Michel Foucault, 'We the Other Victorians', in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp.1–13.

For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was still common, it would seem. Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit. Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene, and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century. It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will, and knowing children hung about amid the laughter of adults: it was a period when bodies "made a display of themselves."

But twilight soon fell upon this bright day, followed by the monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech. And ster-

ile behavior carried the taint of abnormality; if it insisted on making itself too visible, it would be designated accordingly and would have to pay the penalty.

Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it merit a hearing. It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation—whether in acts or in words. Everyone knew, for example, that children had no sex, which was why they were forbidden to talk about it, why one closed one's eyes and stopped one's ears whenever they came to show evidence to the contrary, and why a general and studied silence was imposed. These are the characteristic features attributed to repression, which serve to distinguish it from the prohibitions maintained by penal law: repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know. Such was the hypocrisy of our bourgeois societies with its halting logic. It was forced to make a few concessions, however. If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric—*those "other Victorians,"* as Steven Marcus would say—seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted. Words and gestures, quietly authorized, could be exchanged there at the going rate. Only in those places would untrammeled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse. Everywhere else, modern puritanism im-

posed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence.

But have we not liberated ourselves from those two long centuries in which the history of sexuality must be seen first of all as the chronicle of an increasing repression? Only to a slight extent, we are told. Perhaps some progress was made by Freud; but with such circumspection, such medical prudence, a scientific guarantee of innocuousness, and so many precautions in order to contain everything, with no fear of "overflow," in that safest and most discrete of spaces, between the couch and discourse: yet another round of whispering on a bed. And could things have been otherwise? We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. For the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics. Hence, one cannot hope to obtain the desired results simply from a medical practice, nor from a theoretical discourse, however rigorously pursued. Thus, one denounces Freud's conformism, the normalizing functions of psychoanalysis, the obvious timidity underlying Reich's vehemence, and all the effects of integration ensured by the "science" of sex and the barely equivocal practices of sexology.

This discourse on modern sexual repression holds up well, owing no doubt to how easy it is to uphold. A solemn historical and political guarantee protects it. By placing the advent of the age of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression, one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism: it becomes an integral part of the bourgeois order. The minor chronicle of sex and its trials is transposed into the ceremonious history of the modes of production; its trifling aspect fades from view. A principle of explanation emerges after-

fact: if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those—reduced to a minimum—that enabled it to reproduce itself? Sex and its effects are perhaps not so easily deciphered; on the other hand, their repression, thus reconstructed, is easily analyzed. And the sexual cause—the demand for sexual freedom, but also for the knowledge to be gained from sex and the right to speak about it—becomes legitimately associated with the honor of a political cause: sex too is placed on the agenda for the future. A suspicious mind might wonder if taking so many precautions in order to give the history of sex such an impressive filiation does not bear traces of the same old prudishness: as if those valorizing correlations were necessary before such a discourse could be formulated or accepted.

But there may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker's benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays. When they had to allude to it, the first demographers and psychiatrists of the nineteenth century thought it advisable to excuse themselves for asking their readers to dwell on matters so trivial and base. But for decades now, we have found it difficult to speak on the subject without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be

hastened by the contribution we believe we are making. Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual oppression. Some of the ancient functions of prophecy are reactivated therein. Tomorrow sex will be good again. Because this repression is affirmed, one can discreetly bring into coexistence concepts which the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from putting side by side: revolution and happiness; or revolution and a different body, one that is newer and more beautiful; or indeed, revolution and pleasure. What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights. This is perhaps what also explains the market value attributed not only to what is said about sexual repression, but also to the mere fact of lending an ear to those who would eliminate the effects of repression. Ours is, after all, the only civilization in which officials are paid to listen to all and sundry impart the secrets of their sex: as if the urge to talk about it, and the interest one hopes to arouse by doing so, have far surpassed the possibilities of being heard, so that some individuals have even offered their ears for hire.

But it appears to me that the essential thing is not this economic factor, but rather the existence in our era of a discourse in which sex, the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of a certain felicity are linked together. Today it is sex that serves as a support for the ancient form—so familiar and important in the West—of preaching. A great sexual sermon—which has had its subtle theologians and its popular voices—has swept through our societies over the last decades; it has chastised the old order, denounced

hypocrisy, and praised the rights of the immediate and the real; it has made people dream of a New City. The Franciscans are called to mind. And we might wonder how it is possible that the lyricism and religiosity that long accompanied the revolutionary project have, in Western industrial societies, been largely carried over to sex.

The notion of repressed sex is not, therefore, only a theoretical matter. The affirmation of a sexuality that has never been more rigorously subjugated than during the age of the hypocritical, bustling, and responsible bourgeoisie is coupled with the grandiloquence of a discourse purporting to reveal the truth about sex, modify its economy within reality, subvert the law that governs it, and change its future. The statement of oppression and the form of the sermon refer back to one another; they are mutually reinforcing. To say that sex is not repressed, or rather that the relationship between sex and power is not characterized by repression, is to risk falling into a sterile paradox. It not only runs counter to a well-accepted argument, it goes against the whole economy and all the discursive "interests" that underlie this argument.

This is the point at which I would like to situate the series of historical analyses that will follow, the present volume being at the same time an introduction and a first attempt at an overview: it surveys a few historically significant points and outlines certain theoretical problems. Briefly, my aim is to examine the case of a society which has been loudly castigating itself for its hypocrisy for more than a century, which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very laws that have made it function. I would like to explore not only these discourses but also the will that sustains them and the strategic intention that supports them. The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against

ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated? What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence? And we do all this by formulating the matter in the most explicit terms, by trying to reveal it in its most naked reality, by affirming it in the positivity of its power and its effects. It is certainly legitimate to ask why sex was associated with sin for such a long time—although it would remain to be discovered how this association was formed, and one would have to be careful not to state in a summary and hasty fashion that sex was "condemned"—but we must also ask why we burden ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin. What paths have brought us to the point where we are "at fault" with respect to our own sex? And how have we come to be a civilization so peculiar as to tell itself that, through an abuse of power which has not ended, it has long "sinned" against sex? How does one account for the displacement which, while claiming to free us from the sinful nature of sex, taxes us with a great historical wrong which consists precisely in imagining that nature to be blameworthy and in drawing disastrous consequences from that belief?

It will be said that if so many people today affirm this repression, the reason is that it is historically evident. And if they speak of it so abundantly, as they have for such a long time now, this is because repression is so firmly anchored, having solid roots and reasons, and weighs so heavily on sex that more than one denunciation will be required in order to free ourselves from it; the job will be a long one. All the longer, no doubt, as it is in the nature of power—particularly the kind of power that operates in our society—to be repressive, and to be especially careful in repressing useless energies, the intensity of pleasures, and irregular modes of behavior. We must not be surprised, then, if the effects of liberation vis-à-vis this repressive power are so slow to manifest themselves; the effort to speak freely about sex and ac-

cept it in its reality is so alien to a historical sequence that has gone unbroken for a thousand years now, and so inimical to the intrinsic mechanisms of power, that it is bound to make little headway for a long time before succeeding in its mission.

One can raise three serious doubts concerning what I shall term the "repressive hypothesis." First doubt: Is sexual repression truly an established historical fact? Is what first comes into view—and consequently permits one to advance an initial hypothesis—really the accentuation or even the establishment of a regime of sexual repression beginning in the seventeenth century? This is a properly historical question. Second doubt: Do the workings of power, and in particular those mechanisms that are brought into play in societies such as ours, really belong primarily to the category of repression? Are prohibition, censorship, and denial truly the forms through which power is exercised in a general way, if not in every society, most certainly in our own? This is a historico-theoretical question. A third and final doubt: Did the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come to act as a roadblock to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged up to that point, or is it not in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it "repression"? Was there really a historical rupture between the age of repression and the critical analysis of repression? This is a historico-political question. My purpose in introducing these three doubts is not merely to construct counterarguments that are symmetrical and contrary to those outlined above; it is not a matter of saying that sexuality, far from being repressed in capitalist and bourgeois societies, has on the contrary benefitted from a regime of unchanging liberty; nor is it a matter of saying that power in societies such as ours is more tolerant than repressive, and that the critique of repression, while it may give itself airs of a rupture with the past, actually forms part of a much older process and, depending on how one

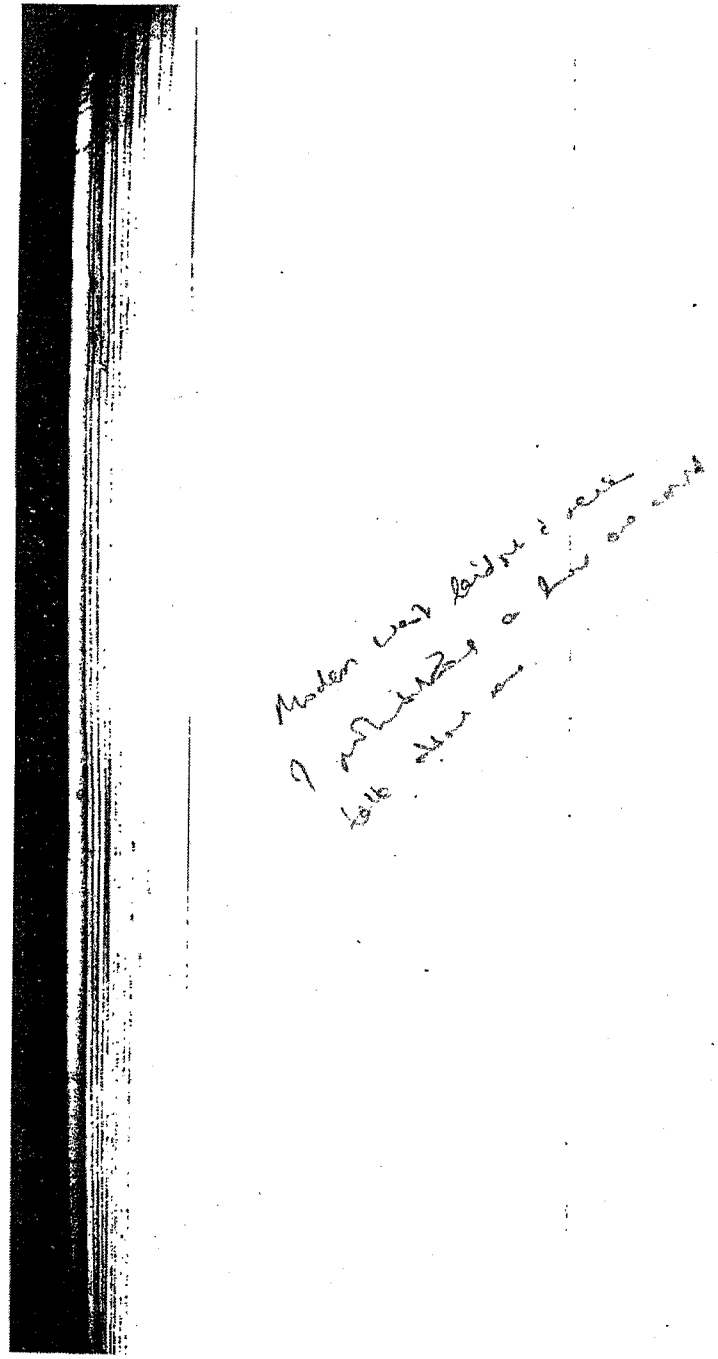
chooses to understand this process, will appear either as a new episode in the lessening of prohibitions, or as a more devious and discreet form of power.

The doubts I would like to oppose to the repressive hypothesis are aimed less at showing it to be mistaken than at putting it back within a general economy of discourses on sex in modern societies since the seventeenth century. Why has sexuality been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it? What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? What knowledge *(savoir)* was formed as a result of this linkage? The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world. The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse." Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure—all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the "polymorphous techniques of power." And finally, the essential aim will not be to determine whether these discursive productions and these effects of power lead one to formulate the truth about sex, or

on the contrary falsehoods designed to conceal that truth, but rather to bring out the "will to knowledge" that serves as both their support and their instrument.

Let there be no misunderstanding: I do not claim that sex has not been prohibited or barred or masked or misapprehended since the classical age; nor do I even assert that it has suffered these things any less from that period on than before. I do not maintain that the prohibition of sex is a ruse; but it is a ruse to make prohibition into the basic and constitutive element from which one would be able to write the history of what has been said concerning sex starting from the modern epoch. All these negative elements—defenses, censorships, denials—which the repressive hypothesis groups together in one great central mechanism destined to say no, are doubtless only component parts that have a local and tactical role to play in a transformation into discourse, a technology of power, and a will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former.

In short, I would like to disengage my analysis from the privileges generally accorded the economy of scarcity and the principles of rarefaction, to search instead for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate); I would like to write the history of these instances and their transformations. A first survey made from this viewpoint seems to indicate that since the end of the sixteenth century, the "putting into discourse of sex," far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement; that the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather one of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities; and that the will to knowledge has not come to a halt in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but has persisted in constituting—despite many mistakes, of course—a science of sexuality. It is these movements that I will now attempt to bring into focus in a schematic way, bypassing as it were the repressive hypothesis and the facts of interdiction or exclusion it invokes, and starting from certain historical facts that serve as guidelines for research.



I

The Incitement to Discourse

The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship.

Yet when one looks back over these last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion. We must be clear on this point, however. It is quite possible that there was an expurgation—and a very rigorous one—of the authorized vocabulary. It may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified. Without question, new rules of propriety

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

From Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

The Repressive Hypothesis: "The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship" (17).

The "Incitement to Discourse:" "At the level of discourses and their domains, however, practically the opposite phenomenon occurred. There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex – specific discourses, different from one another both by their form and by their object: a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward. Here I am thinking not so much of the probable increase in 'illicit' discourses, that is, discourses of infraction that crudely named sex by way of insult or mockery of the new code of decency; the tightening up of the rules of decorum likely did produce, as a countereffect, a valorization and intensification of indecent speech. But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (18).

The "Multiplication of Perversions:" "This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals*. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology…Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (42-43).

The "Production of Sexuality:" "This implantation of multiple perversions is not a mockery of sexuality taking revenge on a power that has thrust on it an excessively repressive law. Neither are we dealing with paradoxical forms of pleasure that turn back on power and invest it in the form of a 'pleasure to be endured.' The implantation of perversions in an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct. And accompanying this encroachment of powers, scattered sexualities rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice….Pleasure and this optimisation of power do not cancel or turn their back against one another; they reinforce, overlap, and strengthen one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement. 48

CHAPTER 1

Genealogies of Queer Theory

Kadji Amin

To perform a genealogy of queer theory need not require going in search of origins that legitimate and stabilize the field. "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations," Foucault writes, "on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."[1] Genealogy reveals the element of chance that allowed certain theoretical schools to become central to the field; it exposes the incommensurable fractures between different theories within the field and, at times, within the work of a single theorist. Perhaps most excitingly, genealogy allows for the formation of new roots to the side of those canonized for "founding" a field. This chapter begins with a section on "Inception" that assesses the influence of three major figures through which the field was conceived – Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault – as well as psychoanalytic theory. Butler, Sedgwick, and Foucault demonstrate the element of chance in genealogy: They all wrote their most canonical queer theoretical texts before the inception of a field called "queer theory" and were retrospectively claimed (almost instantaneously in the case of Butler and Sedgwick) as founders. The first section asks what theoretical orientations each of these figures brought to the field of queer theory and how those orientations influenced later queer theorists. I understand "influence" in various ways – as self-conscious citation and intellectual debt, as largely uncited methods and habits of thought, and as critical divergence, in which the critique of a theorist generates a new body of work. The second section, "Alternate Genealogies," focuses on queer theorists who self-consciously sought alternative intellectual roots for the field and claimed new founding figures, largely in a bid to center racialized populations and/or geopolitical locations outside Europe and North America. This chapter leaves out many names and intellectual schools; in this short space, it cannot possibly give an exhaustive account of every "turn" in the history of queer inquiry or every important queer theorist.

Its ambition, instead, is to simultaneously account for the generativity of particular theorists and theories – sometimes for critics whose political stakes and objects of study could not be more different – while leaving the field open to the claiming of new genealogies.

But first, a word about the intrinsic difficulty in defining queer theory or the field of Queer Studies to which it gave rise. It is worth remembering that queer theory emerged in the US academy during the 1990s as a theoretically oriented disruption of "normal business in the academy"[2]; it was never intended to found a field of study. Despite its anti-institutional ethos, queer theory was crucially informed by three aspects of the institutional context of the US academy during the 1990s. First, the "identity knowledges" of Women's Studies, Black Studies, Latino Studies, etc.[3] – all of which emerged from social movements of the 1960s – had recently been institutionalized within the academy. This institutionalization sparked a series of critiques of the constitutive limitations of institutionalized, identity-based fields of study. Emerging at a moment when these critiques were hotly debated, queer theory did not seek to become an identity knowledge among others, nor did it demand institutionalization. To the contrary, it articulated a critique of settled identities and assumed a posture of resistance to institutionalization and academic disciplinarity. Queer theory's most original move was to describe itself as a form of "subjectless critique" that, unlike the identity knowledges, could not be defined by its object of study.[4] However, queer theory's star-studded and intellectually dazzling debut quickly eclipsed and partially absorbed the still-emergent field of Gay and Lesbian Studies. The result was that queer theory became at once a sophisticated critique of identitarian knowledges emphatically *not* defined by the study of gays and lesbians, *and* it became one of the major sites for the study of (homo)sexuality and gender transgression in the US academy. This paradoxically identitarian anti-identitarianism remains a central tension within contemporary queer theory and Queer Studies. The second major way in which the state of the US academy shaped queer theory was the fact that the 1990s were the heyday of "high" theory in the humanities. Queer theory immediately and promiscuously pillaged the various forms of theory in ascent at that moment and put them into transformative contact with dissident sexualities. Finally, queer theory was initially housed primarily within English departments. When Queer Studies later solidified, it inherited from queer theory the following set of tensions: an antidisciplinary orientation emerging primarily from the disciplinary location of the humanities; an anti-identitarian ethos uneasily paired with an overall focus on dissident sexualities and LGBT

identities; and an institutionalization of humanities theories over objects, areas, periods, or methods that, paradoxically, had the effect of marginalizing certain objects, areas, periods, and methods. For these reasons, queer theory and Queer Studies remain hotly contested sites of inquiry. Given the fact that they were largely institutionalized through *theory*, rather than objects, a genealogy of the theories that inform queer theory seems like a good place to start.

Inception

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) was written before the inception of queer theory as an antifoundationalist feminist approach to "sex."[5] Specifically, it contributed to debates within feminist scholarship about how to conduct feminist inquiry while thoroughly critiquing all essentialisms, including those that ground the category "woman." *Gender Trouble*'s import for queer theory was solidified by Butler's famous use, toward the end, of the drag queen as the key figure that subversively reveals the performativity of all gender – that is, the fact that gender's apparent solidity and binary structure are illusions derived from compelled and reiterated performances of gender ideals. *Gender Trouble* was hugely influential throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, giving rise to a wave of scholarship analyzing the performativity of various forms of social identity and assessing the subversive potential of particular performative iterations.

Gender Trouble may still be the queer theoretical text most likely to be read by those situated outside the field; it is certainly the most-read work of queer theory in translation. Despite its continuing status as the exemplification of "queer theory," it is no longer at the origin of current trends within the field. Butler's influence has gone more underground. Her signature remains present within queer theory's antifoundationalist and anti-identitarian bent: its deep suspicion of settled social and sexual identities. We might locate Butler's legacy in the queer method, borrowed from poststructuralism, of unsettling and subverting binaries, and in the tendency to put more political weight on moments of slippage, fluidity, and subversion that call entire ontological systems into question than in the goal-oriented, intentional, and effective mobilization more conventionally understood as "politics." Nevertheless, in queer theory today, Butler's profound antifoundationalism is as apt to pose a problem as to be seen as a resource. Butler may currently have the most citational life in those movements of thought directly opposed to the anti-essentialism of

which she is one of the most sophisticated exemplars: affect theory, new materialism, and transgender studies. The move, on a number of fronts, to take bodies, biology, materiality, and affect seriously, not as limitations, but as more vital and even more "queer" than the critique of essentialism could admit, is indebted to Butler in its very departure from the forms of suspicion she exemplifies.

Like Butler, Sedgwick published her landmark queer theoretical text, *Epistemology of the Closet*, in 1990, before the inception of the queer theory that the text was immediately taken up as exemplifying.[6] *Epistemology* was written specifically as a work of "antihomophobic inquiry" within gay literary studies.[7] Its "Introduction: Axiomatic" asserts that homosexuality is crucial to a contradictory series of epistemological binaries foundational to Western modernity. This strong argument for the epistemological significance of homosexuality within something so grand as "Western modernity" was, undoubtedly, what catapulted Sedgwick to prominence within queer theory. However, *Epistemology* is also an exuberant look at just how *incoherent* modern constructions of homosexuality actually are. This is one example of the unsystematizability of Sedgwick's thought: it cannot be distilled into singular analytic or argument without doing violence to the textures and surprises of her writing as well as of her objects of study. For many queer scholars today, *Epistemology*'s objects of study are a negative reminder of the white and cisgender gay male, as well as canonical and literary origins of queer theory. Despite this, Sedgwick's orientation toward unsystematizable complexity continues to prove a source of renewal to contemporary queer critics. This orientation has been carried forward by Sedgwick's student, José Esteban Muñoz, and an entire cadre of queer and queer of color critics interested in the generativity of literature, performance, and art practices as sites of queer (of color) world-making, reparation, and alternatives. Sedgwick appeals to the desire to bypass or supplement strong theories with vast diagnostic power in favor of a multitude of "weak theories," including affect theory, that stay close to the textures of the everyday.[8]

Foucault, on the other hand, exemplifies the "paranoid criticism" that Sedgwick critiques as dominant within politicized humanistic scholarship. He is the theorist of what have become three key terms within queer theory: sexuality, normativity, and biopolitics. His *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976) identifies sexuality as a key switchpoint of modern biopower – a means of simultaneously disciplining the individual body and controlling populations on the biological level of birth,

fertility, and death.[9] Queer theory needed Foucault's theoretical cachet to establish sexuality, not as some giggly, private joke, but as a consequential technology invested with the gravitas of modern biopower itself. Along with sexuality, Foucault influentially identified norms, normativity, and normation – based on the development of the nineteenth-century science of statistics and invention of the "population" as a statistical entity – as crucial modalities of modern power. Recently, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have argued that "normativity" rather than sexuality occupies the definitional center of queer theory.[10] As a form of "subjectless critique," "queer" refers not to LGBT, but to whatever subverts, resists, or creates alternatives to various forms of normativity. They argue, however, that this shorthand definition of queer as antinormative is actually anti-Foucauldian, since, as a statistical average, the norm already contains and modulates all variations. Norms, in this statistical sense, cannot be opposed or resisted. Statistical norms, however, may be distinct from the forms of *normalizing power* that queer theorists seek to analyze and oppose.[11] Regardless, critical reflection on the proliferation of binaries, within queer scholarship, that oppose a queer term to a normative one does seem warranted within the field, as does further work parsing and multiplying kinds of relations to normativity beyond opposition and resistance. "Biopolitics," along with "necropolitics," Achille Mbembe's term critically reorienting biopolitics toward the power to kill, is increasingly being centered by queer work on race, homonormativity, and geopolitics.[12] For such scholarship, biopolitics and necropolitics name racialized technologies of control over life and death *within which* sexuality is a key node. By foregrounding biopolitics and necropolitics, this body of scholarship reframes sexuality as a technology of race rather than as, in and of itself, a point of potential resistance to normativity.

Foucault famously premised his analysis of power on a critique of psychoanalysis and the "repressive hypothesis." Nevertheless, in one of many interesting contradictions, Foucault's position as one of queer theory's major progenitors is matched by the prominence of psychoanalysis as a major strand of queer theory. This is partly because, along with poststructuralism, psychoanalysis was a major form under which "high theory" circulated in the US academy during the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s. It is also because psychoanalysis offers one of the most compelling modern accounts of sexuality and subjectivity. Queer theoretical engagements with psychoanalysis have been diverse, from Judith Butler's theorization of how prohibited same-sex love is melancholically

incorporated as the gendered ego to Muñoz's formulation of "disidentification" as a queer of color tactic for creatively reworking exclusionary dominant ideals.[13] Queer theorists tend to read psychoanalysis against the grain – particularly given psychoanalysis's colonialist inheritance, focus on bourgeois nuclear families in Europe, and emphasis on "normal" trajectories of gendered and sexual development. Perhaps most strikingly, queer theorists have used psychoanalytic accounts of *jouissance* and the death drive as resources to theorize the ways in which sex shatters subjecthood, identity, relationality, and linear temporality. For Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, queers bear the symbolic burden for the ways in which jouissance and the death drive, respectively, threaten subjectivity in general.[14] Both theorists have been critiqued for installing a presumptively white gay male subject at the heart of their theorizations of queer sexuality. This critique has itself generated queer of color scholarship that inhabits black sexual abjection and explores the ethical potential of the stereotype of the Asian American man as a bottom.[15] A critically reworked version of psychoanalysis, in sum, has offered queer and queer of color critics a means of thinking through the possibilities of sex as a form of negativity and a means of shattering, debasing, and abjecting the self.

Alternate Genealogies

Queer theory's antidisciplinary stance has sometimes made it difficult to address the fact that the field has developed its own normativities and produced its own marginalizations. It is glaring, for instance, that the theorists, theories, areas, and objects of study taken up as "queer theory" during the field's inception were white and Euro-North American. It can be less obvious, to those of us whose disciplinary training is in the humanities, that much of what is recognized as queer theory has predominantly emerged from humanities departments and prizes humanistic methods, theories, and habits of thought. As queer theory develops into Queer Studies – a more genuinely interdisciplinary field – it must reckon with the exclusions inherent in what have been claimed as its founding theoretical genealogies. Increasingly, scholars have been responding to these exclusions by seeking new theoretical precursors for their work, as well as rediscovering early queer theorists who have not always received credit as "founders" of the field.

Heather Love argues that midcentury deviance studies contributed to the inception of queer theory but was incorporated and largely forgotten, rather than being hailed as a founding genealogy.[16] Social

scientists influenced by midcentury deviance studies, such as Esther Newton (1972) and Gayle Rubin (1984), conducted groundbreaking scholarship on sexual subcultures before the inception of queer theory and under institutionally difficult conditions.[17] Although some of their insights were absorbed by subsequent queer theorists, the genealogy of their thought in deviance studies and the social sciences more broadly was largely cast aside. Love's centering of deviance studies as a social scientific genealogy of queer theory reveals the field's occluded grounding in the critical humanities. Queer humanities scholarship is more likely to be classified as Queer Studies and as theory, whereas queer social science and historical scholarship is more likely to be classified as Sexuality or LGBT Studies and seen as contributing examples rather than theories. This disciplinary divide tends to reinforce the existing marginalization of work on the Asias, Latin America, and Africa in Queer Studies, given that much scholarship on sexuality in these areas is conducted within the social sciences, especially cultural anthropology. As a result, the existing sense that area studies scholarship, as well as scholarship conducted in non-European (and even non-English) languages is "specialized" and generative of examples rather than theories or epistemologies is compounded by the tendency to dismiss empirical methods as disciplinary, naïve, and uncritical.[18] Could centering midcentury deviance studies indirectly spur a methodological opening of queer theory to scholarship on other geographical areas?

Queer of color critique was a theoretically diverse enterprise from the start. Among other intellectual traditions, Muñoz drew from utopian Marxism and Sedgwickian reparative reading, Roderick Ferguson from Marxism and the critique of sociology, and Chandan Reddy from legal studies and the critique of liberalism.[19] Despite its intellectual heterogeneity, queer of color critique was drawn together at its inception by its explicit claiming of women of color feminism as its theoretical genealogy. Women of color feminism was the inspiration for two of queer of color critique's lasting interventions: intersectionality and, relatedly, the expansion of "queer" to include heterosexual but nonheteronormative racial formations. "Intersectionality," first theorized by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, but present in prior US women of color thought, is an analytic that parses concatenated vectors of social power – including race, class, and gender – by centering figures, such as black women, who tend to fall through the cracks when a single mode of power is under analysis.[20] Queer of color analysis contributes to this project by proposing, as Ferguson writes of Reddy's work, "that racist practice articulates itself

generally as gender and sexual regulation, and that gender and sexual differences variegate racial formations" and by centering racial formations for queer theorization.[21] Hence, queer of color critique, along with work on queer diasporas, also necessarily articulates a critique of the unmarked white (and often, gay cisgender male) basis of certain queer theorizations. This critique has been deepened by queer native and disability scholarship, which reveals and seeks alternatives to the unacknowledged role of settler colonial and ableist logics, respectively, within queer theory. Queer of color critique's second major intervention is the move to include heterosexual, but nonheteronormative racial formations within the purview of queer theorization. Queer of color critics argue that, because racialized cultures have been constituted as sexually aberrant and materially excluded from the achievements that define heteronormativity – including property ownership, citizenship, and/or self-sufficient nuclear family formations – racial formations are nonheteronormative and should occupy the center of intersectional queer theorizing.

Queer of color critique's claiming of women of color feminism as its genealogy has lastingly transformed queer theorization. However, women of color feminism is not a unified or unproblematic genealogy for queer theory. As Sharon Holland has noted, the internal complexity and dissonance of black feminism – for instance, Audre Lorde's suspicion of BDSM and critique of pornography – was not engaged by early queer of color critique, though new work by scholars like Ariane Cruz is beginning to change this.[22] Although the tensions between a version of feminism that prioritizes the issue of sexual violence against women and a version of queer theory that champions marginalized sexual practices and subjectivities have been well-explored, potential sites of discord between women of color feminism and its (largely celebratory) queer of color uptake have not received the same attention. One underexplored dissonance, for instance, is the fact that some versions of women of color feminism rely on a standpoint epistemology that prioritizes the marginalized knowledges of women of color, whereas the anti-identitarian, psychoanalytic, Foucauldian, and poststructuralist genealogies of queer theory all tend to cast doubt on the foundation of epistemic authority on identity.[23]

Queer of color critique is an entry point into an important question: What would vocabularies, epistemologies, and genealogies of queer theory look like that emerged from racialized cultures or marginalized geographic locations? E. Patrick Johnson's use of the African American vernacular "quare," Kale Fajardo's Filipinization of "kweer," and the Queer/Cuir/Cuyr

Americas Working Group's hemispheric exchanges all work to provincialize "queer" and to reground queer epistemologies in marginalized locations.[24] Such a project is inspired by another intellectual genealogy – one which focuses on the hierarchies of power and scale that inform translation within the academy, provincializes particulars that accede to the status of universals ("queer" itself might be one such universal), and analyzes translocalizations of "global" vocabularies. This multisited intellectual genealogy has roots in postcolonial and area studies, comparative literature, and transnational and diasporic modes of analysis. Another approach is to mine "queer" itself for the racial and geopolitical histories it conceals. Gloria Anzaldúa's "La Prieta" (1986) contains the first printed use of "queer" as a theoretical term evoking a sense of racialized/sexual Latina borderlands abjection.[25] Nevertheless, Anzaldúa is not regularly recognized as a founder of queer theory. Finally, as with queer of color critique's claiming of women of color feminism, another strategy is to hail, as queer theorists, authors who were not intentionally writing as part of a queer theoretical tradition. As we have seen, Foucault, Butler, and Sedgwick all wrote their major queer theoretical texts before the inception of queer theory. These works were intended to contribute to other scholarly debates rather than to found a field, and their interventions were not, moreover, anchored by the term "queer." Genealogy is always disparate; it indexes the work of chance as well as relations of power. What makes something a foundational queer text is the fact that it is taken up as such and used to found bodies of queer scholarship. Such a promiscuous understanding of genealogy might serve as an impetus to scholars seeking queer epistemologies in authors and geopolitical locations that have not, thus far, been central to queer theorization.

One stunningly successful example of a rerooting of queer theory in an alternate genealogy is recent queer and trans scholarship under the sign of what could be termed black antihumanism.[26] This emergent body of scholarship is more likely to take up Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, or Sylvia Wynter as its foundational theorists than Sedgwick, Butler, or Foucault.[27] Moreover, it begins from a different ontological premise than queer of color critique. Black antihumanists center their queer and trans readings less on intersectional analysis than on the fungibility, dehumanization, and ungendering of the black body under chattel slavery and, more broadly, within the Western metaphysical and medico-scientific tradition. Without a doubt, this body of work has successfully animated an alternative genealogy and a new theoretical lexicon for black queer and trans studies. In a striking departure from

most queer theorization to date, for instance, "normative" and "nonnormative" are not necessarily anchoring concepts. For black antihumanists, the position of the slave is not that of a human bearing a nonnormative racialized sexuality or living in nonheteronormative social formations. Instead, the position of the slave is that of the nonhuman thing, the exchangeable commodity, and the border between the human and its animal others. As a result, the slave cannot be disciplined by normalizing power or counted among the statistical gradations of normative and nonnormative. Here, too, however, there are important disagreements – between Afro-pessimists who seek no horizon of future becoming and scholars who forecast the elaboration of new genres of the human; between thinkers who map the relation between blackness and other modes of racial formation and those for whom blackness is a unique and incomparable ontology of race; and between theorists who root a new genealogy of queer and trans becoming in blackness and those for whom blackness is incommensurate with queer and transgender as versions, however nonnormative, of the human. These important debates are just beginning to get underway.

Conclusion

A genealogical approach demonstrates that queer theory has always been a promiscuous borrowing, reworking, and interested claiming of disparate theoretical traditions. As such, scholars might rework queer theory by rerooting it in its own forgotten genealogies as well as in alternate theoretical traditions. To say this is not, however, to claim that queer theory is infinitely mobile and open to redefinition. I have argued elsewhere that queer theory bears the trace of its discursive travels and of the intellectual genealogies that have most repetitively defined it.[28] These genealogies cannot simply be cast off, for they have come to shape some of the key sensibilities, methodological moves, and scholarly orientations of queer theory. If Queer Studies is to become a genuinely interdisciplinary field, it is critical to multiply its theoretical genealogies. However, this process of multiplication will inevitably give rise to both dissonances and resonances with the habits of thought and feeling that had previously shaped the field. Investigating the source of these dissonances and amplifying the resonances should be part of the work of claiming alternate theoretical genealogies for queer scholarship.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2011)
Excerpts

1990 Preface, pp.xxx – xxxii.

"What best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality? Consider the fate of "female trouble," that historical configuration of a nameless female indisposition, which thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural indisposition. Serious as the medicalization of women's bodies is, the term is also laughable, and laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play. Female Trouble is also the title of the John Waters film that features Divine, the hero/heroine of Hairspray as well, whose impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates. Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness" constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex? Divine notwithstanding, gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematize "the natural" in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex. What other foundational categories of identity—the binary of sex, gender, and the body—can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable?

To expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power requires a form of critical inquiry that Foucault, reformulating Nietzsche, designates as "genealogy." A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. The task of this inquiry is to center on—and decenter—such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality.

Precisely because "female" no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as "woman," and because both terms gain their troubled significations only as relational terms, this inquiry takes as its focus gender and the relational analysis it suggests. Further, it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. Instead, we ought to ask, what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity. What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? And to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?"

1999 Preface, pp.43 – 46.

"I grew up understanding something of the violence of gender norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body, deprived of family and friends, living out his days in an "institute" in the Kansas prairies; gay cousins forced to leave their homes because of their sexuality, real and imagined; my own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes. All of this subjected me to strong and scarring condemnation but, luckily, did not prevent me from pursuing pleasure and insisting on a legitimating recognition for my sexual life. It was difficult to bring this violence into view precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed. It was assumed either to be a natural manifestation of sex or a cultural constant that no human agency could hope to revise. I also came to understand something of the violence of the foreclosed life, the one that does not get named as "living," the one whose incarceration implies a suspension of life, or a sustained death sentence. The dogged effort to "denaturalize" gender in this text emerges, I think, from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality. The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of "real" politics, as some critics have conjectured (as if theatre and politics are always distinct). It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. What would the world have to be like for my uncle to live in the company of family, friends, or extended kinship of some other kind? How must we rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to a death within life?"

Some readers have asked whether *Gender Trouble* seeks to expand the realm of gender possibilities for a reason. They ask, for what purpose are such new configurations of gender devised, and how ought we to judge among them? The question often involves a prior premise, namely, that the text does not address the normative or prescriptive dimension of feminist thought. "Normative" clearly has at least two meanings in this critical encounter, since the word is one I use often, mainly to describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals. I usually use "normative" in a way that is synonymous with "pertaining to the norms that govern gender." But the term "normative" also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed thereform. One critical question posed of Gender Trouble has been: how do we proceed to make judgments on how gender is to be lived on the basis of the theoretical descriptions offered here? It is not possible to oppose the "normative" forms of gender without at the same time subscribing to a certain normative view of how the gendered world ought to be. I want to suggest, however, that the positive normative vision of this text, such as it is, does not and cannot take the form of a prescription: "subvert gender in the way that I say, and life will be good.

Those who make such prescriptions or who are willing to decide between subversive and unsubversive expressions of gender, base their judgments on a description. Gender appears in this or that form, and then a normative judgment is made about those appearances and on the basis of what appears. But what conditions the domain of appearance for gender itself? We may be tempted to make the following distinction: a descriptive account of gender includes

considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its conditions of possibility, whereas a normative account seeks to answer the question of which expressions of gender are acceptable, and which are not, supplying persuasive reasons to distinguish between such expressions in this way. The question, however, of what qualifies as "gender" is itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power, a fugitive operation of "what will be the case" under the rubric of "what is the case." Thus, the very description of the field of gender is in no sense prior to, or separable from, the question of its normative operation."

Judith Butler, 'Critically queer', *GLQ* 1., no.1 (1993), 21.

> that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a "one" who is prior to this gender, a one who goes into the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a voluntaristic account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering. The sense of gender performativity that I meant to convey is something quite different.[17]

Judith Butler, 'Critically queer', *GLQ* 1., no.1 (1993), 22.

> Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged.[18]

is necessary to learn a double movement: to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest. That the term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds, and to do this precisely in order to learn how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation.

8

CRITICALLY QUEER

> Discourse is not life; its time is not yours.
> —Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse"

The risk of offering a final chapter on "queer" is that the term will be taken as the summary moment, but I want to make a case that it is perhaps only the most recent. In fact, the temporality of the term is precisely what concerns me here: how is it that a term that signaled degradation has been turned—"refunctioned" in the Brechtian sense—to signify a new and affirmative set of meanings? Is this a simple reversal of valuations such that "queer" means either a past degradation or a present or future affirmation? Is this a reversal that retains and reiterates the abjected history of the term? When the term has been used as a paralyzing slur, as the mundane interpellation of pathologized sexuality, it has produced the user of the term as the emblem and vehicle of normalization; the occasion of its utterance, as the discursive regulation of the boundaries of sexual legitimacy. Much of the straight world has always needed the queers it has sought to repudiate through the performative force of the term. If the term is now subject to a reappropriation, what are the conditions and limits of that significant reversal? Does the reversal reiterate the logic of repudiation by which it was spawned? Can the term overcome its constitutive history of injury? Does it present the discursive occasion for a powerful and compelling fantasy of historical reparation? 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?[1]

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche introduces the notion of the "sign-chain" in which one might read a utopian investment in discourse, one that reemerges within Foucault's conception of discursive power.

Nietzsche writes, "the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion" (77). The "ever new" possibilities of resignification are derived from the postulated historical discontinuity of the term. But is this postulation itself suspect? Can resignifiability be derived from a pure historicity of "signs"? Or must there be a way to think about the constraints on and in resignification that takes account of its propensity to return to the "ever old" in relations of social power? And can Foucault help us here or does he, rather, reiterate Nietzchean hopefulness within the discourse of power? Investing power with a kind of vitalism, Foucault echoes Nietzsche as he refers to power as "ceaseless struggles and confrontations...produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another."[2]

Neither power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment; they are not as weightless as the utopics of radical resignification might imply. And yet how are we to understand their convergent force as an accumulated effect of usage that both constrains and enables their reworking? How is it that the apparently injurious effects of discourse become the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought? Here it is not only a question of how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility. And further, how is it that those who are abjected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?

PERFORMATIVE POWER

Eve Sedgwick's recent reflections on queer performativity ask us not only to consider how a certain theory of speech acts applies to queer practices, but how it is that "queering" persists as a defining moment of performativity.[3] The centrality of the marriage ceremony in J.L. Austin's examples of performativity suggests that the heterosexualization of the social bond is the paradigmatic form for those speech acts which bring about what they name. "I pronounce you..." puts into effect the relation that it names. But from where and when does such a performative draw its force,

and what happens to the performative when its purpose is precisely to undo the presumptive force of the heterosexual ceremonial?

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power.[4] Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* discourse.

Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only, to repeat an earlier phrase, a reiterated acting that *is* power in its persistence and instability. This is less an "act," singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power. Hence, the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names invariably *cites* the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power. And though it may appear that the binding power of his words is derived from the force of his will or from a prior authority, the opposite is more true: it is *through* the citation of the law that the figure of the judge's "will" is produced and that the "priority" of textual authority is established.[5] Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary "act" emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions.

Where there is an "I" who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that "I" and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no "I" who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the "I" only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated, to use the Althusserian term, and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the "I"; it is the transitive invocation of the "I." Indeed, I can only say "I" to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech; paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition

precedes and conditions the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject. Further, the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one's social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation. The "I" is thus a citation of the place of the "I" in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak.

QUEER TROUBLE

The term "queer" emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, *within* performativity. The term "queer" has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject *through* that shaming interpellation. "Queer" derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts "queer!" To what extent, then, has the performative "queer" operated alongside, as a deformation of, the "I pronounce you..." of the marriage ceremony? If the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which "queers" those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction.

On that note, let us remember that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same. And the "act" by which a name authorizes or deauthorizes a set of social or sexual relations is, of necessity, *a repetition*. "Could a performative succeed," asks Derrida, "if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance...if it were not identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?"[6] If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that "success" is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that

action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. What this means, then, is that a performative "works" to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force.

This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history[7] that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and that this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said.[8] What it also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn *against* this constitutive historicity. Those of us who have questioned the presentist assumptions in contemporary identity categories are, therefore, sometimes charged with depoliticizing theory. And yet, if the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed, then it follows that the critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing *democratization* of queer politics. As much as identity terms must be used, as much as "outness" is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal "outness"? Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism's most treasured contemporary premises.

As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. This is not an argument *against* using identity categories,

but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use. The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblematizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.

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.

It may be that the conceit of autonomy implied by self-naming is the paradigmatically presentist conceit, that is, the belief that there is a one who arrives in the world, in discourse, without a history, that this one makes oneself in and through the magic of the name, that language expresses a "will" or a "choice" rather than a complex and constitutive history of discourse and power which compose the invariably ambivalent resources through which a queer and queering agency is forged and reworked. To recast queer agency in this chain of historicity is thus to avow a set of constraints on the past and the future that mark at once the *limits* of agency and its most *enabling conditions*. 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 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,[9] in others the term represents a false unity of women and men. Indeed, it may be that the critique of the term will initiate a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within lesbian and gay politics

or open up new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these constituencies are radically distinct from one another. The term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized.

