "black gay man," claim membership in a homosocial/homosexual community of black lesbian feminists? Conceiving of explicitly homosexual spaces as also homosocial already carries with it a tricky set of gendered problems and betrays an unevenness in ideologies of male versus female homosocial space. As Sedgwick rightly notes in the introduction to *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women… than for men" (2). Rich's landmark phrase "the lesbian continuum," for example, characterizes the female homosocial and the female homosexual as connected, rather than divided, concepts). In some ways, we can think of Reid-Pharr's cross-identification as extending "the lesbian continuum" to all genders—perhaps the ultimate universalizing gesture. Such a gesture masks lived difference, and potentially ignores real-world inequalities produced in a sexist society. There is no denying that Reid-Pharr's identification with the black lesbian feminist community is fraught: the universalizing thrust of Reid-Pharr's claims to living as (if) a lesbian might be resistant, radical, or even utopian, or it might be reductive, romanticizing, and oversimplified (or, as is most likely the case, both).

Reid-Pharr's textual interruptions, however, complicate his initial move toward a limitless, universally accessible "as if" way of living and writing. Reid-Pharr attributes his ability

to enter, exist in, and survive all-male spaces to a learned lesbian "bravado" (163), while still noting the ways in which this simple formula breaks down in an environment that is different than the social world of black women to whom he feels indebted. In the gay male space of the bathhouse, for example, Reid-Pharr finds his lesbian identifications problematized by his access to male homosexual/homosocial space, the physical act of fucking, and the larger social privilege of relative safety afforded by his masculinity:

> Now I find myself asking whether in the bathhouse, the most sacred of male enclaves, where my masculine body and affected macho style increase my worth in the sexual economy, I am still lesbian. Is it lesbianism that spills out of the end of my cock as bald-headed men with grizzled beards and homemade tattoos slap my buttocks and laugh triumphantly? Is it lesbianism that allows me to walk these difficult streets alone, afraid only that I will not be seen, accosted, 'forced' into sexual adventure? (162)

The gender difference is here made stark: in a moment of particularly blatant gender contrast, Reid-Pharr admits that he feels anxious about the prospect of *not* being sexually hailed or accosted on the street (an anxiety, I would wager, few of his female compatriots share). It is significant that these moments are the most explicit parts of Reid-Pharr's essay; they occur at the interruptive scenes of "actual" sex that seem far removed from the mostly platonic descriptions of the society of lesbian poets, academics, artists, and activists with whom he is most comfortable. Reid-Pharr's racy interludes, read this way, risk reinforcing a theoretically-constructed divide between lesbians and gay men, one that would associate a desexualized "erotic" with the former, and a hypersexualized "pornographic" with the latter. Linda Williams, in her influential edited volume *Porn Studies* (2014), writes about "related debates about pornography within feminism, in which a 'bad,' androcentric pornography is often opposed to a 'good,' gynocentric eroticism" [6], for example. But while this may be true, the ruptures in "Living as a Lesbian"—and, as we shall see, elsewhere in *Black Gay Man*—also do more complicated work, challenging such clean-cut distinctions.

At the same time as he reaches toward an aspiring lesbianism, Reid-Pharr remains attentive to the moments in which his attempts at homosociality within his community of black lesbians come up against seemingly un-breechable rifts of difference that startlingly return him to his identity "as" a black gay man. His identifications quickly become quite complicated, especially at the scene of gay male sex. Recounting one such scene, he writes (in italics):

> Of late I have taken to rubbing my face along the cocks and balls and inside the buttocks of my lovers, hoping that in their scent I might find something of my own, or my father's, or his own unknown father's. I lick the sweat off bellies spilling over too-tight jeans, suck gobs of chest hair, and underarm hair, and scrotum hair into my mouth, gorging on the rough texture, begging to be pinned down to the bed, to be penetrated by a vigorous and vibrant masculinity. My lovers whisper, 'Whose pussy is this?' as they struggle to slip their cocks into my ass. I haven't the heart to answer simply that it is my own. (158)

When Reid-Pharr admits that he lacks the heart to leap from metaphor to literalism, he nonetheless acknowledges a possibility (perhaps, if we take this as paralepsis, even a longing) that he might "simply" be a woman—just because gender and sex present a difficulty in these scenes does not mean that the physical or embodied experiences that Reid-Pharr describes are always or even primarily incompatible with a lesbian or female identity. For Reid-Pharr, as well as for many other theorists, the physical experience of penile ejaculation does not preclude one from being a lesbian, or from being a woman.[21]

Nonetheless, Reid-Pharr's lesbian identification is not easy. He recalls, for example, the difficulty of holding on to both a gay male and a lesbian identity while looking in the mirror at his own body: "Even as I stand before the bathroom mirror, my dick tucked between my legs so that only the bushy triangle of pubic hair is showing, I continue to smell my own heavy man's smell"

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[21] For a good treatment highlighting how these such identity formations might constitute "modes of self-fashioning that allow for a reconstruction of black manhood from the place of incoherence and femininity which might be best exemplified, or at the least typified, in recent representations of and by black trans-cultures, but not exclusive to them" (77), see Rinaldo Walcott's discussion of the work of Reginald Shepard, "Reconstructing Manhood, or, the Drag of Black Masculinity" (2009).

(158). Reid-Pharr takes the Lacanian mirror stage, in which an infant arrives at split subjecthood via the visual of his own body reflected back in a mirror, and introduces a new element: smell. In so doing, Reid-Pharr takes a relatively abstract moment that is well known in the French poststructuralist cannon, and interrupts its predictable telos—a.k.a., "healthy" ego formation—by way of an embodied experience. Expanding on pre-held notions of gender as primarily seen, his emphasis on smell also introduces the messiness of existence back into an old critical trope.

It is hard to believe this implicit citation of Lacan is accidental: because of the strong influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on much of US queer theory, mirror scenes crop up frequently in queer literary criticism. Perhaps the most famous example of a fictional mirror scene taken up by queer literary criticism is a scene from Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), in which the protagonist Stephen laments her masculine body while standing in front of her bedroom mirror. This scene is notable in no small part because it presents nearly the opposite picture of the mirror scene that Reid-Pharr describes (including, importantly, Radclyffe's description of Steven's body as "so white").[22] While Reid-Pharr delights at the cross-gender potential of his "fleshy thighs," Steven is miserable at the sight of her own "slender flanks" (187). At the same time, in both scenes, the main actors arrive at a kind of autoerotic melancholy, an ambivalence about their own bodies brought on by stroking, smelling, and seeing. Perhaps it is this ambivalence that makes the scene such a source of contestation for literary critics.[23] In the

[22] Hall: "That night she stared at herself in the glass; and even as she did so she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete…. She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel; it was so white, so strong and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs—oh poor and most desolate body!" (187).