We no more create from nothing the political terms that come to represent our "freedom" than we are responsible for the terms that carry the pain of social injury. And yet, neither of those terms are as a result any less necessary to work and rework within political discourse.

In this sense, it remains politically necessary to lay claim to "women," "queer," "gay," and "lesbian," precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing. Laying claim to such terms in reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in "private" life. But the necessity to mobilize the necessary error of identity (Spivak's term) will always be in tension with the democratic contestation of the term which works against its deployments in racist and misogynist discursive regimes. If "queer" politics postures independently of these other modalities of power, it will lose its democratizing force. The political deconstruction of "queer" ought not to paralyze the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought. Some recent race theory has underscored the use of "race" in the service of "racism," and proposed a politically informed inquiry into the process of *racialization*, the formation of race.[10] Such an inquiry does not suspend or ban the term, although it does insist that an inquiry into formation is linked to the contemporary question of what is at stake in the term. The point may be taken for queer studies as well, such that "queering" might signal an inquiry into (a) the *formation* of homosexualities (a historical inquiry which cannot take the stability of the term for granted, despite the political pressure to do so) and (b) the *deformative* and *misappropriative* power that the term currently enjoys. At stake in such a history will be the differential formation of homosexuality across racial boundaries, including the question of how racial and reproductive relations become articulated through one another.

One might be tempted to say that identity categories are insufficient because every subject position is the site of converging relations of power

that are not univocal. But such a formulation underestimates the radical challenge to the subject that such converging relations imply. For there is no self-identical subject who houses or bears these relations, no site at which such relations converge. This converging and interarticulation *is* the contemporary fate of the subject. In other words, the subject as a self-identical entity is no more.

It is in this sense that the temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error. And if identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of "queer" will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments. Indeed, the term "queer" itself has been precisely the discursive rallying point for younger lesbians and gay men and, in yet other contexts, for lesbian interventions and, in yet other contexts, for bisexuals and straights for whom the term expresses an affiliation with anti-homophobic politics. That it can become such a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance ought to be safeguarded not only for the purposes of continuing to democratize queer politics, but also to expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term.

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND DRAG

How, if at all, is the notion of discursive resignification linked to the notion of gender parody or impersonation? First, what is meant by understanding gender as an impersonation? Does this mean that one puts on a mask or persona, that there is a "one" who precedes that "putting on," who is something other than its gender from the start? Or does this miming, this impersonating precede and form the "one," operating as its formative precondition rather than its dispensable artifice?

The construal of gender-as-drag according to the first model appears to be the effect of a number of circumstances. One of them I brought on myself by citing drag as an example of performativity, a move that was taken then, by some, to be *exemplary* of performativity. If drag is performative, that does not mean that all performativity is to be understood as

drag. The publication of *Gender Trouble* coincided with a number of publications that did assert that "clothes make the woman," but I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman. Added to these, however, are the political needs of an emergent queer movement in which the publicization of theatrical agency has become quite central.[1]

The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which *undermines* the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language.

As *Paris Is Burning* made clear, drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which hererosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure. But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony *through* its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies that reidealize heterosexual norms *without* calling them into question.

On other occasions, though, the transferability of a gender ideal or gender norm calls into question the abjecting power that it sustains. For an occupation or reterritorialization of a term that has been used to abject a population can become the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political resignification. And this has happened to a certain extent with the notion of "queer." The contemporary redeployment enacts a prohibition and a degradation against itself, spawning a different order of values, a political affirmation from and through the very term which in a prior usage had as it final aim the eradication of precisely such an affirmation.

It may seem, however, that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of discourse. Are these two different senses of "performativity," or do they converge as modes of citationality in which the compulsory character of certain social imperatives becomes subject to a more promising deregulation? Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity

and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond. In this sense, the initiatory performative, "It's a girl!" anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, "I pronounce you man and wife." Hence, also, the peculiar pleasure of the cartoon strip in which the infant is first interpellated into discourse with "It's a lesbian!" Far from an essentialist joke, the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability.*

To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "girling" is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a "girl," however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no "one" who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a "one," to become viable as a "one," where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms.

It is in terms of a norm that compels a certain "citation" in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought. And precisely in relation to such a compulsory citationality that the theatricality of gender is also to be explained. Theatricality need not be conflated with self-display or self-creation. Within queer politics, indeed, within the very signification that is "queer," we read a resignifying practice in which the desanctioning power of the name "queer" is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy. Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is "queered" into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up* or *cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses.* The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic "law" that can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies.

To oppose the theatrical to the political within contemporary queer politics is, I would argue, an impossibility: the hyperbolic "performance"

of death in the practice of "die-ins" and the theatrical "outness" by which queer activism has disrupted the closeting distinction between public and private space have proliferated sites of politicization and AIDS awareness throughout the public realm. Indeed, an important set of histories might be told in which the increasing politicization *of* theatricality for queers is at stake (more productive, I think, than an insistence on the two as polar opposites within queerness). Such a history might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch-femme spectacles, the sliding between the "march" (New York City) and the parade (San Francisco); die-ins by ACT UP, kiss-ins by Queer Nation; drag performance benefits for AIDS (by which I would include both Lypsinka's and Liza Minnelli's in which she, finally, does Judy[12]); the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism;[13] performing excessive lesbian sexuality and iconography that effectively counters the desexualization of the lesbian; tactical interruptions of public forums by lesbian and gay activists in favor of drawing public attention and outrage to the failure of government funding of AIDS research and outreach.

The increasing theatricalization of political rage in response to the killing inattention of public policy-makers on the issue of AIDS is allegorized in the recontextualization of "queer" from its place within a homophobic strategy of abjection and annihilation to an insistent and public severing of that interpellation from the effect of shame. To the extent that shame is produced as the stigma not only of AIDS, but also of queerness, where the latter is understood through homophobic causalities as the "cause" and "manifestation" of the illness, theatrical rage is part of the public resistance to that interpellation of shame. Mobilized by the injuries of homophobia, theatrical rage reiterates those injuries precisely through an "acting out," one that does not merely repeat or recite those injuries, but that also deploys a hyperbolic display of death and injury to overwhelm the epistemic resistance to AIDS and to the graphics of suffering, or a hyperbolic display of kissing to shatter the epistemic blindness to an increasingly graphic and public homosexuality.

MELANCHOLIA AND THE LIMITS OF PERFORMANCE

The critical potential of "drag" centrally concerns a critique of a prevailing truth-regime of "sex," one that I take to be pervasively heterosexist: the

distinction between the "inside" truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the "outside" truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed "truth" can be established. Gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as "internal" and "hidden," nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play *between* psyche and appearance (where the latter domain includes what appears *in words*). Further, this will be a "play" regulated by heterosexist constraints though not, for that reason, fully reducible to them.

In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is therefore the "truth" of gender; performance as bounded "act" is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice"; further, what is "performed" works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake.

The rejection of an expressive model of drag which holds that some interior truth is exteriorized in performance needs, however, to be referred to a psychoanalytic consideration on the relationship between how gender *appears* and what gender *signifies*. Psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious sets limits to the exteriorization of the psyche. It also argues, rightly I think, that what is exteriorized or performed can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier and from the domain of corporeal legibility.

How precisely do repudiated identifications, identifications that do not "show," circumscribe and materialize the identifications that do? Here it seems useful to rethink the notion of gender-as-drag in terms of the analysis of gender melancholia.[14] Given the iconographic figure of the melancholic drag queen, one might consider whether and how these terms work together. Here, one might ask also after the disavowal that occasions performance and that performance might be said to enact, where performance engages "acting out" in the psychoanalytic sense.[15] If melancholia in Freud's sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss (a sustaining of the lost object/Other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with that Other, self-beratement, and the acting out of unresolved anger and love),[16] it may be that performance, understood as "acting out,"

is significantly related to the problem of unacknowledged loss. Where there is an ungrieved loss in drag performance (and I am sure that such a generalization cannot be universalized), perhaps it is a loss that is refused and incorporated in the performed identification, one that reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability. This is neither a territorialization of the feminine by the masculine nor an "envy" of the masculine by the feminine, nor a sign of the essential plasticity of gender. What it does suggest is that gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go.

The analysis above is a risky one because it suggests that for a "man" performing femininity or for a "woman" performing masculinity (the latter is always, in effect, to perform a little less, given that femininity is often cast as the spectacular gender) there is an attachment to and a loss and refusal of the figure of femininity by the man, or the figure of masculinity by the woman. Thus, it is important to underscore that drag is an effort to negotiate cross-gendered identification, but that cross-gendered identification is not the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality, although it may be one. In this sense, drag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize *gender*. Not only are a vast number of drag performers straight, but it would be a mistake to think that homosexuality is best explained through the performativity that is drag. What does seem useful in this analysis, however, is that drag exposes or allegorizes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibility* of homosexuality, a foreclosure that produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time that it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love. Drag thus allegorizes *heterosexual melancholy*, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but "preserved" through the heightening of feminine identification itself. In this sense, the "truest" lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the "truest" gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man.

What drag exposes, however, is the "normal" constitution of gender

QUEER AND NOW

Eve Kofosky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994)

A MOTIVE I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents. To us, the hard statistics come easily: that queer teenagers are two to three times likelier to attempt suicide, and to accomplish it, than others; that up to 30 percent of teen suicides are likely to be gay or lesbian; that a third of lesbian and gay teenagers say they have attempted suicide; that minority queer adolescents are at even more extreme risk.[1]

The knowledge is indelible, but not astonishing, to anyone with a reason to be attuned to the profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives. I look at my adult friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work, and I feel that the survival of each one is a miracle. Everyone who survived has stories about how it was done

> —an outgrown anguish
> Remembered, as the Mile
>
> Our panting Ankle barely passed—
> When Night devoured the Road—
> But we—stood whispering in the House—
> And all we said—was "Saved"!

(as Dickinson has it).[2] How to tell kids who are supposed never to learn this, that, farther along, the road widens and the air brightens; that in the big world there are worlds where it's plausible, our demand to *get used to it*.

EPISTEMOLOGIES I've heard of many people who claim they'd as soon their children were dead as gay. What it took me a long time to believe is that these people are saying no more than the truth. They even speak for others too delicate to use the cruel words. For there is all the evidence. The

1. Paul Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide* (Washington, D.C., 1989), vol. 3, pp. 110–142.

preponderance of school systems, public and parochial, where teachers are fired, routinely, for so much as intimating the right to existence of queer people, desires, activities, children. The routine denial to sexually active adolescents, straight *and* gay, of the things they need—intelligible information, support and respect, condoms—to protect themselves from HIV transmission. (As a policy aimed at punishing young gay people with death, this one is working: in San Francisco for instance, as many as 34 percent of the gay men under twenty-five being tested—and 54 percent of the young black gay men—are now HIV infected.)[3] The systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic sequestration from the truth about the lives, culture, and sustaining relations of adults they know who may be queer. The complicity of parents, of teachers, of clergy, even of the mental health professions in invalidating and hounding kids who show gender-dissonant tastes, behavior, body language. In one survey 26 percent of young gay men had been forced to leave home because of conflicts with parents over their sexual identity;[4] another report concludes that young gays and lesbians, many of them throwaways, comprise as many as a quarter of all homeless youth in the United States.[5]

And adults' systematic denial of these truths to ourselves. The statistics on the triple incidence of suicide among lesbian and gay adolescents come from a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1989; under congressional pressure, recommendations based on this section of the report were never released. Under congressional pres sure, in 1991 a survey of adolescent sexual behavior is defunded. Under the threat of congressional pressure, support for all research on sexuality suddenly (in the fall of 1991) dries up. Seemingly, this society 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.

PROMISING, SMUGGLING, READING, OVERREADING This history makes its mark on what, individually, we are and do. One set of effects turns up in the irreducible multilayeredness and multiphasedness of what queer survival means—since being a survivor on this scene is a

2. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H.Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), poem 325, p. 154.

3. T.A.Kellogg et al., "Prevalence of HIV-I Among Homosexual and Bisexual Men in the San Francisco Bay Area: Evidence of Infection Among Young Gay Men," *Seventh International AIDS Conference Abstract Book,* vol. 2 (Geneva, 1991) (W.C. 3010), p. 298.

4. G.Remafedi, "Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent's Perspective," unpublished manuscript, Adolescent Health Program, University of Minnesota, 1985. Cited in Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide."

5. Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," pp. 113–15.

matter of surviving *into* threat, stigma, the spiraling violence of gay- and lesbian-bashing, and (in the AIDS emergency) the omnipresence of somatic fear and wrenching loss. It is also to have survived into a moment of unprecedented cultural richness, cohesion, and assertiveness for many lesbian and gay adults. Survivors' guilt, survivors' glee, even survivors' responsibility: powerfully as these are experienced, they are also more than complicated by how permeable the identity "survivor" must be to the undiminishing currents of risk, illness, mourning, and defiance.

Thus I'm uncomfortable generalizing about people who do queer writing and teaching, even within literature; but some effects do seem widespread. I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queereradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged.

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. This can't help coloring the adult relation to cultural texts and objects; in fact, it's almost hard for me to imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it. The demands on both the text and the reader from so intent an attachment can be multiple, even paradoxical. For me, a kind of formalism, a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects. Education made it easy to accumulate tools for this particular formalist project, because the texts that magnetized me happened to be novels and poems; it's impressed me deeply the way others of my generation and since seem to have invented for themselves, in the spontaneity of great need, the tools for a formalist apprehension of other less prestigious, more ubiquitous kinds of text: genre movies, advertising, comic strips.

For me, this strong formalist investment didn't imply (as formalism is generally taken to imply) an evacuation of interest from the passional, the imagistic, the ethical dimensions of the texts, but quite the contrary: the need I brought to books and poems was hardly to be circumscribed, and I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest from them sustaining news of the world, ideas, myself, and (in various senses) my kind. The reading practice founded on such basic demands and intuitions had necessarily to run against the grain of the most patent available formulae for young

people's reading and life—against the grain, often, of the most accessible voices even in the texts themselves. 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.

WHITE NIGHTS The first lesbian and gay studies class I taught was in the English Department at Amherst College in 1986. I thought I knew which five or six students (mostly queer) would show up, and I designed the course, with them in mind, as a seminar that would meet one evening a week, at my house. The first evening sixty-five students showed up—a majority of them, straight-identified.

Having taught a number of these courses by now, I know enough to expect to lose plenty of sleep over each of them. The level of accumulated urgency, the immediacy of the demand that students bring to them, is jolting. In most of their courses students have, unfortunately, learned to relinquish the expectation that the course material will address them where they live and with material they can hold palpably accountable; in gay/lesbian courses, though, such expectations seem to rebound, clamorous and unchastened, in all their rawness. Especially considering the history of denegation that most queer students bring with them to college, the vitality of their demand is a precious resource. Most often during a semester everyone will spend some time angry at everybody else. It doesn't surprise me when straight and gay students, or women and men students, or religious and nonreligious students have bones to pick with each other or with me. What has surprised me more is how divisive issues of methodology and disciplinarity are: the single most controversial thing in several undergraduate classes has been *that they were literature courses,* that the path to every issue we discussed simply had to take the arduous defile through textual interpretation.

Furthermore, it was instructive to me in that class at Amherst that a great many students, students who defined themselves as nongay, were incensed when (in an interview in the student newspaper) I told the story of the course's genesis. What outraged them was the mere notation that I had designed the course evisioning an enrollment of mostly lesbian and gay students. Their sense of entitlement as straight-defined students was so strong that they considered it an inalienable right to have all kinds of different lives, histories, cultures unfolded as if anthropologically in formats specifically designed—designed from the ground up—for maximum legibility to themselves: they felt they shouldn't so much as have to slow down the Mercedes to read the historical markers on the battlefield. That it was a field where the actual survival of other people in the class might at the very moment be at stake—where, indeed, in a variety of ways so might their own be—was hard to make notable to them among the

permitted assumptions of their liberal arts education. Yet the same education was being used so differently by students who brought to it sharper needs, more supple epistemological frameworks.

CHRISTMAS EFFECTS What's "queer"? Here's one tram of thought about it. The depressing thing about the Christmas season—isn't it? —is that it's the time when all the institutions are speaking with one voice. The Church says what the Church says. But the State says the same thing: maybe not (in some ways it hardly matters) in the language of theology, but in the language the State talks: legal holidays, long school hiatus, special postage stamps, and all. And the language of commerce more than chimes in, as consumer purchasing is organized ever more narrowly around the final weeks of the calendar year, the Dow Jones aquiver over Americans' "holiday mood." The media, in turn, fall in triumphally behind the Christmas phalanx: ad-swollen magazines have oozing turkeys on the cover, while for the news industry every question turns into the Christmas question—Will hostages be free *for Christmas*? What did that flash flood or mass murder (umpty-ump people killed and maimed) do to those families' *Christmas*? And meanwhile, the pairing "families/Christmas" becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of "the" family.

The thing hasn't, finally, so much to do with propaganda for Christianity as with propaganda for Christmas itself. They all—religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourses of power and legitimacy—line up with each other so neatly once a year, and the monolith so created is a thing one can come to view with unhappy eyes. What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where *everything means the same thing*? Think of that entity "the family," an impacted social space in which all of the following are meant to line up perfectly with each other:

a surname
a sexual dyad
a legal unit based on state-regulated marriage
a circuit of blood relationships
a system of companionship and succor
a building
a proscenium between "private" and "public"
an economic unit of earning and taxation
the prime site of economic consumption
the prime site of cultural consumption
a mechanism to produce, care for, and acculturate children

a mechanism for accumulating material goods over several generations
a daily routine
a unit in a community of worship
a site of patriotic formation

and of course the list could go on. Looking at my own life, I see that—probably like most people—I have valued and pursued these various elements of family identity to quite differing degrees (e.g., no use at all for worship, much need of companionship). But what's been consistent in this particular life is an interest in *not* letting very many of these dimensions line up directly with each other at one time. I see it's been a ruling intuition for me that the most productive strategy (intellectually, emotionally) might be, whenever possible, to disarticulate them one from another, to disengage them—the bonds of blood, of law, of habitation, of privacy, of companionship and succor—from the lockstep of their unanimity in the system called "family."

Or think of all the elements that are condensed in the notion of sexual identity, something that the common sense of our time presents as a unitary category. Yet, exerting any pressure at all on "sexual identity," you see that its elements include

your biological (e.g., chromosomal) sex, male or female;
your self-perceived gender assignment, male or female (supposed to be the same as your biological sex);
the preponderance of your traits of personality and appearance, masculine or feminine (supposed to correspond to your sex and gender);
the biological sex of your preferred partner;
the gender assignment of your preferred partner (supposed to be the same as her/his biological sex);
the masculinity or femininity of your preferred partner (supposed to be the opposite[6] of your own);
your self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to correspond to whether your preferred partner is your sex or the opposite);
your preferred partner's self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to be the same as yours);
your procreative choice (supposed to be yes if straight, no if gay);
your preferred sexual act(s) (supposed to be insertive if you are male or masculine, receptive if you are female or feminine);
your most eroticized sexual organs (supposed to correspond to the procreative capabilities of your sex, and to your insertive/receptive assignment);

your sexual fantasies (supposed to be highly congruent with your sexual practice, but stronger in intensity);

your main locus of emotional bonds (supposed to reside in your preferred sexual partner);

your enjoyment of power in sexual relations (supposed to be low if you are female or feminine, high if male or masculine);

the people from whom you learn about your own gender and sex (supposed to correspond to yourself in both respects);

your community of cultural and political identification (supposed to correspond to your own identity);

and—again—many more. Even this list is remarkable for the silent presumptions it has to make about a given person's sexuality, presumptions that are true only to varying degrees, and for many people not true at all: that everyone "has a sexuality," for instance, and that it is implicated with each person's sense of overall identity in similar ways; that each person's most characteristic erotic expression will be oriented toward another person and not autoerotic; that if it is alloerotic, it will be oriented toward a single partner or kind of partner at a time; that its orientation will not change over time.[7] Normatively, as the parenthetical prescriptions in the list above suggest, it should be possible to deduce anybody's entire set of specs from the initial datum of biological sex alone—if one adds only the normative assumption that "the biological sex of your preferred partner" will be the opposite of one's own. With or without that heterosexist assumption, though, what's striking is the number and *difference* of the dimensions that "sexual identity" is supposed to organize into a seamless and univocal whole.

And if it doesn't?

That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically. 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,

6. The binary calculus I'm describing here depends on the notion that the male and female sexes are each other's "opposites," but I do want to register a specific demurral against that bit of easy common sense. Under no matter what cultural construction, women and men are more like each other than chalk is like cheese, than ratiocination is like raisins, than up is like down, or than 1 is like 0. The biological, psychological, and cognitive attributes of men overlap with those of women by vastly more than they differ from them.

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.

Again, "queer" can mean something different: a lot of the way I have used it so far in this dossier is to denote, almost simply, same-sex sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of definitional lines. And given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself.

At the same time, a lot of the most exciting recent work around "queer" spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identityfracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes "queer"—I think of an Isaac Julien, a Gloria Anzaldúa, a Richard Fung—are using the leverage of "queer" to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas,* the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity) of the term "queer" itself deepens and shifts.

Another telling representational effect. A word so fraught as "queer" is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone's use of "queer" about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. This is true (as it might also be true of "lesbian" or "gay") because of the violently different connotative evaluations that seem to cluster around the category. But "gay" and "lesbian" still present themselves (however delusively) as objective, empirical categories governed by empirical rules of evidence (however contested). "Queer" seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes —all it takes—to make the description "queer" a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person.

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7. A related list that amplifies some of the issues raised in this one appears in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet,* pp. 25–26.

crecy, than a decade ago is that it is no longer the most feared disease. In recent years some of the onus of cancer has been lifted by the emergence of a disease whose charge of stigmatization, whose capacity to create spoiled identity, is far greater. It seems that societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil, and attaches blame to its "victims," but it is hard to be obsessed with more than one.

Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its metaphors (New York: Picador, 1990)

2

Just as one might predict for a disease that is not yet fully understood as well as extremely recalcitrant to treatment, the advent of this terrifying new disease, new at least in its epidemic form, has provided a large-scale occasion for the metaphorizing of illness.

Strictly speaking, AIDS—acquired immune deficiency syndrome—is not the name of an illness at all. It is the name of a medical condition, whose consequences are a spectrum of illnesses. In contrast to syphilis and cancer, which provide prototypes for most of the images and metaphors attached to AIDS, the very definition of AIDS requires the presence of other illnesses, so-called opportunistic infections and malignancies. But though not in *that* sense a single disease, AIDS lends itself to being regarded as one—in part

because, unlike cancer and like syphilis, it is thought to have a single cause.

AIDS has a dual metaphoric genealogy. As a microprocess, it is described as cancer is: an invasion. When the focus is transmission of the disease, an older metaphor, reminiscent of syphilis, is invoked: pollution. (One gets it from the blood or sexual fluids of infected people or from contaminated blood products.) But the military metaphors used to describe AIDS have a somewhat different focus from those used in describing cancer. With cancer, the metaphor scants the issue of causality (still a murky topic in cancer research) and picks up at the point at which rogue cells inside the body mutate, eventually moving out from an original site or organ to overrun other organs or systems—a domestic subversion. In the description of AIDS the enemy is what causes the disease, an infectious agent that comes from the outside:

> The invader is tiny, about one sixteen-thousandth the size of the head of a pin. . . . Scouts of the body's immune system, large cells called macrophages, sense the presence of the diminutive foreigner and promptly alert the immune system. It begins to mobilize an array of cells that, among other things, produce antibodies to deal with the threat. Single-mindedly, the AIDS virus ignores many of the blood cells in its path, evades the rapidly advancing defenders and homes in on the master coordinator of the immune system, a helper T cell. . . .

This is the language of political paranoia, with its characteristic distrust of a pluralistic world. A defense system consisting of cells "that, among other things, produce antibodies to deal with the threat" is, predictably, no match for an invader who advances "single-mindedly." And the science-fiction flavor, already present in cancer talk, is even more pungent in accounts of AIDS—this one comes from *Time* magazine in late 1986—with infection described like the high-tech warfare for which we are being prepared (and inured) by the fantasies of our leaders and by video entertainments. In the era of Star Wars and Space Invaders, AIDS has proved an ideally comprehensible illness:

> On the surface of that cell, it finds a receptor into which one of its envelope proteins fits perfectly, like a key into a lock. Docking with the cell, the virus penetrates the cell membrane and is stripped of its protective shell in the process. . . .

Next the invader takes up permanent residence, by a form of alien takeover familiar in science-fiction narratives. The body's own cells *become* the invader. With the help of an enzyme the virus carries with it,

> the naked AIDS virus converts its RNA into . . . DNA, the master molecule of life. The molecule then penetrates the cell nucleus, inserts itself into a chromosome and takes over part of the cellular

> machinery, directing it to produce more AIDS viruses. Eventually, overcome by its alien product, the cell swells and dies, releasing a flood of new viruses to attack other cells. . . .

As viruses attack other cells, runs the metaphor, so "a host of opportunistic diseases, normally warded off by a healthy immune system, attacks the body," whose integrity and vigor have been sapped by the sheer replication of "alien product" that follows the collapse of its immunological defenses. "Gradually weakened by the onslaught, the AIDS victim dies, sometimes in months, but almost always within a few years of the first symptoms." Those who have not already succumbed are described as "under assault, showing the telltale symptoms of the disease," while millions of others "harbor the virus, vulnerable at any time to a final, all-out attack."

Cancer makes cells proliferate; in AIDS, cells die. Even as this original model of AIDS (the mirror image of leukemia) has been altered, descriptions of how the virus does its work continue to echo the way the illness is perceived as infiltrating the society. "AIDS Virus Found to Hide in Cells, Eluding Detection by Normal Tests" was the headline of a recent front-page story in *The New York Times* announcing the discovery that the virus can "lurk" for years in the macrophages—disrupting their disease-fighting function without killing them, "even when the macrophages are filled almost to bursting with virus," and

without producing antibodies, the chemicals the body makes in response to "invading agents" and whose presence has been regarded as an infallible marker of the syndrome.* That the virus isn't lethal for *all* the cells where it takes up residence, as is now thought, only increases the illness-foe's reputation for wiliness and invincibility.

What makes the viral assault so terrifying is that contamination, and therefore vulnerability, is understood as permanent. Even if someone infected were never to develop any symptoms—that is, the infection remained, or could by medical intervention be rendered, inactive—the viral enemy would be forever within. In fact, so it is believed, it is just a matter of time before something awakens ("triggers") it, before the appearance of "the telltale symptoms." Like syphilis, known to generations of doctors as "the great masquerader," AIDS is a clinical construction, an inference. It takes its identity from the presence of *some*

* The larger role assigned to the macrophages—"to serve as a reservoir for the AIDS virus because the virus multiplies in them but does not kill them, as it kills T-4 cells"—is said to explain the not uncommon difficulty of finding infected T-4 lymphocytes in patients who have antibodies to the virus and symptoms of AIDS. (It is still assumed that antibodies will develop once the virus spreads to these "key target" cells.) Evidence of presently infected populations of cells has been as puzzlingly limited or uneven as the evidence of infection in the populations of human societies—puzzling, because of the conviction that the disease is everywhere, and must spread. "Doctors have estimated that as few as one in a million T-4 cells are infected, which led some to ask where the virus hides. . . ." Another resonant speculation, reported in the same article (*The New York Times*, June 7, 1988): "Infected macrophages can transmit the virus to other cells, possibly by touching the cells."

among a long, and lengthening, roster of symptoms (no one has everything that AIDS could be), symptoms which "mean" that what the patient has is this illness. The construction of the illness rests on the invention not only of AIDS as a clinical entity but of a kind of junior AIDS, called AIDS-related complex (ARC), to which people are assigned if they show "early" and often intermittent symptoms of immunological deficit such as fevers, weight loss, fungal infections, and swollen lymph glands. AIDS is progressive, a disease of time. Once a certain density of symptoms is attained, the course of the illness can be swift, and brings atrocious suffering. Besides the commonest "presenting" illnesses (some hitherto unusual, at least in a fatal form, such as a rare skin cancer and a rare form of pneumonia), a plethora of disabling, disfiguring, and humiliating symptoms make the AIDS patient steadily more infirm, helpless, and unable to control or take care of basic functions and needs.

The sense in which AIDS is a slow disease makes it more like syphilis, which is characterized in terms of "stages," than like cancer. Thinking in terms of "stages" is essential to discourse about AIDS. Syphilis in its most dreaded form is "tertiary syphilis," syphilis in its third stage. What is called AIDS is generally understood as the last of three stages—the first of which is infection with a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and early evidence of inroads on the immune system—with a long latency period between infection and the onset of the "telltale" symptoms.

(Apparently not as long as syphilis, in which the latency period between secondary and tertiary illness might be decades. But it is worth noting that when syphilis first appeared in epidemic form in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, it was a rapid disease, of an unexplained virulence that is unknown today, in which death often occurred in the second stage, sometimes within months or a few years.) Cancer *grows* slowly: it is not thought to be, for a long time, latent. (A convincing account of a process in terms of "stages" seems invariably to include the notion of a normative delay or halt in the process, such as is supplied by the notion of latency.) True, a cancer is "staged." This is a principal tool of diagnosis, which means classifying it according to its gravity, determining how "advanced" it is. But it is mostly a spatial notion: that the cancer advances through the body, traveling or migrating along predictable routes. Cancer is first of all a disease of the body's geography, in contrast to syphilis and AIDS, whose definition depends on constructing a temporal sequence of stages.

Syphilis is an affliction that didn't have to run its ghastly full course, to paresis (as it did for Baudelaire and Maupassant and Jules de Goncourt), and could and often did remain at the stage of nuisance, indignity (as it did for Flaubert). The scourge was also a cliché, as Flaubert himself observed. "SYPHILIS. Everybody has it, more or less" reads one entry in the *Dictionary of Accepted Opinions*, his treasury of mid-nineteenth-century platitudes. And syphilis did

manage to acquire a darkly positive association in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe, when a link was made between syphilis and heightened ("feverish") mental activity that parallels the connection made since the era of the Romantic writers between pulmonary tuberculosis and heightened emotional activity. As if in honor of all the notable writers and artists who ended their lives in syphilitic witlessness, it came to be believed that the brain lesions of neurosyphilis might actually inspire original thought or art. Thomas Mann, whose fiction is a storehouse of early-twentieth-century disease myths, makes this notion of syphilis as muse central to his *Doctor Faustus*, with its protagonist a great composer whose voluntarily contracted syphilis—the Devil guarantees that the infection will be limited to the central nervous system—confers on him twenty-four years of incandescent creativity. E. M. Cioran recalls how, in Romania in the late 1920s, syphilis-envy figured in his adolescent expectations of literary glory: he would discover that he had contracted syphilis, be rewarded with several hyperproductive years of genius, then collapse into madness. This romanticizing of the dementia characteristic of neurosyphilis was the forerunner of the much more persistent fantasy in this century about mental illness as a source of artistic creativity or spiritual originality. But with AIDS—though dementia is also a common, late symptom—no compensatory mythology has arisen, or seems likely to arise. AIDS, like cancer, does not allow romanti-

cizing or sentimentalizing, perhaps because its association with death is too powerful. In Krzysztof Zanussi's film *Spiral* (1978), the most truthful account I know of anger at dying, the protagonist's illness is never specified; therefore, it *has* to be cancer. For several generations now, the generic idea of death has been a death from cancer, and a cancer death is experienced as a generic defeat. Now the generic rebuke to life and to hope is AIDS.

3

Because of countless metaphoric flourishes that have made cancer synonymous with evil, having cancer has been experienced by many as shameful, therefore something to conceal, and also unjust, a betrayal by one's body. Why me? the cancer patient exclaims bitterly. With AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt; and the scandal is not at all obscure. Few wonder, Why me? Most people outside of sub-Saharan Africa who have AIDS know (or think they know) how they got it. It is not a mysterious affliction that seems to strike at random. Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far,

as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution.

Getting cancer, too, is sometimes understood as the fault of someone who has indulged in "unsafe" behavior—the alcoholic with cancer of the esophagus, the smoker with lung cancer: punishment for living unhealthy lives. (In contrast to those obliged to perform unsafe occupations, like the worker in a petrochemical factory who gets bladder cancer.) More and more linkages are sought between primary organs or systems and specific practices that people are invited to repudiate, as in recent speculation associating colon cancer and breast cancer with diets rich in animal fats. But the unsafe habits associated with cancer, among other illnesses—even heart disease, hitherto little culpabilized, is now largely viewed as the price one pays for excesses of diet and "life-style"—are the result of a weakness of the will or a lack of prudence, or of addiction to legal (albeit very dangerous) chemicals. The unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency—addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant.

The sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means—especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity. (I am thinking, of course, of the United States, where people are currently being told that heterosexual transmission is extremely rare, and unlikely—as if Africa did not exist.) An infectious disease whose principal means of transmission is sexual necessarily puts at greater risk those who are sexually more active—and is easy to view as a punishment for that activity. True of syphilis, this is even truer of AIDS, since not just promiscuity but a specific sexual "practice" regarded as unnatural is named as more endangering. Getting the disease through a sexual practice is thought to be more willful, therefore deserves more blame. Addicts who get the illness by sharing contaminated needles are seen as committing (or completing) a kind of inadvertent suicide. Promiscuous homosexual men practicing their vehement sexual customs under the illusory conviction, fostered by medical ideology with its cure-all antibiotics, of the relative innocuousness of all sexually transmitted diseases, could be viewed as dedicated hedonists—though it's now clear that their behavior was no less suicidal. Those like hemophiliacs and blood-transfusion recipients, who cannot by any stretch of the blaming faculty be considered responsible for their illness, may be as ruthlessly ostracized by frightened people, and potentially represent

a greater threat because, unlike the already stigmatized, they are not as easy to identify.

Infectious diseases to which sexual fault is attached always inspire fears of easy contagion and bizarre fantasies of transmission by nonvenereal means in public places. The removal of doorknobs and the installation of swinging doors on U.S. Navy ships and the disappearance of the metal drinking cups affixed to public water fountains in the United States in the first decades of the century were early consequences of the "discovery" of syphilis's "innocently transmitted infection"; and the warning to generations of middle-class children always to interpose paper between bare bottom and the public toilet seat is another trace of the horror stories about the germs of syphilis being passed to the innocent by the dirty that were rife once and are still widely believed. Every feared epidemic disease, but especially those associated with sexual license, generates a preoccupying distinction between the disease's putative carriers (which usually means just the poor and, in this part of the world, people with darker skins) and those defined—health professionals and other bureaucrats do the defining—as "the general population." AIDS has revived similar phobias and fears of contamination among *this* disease's version of "the general population": white heterosexuals who do not inject themselves with drugs or have sexual relations with those who do. Like syphilis a disease of, or contracted from, dangerous others, AIDS is perceived as afflicting, in greater proportions

than syphilis ever did, the already stigmatized. But syphilis was not identified with certain death, death that follows a protracted agony, as cancer was once imagined and AIDS is now held to be.

That AIDS is not a single illness but a syndrome, consisting of a seemingly open-ended list of contributing or "presenting" illnesses which constitute (that is, qualify the patient as having) the disease, makes it more a product of definition or construction than even a very complex, multiform illness like cancer. Indeed, the contention that AIDS is invariably fatal depends partly on what doctors decided to define as AIDS—and keep in reserve as distinct earlier stages of the disease. And this decision rests on a notion no less primitively metaphorical than that of a "full-blown" (or "full-fledged") disease.* "Full-blown" is the form in which

* The standard definition distinguishes between people with the disease or syndrome "fulfilling the criteria for the surveillance definition of AIDS" from a larger number infected with HIV and symptomatic "who do not fulfill the empiric criteria for the full-blown disease. This constellation of signs and symptoms in the context of HIV infection has been termed the AIDS-related complex (ARC)." Then follows the obligatory percentage. "It is estimated that approximately 25 percent of patients with ARC will develop full-blown disease within 3 years." Harrison's *Principles of Internal Medicine*, 11th edition (1987), p. 1394.

The first major illness known by an acronym, the condition called AIDS does not have, as it were, natural borders. It is an illness whose identity is designed for purposes of investigation and with tabulation and surveillance by medical and other bureaucracies in view. Hence, the unselfconscious equating in the medical textbook of what is empirical with what pertains to surveillance, two notions deriving from quite different models of understanding. (AIDS is what fulfills that which is referred to as either the "criteria for the *surveillance definition*" or the "*empiric criteria*": HIV infection plus

the disease is inevitably fatal. As what is immature is destined to become mature, what buds to become full-blown (fledglings to become full-fledged)—the doctors' botanical or zoological metaphor makes development or evolution into AIDS the norm, the rule. I am not saying that the metaphor creates the clinical conception, but I am arguing that it does much more than just ratify it. It lends support to an interpretation of the clinical evidence which is far from proved or, yet, provable. It is simply too early to conclude, of a disease identified only seven years ago, that infection will always produce something to die from, or even that everybody who has what is defined as AIDS will die of it. (As some medical writers have speculated, the appalling mortality rates could be registering the early, mostly rapid deaths of those most vulnerable to the virus—because of diminished immune competence, because of genetic predisposition, among other possible co-factors—not the ravages of a uniformly fatal infection.) Construing the disease as divided into distinct stages was the necessary way of implementing the metaphor of "full-blown disease." But it also slightly weakened the notion of inevitability suggested by the metaphor. Those sensibly interested in hedging their bets about how uniformly

the presence of one or more diseases included on the roster drawn up by the disease's principal administrator of definition in the United States, the federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.) This completely stipulative definition with its metaphor of maturing disease *decisively influences how the illness is understood.*

lethal infection would prove could use the standard three-tier classification—HIV infection, AIDS-related complex (ARC), and AIDS—to entertain either of two possibilities or both: the less catastrophic one, that *not* everybody infected would "advance" or "graduate" from HIV infection, and the more catastrophic one, that everybody would.

It is the more catastrophic reading of the evidence that for some time has dominated debate about the disease, which means that a change in nomenclature is under way. Influential administrators of the way the disease is understood have decided that there should be no more of the false reassurance that might be had from the use of different acronyms for different stages of the disease. (It could never have been more than minimally reassuring.) Recent proposals for redoing terminology—for instance, to phase out the category of ARC—do not challenge the construction of the disease in stages, but do place additional stress on the *continuity* of the disease process. "Full-blown disease" is viewed as more inevitable now, and that strengthens the fatalism already in place.*

* The 1988 Presidential Commission on the epidemic recommended "de-emphasizing" the use of the term ARC because it "tends to obscure the life-threatening aspects of this stage of illness." There is some pressure to drop the term AIDS, too. The report by the Presidential Commission pointedly used the acronym HIV for the epidemic itself, as part of a recommended shift from "monitoring disease" to "monitoring infection." Again, one of the reasons given is that the present terminology masks the true gravity of the menace. ("This longstanding concentration on the clinical manifestations of AIDS rather than on all stages of HIV infection [i.e., from initial

From the beginning the construction of the illness had depended on notions that separated one group of people from another—the sick from the well, people with ARC from people with AIDS, them and us—while implying the imminent dissolution of these distinctions. However hedged, the predictions always sounded fatalistic. Thus, the frequent pronouncements by AIDS specialists and public health officials on the chances of those infected with the virus coming down with "full-blown" disease have seemed mostly an exercise in the management of public opinion, dosing out the harrowing news in several steps. Estimates of the percentage expected to show symptoms classifying them as having AIDS within five years, which may be too low—at the time of this writing, the figure is 30 to 35 percent—are invariably followed by the assertion that "most," after which comes "probably all," those infected will eventually become ill. The critical number, then, is not the percentage of people likely to develop AIDS within a relatively short time but the *maximum* interval that could elapse between infection with HIV (described as lifelong and irreversible) and appearance of the first symptoms. As the years add up in which the illness has been tracked, so does the possible num-

infection to seroconversion, to an antibody-positive asymptomatic stage, to full-blown AIDS] has had the unintended effect of misleading the public as to the extent of infection in the population. . . .") It does seem likely that the disease will, eventually, be renamed. *This* change in nomenclature would justify officially the policy of including the infected but asymptomatic among the ill.)

Hervé Guibert,
To the friend who did
not save my life,
trans. Linda Coverdale
(Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e),
2020)

1

I had AIDS for three months. More precisely, for three months I believed I was condemned to die of that mortal illness called AIDS. Mind you, I wasn't imagining things, I really did have the disease, and the positive test results to prove it, as well as lab workups showing that my blood was beginning to deteriorate. But after three months, something completely unexpected happened that convinced me I could and almost certainly would escape this disease, which everyone still claimed was always fatal. Just as I had told no one save a few of my close friends that I was doomed, I told no one save these same friends that I was going to make it, that I would become, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, one of the first people on earth to survive this deadly malady.

2

On this twenty-sixth day of December, 1988, as I begin this book, in Rome, where I've come alone and against everyone's advice, fleeing that handful of friends who, fearing for the state of my morale, tried to persuade me not to leave, on this holiday when everything is closed and every passerby is a stranger, in Rome where I realize once and for all that I do not like my fellow men, where, determined to avoid them like the plague, I therefore have no idea with whom or where I can go to have a bite to eat, several months after those three months when I was truly convinced I was lost, and after the months that followed when I was able to believe myself saved by the luckiest of chances, wavering now between doubt and lucidity, having reached the limits of both hope and despair, I don't know what to think about any of these crucial questions, about this alternation of certain death and sudden reprieve, I don't know if this salvation is a decoy intended to soothe me, dangled before my eyes like a trap about to be sprung, or a genuine science fiction adventure in which I shall play the role of a hero, and I can't tell if it's a ridiculously human failing to have faith in this deliverance and this miracle. I have a sense of the structure of this new book I've been harboring within myself all

these last weeks, but I don't know how it will unfold in its entirety; I can imagine several endings, all of which fall for the moment under the heading of premonition or heartfelt desire, but the whole truth is still hidden from me, and I tell myself that this book's raison d'être lies only along this borderline of uncertainty, so familiar to all sick people everywhere.

3

I'm alone here and they feel sorry for me, they worry about me, they think I'm not taking good care of myself, so these friends (who can be counted on the fingers of one hand, according to Eugénie) telephone me regularly, compassionately, me—a man who has just discovered that he doesn't like his fellow men, no, I definitely don't like them, I rather hate them instead, and this would explain everything, that stubborn hatred I've always felt, and I'm beginning a new book to have a companion, someone with whom I can talk, eat, sleep, at whose side I can dream and have nightmares, the only friend whose company I can bear at present. My companion, my book, which I'd imagined would proceed according to the original flight plan, has already begun to wrest the controls from my hands, even though I might appear to be the captain of this exercise in contact flying. There's a demon stowed away in my baggage compartment: TB. I've stopped reading these pages to keep the poison from spreading. It's said that each reintroduction of the AIDS virus through bodily fluids—blood, sperm, tears—renews the attack on the already infected patient; perhaps they're just saying that in an effort to contain the damage.

4

My blood continues to deteriorate with each passing day; for the moment, my condition might be described as a case of leukopenia. My most recent test results, dated November 18, show a T4 count of 368, whereas a healthy man's range is between 500 and 2000. The T4 cells are the leucocytes against which the AIDS virus directs its initial attack, gradually weakening the immune system. The final offensives, the pneumocystis and toxoplasmosis that ravage the lungs and brain respectively, are launched when the T4 count drops below 200, and these assaults can now be slowed down by the drug AZT. Early in the history of AIDS, T4 cells were called "helpers," while the remaining leucocytes, the T8s, were called "suppressors." Before anyone had ever heard of AIDS, an electronic game invented for the amusement of adolescents portrayed the effects of the virus in the bloodstream. On screen, the circulatory system was a labyrinth through which roamed the Pacman, a yellow cartoon blob controlled by a lever; as it gobbled up all it encountered, stripping the various passageways of their plankton, Pacman was itself threatened by the sudden appearance and proliferation of even more gluttonous red blobs. If you compare AIDS to the Pacman game, which remained popular for quite a long time, the

T4s would stand for the initial inhabitants of the labyrinth, while the T8s would be the yellow blobs, themselves closely pursued by the HIV virus, represented by the red blobs and their insatiable appetite for immunological plankton. Long before my positive test results confirmed that I had the disease, I'd felt my blood suddenly stripped naked, laid bare, as though it had always been clothed or covered until then without my noticing this, since it was only natural, but now something—I didn't know what—had removed this protection. From that moment on, I would have to live with this exposed and denuded blood, like an unclothed body that must make its way through a nightmare. My blood, unmasked, everywhere and forever (except in the unlikely event of miracle-working transfusions), naked around the clock, when I'm walking in the street, taking public transportation, the constant target of an arrow aimed at me wherever I go. Does it show in my eyes? I don't worry so much anymore about keeping my gaze human as I do about acquiring one that is too human, like the look you see in the eyes of the concentration camp inmates in the documentary *Night and Fog.*

5

I felt death approaching in the mirror, gazing back at me from my own reflection, long before it had truly arrived to stay. Was I already throwing this death into other people's faces whenever I looked into their eyes? I didn't talk about this to everyone. Until then, until the book, I hadn't admitted it to everyone. Like Muzil, I would have liked to have had the strength, the insane pride, as well as the generosity, to tell no one, allowing friendships to live as lightly as air, carefree and eternal. But what can you do when you're at rock bottom, and the disease is jeopardizing even friendship itself? I did tell some people: Jules, then David, then Gustave, then Berthe, I would've preferred not to tell Edwige but I felt from the first time we lunched together in silence and falsehood that it was driving us horribly apart and that if we didn't cleave immediately to the truth it would soon be forever too late, so to remain true to her I told her, and as things turned out I had to tell Bill, sensing as I did so that I was losing all freedom, all control over my illness, and then I told Suzanne, because she's so old she isn't afraid of anything anymore, because she's never loved anyone except a dog over which she shed tears the day she sent it off to be put to sleep, Suzanne who is ninety-three and whose life expectancy became the

same as mine when I confessed my secret, which her memory might erase or turn into fantasy from one moment to the next, Suzanne who was completely prepared to forget such a shocking idea right then and there. I didn't tell Eugénie; I have lunch with her at La Closerie: does she see it in my eyes? I find her company increasingly boring. It seems to me that my relationships with people are no longer interesting unless they know the truth; everything else has collapsed, become meaningless, worthless, lifeless outside the purlieus of this momentous news, beyond the reach of friendship's daily bulletins, where I draw the line, condemned to solitude by my refusal to speak. If I were to tell my parents, I'd risk having the whole world dump shit on my head, all at the same time, I'd be letting every last asshole on earth crap on me, letting myself be buried under their stinking shit. My chief concern, in this business, is to avoid dying in the spotlight of the parental eye.

6

This is how I saw things, and I said so to Dr. Chandi when he began tracking the evolution of the virus in my body: AIDS isn't really an illness, and to call it one is a simplification, for it's a state of weakness and surrender that uncages the beast within, which I must give free rein to devour me, which I allow to inflict upon my living flesh the operations of disintegration it was preparing for my corpse. The microorganisms responsible for both *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, that boa constrictor of the lungs, and the brain-destroying cysts of toxoplasmosis may be present inside each one of us but are kept in check by a healthy immune system, whereas AIDS gives them the green light, opening the floodgates of destruction. Lying in his hospital bed, completely in the dark about what was eating him alive, Muzil had it figured out even before the experts: "The damned thing must have come from Africa." AIDS, which crossed over to us from the blood of green monkeys, is a disease of witch doctors and evil spells.

7

Dr. Chandi—whom I'd been consulting for over a year, after leaving Dr. Nacier without any explanation, considering him guilty of indiscretion, of gossiping about the rather droopy balls of certain celebrities in his care, but reproaching him even more, actually, for having mentioned, when he diagnosed my shingles, that doctors were seeing a resurgence of that particular sequela of chicken pox in their seropositive patients, since up to that time I'd refused to take the test for the virus first known as LAV, then HIV, tossing into drawers over the years his various lab requisitions directing me, under my real name or an assumed one, to have my blood tested, telling myself that such a step would drive a nervous type like me to suicide, convinced that I knew the results beforehand and didn't need to take the test, being levelheaded or just fooling myself, allowing at the same time that a minimum of moral decency required that one conduct one's love life, which tends to slow down with age, as though one were infected by the disease, keeping in the back of my mind, while passing through a hopeful phase, that this was also the way to protect myself, but maintaining that the test served only to reduce unfortunate souls to the most abject despair as long as no cure was yet available, which is exactly

what I replied to my mother, who had written asking me to reassure her (the shameless egotist) on this worrisome subject—Dr. Chandi (this new general practitioner whom Bill had recommended to me with high praise for his discretion, even pointing out that he was treating a mutual friend who had AIDS, which friend I could therefore immediately identify and who despite his celebrity had thus far been shielded from rumor by the absolute discretion of his physician) performed the same procedures in the same order each time he examined me: after the usual auscultation and taking of blood pressure, he would check the soles of my feet, the skin between my toes, delicately inspect the opening of the ever-so-sensitive urethra, and then I would remind him, after he'd palpated the groin, belly, armpits, and the throat up under the jaw, that it was useless to proffer the slim wooden depressor that my tongue has stubbornly refused to have anything to do with ever since I was a child, for I prefer to open my mouth very wide at the approach of the flashlight beam, contracting my guttural muscles to draw the uvula back up against the palate, but each time Dr. Chandi would forget that he obtained a much better view from this maneuver than from brandishing that slick little stick bristling with imaginary splinters, and he had added to this examination routine, in the course of his inspection of the soft palate (making quite a thorough job of it, as though it were subsequently up to me to keep a close watch on this area to see if it concealed some decisive sign regarding the progress of the fatal disease), a study of the tissues of the frenum, often bluish or bright red, that anchors the tongue to the floor of the mouth. Then, grasping my skull from behind with one hand and pressing hard with the thumb and index of the other against the middle of my forehead, he would ask me if that hurt, while studying the reactions of my irises. He'd

wind up the examination by inquiring if I hadn't been suffering lately from fairly constant bouts of diarrhea. No, everything was fine, and with the help of ampules of Trophisan in a glycol base, I'd gained back the weight I'd lost during my attack of shingles, tipping the scales at 154 pounds.

8

Bill was the first to tell me about this famous disease, it must have been sometime in 1981. He'd just returned from the United States, where he'd come across the first clinical reports about this strange death and its specific provenance in a professional journal. He himself spoke of this mysterious illness with both skepticism and real foreboding. Bill is the manager of a large pharmaceutical laboratory that manufactures vaccines. While dining alone with Muzil the next day, I passed on Bill's alarming news. My friend fell off the sofa in a paroxysm of laughter. "A cancer that would hit only homosexuals, no, that's too good to be true, I could just die laughing!" As it happened, Muzil was already infected with the retrovirus, since its latent period, as Stéphane told me the other day, is now known to be about six years, although this is being kept quiet to avoid spreading panic among the thousands who are seropositive. A few months after Muzil's fit of hilarity at dinner, he went into a deep depression; it was during the summer, I could hear the change in his voice over the phone, I'd stare disconsolately from my studio apartment over at my neighbor's balcony (that's how I'd discreetly dedicated a book to Muzil, "To my neighbor," before having to dedicate the next one "To a dead friend"), I was

afraid he might throw himself from this balcony, I was stretching invisible nets from my window to his to save him, I didn't know what was wrong but I could tell from his voice that it was something terrible, and later I learned that he confided in no one but me, that day when he told me, "Stéphane is sick with love of me, I finally understand that I am Stéphane's sickness and that I'll remain so all his life, no matter what I do, unless I disappear; the only way to save him from his illness, I'm sure of this, would be to do away with myself." But the die was already cast.

9

After fulfilling his military obligations with a long stint as an intern in the hospital at Biskra, Dr. Nacier had become interested in geriatrics; at that time he was working in a hospice for the elderly on the outskirts of Paris, and as we were then still on friendly terms, he invited me to visit him there and to bring along a camera, which might easily be hidden in the pocket of the white coat he would provide so that I might pass for one of his colleagues during rounds. Dr. Nacier's belief that I was secretly intrigued by moribund flesh had been inspired by the photonovel I'd devoted to my two great-aunts, who were then eighty-five and seventy-five years old. He was entirely mistaken about this, for not only did I not take a single picture in that old-age home, I wasn't even tempted to take one, and that visit in disguise filled me with shame and horror. Dr. Nacier, that handsome young man so popular with elderly ladies, that former male model who had tried unsuccessfully to become an actor before reluctantly entering medical school, that dapper dandy who boasted of having been raped at the age of fifteen (in the Grand Hotel in Vevey, where he was staying with his parents shortly before the automobile accident that would claim his father's life) by one of the actors who played James Bond, that man was too

ambitious to resign himself to a career as an internist earning eighty-five francs a visit from flabby, smelly, fussy patients, all hypochondriacs, in a crummy neighborhood doctor's office that might just as well be a cesspool. That's why he first tried to make his name through the creation of a designer death resort, complete with registered trademark, which, in the form of a high-tech clinic, or do-it-yourself kit, would replace those long revolting death agonies with the speed and fairy-tale atmosphere of a first-class trip to the moon (not reimbursed by Medicare). To persuade the banks to finance this venture, Dr. Nacier had to come up with someone whose moral authority would protect such a project from any suspicion of shadiness. Muzil was the ideal godfather for this baby. Through me, Dr. Nacier easily obtained an appointment with Muzil, with whom I was going to have dinner afterward. When I arrived, I found my friend beside himself with glee, a mad twinkle in his eye. This project—which he dismissed, quite reasonably, as utterly worthless—was at the same time like finest catnip to him. Muzil never laughed so much or so heartily as when he was dying. Once Dr. Nacier had left, he said to me, "This is what I told your little buddy: that nursing home of his, it shouldn't be a place where people go to die, but a place where they pretend to die. Everything there should be luxurious, with fancy paintings and soothing music, but it would all be just camouflage for the real mystery, because there'd be a little door hidden away in a corner of the clinic, perhaps behind one of those dreamily exotic pictures, and to the torpid melody of a hypodermic nirvana, you'd secretly slip behind the painting, and presto, you'd vanish, quite dead in the eyes of the world, since no one would see you reappear on the other side of the wall, in the alley, with no baggage, no name, no nothing, forced to invent a new identity for yourself."

10

Muzil had become obsessed with his own name. He wanted to obliterate it. I'd asked him to contribute an article on criticism to the newspaper I worked for, but he kept putting me off, at the same time trying to avoid hurting my feelings by claiming he was unable to write because of excruciating headaches, so I finally suggested that he publish the piece under an assumed name. Two days later it arrived in the mail, a limpid and incisive text, along with this note: "What flash of insight told you that the problem isn't the head, but the name?" He proposed signing the article "Julien de l'Hôpital," and two or three years later, whenever I visited him in the hospital where he lay dying, I'd remember this somber nom de plume that never saw the light of day, because obviously the big daily newspaper I worked for had no use for an article on criticism by "Julien de l'Hôpital." A copy of it sat around for a long time in a secretary's files but had disappeared by the time Muzil asked for it back; I found the original at my place and gave him that, and Stéphane discovered at his death that he'd destroyed it, along with so many other texts, hurriedly, during the last few months before his collapse. I was probably responsible for the destruction of an entire manuscript on Manet he'd once mentioned and which I later

asked him to lend me, hoping it might help with a study I'd begun writing, "The Painting of the Dead," which I never completed. It was because of my request that Muzil, who'd promised to loan me the piece, went digging around in his chaotic mess of papers for the manuscript, which he found, reread, and tore to shreds that very day. Its destruction meant the loss of tens of millions of francs for Stéphane, even though Muzil left as his sole will and testament a few laconic and doubtless well-chosen instructions that kept his work inviolate, materially preserving his manuscripts from his family by leaving them to his companion, and morally withholding them from his companion's control by forbidding all posthumous publication, thus preventing Stéphane from concocting his own work from Muzil's leftovers, forcing him to strike out on his own, and therefore limiting the damage that might have been done to his legacy. Stéphane did succeed, however, in making Muzil's death his business, and perhaps that's how Muzil had intended to make him a present of it: by inventing the job of defending this new, original, and fearsome death.

11

Just as he was careful, beyond the limits he established for his oeuvre, to erase that name made inordinately famous throughout the world, he tried to make his face invisible, although he was particularly easy to recognize, thanks to several distinctive features and the many pictures of him published by the press over the previous decade. Whenever he invited out to dinner one of the few friends he still enjoyed seeing (chosen from a select circle he had ruthlessly reduced during his last years, by pushing his acquaintances out into a distant zone of friendship that suddenly meant he no longer had to spend time with them, limiting their relationship to an occasional note or phone call), as soon as he entered the restaurant—shouldering the cherished friend aside, if he had to—he'd make a beeline for a chair that would allow him both to sit with his back to the other patrons and to avoid facing a mirror, and only then would he recover his aplomb, politely offering the chair or banquette he didn't want to his guest. *The public would see only the gleaming and self-contained enigma of that skull he took care to shave every morning, on which I sometimes observed, when he opened his door to welcome me, trickles of dried blood that had escaped his notice, and when he gave me two tiny, smacking kisses*

on each cheek, I could smell the freshness of his breath and realized he'd had the courtesy to brush his teeth shortly before I was due to arrive. He couldn't go out much in Paris, where he felt too well known. When he went to the movies, all eyes were on him. Some nights, from my balcony at 203 Rue du Bac, I'd see him leave his place wearing a black leather jacket with chains and metal rings on the epaulets, taking the open passageway that links the various staircases at 205 Rue du Bac, going down to the underground garage where he kept his car, which he drove rather clumsily, like a panic-stricken mole with his nose shoved nearsightedly against the windshield, and he'd set out across Paris for Le Keller, a bar in the douzième arrondissement, where he'd pick up victims. In a closet in the apartment, which the handwritten will had put off-limits to the family, Stéphane later discovered a huge bag filled with whips, leather hoods, leashes, bridles, and handcuffs. These items, which he claimed not to have known about, gave him a feeling of unexpected revulsion, he said, as though they were now dead as well, and stone-cold. Following the advice of Muzil's brother, he had the apartment disinfected before taking possession of it, still unaware that most of the manuscripts had been destroyed. Muzil adored violent orgies in bathhouses. He didn't dare frequent the baths in Paris for fear of being recognized, but when he went off to give his annual seminar near San Francisco, he went at it to his heart's content in that city's many bathhouses, which have since been closed because of the epidemic and turned into supermarkets or parking lots. San Francisco's homosexuals could act out their wildest fantasies in those places, using old bathtubs for urinals, where victims would lie all night waiting to be defiled, or wedging sections of dismantled trucks into upstairs rooms for torture chambers. In the autumn of 1983, Muzil returned from his seminar with a dry

cough that was tearing his lungs out and slowly wearing him down. Between fits of coughing, however, he was eager to report on his latest escapades in the baths of San Francisco. That day I remarked to him, "Those places must be completely deserted now because of AIDS." "Don't be silly," he replied, "it's just the opposite: the baths have never been so popular, and now they're fantastic. This danger lurking everywhere has created new complicities, new tenderness, new solidarities. Before, no one ever said a word; now we talk to one another. We all know exactly why we're there."

12

I first met Muzil's secretary on the day of my friend's funeral, which I attended with Stéphane. A few days later I met the man again on a bus, and he told me a few things I hadn't known. We still weren't certain whether Muzil had ever realized exactly what was killing him; his assistant assured me that in any case, he'd been aware that the illness would prove fatal. All through 1983, Muzil regularly attended the meetings of a humanitarian association, which were held in a dermatological clinic run by someone who belonged to the organization that sends doctors all over the world when there's a political or natural disaster. The first cases of AIDS were being treated at this clinic because of the dermatological symptoms involved, in particular Kaposi's sarcoma, which begins on the feet and legs with reddish-violet marks that eventually spread all over the body, even to the face. Muzil would cough like mad at these meetings, where everyone discussed the situation in Poland after the coup d'état. Despite Stéphane's and my urging, he refused to see a doctor, finally giving in only when the head of the clinic voiced his concern over that persistent, hacking cough. Muzil spent a morning in the hospital having tests done, and told me he'd forgotten how completely the body loses all identity once it's delivered

into medical hands, becoming just a package of helpless flesh, trundled around here and there, hardly even a number on a slip of paper, a name put through the administrative mill, drained of all individuality and dignity. They slid a tube down his throat to examine his lungs. The head of the clinic was soon able to determine the nature of Muzil's illness from the results of these tests, but to safeguard the reputation of his patient and colleague, he took steps to keep the truth from leaking out by monitoring the medical records and lab results linking that famous name to this new disease, by falsifying and censoring this paper trail so that Muzil could retain a free hand with his work until his death, unencumbered by troublesome rumors. He made the unusual decision not to tell even Muzil's companion, Stéphane, whom he knew slightly, so as to keep this terrible specter from haunting their friendship, but he did inform Muzil's assistant, so that he would devote himself more than ever to his employer's wishes and help him with his final projects. During our talk on the bus months later, the assistant told me that the head of the dermatological clinic had spoken with him shortly after this meeting with Muzil, when the doctor had gone over the test results with his patient only to have him put an end to the discussion with an abrupt wave of his hand, while the intent look in his eyes had become more piercing than ever. "How long?" he'd asked. That was the only question of importance for him, for his work, for finishing his book. Did the doctor then tell him exactly what was wrong? I doubt it, even today. Did Muzil even give him a chance to speak? A year earlier, during one of our suppers in his kitchen, I'd steered him toward that question, the relationship between doctor and patient when it comes to telling the truth about a mortal illness. I was afraid I might be suffering from liver cancer as a result of a poorly handled bout of hepatitis.

Muzil had said to me, "The doctor doesn't tell the patient the truth straight out, but he gives him the means and the opportunity, by talking in a roundabout way, to figure it out for himself, which also allows him to remain blessedly ignorant, if that's really what he wants." The head of the clinic prescribed massive doses of antibiotics for Muzil, which brought his cough under control and so deferred his death for an indeterminate time. Muzil got back to work, tackled his book again, and even decided to give a series of lectures he'd been thinking of postponing. He didn't mention this interview with the doctor to either Stéphane or me. One day he announced his intention of going halfway around the world with a team from that humanitarian association he helped sponsor, on a dangerous mission from which, he led me to understand, he might never return, but I could see in his face that he was somehow testing my reaction, that he was still undecided and wanted my advice. He was taking off for the ends of the earth to seek that dreamed-of little door to oblivion hidden behind the picture in the ideal death resort. Frightened by this project and doing my best not to show him how upset I was, I replied casually that I thought he'd be better off finishing his book. His endless book.

13

He'd begun his history of human behavior before I met him, which must have been early in 1977, since my first book, *Death/Propaganda*, came out in January of that year, and it was after my book appeared that I was lucky enough to join his small circle of friends. The first volume of his monumental study had already been published, and although originally conceived as an introduction to the work, had expanded until it became a book in its own right, thus delaying the publication of the real first volume, which then became the second, even though it had been ready to go to press when that introduction had knocked it out of first place, in the spring of 1976, when I hadn't met him yet, when he was for me only a celebrated and fascinating neighbor, an author of books I hadn't read. When this introduction appeared, and was roundly criticized because its thesis was fundamentally opposed to the ideas on repression then in favor, he had agreed, for the first and last time (since he refused all subsequent invitations), to appear on the intellectual variety show called "*Apostrophes*." I didn't watch this program at the time, but Christine Ockrent, Muzil's favorite television announcer (he often jokingly called her his little—or big—sweetie, and whenever I arrived too early for dinner at his place, he'd make

me walk around outside for a while so that he could have her all to himself on the TV screen until eight-thirty), showed a short clip on her news broadcast—which he wouldn't have missed for anything—on the night of his death, in June of 1984. What Christine Ockrent actually reran was one huge, endless fit of laughter, taped during that program of "*Apostrophes*," showing Muzil in a tie and three-piece suit, literally cracking up at a moment when everyone expected him to be as serious as the pope and pontificate about one of the tenets of his subversive history of behavior, and that burst of hilarity warmed my heart at a time when I thought it had turned to ice, when I switched on the TV over at Jules and Berthe's place, where I'd taken refuge the night he died, to find out how they were going to present his obituary on the evening news. That was the last tape of Muzil I ever watched, for since then I've refused, from fear of the pain it would cause me, to face any other images of his presence, save those of dreams, and his great shout of laughter, which I've preserved forever in a freeze-frame, delights me still, even though I'm somewhat jealous that laughter so fantastic, so impetuous, so luminous, could have burst forth from Muzil at a time just before our friendship was to begin. In the same way that he attacked the foundations of society's collective assumptions regarding sex, he'd begun to undermine the structure of his own labyrinth. He'd announced the titles of the following four books in his mammoth history of human behavior on the back of the first volume to appear, because the next one was already completed and he had all the documentation he needed for the others. Committed to the first section of a project for which he has drawn up the plans, designed the framework and vaults, sketched in connecting passageways and areas of shadow, following the rules of a system that has already proven its value in his previous books and won him his

international reputation, he's now struck with boredom, or some terrible misgiving. Everything comes to a halt, the plans go out the window, and he stops working on this huge project already plotted out on his dialectical graph paper. At first he intends to move the second volume to the end of the series, or at least to set it temporarily aside, so that he can approach the subject from another angle, shift the beginning of his study back in time, and invent a new methodology of exploration. Following peripheral paths from detour to detour, allowing supplementary paragraphs to burgeon into something more like complete books, he becomes lost, discouraged, destroys pages, abandons efforts, reconstructs, rearranges, slowly falling prey to the insidious lassitude of withdrawal, of persistently avoiding publication, and is exposed to the most jealous rumors of all kinds, accusations of impotence, senility, his silence interpreted as an admission of error or vacuity, seduced more and more by the dream of an endless book that would raise every possible question, that nothing could bring to an end save death or exhaustion, the most powerful and fragile book in the world, a treasure-in-progress whose creator holds it out toward—or snatches it back from—the abyss with every twist and turn of his thoughts, toying with the idea of consigning it to the flames with each fit of dejection, a bible destined for hell. The certainty of his approaching death put an end to this dream. Realizing his days were numbered, he began to reorganize his book with absolute clarity. In the spring of 1983, he and Stéphane left for Andalusia. I was surprised that he made reservations in second- or third-class hotels; he was often thrifty in such matters, and yet after his death, numerous checks amounting to several million francs were found in his apartment, checks he hadn't bothered to deposit. Actually, he was more horrified than anything else by luxury, but he disapproved of his mother's

stinginess when she let him have only some chipped crockery after he asked her for a token gift for his recently purchased house in the country, where he dreamed of spending glorious and productive summers with us. The day before he left for Andalusia, Muzil summoned me to his home, and pointing at two big folders bulging with papers lying side by side on his desk, he told me solemnly, "These are my manuscripts. If anything happens to me on this trip, I want you to come over and destroy both of these folders. You're the only one I can ask to do this, and I'm counting on your promise." I replied that I could never do such a thing and so was obliged to refuse. Muzil was shocked, disgusted, and deeply disappointed by my reaction. As it turned out, he wasn't to finish his work until months later, after rearranging the whole thing one last time. When he collapsed in his kitchen, where Stéphane found him lying unconscious in a pool of blood, he had already handed his two manuscripts over to his editor but was going to the Bibliothèque du Chaussoir every day to check the accuracy of his footnotes.

14

When I returned hurriedly from Mexico in October of 1983, after having implored the manager of Air France in Mexico (who received me with his feet up on his desk, contemplating the steady drip-drop leaking from his ceiling into a pot, courtesy of the storm raging outside, while I stood there dripping as well and begging for pity) to allow me to go home on an emergency basis by waiving the restrictive conditions of my damned excursion-rate ticket with the set date of departure and thirteen-day minimum stay, after having violent attacks of fever even on the plane winging me helpfully home to my native land, surrounded by carousing tourists decked out in sombreros gulping down their last snorts of tequila with gleeful squeals, I called Jules from the airport only to learn that during the entire time I'd been in Mexico, he'd been hospitalized himself with high fevers, his body covered with mysterious swellings, having test after test performed on him—without conclusive results—at the hospital in the Cité Universitaire, until he was finally sent home. Staring out at the grayish landscape of a Parisian suburb through the window of my taxi, which I thought of as my ambulance, considering the fact that the symptoms Jules had just described to me were the same ones people were beginning

to associate with that famous plague, I told myself that we both had AIDS. In an instant, this certainty changed everything, turned everything upside down, even the landscape, and this both paralyzed and liberated me, sapped my strength while at the same time increasing it tenfold; I was afraid and light-headed, calm as well as terrified: I had perhaps finally achieved my end. Others, of course, did their best to persuade me I was wrong. First Gustave, in whom I confided that very evening, and who told me skeptically on the phone from Munich that I shouldn't start imagining things just because I'd had a scare. Then I went to dinner at Muzil's the following evening (he was already in a rather advanced stage of the disease, since he had less than a year to live), and he said, "Poor baby, what else are you going to get all worked up about? If all the viruses traveling around the world ever since charter flights became so popular were deadly, you'd better believe there wouldn't be many people left on this earth." This was the period when the most incredible rumors were circulating about AIDS, but they seemed believable at the time because we knew so little about the nature and workings of what hadn't yet been narrowed down to a virus, a slow virus or retrovirus related to the kind that is harbored by horses. We heard you could catch AIDS from sniffing amyl nitrite, which suddenly became hard to find, or that it was a biological weapon launched by either Brezhnev or Reagan, depending on whom you listened to. At the very end of 1983, when Muzil was back coughing worse than ever (having stopped taking those antibiotics, which he'd been downing in doses a neighborhood pharmacist assured him were strong enough to kill—funny thing—a horse), I said to him, "Actually, you hope you have AIDS." He shot me a black look, one that brooked no appeal.

15

Shortly after my return from Mexico, a huge abscess appeared on the back of my throat, which made swallowing difficult and eating impossible. I was no longer seeing Dr. Lévy, whom I blamed for not taking proper care of my hepatitis and for treating all my ailments too lightly, especially a tenacious pain in my right side that I was afraid might be liver cancer. Dr. Lévy died soon thereafter of lung cancer. Eugénie had suggested that I go to the Centre d'Exploration Fonctionelle, where I found a new internist, Dr. Nocourt, the brother of one of my colleagues at the newspaper. I badgered him unmercifully, consulting him at least once a month about that pain in my side, nagging him until he gave me lab requisitions for every possible and imaginable examination, naturally including the blood workups that would show my transaminase levels, as well as a sonogram (during which the blobs formed on screen by my internal organs were studied by both me and the technician, who palpated my greased abdomen with the end of his probe, as I hurled abuse at him for examining me with an eye so cold and equable that it had to be hiding something, so I accused this eye of gross deceit, until my suspicions caused the man to burst out laughing and observe that it was very rare to die of liver cancer

at the age of twenty-five), and finally a uroscopy that was a miserable ordeal: humiliated, lying naked for more than an hour—no one had warned me how long this exam would take—on a chilly metal table under a skylight where I could be seen by some workmen up on the roof, unable to call anyone because they'd forgotten all about me, with a huge needle stuck into a vein, dripping into my arm a purplish-blue liquid that made it feel boiling hot, until from behind a screen I heard the technician return, tell a colleague that she'd taken the opportunity to run out to the butcher's for a steak, and then ask him about his recent vacation on the island of Réunion. As it happened, this investigation finally turned up something, which both relieved and disappointed me, because Dr. Nocourt announced that the problem was an extremely rare but completely benign phenomenon that he'd never encountered in all his thirty years of practice: a renal malformation, probably congenital, a kind of pocket where crystals could accumulate, thus provoking that sharp pain in my right side, which the urologist believed could be eliminated by massive doses of sparkling water and lemon, but even before I could devote myself to a frenetic consumption of lemons, the twinge in my right side promptly disappeared, now that I knew what was causing it, and for a very short period of time I was left, like an idiot, without any pain at all.

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In the meantime, Eugénie had advised me to consult Dr. Lérisson, a homeopath. Eugénie would spend whole nights in his waiting room, biding her time until the providential appointment, sitting with her husband and sons, along with society women and street people (since it was a point of honor with Dr. Lérisson to make countesses pay a thousand francs for a visit, while he gave the same attention to the homeless absolutely gratis), Eugénie staring fixedly at the consulting-room door where sometimes, at around three in the morning, Dr. Lérisson would appear and with a tired wave of his hand, usher in her entire little family—all in perfect health—who would then emerge with prescriptions for ten yellow capsules about the size of a peanut to be taken before meals, five medium-sized capsules, seven blue tablets, and a batch of pellets that were to be placed under the tongue to dissolve. All this medication almost killed one of Eugénie's sons when he came down with ordinary appendicitis, since Dr. Lérisson did not approve of intrusive procedures, ablation, or chemical treatments, placing his faith instead in herbal remedies and nature's own equilibrium, which meant that Eugénie's son wound up with peritonitis complicated by various opportunistic infections, entailing three operations that

left a lovely scar running from pubis to neck. Marine waxed ecstatic about Dr. Lérisson, telling me he was a saint who sacrificed his personal life, and even his poor wife (whom she was happy to have out of the way), to practice his art. Whenever Marine went to consult him, which was three or four times a week, she didn't have to bother with the waiting room: an assistant would recognize her dark glasses and whisk her through a hidden door into a dressing room adjoining the doctor's examination room, where he conducted his most titillating experiments on his most famous female patients, shutting them up nude inside metal chests after affixing all over their bodies needles filled with concentrates made from herbs, tomatoes, bauxite, pineapples, cinnamon, patchouli, turnips, clay, and carrots, from which lockers they would stagger out as if drunk, and a handsome shade of scarlet. Up to his ears in patients, Dr. Lérisson was not taking on any more suckers. Thanks to the exceptional recommendations of Eugénie and Marine, I finally obtained an appointment, after negotiations with an ultra-private secretary, for the following trimester. I cooled my heels in the waiting room for four hours, surrounded by truly depressing faces, and when an assistant in a completely ordinary white coat opened the door and called my name, I said, "No, I've got an appointment with Dr. Lérisson." "Come in," he told me. "But there's some mistake," I replied, suspecting some kind of trick, "I want to see Dr. Lérisson in person." "But I'm Dr. Lérisson—come in!" he insisted, slamming the door behind me in irritation. Eugénie's and Marine's infatuations had led me to expect a Don Juan. Dr. Lérisson could tell what my problem was just by looking at me. Peering intently at my eyelids while he pinched my lip, he said, "You have dizzy spells, don't you?" After my obvious reply, he added, "You're one of the most unbelievable spasmophiliacs I've

ever met, perhaps even more so than your friend Marine, and she's a champion in that department." Dr. Lérisson explained that spasmophilia wasn't really a disease, nothing organic or mental, but rather a formidable potential for bodily torment springing from a lack of calcium. Spasmophilia was thus not a psychosomatic illness, but the selection of the object and locus of the pain it was capable of producing was the result of a semivoluntary, or more often unconscious, decision on the part of the patient.

musicians, who resented being kept on so late in the season in a summer palace unsuited to frosty weather, and prevented from rejoining their families in the city, by the capricious decision of Prince Esterházy. The symphony began in full splendor, using every instrument in the orchestra, whose members then slowly left, one by one and in full view the audience, since Haydn had written the score with the successive elimination of all the instruments, up to the very last solo, even including in the music the breath of the musicians as they blew out the candles on their music stands, and the sound of their footsteps tiptoeing away, making the gleaming parquet floor of the concert hall creak as they went. I had to admit it was a lovely idea, fitting in with Muzil's twilight and Marine's disappearance, and so, at Muzil's prompting, that was the story I recounted to Marine in my letter, which she never answered.

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Muzil collapsed in his kitchen before the long holiday weekend of Pentecost, and that's where Stéphane found him, unconscious in a welter of blood. Unaware that he was doing exactly what Muzil had wanted to avoid, Stéphane immediately called Muzil's brother, who'd had no idea Muzil was so ill, and who had him taken to the Hôpital Saint-Michel, near where he lived. I went to visit him there the next day in a room that stank of cafeteria fried fish because of a nearby kitchen door. The weather was gorgeous, Muzil was bare chested, and I discovered he had a magnificent body: well muscled, supple and powerful, tanned, his skin sprinkled with freckles. Muzil often sat out in the sun on his balcony, and a few weeks before his collapse, his nephew, who was helping him get his country house ready (a house that became useless even before it was finished), tried to pick up a bag, couldn't, and discovered it contained the barbells his uncle exercised with every day, despite the ravages the pneumocystis had made in his breathing, to fight the diabolical progress of the microbe colonizing his lungs. When I arrived, Muzil's sister left the room so that we could be alone. She'd brought him some extra food, some dried fruit rolls. I'd never met her before; she wore her gray hair in a bun and seemed energetic,

quite equal to the occasion, although shaken by Muzil's condition or by what she'd learned from her other brother, a surgeon, for there were tears in her eyes. Muzil was sitting in front of the sunny window in a white imitation-leather reclining chair, in that room reeking of fried mackerel, in the silence of that deserted hospital on Pentecost weekend. He avoided meeting my eyes, and said, "You always think that in a certain kind of situation you'll find something to say about it, and now it turns out there's nothing to say after all." He wasn't wearing his glasses, and along with the discovery of his young man's torso, with its delicately crepey skin, came that of his face without glasses: I don't know how to describe it because I don't remember it, for the image of Muzil I try to keep from recalling is still engraved in my heart and memory with glasses, except for those brief moments when he'd take them off to rub his eyes. When he stood up, exhausted, to go lie down on the bed again, I glimpsed a little dried blood on the back of his shaved head, from where he had hurt himself in his fall. A handle had been placed over his bed for him to hold on to when lying down or sitting up, and it allowed him some relief from the chest pain that dogged his breathing, stiffening his entire body, gripping even his legs with intermittent cramps. He was still tearing his lungs out in endless fits of coughing, which he'd interrupt only long enough to ask me to leave the room. A brown cardboard receptacle had been placed on the bedside table, and every time the nurse went by she told him he had to spit, to spit as much as possible, and his sister, who had heard the nurse, repeated this when she left, pointing to the receptacle and telling him he should spit, spit as much as he could, and this really irritated Muzil, who knew there was nothing to cough up. They were going to do a spinal tap, and he was frightened.

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I went every day to see Muzil in Saint-Michel, where the room always smelled of fried fish, the same brilliant sunlight stopped right at the edge of his window, the sister would dash off whenever I arrived, Muzil hadn't eaten the dried fruit rolls, the cardboard receptacle was empty, and they'd made a mess of the spinal tap, they were going to try another, it was atrociously painful, the nurses said that the vertebrae were jammed together, which happens as one gets older, this kept the tube from reaching the marrow cavity, and now that he'd experienced that pain, Muzil feared it more than anything else, you could see it in his eyes, that panic at a suffering no longer mastered inside the body but provoked artificially by an outside intervention directed at the site of the illness under the pretext of eliminating it, and clearly this pain was more abominable for Muzil than his private bodily suffering, which had become intimately familiar to him. In trouble over the potential failure of my film project, which was going to become official unless I obtained my government-sponsored loan, I'd timidly returned to my newspaper work by doing a few articles here and there. I'd just interviewed a collector of naïf children's portraits, who'd given me the catalogue to his exhibition, which I had on my lap with the

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I'm probably leaving some things out, but I've no desire to look in that diary now, five years later, since I'd rather spare myself the pain of being nastily reminded of this sad time in such vivid detail. Muzil had been transferred to the Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière. When I entered his new room, it was full of friends, but he wasn't there: everyone was waiting for him to be brought back from the latest attempt at a spinal tap. They were stealing his bone marrow. Stéphane had brought him piles of mail from home, but opened everything himself, tossing each item into the wastebasket as he told Muzil what it was, and that day Matou had sent him one of his books, the title of which alluded to the odor of corpses, and when Muzil opened it to find the dedication, he read, "This scent." In a panic he asked me what that meant, and I replied, with studied nonchalance, that it was just pure Matou and didn't mean anything. To break the silence, someone described his visit to an exhibition at the Grand Palais, which included a famous painting that Muzil had discussed at length in an essay, but Muzil couldn't seem to understand what he was talking about, kept asking questions about the subject of the painting, sensing from our uneasiness that his mind was slipping, which for him was the worst blow. When some

nurses arrived to take care of their patient, we all trooped out of the room together, and Stéphane announced in the hospital courtyard that he'd hidden this from us up to now so that we'd still be cheerful around Muzil, and that he'd only learned it recently himself: Muzil was going to die, for several inoperable lesions had been detected in his brain, but this absolutely shouldn't become known all over Paris, and he abruptly went off by himself, refusing the "moral support" some of us said we'd be glad to give him.

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Neither David nor I was able to visit Muzil again, even though he wanted to see us, as Stéphane said when we called every day for news. I'd sent a note to Muzil in the hospital telling him I loved him—I don't know why I waited until the last moment—and I'd enclosed a color snapshot of me taken by Gustave on the balcony of a hotel in Aswân, watching the sunset on the Nile with my back to the camera, and Stéphane mentioned, knowing I'd be pleased, that he often found Muzil holding this photo when he arrived to visit him. Stéphane also told me that Muzil was speaking only in cryptic sentences, at that point, for example, "I'm afraid the potlatch won't come out in your favor," or, "I hope Russia turns White once more." Besides Stéphane's all-important visits, Muzil was allowed to see his sister every day, since she was family; despite their affection, he'd grown apart from her over the years. Muzil told Stéphane that the young doctor spent long hours talking with him during the night. One afternoon, a fellow journalist called me up at home to ask if I had any photos of Muzil. I didn't understand; he burst into tears, and I hung up and took a cab to the hospital. In the courtyard of the building housing the intensive care unit I found Stéphane and some other people who knew

Muzil, and in a casual tone of voice, Stéphane said to me, "Go up quickly and give him a kiss, he loves you so much." Suddenly, alone in the elevator, I started to wonder: he'd used the present tense, so perhaps it was just a rumor, yet Stéphane's attitude seemed too normal to be real, and when I walked down the corridor I saw that everyone had vanished, nobody was guarding the door, as though they'd all gone off on vacation after a stretch of very hard work; I saw Muzil through the window once more under his white sheet, with his eyes closed, and a tag tied around his wrist or perhaps it was his leg, sticking out from under the sheet, and I could no longer enter that room, I could not kiss him anymore, I grabbed a nurse by her blouse and backed her out into the corridor, babbling, "It's true that he's dead? Is it? He's really dead?" The last thing I wanted was an answer—I took off like a shot. I raced across the Pont d'Austerlitz singing a song by Françoise Hardy that I'd learned by heart from listening to the pop singer Étienne Daho: "And if I should go before you/ Remember I'll come back again/ Look for me in the sunshine/ I'll be there in the wind and rain/ To touch you with a sweet caress/ With a breeze so soft and warm/ Just like your love/ And if you're blind and cannot see/ I'll find a way to open your eyes/ I'll turn against you angrily/ Becoming one with stormy skies/ To hurt you, chill you to the bone/ The howling wind will shriek my pain/ And if you still forget our love/ I'll have to leave the wind and rain/ Leave the sun and clouds above/ But this time I would leave forever/ Really leave you all alone/ No voice would call you in the wind/ For I'd be gone." I was flying across the bridge, I knew a secret still unknown to the people all around me, but one that would change the face of the world. That very night on the news, Christine Ockrent—his little sweetie—would give Muzil

back his bright laughter. I went to see David, and found him with Jean; they were both bare chested and scratching everywhere, having taken some cocaine to see them through this thing, and they offered me some, but I preferred to go back outside and keep on singing.

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The day after Muzil died, I had lunch with Stéphane in a pizzeria near his place. He told me that Muzil's illness had been AIDS, and that he'd known nothing about this until the previous evening, when he'd gone with Muzil's sister to the hospital registrar's office and they'd both seen the entry in the register at the same moment: "Cause of death: AIDS." The sister had demanded that they cross this out, that they blacken it completely, or scratch it out if they had to, or even better, tear out the page and redo it, for while these records are of course confidential, still, you never know, perhaps in ten or twenty years some muckraking biographer will come and Xerox the entry, or X-ray the impression still faintly legible on the next page. Stéphane had immediately produced the only will in Muzil's handwriting, which prohibited the family from gaining access to the apartment, but the terms of this will were not very clear, and didn't specifically name Stéphane as an heir. I reassured him, saying that Muzil had recently consulted a lawyer, and I gave Stéphane his address. He came back empty-handed from his appointment with the lawyer. There was a will, and it was in his favor, naturally, but it was only a rough draft written up by the lawyer after his meeting with Muzil, who had never returned to

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Stéphane threw himself heart and soul into the association he'd established, finding there, it must be said, a sense of real meaning to his life after Muzil's death, and through his friend's disappearance, or beyond it, he discovered a way to fully engage his moral, intellectual, and political strength, which up until then had been in Muzil's shadow and thrall, vegetating and leading nowhere in a neurotic idleness topped off with interminable phone calls that used to drive Muzil crazy, articles in progress that were never finished, the whole thing bound up in an incredible mess. AIDS became the social raison d'être of many people, their hope for public recognition and a position in society, especially for the doctors who tried in this way to escape the boring routine of their medical practices. Dr. Nacier, who'd already joined Stéphane's association, enrolled his crony Max, whom I knew as an ex-colleague at the newspaper, and about whom Muzil had remarked that he looked like "the inside of a chestnut." Dr. Nacier and Max were quite a pair, what some people might call a couple of crooks. I think Stéphane fell in love with the two of them, particularly with the inside of a chestnut, and they became his right-hand men. At the same time, Stéphane kept harping on a single theme: "I'll be handing things over to you soon, I've got everything set up but now

I've got better things to do with my time, I really hate appearing on TV, so please, why don't you go in my place..." In fact, Stéphane invented the treachery of Max and Dr. Nacier the way some elderly people take a sick pleasure in encouraging the greed of their heirs, by dangling fabulous treasures under their noses, a diamond necklace or an exceptionally valuable dresser, only to leave them at the last minute to their masseur or gardener. Since at the time I was seeing both Stéphane and Dr. Nacier, it amused me to hear the former say, "They seem rather pushy to me, they're eager to grab the limelight," and the latter, "We're fighting two plagues, AIDS and Stéphane." David and I were careful to tattle to Stéphane about every attempted dismissal and putsch plotted by Max and Dr. Nacier, who confided them to me in complete innocence. (It was the only dirty trick we allowed ourselves in the aftermath of Muzil's death, and our friend would have probably gotten a kick out of our Machiavellianism.) Stéphane was thus able to set up a vote destined to blackball the ambitious pair. Max wrote him a fatal letter in which he told Stéphane that he gave "too homosexual an image to the association." A few months after having routed them, and at the same time deeply wounded on account of the inside of a chestnut, Stéphane ran into me on the street and snapped, "Don't tell me Nacier is still your doctor, that would really hurt my feelings!" I didn't tell him the name of my new doctor, who was also one of his acolytes. David told me Stéphane would probably hang himself in despair the day they found a cure for AIDS. I met a former friend of mine who worked in his association, a psychiatrist, who explained to me that he'd found a great way to talk to AIDS victims about the disease; he'd say to them, "Don't try to make me believe you didn't dream about death at some time or another before you became ill! Psychic factors are instrumental in the onset of AIDS. You longed for death, and here it is."