[23] Esther Newton, in her 1984 piece "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian" uses the scene to discuss the persistence of the male/female gender binary in modern discussions of lesbian identity; Theresa deLauretis, ten years later, takes a more psychoanalytic approach in her article "The Lure of the Mannish Lesbian." Later, frustrated that these earlier readings of *The Well of Loneliness* are unwilling to problematize "lesbian," J .Halberstam rethinks the scene in order to make room for alternative ideas of female masculinity, in a chapter titled "'A Writer of Misfits': John Radclyffe Hall and the Discourse of Inversion" (1994). Motivated by similar frustrations, though far more literal in his condemnation,

words of Heather Love, "each of these critics attempts to assimilate Stephen's narrative to a later, happier narrative of gendered existence" (199). Just as I read Reid-Pharr's mirror scene as an ambiguous negotiation of identity, so too does Love want to read Steven's anguish as the result of an ambiguous or melancholic relationship to available fixed gender categories: "Despite our present sense of expanding possibilities for gendered embodiment, the melancholic trace in Stephen's experience of herself is impossible to wish away" (199). Reid-Pharr explores the difficulty of negotiating a stable gender identity: again, it is the lived experience of identity that informs the same theories that undercut the concept of identity. His sensory experience, here in the form of an interruptive smell, conflicts with, but does not contradict, the theoretical and social connections he has forged in other aspects of his existence.

Rather, Reid-Pharr regards gendered subjecthood with productive and provocative ambiguity, one that dialogues well with more recent articulations of embodiment and identity in transgender theory. To borrow C. Riley Snorton's term, Reid-Pharr's ambiguous relation to masculinity "transfigures" black women's studies, expanding and complicating ideas of who is recognizable "as" lesbian. It is this very ambiguity that allows Reid-Pharr to reach, albeit tentatively and incompletely, moments of lesbian "transcendence" (161), a word whose polysemous prefix predicts later transgender studies work that theorizes "trans" as a type of "transitivity" or "transfiguration."[24] Recent work by Snorton, Kai Greene, Marquis Bey, and

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Jay Prosser takes these critics to task for "trying to fit a square peg into a round hole" (168), and instead reads Steven's story as the story of a transgender man.

[24] In an article written in 2011 for the website *Feminist Wire* titled "Transfiguring Masculinities in Black Women's Studies," Snorton writes, "To practice black (male) feminism in the space of transition then…calls for feminist scholars to exert theoretical pressures on the category of maleness, itself—to allow it to destroy itself—and in so doing to allow black feminisms radical inclusivities to reemerge." It is worth noting here that Snorton's article specifically mentions "ambiguity" as an important result of this transfiguration:

> …[T]ransfiguring masculinities in Black Women's Studies necessitates a move towards queer revaluations of the body as well as the family and sexuality. Queering male bodies requires that we move from black (male)

others explores the ways in which black subjects are, in some ways, already positioned outside of or opposed to normative gender binaries set up under white supremacy. Just as Roderick Ferguson, in *Aberrations in Black* (2004), points out that black sexuality cannot be heteronormative, so too to these theorists help us see that black has a different relation to normative gender than white masculinity.[25] Indeed, the parallels between Reid-Pharr's work in 2001 and the work of more recent theorists also help to illuminate how Reid-Pharr's lesbianism works alongside and through black lesbian feminism.[26] Many critics have by now pointed out that

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> feminism to a proliferation of gendered bodies that talk very precisely about how they enter black feminist theory and practice. Inhabiting the queer space of the black body—a body that is always already figured as sexually non-normative—and transsexing black (male) feminism as a body of literature honors the ways that black feminisms have made room for all kinds of masculinities from its inception… at its most theoretically provocative, black (male) feminism demonstrates the fragility of masculinity, particularly when it refuses the safe harbor of patriarchy, heteronormativity and white privilege. As Gary Lemons puts it: "being black and male in feminist alliance means being an 'invisible (wo)man'—not a woman but neither a man in traditional phallocentric terms. Without oversimplifying this condition, perhaps, there is a kind of gender/race *ambiguity* that informs the idea of black male feminist positionality" (Lemons 1997, 45). This *ambiguity* Lemons describes is the result of a black feminist imperative to submit masculinity to critical scrutiny, in the efforts of uncovering repressed femininity. Part of transforming black (male) feminism, then, requires discarding familiar familial modes of thinking to, as Hortense Spillers has argued, say "'yes' to the 'female' within" (Spillers 2003, 228). (emphasis mine)

Like Reid-Pharr, Snorton also draws on the work of the Combahee River Collective, arguing that their critique, which was aimed at white lesbian separatists, raises several questions, such as "how can black (cisgender or non-transgender) men be feminists?...what opportunities are made possibly by black feminisms' radical inclusivity, and how does that shape the study of masculinities within black women's studies and Women's Studies more generally?" These questions remain vitally important, too, in "Living as a Lesbian," and for many of the same reasons. See Green, "Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* Analytic" (2016) for more on trans* used in this sense.

[25] For a more in-depth look at the ways in which blackness complicates gender norms, see Marquis Bey's "The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness" (2017). Working primarily with Ferguson and Hortense Spillers, Bey explores the ways in which blackness functions as "the disagreeable," that is, as "the subversions of the stasis giving intelligibility to one's validity as 'human'… Blackness cannot, and refuses to, attain the agreeable because such a category is predicated on an exclusionary 'human' and defers to a fixed rigidity that aligns with propriety, decorum, and the like" (282). See also Calvin Warren's piece, "Calling into Being: Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology," in the same issue.

[26] As guest editors Treva Ellison, Green, Matt Richardson, and Snorton write in their introduction to a recent special issue of *TSQ* titled "The Issue of Blackness," both transgender studies and black feminisms have sought after a "critical explanation of embodied difference" (163). The editors of the journal expound on this point, and take the occasion of the special *TSQ* issue as an opportunity to point out the ways in which earlier black feminist and black studies scholarship has grappled with the issues of abstraction and racialization, and to chastise the academy for failing to acknowledge those contributions (163).

Trans studies, in turn, can also productively disrupt certain lines of black lesbian feminist thought. Consider, for example, Kai Green's definition of trans-with-an-asterisk, in his recent piece "Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* Analytic" (2016):

the genealogies of black feminism and black queer studies are deeply entwined with the genealogy of transgender studies; black feminist theory in the vein of Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde and contemporary transgender studies are both, in the words of the editors of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, "theories in the flesh" (159). Recently, new writing on black transgender and queer criticism has articulated these connections. At the same time, despite the deep theoretical debts transgender theory owes black feminism and black queer studies, transgender studies "always already depend[s] on an abstraction of the racialization of space as foundational to the study of gender and sexuality" (163).

Reid-Pharr's own formula, "lesbian-identified gay man" (instead of "lesbian transgender woman") highlights the complicated cross-identifications mapped in his piece. In fact, Reid-Pharr's reluctance to read his male lovers' substitution of "pussy" for "asshole" as anything more than playful slang speaks to his complicated relationship not to embodied maleness, but to masculinity. Crucially, anatomy does not preclude Reid-Pharr from being a lesbian; rather, his own attachment to black gay masculinity does. On the one hand, it seems Reid-Pharr merely doesn't have the heart to surrender the power that results from calling oneself a man, and being read in the world as such. At the same time, this power is complicated by other intersections of Reid-Pharr's identity. This scene instead indicates something more nuanced: Reid-Pharr here is unwilling to surrender the ironic, joking valences of a gay man calling his male partner's asshole

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I mobilize my capacious use of Trans* to also theorize the relationship between black, lesbian, and feminist in the term 'black lesbian feminist.' Feminism was not ever just about white women, though they became the representative subject for its politics. "Black lesbian" can be understood as a Trans* modifier of feminism. In the same way that black lesbians critiqued white feminism for creating a politics centered in whiteness that invisiblized black lesbian women, I use Trans* to critique black lesbian feminist politics, which at times disavows the presence of black trans subjects in order to present a coherent category, 'black lesbian.' I argue that 'black lesbian' accommodates trans excess. A Trans* reading of black lesbian feminist texts illuminates those moments of fissure, contradiction, and coherence where the possibility of trans subjectivity troubles the coherence of 'black lesbian.' (67)

a pussy—a move that retains masculine privilege, while still winkingly acknowledging the ways in which blackness and gayness (in particular gay bottom-ness) are, like femaleness, mutually and differently oppressed under patriarchal and white supremacist systems.