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Before his death, Muzil had managed, discreetly, gradually, to separate himself somewhat from the one he loved, even having the amazing reflex, the unconscious grace to spare this loved one at a time when almost all of his body, his sperm, saliva, tears, sweat—we weren't so aware of this then—had become highly contagious, and I learned this recently from Stéphane, who insisted on telling me, perhaps untruthfully, that he wasn't seropositive, that he'd escaped the danger, whereas he'd boasted (shortly after revealing to me the nature of Muzil's illness, which he'd just learned for the first time) of having slipped into the dying man's hospital bed and of having warmed various parts of his body, which was real poison, with his mouth. I wasn't able to repeat Muzil's valiant feat with Jules, or it was Jules who didn't manage it with me, and we didn't manage it jointly with Berthe, but sometimes I still have hope that the children, or at least one of them, have been spared.

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Consulting my 1987 appointment book, I'd say that December 21 was the day I discovered in the bathroom mirror, under my tongue, where I'd developed the habit of looking automatically, copying the way Dr. Chandi always checked there when he examined me, for although I didn't know the meaning or appearance of what he was looking for, I was convinced by his sustained interest that he was awaiting the arrival of what I had never seen before that moment: little whitish threads, flat papillomas, striped like alluvium on the tegument of the tongue. My gaze faltered in that instant, just as for one tiny fraction of a second, transfixed and unmasked by mine like a criminal hunted by a detective, Dr. Chandi's gaze will waver when I show him my tongue the next day, at his office on Tuesday morning. Faced with this catastrophic symptom, Dr. Chandi is too young to know how to lie like those old hands, Drs. Lévy, Nocourt, or Aron; he hasn't learned yet how to keep his gaze opaque at the crucial moment, to keep from blinking no matter what, for he retains toward the truth a transparence lasting a fraction of a second, the way the diaphragm of a camera opens to let in the light, before closing to ripen its harvest. I had a luncheon appointment with Eugénie that day; I was false to her by omission, suddenly absent

let him, and took his penis in my mouth to relieve him. The phone booths were either busy or out of order, Gustave realized he didn't have the necessary token when he finally found the only phone that worked, the grocery store where tokens were sold was closed, and it was high time to get back to the church. When the priest opened the front door to the house, the first thing he saw when he looked up the stairs, framed by the door to the living room, was the Poet sitting naked on the couch. He stood up to shake hands with the priest, politely but with a certain reserve. I kept a discreet eye on the priest to see how he would react to what was doubtless the first real vision he'd ever had in his entire ecclesiastical career: he was transported, both mortified and warmed by his delighted astonishment, ready to fall down on his knees. To regain his composure, he grabbed the copy of Dante's *Inferno* lying on table, the cover of which showed a plunging tangle of fallen angels, and said these words: "The devil does not exist; it's just something invented by men." He invited us to come to the presbytery to celebrate the New Year with some champagne. His little, wrinkled old mother, who kept house for him and whom he called his "cross," brought us the *panetone*, the traditional brioche. We wished each other a Happy New Year, the priest's eyes were full of gratitude toward me, and I felt ashamed. He'd prepared some fireworks, some rockets we set off while running all around the church, filling the square with a livid gray cloud of thick gunpowder smoke.

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Back in Paris again, I had to admit that although I'd faithfully continued the applications of Fongylone for twenty-one humiliating days, hiding from the others in the bathroom to soak my tongue in that viscous, yellowish goo that stained everything and made me feel sick on an empty stomach, the medication had not gotten rid of those white papillomas on my tongue, which I began to hate as a sensual instrument, even though Dr. Chandi had told me specifically that this fungus could not under any circumstances be transmitted by any erotic contact, and he prescribed something else for me, Daktarin, which turned out to be a white, almost grainy product, a kind of glue that made my mouth sticky and had a metallic taste but did not succeed either, despite another twenty-one days of treatment, in getting that fungus off my tongue, which I decided to retire from my sensual arsenal, limiting even further the rare physical relations I was still having with two people, one of whom was aware of my illness, while the other was not. Jules and I had finally decided to take this famous test for seropositivity, for which I'd accumulated over the last few years so many lab requisitions written by Dr. Nacier, without ever managing to bring myself to just do it. In January of 1988, Jules was convinced, and needed to convince himself, that we were both

seronegative, and that Dr. Chandi was a raving lunatic who was wrongfully upsetting his patients through his own incompetence. That's why he wanted us (especially me, the worrywart) to take the test: for reassurance. In the same way, David, who'd never wanted to believe in my illnesses, told me sneeringly that I'd really be pissed off when I had to admit that I was officially seronegative, given my miserable sexual experiences, and that I'd then be forced to commit suicide in despair over not being seropositive. When I consulted Dr. Chandi on the phone about our decision, he insisted on seeing the two of us before we had the test. The interview was decisive, if not determinant! These two words came up again, put back into play by Dr. Chandi because of Jules's attitude, which was one of aggression toward the fast-approaching truth that would hurl us into another world, after all, and into another life, so to speak. Dr. Chandi realized that he didn't need to deliver his speech on the protective measures that were the only way to stem the epidemic, since we'd been using them together—and separately—for years. Instead Dr. Chandi reviewed various possibilities (one is seropositive but the other is not, or both are seropositive) and possible reactions to this or that situation, and let's face it, there weren't all that many different possibilities in store for us. We considered the question of anonymity, which seemed to the two of us absolutely necessary, for both professional and personal reasons. In Bavaria or the Soviet Union, they were talking about mandatory testing, at the borders and for segments of the population that were "at risk," a measure also supported by Le Pen's medical advisor. I told Dr. Chandi that because of my constant trips back and forth between Italy and France, it was vital that I remain free to cross that frontier. He advised us to have the test done anonymously and without charge by Médecins du Monde, since they performed the test every Saturday morning not far from the statue of

Joan of Arc on the Boulevard Saint Marcel, on the corner of a small street, Rue du Jura, which I couldn't pass by months later, on the number 91 bus that I took to go have dinner at David's place, without immediately feeling a ghastly chill. The Saturday morning in January Jules and I went there, we lined up along with a great many Africans in a very mixed crowd of all ages, with prostitutes, homosexuals, and some people who didn't seem to fit the usual categories at risk. The line stretched all the way down the sidewalk to the Boulevard Saint Marcel, because it included those who'd come to check their results from the week before. After we'd had our blood samples taken, which had been done without gloves or any special precaution, to my astonishment, we saw one boy come out again absolutely in shock, as though this sidewalk on the Boulevard Saint Marcel had actually opened beneath his feet and the earth had whirled around him in a flash, leaving him no longer certain either where to go or what to do with his life, paralyzed at the news written all over his face, which he lifted suddenly to heaven, where no answer appeared. It was a terrifying vision for Jules and me, which projected us one week into the future, and at the same time relieved us by showing us the worst that could happen, as though we were living it at the same time, precipitously, secondhand, a cheap exorcism at the expense of that poor wretch. Suspecting that our results would be bad, and wishing to speed up the process because of my approaching return to Rome, Dr. Chandi had already sent us to the Institut Alfred-Fournier for the blood analyses that are done after a seropositive result, specifically to ascertain the progress of the HIV virus in the body. At this institute, which had earned its reputation in the heyday of syphilis, they wore latex gloves to draw the blood samples and they asked you to be the one to throw away the bloodstained cotton that you pressed over the tiny wound in the hollow of your arm. Jules,

who'd promised to take the same tests at the same time as I did, was forced to postpone this one, to his fury, because he hadn't followed the instruction to fast before having the test. He waited while they finished with me. Looking over my lab slip, the nurse asked me, "How long have you known that you're seropositive?" I was so surprised I couldn't answer her. The results of the blood analysis were to be sent to us in about ten days, before the results of the seropositivity test would be known, in that precise interval of uncertainty, or feigned uncertainty, and since I couldn't have the blood analysis lab report sent to my apartment, because my mail there was being automatically forwarded to Rome, I'd given Jules's address as my own, and he kept the results of my analysis (which he'd pored over attentively) to himself until the morning we went to find out about the seropositivity tests. I picked him up at his home in a taxi, and it was while we were on our way to the dispensary run by Médecins du Monde on the Rue du Jura that he told me my blood workup wasn't good, that they'd already seen the bad news there even without knowing the results of the other test. At that instant I understood that a calamity had hit us, that we were beginning a period of rampant misfortune from which there would be no escape. I was like that poor boy devastated by his test results, apparently on his feet, but laid low on that bit of sidewalk that kept cracking and heaving under him. I felt an immense pity for us. What frightened me the most was that I knew, despite everything he'd said to steel me for the death sentence, that Jules still hoped our tests, or perhaps his, would turn out negative. We each had in our pockets a piece of cardboard with a number, to which we'd refused to attach any good or bad luck during the whole week of waiting. A doctor was going to open an envelope with the same number containing the verdict, and it was his job to pass on this verdict using

the appropriate psychological recipe. A daily newspaper published a study showing that about 10 percent of the people taking the test in this center were seropositive, but that this figure wasn't symptomatic for the general population, given that the center was geared precisely to the fringe populations considered to be most at risk. Since I didn't like the doctor who gave me my results, of course I took the news calmly so that I could escape as soon as possible from this man who did his work on the assembly line, thirty seconds and a smile plus a brochure for the seronegatives, a five- to fifteen-minute "personalized" interview for the seropositives: asking me if I lived alone, showering me with ads for Dr. Nacier's new association, and advising me (to deaden the blow) to come back the following week, time enough for them to do a follow-up test that might contradict the first one (there was one chance in a hundred, he said). I don't know what happened in the cubicle where Jules was, however, and in fact I didn't want to find out, but I'd finished with my interview and watched the door as it opened and shut several times while people rushed in and out, so I could see that Jules's presence in that little room was creating a huge disturbance in the center, as the receptionist called for a second doctor, and then a social worker. I think that Jules, who seemed so strong, fainted dead away when he heard a stranger tell him what he already knew, that when this certainty became official, even though it remained anonymous, it became intolerable. That was probably the hardest thing to bear in this new era of misfortune that awaited us: to feel one's friend, one's brother, so broken by what was happening to him—that was physically revolting. I went along with Jules to the Ruggieri fireworks store on Boulevard du Montparnasse, where he planned to buy novelties and firecrackers for his children for the coming Mardi Gras Carnival.

from his car as he was driving toward Fontainebleau, to go over everything again, only this time turning all my accusations back on me. He said, "I can't understand how you can be sorry Olaf kept me from catching the virus." "Of course I never said that," I replied, "but just as you said yourself, it's as though one friend were to say to another: 'You, you're mired in misfortune, while I'm not, thank God...' But what I blame you for is much more serious..." Bill then cut the conversation short. "I'll call you back tomorrow," he said, "it gives me chills to think someone might hear us talking..." "Who do you think could be listening?" I asked him. "You know, there comes a point when that sort of thing just doesn't matter." I thought that Bill probably wasn't alone in the car, and that he'd turned on the speaker phone for his passenger. He didn't call back, neither the next day, nor all summer long.

85

One morning, when I was over at Spallanzani to leave a blood sample, there was some confusion when my name was called, and the nurse turned her back on me to hide something: the test tubes with my name on them were already full of blood, waiting in their wooden basket to go down to the lab. The nurse and I had to search among the remaining empty tubes for a name that might correspond to this blood, and we decided that a certain Margherita had provided the contents of Hervé Guibert's test tubes. Her name was pasted over mine on the first set, and the nurses made new labels for the tubes marked with Margherita's name. You can imagine what kind of misunderstandings might have been caused by the switch. The drawer of the little table on which the patient made a fist remained permanently open, with its little pad of gauze, gray-green with dust, the old piece of elastic for the tourniquet, and the syringe with its flexible plastic tube, through which the blood flowed into the Vacutainer. I often thought, when I arrived to find this material all prepared, that it must have been used on my predecessor, especially since the nurse didn't seem in a hurry to throw it out when I left.

Another morning when I was at Spallanzani, I had to fight to get them to take my blood sample because I'd been ten minutes late according to a schedule that hadn't been enforced the previous time. After a quarter of an hour of arguing with the nurses, I practically had to draw my own blood myself, collecting the empty test tubes with my name on them from the pile of unused tubes, wrapping the tourniquet around my arm and holding it out to the nurse until she gave up and inserted the needle. I saw myself at that moment in a mirror, and thought I looked extraordinarily handsome, when for months I'd been seeing nothing more in my reflection than a skeleton. I'd just discovered something: in the end, I would've had to get used to this cadaverous face that the mirror invariably shows me, as though it already belongs no longer to me but to my corpse, and I would've had to succeed, as the height or the renunciation of narcissism, in loving it.

I still hadn't obtained the drug for committing suicide, because every time I'd gone into a pharmacy with my fake prescription, jotted down during the emergency phone call about the tachycardia attack of my aunt, with whom I was supposedly traveling in Italy, despite the apparent veracity of her doctor's phone number in Paris that was actually mine and was thus unanswerable, despite the fake crossings-out and corrections regarding the name of the drug and its dosage, and even though I'd find myself facing someone quite willing to look up the name, phone the central warehouse, or hover over the computer screen to discover that this particular product was no longer available, my attempt would fail, I'd get all balled up, and I told myself that fate was trying to sabotage my plan. But one fine day when I went into a drugstore intending only to buy some soap and toothpaste, I suddenly added to the list, after the word Fluocaryl: Digitaline in liquid form. At first the pharmacist said it wasn't made anymore. She asked me who it was for, and why it was needed. I answered, quite casually (I'd actually given up on my scheme and rather hoped it would fail once and for all): "It's for me, I've got problems with an irregular heartbeat." The pharmacist leafed through her Vidal, like all the others had, conducted a search

on her computer, and brought me two similar drugs in medicine-stopper bottles. The fact that I hesitated to take these substitutes worked in my favor, since reluctance was hardly to be expected of an impatient suspected addict. The pharmacist told me to come back the next day, and she would try to locate the original product. When I returned the following day just on the off chance, as soon as I'd pushed open the door, despite the crowd of clients waiting to be served and the dark glasses that hid my face, the pharmacist noticed my presence immediately and called triumphantly to me from across the store: "I've got your Digitaline!" Never in my entire life has any salesperson been so thrilled to sell me something. She wrapped it up in a little piece of brown paper; my death cost less than ten francs. She wished me good day with a solemn and radiant air, as though she'd been a travel agent who'd just sold me a trip around the world, and were wishing me bon voyage.

88

Thursday, September 14: I'm going to dinner at Robin's, and am impatient to meet Eduardo, this young Spaniard Bill has taken under his wing ever since the boy's test came back seropositive. Eduardo arrived this morning from Madrid, and will be leaving again tomorrow to join Bill in the United States. Robin has seated me next to him, and I observe him on the sly, with sidelong glances. He's a slender young man, like a startled fawn, who blushes easily; his clothes lack elegance, but all his gestures show a languid grace. He doesn't say anything. He wants to write. I see already in his eyes that panic I've been noticing in my own for two years now. We've hardly begun to eat when the phone rings, and it's Bill: our demiurge is spying on us from afar. Robin leaves the table to speak with him, going out to the stairs where it's quieter. He comes back and says Bill wants to talk to me. He hadn't called me since May, since that famous phone call from his car. I hesitate to beg off with the excuse that I've lost my voice, which would be too spectacular, given the present company. Holding out the cordless phone, Robin tells me, "Take it out on the stairs, you'll be more comfortable." Bill's voice, crackling and distant, is made even choppier by the echo: "So, you're still angry with me?" There's such arrogance in his tone that

I pretend not to understand, replying, "You're in Miami? Montreal?" "No, in New York, on the corner of Forty-second Street, at number 121, on the seventy-sixth floor. But I asked if you were still pissed off at me—are you?" I continue to play deaf: "Are you going to win or lose?" (The newspapers have been reporting on the fierce battle between the English firm of Milland and the Dumontel Company, where Bill works, over the acquisition of a Canadian producer of vaccines, a takeover that would allow Mockney's serum to be distributed on a large scale.) "We've lost the first round," answers Bill, "but we haven't thrown in the towel. I'll call you tomorrow—can you put Eduardo on the line?" Coming back to the dinner table with the portable phone, I don't dare announce brightly to the other guests, "I've been asked to fetch the next seropositive." I had a certain suspicion that evening, but it was too mind-numbing for even me to believe.

September 20, dinner at China's Club with Robin: his extraordinary and friendly attentiveness allowed me, for the first time, to explain somewhat clearly my theory about Bill, which Jules had refused to listen to until then, claiming that there were times when a sense of urgency shouldn't be sidetracked by a slew of fictional complications. I outlined the core of my hypothesis to Robin: Just as AIDS will have been my paradigm in my project of self-revelation and the expression of the inexpressible, AIDS will prove to be the perfect model for the secret of Bill's entire life. AIDS has allowed him to take the role of master of ceremonies in our little group of friends, which he manipulates as though it were a kind of scientific experiment. He has enrolled Dr. Chandi as an intermediary, as a screen for him between the worlds of business and illness. Dr. Chandi is an agent in his plan, a lightning rod to gather in the most secret undercurrents, and swallow them up completely. To "save" my life, I've had to be transparent for Bill for eighteen months: to be prepared to report at any moment on one's plunging T4 count is worse than having to show what's in one's pants. Thanks to the bait of Mockney's vaccine, Bill will have succeeded in making me dance in front of him with a hard-on for a year and a half. When I tried to extricate myself from this

game by denouncing it, he must have felt exposed, and feared losing his place as ringmaster in this circle of friendships he's craftily built up among you and me, your brother, Gustave, Chandi, the whole little clan, by confiding things to some that he was hiding from others. I think he latched specifically onto you via your brother's fate, and me directly, because we're people who accomplish what's called an oeuvre, a body of work, which is the exorcism of impotence. At the same time, this relentless disease is the epitome of impotence. Powerful individuals empowered by their work yet reduced to powerlessness: these are the fascinating creatures Bill was able to manipulate by enticing them with the fictitious power of salvation. Bill couldn't bear my reproaches, because if I communicated them to the rest of our group, his scheme would fall apart. He tried to foil me by turning my own accusations against me, flinging them around toward the various antennas of our group—Chandi, you, Gustave—accusing me of having reproached him unfairly, and disguising the main accusation under peripheral criticism, which might in fact look like trifles. That's why I think there was someone in his car when he called me, and he broke off the conversation when it turned dangerous for him by saying, "I'm too afraid someone might overhear us," because he had to have a witness when he tried to turn my arguments against me. That would give him his pretext to drop me without having to justify himself within his group ("He's out of control, you can't do anything for him anymore"), and to line up a new recruit, to function as a mirage. So the new decoy is Eduardo, the young Spaniard, who allows him to carry on for a while longer this game that by coincidence gives him such personal satisfaction."

This is more or less how I put things to Robin, who told me, when I was finished, "I'll never forget a single word you've said tonight."

90

I thought I saw Ranieri, the junkie, in the gardens of the villa. He was slipping through the Bosco, heading toward my building. I went back to the pharmacy after three weeks to ask for the second bottle of Digitaline, which was needed to make up a fatal dose. This time the pharmacist looked a little worried, and asked me, "Is it doing you any good?" "Yes," I replied, "it's very mild."

91

Saturday, October 7, on the island of Elba: we've hardly gotten back to the house with the boxes and things we've brought from my place in Rome when the phone rings. Gustave answers, and I hear him say, "Yes, Bill." Bill's calling from New York, brimming over with excitement (later we'll learn that Robin had really chewed him out): he says that on the previous day, Mockney's vaccine finally obtained a license from a very strict organization that had been holding things up and that now more experiments can be conducted in the United States. "That way, if there's the slightest problem for you in the French setup, you'll come to Los Angeles for three or four days, and you can get the boosters in Paris." After a stopover in Geneva, Bill will be in Paris at the end of the week, and he suggests that the two of us meet with Chandi to work things out, "but I can't be the one to set up this meeting," he adds.

92

Friday, October 13, at noon, in Dr. Chandi's office. The first thing he tells me is that we'll have to cheat to get me into the French operation. We're talking about the initial group, which will comprise only about fifteen people intended to test the vaccine's toxicity, without any control group. The candidates must not have undergone any treatment, and must have a T4 count above 200. My latest lab report gives me 200 on the nose. It's not enough to lie to the army doctor, the clinician in charge of the experiment, by saying that I've never taken any AZT, because I'll have to cleanse my blood of all traces of the drug, which is immediately identifiable from the increase it causes in the blood count. To bring down my blood count I'd have to stop the treatment at least one month before the first blood sample is taken, and this interruption of the treatment risks dropping my T4 count below 200, which would also disqualify me. Dr. Chandi is too involved in talking with me about the vaccine to notice what poor shape I'm in: I've lost eleven pounds, and I'm constantly fighting off exhaustion again. I can see panic in Chandi's eyes: we're both screwed, because of Bill, unless some unlikely loophole comes along. For the first time I feel pity for Dr. Chandi, whom I suddenly see—in that moment of truth when he must see me as a man condemned without reprieve—as Bill's stooge.

93

The meeting has been set for three-thirty on Sunday, October 15, at Bill's place. Up until the last minute I expected him to wriggle out of it. Dr. Chandi told me, "It's important to pin him down, back him up against the wall, so that each of us will be the other's witness for any eventual promises Bill might make." I arrive early and sit huddled on a bench in the square next to the Église de Notre-Dame-des-Champs, where I watch Bill drive up in his Jaguar; he emerges wearing dark glasses and carrying his keys, crosses the boulevard with his springy step, walking like a cool old cowboy, soon followed by Dr. Chandi, who parks his new red car behind Bill's Jag and walks almost at a run, his shirt open at the neck, sneakers on his feet and folders tucked under his arm. I suddenly have the impression that I'm the one manipulating these two men. I let a few seconds go by before disappearing in turn through the entrance that has just swallowed up Chandi, so our three-way meeting can't have any two-way preamble. Bill welcomes me warmly: "So here's our dear Hervelino, who doesn't look as bad as all that!" When Bill immediately turns on the verbal tap, treating us to a professional lecture on the history of the vaccine and its attendant ethical problems (to swamp the real issue, it seems to

me), I notice that since I've become ill I've been suffering from a kind of schizophrenia: I understand perfectly what Bill's saying, no matter how complicated it is, as long as he's speaking in general scientific terms, but I become an instant idiot whenever he touches on my own situation. I no longer grasp a thing, I have a complete block about it, and if I ask a crucial question I forget the answer immediately. Chandi interrupts Bill's well-oiled delivery: "And what concrete help can you offer Hervé?" Dr. Chandi, trembling at the importance of his request, has tacked on to my plight another borderline case he feels deeply about, a patient whose T4 count is hovering around 200 and who's been treated with AZT: "If you have Hervé vaccinated in the U.S., could you do something as well for another similar case?" I see from Bill's face, which he tries to keep inscrutable, that this request gives him great joy, that it flatters his sense of power, which will simply be reinforced indiscriminately by either keeping or betraying his word. A strange smile is frozen on his lips, a momentary absent-mindedness connected with his pleasure, and he replies with vulgar offhandedness to Chandi's pleas for a man's life: "As long as I don't end up with a whole planeful... Yes, after all, what I did for Eduardo, I can do for both Hervé and some stranger, why not..." It's at that point, as calmly as you please, that Bill starts explaining this staggering thing: how he managed to get the vaccine for Eduardo, this young Spaniard he'd never met until barely three months ago, the brother of Tony, the guy he was in love with but whose parents didn't want him to go live with Bill in America. Eduardo has just been infected by his lover, a fashion photographer who's dying in a hospital in Madrid in surroundings, Bill says to me, rather worse than the ones I saw in Rome. Learning from his brother of Bill's key position, Eduardo wrote him heartrending letters: "I'll let you read them," Bill tells

me, "you'll see for yourself, but I think a writer has been born." When Bill makes it clear Eduardo has already received the vaccine, I almost storm out of the room, but I control myself and listen to this touching story with a simpering smile. Chandi seems to be experiencing some kind of discomfort, as though he were suffocating: he throws his head back, closes his eyes and rubs them, breathing with difficulty. Then he gets out the letters he's received from the Dumontel Company, informing him exactly how he'll be paid for his involvement in the experiment: as a headhunter, according to the number of patients recruited and inoculated, which isn't at all how Bill had presented the job to him. "And what will we do if I drop below a 200 T4 count?" I ask. "We'd have to steal the medication," replies Chandi, and Bill answers, "We'll go underground." Nothing definite is decided about me for the present. When we say good-bye to one another on the boulevard, however, Bill winks to let me know I'm to have dinner with him tonight.

94

Both Edwige and Jules, alerted by phone, tell me I've got incredible nerve to go eat with that old bugger. Jules is suddenly furious with Bill, revolted, disgusted; I can just see the tears in his eyes. "It's not as though you were a pathological liar," he tells me. "What's serious isn't so much that Bill hasn't kept his promises, but that he made them to you at all. Now I understand how generous Chandi is." He asks me to take along a needle and drop a little blood from my pricked finger into Bill's red wine as soon as he leaves the table for a minute, and then to admit this to him the next day. I've decided to be calm, to follow to the end this novelistic logic that so hypnotizes me, at the expense of all idea of survival. Yes, I can write it, and that's undoubtedly what my madness is—I care more for my book than for my life, I won't give up my book to save my life, and that's what's going to be the most difficult thing to make people believe and understand. Before seeing the bastard in Bill, I see him as a character made out of solid gold. When he opens his door to me, he doesn't waste any time, saying, "Did you see Chandi's funny spell? Rather strange, no? What do you make of it?" Then, pretending to strangle me, "Ah! You were angry with me, hey? Well, guess what, I hated you, you hear me? You know what that's like?" I sit

down on his sofa, take out a cigarette, and flicking away at a lighter shaped like a can of Coke, I reply, "You're right, it's a very strong emotion, so do you want to talk about it?" But Bill doesn't want to talk about it, funny thing, he switches the conversation on to his everlasting ethical problems, the dishonesty of researchers, the urgent need to save patients. I tell him I've lost eleven pounds and that I feel as though my muscles are atrophying. He asks me if I've had problems with diarrhea. "Then it's your intolerance for the medication: your liver is saturated and can't filter nourishment anymore, that's why you're losing weight. Chandi gives you that shit continually, without a break? He's a great guy, Chandi, but unfortunately he hasn't got an advanced degree, so we're going to have to put someone over him for the drug testing, someone who's been in charge of a clinic..." Since Bill has had hepatic problems, I ask him if the liver recovers quickly. "And how! If they graft on a tiny piece, not even a whole lobe, the damn thing grows back like crabgrass!" "Is that what they did for you?" I ask. "Hold on—where'd you get that idea?" he says. "No, what I had was just a biopsy, luckily, they just nipped out a tiny bit of the liver to see how well I was recovering from my hepatitis."

95

Jules had asked me how Mockney's immunogenic agent was able to take the place of the virus. "It isn't a substitute," answered Bill, "and that's why it's causing such an uproar, because in the end it's the real virus that's injected, even if it is deactivated, and rival research scientists are saying that seronegative individuals must not be injected with the virus, since the vaccine still lacks certain adjuvants, and the gamma globulin isn't enough." Bill explained to me that the virus is so diabolical because it splits in two, running a decoy operation that exhausts the body and its immune system. It's the viral envelope that functions as a decoy: as soon as the host organism detects its presence, T4 cells are sent to the rescue; massed on the viral envelope, they're as if blind to the presence of the viral core, which slips incognito through the fray to infect other cells. When it begins its attack, the HIV virus mounts a corrida inside the body, with the viral envelope for a red cape, the core of the virus as the deadly sword, and the patient as the exhausted victim. Mockney's immunizing agent is a kind of shrewd double for the virus; by reactivating the immune system and stimulating the production of specific antibodies, it functions as a decoder, to teach the body how to detect and foil the

destructive program of the viral core, which until then has been camouflaged by the diversionary tactics of the envelope. There's no longer any question of Mockney and Bill inoculating themselves with the vaccine.

Bill asks for an out-of-the-way table, in the empty back room of the Grill Drouant, telling the waitress, "We've got very important business to discuss." Glancing around at the diners in the front room, he adds, "That way no one will be able to hear us... I was followed in Montreal. First I noticed a young guy in the hotel lobby, not bad, twenty-five years old, didn't really fit in with the hotel's usual clientele, but I didn't pay much attention. Then I ran into him again out in the street in the red-light district, late at night. There's a club there where students work as strippers to pick up extra cash: you sit there while the boys parade around in front of you; if you slip a few dollars in the strap they take it off, and for twenty in the sock, they'll come a little closer. Leaving this place, I saw the guy again, which seemed strange to me. I turned around twice on two parallel streets, an old trick they taught me in Berlin for the East German spies. The guy was still following me. I lost him in the straight part of town. In the hotel lobby, there he was again. I pretended not to notice anything, but going up in the elevator, I saw in a mirror that he was getting out a notebook to write something down. I think he was hired by Milland, our competitor. I'm afraid of blackmail, of somebody putting the screws on; I

may have realized this too late—perhaps they took pictures the last time I had a little fun at the club. In this world, homosexuality is possible as long as you don't talk about it. But it can't be obvious." I didn't ask Bill what he was up to in Berlin with East-bloc spies after the war. Throughout the entire dinner, Bill never took his eyes off his glass of Chilean red, nor did he leave the table to go to the men's room.

97

I kept splitting into two people during the dinner by bringing up the subject of Eduardo again. Bill seemed to answer my questions in all innocence, as though he had no suspicion that I might turn out to be a traitor too. I displayed great disinterest, equanimity, and sentimental appreciation at hearing this lovely fairy tale. "That must have been a truly moving moment," I told him. "Did you by any chance give him the shot yourself? You were at least present, I suppose?" "Of course," answered Bill. "'You must have relished taking such revenge on this conservative family that prevented their eldest son from going off with you…" "You don't know the best part of it," said Bill. "The father of Tony and Eduardo is the managing director of the Spanish branch of Milland, our number one rival… I figured this little detail would give you a kick. . . . In any case, I took enormous risks for Eduardo…" "Enormous risks," remarked Robin when I told him all this, "and it's not nice to say so, but it won't make any difference." Eduardo's T4 count was over 1000; he'd just been infected. If there was an emergency case anywhere in Bill's entourage, it certainly wasn't that one.

On October 16, after trying for several weeks to cope with a burning sensation in my right side and an acid stomach that was growing unbearable, I decided to stop taking the AZT. I called Dr. Chandi the next day to let him know, adding, "Perhaps this isn't the moment to make such gloomy prophecies, but I don't think either you or I can count on Bill's word. Bill hasn't any word, any sense of honor, and he proved this when he simply shrugged off promises made a year and a half ago, without any explanation at all, from cowardice. Bill is a faker who doesn't do a single thing out of kindness or generosity. He doesn't belong to our world, he's not on our side, he'll never be a hero. The hero is the one helping someone who is dying, the hero is you, and maybe me as well, the one who's dying. Bill will never be up to helping anyone die, he's way too frightened. When he was at the hospital with his friend who'd gone into a coma, his friend's brother urged him to communicate with him by squeezing his hand, but Bill couldn't hold his hand for more than a second, he got scared and dropped it and never touched him again."

Driving home from Miami Airport one night, in the glare of his headlights Bill sees a barefoot, unkempt young man in shorts running by the side of the highway. He makes him get into his American Jaguar, takes him home, and cleans him up in the bathtub, except for his genitals, which this guy won't let him touch, even in bed in the dark. The next day, Bill takes him shopping, outfits him from head to toe, and the boy calls him his uncle. The day after that, the boy's calling him his father, which starts to worry Bill, and besides, he's got to go away on a business trip, so he takes the kid to a youth hostel and pays his lodging there for ten nights or so, as well as giving him fifty dollars in cash. When Bill returns from his trip, he finds all his security systems going nuts: the alarms are on in his garage, his elevator, his apartment. The security guards inform Bill that the young man, wearing his new suit, has been trying day and night to force his way past them, claiming that he's Bill's son and has been abandoned by a worthless father. Bill finds his answering machine full of messages from the boy, so he gets a new, unlisted number. In no time the kid has wangled it out of some inexperienced employee and calls up his supposed father. Bill can't deal with this, gets a different unlisted number, and returning

home one night from another trip, sees the guy, all filthy again, barefoot and in shorts, come bursting out from behind a bush and crash into the Jaguar, which goes into a skid. Bill threatens to call the police on him, while the guards look on. He goes home, unplugs his alarm system up on the thirty-fifth floor of the high rise, turns off the microphones that connect him with the security guards' office; the phone rings, he answers it, and hears a man's smooth and implacable voice say, "Hello, this is Plumm, the monkey handler. I see you have a weakness for little monkeys. I've just received a new shipment, which I've started to train. If you're interested, please don't hesitate to let me know... I'll leave you my phone number."

100

My book is closing in on me. I'm in deep shit. Just how deep do you want me to sink? Fuck you, Bill! My muscles have melted away. At last my arms and legs are once again as slender as they were when I was a child.

Puar, Jasbir, 'Homonationalism and Biopolitics'
in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), pp.1–10

"People are now coming out of the closet on the word empire," said the conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer. "The fact is no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically and militarily in the history of the world since the Roman Empire." The metaphor of coming out is striking, part of a broader trend of appropriating the language of progressive movements in the service of empire. How outrageous to apply the language of gay pride to a military power that demands that its soldiers stay in the closet.—Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today"

introduction:

homonationalism and biopolitics

Both Krauthammer and his critic, the American studies scholar Amy Kaplan, highlight the confluence of American sexuality and politics.[1] The coming out metaphor, which Kaplan later states is invoked incessantly by U.S. neocons to elaborate a burgeoning ease with the notion of the United States as an empire, is striking not only for its appropriative dissemination, but for what the appropriation indexes. On the one hand, the convergence marks a cultural moment of national inclusion for homosexuality, alluding to a particular kind of parallel possibility for the liberated nation and the liberated queer. This sanctioning of the lingua franca of gay liberation hints that the liberation of American empire from its closets—an empire already known but concealed—will and should result in pride, a proud American empire. In this incisive piece, Kaplan astutely points to the necessary elisions of Krauthammer's pronouncement, but unfortunately enacts another effacement of her own. From a glance at the demographics, one could deduce that those most likely to be forced into closeting by the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, given their disproportionate percentage of enlistment in the U.S. military, are men and women of color.[2] Thus, any affinity with nonnormative sexual subjects the nation might unconsciously intimate is vigilantly circum-

scribed by a "military power that demands that its soldiers stay in the closet." This proviso is implicitly racially inflected, demarcating the least welcome entrants into this national revelation of pride to be queer people of color. Moreover, in this reclamation of exceptionalism, both Krauthammer and Kaplan execute a troubling affirmation of the teleological investments in "closeting" and "coming out" narratives that have long been critiqued by poststructuralist theorists for the privileged (white) gay, lesbian, and queer liberal subjects they inscribe and validate.

National recognition and inclusion, here signaled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary. At work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term "homonationalism"—that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. There is a commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness that is implicated in the propagation of the United States as empire as well as the alliance between this propagation and this brand of homosexuality. The fleeting sanctioning of a national homosexual subject is possible, not only through the proliferation of sexual-racial subjects who invariably fall out of its narrow terms of acceptability, as others have argued, but more significantly, through the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of *populations* of sexual-racial others who need not apply.

In what follows I explore these three imbricated manifestations—sexual exceptionalism, queer as regulatory, and the ascendancy of whiteness—and their relations to the production of terrorist and citizen bodies. My goal is to present a dexterous portrait, signaling attentiveness to how, why, and where these threads bump into each other and where they weave together, resisting a mechanistic explanatory device that may cover all the bases. In the case of what I term "U.S. sexual exceptionalism," a narrative claiming the successful management of life in regard to a *people*, what is noteworthy is that an exceptional form of national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity, in other words, homonationalism. Collectively, they continue or extend the project of U.S. nationalism and imperial expansion endemic to the war on terror. The terms of degeneracy have shifted such that homosexuality is no longer a priori excluded from nationalist formations. I unearth the forms of regulation im-

plicit in notions of queer subjects that are transcendent, secular, or otherwise exemplary as resistant, and open up the question of queer re/production and regeneration and its contribution to the project of the optimization of life. The ascendancy of whiteness is a description of biopolitics proffered by Rey Chow, who links the violence of liberal deployments of diversity and multiculturalism to the "valorization of life" alibi that then allows for rampant exploitation of the very subjects included in discourses of diversity in the first instance. I elucidate how these three approaches to the study of sexuality, taken together, suggest a trenchant rereading of biopolitics with regard to queerness as well as the intractability of queerness from biopolitical arrangements of life and death.

U.S. Sexual Exceptionalism

One mapping of the folding of homosexuals into the reproductive valorization of living—technologies of life—includes the contemporary emergence of "sexually exceptional" U.S. citizens, both heterosexual and otherwise, a formation I term "U.S. sexual exceptionalism." Exceptionalism paradoxically signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress. Exception refers both to particular discourses that repetitively produce the United States as an exceptional nation-state and Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the sanctioned and naturalized disregard of the limits of state juridical and political power through times of state crisis, a "state of exception" that is used to justify the extreme measures of the state.[3] In this project, this double play of exception speaks to Muslim and Sikh "terrorist" corporealities as well as to homosexual patriots. The "sexual torture scandal" at Abu Ghraib is an instructive example of the interplay between exception and exceptionalism whereby the deferred death of one population recedes as the securitization and valorization of the life of another population triumphs in its shadow. This double deployment of exception and exceptionalism works to turn the negative valence of torture into the positive register of the valorization of (American) life, that is, torture in the name of the maximization and optimization of life.

As the U.S. nation-state produces narratives of exception through the war on terror, it must temporarily suspend its heteronormative imagined community to consolidate national sentiment and consensus through the recognition and incorporation of some, though not all or most, homosexual

subjects. The fantasy of the permanence of this suspension is what drives the production of exceptionalism, a narrative that is historically and politically wedded to the formation of the U.S. nation-state. Thus, the exception and the exception*al* work in tandem; the state of exception haunts the proliferation of exceptional national subjects, in a similar vein to the Derridean hauntology in which the ghosts, the absent presences, infuse ontology with a difference.[4]

Through the transnational production of terrorist corporealities, homosexual subjects who have limited legal rights within the U.S. civil context gain significant representational currency when situated within the global scene of the war on terror. Taking the position that heterosexuality is a necessary constitutive factor of national identity, the "outlaw" status of homosexual subjects in relation to the state has been a long-standing theoretical interest of feminist, postcolonial, and queer theorists. This outlaw status is mediated through the rise during the 1980s and 1990s of the gay consumer, pursued by marketers who claimed that childless homosexuals had enormous disposable incomes, as well as through legislative gains in civil rights, such as the widely celebrated 2003 overturning of sodomy laws rendered in the *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* decision. By underscoring circuits of homosexual nationalism, I note that some homosexual subjects are complicit with heterosexual nationalist formations rather than inherently or automatically excluded from or opposed to them. Further, a more pernicious inhabitation of homosexual sexual exceptionalism occurs through stagings of U.S. nationalism via a praxis of sexual othering, one that exceptionalizes the identities of U.S. homosexualities vis-à-vis Orientalist constructions of "Muslim sexuality." This discourse functions through transnational displacements that suture spaces of cultural citizenship in the United States for homosexual subjects as they concurrently secure nationalist interests globally. In some instances these narratives are explicit, as in the aftermath of the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, where the claims to exceptionalism resonated on many planes for U.S. citizen-subjects: morally, sexually, culturally, "patriotically." This imbrication of American exceptionalism is increasingly marked through or aided by certain homosexual bodies, which is to say, through homonationalism.

What is nascent is not the notion of exceptionalism, nor of a gender exceptionalism that has dominated the history of western feminist theoretical production and activism. Current forms of exceptionalism work or are furthered by attaching themselves to, or being attached by, nonheterosexual, homonormative subjects. Exceptionalism is used not to mark a break with

historical trajectories or a claim about the emergence of singular newness. Rather, exceptionalism gestures to narratives of excellence, excellent nationalism, a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority and its own singularity, "stuck," as Sara Ahmed would say, to various subjects.[5] Discourses of American exceptionalism are embedded in the history of U.S. nation-state formation, from early immigration narratives to cold war ideologies to the rise of the age of terrorism. These narratives about the centrality of exceptionalism to the formation of the United States imply that indoctrination à la exceptionalism is part of the disciplining of the American citizen (as it may be to any nationalist foundation).[6] Debates about American exceptionalism have typically mobilized criteria as far ranging as artistic expression, aesthetic production (literary and cultural), social and political life, immigration history, liberal democracy, and industrialization and patterns of capitalism, among others.[7] However, discussions of American exceptionalism rarely take up issues of gender and sexuality. While for the past forty years scholars have been interrogating feminist practices and theorizations that explicitly or implicitly foster the consolidation of U.S. nationalism in its wake, a growing cohort is now examining queer practices and theorizations for similar tendencies. Forms of U.S. gender and (hetero)sexual exceptionalism from purportedly progressive spaces have surfaced through feminist constructions of "other" women, especially via the composite of the "third world woman."[8]

Inderpal Grewal, for example, argues against the naturalization of human rights frames by feminists, noting that the United States routinely positions itself "as the site for authoritative condemnation" of human rights abuses elsewhere, ignoring such abuses within its borders. Grewal alludes to the American exceptionalism that is now requisite common sense for many feminisms within U.S. public cultures: "Moral superiority has become part of emergent global feminism, constructing American women as saviors and rescuers of the 'oppressed women.' "[9] The recent embrace of the case of Afghani and Iraqi women and Muslim women in general by western feminists has generated many forms of U.S. gender exceptionalism. Gender exceptionalism works as a missionary discourse to rescue Muslim women from their oppressive male counterparts. It also works to suggest that, in contrast to women in the United States, Muslim women are, at the end of the day, unsavable. More insidiously, these discourses of exceptionalism allude to the unsalvageable nature of Muslim women even by their own feminists, positioning the American feminist as the feminist subject par excellence.[10]

One pertinent example is culled from the interactions of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) with the Feminist Majority Foundation, which ended with an accusation of appropriation and erasure of RAWA's efforts by the foundation. A letter written on April 20, 2002 condemns the foundation's representation of its handiwork as having "a foremost role in 'freeing' Afghan women" while failing to mention RAWA's twenty-five-year presence in Afghanistan (indeed, failing to mention RAWA at all), as if it had "single-handedly freed the women of Afghanistan from an oppression that started and ended with the Taliban." Calling the Feminist Majority Foundation "hegemonic, U.S.-centric, ego driven, corporate feminism," RAWA notes that it has "a longer history than the Feminist Majority can claim" and cites multiple instances of the foundation's erasure of RAWA's political organizing. RAWA also berates the Feminist Majority for its omission of the abuse of women by the Northern Alliance, atrocities that at times were more egregious than those committed by the Taliban, stating that "the Feminist Majority, in their push for U.S. political and economic power, are being careful not to anger the political powers in the U.S."[11]

The ranks of "hegemonic U.S.-centric" feminists enamored with the plight of Afghan women under Taliban rule included the Feminist Majority Foundation, which had launched "Our Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan" in 1996.[12] This campaign arguably led to commodity fetishes such as Eve Ensler's V-Day benefit with her "tribute to Afghan women," a monologue entitled "Under the Burqa" performed by Oprah Winfrey at New York City's largest arena, Madison Square Garden, to a sold-out audience in February 2001.[13] The event also promoted the purchase, in remembrance of Afghan women, of a "burqa swatch," meant to be worn on one's lapel to demonstrate solidarity with Afghan women through the appropriation of a "Muslim" garment. While these forms of celebrity feminism might provide us momentary sardonic amusement, they are an integral part of U.S. feminist public cultures and should not be mistaken as trivial. Their agendas are quite conducive to that of serious liberal feminists in the United States such as those in the ranks of the Feminist Majority, and in the age of professionalized feminism these purportedly divergent circuits divulge their imbrication through various modes of commodification. These feminists, having already foregrounded Islamic fundamentalism as the single greatest violent threat to women, were perfectly poised to capitalize on the missionary discourses that reverberated after the events of September 11. Despite their active stance against the invasion of Afghanistan,

they were caught in a complicitous narrative of U.S. exceptionalism in regard to the removal of the Taliban.[14] As Drucilla Cornell notes, the silence of the Feminist Majority Foundation on the replacement of the Taliban by the Northern Alliance "forces us to question whether the humanitarian-intervention discourse of the U.S. government was not a particularly cynical effort to enlist U.S. feminists in an attempt to circumscribe the definition of what constitutes human rights violations—to turn the Feminist Majority into an ideological prop that delegitimizes the political need for redressing human-rights violations." Cornell basically implies that mainstream U.S. feminists traded RAWA's stance against punitive state laws penalizing women who refuse to wear the burqa (but not against women wearing burqas, an important distinction) for the celebratory media spectacle of unveiling rampant in the U.S. media after the "successful" invasion of Afghanistan.[15] Under the burqa indeed. But as a final comment, it is worth heeding Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation, "We will see, every time, the narrative of class mobility." Complicating any indigenous positioning of RAWA, she writes, "It is the emergence of [the] middle class that creates the possibility for the kind of feminist struggle that gives us a RAWA. And this middle class, the agent of human rights all over the world, is altogether distant from the subaltern classes in 'their own culture,' epistemically."[16] Despite RAWA's feud with the Feminist Majority, invariably they remain complicit with a displacement of other Afghan women's organizations that cannot so easily enter the global feminist stage. Spivak's caution is a reminder that the dominant reception of feminist discourses on Muslim women is a tokenistic liberal apology that often leaves uninterrogated a west/Islam binary.

With the United States currently positioning itself as the technologically exceptional global counterterrorism expert, American exceptionalism feeds off of other exceptionalisms, particularly that of Israel, its close ally in the Middle East. The exceptional national security issues of Israel, and the long-term "existential" threat it faces because of its sense of being "entangled in a conflict of unparalleled dimensions," for example, proceeds thus: "exceptional vulnerability" results in "exceptional security needs," the risks of which are then alleviated and purportedly conquered by "exceptional counterterrorism technologies."[17] In this collusion of American and Israeli state interests, defined through a joint oppositional posture toward Muslims, narratives of victimhood ironically suture rather than deflate, contradict, or nullify claims to exceptionalism. In other words, the Israeli nation-state finds itself continuously embroiled in a cycle of perceived exceptional

threats of violence that demand exceptional uses of force against the Palestinian population, which is currently mirrored by U.S. government officials' public declarations of possible terror risks that are used to compel U.S. citizens to support the war on terror.

Reflecting upon contemporary debates about the United States as empire, Amy Kaplan notes, "The idea of empire has always paradoxically entailed a sense of spatial and temporal limits, a narrative of rising and falling, which U.S. exceptionalism has long kept at bay." Later, she states, "The denial and disavowal of empire has long served as the ideological cornerstone of U.S. imperialism and a key component of American exceptionalism."[18] Thus, for Kaplan the distancing of exceptionalism from empire achieves somewhat contradictory twofold results: the superior United States is not subject to empire's shortcomings, as the apparatus of empire is unstable and ultimately empires fall; and the United States creates the impression that empire is beyond the pale of its own morally upright behavior, such that all violences of the state are seen, in some moral, cultural, or political fashion as anything but the violence of empire. U.S. exceptionalism hangs on a narrative of transcendence, which places the United States above empire in these two respects, a project that is aided by what Domenico Losurdo names as "the fundamental tendency to transform the Judeo-Christian tradition into a sort of national religion that consecrates the exceptionalism of American people and the sacred mission with which they are entrusted ('Manifest Destiny')."[19] Kaplan, claiming that current narratives of empire "take American exceptionalism to new heights," argues that a concurrent "paradoxical claim to uniqueness and universality" are coterminous in that "they share a teleological narrative of inevitability" that posits America as the arbiter of appropriate ethics, human rights, and democratic behavior while exempting itself without hesitation from such universalizing mandates.[20]

Whether one agrees that American exceptionalism has attained "new heights," Kaplan's analysis perfectly illustrates the intractability of state of exception discourses from those of exceptionalism. Laying claim to uniqueness (exception = singularity) and universality (exceptional = bequeathing teleological narrative) is not quite as paradoxical as Kaplan insists, for the state of exception is deemed necessary in order to restore, protect, and maintain the status quo, the normative ordering that then allows the United States to hail its purported universality. The indispensability of the United States is thus sutured through the naturalized conjunction of singularity

and telos, the paradox withered away.[21] State of exception discourses rationalize egregious violence in the name of the preservation of a way of life and those privileged to live it. Giorgio Agamben, noting that biopolitics continually seeks to redefine the boundaries between life and death, writes, "The state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other."[22] The temporality of exception is one that seeks to conceal itself; the frenzied mode of emergency is an alibi for the quiet certitude of a slowly normativized working paradigm of liberal democratic government, an alibi necessary to disavow its linkages to totalitarian governments. The state of exception thus works to hide or even deny itself in order to further its expanse, its presence and efficacy, surfacing only momentarily and with enough gumption to further legitimize the occupation of more terrain. Agamben likens the externally internal space of the state of exception to a Möbius strip: at the moment it is cast outside it becomes the inside.[23] In the state of exception, the exception insidiously becomes the rule, and the exceptional is normalized as a regulatory ideal or frame; the exceptional is the excellence that exceeds the parameters of proper subjecthood and, by doing so, redefines these parameters to then normativize and render invisible (yet transparent) its own excellence or singularity.

Sexual exceptionalism also works by glossing over its own policing of the boundaries of acceptable gender, racial, and class formations. That is, homosexual sexual exceptionalism does not necessarily contradict or undermine heterosexual sexual exceptionalism; in actuality it may support forms of heteronormativity and the class, racial, and citizenship privileges they require. The historical and contemporaneous production of an emergent normativity, homonormativity, ties the recognition of homosexual subjects, both legally and representationally, to the national and transnational political agendas of U.S. imperialism. Homonormativity can be read as a formation complicit with and invited into the biopolitical valorization of life in its inhabitation and reproduction of heteronormative norms. One prime mechanism of sexual exceptionalism is mobilized by discourses of sexual repression—a contemporary version of Foucault's repressive hypothesis—that are generative of a bio- and geopolitical global mapping of sexual cultural norms. Unraveling discourses of U.S. sexual exceptionalism is vital to critiques of U.S. practices of empire (most of

which only intermittently take up questions of gender and rarely sexuality) and to the expansion of queerness beyond narrowly conceptualized frames that foreground sexual identity and sexual acts.

Given that our contemporary political climate of U.S. nationalism relies so heavily on homophobic demonization of sexual others, the argument that homosexuality is included within and contributes positively to the optimization of life is perhaps a seemingly counterintuitive stance. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we continue to read the racial, gender, class, and national dimensions of these vilifying mechanisms. So I proceed with two caveats. First, to aver that some or certain homosexual bodies signify homonormative nationalism—homonationalism—is in no way intended to deny, diminish, or disavow the daily violences of discrimination, physical and sexual assault, familial ostracism, economic disadvantage, and lack of social and legal legitimacy that sexual others must regularly endure; in short, most queers, whether as subjects or populations, still hover amid regimes of deferred or outright death. What I am working through in this text are the manifold trajectories of racialization and un-nationalization of sexual others that foster the conditions of possibility for such violent relegation to death. The spectral resistances to gay marriage, gay adoptive and parental rights, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies, and the privatization of sexuality entail that the protection of life granted through national belonging is a precarious invitation at best. Second, there is no organic unity or cohesion among homonationalisms; these are partial, fragmentary, uneven formations, implicated in the pendular momentum of inclusion and exclusion, some dissipating as quickly as they appear. Thus, the cost of being folded into life might be quite steep, both for the subjects who are interpellated by or aspire to the tight inclusiveness of homonormativity offered in this moment, and for those who decline or are declined entry due to the undesirability of their race, ethnicity, religion, class, national origin, age, or bodily ability. It also may be the case, as Barry D. Adams argues, that the United States is exceptional only to the degree to which, globally speaking, it is *un*exceptional, another angle that stresses the contingency of any welcome of queer life. In terms of legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships, Adams notes ironically that to some extent the United States lags behind most European countries, as well as Canada, Brazil, Colombia, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa—a "backwardness" that the United States often ascribes to others in comparison to itself.[24] We can also say that the United States has investments in being exceptionally heteronormative even as it claims to be exceptionally tolerant of (homosexual) difference. But Adams's reliance on

Abdellah Taïa,
Salvation Army
(Cambridge, Mass. : Semiotext(e),
2009)

She always slept with us, in the middle, between my little brother Mustapha and my sister Rabiaa.

She would fall asleep very quickly, and night after night, her snoring would punctuate her sleep in a natural, almost harmonious manner. It used to bother us in the beginning, keep us from a peaceful entry into dreams. Over time, her nocturnal music, her noises, became a benevolent breathing that accompanied our nights and even reassured us when we were racked by nightmares that wouldn't let go until we were exhausted, wiped out.

For a long time, Hay Salam our house in Salé, was nothing more than a ground floor dwelling with three rooms, one for my father, one for my older brother Abdelkébir, and the last one for us, the rest of the family: my six sisters, Mustapha, my mother and I. In that room, there were no beds, just three benches that served as our living room couch during the day.

We spent all of our time in that room, where there was also this monstrous, gigantic old cupboard, all packed in

together: we ate there, sometimes made mint tea, went over our lessons, entertained guests, told stories that never ended. And, yes, that's where we'd argue, politely or violently depending on the day, our mental state and, most importantly, our mother's reaction.

For several years, my childhood, my adolescence, the essential part of my life occurred in that room facing the street. Four walls that didn't really protect us from outside noises. A small roof to live under, storing in our memory, beneath our skin, what made up our life, experimenting everything, feeling everything and later, remembering it all.

The other two rooms were almost beyond limits, especially Abdelkébir's. He was the oldest, almost the king of the family. My father's room was at once the reception room, the library where he stored his magnificently-bound Arabic books, and his love nest. That's where my parents made love. And they did it at least once a week. We knew. We knew everything that happened at home.

To communicate his sexual desire to my mother, my father had perfected his own techniques, his own strategies. One of them consisted simply in spending the evening with us, in our room. My father, who was a great talker, who commented on everything, would suddenly fall silent. He would not say anything, no word or sound would cross his lips. He wouldn't even smoke. He'd huddle in a corner of the room, alone with the torments of his desire, in the first stages of the sex act, already in a state of pleasure, his arms around his body. His silence was eloquent, heavy, and nothing could break it.

My mother would get it pretty quickly, and so would we.

When she accepted his silent proposition, she'd enliven the evening with her village tales and outbursts of laughter. Tired, or angry, she would be silent as well. Her refusals were obvious, and my father would not insist. Once, upset, he took his revenge on her, and on us by the same token (although we maintained complete neutrality in terms of their sexual relations, or at least tried to) by cutting off the electricity to the entire house. He thus cruelly kept us from the international variety shows that we followed with great interest every week on television. He made us as frustrated as he was. Nobody complained. We understood perfectly: no pleasure for him, no pleasure for us.

M'Barka would wait until we were asleep before going to his reception room. She'd leave us then, her mind at ease, to carry out her conjugal duties and make her man happy. Several times I tried to stay awake to witness this magic moment: her heading out into the darkness towards love. In vain. Back then I had no trouble sleeping. I'd climb into bed and the darkness inside me would almost immediately become a movie screen. It was a talent I inherited from my mother.

On love-making nights, my mother's snoring was no longer there to accompany us, cradle us. To love us. Getting up the next day was hard, something was missing, but M'Barka would have already returned, in her spot, between Rabiaa and Mustapha.

My dreams at night weren't sexual. On the other hand, on certain days my imagination would easily, and with a certain

Abdelkébir read for the whole trip, this fat novel with a title I couldn't understand, *Christ Recrucified* by Nikos Kazantzakis.

Abdelkébir, as usual, didn't speak. There's no conversation with him. He's there. You're there with him. In silence. You don't look at one another. From time to time he'd content himself with asking the question, "You OK?" Mustapha and I would answer together, the same way each time: "Just fine, big brother."

But for me, for a while already, I had made it a habit to secretly observe him. To study him from head to toe, let myself dissolve in him.

I journeyed across his body, seated right in front of me. For the entire trip. He wasn't aware of a thing. I had dissolved inside him and he never realized it.

Abdelkébir is 30 years old. He's a man. M'Barka, more than anyone else in the family, reveres him. For her, he comes before everyone else, and to prove it to him, she always saves him the best of what there is, the best of what she cooks. She loves him more than she loves us. And me, I also love him more than I love the others, more than I love anyone.

His reading absorbed him the entire trip. I tried to read, to guess from his face the story inside this novel with the enigmatic title. Nothing. Nothing was revealed. Is it a love story? A happy story? Sad? Tragic? A spy novel? Nothing. No sign that would let me guess the content of that book or what was going on in Abdelkébir's head.

That irritated me. The impossibility of knowing what was on his mind made me furious. I really felt like asking him to

tell me the story that novel told but that was out of the question. With Abdelkébir this kind of closeness is inconceivable, an overly large barrier keeps us from talking like this, naturally, in a familiar way. With him, all words are reduced to a strict minimum.

But miracles exist.

"I'll pass this book on to you when I'm done with it ... if you want," he said, as he continued on with his reading.

Surprised, disconcerted, I mumbled without thinking about what I was saying:

"It's too thick for me ... lots of pages ..."

Silence again.

He brought it up again a few minutes later.

"You don't have to read the whole thing."

"Then I won't know how it ends ..."

"I'll tell you."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"But there's another problem ... That novel is written in French, right?"

"Yes, so what's the problem?"

"I don't speak that language as well as you do."

"It doesn't matter if you don't understand everything. The important thing is that you keep moving, that you constantly keep reading a little bit more, a little bit more ... And then one day, without even realizing it, you'll end up understanding everything."

"So when are you going to loan it to me?"

"In two or three days, maybe a little longer … I'm a slow reader."

That's it. A true miracle. A conversation with Abdelkébir. Well, the word "conversation" is a little exaggerated. Short sentences. And a promise.

We arrived in Tangiers around two o'clock. The station is located right next to the port and the beach isn't far away.

Abdelkébir had booked a room with three beds in an old hotel that directly overlooked the beach on the coast road … The Hotel Tingis. It's a real palace that's falling into ruin. You feel like you're on a movie set that isn't used anymore, scenery without life but full of ghosts.

This hotel frightens me a little. There are too many dark corners and it's almost empty.

After we put our things in our room, a vast, strangely designed room with a ceiling that was too high, we went out to buy sandwiches, then immediately came back to the hotel. We didn't meet anyone, neither coming nor going.

This hotel really scares me. I don't dare tell Abdelkébir. I don't want him to think I'm a wimp but at the same time I'd love him to take me into his arms to reassure me or else, if I admit my fear, to invite me to join him in his little bed, the way he did back in Hay Salam.

We ate our sandwiches (all tuna) in silence, and then Abdelkébir imposed a siesta—like M'Barka, for whom it was a sacrosanct habit. Without believing in it and without complaining either, Mustapha and I tried to do as he did. We are totally dependent upon him and consequently must obey him.

I love obeying Abdelkébir.

I didn't manage to fall asleep. Abdelkébir did, and very fast. He snored for a long time. And since that's what kept me from falling asleep, I watched him, studied his body once again. I had the bed in the middle. I rolled onto my right side, turning my back to Mustapha.

Abdelkébir was in full view.

It had been very hot. All he was wearing were these black underpants. He was sleeping on his back, without a cover. His body is light-skinned, really light. He has some hair on his chest, a lot on his legs and calves, very black and curly.

He's not very strong, even a little thin compared to other men from Hay Salam. But he is, without question, a man. All man: I don't know how else to put it. I know I'll never be a man like him, a man as real as the one he will become, more and more as years go by.

He was sound asleep. His snoring, like M'Barka's, didn't bother me in the end. His stomach, almost flat, rose and fell with a regular rhythm. And I rose and fell with it, hypnotized.

My brother's body was there in front of me all afternoon. I scrutinized it, studied it from head to toe with the great care of a scientist dwelling on every detail. The slender nose. The big eyes. The bushy eyebrows. The thick hair I washed so many times. The lips, full-fleshed and sensual. The thin moustache. The cheeks, not completely round. The neck … The enormous Adam's apple. The gently falling shoulders. The not-really-muscular chest. The dark nipples. The navel … The black underpants and what they

concealed. The strong legs. The prominent knees. The calves, muscular, after years of cycling. The feet rather small and beautiful.

All afternoon, I swam inside this unconscious body, that couldn't know how it was entertaining me. This body that is a part of myself and, at the same time, is another self.

Later on, around 5 o'clock, Abdelkébir took us to the beach, which was swarming with people.

Around 8 o'clock we ate in a fancy restaurant on the coast road. I don't remember what we ate (maybe fish). I was tired and only wanted to do one thing: sleep. Abdelkébir understood that. He brought us back to the hotel around 9:30.

He's changing his clothes. He's going out again to walk around.

I'm busy reporting the day's events in my journal and wondering where he's going like that, all dressed up, more elegant than usual, so handsome, more handsome than usual.

All of a sudden, I'm not even sleepy.

Wednesday

I wound up falling asleep pretty fast yesterday, I think. I dreamt about Tangiers all night, Tangiers that I don't really know yet. I was walking alone down streets full of people, not just Moroccans, not really Moroccan streets. Tangiers belongs to another lifetime, one set in the fairly recent past but one in which I played no part.

When I got up, Mustapha was still sleeping. Abdelkébir wasn't in his bed. I immediately thought he had spent the night somewhere else. With whom? Where?

Suddenly he came into the room, a towel around his waist. He had just taken his morning shower and even at a distance smelled good, like his vanilla shower gel. He said "good morning" with a nice smile, forced perhaps, but one that basically translated an inner state of well-being ... and that really intrigued me. Without thinking, I answered with a question: "Did you spend the night here, with us?" My audacity surprised him. As a way of answering, he flashed me this half-smile which showed his amusement and, at the same time, his annoyance, and then he turned his back to me. He let the towel drop from his waist, revealing, almost proudly, his butt.

What a shock!

He had my mother's butt! Yes, I'd seen it before, several times in fact, very long ago, in what seems another century, when, as a child, she would bring me to the ladies' section of the public baths. I never really looked at them. Women would pass by and their butt come into view but it didn't bother me. Their breasts too, I know what they looks like.

My father's butt, no. Mustapha's butt, no. Not my sisters' either, no way.

Abdelkébir's butt was right in front of me, less than seven feet away. I could even (I dreamt about this for a moment) reach my hand out and touch it, feel it, get a better look. His

I'm not going to go into the nature of that love here. It's something beyond me. Something that haunts me.

I'm in love and that's all there is to it.

I feel abandoned. Unloved. Hollow.

Where is Abdelkébir now? What is he doing? Who is he with? What is he thinking?

On the beach, Mustapha caught up with his friends and played soccer with them all afternoon. They invited me to join them. Out of fear of making a fool of myself, getting treated like a girl again, I turned down their invitation and stayed by myself, offering my already darkened body to the sun.

This older man (maybe 35, 40?) came up to me. He gently touched my shoulder and said in French:

"You've got to be careful in the sun. It's dangerous. Do you have any sun screen?"

He didn't give me time to answer and offered me his. I rubbed it all over my body, thanked him, and gave it back. He started right in again:

"Your back. You forgot to rub some on your back. Turn around, I'll help you ... when it comes to your back ... it's hard to ..."

I did as he asked. He put his left hand on my shoulder and started to rub his sun screen across my back with his right hand. It didn't take long. Maybe a minute at most.

"What's your name?

"Abdellah."

"I'm Salim."

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"Are you Moroccan?"

"Yes!"

"Then how come you speak French?"

"Because I live in Paris. I don't know any Arabic."

"You mean, you don't even know a single word in Arabic?"

"Well, maybe four or five ... tops ..."

"And you don't miss that ... speaking your country's language, your first country's language?"

"No, I really don't! How about you, where did you learn French?"

"My French isn't very good, I know that. I still make a lot of mistakes. I learned it in school, like everybody else."

"What are you doing here, alone in Tangiers?"

"Vacation. I'm on vacation with my little brother who's playing soccer over there and my big brother who's gone to Tetouan for the day."

"So you're alone then?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Do you want to go somewhere, just the two of us?"

"Where?"

"Maybe the movies."

"There's a theater at the entrance to the medina. It's called the Mauritanya."

"I know it. Do you want to head there and watch a movie?"

"Yeah, I'd like that. I love movies ... But there's a problem ... my little brother."

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"He can stay here and play soccer. We won't be gone very long, two hours at the most."

"We'll take a taxi back to the beach."

"Alright. I'll tell him."

Saturday

I feel sick, sick, sick.

I am a traitor.

I have betrayed Abdelkébir.

At the movies, with Salim.

And the worst is that, I loved it, loved having this 40 year old man who smelled good wrap me in his strong arms and talk French in my ear while he tried to get at my penis, my ass. And I let him. And it didn't hurt. Oh, I loved it. Yes. Oh God!

I feel sick. I want to stay in bed all day.

Abdelkébir came up to me this morning. He bent over me, put his hand on my forehead. "Have you got a fever? Yes, you might have one, but it's not very high. You'd better stay in bed and rest. I'll go out and get you some Tylenol and some fruit. You need to drink a lot of water too. I'll leave my bottle of Sidi Ali next to the bed."

When he stood up, I noticed this hickey, this big red hickey where his tee-shirt usually covers his neck.

There it was, the undeniable proof. He had done the unforgivable. Him too. I knew it ... I thought so ... And I was right.

He had betrayed me too.

When all this started, I was a little nuts. Now, I'm completely crazy.

I feel sick ... Alone. Far, far from him who still remains so close.

Something has broken between us. Will it stay like that forever?

I'm going to try to sleep, try to forget if that's possible.

Forget what? Forget who? Can I forget a little, just a little?

Sunday

What happened to me yesterday? How did I get through the day? And the night? What did I do? Sleep? Did I sleep for twenty-four hours?

I don't remember a thing.

Abdelkébir was never far away. It was as if he had slept with me, in the same bed, like in Salé. Did he watch over me?

Today, oddly enough, I feel better. I'm fine, not sick anymore. Was I really that bad yesterday?

I am full of doubts, doubts about everything. I'm obsessed, consumed by questions without answers.

What was going on in my head? In my body?

It's all blacked out.

My first case of lovesickness. Sick because I was deceived,

On the other shore, far, so far away, alone, helpless, panic-stricken, done for, I was already crying: "Help." I called Morocco, called my mother in Morocco.

I had just arrived in Geneva. I was still at the airport.

I told my mother a pack of lies. I had no other choice.

"Everything's fine, mom, just fine. Yes, I finally got here. Don't worry. It's not cold, not yet, anyway ... No, I wasn't afraid in the plane this time. There were a lot of Moroccans on board, I think that calmed me down a little ... Yes, my friend came to get me. He's here with me, we're still at the airport. I'll stay at his house tonight and maybe a few more nights. Yes, he's real nice, a real nice guy ... I promise, yes, of course, I'll tell him you said hello ... You'll say a prayer for him too? Well, of course I'll tell him, I'm sure he'll be glad to know that! Yes, mom, I told you, no, he doesn't take advantage of people ... and he's a really good cook ... He's got three bedrooms and plenty of blankets, so don't worry, I won't catch cold. He told me several times how he'd look after me

like a big brother. I've got to go now, M'Barka, he's waiting, we're heading back to his place ... I'll call you later ... What's that? ... What did you say? He's got a car ... Say a prayer for me ..."

September 30, 1998. Late afternoon.

Nobody was waiting to meet me at the Geneva airport. After two long hours, I had to face the facts: Jean's friend, Charles, wasn't coming to pick me up like he promised. He wasn't just late, like I had been hoping.

I called him at home several times. I got the answering machine every time: "You have reached Charles. You can leave a message, even two if that's what you want. I'll call you back as soon as I can. It's up to you." His voice was invariably the same, warm, too warm for a Swiss person. Charles had a voice like some guy you'd love to gossip with about anything and everything. An obliging guy, he would never let you down, no matter what. A good guy, a really good guy.

First message. "Hi Charles, it's Abdellah! I'm in Geneva ... at the airport. I've been looking for you for fifteen minutes. I don't see you. Are you hiding somewhere? Where? Well, you'll probably turn up as if by magic ... I had no problems at Customs ... I'm here, waiting for you ... I'm sure you're on your way ... I mean, on your way to the airport ... Maybe you're stuck in traffic ... Anyway, I'm here. See you in a bit."

An hour later, the second message. "Hello Charles. It's me again, Abdellah ... Abdellah Taïa ... the Moroccan ... remember me? I'm still at the airport. There's nobody here now. I don't know where you are ... And I don't know what to do ... Maybe take a bus over to your place? Maybe you're sick, stuck in bed ... so sick you can't even answer the phone. What should I do? What can I do? I don't know the code to get into your building. Okay, I'm going to wait a little while longer ... I've got all the time in the world to wait ... Kiss, kiss. See you in a bit, I hope!"

Another hour. Third and final message. "Good evening, Charles. Obviously you've forgotten me. You know, I sent you a letter a month ago from Salé to confirm the date of my arrival here in Geneva ... Didn't you get it? ... Maybe not ... I probably should have called to tell you exactly when I'd arrive ... You can't always trust the mail, especially Moroccan mail ... Assumptions. That's what I've been under ever since the plane landed ... I've been at the airport for almost three hours ... I've got this really big suitcase. I have a few presents for you. I'm starting to get hungry. And I don't know where to go? Where should I go? You know I can't go to Jean's place. Besides, he's probably not even in Geneva. He's up in Leysin, in his chalet ... I don't know what to do. I've got to figure something out. I was prepared for anything, except being abandoned. Abandoned? I'd better grow up fast, real fast. Thanks anyway ... It's dumb, I know, but I was always taught to say thank you. So, thank you. Well, thank you for what? Adieu! as you say in Switzerland ... Adieu!"

Three phone calls. Three messages. Three monologues. The next call is to M'Barka. She tells me it's already dark in Salé and Mustapha isn't back yet. The television is always broken. She's completely alone in that empty house. We're both alone.

Welcome to Europe!

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I took the train to Cornavin Station in downtown Geneva. The ride didn't even take fifteen minutes. My mind was going blank. I couldn't think, didn't know how to link my thoughts, how to decide on anything. I only knew one thing: where to leave my suitcase. I'd leave it at the checkroom that most train stations have for baggage. Luckily I had some money with me, a few Swiss francs.

Geneva, that I really loved when I was with Jean, revealed a whole new side of itself: a cold city, colder than usual. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful city, more beautiful than ever, the leaves on the trees red, yellow, green, black, more full of color ... Geneva experiencing a magnificent autumn. And me, I just had to find myself someplace warm before night finally fell. No need to panic, be afraid, tremble, cry, feel sorry for myself about how things turned out. Now wasn't the time, no, no ... I had to be strong, STRONG. That's when I weighed 121 lbs. I don't know where my strength came from, how I found it in me. Undoubtedly it was the strength you

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laid by cute, young Moroccans? Hadn't he come to Morocco to spend time with me, just me?

A dark cloud settled over my head, a nimbus it was impossible to send away, impossible to put into words.

Jean paid for everything, for both Mohamed and me.

Mohamed was heavenly, sublime, someone I couldn't compete with.

I liked Mohamed too.

Jean invited him to have dinner with us. At the end of the meal, he slipped this two-hundred dirham note into his pants pocket.

Mohamed allowed himself to be bought. He didn't have a problem with that, obviously.

What about me? Was Jean trying to buy me too?

I didn't ask him that. I kept the question buried inside myself. Maybe he and I shared the same love of books, but we still didn't have the same set of values nor the same set of doubts.

I had no experience at all with money.

Thanks to his Swiss francs, Jean could have whatever he wanted in my country.

And, in a roundabout way, by watching how he behaved, here where everything was foreign to him, I learned, to my surprise, my curiosity and my horror, a certain fact about being Moroccan: I didn't want a single cent from him.

Apart from that, things were fine. At the end of his two-week stay in Tangiers, Jean invited me to stay with him in Switzerland the following summer. When he got back, he'd take care of all the paperwork so I could get a visa.

It was almost eight in the morning. It was still dark out. People like myself, who had spent the night at The Salvation Army, were nowhere to be found. I couldn't help wondering about them. Where had they gone? Off to work? Off looking for work? Off wandering about? Out stealing? Were they walking around in circles? Were they hanging out on street corners the way so many unemployed young people did in Morocco? Were they selling themselves? Were they dealing?

All around Cornavin Station, even though it was still dark out, there was a lot of activity: office workers headed to their jobs in Geneva, students taking busses to middle or high school, street cleaners hard at work, elegantly dressed women in sophisticated make-up, old people ... Everybody seemed to know exactly where to go, what direction to go in, what bus to take, where to change lines, exactly where they were headed. The air held a certain energy, this excitement over being alive, over a new day starting. Of course, that wouldn't last long. Switzerland would always go back to being calm,

return to its silence, its respect, its respect for everything, for every rule and regulation.

A day in Geneva. Alone. What would I do? How would I spend my time?

My body, well-rested, reclaimed some of its natural affinity for joy this autumn morning, its desire to be happy. Without even being aware of it, it was my body that chose to be happy. And I went along with that.

I headed for the baggage check room to get some clean clothes out of my big suitcase. I changed in the bathroom at the station, brushed my teeth, put on a little cologne to smell good. I was ready to meet the world and think about how I was going to spend my day.

The phone card I bought at the airport the other day still had some time left on it.

My mother? Should I call my mother?

Nobody answered at Hay Salam. M'Barka wasn't home. Where could she be? It was only 8 in the morning in Morocco. Was she still sleeping? Impossible, my mother had always been an early riser. So where was she? I needed her so badly, needed to hear her voice, even if the decision to leave her had been my own. Nobody there for me in Morocco? So soon? I was already out of the phone booth when I remembered her telling me the other day how she was going to visit my sister in Rabat.

Should I call Latéffa then?

"Hello, Latéffa? It's me, Abdellah."

"It's my brother. My baby brother. You left before I had a chance to see you."

"But I passed by your place two days ago in the late afternoon. I knocked and knocked but obviously you weren't home."

"I probably went to pick the kids up at school. You know, they're still not too good at finding the way back to the house by themselves."

"How are they doing? And how's that husband of yours, how's El-Mahdi?"

"Everybody's fine. We're all thinking about you and everybody says hi. So, how are you doing, way off in that foreign country where you have no *hbibe* and you have no friends?"

"Stop worrying. I've made a few friends."

"Well, that's a good thing. But nothing can take the place of your family, can it? Water is never thicker than blood ... We miss you already, honey. Mom says the house feels really empty now. She's completely alone. Mustapha is always out and Abdelkébir, well, you know Abdelkébir, he spends all his time with his wife. Mom will be here any minute now. She's going to stay with us because she can't stay by herself in Hay Salam anymore."

"I miss all of you too. It's cold here."

"Did you remember your winter coat?"

"Yes."

"Are your friends taking good care of you?"

"Yes, very good care."

"Don't cry. Sooner or later, everybody leaves. Today it's your turn. I know it's hard. It will take months, even years, before we understand how important leaving is for us and for

a lot of other people … Don't cry … Be a man … Don't cry. Are you eating? You have to eat in a place like that, it's so cold."

"Latéffa!"

"Yes?"

"I'm almost out of credit. Give everybody a kiss from me. Take good care of mom. Tell her I'll call again …"

That Latéffa, what a sweetheart! Before Abdelkébir started working, she was the one who helped my parents provide for us. She made rugs, had a real talent for it. For quite a few years, you could count on having a nice dinner every Saturday because Saturday is when she got paid and she'd turn most of that money over to M'Barka. Latéffa was the first one to make sacrifices for the rest of us. She left home to marry El-Mahdi, this guy she loved who had a moustache.

Latéffa is the only one of my sisters who can make me cry. Her voice is so tender, so sweet, so filled with emotion, that I can't stop crying along with her whenever she starts to cry.

Latéffa always gives me the impression that she's in contact with another world. She knows what is really important in life, has come to understand love and suffering and has already forgiven everyone. I would have made my mother very happy if I had married a girl like Latéffa … if I had stayed there in Morocco. And it wouldn't have taken much for me to do that.

That morning, September 31st in Geneva, I had also lied to Latéffa on the phone. Some day I'd tell her the whole story. Talk about my life. Be totally honest. She would understand. She knows how easy it is to pass judgement on others. She

wouldn't do that to me. I was sure Latéffa would accept me for who I am. Some day, Latéffa, it is I who will make sacrifices for you. You remember what happened to us that one day. We were both in the kitchen, everybody was taking a siesta. You had locked the door and taken me into your arms. You had something important to tell me. Something to do with love, of course. A tale of love. That was way before El-Mahdi. His name was Abdessalam and he worked as a foreman in that little factory where you used to weave carpets. You told me the whole story. I listened devotedly. When you were done, you took me in your arms again, kissed me on the forehead, then on the lips. Later on, I helped you get to all your rendezvous with him. We told M'Barka you were going to your girlfriend Najma's house. You should have married him. He came to ask for your hand and mom and dad hesitated a lot before they finally said yes. We were so happy for both of you. But our happiness didn't last long. Abdessalam's stepmother did all she could so that he'd marry her daughter. She put a spell on him, several spells. He never came to the house again. You cried for nights on end. During the day, you acted like nothing had happened because there was no way M'Barka could find out you were in love with him. You would cry at night. I would hear you. I couldn't do anything to help you, so I cried along with you.

After I hung up, I left the phone booth and ran for the bathroom inside Cornavin Station. I started crying again. In another corner of the world, there in Rabat, I pictured Latéffa crying too, crying just like me, crying, in fact, for me.

Nobody had died. Nothing had come between us. We were crying for what would later wither between us, collapse beyond our control.

Geneva was not Geneva anymore. The world was not the world anymore. Suddenly I was somebody else. I was weak. And I was strong and that was what linked me to Latéffa.

I walked without knowing where I was headed. That way I could just kept going, not have to think about where I might wind up. When I snapped out of it, I was surprised to see where I was: right across from the University, in Bastions Park, sad and magnificent in its autumn clothes.

I went to see Denise, the French Department secretary. I needed the address for the Scholarship Office and she was the only one I could ask. She gave me a cool reception, made it quite clear I was disturbing her. Her attitude, shocking as it was, really didn't matter. I got what I came for. I thanked her three, four, maybe even five times. Jean must have told her the whole story because all she saw in me was this piece of trash from Morocco who was about to blow into Europe. I had been transformed into this little demon, heartbreaker, arriviste, nothing but *a little whore* in the end. Even in her eyes, I was someone else. Not the person I thought I was. Every single person pictured me in his own way.

matter. She was looking out the window, kept turning her back to me and from time to time repeating the words: "of course, yes, of course, that goes without saying."

I told myself it was best to go. So I did. I waited another half hour for her at the reception desk.

When she didn't show up, I asked the secretary if she was still busy talking.

"No, no, she's done. You can go in now, but don't get upset if you notice anything strange. She's a little odd."

Just as I was about to knock, the door flew violently open. A volcano erupted.

"I don't have time to see you now. Come back tomorrow, no, make that the day after tomorrow. I've got to catch the next train for Bern. It's absolutely urgent. Adieu!"

I didn't even have time to come up with some kind of answer. She quickly disappeared, racing down the hallway like a nut in full crisis mode.

August 8th, 1997. The day after my birthday.

I left Morocco for the first time in my life. Jean said he'd come to the airport to meet me. He wasn't there. Instead he sent a friend of his. His name was Charles. Jean would join us as soon as he could, his train was late.

The first person I met in Europe: Charles!

He was kind, sweet, a little refined. He put me at ease right away. "I'm one of Jean's best friends, maybe his best friend ... but you'll have to ask him that." He laughed easily and, always the gentleman, I laughed along with him. Then, as nice as ever, he continued: "Jean asked me to entertain you until he got here. Can I get you something from the cafeteria?"

It was quite a while before Jean showed up. Charles used that time to ask me a lot of questions, first about myself, and then about how I came to know Jean in the first place, something Jean hadn't really talked about. I was delighted to answer his questions, happy to talk, to communicate, for as

long as I could. I wanted to please. I did everything I could to make that happen.

As the minutes passed, this feeling of happiness (or something just like it) started to come over me. I was in Europe! In Switzerland! And just that thought, the realization that here I was on foreign soil, someplace that wasn't Morocco, that alone was enough to sustain my upbeat mood, keep me as happy as a child on a visit to the *hammam* with his mother, as delighted and amazed as some country boy who finds himself in the city for the first time.

"You seem young. How old are you?" Charles didn't believe me when I told him I was 23. He guessed I was five years younger. He went on to say: "That could cause problems for Jean ... When people see you two together, on the street, for example, they might think you're a ..."

He didn't have time to finish his sentence. Jean had shown up, finally! There was something unreal about seeing him again in a place that wasn't Morocco. I didn't know what to say. I found myself speechless. Grateful. Happy. Confused. I was also surprised, surprised to see him again, right there in the flesh, right there in front of me, right there, nowhere near Morocco!

And then the big question and all the other questions: Did he really love me? What did he really want from me? What could I really give him?

Yes, Jean had shown up late, but at least he showed up: my Swiss summer was about to begin.

I stayed with him in Geneva for two months, August and September of 1997.

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It took us a while to get used to living together, a while for me to feel at home there.

Jean wasn't easy to live with. He was very fussy and had unbelievable mood swings. Almost every day, he'd get really irritated with me. I was terrified. I didn't talk back. I didn't cry. He had something in common with my mother: very strong dictatorial tendencies. As the days went by, I realized he wasn't a bad person but rather the product of a certain kind of upbringing, something and someone it was too late to change. I never felt at home there. No matter what it took, I had to adapt myself to his personality, his tempo.

Sometimes I was afraid: Switzerland struck me as a very strange place, much too quiet. This soundproofed country.

I figured out two other important things during this first trip to Europe. First of all, I realized to what degree my fascination with Western culture was based on reality. And then, once I lived there day in and day out, I got to see just how different the West really was, nothing at all like the place I read about in books or saw in the movies for so many years.

I came from another world and nothing let me forget that.

Jean wanted to expand my cultural horizons by taking me to museums and art galleries. No persuasion necessary, I was the one who wanted to, who felt a need to look at everything, discover it all. It was with him that I first saw paintings by Picasso, Goya, Holbein, De Chirico ... art you don't forget. And that's how Jean, day by day, left his mark on me. He exercised considerable influence on my artistic tastes and opinions. All I wanted to do was learn.

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And there he was, this college professor, right beside me day by day. He was brilliant. His enormous talent for seeing beyond things fascinated me. He needed to be loved and, at the same time, admired. I greatly admired him and I did love him, in my own way.

One day, in a restaurant, while he was in the bathroom, this elegant, slightly arrogant man in his fifties came up to me and gave me his card. He had written on it: "I pay very well."

So that's what Charles was trying to tell me, that unpleasant truth, and having it handed right to me meant I couldn't ignore it. Charles knew some people might think I was just some trick Jean was treating to a vacation. That's what he wanted to tell me, was all set to tell me when Jean showed up that day at the airport. For a lot of people, and the man who had just handed me his card only went to prove it, I was nothing more than a prostitute, some kind of cheap hooker. Making the rounds with Jean, being part of this "new" scene, meant a lot of people saw me as the object of his desire. What else could I be? After all, he was the one paying.

And anybody could buy me, just like he did.

I didn't cry. Tears wouldn't solve anything. I didn't understand what had happened but became aware of this new aspect of myself, a reality beyond my understanding.

Deep inside me, this irreparable fracture opened.

Several weeks later, the plane that brought me back to Morocco was full of Moroccan women trying to look chic. They were very expensive prostitutes. The high season had just ended in Switzerland and they were coming back to Morocco in triumph, their pockets full, their liberty, thanks to all those Swiss francs, finally paid for. Over there, just like back home, everything was for sale.

We started walking again, Jean and I, in silence. We started to hear these sounds, sounds that let us discern, there in the distance, the true soul of Morocco: Jamaa al-Fna Square, vibrant, ablaze, overflowing with joyous insanity. But who was being celebrated?

These two cops, just as they were getting back into their patrol car, yelled out from the other side of the street: "Make sure he pays you a lot … and wash your ass good when he's done, dirty faggot."

Two young lovers, in a state of shock, saw the whole thing happen. They just stood there. For a couple of seconds, the boy stared at me in an odd way. The girl tried to make eye contact and smiled. Then the boy did too.

I didn't sleep that night. I cried my eyes out but found no comfort in tears. I don't know if Jean understood what really happened.

The next day, this brutal bell and this voice that sounded like it belonged to some boxer who was traumatized forever by his losses vigorously announced that sleep time, here at The Salvation Army, was over.

It was already seven in the morning. Back to reality.

It was still dark outside.