5.5 Citing As a Lesbian

Robert Reid-Pharr's particular citational practices in this essay—interruptions and citations all specifically named as lesbian—in fact lead us back to the repetitious violence theorized in the "Gay" section of *Black Gay Man*. This is, in no small part, because of their particular status as academic or theoretical citation. It is not hard to recognize that citation is an important part of Reid-Pharr's essay. A statement by the US black lesbian feminist group Combahee River Collective, poetry by Cheryl Clarke and Lorde, and long excerpts from the criticism and fiction of Michelle Parkerson, Barbara Smith, and Baldwin—as well as one poem by Reid-Pharr himself, written while he was still an undergraduate in North Carolina—interrupt his prose in long, italicized block quotes. The essay itself borrows its title from a book of poems by Clarke, a black lesbian poet and critic.[27] Beyond providing the chapter with its title, Clarke (in the essay, Reid-Pharr refers to her simply as "Cheryl") also appears as a key figure in many of the brief anecdotal scenes featured in Reid-Pharr's essay: it is through intimate interactions and friendship with "Cheryl" that Reid-Pharr most fully comes to know his own lesbianism. As this one example indicates, Reid-Pharr's citation functions not only by way of his interruptive quotes, but also by the repeated lists of names, which serve as a kind of bibliography or works cited within his piece:

> I know all the young black female film and video makers: Cheryl, Shari, Dawn, Vejan, Yvonne, and even Michelle, not to mention Jackie W., the children's writer; Pamela, the performance artist; Cathy, the Ivy league professor and AIDS activist; bald Jackie B., the

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[27] For more on Cheryl Clarke, see chapter two.

> erotic poet; Jewelle who needs no introduction; and, of course, Barbara, the mother of us all. (157)

The black lesbian community Reid-Pharr describes is heterogeneous; an intersecting network of friends, mentors, ex-lovers, sperm donors and receivers, citational footnotes, radical activists, roommates, cash lenders, cash borrowers, and biological kin: "My lesbianism takes me to dyke parties in Brooklyn, small clubs hidden away among the West Side warehouses, the odd women's gathering, and a wealth of impromptu therapy sessions" (157). But it is not only Reid-Pharr's involvement with a particular lesbian social scene that allows him to read, write, and live as/if a lesbian; it is also his proximity to and expert knowledge of the black lesbian feminist texts he cites. Reid-Pharr's lesbian connections are political and personal, publicational and pedagogical—they extend to the books on his shelf ("My files are packed with back copies of *Sinister Wisdom*, *Off Our Backs, On Our Backs*, and *Conditions*" [157], he writes).

Of all the names in "Living as a Lesbian," the one most often invoked is that of Barbara Smith, the famed writer and activist. Reid-Pharr's essay begins with Smith: "In 1985 Barbara Smith came like a fresh wind to Chapel Hill. She brought with her a vision of home unlike anything I had imagined" (153). This sentence repeats at the end of the chapter; in fact, Reid-Pharr invokes Smith's name many times throughout his short reflection. The repeated refrain of Smith's name is not Reid-Pharr's only means of homage—his essay also takes seriously the critical call of her most famous essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," whose publication marked a new era in black lesbian feminist thought and practice. In her piece, Smith envisions a literary critical tradition rooted in the experience of black women. As an example of what this criticism might look like, Smith offers her on reading of Morrison's *Sula* (1973) as a lesbian novel, reading the close female friendship between the two main characters as a lesbian. Like Smith, Reid-Pharr uses an expansive definition of "lesbian" that extends beyond explicit sexuality

into the homosocial sphere.[28] Such a move aligns itself not only with Smith, but with a certain tradition of 1970s lesbian feminism more generally; when Smith writes that "[t]he very meaning of lesbianism is being expanded in literature, just as it is being redefined through politics" (25), her words reference a mode of analysis in the same vein as, say, the Radicalesbians polemic "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), or Adrienne Rich's later essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980).[29]

It is not surprising that Reid-Pharr draws on these theorists in particular; there is no doubt that Reid-Pharr owes much of his own criticism to the groundbreaking work done by the black lesbian feminists of Smith's generation. "Living as a Lesbian" is an overt acknowledgement of this debt. Consider a remark made by Reid-Pharr, in the Introduction of *Black Gay Man*, in the context of the women he later cites in "Living as a Lesbian": "It has been the case the individuals who have responded to previous versions of these essays remark the odd slippage in my writing

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[28] For more on this influential essay and its relationship to and influence on as/if criticism, see chapters one and two of this dissertation.

[29] The Radicalesbians, for example, expand "lesbian" far beyond its sexual signification:

> Affixing the label lesbian not only to a woman who aspires to be a person, but also to any situation of real love, real solidarity, real primacy among women, is a primary form of divisiveness among women: it is the condition which keeps women within the confines of the feminine role, and it is the debunking/scare term that keeps women from forming any primary attachments, groups, or associations among ourselves. (1)

In "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Smith expands on this idea in the name of a new critical mode, wich she names "black feminist criticism":

> Black feminist criticism applied to a particular work can overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions. At the 'Lesbians and Literature' discussion at the 1976 Modern Language Association convention Bertha Harris suggested that if in a woman writer's work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature. As usual, I wanted to see if these ideas might be applied to the Black women writers that I know and quickly realized that many of their works were, in Harris's sense, lesbian. Not because women are 'lovers,' but because they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another… Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters, I discovered in rereading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family… *Sula* is an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed. (25)

Smith's analysis of *Sula* as a lesbian novel thus expands the definition of lesbian to describe something beyond an explicitly sexual (i.e. genital) act, desire, or identity. Rich, writing three years later, echoes these sentiments, introducing her own phrase, "lesbian continuum": "I mean the term lesbian continuum to include range through each woman's life and throughout history of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman," she writes (135).

between the academic and the pornographic, the rigorous and the soft," he writes (10). The binary that Reid-Pharr sets up here is hyperbolically gendered—the "academic" is "rigorous" and "political" while the "pornographic" is "soft" and "personal." One of Reid-Pharr's go-to black lesbian feminist interlocutors, Audre Lorde, is often credited with explicating a similar distinction, although she uses slightly different terms. In a now canonical black feminist essay first delivered as a paper in 1979, "Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power" Lorde advocates for a mode of politics that is informed by the personal erotic rather than by patriarchal methods that are ostensibly divorced from the experience of feeling:

> Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge (56).[30]

Informed as it is by the black lesbian feminist theory of the late 1970s and 1980s, we might rightly expect Reid-Pharr's scholarship to insist on the particulars of the body and its erotics in ways similar to his intellectual forbearers. Sometimes, as in his Introduction, this is indeed the case. Readers of his book, he writes, "have been surprised (pleasantly and otherwise) that I have attempted to refuse the easy distinctions between the political and the personal that continue to exist in so much of our work long after feminists presumably cleared the left intellectual environment of such odd notions" (11). Indeed, for Reid-Pharr, a major appeal of both black feminist theory and the black feminist community is that both allow him to articulate his own existence without having to choose between practice and theory. In this way, the "bravado" and "confidence" Reid-Pharr attributes to his being a lesbian-identified gay man extends to his critical

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[30] For some examples of scholarship regarding this aspect of Lorde's work, see the "Classics Revisited" section of *Women's Studies Quarterly* Volume 40, in particular Bettina Aptheker's "Audre Lorde, Presente!" (289-294), Roderick Ferguson's "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic' (295-300), and Nikki Young's "'Uses of the Erotic' for Teaching Queer Studies" (301-305).

method (163). Put simply, the new tools of black feminist theory embolden Reid-Pharr to write criticism that accounts for sex, race, and embodiment.