Michel Foucault had vanished.

A woman, small and somewhat older, served breakfast. She didn't say "Good morning," that wasn't her style. She passed out little trays and each one came with a big cup of very hot, plain tea, two pieces of buttered bread, some Laughing Cow cheese, some orange marmalade and a chocolate Mars bar.

No one said a word inside the immense room they used as a dining area. There were about fifteen of us, evidently of different nationalities. Since there were only three tables, there was no way to avoid each other but, sooner or later, we'd wind up looking at one another and then we'd look

I knew how my day would end: Michel Foucault was expecting me, along with the others, for supper at The Salvation Army. Night was not far off.

Before heading back, I took a walk around the University of Geneva Library.

In the entrance hall, I ran into Jean Starobinski, the great Swiss writer, critic, professor. My admiration for him knew no bounds. He silently walked right past me, made no noise, emitted no sound. The way he walked was unobtrusive and his whole body, so full of life and young despite its years, moved exactly the same way. I wanted to go up to him, touch him, remind him that Jean had introduced me to him the first time I came to Geneva. I didn't, of course. I stood there petrified, embarrassed, shy and delighted by this coincidence. I watched him walk in right in front of me without recognizing me, cross the foyer, wait for the automatic door to open by itself, walk through it and disappear from my field of vision.

It was a sign. A positive sign that I totally accepted. Starobinski. A man of letters. A generous human being. A smuggler. Perhaps the last man who still snuck books across borders.

The reading room was almost empty. An odd handful of people labored there in monastic silence. In my mind, those people symbolized every student and well-read person's dream: to be passionate about some field of study and then find the ideal place to pursue it, go into it deeper and deeper! And that library, beyond any shadow of a doubt, was more than the ideal place to satisfy their thirst, their passion for learning.

I was only passing through, revisiting those walls where my turn would come to study for hours on end, become familiar with the books, the atmosphere there, the objects, the chairs and tables, the lamps, and the faces of the different librarians too. And finally with the card catalog room.

That room was empty. At least, it seemed empty. I headed toward the files labeled "R" to find some books on Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

I thought I was the only one in the room. Suddenly the thud of someone sliding a file drawer shut on the other end of the card catalog made me jump. I looked up. There was this man standing there, a little ways off, standing there staring at me. I couldn't really make out who it was. I looked down, then right back up. No, it couldn't be, it just couldn't be. But it was.

That man, who kept right on looking at me, was … Jean. Even when I recognized him, I couldn't quite believe it.

He had changed. No, he hadn't gotten thin, scrawny. Now he had this goatee, kind of ridiculous since it made him look much older. He had aged in just two months. He seemed sad.

He was in shock.

I was too.

I knew I'd run into him again, sooner or later (no way around it: he taught in the same department where I had come to pursue my studies), but not that soon, not by accident, and not that day, especially not that day.

He continued staring at me, incredulous.

My eyes filled with tears. I wanted to run up to him, throw myself into his arms, let it be like old times again, lean against him and cry, cry for both of us, and then, he'd run his hand through my hair just like he used to do. I was the one who'd left, the one who broke up with him. I was the one who chose to move far away, but not that far … Seeing him that day, so near and yet so far, made me realize how much tenderness and attachment he aroused in me, and, despite my best efforts, always would.

He was a short man and that came as a surprise, since I hadn't noticed it before. He was really sad, but that was normal.

He started coming towards me.

I yelled out: "Not now, please, not now. It's too soon … or maybe it's too late. Not now."

He stopped short.

I turned around and ran for the exit.

stimulating and personally enriching. She is also grateful for the support of her friend Ervin Malakaj and their continuous discussions on the work of the "feminist killjoys" that often appear in this volume. Siham is also forever indebted to her parents and their sacrifices. Their courage and resilience, through their own story of immigration from Morocco to France, will always be an inspiration for her work.

Denis would also like to thank the College of Humanities, the School of International Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, and the Department of French and Italian at the University of Arizona for their generous support. He is also grateful to his co-editor Siham, whose creativity, intellect, and ambition remind him of why he first got into this profession; it's been an absolute pleasure to work alongside her. As always, Denis wants to thank his husband Stephen, whose love, support, compassion, and laughter strengthen and guide him every day.

Introduction

Reconsidering Abdellah Taïa's Queer Migration

Denis M. Provencher and Siham Bouamer

Abdellah Taïa is a Moroccan-born author who grew up in a large working-class family in the small town of Salé on the outskirts of Rabat. As a young child, he would sit for hours in the Bibliothèque générale de Rabat while his father worked in the building as a *chaouche* [civil servant]. In fact, it is thanks in large part to his father and eldest brother that Taïa developed a love respectively for books and cinema and dreamed of becoming an author and director one day. He attended public school and university in his home country of Morocco and then eventually moved to Europe to pursue higher education in Switzerland and France.

Abdellah Taïa's well-known letter "L'homosexualité expliquée à ma mère" [Homosexuality explained to my mother] was published in Morocco's well-circulated *Tel Quel*, and many scholars have read this essay as a "coming-out" letter and its author as the first or one of the first "openly gay" or "openly queer" Moroccan writers.[1] Indeed, it was his "queer migration" (discussed in detail later in this chapter) to Geneva in 1998 and Paris in 1999 where he began to pursue his dreams. This has led, however, to an overly rehearsed interpretation, in the scholarship at times, of Taïa's path to Europe as a migration of a gay man and a modern influence by Western values of urban life, commercialism, conspicuous consumption, "pride," and liberation, and reverse sexual tourism. Moreover, in the Preface to the English-language version of Taïa's third novel, *Salvation Army* (2009), queer American critic Edmund White emphasizes Taïa as a young Moroccan boy who left his small hometown of Salé to become educated in the French tradition, and who eventually moved to the big gay city to live out his life as a "French intellectual, a Parisian."[2] However, many recent critics, among whom the two editors of the volume (Provencher and Bouamer), have questioned White's and others' typification by nuancing Taïa's contributions.

For example, Ralph Heyndels has written extensively in French on Taïa's oeuvre, which he analyzes through a theoretical lens of European literary criticism coupled with postcolonial studies. Heyndels situates the author's work alongside that of his contemporaries like Rachid O. and compares their work to Jean Genet and other canonical French and Francophone authors. Heyndels has devoted a decade to the study of Taïa's work and has published extensively on themes in Taïa's writing such as gender, sexuality and desire, prostitution in public space, the influence of Arabic and French, reinventing Islam, and "trans" as a new identity category for the queer author. Throughout, he has often implicitly deconstructed the teleology mentioned above of Taïa's ultimate "arrival in the city" and satisfaction with his life in Paris. More recently Heyndels and Zidouh have published *Around/Autour d'Abdellah Taïa* (2020) that assembles a set of papers that emerged from a conference in 2015 hosted at the University of Miami.[3] This volume includes an important set of chapters that explore such important topics in French and English as migration and borders, decolonial trajectories, reverse sexual tourism, subaltern and ambivalent mothers, as well as poetics and revolution, among others. Interestingly, Heyndels and Zidouh decided for this particular volume not to include an introduction or conclusion that would situate the papers in terms of themes, which to some extent, helps us to further nuance Taïa's migratory path and integration (or not) in Europe. Instead, they open the volume with a letter from Abdellah Taïa to James Baldwin (dated June 2020) written at the height of the coronavirus and the Black Lives Matter movement prompted by the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police. Indeed, this frames the volume, and rightly so, with a sense of solidarity across cultures, to be read in a particularly urgent light. The volume concludes in a similar way with another chapter with an original short story by Taïa, "Un jardin, en attendant . . ." [A garden, while waiting . . .], which leaves the reader in an ambiguously open space where the protagonist and other characters who are different from him are all able to find a common space of belonging.

Jean-Pierre Boulé published, in spring of 2020, the first book-length study of Taïa's work in French, with an emphasis on the themes of melancholia, mourning, nostalgia, and reparation among others.[4] He provides the reader a close textual analysis of Taïa's oeuvre and situates it in conversation with the author's public interviews and public media presence/public persona. Boulé has also nuanced the teleology of "arrival in the city" by arguing for an author and figure who is not completely welcomed in his host countries of Switzerland and France and who longs through his treatment of the aforementioned various themes in his writings for his homeland and ties to Morocco.

Expanding notions of identity, place, time, and mobility, Siham Bouamer dismantles narrative expectations grounded in what José Estaban Muñoz identifies as "straight time"[5] and migrant self-exploration paradigms of

belonging in Abdellah Taïa's work. Focusing on *Infidèles* [*Infidels*] (2012), Bouamer argues for a transmedial and transtemporal reading of the text to highlight the author's initiatory journey not as a transcultural success story of "gay arrival" and return, but rather as one that ultimately leads to death. If death can be seen as a state of departure, Bouamer highlights that in the case of Abdellah Taïa, it also signifies revival; hence, showing a constant cyclic movement in the author's self-exploratory narrative.[6]

Denis M. Provencher has directly and systematically deconstructed White's supposed teleology of the poor Moroccan boy who must flee to the postcolonial metropolis where he can be saved by France and its model of citizenship based on republican universalism and integration.[7] Taïa may very well have become an intellectual living in Paris, however, twenty-first century France remains largely unsympathetic to communities of difference, that is, queer, Muslim, or otherwise. In fact, Provencher illustrates how Taïa and his characters' wanderings represent a set of "comings and goings" that rely on multiple temporalities in Morocco, Egypt, Switzerland, France, and other sites to make sense of their own belonging.[8]

At the same time, Taïa does not always completely feel at home in France even when he relies on these multiple spaces. Like other interlocutors Provencher has interviewed, Taïa has to work through the "cruel optimism"[9] sold by the West to its migrants, which often leaves them running on empty. For example, Farid, a queer French-speaking migrant from Algeria whom Provencher interviewed speaks of his "impossible" life and living situation in Paris, four years after moving to France. Farid finds it difficult to pay his bills, meet men of substance, and feel a sense of accomplishment.[10] He expresses this most saliently when he states: "Il y a une date d'expiration pour ma vie . . . J'ai l'impression que j'ai joué toutes mes cartes . . . J'ai le sentiment quand tu arrives à la fin de quelque chose" [There's an expiration date on my life . . . I have the impression I've played my whole hand . . . I have the feeling like when you arrive at the end of something].[11] For this and many other reasons, Farid is left in an impossible situation where saying "I" in the gay metropolis in a satisfying way never happens.

Unlike Farid however, Abdellah Taïa emphasizes the use of "I" in his autofiction—sometimes more successfully than others—to work through his own cruel optimism and situation as a queer migrant. Indeed, throughout his migrations, the author acquires a "flexible accumulation of language"[12] or an accrual of lexical items and scripts, which finds its way into his writing. These speech acts draw on a transnational repertoire of signifying practices that help him and his characters remain less bound to one specific site of meaning making.[13] Moreover, and as mentioned above, Taïa's sense of belonging does not come from a new-found form of belonging and citizenship in France through its form of republican universalism that touts integration. In contrast, a queer

migrant like Taïa who "comes and goes" across cultures, languages, and spatial-temporalities, acquires a form of transgressive filiation or "transfiliation" according to Provencher (2017) that transcends national borders in order to create new forms of transgressive association with individuals and communities that have otherwise seemed mutually exclusive.

Indeed, we aim to bring into conversation the previous scholarship mentioned above with the essays published in our current volume. Overall, the volume aims to examine the evolution of Taïa's work from his earliest to latest texts. While all contributors to this volume may cite Taïa's earlier novels—*Mon Maroc* [*My Morocco*] (2000), *Le rouge du tarbouche* [*The Red of the Fez*] (2004), *L'armée du salut* [*Salvation Army*] (2006), *Une mélancolie arabe* [*An Arab Melancholia*] (2008), and *Le jour du Roi* [*The Day of the King*] (2010)—many of them also turn to his later work—*Infidèles* [*Infidels*] (2012), *L'armée du salut* (his 2013 film based on his 2006 novel), *Un pays pour mourir* [*A Country For Dying*] (2015), *La vie lente* [*The Slow Life*] (2017), and *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* [*The One Who is Worthy of Love*] (2019). In particular, we and the authors in this volume aim to explore the theme of (queer) migration beyond geographical displacement with an emphasis on non-places, affective economies, and postcolonial temporalities.

FRAMING QUEER MIGRATION AND DIASPORA FOR THIS VOLUME

Since 2000, much scholarship has been conducted on the themes of queer migration and diaspora. Some salient examples include Cantú (2009), Cashman (2017), Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan (2002), Decena (2011), Gaudio (2009), Gray and Baynham (2020), Manalansan (2003; 2006), Mole (2018), Patton and Sánchez-Eppler (2000), and Zheng (2015) where scholars examine, to varying degrees, queer migration from the village to the city (in-country migration); from one city to another (in-country or trans-country); and sexual asylum from the global South to the global North. Most of this scholarship, however, has overlooked the Francophone regions of the world. In fact, it is really only within the past several years that scholarship in French and Francophone Studies, which draws on scholarship in queer migration and diaspora, has expanded with examinations of the work of authors, artists, directors, and everyday speakers from the French-speaking world.[14]

In the case of Abdellah Taïa, this involves both the migration from a small town of Salé to a city, first to Rabat, and then a non-named sexual asylum from the global South of Morocco to the global North of Switzerland and France. Within those different movements, we first consider Abdellah Taïa as un "homme dépaysé" [man out of place, literally "out of his country"].

Despite the fact that Todorov does not engage with queer subjectivities, his concept of "homme dépaysé"[15] allows for an analysis of the different implications of Taïa's exploration of identity and mobility, whether in some of his specific works or in the evolution of his oeuvre. As the different translations of the term foreground, "dépaysé" entails notions of loss of national ties, dis(orientation), and displacement from/to different centers/margins and social beliefs. As it is the case in Todorov's experiences of exile, Taïa's *dépaysement* is the result of intertwined dynamics involved in the author's self-definition, which the different contributors of the volume explore. More recently, Gray and Baynham identify similar complexities and argue that often an "in-country migration can be a prelude to subsequent cross-border migration"[16] and this is indeed the case for the author who is the focus of our edited volume. Gray and Baynham also suggest that "linguistic approaches can bring much to the interdisciplinary investigation of queer migration by providing close attention to the materiality of talk, to questions of voice, and to the construction of subjectivity and identity positions through language."[17] They continue: "Whether within borders or across them, queer migration is clearly a complex phenomenon in which the intersections of sexuality, gender identity, desire, affect, abjection, economic necessity, social class, politics, and fear for one's one life (along with doubtlessly unnamed other aspects of human experience) combine in ways that are unique in the lives of individual migrants" (online). Indeed, as we will see in the collection of essays in this volume, authors explore the construction of identity in Taïa's oeuvre and each one, to varying degrees, points to the materiality of talk that is allotted to queer Maghrebi French speakers.

Ultimately, our approach aims to frame the uniqueness of Abdellah Taïa's migration by considering current queer theory. Several recent studies call for a reexamination of migrancy through queer subjectivities. Drawing on Nacira Guénif's (2014) and Fatima El-Tayeb's (2011) scholarship on queering the European space, James S. Williams, in the specific case of film, regrets the lack of scholarship on the cinematic representations of queer migration and attributes this gap to the conflation with broad themes of "immigration and the post-migrant experience of integration, assimilation, and diasporic identity."[18] Instead of an analysis of the condition of the queer migrant within national identities, he proposes to "queer the migrant [. . .] beyond borders"[19] which entails a "celebrat[ion] [of queer migrants] as global *shifters* in a continuous, transcultural process with important ethical and political, aesthetic and philosophical implications."[20] While we recognize the importance of considering Taïa's work within the possibilities of global and transcultural mobility, to which we should add transfiliation, transtemporality, and transmodality,[21] it is our contention, however, that such dynamics are and should not be seen as celebratory. Indeed, Taïa's stories are as unique as any in this

regard and they help us to better understand, as we will see, the material conditions concerning migration and, most importantly, the impossibility for many queer migrants living in the diaspora to access citizenship in their new homeland or a successful return to their home country.

Our refusal to read Taïa's works as successful stories of migration is firmly grounded in queer theory's assessment and redefinition of success for the queer subject.[22] As Taïa himself explains in an interview, "The dream [. . .] is to be the darkest possible."[23] Our volume favors the recognition of failure in migrancy and dismantles expectations of a utopic reconciliation between home, host country, and queer subjectivities. Our analysis of Taïa's work, for that reason, aims to explore queer migrancy not only beyond geographical borders, but also beyond the bounds imposed by fixed socio-historical spaces. The chapters in this volume expand on exploration of migrant identities as defined by cultural and geographical attachments and dwell with entanglements of national identity, place, emotions, sexual orientation, and the colonial past in the author's search of belonging. The chapters highlight, among others, different paradigms that constitute or affect queer migrancy. We divided the volume into three thematic parts: Part I (On Place and Non-Place); Part II (Affective Migration); and Part III (Postcolonial Temporalities).

PART I: ON PLACE AND NON-PLACE

In Part I, Ralph Heyndels, Olivier Le Blond, and Dan Maroun allow us to first question traditional attachments to place(s) in processes of migration. The three chapters explore what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls "migrant orientation," to describe "how bodies arrive and how they get directed in this way or that way as a condition of arrival, which in turn is about how the 'in place' gets placed."[24] Much scholarship in border studies explores transit spaces, but often neglects their value as non-places. Studies instead highlight movements from one point to another, from home to host-sites or host-countries. For example, in *Open Roads, Closed Borders: The Contemporary French-Language Road Movie* (2013), Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt articulate the importance of examining and identifying two subcategories of road movies, namely the ones depicting "voyages to or through France" and the "ones involv[ing] movement in the opposite direction."[25] However, they also begin to reconsider the rigid directionality involved in both movements. Indeed, their analysis of both movements in dialogue aims to show that "culture is a process in motion, linked to the constant melding of both local and global traditions" while at the same time dismantling "France and French identity [. . .] [as] rigidly defined, clichéd spaces."[26] Considering Abdellah Taïa's fondness for film references, his own endeavor in the genre, and his cinematic eye in

his novels, the contributions in this section seek to observe similar dynamism in his "road narratives." They divest the notion of migrant identity of fixed markers defined by geographical arrivals or departures and introduce the concepts of the nowhere (Heyndels), geographical fluidity (Le Blond), and mobile borderland (Maroun).

In chapter 1, Ralph Heyndels contextualizes Taïa's novel as a reaction to what Pierre Tevanian and Saïd Bouamama call "un racisme post-colonial" [a postcolonial racism] and "un passé qui ne passe pas" [a past that does not pass] by focusing on a decolonial reading of Taïa's *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé*, and drawing from works by Abdelalli Hajjat, Catherine Withol de Wenden, Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, and Françoise Vergès, among several others. Heyndels also examines this topic from the viewpoint of what Bourdieu in *On the State* defines as "alienating integration as a condition of domination, submission, of depossession"[27] based on an ethno-centered notion of "Western civilization" superiority. He specifically looks at the use of language in Taïa's *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé*, in which the French-Arabic interface plays a significant role while the protagonist Ahmed proclaims his intention to exit French and what he has realized to be its very coloniality.

Olivier Le Blond focuses in chapter 2 on Taïa's novel *L'armée du salut*, in which the author tells the story of Abdellah's journey to Geneva to pursue his graduate studies and the struggles he encounters during his first few days in this city along with that of happier times in Morocco. Through the lens of queer theory, Le Blond argues that movement, whether it be through the author's writing, the temporal movement between the present of the novel and the flashbacks in Morocco or the geographical movement, contributes to the creation of a queer Moroccan identity. He first proposes to look at the theme of movement in the novel and how the changes in pronouns in each of the three sections of the novel are an integral part in the creation of this queer identity. Next, Le Blond looks at the chronological movement with the incessant back and forth between the present of the novel, the chapters in Geneva, and the past, represented by the chapters in Morocco, and how this temporal movement participates in the creation of the protagonist Abdellah's queer identity. Le Blond concludes that the geographical movement also informs this queer identity. Indeed, a great deal of attention is brought to the description and importance of the different places in *L'armée du salut* where Abdellah moves and interacts with other characters.

In chapter 3, Daniel Maroun examines how Taïa constructs his narratives of queer masculinity across his greater corpus of texts. This scholar argues that the evolution of queer Moroccan masculinity in Taïa's works is embedded in Muñoz's process of "disidentification" where queer performativity collides with heteronormative ideologies pushing performativity to the periphery. Maroun divides his analysis in two parts by first exploring how Taïa's works

negotiate with and undermine Moroccan patriarchy, and then looking at how these queer, sexually non-normative performativities uniquely occur in liminal spaces. The works reviewed in this chapter include *L'armée du salut* (2006), *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008), *Lettres à un jeune marocain* [*Letters to a Young Moroccan*] (2009), and *Le jour du Roi* (2010); texts Maroun argues are narratively reflective. These are works whose aim is to recount to the audience how the protagonist of the novel came to "today," the present reading of the text. This structure is later opposed in Taïa's more recent novels, *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* (2017) and *La vie lente* (2019), that highlight a continual presence of queerness. The division follows how Taïa begins to nuance his character's engagement with social expectations of sexuality and the clandestine sexual underbelly of homosexuality in Moroccan society. Maroun argues that these performances of queer Moroccan masculinity find their true expression on the border, in a place that is traversed instead of being inhabited.

PART II: AFFECTIVE MIGRATION

Part II further dismantles the question of place by considering the "affective economies," to borrow Sara Ahmed's words, at play in processes of migration and national belonging.[28] In*The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Ahmed reflects on the effects of linguistic, bodily, and affective expressions in the shaping of western narratives of nationhood. In a phenomenological tradition, she explores how emotions are materialized through bodies and languages, and how such physicality leads to the constitution of communities, a process through which individuals are included or excluded. In particular, Siham Bouamer, Ryan Schroth, and Jean-Pierre Boulé consider "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies"[29] in Abdellah Taïa's work. They argue that Taïa's narratives are not only part of a story of queer migrants who move to other places. His writings are also part of *queering* the migration process, which Gray and Baynham refer to as the "pulling away of the migration story from neoliberal accounts."[30] Indeed, the contributors aim to underscore how Taïa's use of language moves us away from stories of successful migration toward conversations about affective migration, through the lens of cruel optimism (Bouamer), shame (Schroth), and melancholy (Boulé).

Siham Bouamer proposes in chapter 4 to examine Abdellah Taïa's film *L'armée du salut* (2013) through the lens of Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism." In an interview, Taïa explains that he does not understand the optimism imposed on his work. He further explains that for him, "The dream [. . .] is to be the darkest possible," but he regrets failing every time

and does not "know where that hope comes from."[31] Bouamer argues that this hope stems from what Berlant has coined as "cruel optimism" to describe "the relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility."[32] This notion provides a way to dismantle the affective structure imposed on Taïa's work. Bouamer explores how Taïa destroys possibilities of "forever love" for protagonist Abdellah, to which Berlant prefers the expression "durable intimacy."[33] In particular, Bouamer analyzes the importance of his failed relationships with his father Mohammed, his brother Slimane, and the Swiss professor, Jean. She shows how the negotiations of intimacy with the three characters lead to Abdellah's gradual detachment from cruel optimism and expectations of durable intimacy at different stages of his life, articulated through the multiple repetitions in the film of Abdel Halim Hafez's song "*Ana Laka 3ala Toul*" [I am yours forever].

In chapter 5, Ryan K. Schroth examines the letter form in Taïa's writing, an element of his work that is often overlooked by critics. Schroth studies a different selection of Taïa's letters: his personal open letter destined to his mother, "L'homosexualité expliquée à ma mère" [Homosexuality explained to my mother]; a letter to his nephew published in Taïa's *Lettres à un jeune marocain*; and two letters from his epistolary novel, *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé*. Schroth demonstrates the importance Taïa gives to the letter form and its implications of circulation, exchange, and connection. Interrogating the question of shared origins and the lived experiences of shame related in these letters, Schroth traces the emergence of a queer Arab shame that is not predicated on the post-Stonewall binary politics of "pride" and "shame." In this way, shame becomes less the opposite of pride and more a productive experience of queer existence. Identifying several reception paradigms (e.g., between author and mother, author and nephew, etc.), Schroth focuses on the ways in which Taïa structures the relationship between author and reader, arguing that Taïa's epistolarity ultimately serves to connect author and reader through common experiences of shame, while fortifying queer Arab shame and its specificities to queer Arab communities.

In chapter 6, Jean-Pierre Boulé focuses on Taïa's penultimate novel to date *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* (2017), composed of four letters written by three different narrators, spanning four time periods. Through an analysis of the letters, Boulé demonstrates that the novel is a work of mourning, supported by Melanie Klein's pyscho-ananalytic theories. Starting with the first letter, Boulé examines the first stage: anger. Feeling abandoned by the death of his mother, the narrator Ahmed displays anger, when the letter was supposed to be a homage to her. Boulé shows that despite the fact that the father is seen as the "good internal object," the narrator identifies with the mother and turns his anger against himself. Then, Boulé attributes to the second letter the task of castigating Ahmed as it is written from the point of view of his French

lover Vincent whom Ahmed abandoned. Next, Boulé turns to the fourth letter, written from the point of view of Ahmed's "older brother" Lahbib, in which he warns Ahmed against sexual exploitation by rich Westerners, in his own case Gérard. Boulé contrasts Lahbib and Ahmed's experiences: while the former accepted Gérard's mother's love and has an open heart, which will lead to his suicide, the latter has a closed heart, which allows him, like his mother, to survive. Boulé concludes with the third letter, written by Ahmed for his French lover, Emmanuel. Describing the letter as the most political one, Boulé analyzes Ahmed's process of reconciliation. In particular, Boulé examines how Ahmed, first, dwells with the colonial and neocolonial attitude of Emmanuel and his relationship to the French language, and second, wants to reconcile himself with his mother and his sisters.

PART III: POSTCOLONIAL TEMPORALITIES

In Part III, Thomas Muzart, Philippe Panizzon, and Denis M. Provencher further deconstruct neoliberal accounts of Abdellah Taïa's work by considering neocolonial structures involved in the processes of queer migrancy. While the chapters do not specifically deal with emotionality as a foundation of queer experiences within the discursive building of nationhood, the authors engage with a similar framework to the previous section and question definitions of "the legitimate subject of the nation."[34] Recognizing that Taïa's portrayal of migrant experiences constitutes, to borrow Ahmed's words, a "contact [that] is shaped by past histories of contact," the contributions in this section dismantle the "alignment of family, history, and race [. . .] that recognises all non-white others as strangers, as bodies *out of place*."[35] Ultimately, the chapters explore how Taïa displaces discourses of belonging and otherness to create spaces where the queer migrant is allowed to offer a counter-history to one of white and heteronormative nationhood.

For example, in chapter 7, Thomas Muzart aims to determine how sexual marginality can play a role in postcolonial struggles such as the Arab Spring in 2011 by focusing on the influence of Taïa's migration on his relations to others both in Europe and in the Arabo-Muslim World. Muzart begins by considering the geographical displacements depicted in Taïa's autofictional work as attempts to develop what Foucault calls an aesthetic of existence, which allows the individual to occupy in the community a specific and proper place.[36] Using Ahmed's concept of the "melancholic migrant," Muzart also shows the difficulties encountered by Taïa to bind the hybrid self that he elaborates to any national ideal. By keeping attachment to his culture and traditions through literature, Muzart argues nonetheless that Taïa shows that he aspires to a return to his origins through a new form of belonging shaped

by his experience as a migrant. Next, Muzart shows that the recognition of his marginality is not an end-goal but the position through which he can belong to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "the multitude," that is, a resistance collective in which individuals as singularities can develop new circuits of collaboration that contribute to the development of a sense of commonality. Muzart concludes that writing constitutes, in Taïa's case, a performative return to his homeland that overcomes the melancholia of migration and opens a path for the Arabo-Muslim world to become more inclusive of marginal voices, especially in light of the Arab Spring.

In chapter 8, Philippe Panizzon explores the power relations at play in cultural and sexual liaisons between the Moroccan protagonists and Frenchmen in Taïa's fiction. He argues that the encounters between the protagonists in Taïa's fictions occur, except in a few cases, according to pre-written scripts informed by old paradigms of colonial violence or by French policy concerning sexuality and race at the turn of the twentieth-first century. Furthermore, he offers a fresh perspective on the place of the homosexual ethnic Other in France today, given ongoing political debates around race, sex, and sexualities. He demonstrates that whereas France incorporates those queer white subjects living according to the homonormative model in the nation state, other "orientalized" bodies remain actively excluded.

In chapter 9, Denis M. Provencher briefly lays out the recent work in postcolonial mythologies and postcolonial realms of memory where scholars like Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno examine the postcolonial sites of memory and mythmaking both in and beyond the Hexagon that continues to erase the memory making for communities of color in France.[37] For example, through an analysis of French public space, popular culture, literature, media, the world of sports, consumer products, among other realms, Achille and Moudileno aim to expose the underlying racial stereotypes and blind spots that still undergird many institutions and cultural phenomena in contemporary France. In contrast to this work, Provencher illustrates through an analysis of Taïa's writings that while queer Maghrebi French speakers may be initially drawn to the French Republic and its associated cultural mythologies and realms of memory first discovered through films and books—like Jean Genet or Isabelle Adjani among others—they will sooner or later decolonize them and propose new "non-white" and Arabicized models of belonging in the postcolonial, the French, and the transnational contexts because of their sense of disconnection and disidentification.[38] While Taïa is not a postcolonial French subject creating a new set of cultural myths or realms of memory for all citizens of the Hexagon, he does assemble from a distance to the French metropole a different set of signifiers that are not necessarily always and already linked to colonial memory. In contrast then to the myths that Achille and Moudileno examine, for example, that emerge

in specifically French contexts of the Hexagon and the departments and territories of the *Outre-Mer*—where a tension exists between the two poles of mythmaking—"de l'occultation d'une part, et de l'exploitation racialisante de l'autre" [the concealing on the one hand and the racializing exploitation on the other][39]—Provencher illustrates that Taïa moves beyond this binary and proposes new transfilial paths forward to a more understanding space of belonging for queers of color in the Francosphere and beyond. Indeed, Taïa's work involves global bodies and transfilial signifiers, mainly U.S. based in this particular case study, like Marilyn Monroe and James Baldwin, which is largely due to the desire among queer migratory individuals to seek new forms of queer and neoliberal belonging on a global scale but also to combat forms of isolation, unrealized dreams and cruel optimism as well as impossible citizenship.[40]

PART IV: NEW DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this final section, Antoine Idier addresses a letter to author and friend Abdellah Taïa where he suggests how "it may be time" for the author "to return to the Arabic language," citing Taïa's own words to prompt further discussion on an established topic.[41] Idier underscores that "returning" is one of the fundamental concerns of Taïa and his characters, and like Heyndels (in this volume), he raises again the important question, "but how and where to return?" Idier then clarifies that Taïa's work involves what could be called an "impossible reappropriation" or, at least, draws a return that is not a destination, but a path and a cartography that are eternally moving, displaced in the course of attempts to return, in the course of the words and voices that are expressed therein. Indeed, Idier closes his letter with a sentiment of desire, indeed shared by many of Taïa's readers, wondering about Taïa's next project and where the author will take all of us in his next installment, always indicative of his own continued migratory path.

As we near the end of the volume, in chapter 11, Abdellah Taïa contributes an original short story titled "Three Tired Men," which has not been previously published. Taïa's novella offers a fresh and surprising perspective on all three themes explored in this volume (non-places, affect, and temporalities) and invites the reader to walk with him as he thinks through where he belongs and does not belong. In chapter 12, Denis M. Provencher provides an English translation of Taïa's new text. Finally, Denis M. Provencher and Siham Bouamer, conclude the volume in chapter 13 with an analysis of the novella along the three themes of the volume and then point us on the road to new directions in the scholarship on queer migration and diaspora studies and on authors like Taïa specifically.

NOTES

1. Tina Dransfeldt Christensen, "Writing the Self as Narrative of Resistance: *L'Armée du salut* by Abdellah Taïa," *The Journal of North African Studies* 21, no. 5 (2016): 857–876; Tina Dransfeldt Christensen, "Breaking the Silence: Between Literary Representation and LGBT Activism. Abdellah Taïa as Author and Activist," *Expressions maghrébines* 16, no. 1 (2017): 107–125; Antoine Idier, "'Sortir de la peur'. Construire une identité homosexuelle arabe dans un monde post-colonial" (Entretien avec Abdellah Taïa), *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* 12 (2016): 197–207; Daniel N. Maroun, "Comment échapper à la honte du *zamel*: Vers la construction de la masculinité maghrébine queer," *Revue Analyse* 11, no. 3 (2016): 135–154; Ryan K. Schroth, "Le Sacrifice de l'écrivain homosexuel: entretien avec Abdellah Taia," *The French Review* 89, no. 3 (2016): 175–183; Ryan K. Schroth, "Queer Shame: Affect, Resistance, and Colonial Critique in Abdellah Taïa's *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé*," *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, no. 1 (2021): 138–162. Published online October 22, 2019: DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2019.1683449.

2. Abdellah Taïa, *Salvation Army,* translated by Frank Stock (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 9.

3. Ralph Heyndels and Amine Zidouh, *Autour d'Abdellah Taïa: Poétique et politique du désir engagé /Around Abdellah Taïa: Poetics and Politics of Engaged Desire* (Caen: Editions Passage(s), 2020).

4. Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Abdellah Taïa: La mélancolie et le cri* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2020).

5. José Estaban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

6. Siham Bouamer, "De 'River of no Return' à 'Trouble of the World,': Parcours initiatique musical dans *Infidèles* (2012) d'Abdellah Taïa," *Expressions maghrébines* 19, no. 1 (2020): 107–124.

7. Denis M. Provencher, *Queer French: Globalization, Language, and Sexual Citizenship in France* (Burlington/Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

8. Denis M. Provencher, *Queer Maghrebi French: Language, Temporalities, Transfiliations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

9. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

10. Provencher, *Queer Maghrebi French,* 267–280.

11. Provencher, *Queer Maghrebi French,* 267.

12. William L. Leap, "Language and Gendered Modernity," in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, edited by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 401–422; Provencher, *Queer Maghrebi French.*

13. Provencher, *Queer Maghrebi French.*

14. Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nation: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2000); Provencher, *Queer Maghrebi French*; Mehammed Amadeus Mack, *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Valérie Orlando, and Pam Pears, eds., *Paris and the Marginalized Author: Treachery, Alienation, Queerness, and*

Chapter 4

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Cruel Optimism in Abdellah Taïa's L'armée du Salut

Siham Bouamer

In his study of the representation of the "Arab boy" in French and Francophone literature, Mehammed Amadeus Mack examines the work of Abdellah Taïa. He contests the analysis of Taïa's work "in a celebratory mode."[1] Specifically, he regrets the fact that current scholarship on the Moroccan writer has exclusively praised his novels and film as being narratives of queer sexual liberation. As such, those studies fail to recognize problematic aspects of his work, such as the subjective divide between, on the one hand, "Arab sexual intolerance" and, on the other hand, "Western sexual liberation."[2] By reducing Taïa's work to an outlet to set free Arab queer sexual identity, critics miss part of the Taïa's efforts to dismantle specific structures that complicate such a dichotomy.

For example, Mack calls attention to Taïa's important discussion on sexual tourism. He insists on considering the writer's voice as a counter-discourse to the existing literary landscape on the subject matter since Taïa speaks from a Moroccan perspective.[3] Mack focuses on "Terminus des Anges" in *Le rouge du tarbouche* [*The Red of the Fez*] (2004) and the relationship between René, a European tourist, and M'hamed, a young Moroccan man. When the latter implores his lover to help him obtain a visa for Europe, he presents such a request as a fair exchange for the sexual favors he granted him. Such a plea shifts the bond between them from a possible romantic relationship to a transaction framed around their respective socioeconomic reality and the power dynamics founded on the colonial past between France and Morocco. Mack concludes that while such a strategy aims at dismantling "the globalization of homonormative discourses" imposed within a structure where economic

imbalance and cultural differences are at play, Taïa leaves the reader sur *sa faim/fin* with an unfinished resolution based on "erotic promises."[4]

This sort of incomplete resolution based on possibilities of affective reciprocity is one of the reasons why critics often see Taïa's work as being tinged with optimism: an optimism that the writer describes, in a recent interview, as being imposed on him and his work. In the same discussion, Taïa further explains that for him, "The dream [. . .] is to be the darkest possible." He regrets failing every time and attributes this tendency to the reading of the presence of romantic moments in his work, but that ultimately, he does not "know where that hope comes from."[5]

In this chapter, I will argue that the hope imposed on his work stems from what Lauren Berlant has coined as "cruel optimism" to describe "the relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility."[6] This notion provides a way to dismantle the affective structure imposed on Taïa's work. Focusing on the film adaptation of *L'armée du salut* [*Salvation Army*] (2013), I will explore how Taïa destroys possibilities of "forever love"[7] for the main character, Abdellah. Berlant argues that attachment to such a fantasy, to which she prefers the expression "durable intimacy," is representative of the nurturing of ideals of "the good life" in liberal-capitalist societies.[8] I will stress here debunking such imagined possibilities aims to challenge western heteronormative structures—of family, success, and love—in which such ideality is engrained.[9] In the film, Taïa maps Abdellah's coming-of-age *out* of such oppressive structure for the queer subject, a process that I will explore through Kathryn Stockton's notion of "growing sideways."[10]

The impossibility of "forever love" and the acceptance of such a condition is set early in the movie and leaves no possibility for further nurturing of such a fantasy. Sitting alone in the family house's courtyard, Abdellah is playing the game "He loves me, he loves me not." Following the rules, he picks the petals off of a flower in order to determine if the object of his affection shares similar feelings. He repeats "*Taibrini, Mataibrinish*," which translates in English to "he loves me, he loves me not." While the French syntactic structure contains several levels of affection, *Il m'aime un peu, beaucoup, à la folie, passionnément, pas du tout* [He loves me a little, a lot, to madness, passionately, not at all], in Moroccan Arabic, like in English, the phrase cuts the range of possibilities in the structure of love; it is *quitte ou double*, all or nothing. The binary options structure Abdellah's ability to reach his goal and anticipate the way he receives the results during the game and throughout the film. According to the rules of the game, the last petal of the flower reveals if the love interest reciprocates the same feelings for the player. Abdellah accepts the discouraging results: *Mataibrinish* [He loves me not].

The scene only lasts for a few minutes, but it does not conclude Abdellah's repetitive acceptance of rejection throughout the film. While he does not

disclose the identity of his love interest during the game, the film soon reveals several male figures in Abdellah's life who could play this role. I will pay particular attention to the importance of his relationships with his father Mohammed, his brother Slimane, and a Swiss professor named Jean. I argue that the individual negotiations of intimacy with the three characters leads to Abdellah's gradual detachment from cruel optimism and expectations of "durable intimacy" and the "good life" at different stages of his life. I will show that the multiple repetitions of Abdel Halim Hafez's song "*Ana Laka 3ala Toul*" [I am yours forever] from the Egyptian film *Ayyam wa layali* [*Days and Nights*] (1955) serve as markers for those transitions. Such inclusion is rather ironic since the lyrics nurture the ideality of forever love and echoes the linguistic binary of all or nothing love.

The same musical framework will outline this chapter. In the first section, I will focus on the first reference to the song. It will provide an understanding of Abdellah's initial realization regarding the unproductivity of cruel optimism through his dad and specifically his parents' toxic relationship. This initial lesson prepares the young protagonist to deal with unstable moments throughout his life, which I will identify in the second section with the acceptance of the impossibility of brotherly love (Slimane) and European love (Jean). We shall see that the song, in its intermediality within the film, serves as an indicator of moments of crisis, but also as a catalyst for overcoming precarity and accepting its ordinariness in everyday life, hence helping the dismantling of cruel optimism.

TOXIC FAMILIAL CRUEL OPTIMISM

Immediately after the scene of "He loves me, he loves me not," the song "*Ana Laka 3ala Toul*" appears for the first time. Mohammed, the father, is the character who allows the transitions between the two sequences. He comes out in the courtyard to smoke a cigarette. When he sees and hears Abdellah playing the game, he pauses to let him finish before breaking his solitude. Noticing Abdellah's sadness, Mohammed attempts to negotiate the meaning and origin of his son's sorrow. For example, he attributes his feelings to boredom due to the long summer break. He also suggests that he might not be feeling well because he is hungry and encourages him to eat something. His suppositions are part of his strategy of avoidance. He never mentions the possibility that Abdellah suffers from a heartbreak although he witnessed Abdellah plucking the last petal. While this scene could be seen as a positive and constructive exchange between a father and a son, it instead emphasizes the unproductiveness of the reasons the father presents. He bases his speculations on the notion that unhappiness is temporary with concepts such as vacation and hunger. Most

importantly, he does not acknowledge Abdellah's queerness despite the fact that he heard his son using the Arabic masculine form of "He loves me not."

At that moment, the father becomes the vehicle for cruel optimism, which he then takes into the house to pass on to the next scene and to the rest of the family. In the house, Abdellah, his mother, and sisters are watching the black and white Egyptian film and musical *Ayyam wa layali* starring the young Abdel Halim Hafez. The poor condition of the family room, which also serves as a bedroom for the children and the mother, contrasts with the scene of the film captured on the small TV screen. Floating on the Nile river, Hafez sings the infamous song "*Ana Laka 3ala Toul*" which allows him to profess his selfless love to the actress Emane. For example, following a common trope in Arabic love songs, the singer promises his eyes as a token of his affection. The family is mesmerized by the Dark-Skinned Nightingale's voice.[11] As for M'Barka, the mother, she shows less enthusiasm for the performance, and after a few minutes, she asks Abdellah to turn down the volume of the TV because she does not like the Egyptian singer.

When the mother declares her aversion for Hafez, Emane appears on the black and white screen at the same time. Even though the young actress's radiant smile contrasts drastically with the mother's stern and jaded expression, it becomes clear that the superposition aims at emphasizing the similarities between the two women. This comparison is a reflection of the function of actresses and mothers as allegories of resistance in Taïa's life and work. At the 2015 Oslo Freedom Forum, Taïa stresses the influence of Egyptian actresses in his life. For him, women such as Soad Hosny and Nadia Lofti "were making political statements" by acting.[12] He refers here to their roles as performers in the theatrical meaning of the word. In the same fashion as Abdellah (the character) who is captivated by the film *Ayyam wa layali*, Taïa explains, in the same interview, his fascination for Egyptian movies during his childhood. It is clear that those productions played a crucial role in the shaping of his identity. For example, he reveals in the same speech how the acting profession inspired him to adopt real-life strategies for survival as a queer man in Morocco. From a Butlerian standpoint, he explains that they taught him how to negotiate his identity through the art of performative impersonation of imposed social expectations, without completely conforming to them.