Reid-Pharr's invocation of these thinkers also adds another, thornier layer to the pornographic interludes in "Living as a Lesbian" introduced at the beginning of my chapter. Reid-Pharr cites Lorde by name six times in *Black Gay Man* (once in the chapter "Dinge," four times in "Living as a Lesbian," and once in "It's Raining Men," a chapter reflecting on the Million Man March,); his debt goes well acknowledged. But Reid-Pharr's specific term, "pornography," as well as his authorial choice to include explicit scenes of sex, complicates this simple lineage. In designating the anecdotal moments in his text as pornographic, Reid-Pharr also invokes the anti-porn debates of the so-called "feminist sex wars" of the late 1970s and early 1980s.[31] In fact, it is in "Uses of the Erotic" that Lorde perhaps most forcefully draws a distinction between the pornographic and the erotic, a distinction Reid-Pharr seems to elide. Lorde writes:

> [W]e have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling… There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual… And this misnaming of the need and the deed give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity—the abuse of feeling. (59)

Sticking with the term "pornographic," Reid-Pharr in this case sits squarely against the anti-porn feminists, of which Lorde was one. Unlike Lorde's pornographic, Reid-Parr's pornographic is deeply implicated and deeply imbricated in feeling, intuition, and (quite optimistically) the potential for radical political power. Once again, Reid-Pharr's particular lexicon reproduces a gendered divide between the erotic/lesbian/female and the pornographic/gay/male. While this

[31] For a good primer on this period of feminist intellectual and activist history, see Andrew McBride's comprehensive online summary, "The Sex Wars, 1970s to 1980s" (http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lesbians-20th-century/sex-wars).

problematic and over-hashed gender divide is undoubtedly one result of Reid-Pharr's vocabulary, I am more interested in how his continual citation of and performative cross-identification with black lesbian feminists works with his pornographic interludes, even as it also works against them.

The connections between sex, citation, and death mapped out in Reid-Pharr's essay on Fisher are key to understanding the mechanism of Reid-Pharr's as/if criticism in "Living as a Lesbian." Beyond their formal similarities, "Living as a Lesbian" and "The Shock of Gary Fisher" also share a setting: the majority of Fisher's anecdotes take place while he is in graduate school in Chapel Hill; in "Living as a Lesbian," Reid-Pharr also focuses primarily on his experiences while he is working and living at UNC. These notable overlaps reveal an important connection between the two essays: namely, their refusal to draw a hard distinction between the sexual and the academic. At the end of "The Shock of Gary Fisher," Reid-Pharr writes that Fisher's work makes clear the absolute danger of education: cultural knowledge, in a white supremacist society, might itself be both a means of survival and a fatal disease. Writes Reid-Pharr:

> For Fisher the individual who would know is never innocent, never wholly separate from even the most ugly truths that she uncovers. In order to master fully the intricacies of Western modernity, one must expose oneself to degradation and disease, even though the likely consequence of such exposure is death. My thinking in this matter has been strongly influenced by the fact that Fisher believed he contracted H.I.V. as a student at the University of North Carolina during one of his many study sessions in the Wilson Library, that the mastery of his subjects was coterminous with the disease's mastery of his flesh… The piling on of forms of mastery—literary, scientific, sexual—is so very overdetermined as to seem obscene. (145)

With such a statement in the back of our minds, how are we to read the celebration of a tight-knit academic/activist/sexual community in "Living as a Lesbian"? On the one hand, it seems that Reid-Pharr sets up his liberating black lesbian bibliography as an alternative to Fisher's deadly critical canon. Some of the italicized interruptions in Reid-Pharr's "Living as a Lesbian" are

pornographic: they interrupt the otherwise platonic erotics, the acceptable academic and activist connections that Reid-Pharr outlines. On the other hand, the pornographic reminds us once again of the "obscene," a phrase that Reid-Pharr has used just pages earlier to describe Fisher's own deadly relationship to education.

Reid-Pharr's entry into a new academic community of black lesbian feminist in "Living as a Lesbian" is incomplete, in some ways unsuccessful; though his piece is titled "Living as a Lesbian," it too ends on the sobering note of death. Reid-Pharr concludes "Living as a Lesbian" with a necrology, reflecting on the isolation he experiences in the wake of the rapidly increasing death toll wrought by continued state violence against the black communities he has become a part of. The inescapable specters of illness and death precipitate his disenchantment with the utopian promise of black lesbianism. He writes,

> It would be years before I would look up to find that as I searched for home I continued in my isolation. It was the death of Pat Parker that first alerted me to the fragility of both our dreams and our community. First her than Joe Beam then Donald Woods then David Frechette then Rory Buchanan then James Baldwin and Roy Gonsalves then Audre Lorde herself. (157)

As a black gay man in America, Reid-Pharr is already part of a population targeted for extermination from multiple angles. During an epidemic, that already extant danger increases exponentially. In Reid-Pharr's list of the dead, all the women he lists die of breast cancer, and all of the men die of HIV-related ailments (with the exception of Baldwin, who dies of stomach cancer in 1987). It is precisely at this moment of mourning, however, that the paradox of queer identificatory politics at the peak of the AIDS crisis must emerge. For it is in the mutually shared vulnerability to terminal illness, directly brought on by state-sanctioned denial of care, that we find a common point of solidarity between black lesbians and black gay men.

Reid-Pharr's methodological and stylistic ethics also speak back to another contemporary of Reid-Pharr and Fisher, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. As Reid-Pharr notes in *Black Gay Man*,

"Tearing the Goat's Flesh" first appears in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction (1997),* an early publication of Sedgwick's "Series Q." In her notorious essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," (which, incidentally, serves as the introduction of *Novel Gazing*), Sedgwick also uses language that is in some parts strikingly similar to the language of Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic": namely, both encourage a critical practice informed by pleasure (defined expansively).[32] The original version of "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" praises the articles collected in *Novel Gazing*, including "Tearing the Goat's Flesh," precisely because the authors published in the volume do not reject the critical power of affect, experience, or pleasure. Though Sedgwick, in the spirit of the Klein's reparative mode, remains more ambivalent than Lorde, both authors are hesitant to dismiss pleasure as, if not the way, one (equally valid) way of knowing.[33] Reid-Pharr's and Sedgwick's connection also clues us in to a longer genealogy of "orality" in queer criticism that has yet to be fully explored. We might consider, for example, Sedgwick's self-diagnosis as "oral sadistic, anal masochistic" (213) in her groundbreaking essay "A Poem is Being Written." Though the rest of the essay chooses to elaborate on the latter, "anal masochistic" diagnosis, Sedgwick's critical verbosity performs the former, "oral sadistic" diagnosis, raising questions

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[32] Lorde, for example, writes: "Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (57). Sedgwick, too, reclaims "joy" as a possible way of knowing or motivation for critical exploration:

> In the paranoid Freudian epistemology, it is implausible enough to suppose then that truth could be even an accidental occasion of joy; inconceivable to imagine joy as a guarantor of truth. And indeed, from any point of view it is circular, or something, to suppose that one's pleasure at knowing something could be taken as evidence of the truth of the knowledge. …Allow each theory its own, different prime motive, at any rate—the anticipation of pain in one case, the provision of pleasure in the other—and neither can be called more realistic than the other. (16)

[33] Sedgwick: "[T]he list of damaging a priori oppositions to which these essays quietly, collectively find alternative approaches is very impressive: the authors transmit new ways of knowing … that pleasure, grief, excitement, boredom, satisfaction are the substance of politics rather than their antithesis; that affect and cognition are not very distant processes; that visual perception need not be conceptually isolated from the other four bodily senses; that gender differentiation is crucial to human experience but in no sense coextensive with it; that it's well to attend intimately to literary texts, not because their transformative energies either transcend or disguise the coarser stuff of ordinary being, but because those energies are the stuff of ordinary being" (2).

about the place of "oral sadism" in the relations of cross-identification and "homosexual reading" that she outlines in the piece. Both Reid-Pharr and Sedgwick also have a writerly affinity for the rhythmic violence of poetry: in both "A Poem is Being Written" (1986) and *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), Sedgwick, like Reid-Pharr, interrupts her prose with poetry.

These similarities are no accident. Reid-Pharr and Sedgwick share several points of connection beyond their as/if critical tendencies. Sedgwick's name makes an appearance is the acknowledgements of *Black Gay Man*. As I've already noted in this chapter, both have written on Fisher, and both published with Duke University Press. Their academic points of commonality also yield locational and biographical near-coincidences: Reid-Pharr lived in Chapel Hill as an undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina until moving to Yale for his PhD in 1989; Sedgwick became a professor one town away, at Duke University in 1988. Both have several theoretical and intellectual shared points of interest: Sedgwick and Reid-Pharr are both queer theorists, and both are queer public intellectuals who have attempted to disrupt heterosexual frameworks in their theoretical and literary critical writing.

Most importantly, "Living as a Lesbian" describes—in a near-mirror image—a way of identifying across gender and sexuality for which Sedgwick is also infamous. As Sedgwick herself acknowledges throughout her career, both her scholarship and her personal life are structured by her identification across gender and sexuality, as a heterosexual married woman writing about gay men, and living in a homosocial community of gay male activists and academics.[34] In other words, Sedgwick is "living as a gay man" in the same or a similar way that Reid-Pharr is "living as a lesbian." Writing from an avowed identity while at the same time

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[34] For a detailed discussion of Sedgwick's tendency to cross-identify, and its effects, see chapter one.

writing across identities, both Sedgwick and Reid-Pharr's criticism performs the transitivity of identity in the name of both a personal desire and a militant solidarity across difference.

In 2014, nearly twenty years after "Living as a Lesbian" was first published in *Sister and Brother*, Reid-Pharr pens a blog post for *The Feminist Wire* titled "This Useful Death." Halfway through the short, polemical essay, Reid-Pharr reminds his audience of the precarity of the past, by way of a cliché of the present: "Gay men of my generation, particularly black gay men, are continually reminded of how lucky we are to be alive." Castigating those for whom politics begins and ends at this trite injunction, Reid-Pharr laments that modern LGBT+ activism, lulled into "a vehicle of capitalist hegemony" and "freighted with narrow self-interest and cynicism," has abandoned its radically disruptive potential. As a remedy for this normative malaise, Reid-Pharr invokes not the radical AIDS activism of queer activism (as one might expect) but rather conjures a different, but also familiar, figure: Audre Lorde. Championing Lorde's later work on "health, desire, embodiment, and dying"—work which takes seriously both "the erotic" and the realities of dying of terminal cancer—Reid-Pharr yet again waxes universal, even as he invokes the specific. In the deaths of his mother, his black gay compatriots, and Lorde, Reid-Pharr finds a point of connection, a "frailty and funkiness" that he claims "forces recognition of our profound connection to the rest of existence." A mutual claim to death, bound up in a mutual claim to embodied erotics, produces, for Reid-Pharr, both radical disruption and profound solidarity.[35]

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[35] Reid-Pharr: "If we are to take seriously Lorde's call for women, people of color, and so-called sexual minorities to engage and celebrate the power of the erotic then we must attend to the fact that to be human is first and foremost to be animal. We eat, drink, laugh, cry, fight, fuck, give birth, suffer, and die. To recognize this, to embrace the clumsy reality that the spirit, the intellect, the flesh are not distinct parts of 'the self,' but, on the contrary, simply different modes of naming human singularity, is to take one awkward, uncertain step toward claiming responsibility for one's own existence. The gay man, vulgar and feral, skin against skin, locked in sweaty embrace with a partner not yet become a lover is a being in struggle against its own domestication, a citizen with his eyes cast beyond the state. The same man, standing wounded and alert by the side of his dying mother feels within himself a force, an erotics of living *and* dying that has the potential to disrupt both self and society… the promise that Lorde announced, is to remember that most of us were never intended to survive. Our very existence is an affront to the most sacred strictures of homophobia and white supremacy. We are, in fact, in a 'fucked-up whiteboys' world.' Saying so with less heat or

Reid-Pharr's focus on the difficulties of identification, and his performative longing for recognition and community despite those difficulties, makes clear the irony I want to highlight. The irony is this: it is precisely at the moment of impossible crossing that identification is most felt, and coalition most practiced. In his list of names (itself a kind of rhythmic accounting, a dirge of remembrance) Reid-Pharr attests to the divide most impossible to cross: what Sedgwick calls the ontological divide between the living and the dead. Through his inter-textual citation, Reid-Pharr produces the same rhythmic interruptions theorized in his other work. There are several ways to read these interruptions. They may be the rhythmic blows of historical homophobic and/or racist violence. They may be the scansion of a line of poetry by Reid-Pharr, Clarke, Hemphill, Lorde, or others. The italicized breaks in narrative or argument may even formally mirror an unrelenting death drive, each interruption to the flow of the text nonetheless propelling each essay forward. Nor are these options mutually exclusive.[36]

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more sentimentality will not change that basic fact. It is this awareness that is our most basic tool. We cannot allow the tacky gifts of an unstable society to distract us from our larger goals, the liberation of ourselves, including our animal selves, the creation of new forms of sociality and exchange, the right to make something winning from our deaths. The erotic is that place at which the frailty and the funkiness of our human bodies is recognized not as a tragedy but, on the contrary, as a gift, that thing which forces recognition of our profound connection to the rest of existence. It is this reality that Audre Lorde helped bring into the clarity of the neon light." (n.p.)