Taïa highlights that the accessibility of Egyptian films on television made him feel that these role models were with him at home, in his everyday life. Within that space, notes Tina Dransfeldt Christensen, the mother holds a similar subversive position in Taïa's work. For example, in her study on the voices of resistance in the novel *L'armée du salut*, she explains:

> The different depictions of his mother—as a representative of those who are marginalized by the patriarchal norms; as the dictator of the family house; and as the empowered mother in opposition to the defeated or absent father—all serve the same purpose as resistance narratives that defy the traditional patriarchal norms of society.[13]

Christensen emphasizes, here in the case of the novel, the essential role of M'Barka for the dismantling of heteronormative structures in the household. Taïa further nurtures this function in the film. For example, when the mother asks Abdellah to turn down the music, she acts as an authoritarian figure who disregards the majority's opinion. This characteristic does not function as a criticism, but as a source of admiration. Visually, she is at the center of her children who serve as a frame for the painting that Taïa draws of her. She is laying down on the *sedari*, a Moroccan couch, like *La Grande Odalisque*. Through the metaphorical evocation of an ambiguous subversive feminine figure, Taïa presents his mother as another model for the possibilities of revolutionary acts within an oppressive space.

While those domestic acts take many forms in the film, I would like to focus here on the role of Abdellah's mother as what Sara Ahmed calls the "feminist killjoy." First, I choose this specific notion in order to evoke Ahmed's statement that feminist work must be firmly grounded at home, in everyday life.[14] I am also interested in the active role of such a figure as someone who "kill[s] other people's joy [and] [. . .] get[s] in the way of other people's investments."[15] I suggest replacing the expression "investment" with "cruel optimism." When M'barka asks Abdellah to turn down the music despite the fact that her son and his siblings are enjoying the song, she serves as an essential agent for the dismantling—the killing of joy—of some of the affective structures grounded in cruel optimism that the Egyptian film entertains.

It is important to note that Abdellah's mother does not express an aversion for the film; she only dislikes the singer, Abdel Halim Hafez. Considering the analogy that I have established between M'Barka and Emane, I would like to suggest that the rejection of the singer is an indirect attack of the father. As such, the black and white movie functions as a flashback of their past as young lovers. Turning down the music is thus an attempt to suppress cruel optimism that she once entertained within their relationship. When the father enters the family room, he reintroduces cruel optimism. He asks Abdellah to turn up the music and explains the reason for such request: "It is Saturday, so everybody should be happy."[16] By attributing the state of happiness to a specific day, Mohammed brings about promises of "the good life" in the same fashion as his conversation with Abdellah in the courtyard. Happiness and sadness are attached to temporary factors such as the summer break, hunger, and the weekend. His effort to impose solutions to solve what Sara Ahmed describe as "crises of happiness" to describe "the belief that happiness [. . .] [is] the reward for a certain loyalty" is doomed to failure.[17] He soon serves as

the instigator who will destroy the same structure of happiness he nurtures. Through this vicious circle, Taïa emphasizes the unproductiveness of cruel optimism that he develops within the framework of the relationship between Abdellah's parents.

We understand that the object that will lead to the father's happiness is the mother. As such, his request to turn up the sound of the TV is a way to serenade her, in the same way that Hafez courts Emane. Mohammed attempts to reintroduce the same memories of their past as young lovers that the mother wanted to suppress because of, as we will see, the reality of everyday life forced her to give up on past memories. Despite her initial "killing of joy," the mother ends up reciprocating the attention by complimenting his shirt. This exchange announces the next scene. In the middle of the night, Abdellah wakes up and hears his parents having sex. More than the depiction of a teenager catching an intimate moment between his parents, the scene shifts the parents' sexual dynamic from "a private affair of the two" to "an intimate part of family life [. . .] that shapes Abdellah's whole existence and sexuality."[18] First, it seems to have a positive effect on Abdellah. He goes to the kitchen where he devours bread and honey. Getting his appetite back, in contrast to the scene on the patio, can appear as a sign of hopefulness for the possibility of durable intimacy for himself. However, the cruelly optimistic moment he is savoring is as short as *une lune de miel* [a honeymoon] since it is interrupted by his mother's screams. We soon understand that the father is hitting her.

The scene of abuse on the mother is hard to watch but is essential to our understanding of Taïa's cinematic style. In an interview, Taïa explains: "Cinema needs to feel real to me: concrete, sincere, complex and also melodramatic—like family life, when your parents fight, or when you hear them having sex; this intensity in the house, how you deal with the drama: there is some structure in that."[19] In other words, moments of trauma, which are part of everyday life, have to be part of the visual storytelling. Watching the children knocking on the door and begging their father to stop hitting their mother in the middle of the night can be seen as chaotic. However, Taïa sees structure in moments of crisis. Cinema allows him to re-center such moments into the reality of recurrent precarious situations. As such, he frames the scene of abuse as a critical moment of transition for Abdellah's journey sideways of his family structure.

IMPASSIVITY AND CRUEL OPTIMISM

In order to understand Abdellah's experience with his parents' relationship, I would like to first consider what Lauren Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness."

Instead of focusing on the exceptional nature of trauma, she proposes to consider moments of crisis in the everyday nature of ordinary life. Such a shift allows individuals to find ways of coping with instability daily.[20] The moment of crisis in his family offers Abdellah a foundation that will help him deal with future adversities. I will show how, through the effective management of "crisis ordinariness," Abdellah can build himself outside the heteronormative linear progression that his family tried to impose on him. The realization of the dysfunctional nature of cruel optimism in his household allows him to slowly reject such a structure.

In order to deal with "crisis ordinariness," Lauren Berlant suggests considering the strategy of impassivity. She identifies three specific types of impasse:

> First, there is the impasse after the dramatic event of a forced loss, such as after a broken heart, a sudden death, or a social catastrophe, when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while knowing, must adjust. Second, there is what happens when one finds oneself adrift amid normative intimate or material terms of reciprocity without an event [. . .]—coasting through life, as it were, until one discovers a loss of traction. Third, there are situations where managing the presence of a problem/event that dissolves the old sureties and forces of improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees is a pleasure and a plus, not a loss.[21]

While those impasses can be examined as independent transitional moments, the passage from the first to the third type can also be considered as progress on how to deal with crisis. Immediately after the fight between his parents, Abdellah goes through the first two types of impasses (adjustment to trauma and loss of control), which I propose to examine by engaging with Kathryn Bond Stockton's notion of growing sideways. Berlant describes impassivity as "[t]he way the body slows down [. . .] to clarify the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss."[22] In other words, impasses are transitional moments which, similarly to what Stockton calls "moving suspension," entail a form of delay.[23]

Specifically, during those two phases, Abdellah nurtures "sideways relations," an expression used by Stockton to define "forms of growing sideways [. . .] for children who have often not found it safe to express their "same-sex" longings to their peers without the fear of being ostracized or bullied."[24] Despite not explicitly revealing his homosexuality, it is clear that he cannot do so because he is already bullied for not fitting "male standards." For example, when he tries to join his mother and sisters to eat lunch with them, they reject him from their female space. When he expresses his sadness, they shame him for acting "like a girl." Other people also try to humiliate him because of his

"nonnormative" behavior. For instance, while he is walking on the street, people throw stones at him from rooftops. To defend himself, he attempts to stand up to them by asserting his readiness to confront them without any fear. This response mainly aims at performing manhood to protect himself. However, it is truly in the following scene that Abdellah finds shelter when he meets one of the men from his neighborhood with whom he entertains a relationship. This "man/boy love" becomes, in the words Stockton, "a substitute lateral relation" for Abdellah to respond to the "arrested development and ghostly gayness thrust upon" him.[25] Here, the concepts of laterality and ghostly presence can help us understand Taïa's visual framing of Abdellah's sideways relations with this man and another one from his neighborhood during his adolescence.

First, the two men drag him into isolated spaces and Abdellah follows them to spaces that embody the last two impasses Berlant defines. First, the houses where the sexual exchanges happen are under construction. Symbolically, the unfinished structures challenge "the vertical [. . .] metaphor of growing up" and dismantle the concept of the household.[26] More than being fleeting moments of intimacy, the encounters sidetrack Abdellah from his family structure and some of the functions that he must fulfill as part of the expectations to grow "up" and become a man in the family. For example, the first man accosts Abdellah while he is on his way to accomplish a task traditionally attributed to the son in the family: carrying bread that his mother has prepared to the communal oven to be baked. On another occasion, Abdellah initiates the interaction with the second man from his neighborhood by asking if he needs help. This offer symbolically deprive his own family from his contribution to the well-functioning, a lack for which he is often reprimanded.

Abdellah does not reveal the nature of the help he is offering to this man, but we understand that he implies sexual favors. Because Abdellah initiates this last encounter, I would like to examine here the weight of his agency within those relationships in which he appears to be a victim. Stockton's notion "sideways motions" is here apt to help us make sense of this dynamic. I suggest that his experiences with these older men prepare Abdellah to become the "author of [. . .] [his] motions and emotions."[27] They set him up to enter the third type of impasses which, as defined by Berlant, consists of manageable and constructive moments of crisis that allows the acceptance of "life-without-guarantees."[28] In the film, the song "*Ana Laka 3ala toul*" allows us to identify those moments for Abdellah. During each crisis, Abdellah is successful in taking one step further from his family structures, while at the same time understanding that overcoming one difficult situation does not exclude the possibilities of more to come.

The first step in Abdellah's detachment from the familial structures stems from his ambiguous relationship with his brother. Taïa openly depicts

Abdellah's obsession with Slimane when, for example, the young man sneaks into his brother's bedroom and smells his underwear. If the scene left any further doubts, Abdellah takes this odd prized possession to the courtyard and touches the same flowers that served as prop for the game "He loves me, he loves me not," which leads us to think that the object of his affection was his older brother. Disheartened, Abdellah accepted the results of the game on the patio, the same way he takes Slimane's rejection and unkindness during their daily interactions. However, a trip organized to the seashore by Slimane with his two little brothers shifts this dynamic.

The transitionary nature of the concept of "vacation" echoes the fleeting moments of intimacy during Abdellah's previous sexual relationships with older men. As such, it opens a possibility for an incestuous relationship between the two brothers, but, at their arrival at the hotel, this probability is soon dismantled. While they are checking in, the song "*Ana laka 3ala toul*" is playing. After getting the keys, the hotel receptionist and Abdellah make eye contact to express their attraction for one another. Their age proximity breaks from his experience with intimacy thus far and this short encounter distracts Abdellah from his fascination for his brother.

This moment foreshadows Abdellah's further disconnection from Slimane. For example, Abdellah, who holds Slimane in high esteem, explicitly contests his conception of "the good life" while the two brothers are relaxing on the beach at the beginning of their vacation. Slimane is reading a book in French and tries to convince Abdellah to try to learn the language. His main arguments are based on the idea that French can open up opportunities for upward social mobility. In particular, while symbolically leaning on a boat, he mentions the possibility of crossing the Mediterranean Sea to live in France. Despite his admiration for his brother, Abdellah challenges his brother's perspective and asserts his belonging in Morocco, its people, and its language. Such a position is surprising considering Abdellah's experience in the country. He lives in a society that does not accept his queerness, whether on the street or in his family, which can lead us to think that he would want to leave the place of his oppression. However, more than a defense of Morocco, his reaction aims at attacking the oppressive structures of normativity that his brother nurtures. Specifically, he rejects the idea that the Western world unquestionably bring about possibilities of "the good life."

This standpoint is Abdellah's first step toward the process of disidentification which, in Muñoz's words, "is about managing and negotiating [. . .] systemic violence" grounded in whiteness and heteronormativity.[29] While Abdellah first stands up against the first system of oppression on the beach, he later attacks heteronormativity. Abdellah realizes that Slimane left him and his younger brother to meet up with a woman. He feels a strong sense of betrayal. To take his revenge, he decides to inform his mother about his

brother's whereabouts. Despite the fact that Slimane was probably with the waitress he met at a restaurant, Abdellah tells his mother that he has left with a prostitute. By framing Slimane's escapade as unlawful, Abdellah decenters the "nonnormativity" of his sexuality. In turn, Abdellah abandons his little brother on the beach so he can meet up with a man he had met on the beach for a sexual encounter. With this act, Abdellah seems to reproduce the same toxic patterns to which he fell victim. The process is similar to previous transitionary moments of intimacy since it is happening in a house under construction.

We are left to wonder if Abdellah's progression has failed since he seems to have returned to the first (adjustment to trauma) and second types of impasse (loss of control) by this act. However, at the difference of other men, Abdellah embraces the man for comfort. While this new lover stays anonymous in the film, his name is Slimane in the novel. Such transfer symbolizes Taïa's effort in the film—in opposition to the novel—to clearly displace Abdellah's affective structure from filial relationship in his *famille de sang* [blood-related family] to his chosen family, as a queer act of resilience. Besides, such movement is highly symbolic since, more than being related by blood, the two brothers, notes Denis Provencher, are linked as "frères de sexe" [sex brothers] because they went through circumcision at the same time.[30] The ceremony is an important rite of passage in Islam as it prepares the child to "grow straight" into manhood. When Abdellah realizes that Slimane left, he "grows sideways" and abandon ties defined by Moroccan and Muslim heteronormative societies.

From this point forward, the family disappears from the screen. Taïa transports us forward in time, with an older Abdellah. In the scene that follows, he is having breakfast with Jean, a Swiss professor. They then decide to take a stroll on the beach where a man on a *fluka*, a boat, approaches them to ask if they would be interested in a ride. At this moment, Taïa sets the scene in a way that leads the audience to expect a romantic boat ride, which would echo the scene of *Days and Nights* with Hafez serenading Emane. However, a further reading of the scene can help us understand how Taïa destroys such possibilities. By setting the two lovers on the bark, he creates an indirect reference to the song and the love scene on the Nile from *Days and Nights*. The visual evocation of the clip serves as a reminder to presage that the boat ride will not end in a "forever love," the same way it failed for his parents. Prepared for a possible crisis, he accepts the ride, but we feel that he is concerned, and rightly so. The driver will not serenade the couple. He becomes another type of singer, a *maître-chanteur*.

The driver questions Abdellah's relationship with Jean and threatens to kill them if he does not pay him a higher fare. This blackmailing is grounded in the same economic reality previously discussed in *Le rouge*

du tarbouche and the power dynamics at play in relationships between Western and Moroccan men. The extortionist rejects the possibility of an actual relationship between Jean and Abdellah, and instead, frames it as a capitalist transaction from which he can himself benefit. While Jean, who does not understand Arabic, ignores the seriousness of the situation, Abdellah handles the issue with calm, due to his ability to deal with "crisis ordinariness." The river metaphorically symbolizes another transitional moment; he is floating away to the realization that the fantasy of forever love is impossible. The shipwreck, welcoming them on the beach at the end of their boat ride, metaphorically confirms this outcome. Their relationship is doomed to destruction. The structure echoes the previous setting of unfinished constructions where Abdellah meets older Moroccan men during his childhood. It however takes a step further, since the boat can be seen as a symbol not as a refusal of "growing up," but as his realization of the necessity to dismantle expectations of forever love, instead of suffering through its decay.

After this scene, Taïa forwards the narrative to Geneva when Abdellah arrives at the airport. The fact that he leaves his bag in a locker is not surprising, although Jean lives in the Swiss city. The previous scene on the *fluka* has already prepared us and Abdellah for this conclusion. After days of wandering in the city and sleeping on benches, Abdellah seeks help at the Salvation Army where they give him a room to share with another young Moroccan man. As a sign of friendship, Abdellah offers to share an orange with him. His new roommate accepts but insists on paying him back by singing a song for him. Abdellah requests "*Ana Laka Hala Toul*" and cries while listening to the song. Here, he does not fall apart because the song reminds him of the traumatic experience involving the mother and the father, the failure of his relationship with his brother or with Jean. The song serves as a catharsis to reframe adversities within "crisis ordinariness." As such, the emotional release helps him find strength in another moment of failure.

CONCLUSION

Taïa's film could be described as an adaptation of his novel. However, I would like to offer an alternative expression. The term "remake" helps me here step away from expectations of faithfulness from one medium to another since I did not intend to make a comparison between the novel and the film. Throughout my analysis, a few references to the novel allowed me to understand the film in Taïa's overall autobiographical narrative. The inclusion of the song "*Ana Laka 3ala Toul*" in the film, absent in the novel, as a thread guiding us through Abdellah's escape from "cruel optimism," indicates

The processes of crafting and performing the self that I examine here are not
explained by recourse to linear accounts of identification. As critics who work on and
with identity politics well know, identification is not about simple mimesis, but, as
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us in the introduction to *The Epistemology of the*
Closet, "always includes multiple processes of identifying with. It also involves identi-
fication as against; but even did it not, the relations implicit in identifying with are,
as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of
incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal."[7] Iden-
tification, then, as Sedgwick explains, 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.

Although the various processes of identification are fraught, those subjects who
are hailed by more than one minority identity component have an especially ar-
duous time of it. Subjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres
encounter obstacles in enacting identifications. Minority identifications are often ne-
glectful or antagonistic to other minoritarian positionalities. This is as true of differ-
ent theoretical paradigms as it is of everyday ideologies. The next section delineates
the biases and turf-war thinking that make an identity construct such as "queer of
color" difficult to inhabit.

Race Myopias/Queer Blind Spots: Disidentifying with "Theory"

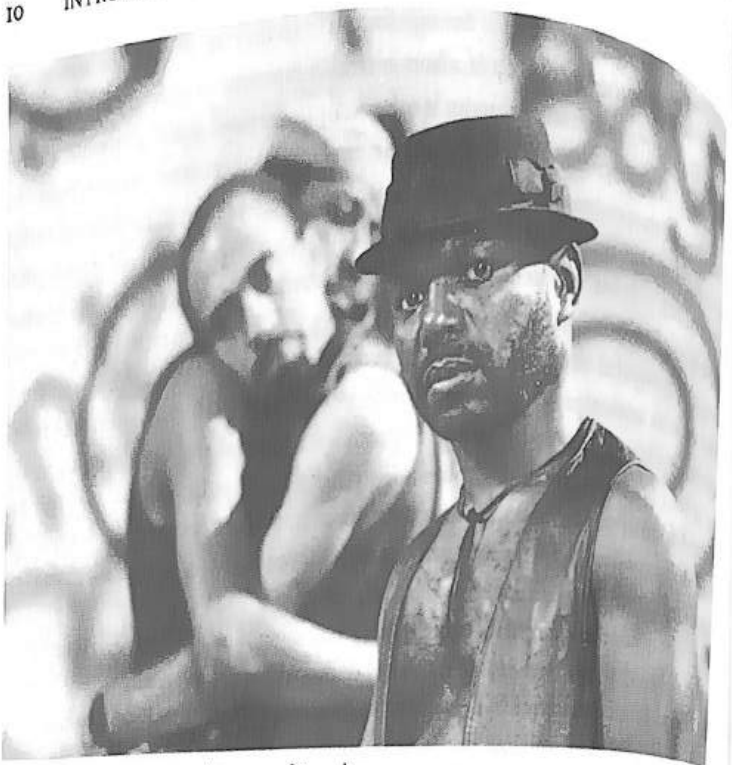
Disidentifications is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not
monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of inter-
locking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social. Cultural
studies of race, class, gender, and sexuality are highly segregated. The optic that I wish
to fashion is meant to be, to borrow a phrase from critical legal theorist Kimberle
William Crenshaw, *intersectional*.[8] Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is meant to
account for convergences of black and feminist critical issues within a paradigm that
factors in both of these components and replaces what she has referred to as mono-
causal paradigms that can only consider blackness at the expense of feminism or vice
versa. These monocausal protocols are established through the reproduction of nor-
mative accounts of woman that always imply a white feminist subject and equally
normativizing accounts of blackness that assume maleness.

These normativizing protocols keep subjects from accessing identities. We see
these ideological barriers to multiple identifications in a foundational cultural studies
text such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, the great twentieth-century trea-
tise on the colonized mind. In a footnote, Fanon wrote what is for any contemporary
antihomophobic reader an inflammatory utterance: "Let me observe at once that I
had no opportunity to establish the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique.
This must be viewed as the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles. The

schema of homosexuality is well enough known."[9] In his chapter on colonial identity,
Fanon dismisses the possibility of a homosexual component in such an identic forma-
tion. This move is not uncommon; it is basically understood as an "it's a white thing"
dismissal of queerness. Think, for a moment, of the queer revolutionary from the
Antilles, perhaps a young woman who has already been burned in Fanon's text by his
writing on the colonized woman. What process can keep an identification with
Fanon, his politics, his work possible for this woman? In such a case, a disidentifica-
tion with Fanon might be one of the only ways in which she is capable of reformat-
ting the powerful theorist for her own project, one that might be as queer and femi-
nist as it is anticolonial. Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian
reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would
be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet me-
diated identification. This maneuver resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/
bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and im-
mediate, a disidentification that enables politics.

The phenomenon of "the queer is a white thing" fantasy is strangely reflected in
reverse by the normativity of whiteness in mainstream North American gay culture.
Marlon Riggs made this argument with critical fierceness in his groundbreaking
video *Tongues Untied* (1989), where he discussed being lost in a sea of vanilla once he
came out and moved to San Francisco. A segment in the video begins a slow close-up
on a high-school yearbook image of a blond white boy. The image is accompanied by
a voice-over narration that discusses this boy, this first love, as both a blessing and, fi-
nally, a curse. The narrative then shifts to scenes of what seems to be a euphoric
Castro district in San Francisco where semiclad white bodies flood the streets of the
famous gay neighborhood. Riggs's voice-over performance offers a testimony that
functions as shrewd analysis of the force of whiteness in queer culture:

> In California I learned the touch and taste of snow. Cruising white boys, I
> played out adolescent dreams deferred. Patterns of black upon white upon black
> upon white mesmerized me. I focused hard, concentrated deep. Maybe from
> time to time a brother glanced my way. I never noticed. I was immersed in
> vanilla. I savored the single flavor, one deliberately not my own. I avoided the
> question "Why?" Pretended not to notice the absence of black images in this
> new gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, my own fantasies. I tried
> not to notice the few images of blacks that were most popular: joke, fetish, car-
> toon caricature, or disco diva adored from a distance. Something in Oz, in me,
> was amiss, but I tried not to notice. I was intent on the search for love, affirma-
> tion, my reflection in eyes of blue, gray, green. Searching, I found something I
> didn't expect, something decades of determined assimilation could not blind me
> to: in this great gay mecca I was an invisible man; still, I had no shadow, no sub-
> stance. No history, no place. No reflection. I was alien, unseen, and seen, un-
> wanted. Here, as in Hepzibah, I was a nigga, still. I quit—the Castro was no
> longer my home, my mecca (never was, in fact), and I went in search of some-
> thing better.



Marlon Riggs in *Tongues Untied*. Courtesy of Frameline.

This anecdotal reading of queer culture's whiteness is a critique that touches various strata of queer culture. *Tongues Untied* has been grossly misread as being a "vilification" of white people and the S/M community in general. Consider John Champagne's apologist defense of the mainstream gay community's racism as a standard maneuver by embattled white gay men when their account of victimization is undercut by reference to racial privilege.[10]

A survey of the vast majority of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in print shows the same absence of colored images as does the powerful performance in *Tongues Untied*. Most of the cornerstones of queer theory that are taught, cited, and canonized in gay and lesbian studies classrooms, publications, and conferences are decidedly directed toward analyzing white lesbians and gay men. The lack of inclusion is most certainly not the main problem with the treatment of race. A soft multicultural *inclusion* of race and ethnicity does not, on its own, lead to a progressive identity discourse. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has made the valuable point that "[t]he lack of attention to race in the work of leading lesbian theorists reaffirms the belief that it is possible to talk about sexuality without talking about race, which in turn reaffirms the belief that it is necessary to talk about race and sexuality only when discussing people of color and their text."[11] When race is discussed by most white queer theorists, it is usually a contained reading of an artist of color that does not factor questions of race into the entirety of their project. Once again taking up my analogy

with Riggs's monologue, I want to argue that if the Castro was Oz for some gay men who joined a great queer western migration, the field of scholarship that is emerging today as gay and lesbian studies is also another realm that is over the rainbow. The field of queer theory, like the Castro that Riggs portrays, is—and I write from experience—a place where a scholar of color can easily be lost in an immersion of vanilla while her or his critical faculties can be frozen by an avalanche of snow. The powerful queer feminist theorist/activists that are most often cited—Lorde, Barbara Smith, Anzaldúa, and Moraga, among others—are barely ever critically engaged and instead are, like the disco divas that Riggs mentions, merely adored from a distance. The fact that the vast majority of publications and conferences that fill out the discipline of queer theory continue to treat race as an addendum, if at all, indicates that there is something amiss in this Oz, too.

The Pêcheuxian Paradigm

The theory of disidentification that I am offering is meant to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields. The French linguist Michel Pêcheux extrapolated a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's influential theory of subject formation and interpellation. Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" was among the first articulations of the role of ideology in theorizing subject formation. For Althusser, ideology is an inescapable realm in which subjects are called into being or "hailed," a process he calls interpellation. Ideology is the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The location of ideology is always within an *apparatus* and its practice or practices, such as the state apparatus.[12]

Pêcheux built on this theory by describing the three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices. In this schema, the first mode is understood as "identification," where a "Good Subject" chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. "Bad Subjects" resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to "counteridentify" and turn against this symbolic system. The danger that Pêcheux sees in such an operation would be the counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of "counterdetermination." Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.[13] Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact

permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.

Judith Butler gestures toward the uses of disidentification when discussing the failure of identification. She parries with Slavoj Žižek, who understands disidentification as a breaking down of political possibility, "a fictionalization to the point of political immobilization."[14] She counters Žižek by asking the following question of his formulations: "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" Butler answers: "it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference."[15] Both Butler's and Pêcheux's accounts of disidentification put forward an understanding of identification as never being as seamless or unilateral as the Freudian account would suggest.[16] Both theorists construct the subject as *inside* ideology. Their models permit one to examine theories of a subject who is neither the "Good Subject," who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture, or the "Bad Subject," who imagines herself outside of ideology. Instead, they pave the way to an understanding of a "disidentificatory subject" who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form.

As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life. Sedgwick, in her work on the affect, shame, and its role in queer performativity, has explained:

> The forms taken by shame are not distinct "toxic" parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process in which identity is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *trans*figuration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure.[17]

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.

Disidentifications is, to some degree, an argument with psychoanalytic orthodoxies within cultural studies. It does not represent a wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis. Indeed, one's own relationship with psychoanalysis can be disidentificatory. Rather than reject psychoanalytic accounts of identification, the next section engages

work on identification and desire being done in the psychoanalytic wing of queer theory.

Identification beyond and with Psychoanalysis

The homophobic and racist vicissitudes of psychoanalysis's version of identification have been explored by various critics. Diana Fuss, for instance, has shown the ways in which Freud constructed a false dichotomy between desire and identification. Desire is the way in which "proper" object choices are made and identification is a term used to explicate the pathological investment that people make with bad object choices.[18] Fuss proposes a new theory of identification based on a vampiric understanding of subjectivity formation:

> Vampirism works more like an inverted form of identification—identification pulled inside out—where the subject, in the act of interiorizing the other, simultaneously reproduces externally in the other. Vampirism is both other-incorporating and self-reproducing; it delimits a more ambiguous space where desire and identification appear less opposed than coterminous, where the desire to be the other (identification) draws its very sustenance from the desire to have the other.[19]

The incorporation of the other in this account is in stark opposition to Freud's version, in which identification is distributed along stages, all teleologically calibrated toward (compulsory) heterosexuality. Fuss's revisionary approach to psychoanalysis insists on desire's coterminous relationship with identification.

Fuss's groundbreaking work on identification has been met with great skepticism by Teresa de Lauretis, who discounts this theory on the grounds that it will further blur the lines between specifically lesbian sexuality and subjectivity and feminist takes on female sexuality and subjectivity.[20] De Lauretis's approach, also revisionary, takes the tack of substituting desire for identification in the narrative of psychoanalysis. For de Lauretis, lesbian desire is not predicated by or implicated within any structure of identification (much less cross-identifications). Her approach to desire is to expand it and let it cover and replace what she sees as a far too ambiguous notion of identification. On this point, I side with Fuss and other queer theorists who share the same revisionary impulse as de Lauretis but who are not as concerned with ordering the lines of proper, reciprocal desire against what she views as oblique cross-identifications. A substantial section of chapter 1, "Famous and Dandy like B. 'n' Andy," is concerned with the power of cross-identifications between two artists, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, who do not match along the lines of race, sexuality, class, or generation. This strategy of reading the two artists together and in reaction to each other is informed by a politics of coalition antithetical to the politics of separatism that I see as a foundational premise of de Lauretis's project. The political agenda suggested here does not uniformly reject separatism either; more nearly, it is wary of separatism because it is not always a feasible option for subjects who are not

INTRODUCTION

An anecdote that may be instructive to the reader of novels written under Oulipian constraint: in 1969, after Georges Perec published *La Disparition*—if not the most illustrative example of an Oulipian novel then certainly the easiest to explain[1]—a critic named René-Marill Albérès reviewed it, lukewarmly, in the journal *Les Nouvelles littéraires*. Other critics reviewed *La Disparition* too, of course; what stood out about Albérès was that he plainly missed the central conceit of the book, namely that it had been written without any words containing the letter E.

I bring this up because, whatever grim conclusions we may reach specific to Albérès's deftness as a reader (and *La Disparition* takes place in a world from which the letter E has gone mysteriously missing, so it's not like there weren't clues), his gaffe points out a pitfall with the potential to trip up even the most meticulous littérateur: reading an Oulipian novel without knowing the precise way in which it is Oulipian.

Did I say pitfall? I might have meant windfall.

As types of vertigo go, after all, being in the Oulipian dark is not such a bad one. It can even be refreshing, given that most novels in this milieu are preceded at some distance by their reputations. But in any

1 Speaking of explanations, the adjective Oulipian is retrofitted from the name OuLiPo, which stands for ouvroir de littérature potentielle, or workshop for potential literature: a collective established in Paris in 1960 with the purpose of exploring and exploiting the generative literary potential of linguistic, mathematical, and scientific structures—which, lots of the time, is a fancy way of saying the use of constraints as a writing aid. Perec became a member of the Oulipo in 1967 (and is still a member despite having died in 1982, according to one of the group's admittedly stringent bylaws). Anne Garréta, on whom more in a moment, became a member in 2000, and I became one in 2009.

case let's continue to treat the situation with gravity, so to speak, for a moment longer.

The first time I read *Sphinx*, Anne Garréta's first novel, I knew that it was Oulipian,[2] but not how. It took me about forty pages to figure out its conceit, and what I felt once I did was more than just relief, more than just satisfaction to have quieted that nagging sense of missing something: I was, well, still bewildered. But it was a refreshing, trees-to-forest kind of bewilderment, the kind that comes when, say, you've been so busy trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle that you're caught off guard by how strange and fascinating the resulting picture is. A bewilderment that asks not *what* but *how*. Like its namesake from Greek myth, *Sphinx* was that rare riddle that only makes you think harder after you know the answer.

Now, I assume that if you're here you already know the answer, such as it is: you know the unspoken constraint behind the novel you are about to read, or have maybe just finished. (If you happen *not* to know the answer yet, I urge you to do everything in your power to stay ignorant for a while longer: sheathe the front and back covers of the book in kraft paper, avoid discussing it with booksellers, and don't read any reviews unless you're confident that they were written by lousy, inattentive critics. One hint: Anne Garréta uses the letter E plenty of times herein—your quarry lies elsewhere.)

Here's the thing about *Sphinx*, though: it will bewilder you no matter which side of the riddle you enter from. The reader who knows what he or she is getting into from the outset loses nothing of the novel's

2 This is actually a much more complex and debatable statement than it seems. First of all, there is a longstanding debate within and without the Oulipo as to whether any work should be called Oulipian simply because its author is a member of the Oulipo. (Is this introduction Oulipian?) Second of all, even if you respond yes to the first point, there is still the technicality that Garréta published *Sphinx* in 1986, fourteen years before she became an Oulipian. In any event, at the time of my first reading the book had been commended to me as Oulipian by a trusted source, and I do not feel I was led astray.

true vertigo—the high-wire act by which Garréta, under the cover of a relatively conventional narrative, quietly dismantles various conventions in the way we think and speak about love and despair and need. It bewilders me still, less on the technical level than on the level at which the technical merges with the conceptual, the medium with the message. To read *Sphinx* already aware of its conceit is only to break the picture back into its constituent puzzle pieces, to reverse the sequence of the questions your bewilderment asks: to go in wondering how the novelist pulled off this one trick,[3] but come out wondering what kind of reality you've been inhabiting.

Above and beyond constraint, that particular blend of readerly effort and figure-ground reversal is one of the best things an Oulipian novel can hope to achieve, and in that sense *Sphinx* is consummately Oulipian. It's worth noting, I suppose, that in other senses it is not remotely: stylistically, for one thing, it has none of the lightness, none of the gleeful air of structured play, found in most Oulipian fiction. Garréta's prose is heavy, drastic, baroque, at once ruthlessly clinical and deeply sentimental; her characters wage their struggles against language and its strictures not out of a desire to explore or make mischief, but based on stakes of life and death. Sometimes literally, depending on the book.[4]

Nonetheless, even if Garréta is an unusually ornate stylist for the Oulipo, and arguably the most deliberately radical thinker it has ever

3 To say nothing of the translator. If Garréta's composition of *Sphinx* was a high-wire act, then Emma Ramadan's task in carrying it over into a language with at least one crucially important constitutional difference is, near as I can figure it, akin to one tightrope walker mimicking the high-wire act of a second walker on a steeply diverging tightrope, while also doing a handstand.

4 The two other novels Garréta published prior to joining the Oulipo, *Ciels liquides* (1990) and *La Décomposition* (1999), are excellent examples of the class of modern French novel or film that sounds charming and fun when you hear its synopsis but turns out to be sort of existentially upsetting when you actually read or watch it.

counted among its ranks, she still belongs in those ranks, and *Sphinx* shows why. Like the best of the workshop's productions, it is animated by a drive to use language to question language, to manipulate and master and subvert the mechanics of everyday expression. In doing so it creates a subtly but sometimes chillingly different world, one that arises not so much within the narrative as within our experience of reading it. And it leaves us to sort out the implications, mostly, once we learn to recognize them: the arbitrariness of our assumptions; the flimsiness of our institutions; the difficulties of knowing another person, oneself, anything. Pitfall, windfall. The vertigo changes but does not disappear.

Daniel Levin Becker
San Francisco, January 2015

Remembering saddens me still, even years later. How many exactly, I don't know anymore. Ten or maybe thirteen. And why do I always live only in memory? Soul heavy from too much knowing, body tired from feeling pensive and powerless at the same time, so riven by this obsessive ennui that nothing, or almost nothing, can distract it anymore. Back then, if I recall correctly, I used to describe the world as a theater where processions of corpses danced in a macabre ball of drives and desires. My contempt and ennui did not, however, keep me from observing how this dance dissolved into an amorous waltz. Languid nights at the whim of syncopated rhythms and fleeting pulses; the road to hell was lit with pale lanterns; the bottom of the abyss drew closer indefinitely; I moved through the smooth insides of a whirlwind and gazed at deformed images of ecstatic bodies in the slow, hoarse death rattle of tortured flesh.

But I was slipping and could only keep falling; I couldn't cut myself off or break from my destiny with a mesmerized flight. Is it blasphemy to insist that my lucid crossing to hell was a direct road to redemption? "You would not look for me if you had not found me; you would not long for me if you had not once held me in your arms."

Those arms, the intense sweetness, a series of scenes that still ignites a carnal flame in my memory. A*** was a dancer. I would spend my nights waiting for A*** to appear on the stage of the Eden, a cabaret on the Left Bank. And who wouldn't have been enamored of that svelte

frame, that musculature seemingly sculpted by Michelangelo, that satiny skin far superior to anything I had ever known?

In those years I was the resident DJ at the Apocryphe, a fashionable nightclub at the time.

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I've been trying unsuccessfully to remember the first visions I had of A***. Without a calling, I drift through the world with no control over my explosions of delirious happiness or my collapses into despair. I am easily distracted, ready for the most random deviations. So I must have first spotted A*** during a melancholic, disinterested contemplation of a succession of bodies I wasn't trying hard to distinguish, on the stage of a cabaret where some obliging alcoholic had decided to drag me, coming from a club where we'd mingled our disappointments. Asking myself afterward what had made the place so appealing, I couldn't describe it. In that blur, something must have struck me: something started operating underground, a digging, a tunneling in my mind following the blinding impact of a fragment on my retina. A body, just one, that I hadn't identified, surreptitiously had filled the place with a seduction that permeated so deeply I couldn't discover the cause, I couldn't uncover the root of it.

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Not long after that first outing at the Eden, Tiff, one of my friends of the time who had recently become an exotic dancer after her stint as an acrobat, dragged me along on her usual tour of cabarets. I was finally being granted what I had been after for a long time: the chance to be the shadow of a body whose own is stolen by the spotlight. She had agreed to meet me around ten one night, in one of the big cafés on the Place Pigalle. It was autumn. On my way there, I was walking against the current in a flood of hurried men, watchful men with a careful step—where were they going to in such a rush? A streetwalker crossed my path,

harnessed in garters and leather straps. Her joints, limbs, and torso w bound in black leather fastened with metallic buckles. On the edge the sidewalk she began her firefly ballet. She looked like a gladiator, some kind of beast of burden. All along the boulevard these stores—hal sex shop, half erotic lingerie shop—offered the elements of such ensembles. A little farther along, I stopped in front of one of the half-curtained storefronts. Were there really women who wore these blood-red bodices, purple garter belts, and sheer lace thongs? I was continuing on my way when, passing through the halo of light projected onto the pavement from the entrance of a cabaret, I suddenly recalled the spotlight cast on that body dancing the finale on the stage of the Eden. The desire to go back pulsed through me—the fleeting feeling that I had left something behind there.

I sped up until I reached the café on the northwest corner of the Place Pigalle. Some working-class men in tired suits were packed tightly together along the bar. The neon dripped a muggy light on this anxious sampling of humanity. Tiff was standing near the cash register talking to one of the servers. I recognized her thanks to the shimmer of her rhinestones and sequins shining dimly through a thick cloud of cigarette smoke. Tiff would always start yelling out to me as soon as she saw me. Her shortsightedness, which she refused to correct out of vanity, thankfully limited the range of her shouts—a hello accompanied by so many affectionate names that it had made me blush at the beginning of our friendship. In this café filled with the lingering stench of anxiety and brutality, hearing myself called "my love" and "my pet" sent shivers of nervousness and dread down my spine. In the clash of Arabic sounds and the servers' shouts, I thought such an outburst would make the world stop spinning. But no one seemed to have noticed—to have heard—what was worrying me so much. It was as if I was acting as a sound box,

The Eden held a certain power over me; I was helpless against it. Before I went to work at night, I would spend two hours there, from ten to midnight. The troupe very quickly adopted me: they asked for my opinion on their makeup and confessed to me all their little dramas. I liked to let myself be brushed by naked skin, by boas and feather fans. I liked to watch as a face transformed under the stroke of a pencil and the touch of a brush, the line of a drawn eyebrow, the shape of an accentuated cheekbone. This living exhibition turned me off of antiquities; the odors of perfume and sweat were missing at all the museums I visited.

Out of all the dancers, A*** showed the most enthusiastic fondness toward me. Our relationship was very ceremonious at first. I would follow A*** into the dressing room, often bringing along a token of my affection: flowers; a photograph taken surreptitiously as A*** entered onto the stage; a fashion etching from the 1930s. My attempt at courtship was like something out of a book from the 19th century.

After the kiss on the lips that everyone there was rewarded with upon arrival, I would listen to the details of A***'s day. I would settle deep into the red velvet couch in the dressing room, stretching my legs over the armrest, and silently contemplate the slow process of applying makeup and arranging a costume. I noticed ironically that the dancers spent more time adjusting these little delicate nothings that elude nudity than one would dressing oneself from head to toe for a gala at the Opéra.

There are a thousand details to consider when putting on a sim[illegible] g-string that never even cross the mind of the socialite pulling on [illegible] long gown or the man fastening a bow tie on the wing collar of his sh[illegible] A thousand details in order to show off a behind, leaving the thighs and hips free and visible, but without revealing the crotch. I was amazed at the time it took for a body always to appear smooth, hairless, supple, and flawless: in a word, angelic. I learned that black skin like A***'s demands makeup of a completely different hue and variety than white skin. I learned how fragile the body is, how much care is required to maintain the suppleness of the limbs and joints. Before leaving the dressing room, A*** always performed a few dance steps for my selfish pleasure; then we would separate. The last image I had before going to work was of the shimmering golden reflections on skin lit up by dim hallways lights and soon devoured by the shadows of the wings. I would linger for a few moments in the dressing room, contemplating all the tools of metamorphosis, the street clothes lying around. Often I would dreamily put back an object that had fallen on the floor, or leave a little note slipped between the mirror and its frame. It wasn't the show that brought me to the Eden; I would hurry toward the exit while the audience applauded the opening, sitting with their champagne. Once outside, I would make my way on foot to the Apocryphe, progressively sobering up over the fifteen-minute walk that I always took, regardless of the weather or the season.

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The Apocryphe! Dark nights light up with red. Somewhere between brothel and butcher shop, its ambiguous essence was never revealed except to those who knew how to decipher mirrors' reflections. One had to guess at everything, trying to grasp words on lips, fugitive gestures, events captured in the mirror, while pretending to stare at oneself. A macabre masked ball, people tripping over streamers that snaked down from the

ceiling and coiled around the supporting pillars. To distill music, to set bodies in rhythm, was to be the priest of a harrowing cult. Once I realized that, all I could do was drift, asking myself why I was there, besides the chance that had brought me and the poisonous ease that had ensnared me. Then again, why leave? It was so easy to think of this crossing over as a trial of purification through the mud. I would have had to pretend to look all over again for some kind of calling, knowing full well that there was nothing to find, and that it would all end in horror and silence.

The moment I started there coincided with my decision to abandon what could have been an honest intellectual career. I had wasted four or five years on the benches of my school's theology department. Had I really imagined entering into a religious practice? I was about to launch into a thesis when, for some strange reason, a profound refusal began to bubble up in me. Not a refusal of faith or of metaphysics, but of the inanity of the scholarly discourse the university required me to use. The incomprehension of my fellow students, their constant tendency to relate every idea to some troubling personal decision and thus to consider the slightest original thought as the expression of an individual vice, only added to my melancholy and disgust. I was put on trial for everything I said, and so I adopted a seemingly contemptuous silence. I deserted my courses and avoided the cafés where the new inquisitors gathered and instead took refuge at my house, reading the books left behind long ago in the apartment my grandmother had bequeathed to me. For six months, from October to March, I succumbed to my natural tendency for reclusion, living between my bed and my desk.

I avoided going to the university as much as possible; the idea horrified me. But I went to the lectures on the Incarnation given on certain Thursdays by Padre***, a Spanish Jesuit. One day as I was leaving his class, he called me over, suggesting we have dinner together. The invitation

was so casual, even bordering on nonchalant, that it seemed only natur[al] to accept. Padre*** practiced his faith in the strictest orthodoxy, thoug[h] some people accused him of violating its core commandments in hi[s] private life. Apparently he didn't flee from worldly activities with sufficient horror. Because he wrote a column on culture for one of the larger evening newspapers and was the cofounder of a gastronomic circle, the students considered him a scandalous hypocrite, a deviant of decadent habits, which, I confess, made him pretty interesting to me. And so without hesitating I accepted his invitation for the next day.