[36] For one example of how these possible interpretations of the violent ruptures in Reid-Pharr might intersect along racial, sexual, formal, and historical lines, see Sedgwick's previously mentioned meditations on sexuality, spanking, and poetry in "A Poem is Being Written" (1986). For another, see Lee Edelman's riff on gay-bashing and the death drive in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004):

> The logic of sinthomosexuality justifies that violent fate in advance by insisting that what such a cock had been robbing was always, in some sense, a cradle. And that cradle must endlessly rock, we've been told, even if the rhythm it rocks to beats out, with every blow of the beating delivered to Matthew Shepard's skull, a counterpoint to the melody's sacred hymn to the meaning of life. That meaning, continuously affirmed as it is both in and as cultural narrative, nonetheless never can rest secure and, in consequence, never can rest. The compulsive need for its repetition, for the drumbeat by which it pounds into our heads (and not always, though not infrequently, by pounding in a Matthew Shepard's) that the cradle bears always the meaning of futurity and the futurity of meaning, testifies to something exceeding the meaning it means thereby to assure: to a death drive that carries, on full-fledged wings, into the inner sanctum of meaning, into the reproductive mandate inherent in the logic of futurism itself the burden of the radically negative force that sinthomosexuality names. (117)

For a third, see Christina Sharpe's explanation of the soundscapes in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* in *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2010):

At the same time as they conjure the specter of death, such rhythms also recall the violent openings of possibility that emerge at the end of “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh”: rupture and death become, impossibly, a way of forging the radical new. At the end of “Living as a Lesbian,” Reid-Pharr concludes, “I began to understand lesbianism as a state of being that few of us ever achieve. To become lesbian one has to first be committed to the process of constantly becoming, of creatively refashioning one’s humanity as a matter of course” (161). “Lesbianism,” for Reid-Pharr, is at various points theoretical, citational, platonic, sexual, embodied, and (ultimately) aspirational. Where Sedgwick might use “queer,” where Snorton might use “trans,” Reid-Pharr, like his black feminist forbearer Smith, uses “lesbian.” Reid-Pharr’s tale of aspirational lesbianism, repeatedly frustrated by his own pornographic interruptions, is neither a tale of foreclosure nor of achievement; rather, Reid-Pharr problematizes his own identity while still leaving open the possibility of (temporary or fraught) cross-identification.

> The sounds that she then hears are both ambiguously the amorous sounds of a slowed-down gay porn tape (a whip cracking and the repetitive ‘‘Oh yeah. More’’) and the simulated moans of enslaved people in a ship’s hold on a tape made by Wilberforce House Museum employees for the slave ship diorama housed in the basement… The porn soundtrack merges with the slavery soundtrack and the museum workers’ duties to attend, reconstruct, and conserve the horrors of the Middle Passage. As the low groaning ‘‘Oh yeahs’’ signify on the repeated sounds of ‘‘moans, retching, splashing’’ running on a loop in the slave ship diorama in the museum’s basement, the soundtrack(s) alert us to the museum’s repressed desires and to its intention to reach across a historical chasm to re-create the unrecoverable, the sounds of the Middle Passage, and to institute them. (143)

As these three instances of queer criticism demonstrate, it is not only possible, but imperative, to allow these various interpretations of rhythm to exist in tandem.

6. Conclusion: I Probably Think This Essay is About Me

In "*L'Esthétique du Mal*," Barbara Johnson tells her audience that her use of "as if" is inspired by three very different sources. The first is German philosopher Hans Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (The Philosophy of 'As if') (1911). The second is Cher's recurring exclamations of "As if!" in the popular film *Clueless* (1995). The third is Andrew Boyd's tongue-in-cheek *Life's Little Deconstruction Book: Self-Help for the Post-Hip* (1999), which advises its readers to "Be as if" (33). As my Introduction makes clear, it was Johnson's essay that sparked much of my early thinking about *as/if criticism*, thinking that eventually grew into the four chapters that comprise this dissertation. And it shows: Johnson's three examples of "as if" speak to my own allegiances, including my penchants for continental theory, the queer canon, and the 1990s. But Vaihinger, *Clueless*, and Boyd are not—as I have now come to learn, and as anyone might well expect—the only examples of "as if" out there. As I worked on this project, I came across many more occurrences beyond these three, and each new addition to my "as if" collection revealed something new about what I was working on.

I say I "came across" these examples, but this phrase is disingenuous. Really, the sudden proliferation of "as if"s in my life was less an instance of the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon than it was a proactive effort led by outsiders who knew something about my project. Throughout the course of my research, new texts containing the phrase "as if" periodically appeared in my inbox, all sent by helpful friends, advisors, and colleagues. Of all of the generous contributions, one stands out as particularly remarkable.[1] Unlike the other instances of "as if" that had caught my eye in the course of my research, this one came late in the game, while I was in the throes of

[1] Technically, two contributions. This particular instance of "as if" crossed my virtual desk twice, via two emails from two separate people, who sent me the same quote within a week of each other. (These two people are, in order of email, Julien Fischer and Robyn Wiegman).

draft-polishing. Also unlike the others, this "as if" came from a familiar source; a source so familiar, in fact, that I was astonished I had not remembered it myself. That source was *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975).

I do not use "familiar" lightly. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is one of my favorite books, critical or otherwise. It was this curious example of memoir-cum-criticism, published in between *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), that got me hooked on theory. I have written all over my edition in pencil. Several pages are dog-eared. At one point, I considered getting one of the book's many illustrations physically tattooed on my skin.[2] So it was already quite strange that I had not remembered the "as if" in *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes. More shocking still, the quote in question seems impossible to miss: it serves as an epigraph, and appears on the first page, in English translation, italicized under an image of Barthes's own scrawled French handwriting. It is the only typeset sentence on the page. It reads, "*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel*."

I responded to the two emails alerting me to this quote with both gratitude and embarrassment. Gratitude, because Barthes's quote provided me with yet another weird node in a dense network of citation and affiliation, a network that seemed to grow ever denser the more I researched my four authors. Embarrassment, because I had missed such an obvious connection to a text with which I had hitherto felt a strong and affectionate connection. The sudden shock reminded me of a joke, in which one person brags to another, "I know this place like the back of my hand"—just before noticing a new freckle, and immediately tripping over a curb.

My shock at re-discovering the Barthes epigraph is, of course, an experience not unlike the experience of *as-slash-if*: it is the shock of a bond interrupted. Upon opening that first email, I

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[2]The illustration in question, which appears at the very end of *Roland* Barthes, is a drawing of several squiggly ink lines titled "Doodling… or the signifier without the signified" (Barthes, 186).

found my longstanding identification rudely called into question by the news of my own oversight. Ironically, the very thing that provided this interruption was a point of similarity between Barthes's text and my own. This irony is crucial to understanding the slash of as/if as both break and bridge. The moments of rupture represented by the slash, paradoxically, are the very thing that allows authors who use as/if critical methods to continue their attempts to cross-identify. Eve Sedgwick's fractured recognitions cause displacements that catalyze militancy across difference. Deborah McDowell's defiant qualifications lead to mis-readings that end up crossing disciplinary boundaries. Johnson's suspect intimacies result in elisions that reveal surprising links between identity categories. Robert Reid-Pharr's shocking interruptions test the limits of cross-identification, only to theorize that those limits constitute a point of commonality across identities. In every case, it is precisely at the moment of failure, rupture, or impasse that these authors find their most provocative and shocking connections.

Because its author plays with identity in interesting and provocative ways, *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes shares many characteristics with the works of literary criticism featured in *Reading and Writing As/if: US Literary Criticism and Identity*. The book is made up of several strange and personal paragraphs, musing on different topics, separated by blank space. Through the book, the author recognizes aspects of himself in unexpected and perhaps embarrassing places. His experimental, meandering, dreamy prose often contradicts itself, and as a result he ends up qualifying many of his previous statements. In typical Barthesian fashion, he displays an intimacy with both readers and text, sharing secrets and delighting in the pleasure of writerly discourse. The blank spaces between vignettes—in addition to the doodles, illustrations, and photographs that disrupt the written text—are another example of interruption. Barthes, like the four authors I have examined here, undoubtedly writes as/if.

The discovery of "as if" in Barthes's book shook me all the more because *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, besides being a personal favorite, was already significant to my project. Like Sedgwick's "A Poem is Being Written," *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes was part of the syllabus of "Becoming a Critic," that fateful undergraduate class mentioned at the start of my Introduction. Indeed, Barthes's slim volume gets a special shout-out in the very first paragraph of this dissertation for this reason. In chapter three, Barthes shows up again, this time as the inspiration for D.A. Miller's book-turned-essay *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (1992), the publication which in turn becomes the inspiration for Barbara Johnson's book review, "Bringing Out D.A. Miller," (2002) the article that ultimately inspires Miller to write "Call for Papers: In Memorium Barbara Johnson" (2008). Beyond these explicit guest appearances, Barthes also plays a prominent role as the theorist who establishes the larger leitmotif of the dissertation: that is, the question of the death of the author.

It was in "Becoming a Critic" that Joseph Litvak assigned me one of the most memorable assignments of my undergraduate career. The assignment was a typical analytic paper, with one special requirement: the paper was to be written in the voice and style of the piece of criticism it analyzed. The class was instructed to hyperbolically mimic, even mock, the authors we were studying; in practice, this meant mirroring their tone, imitating their verbal tics, and adopting their punctuation habits. Much as language learners first exaggerate an accent in order to master pronunciation, we were instructed to hone our readerly ears, paying attention to voice in order to (hopefully) develop tastes that would later inform our own stylistic choices. When I got this assignment, a decade ago, I chose to mimic D.A. Miller—a critic who makes frequent guest appearances in the pages of this dissertation, though he never receives top billing. The class had read *Place for Us* (1998) a few weeks before, and I recognized in Miller a skillful stylist whose markedly flamboyant, effortlessly exacting prose made me equal parts enraptured and envious. I

peppered my paper with covert references to Golden Age musicals, as he had done; I delivered an essay written in the show-stopping-est style I could muster.

Old habits die hard. Rereading these four chapters, I am struck by how often I seem to be following the assignment outlined above. My sentences in chapter one run long, and my anecdotes are embarrassing. In chapter two, I am, like McDowell, more deliberate and qualifying in my claims. Chapter three is rife with parentheticals (and I, too, repeatedly fail to come out either as gay, or white, or otherwise interpolated). And though I don't deliberately interrupt chapter four with graphic sexual anecdotes, the subject at hand means that my prose, too, contains perhaps too many uses of "'cock'… 'pussy'… [and] the odd 'motherfucker'" (Pharr, 110). At times, this stylistic mirroring was deliberate. I wish I could say it was always a conscious choice, but the truth is maybe more interesting: regardless of whether or not I want myself to, I still have a tendency to slip into the voice of the writer I am writing about; to write as if I am they. Why?

It is an era-old cliché to assert, as many have, that reading fosters empathy.[3] It is a slightly different thing, I think, to claim that reading fosters a possibly dangerous or destabilizing over-identification. In my explorations of as/if criticism, I have focused on moments when a critic's readerly empathy over-steps the acceptable bounds of identification. Sedgwick, McDowell, Johnson, and Reid-Pharr all dwell on the instances in which the regular processes of readerly empathy morph into a perverse failure to stay in one's identificatory lane. Miller does this, too. In *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, he recognizes in Barthes's writing an unnamed gay

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[3]As three disparate examples of this claim, I submit: 1) Victorian novelist George Eliot, writing in 1859: "The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from them in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures" (Eliot, xxxvii); 2) contemporary YA science fiction author Malorie Blackman, in a 2014 interview with *The Guardian*: "Books allows you to see the world through the eyes of others. Reading is an exercise in empathy; an exercise in walking in someone else's shoes for a while" (Cain and Blackman, n.p.); 3) a psychological study by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, published in *Science* journal in October 2013, which concluded that reading literary fiction "does indeed enhance" the "human capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires and that these may differ from one's own beliefs and desires" (Kidd and Castano, 377).

sensibility, a sensibility with which, as gay writer himself, he identifies. Many fans of Barthes, he notes, find this impulse quite objectionable (and also unprovable; Barthes the author is, after all, literally dead). This is, of course, Johnson's snide point in "Bringing Out D.A. Miller": Miller's essay about Barthes is actually a disguised essay about himself.

If this accusation sounds familiar, that might be because it echoes the title of Sedgwick's well-known Introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997), "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You" (later republished in *Touching Feeling* as "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You"). In this essay, Sedgwick names Miller's New Historicist work, *The Novel and the Police* (1991), as the example *par excellence* of what she calls paranoid criticism, a critical method roughly equivalent to Paul Ricœur's "hermeneutics of suspicion." Whereas Johnson's book review of *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* is, if a little teasing, ultimately appreciative of her friend D.A.'s need to root out or uncover hidden subtext, Sedgwick's essay constitutes a multi-pronged breakdown of the limitations of such a strategy. The essay, now infamous, precipitates a schism in queer literary criticism, and in literary criticism more broadly. The split between paranoid and reparative influences the split between the anti-social and the utopian (in queer theory), and the spilt between belief in depth and faith in surface (in literary theory). It also enacts a split between Miller and Sedgwick themselves: holding Miller up as the paragon of paranoia allows Sedgwick to become the champion of reparativity.

Whenever I read this essay, I cannot help but remember that Sedgwick and Miller were, at one point, friends. They attended graduate school at Yale at the same time. They thanked each other in their first book's acknowledgements. Sedgwick dedicated the first published version of "A Poem is Being Written" to "two Davids": her brother David Kosofsky, and one David Miller.

Their personal, public, and intellectual falling out—indicated in the Introduction to *Novel Gazing*, but also in the pointed dedication of the *Tendencies* reprint of "A Poem is Being Written" to a very *singular* David, just David Kosofsky this time—lends even more affective charge to this essay. No doubt Sedgwick's Introduction gets much of its power from the personal history (and fieldwide gossip) that surrounds it.

The surprise of the Barthes connection, which lead me back to Miller, reminded me of something. And here I have to offer a McDowell-esque revision: I lied, before, when I said that "A Poem is Being Written" had been my first encounter with queer theory. Or maybe I misremembered. By my calculation, Miller is actually the first queer theorist I ever read. I read one of his pieces a year before enrolling in "Becoming a Critic," in my first undergraduate English class. The piece was Miller's now canonical essay on connotation and denotation, "Anal Rope." I remember reading a grainy, xeroxed copy of "Anal Rope" on the bed in my freshman year dorm, cross-legged, absolutely rapt. I remember trying to explain to my patient but incredulous roommate the thrill of this initial exposure. Here was close reading, threateningly close, world-shakingly close in a way I could not articulate for many years, after more reading, more queer theory, more copies of articles and more borrowed books. These essays *were* about me, thank you very much.

They were not. They were about Hitchcock. They were about Gary Fisher, or Oscar Wilde, or free and indirect discourse, or Toni Morrison, or Art Speigelman, or McCarthyism, or postcolonialism, or baseball, or the nineteenth-century novel, or Roland Barthes.

The realization that not every essay was, exactly, about me was also important. This is the irony encapsulated in the Carly Simon song that Sedgwick's title tropes. That a text could be simultaneously "about me," and not about me at all (yes and no, what else), revealed a readerly impulse to identify across identity categories, despite explicit barriers of identiarian difference

and lived experience. By rehearsing their own affiliations, inheritances, and identifications, these authors refuse to shy away from what might be embarrassing, politically undesirable, or deeply unsettling. Does these critics' performative self-awareness save them from reproducing the very structures of identity they mock? This is the question of camp; it is, in some queer theoretical and feminist debates, the question of drag. In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," Sedgwick offers an extended outline of both a "paranoid" and a "reparative" reading of camp. Though she begins by warning that a solely paranoid approach to camp could lead to "serious" misrecognition, her ultimate assessment does much to confound the paranoid and reparative positions.[4] Significantly, while reading "camp" from both paranoid and reparative angles, Sedgwick names many of the strategies (interruption, disorientation, over-attachment) that make-up as/if criticism. Perhaps as/if criticism emerges when and where it does because university life already feels a little campy (what is "imposter syndrome," after all, but a symptom of performing academic drag?). Like a lot of self-conscious performance, as/if criticism both reinforces the status quo and undermines it.

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[4] Sedgwick: "The queer-identified practice of camp, for example, may be seriously misrecognized when it is viewed, as Butler and others view it, through paranoid lenses. As we've seen, camp is most often understood as uniquely appropriate to the projects of parody, denaturalization, demystification, and mocking exposure of the elements and assumptions of a dominant culture. And the degree to which camping is motivated by love seems often to be understood mainly as the degree of its self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo. By this account, the x-ray gaze of the paranoid impulse in camp sees through to an unfleshed skeleton of the culture; the paranoid aesthetic on view here is one of minimalist elegance and conceptual economy.

The desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self. To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance: the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the ''over''-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture. As in the writing of D. A. Miller, a glue of surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment, unexplained upwellings of threat, contempt, and longing cements together and animates the amalgam of powerful part-objects … it is not people but mutable positions—or, I would want to say, practices— that can be divided between the paranoid and the reparative; it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices. And if the paranoid or the depressive positions operate on a smaller scale than the level of individual typology, they operate also on a larger: that of shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse." (27-28)

Of the many aspects of the rich "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" essay, I find its snarky subtitle hardest to swallow. Of course, "You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You" irks me because I feel particularly called out by its accusation (proving the point, I know). But more importantly, it baffles me a bit, if only because *thinking an essay is about you* seems to me precisely in line with the modes of reading most celebrated in Sedgwick's bold treatise. Late in the Introduction to *Novel Gazing,* Sedgwick notes that many of the essays collected in the volume both model and analyze what she calls "queer *recognition*" (21, emphasis original). This type of recognition, like as/if criticism, is seldom straightforward.

Queer recognition is also motivated by paranoid suspicion that you are not the only one; or, in James Baldwin's words, "that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive or who had ever been alive" (Howard, 89). Baldwin is talking here about a lesson he learned from reading books. To be sure, it is possible to imagine and name authors who implement as/if tactics in memoir and fiction, enacting their or their character's own failures to fully or easily cross-identify in order to make sure that we, as readers, never forget that the "as if" is only temporary, sometimes impossible, and often haunted by the specter of appropriation. In his 2012 book, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*, Michal Saler uses "as if" to describe a specific readerly mindset, what Saler terms the "ironic imagination" (22). His book begins with the New Romance, detective, science fiction, and fantasy novels of the late nineteenth century, and ends with a gesture towards the virtual realities of the present day. Saler argues that these self-reflexive texts train their readers to hold two worlds in their heads at once (this world, and the world of the text), and thus lend themselves particularly well to social projects that extend beyond their pages: online communities, fan clubs, cosplay conventions, etc. The ironic imagination necessary to read these texts allows modern readers to approach fictional worlds as if they were real, while still

maintaining critical distance. The double-consciousness required to deeply engage with these alternate realities means that consuming fiction is not merely a matter of escapism, but rather of worldmaking.

Saler's work offers a clue as to why I found as/if criticism when and where I did: that is, in queer and feminist criticism, in the 1990s. Because his book is about Victorian genre fiction, Saler focuses on communities of readers that formed outside of, and well before, the community of readers specific to the US academy in the later part of the twentieth century. But the fact that both communities engage "as if" is not coincidental. A notable number of early queer and deconstructionist theorists began their academic careers studying the nineteenth-century novel. Knowing this, and following Saler's argument, it is easy to imagine that genre fiction's imperative to read "as if" may have trained these critics to write as-slash-if later on in their careers as scholars of queer and feminist theory.

The literary critics my project tracks emphasize the ironic in the "ironic imagination," in order to remind their readers that leaps of faith are never easy. At the same time, these failures are a point of commonality; one of the "torments" that Baldwin names as, ironically, a point of identification. By insisting on facing moments of disconnect head-on, as/if critics rethink identification and identity through their queer recognitions. In doing so, as/if criticism offers a refreshingly strange alternative to taking things completely straight.

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Biography

After graduating Tufts University with a B.A. in English and American Studies in 2012, Chase Gregory moved to Durham, NC to pursue a Ph.D. with the Duke University Program in Literature, and a Certificate in Feminist Theory with Duke's Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies. She has published four articles. "In the Gutter: Comix Theory" (*Comics Studies Journal*, 2012) makes the case that comics' formal mechanisms (in particular, the "gutter" between panels, and the "stutter" produced by two consecutive panel frames) provocatively correspond to death drive as it is elaborated within anti-social strains of queer theory. In "That Infinite Sphere': Paradox, Paralepsis, and Parody *in Les guérillères*" (*Feminist Spaces*, 2016), she contends that Monique Wittig's lesbian science fiction novel *Les guérilléres* drives its plot 'forward' via omission rather than via supplied information. Her essay "Critics on Critics: Queer Bonds" (*GLQ*, 2018), thinks anti-sociality alongside academic inquiry and collaboration. Her latest article, titled "Thwarting Repair: Gutter, Stutter, *Are You My Mother?*" (*differences*, 2019) revisits Alison Bechdel's autobiographic comic *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* in order to contest previous feminist scholarship that focuses on the book's therapeutic value. She is currently the 2018-2019 Dissertation Fellow in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke, and received the Howard Whitaker, Jr. Summer Research Fellowship for 3rd-Year and Beyond Ph.D. Students from the Graduate School of Duke University in 2017 and 2016. She will be an Assistant Professor of English at Bucknell University starting August 2019.