Over dinner we vaguely alluded to the path it seemed I was about to quit. I think he understood my reasons for defecting and approved of them, but didn't want to admit it. When I entered into the world of theology, I had aroused hope in many of the priests and professors, due as much to my own intellectual merit as to the overall intellectual weakness of the sons and daughters of well-established families who had devoted themselves to these studies. I inexplicably wasn't living up to their hope that if I didn't take the vow I would at least become a respectable doctor in theology who might bring back a bit of luster to the discipline, devalued as it was by the mediocrity of its traditional followers; the Church pines for these lights of Reason as much as it fears them. Young Catholics born, raised, and nurtured in the accepted family faith tend to lack audacity. Restricted by tight-laced morals, they retreat from thought as soon as a question comes beating too furiously against the flanks of their fortified certitudes. Doomed to inbreeding according to hallowed rituals, they shrink from all secular currents that aren't weighed down by dogmas. The young girls, sensible and stupid, reserving their virginity for their husbands; the young men of old France, equally timid and crude under the contradictory effect of a suppressed sensuality that finds its outlet in military endeavors or during religious charity trips.

conversation were simply a pleasure, like the contemplation of A***'s body or A***'s dance, an aesthetic pleasure that I could attribute only to a lightness of being that never dipped into inanity. I can't define A*** as being anything other than both frivolous and serious, residing in the subtle dimension of presence without insistence.

Our arrival together at every locale and the attention we paid to each other started to incite gossip. Our encounters, which took place only in public, aroused suspicions of a private affair that, at the time, didn't exist. At the Apocryphe and everywhere we went, people made remarks about our striking dissimilarity. They teased me over the contrast in color between our skins, they stressed the difference in our mannerisms: the impulsiveness of A***'s voice and gestures, that wild exuberance and openness to the world, which by comparison underscored my moderation and reserve. A*** in turn had to bear the incessant prattle about my religious and social background. They painted a picture of my incomprehensible oddities: my isolation; my taste for solitude strangely coexisting with a sudden dive into this world; an unheralded abandon of a university career for the improvised post of DJ. For want of any intelligible coherence, they assumed I must have been harboring some kind of vice or perversion.

What did I get out of spending all my time with someone with whom I shared no social, intellectual, or racial community? That was precisely the question troubling them. Black skin, white skin: our looks were against us. Our intimacy went against the mandate dictating that birds of a feather flock together. And this impossible clash of colors produced the general opinion that this was an unnatural union.

In order to stop the scandal, we diluted our dissimilarity by always hanging out in a group. But the people in this crowd tried to detach me from A*** by attempting to convince me that we were fundamentally

incompatible. I couldn't care less that my attachment to my seeming perfect antithesis was provoking worry and alarm. They complained A***'s numerous affairs, highlighted A***'s notorious fickleness and capriciousness that would make any real attachment impossible. They charitably forewarned me that I wasn't A***'s "type," that we weren't even of the same species. That if my intention was to turn this friendship into something more, it was best to give up now, and that if, by some misfortune, it had already become something more, it was just as well to break it off now before it dissolved into unpleasantries and pain.

I thoroughly did not care about their opinions, their advice and warnings, their slanders and denigrations. I was well aware of A***'s fickleness, capriciousness, and quickly changing tastes, for I had witnessed all of these traits myself. As for this concert of well-intentioned deceit and charitable denunciations aimed at discouraging me, I was deaf to it all.

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One morning at the Kormoran, that final stopover for night owls, an old mobster whom I knew and liked rather more than his congeners saw me enter with A***, called me over to his usual spot at the bar, and, after the customary ceremonious greetings, imparted this strange speech, interspersed with knowing winks:

"You know me. I like you. So listen up. All those idiots, they don't know anything. Because they see us chatting fairly often and because I seem to know you pretty well, for a week now they've been coming to me to complain that you're mucking around, that you're out of your mind. That you're foolishly running after that attractive animal there [gesturing toward A***]. You know what they say to me? That it could never work between whites and blacks…And that, furthermore, you two aren't compatible…That one's always dancing, you're always hitting the books. They come to me desperately seeking an explanation…

[He paused to finish his whiskey] But they've got it all wrong, I'm telling you…I've been observing your conquest for two weeks now…And I know what blacks are like…For ten years I've been watching them pass through here…Listen to me: if you keep at it, you will succeed…All those assholes are talking bullshit…Saying that you're lowering yourself! That's what they've been saying to you, right? When you talk to them, they don't absorb anything, and so they can't understand what you see in A***…[He ordered another drink and relit his cigar] But I get what you see…Come back to me in a month and we'll discuss it again. Because it's not at all a lost cause, it just takes a bit of time. Yeah? Turn on the charm! Bring out the violins and *tutti quanti*…It takes time, but you can handle it…Have patience, and by God, you will succeed! And they'll have to eat their words."

He firmly grasped my hand after finishing his speech, pronounced in his eternally hoarse voice, rolling the gravel of an accent that rendered him incomprehensible to any ear unaccustomed to the deformations he inflicted on his syllables. The high-end escort keeping him company winked while watching me with a slightly alarmed air. Ruggero, as he called himself, was studying me paternally, a cigar wedged between his teeth, gauging my surprise. "Persevere or you'll have me to deal with… When you achieve your victory, the champagne is on me. Don't let yourself be intimidated by the blathering, the scandals, and the bullshit… Now go tend to your love affair."

I went and found A***, who had no clue about the sermon I had just endured. No doubt others had taken advantage of those ten minutes I had spent with Ruggero to make remarks about how I seemed to want to capture A***'s attention, and more still, at any price. They saw us everywhere together, but no act or gesture allowed them to definitively conclude it had turned into an affair. They didn't know what to believe, and for them that was insufferable. They would have excused

a brisk adventure, without consequence and without tomorrow—wh was called in this milieu "getting some ass." But an attachment th appeared to stem from something other than sex was intolerable.

Ruggero had, however, clumsily formulated what I had been struggling to express myself, without it being, on my part, a conscious project or concerted maneuver. His soliloquy had clarified and simplified the ideas floating around in my head. Indeed, I'm sure that had been his aim. What I was feeling for A*** needed its own embodiment; the pleasure I took in A***'s company demanded its own fulfillment. I wanted A***, it was true, and all my other desires, needs, and plans paled in comparison. Suddenly, the obsessive clamor for amorous possession took hold of me.

I was surprised to find myself desiring, painfully. In a sudden rush of vertigo, I was tantalized by the idea of contact with A***'s skin. I wanted to dismiss, destroy all those who were thronging around A***, keeping this presence from me. I wanted to wrest A*** from their company, from the intrusive glances clinging to us there, and hide us both away. With an unknowingly crazed look, I was always watching this irresistible body. But my gaze was narrowing and stiffening under the tension of carnal desire. That night, A*** was wearing a black silk shirt and white pleated leather pants that showed off a firm behind. A***'s hair, shaved not long ago for the show, was beginning to grow back, materializing as a light shadow. That face, thus restored to its pure nudity, appeared without interference, without anything that could deceptively modify its proportions or veil its imperfections. Its features had retained nothing of A***'s African origins, except for a barely perceptible, sensual heaviness of the mouth.

I don't know what more to say about this body, although I spent hours contemplating it. But that night, my contemplation was exorbitant, quickly twisting into a desire to take possession…A*** noticed my unusual comportment. I made excuses; I didn't dare reveal the reason for

I want, therefore I am; I need, I breathe. I spend money, they must grant my desire, considering my demands in light of the value that I offer. I pay to exist; the tribute, delivered in kind or in cash, buys the recognition of my right.

My strategy was to inspire incertitude; I derived pleasure in imbuing these souls with doubt by not playing into their pathetic ruses. *Che vuoi?* I was leading them to the brink of an essential anxiety. My reply was always "maybe." It was a dangerous game that exposed me to the disapproval, disrespect, or insidious resentment of the people to whom I denied the assurance of being a subject. Each night I would have to confront this great panic of individual desires that were in reality desires for individuation, for furious revindication. Sometimes I would try—utterly in vain but with a perverse pleasure—to make them understand that the sum of individual desires does not add up to the happiness of all. That when it comes to the music in a club the law of the majority is ineffectual; that neither democracy nor aristocracy, nor even oligarchy, is a possible regime for a coherent musical set. I would argue that a good DJ is one who, rather than simply responding to repetitive wishes that are consciously formulaic and elementary (such and such a record, such and such a song), subconsciously manages to fulfill an unknown desire by creating a unity out of something superior to adding up so many records, so many requests. To appease is not the same as to fulfill.

Each night I made such observations that I would occasionally articulate to myself when pedantic disquisition and contempt started to mutually reinforce each other. I had come to the end of this chapter of my *De natura rerum noctis* dedicated to the essence of the position of the DJ when I noticed A*** standing near the bar, no longer accompanied by that new moronic lover, being served a glass of champagne by the barman.

It was late, the Eden had already been closed for some time, and

I worried that A***'s arrival at the Apocryphe after our altercation meant trouble. I didn't know if I was supposed to leave my booth and go meet A*** or if I was supposed to wait for A*** to approach me. Fortunately, we both had the same reflex, and met halfway between the bar and the booth. There was no visible trace of what had happened a few hours before. A*** was drunk, which almost never happened, and from within that drunkenness asked me to dance. People didn't dance as a couple anymore in those days except during retro sequences when the DJ would revive old dance forms such as the bop, tango, or waltz. And that was absolutely what A*** desired: a waltz, nothing less. I was enticed by this extravagance, and besides, why not? At this late hour, only a small number of people remained on the floor. A waltz would serve as a charming exit, and, irresistibly outmoded, could assume the parodic allure that excuses all improprieties. So from the bottom of the crate I took out an LP of Viennese waltzes that I cued with no transition, following some nondescript funk track. Abandoning the turntables, and without any snarky retort this time, I went to dance this waltz.

A***, though drunk, was dancing divinely. A classic routine demonstrates one's sensibility just as much as the unruly improvisations of today's dance steps. While dancing these waltzes—for we danced many in succession—I had the impression that never until this day had I reveled in such a carefree lightness of being. There was no longer anybody but us on the dance floor; no doubt our perfect execution of the steps had intimidated all the amateurs. A*** had a naïve and clichéd fondness for the antiquated world of the aristocracy, an admiration for the bygone, the retro, the image of luxury that Hollywood associates with times past.

A***'s drunkenness, at once dissipated and concentrated by the dance, kept us moving. When the Apocryphe closed, we hurried to the Kormoran. Ruggero had a bottle of whiskey brought to my table that he insisted

on offering me for the New Year, and as a thank you for the cigars I had brought him back from Germany. And so I too started to drink. A*** and I talked for a long time about everything under the sun. We were drunk, A*** more so than me. There was a warmth, a hint of complicity between us, which soothed the constant tension of our unfinished business. And this happy understanding, permitted by our drunkenness, was further reinforced by the illusory intensity of perception brought on by the alcohol. Leaning toward me and speaking with more abandon than usual, A*** suddenly murmured the following question: "And if we make love, will you still love me after?" Abruptly, I caught a glimpse of what I had given up hoping for, without ever having written it off. It was finally being offered to me, in a whisper and under the extraordinary guise of a fiction, all that we had envisioned and elaborated, that which ultimately gave meaning to all of our stratagems. A*** repeated the query, making it sound like a supplication. I leaned toward A***, not knowing how to respond to the anxiety I sensed in the question.

My only answer was to wrest A*** from the chair and to take us out of this place. Once outside and without having discussed it at all, we hailed a taxi and A*** told the driver the address. Without saying a word, we took the elevator. The fear that I had forgotten suddenly returned and took me by the heart, the fear of flesh that accompanies those first adolescent excitements, an anxiety we attempt to combat too quickly with cynicism. I thought I was going to faint, standing there at last on the threshold of what I had so passionately desired.

I staggered as A*** moved to kiss me; I didn't know what to do except let it happen. The temporal order of events, even the simple spatial points of reference, all disappeared without my realizing it; everything is blurred in my memory. I have in my mouth, still, the taste of skin, of the sweat on that skin; against my hands, the tactile impression of skin and the shape of

that flesh. In a sprawling obscurity—either I closed my eyes or my gaze was struck with a temporary blindness—some vaguely outlined visions, and, in my ear, the echo of soft rustlings, of words barely articulated.

I don't know how to recount precisely what happened, or how to describe or even attest to what I did, what was done to me. And the effect of the alcohol has nothing to do with this eradication; it's impossible to recapture the feeling of abandon through words. Crotches crossed and sexes mixed, I no longer knew how to distinguish anything. In this confusion we slept.

of this narrative. The only thing that managed to subsist in my eyes—lost and blind to everything else—was a dispossession that seized, embraced, and then released, without any more substance or intelligibility than that. It was an impossible task to set the boundaries of what I was, up to the edge where I blurred into the other—the indescribable other—so much did the meanings escape me, the words that others before me had uttered deep within an analogous attrition. I longed to reduce the impossible to the inessential, but I no longer had recourse to this principle of logic, which had suddenly become inadequate.

Inadequate, I would repeat the word to myself, my jaws clamping down on my breath, trying to choke it, to nip in the bud the inarticulate expressions that were surging and gnawing. Why give voice to the unarticulated? Because the inexpressible doesn't articulate itself in the least; it shatters into pieces before even taking form. I felt distinctly that something was breaking under a kind of assault; an obscure combat was taking place, syncopating my breath with its blows. At the impact of that secret confrontation, shuddering with a sadness only noticeable to myself, I pretended to be imperturbable.

Thus, forever oscillating between forced tranquility and irrepressible anguish, I was disconcerting those around me. And indeed, how was I to explain this apparent absurdity: that it is possible to have feelings, to suffer for them, and at the same time to be unable to cut oneself off from them or to have any contempt for them. These sentiments alone have wrested me from the inane inhumanity of my reclusive life spent between God, whom I wanted not to know, and an ennui that I could no longer break or abandon, as I had done too often by absorbing myself in unspeakable frivolities. These sentiments alone have been able to keep me from shamelessly abandoning myself to a life composed entirely of an empty and false legion of distractions.

What was I, truly? A drag queen of intellection, a gigolo of enamoration. A vile series of obscene appearances that had besieged my being without allowing it to escape the gradual stripping bare of its miserable suffering, despair obscurely making its way through my lonely soul. I was finally shedding my mask, my pride, through a fall and a superb defeat, a reduction to my most pure nothingness; such was my annihilation in those beloved arms.

I was swallowed up in the contemplation of this being, asleep, so close, seated and head drooping. I was looking at the bent neck, slender and dipped in shadow beneath a mass of hair. The slow rise and sure fall of breathing, the sudden jerks of consciousness that brusquely raise the oscillating head, which inevitably falls again, as if detached from the body.

I was struggling to discern in the shadows a bitter or desperate crease of the mouth. Arms crossed, folded in sleep over a resting heart, calm in its prison of ribs. That morning at the Apocryphe, while A*** was waiting for me to be able to leave the club, I was wondering what all the surroundings that besiege the sleeping senses—music, lights, voices—were becoming in A***'s dreams. What rhythmic effect was insinuating itself into A***'s sleep? I observed the circular and twitchy movement of the head, corrected in an effort of forced rigidity, straightened and then languid, surrendering to its own weight, straining the neck to the point of making me, watching, uneasy.

What did I get out of watching A*** sleep? I toyed with the desire to interrupt the fall of this head that, in an impulse of sudden tenderness, I could have encircled in my arms and pressed against my shoulder; I wanted to hold, to caress this face that a stray beam of light was illuminating miraculously, unveiling its bottom half as if it were detached, displayed separately from the rest of the body. A***'s legs were stretched over my knees. I didn't dare move, restraining the impulse of my muscles,

normally so restless, I realized then. I was nothing but pure heat, pure momentary contact, a living support frozen in the observation of the other's shudders, those waves that move through the abandon of sleep. A***'s head was resting on its side so that the plane of the cheekbone was visible, skull slowly slipping against the mirror upon which it was leaning. Never before had this beloved body been so perfectly abandoned to my contemplation.

It felt as if I had never been permitted such transparency with anyone—anyone but A***. Had I confided more in A*** than in anybody else? What had I revealed? Had I unmasked myself, or at least what I thought I knew of myself? No, more likely I had exposed my own collapse, the ruin of the edifice I had so painfully constructed out of rhetoric and made to stand in for an identity. I was forcing myself to forget this nudity. My soul was not retreating behind a multitude of appearances that it could have incarnated endlessly, but rather, hollowed from the inside, was being instilled with doubt over this cavity that it hadn't filled with anything. I was then forced to recognize what I had always secretly wanted others to discover: "I" is nothing. It was a painful triumph when, faced with this beloved being, I finally achieved what I had always been aiming toward: the ability to confess my own weakness, my nothingness. But the weight of this nothingness was revealed only to me; it remained unintelligible to A***, and I remained in the barrenness, the ruin, at last revealed as if by accident, following this confrontation with my own nudity and death. "What am I," I was asking myself, "other than what you do not know how to say about me?"

Even when I was embracing this body, I suffered as if I had never held it in my arms, caught up in a love that was always uncompleting itself. Returning home one night, I found a T-shirt that belonged to A*** on the sofa in the living room left out from the night before; I searched in

it for A***'s scent, for a trace that had not yet vanished. I closed my eyes and abandoned myself to a hopeless sweetness, head buried in the cloth as if it were a shroud, as if I were never to see A*** again. I constantly felt as though this body was lingering just out of reach, even when I was holding it in my arms. All I was ever embracing was the hopelessness of not being able to embrace; I was embracing an absence whose scent alone was penetrating me, breathed in from the folds of a T-shirt that had been forgotten and left on a sofa overnight.

I was blind, giving myself without a word, without a sign, existing as mere body heat. In my state of confusion I suddenly lost touch with reality. I was culpable, infinitely culpable for not having seen, for having been able not to see, for having sought a refuge that was too distant, inaccessible. Ever since, by achieving the coveted, powerful mastery of an indecent outward display of emotions, each more false and bitter than the next, I have fallen from betrayal into disgust, searching vainly for this love whose murder I never cease to expiate. What can I do, what can I give to escape from this morbid ennui, from the horrible clutches of this desire to embrace, from the stinging of tears I never managed to shed and from the hopelessness that seizes me so incessantly even while I seem to triumph. I travel; my work on the apophatic tradition has earned me some recognition within academia. They desire me, admire me, respect me…But of all those who will lament my death, how many will lament my life? The torture I endure from my inner thoughts plays out in a ridiculous drama—a tragedy of passion! How I love to mock myself. But I ridicule that which comes mortally to besiege me at those hours when I am unmasked, faced with my own abyss. I was remembering that face, the color of the air that winter day when we made love for the final time, not knowing that the bliss we were sharing then would be our last.

Since then, I have been able to discern only a carnal and obscene

root at the core of all my relationships, which horrifies me. A***'s death caused me to unlearn sensual pleasure; I became caught up in carnal affairs, and I was tortured by the indignity of it all. Thenceforth, flesh became obscene to me. To clutch someone in my arms took on, without fail, a singular sense of indignity, the taste of putrefaction. When I embrace someone I am submerged in a feeling of infamy, in the nauseating sensation of having an orgasm in a charnel house, among the noxious fumes of decomposing flesh. I am revolted by flesh, but this revulsion, failing to deaden the assaults of my libido, merely infects them with a cadaverous terror.

I exist in a morbid state, my body riddled by consumption, not knowing from where to vomit up the soul it has created. For all I have done since A***'s death is forge myself a soul, and I no longer know if I should deny its existence. When I close my eyes, I see my soul as a screen crisscrossed with flowing, intertwined lines; architectural straight lines of a volume uncertain of its limits, exposed on all sides; a fragile construction, by turns knocked down, invaded, uprooted, robbed of its foundations, mined by all those embraces in which it happily prostitutes itself. Gazes, hands, all that is outside comes to burn it, shake it…But I would like to drown out the noise of this tearing of silk that happens between physical bodies and mental architecture. I am assailed by indifference. I had thought that I would never be able to grow tired of loving, but one night I woke to an absence of love and felt no torture: it was the absence of this torture that truly scared me, that tortured me.

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In April 2015, with the publication of the English translation of her first novel, *Sphinx*, the French novelist Anne Garréta became accessible for the first time to an Anglophone readership. When it was first published in 1986, this love story, which tells of the tragic encounter between a nameless young theology student turned DJ and A***, an African American cabaret dancer, erupted onto the French literary scene. The novel astonished its readers through the virtuosic feat of keeping its protagonists' genders completely indeterminable—Garréta, then a twenty-three-year-old *normalienne*, had scrubbed the French text of all marks of gender.[1] Critics, both then and now, have marveled at this complete erasure of gender, even as they have overlooked Garréta's other treatment of difference—the emphasis on racial difference that accompanies her systematic effacement of sexual difference in the novel.

The love story is traditionally understood as requiring difference, in the broadest sense of the term, given that the whole point is that love joins two (or more) individuals. In Garréta's iteration of the love story, however, she erases sexual difference and presents race as the difference that love can then reconcile or traverse: her love story features the relationship between a white European and a black American. This raises the question of why erasing sexual difference should either produce or expose racial difference when the novel was written to express the principle of "fuck difference," as Garréta shared with me in a March 2013 interview in Paris.[2] While the difference Garréta denounces is sexual difference, which she considers to be fetishized dogma, and not racial difference, it seems inconsistent and politically incoherent to decry one form of fetishized difference while promoting another when the problem surrounding difference is precisely the process by which it assumes the status of a concept around which an entire social order can be organized. I see this statement as applying more broadly to all fetishized difference that has been solidified into identity even if the original statement was narrower in its scope. Accordingly, a careful examination of what may be read as a caricatural treatment of racial difference will show that Garréta's seeming instrumentalization and exploitation of race for the purposes of destroying sex, or gender, are actually consonant with what I see as her larger project of writing against difference tout court, an investment that we can trace to the major influence of the French writer and theorist Monique Wittig on her own writing and thought. In other words, if Garréta seems to build up racial difference in *Sphinx*, it is only to tear it down after having shown how such difference is built up through language in the first place.

>> Language and Resistance

Michel Foucault has taught us that discourse has the power to create identity. His *La Volonté de savoir* (*The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*), the first volume of his unfinished *Histoire de la sexualité*, argues that the homosexual did not exist as such until the category of the homosexual was created by sexologists and began to circulate in discourse. This and other identity categories were thus effects of discourse rather than its cause. Thanks in large part to feminist and queer theories informed by Foucault's

Kim, Annabel, 'The Riddle of Racial Difference in Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*', *Diacritics*, 45.1 (2017), pp. 4-22.

insights, the idea that identity is discursively constructed with nothing natural about it is now commonplace. While we are quick to recognize the force of discourse, it is not so clear how it comes to have that force—the power to ossify difference and create categories such as sex and race. Discourse is language that has been fixed into a function. But how does language become discourse? And how does it become fixed?

As a mode of writing that programmatically claims to reflect the world it describes, literary realism often does little to strip discourse down to language in a way that would allow readers to question the gendered norms that have become thoroughly embedded into social practice.[3] In the conventional realist novel, language only exists in an already socialized form and is thus unfit to do the work that Wittig describes in *Le Chantier littéraire* (The literary workshop), her posthumously published ars poetica, of stripping words of the social significations that have sedimented onto them. Language must be stripped of the history of its social usage, thus allowing words to return to their pure materiality, to language in its raw, pre-signifying state, before it has been mobilized around some ideological or conceptual purpose.[4] Wittig calls for teasing language apart from discourse in order to tap into the radical political potential to be found in turning to language, rather than discourse, as a site for new meaning. Precisely for this reason, Garréta, like Wittig before her, treats the experimental (as opposed to the conventional) novel as a cultural form where discourse and language can be played against each other. The self-awareness of the experimental novel's literary language calls attention to the materiality of language.[5] Because the novel must also reference the world outside itself in order to make good on its promise of a textual simulation of lived reality, or a textual experience of an unlived reality, it also calls attention to itself as discourse. This double function gives the novel an advantage over theoretical texts as the means for working with, on, and against language to work against identity and the difference that founds it.[6] It is the novel that has the potential to effect change, reader by reader, by undoing those categories that seem to make sense of reality and order the world in a necessary way. In short, it is the novel, and not theory, that functions as a Trojan horse, the figure Wittig uses to explain how a literary text "can operate as a war machine upon its epoch," an epoch marked then, in the 1980s, as it is now, by difference.[7]

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Garréta sees herself writing "after" Wittig in a double sense—after Wittig chronologically and after her in the sense of deriving inspiration from Wittig's writing:

> Monique Wittig is an extremely important writer to me. In a way, she made it possible for me to write my first novel, *Sphinx*, which attempted to take literally what she means when she says that it is necessary to eliminate and destroy the mark of gender in language, and that this can only happen through exercising language itself.
>
> I thus have a debt that is not a debt but that obligates me nonetheless—it isn't that I owe something to Monique Wittig, but that she opened up a possibility for me. So it is important to me that I continue to pass on something that I think she offered to me, that I have not found except in her. I am absolutely committed to this.[8]

In her homage to Wittig, Garréta offers up a paradoxical characterization of her debt as "not a debt," but something that still has the weight of obligation, even if she does not think of the obligation in terms of owing, but of compelling possibility. In this, Garréta reconceptualizes debt as something that no longer puts the debtor in a position of having to give up something of herself in proportion to the value of what she has received, giving the creditor influence over the debtor. Garréta understands her debt to Wittig as a liberating possibility that is conceived of in terms of something that can be passed on to others to do with as they please. Her obligation does not mean hewing to Wittig's way of experiencing this possibility; rather, it obligates Garréta to become Garréta. This debt demands creativity rather than conformity.

Garréta's obligation is to do something with this possibility of using language to undo difference, to attempt to free others from the categories of identity that are embedded in language—and that are made of and by language. As Wittig explains, rather than having language do things to you, you must begin doing things to language:

> The ontological farce that consists of trying to divide a being in language by imposing a mark on her, the conceptual maneuver that wrests away from marked individuals what rightfully belongs to them—language—must cease. It is necessary to destroy gender entirely. This endeavor can be entirely accomplished through the use of language.[9]

The same language that genders women and marks them as particular can also destroy that mark of particularity, provided one knows how to make it do so. Wittig uses the lesbian subject to displace the universal male subject implied by the unmarked term through her work on pronouns as we see in her revisions of various literary genres: in *L'Opoponax* (1964), Wittig exploits the indeterminate nature of the pronoun *on* to dismantle the gendered bildungsroman and universalize a young lesbian's point of view. She reworks the epic in *Les Guérillères* (1969) by expanding the feminine third person plural *elles* to represent all humanity instead of the specificity of groups of women. Reworking lyric love poetry in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973, *The Lesbian Body*), she works upon and breaks down the *je* and *tu* to establish a relationship of intersubjectivity and interlocution that is based on an absolute reciprocity and interchangeability between the first- and second-person pronouns that are normally distinct. In *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976, *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*) and *Virgile, non* (1985, *Across the Acheron*), she defamiliarizes such

familiar texts as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the standard dictionary by overturning their androcentric perspectives.

Through these works, Wittig demonstrates that *genre* as literary genre has been built on *genre* as gender. Garréta similarly defamiliarizes genre by taking the traditional love story, the seemingly ageless articulation of heterosexual desire, and removing gender from the equation. She works with the possibility opened up by Wittig and makes it hers by replacing Wittig's lesbianized subject with her own project of rendering the subject indeterminable and undifferentiated. But, as we will see, Garréta experiments not only with sex but also with race, and the project of indeterminability is brought to bear on both categories. It is precisely Garréta's experimentation with sex *and* race—where the first is somewhat expected when it comes to deconstructing difference through language, while the latter is unexpected—that makes the novel so important. Let us turn now to *Sphinx* to see the kind of work Garréta does on and to language—work that shows race to be as unnatural a category as sex and makes the text's racial differentiation ultimately serve her project of indifferentiation and indeterminacy.

>> A Racist *Sphinx*?

Sphinx was written and published well before Garréta was inducted into the Oulipo in 2001[10] and before she became known in academic circles for her familiarity with American approaches to queer and gender studies. Nonetheless, *Sphinx* anticipates what was to become Garréta's expressed investment in writing within the constraints for which the Oulipo is known, and it exposes the discursive formation of identities that would become a key insight of queer theory.

Garréta's future intellectual positions are already apparent in *Sphinx*. The language of the novel does away with sexual difference by refusing to reveal the sexes of the protagonists. The reader is given no clues as to whether the relationship is between two men, two women, or a man and a woman. Were she writing in English, she would be writing a novel without using *he* or *she, him* or *her*. In French, subject pronouns, adjectives, compound past tense verbs, and direct object pronouns can all indicate gender, so Garréta carefully avoids these parts of speech and privileges the infinitive, imperfect, and preterit *passé simple* over compound tenses, indirect objects over direct objects, and impersonal, passive constructions in place of the gendered subject pronouns *il* and *elle*.

If the result is surprising in English translation, it is even more so in French. Writing against what seems to be the naturally gendered grain of French, Garréta also resists the naturalness of bodies and their sexed nature. This carefully wrought withholding of deterministic language exposes the constructed nature of identity, or what Judith Butler describes as performative identity,[11] a notion that would be popularized by queer theory. It seems hardly a coincidence that A***—who calls to mind Josephine Baker, another African American cabaret dancer who was a master of turning identity into a performance on her Parisian stages—and the narrator, as a DJ, both inhabit the novel as part of the performance industry. From the very beginning, Garréta keeps her

protagonists' identities indeterminate when it comes to their sex and sexuality, thus setting her readers up to think of identity as something performed, not something fixed that can be ascertained.

Garréta refuses to let her protagonists' bodies bear the mark of sexual difference. A sexual encounter would be the ultimate occasion for either ascertaining sexual difference, in the case of heterosexual encounters, or for disavowing it, as in the case of homosexual ones.[12] In *Sphinx*, however, the body remains stubbornly illegible in terms of its sex:

> J'ai dans la bouche, encore, le goût d'une peau, de la sueur sur cette peau. Contre mes mains l'impression tactile que me firent et cette peau et le modelé de cette chair. . . . Je ne saurais raconter précisément ce qui advint, non plus que décrire ou même faire mention de ce que je fis ou de ce dont je fus l'objet. . . . Sexes mêlés, je ne sus plus rien distinguer.[13]
>
> I have in my mouth, still, the taste of skin, of the sweat on that skin; against my hands, the tactile impression of skin and the shape of that flesh. . . . I don't know how to recount precisely what happened, or how to describe or even attest to what I did, what was done to me. . . . Our sexes mingled, I no longer knew how to tell anything apart.[14]

The sexed nature of bodies in sexual encounters is occluded by treating the body as unspecific skin, flesh, and sweat, and by disregarding genital specificity to articulate instead the confused nature of the coupling. Illegible in terms of its sex, the indeterminate and protean body can reflect whatever the reader desires it to be. The title *Sphinx* evokes this indeterminacy by referencing the impossibility of knowing, or in this case, the impossibility of figuring (out) the body and giving it an identity. Falling into an identitarian trap, reviewers have tended to read the relationship in *Sphinx* as heterosexual or homosexual depending on their own sensibilities. Finding it difficult to suspend certainty and commit to indeterminacy, they have assumed there must be some form of sexual difference (or identity) that Garréta had intended to write into being.[15]

This striking feat of her sustained refusal of sexed bodies is accompanied by a less spectacular, perhaps, but equally significant recoding of the bodies in question in terms of race. The novel identifies the narrator as white and A*** as black: "J'appris qu'une peau noire telle celle de A*** exigeait un maquillage d'une toute autre teinte et d'un tout autre dessin qu'une peau blanche" (I learned that black skin like A***'s demands makeup of a completely different hue and variety than white skin) (22; 9). In the absence of sexual difference, racial difference is introduced, as if bodies still have to be differentiated one way or another for their connection to be meaningful. In *Sphinx*, A***'s black body signals both racial difference and cultural difference. A*** is not simply given a black body as a black iteration of the French citizen. The character is not French or Francophone but foreign, which, in this context, means American. A*** and the narrator therefore have different languages as well as different skin tones, and they come from different places. While removing sexual difference, then, Garréta has nonetheless doubled difference. She has inscribed the bodies of both A*** and the narrator with race, a

difference embedded in a narrative of biological essentialism that translates greater or lesser levels of melanin and pigment into the concepts of blackness or whiteness. She has also inscribed their bodies with the purely cultural difference of nationality. A body does not announce its Frenchness any more than it announces its Americanness, but in *Sphinx* Garréta has tied this cultural difference to racial difference. However, these categories of identity do not carry equal semiotic weight in the novel.

In the second half of the novel, the cultural difference manifest in the language and customs of A***'s American family, which stands in for black America at large, assumes principal importance. Once they become lovers, the narrator and A*** go to Harlem and then visit A***'s extended family somewhere in either Long Island or New Jersey. The narrator describes the experience of conversing and eating soul food with this family as a profound experience of feeling at home:

> Il me semblait être là chez moi, tant ils surent me donner l'impression d'appartenir à leur famille, oubliant sans effort la différence de race, de couleur, de civilisation, de classe et tout ce que l'on voudra bien pointer et accentuer parmi les traits possibles d'altérité. Il me semblait avoir toujours entendu cette langue qu'ils parlaient entre eux, avoir depuis toujours mangé de cette même nourriture qu'ils m'offrirent.
>
> Et les vieilles mammas noires riaient de plaisir à me voir manifester un tel appétit. A***, qui toujours me vit, à l'endroit des nourritures terrestres, faire montre d'ennui ou d'indifférence, s'étonnait et se réjouissait. Il semblait que j'oubliais de dépérir, que je goûtais enfin à la vie, que j'y mordais sans l'entremâcher de paroles, propos de table qui, en Europe assez généralement et en France en particulier, constituent la substance essentielle des dîners. (88)
>
> I felt at home there, so much did they make me feel like a part of their family, effortlessly forgetting our differences in race, color, culture, class—everything that one might cite as possible traits of alterity. It was as if the language they were speaking and the food they were cooking had always been familiar to me.
>
> And the old black mommas laughed with delight to see that I had such an appetite. A***, who was used to seeing me bored or indifferent when faced with earthly sustenance, was astonished and overjoyed. It seemed that I was forgetting to waste away, that I was finally tasting life, that I was biting into it without words getting in the way, those tableside conversations that, in Europe generally and France in particular, constitute the essential substance of meals. (63)

Here, Garréta's narrator figures the alterity of African Americanness as able to do away with all alterity. Black America's culture and dialect—which the narrator finds as familiar as French—is the means of forgetting or transcending alterity and tasting the freedom to be oneself regardless of color, creed, class, etc. The narrator casts black language as naturally resistant to difference in a way that French is not. I contend that it is no accident or contradiction that in her attempt to erase difference, Garréta, through her narrator, appears to shore up African American difference as somehow exemplary and salvific.

This turn toward black America shifts the focus away from biological expressions of racial difference, emphasizing instead cultural and especially linguistic expressions. Indeed, it would appear that Garréta has bundled the biological with the cultural in order to approach the question of racial difference *through* language and, in this way, to insist that this other difference, like sexual difference, also be approached in terms of language. Where Garréta deploys language as a means to undo sexual difference in French, the narrator privileges black language as the site where the desire for hybridity, for a fluid identity liberated from the strictures of fixed difference, is best realized. In the description of eating soul food with A***'s family, what comes to the fore is not the difference between cuisines so much as the difference in languages. For the narrator, meals centered around soul food do not require the sort of conversation, that is, language, that a French meal does; in the narrator's telling, conversation around the French dinner table invariably diminishes one's appetite for life. The primary difference between the two cultures represented by the pair of lovers is thus linguistic, and language will consequently be the means of turning the categorical oppressiveness of French, and its embedded difference, against itself.

However, one has to question Garréta's use of a caricatural image of black America in a novel dedicated to blurring identity and destroying the foundational difference of identity categories. Why does she perpetuate any stereotypes of racial alterity, even if to combat other stereotypes? Indeed, Garréta's use of a worn-out stereotype such as the "old black momma," uncomfortably close to the mammy figure, would seem to legitimate an unquestionably crude form of difference. This is especially remarkable coming from a feminist who uncompromisingly rejects the notion of essential difference. Garréta's call to "fuck difference" is most powerful if it is not a watered-down version of feminism that objects to one form of difference but tolerates another.

It is completely possible that Garréta's anti-difference ethos, which aspires to the universal in the absoluteness of its declaration, in fact depends on a fetishization and instrumentalization of blackness—universalism, as we know all too well, often turns out to be an oppressive, supremacist particularism. It may be that *Sphinx* is in fact very much a text of its time: the 1980s was a moment when the inconsistencies and racist blind spots of second-wave feminism—i.e., "white" feminism—became all too apparent (as seen in the necessary critique performed by intersectionality).[16] It is possible that Garréta's anti-difference ethos has itself evolved over the decades from one that targeted gender and sexuality at the expense of race to one that is more explicitly anti-racist.[17] All these interpretations are possible, but I intend to posit another one, which makes *Sphinx* politically potent today, so that the novel is not simply an artifact of less enlightened times.

From an apparent fetishization of blackness, coupled with the caricatures and stereotypes that pop up throughout the novel, it would be easy to cast Garréta as a writer insensitive to matters of race, but such a reading conflates Garréta with the narrator. Given that Garréta is undeniably behind the scrubbing of gender difference in the novel, it is tempting to confuse Garréta with the narrator and, when it comes to race, attribute that same intentionality to Garréta rather than to the problematic character of the

narrator. If I insist on distinguishing between Garréta and her narrator—as I did in my discussion of the family dinner—to attribute the problematic treatment of race to the latter, it is not merely to perform a recuperative reading of or apology for Garréta. On a number of fronts, I believe it makes the most sense and results in the most productive reading to distinguish Garréta's narrator from Garréta herself. First, if we take seriously Garréta's debt to Wittig, it is logical to treat the novel as a hollow text, a Trojan horse, instead of adopting the perhaps more obvious reading, in which Garréta's twenty-three-year-old self's feminist politics turn out to be not particularly developed, as evinced by a deeply problematic conceptualization of race. This reading, which requires no interpretation because of its obviousness, turns the text into a solid rather than a hollow object. Second, the less facile reading, beyond being consonant with the Wittigian mode of writing a literary text as a Trojan horse that contains something very different than what its equine form promises, integrates *Sphinx* with the rest of Garréta's corpus, which can be described as radically anti-identitarian and anti-differentialist.[18] Garréta's first novel can thus be read alongside and with the novels that follow rather than as a one-off that does not belong with the rest of her literary production. And last, Garréta's entire corpus demonstrates that she is anything but an easy or transparent writer. Her novels are meticulously constructed, and reading them requires work—they are not beach reading, easily consumed.[19] A simplistic reading of *Sphinx*—without the necessary labor to attend to Garréta's own labor in creating the novel—will miss the revelation that the novel is anything but racist: it grapples directly with the problem of racism in order to enjoin the reader to dismantle both racial difference and sexual difference.

If we take seriously Garréta's debt to Wittig, it is logical to treat the novel as a hollow text, a Trojan horse, instead of adopting the perhaps more obvious reading, in which Garréta's twenty-three-year-old self's feminist politics turn out to be not particularly developed, as evinced by a deeply problematic conceptualization of race.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the complex construction of Garréta's deconstructive work, I want to first address the enormous riskiness of Garréta's Trojan horse venture. I am making a case for seeing Garréta's deployment and construction of racial difference as a means to tear it down, but such a reading requires labor. Returning to the astounding blindness to race that *Sphinx*'s readers have demonstrated, the critical reception I mentioned at the beginning of this article is a perfect example of what happens when you don't read laboriously. Instead of a powerful "fuck difference" ethos that articulates a radical political vision of a new sociality unordered and unfettered by any form of difference, an effortless reading may lead to a celebration of the dissolution of sexual difference at the cost of tacit acceptance of racial difference, and not just any

racial difference, but a racist one. In other words, this reading results in a "white feminist" text that does more harm than good in promoting the idea that some invidious forms of difference must be tolerated for the sake of abolishing another. These are the high stakes of Garréta's novel, and we can certainly debate whether or not it's worth the risk. In what follows, I will show what happens if we do put in the work to activate the Trojan horse of *Sphinx*.

>> The Labors of *Sphinx*

To read *Sphinx* laboriously is to read Garréta's deployment of racial stereotypes critically as the means of ironically calling attention to the way the narrator turns cultural differences into natural differences as they are attached to certain bodies. Following this line of thinking, we could say that Garréta uses fiction in much the same way Étienne Balibar uses political theory, to argue that "biological or genetic naturalism is not the only means of naturalizing human behaviour and social affinities. . . . *[C]ulture can also function like a nature*, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin."[20]

In other words, Garréta's apparent investment in racial difference is an ironic one, and the reinforcement of racial difference that accompanies the radical destruction of sexual difference serves as a decoy for difference that reveals itself as hollowed out. This irony, which is hardly obvious or self-evident, can be seen in the narrator's description of black American dialect:

> L'anglais que je parle a gardé les stigmates de cette fréquentation presque exclusive des Noirs. Imperceptiblement, des expressions, des incorrections caractéristiques de leur parler se sont glissées dans le tissu de langue académique qu'on m'avait enseignée au lycée. Cela, depuis, m'a été un trouble dans mes conversations: cette langue que je parle est un hybride monstrueux; j'ai mêlé Oxford et Harlem, Byron et le gospel. (89)

> My English still bears the stigmata of keeping company almost exclusively with black people. Imperceptibly, the expressions and characteristic improprieties of their speech slipped into the tissue of the academic English I had been taught in high school. This has disrupted my conversations: the language I speak is a monstrous hybrid, mingling Oxford and Harlem, Byron and gospel. (64)

Garréta here doles out the clichés: of course black American English is riddled with ungrammatical variations on standard English, of which the most correct iteration is to be found at Oxford; of course the most obviously black idiom is gospel music, and it goes without saying that Harlem is the purest iteration of black American culture. This characterization is disturbing in its racial insensitivity and caricatural treatment of American black culture, but I would argue that Garréta does so in order to parody facile caricatures, rather than to reproduce them uncritically.

The obvious reading of Garréta that takes this passage at face value reproduces a fetishistic view of blackness. Black American language—the sign that turns racial difference into cultural difference and naturalizes the distinction between them—is the guarantor of hybridity and subversion. It undoes English by undermining the correctness of white, Anglo-Saxon, Puritan English. According to this reading, Garréta's grounding of the novel's anti-difference enterprise in an essential black language is a concession made in the name of eliminating sexual difference, the seemingly universal difference that cuts through other differences such as race and class. The marginal status of black English leads directly to the fetishization of black culture and desire for the black body. Following this logic, the narrator sees in blackness the perfect medium for being able to break up fixed categories of identity, but the price for such destabilization is the fixing of blackness.

While the French language fixes difference with its gendered grammar, black African American language counteracts that fixity through soul. The narrator claims: "Mon Amérique à moi est noire: sa musique, ses voix, sa nourriture. Noires, il y a un terme pour cela, *soul*: *soul music, soul food*" (My America is black: the music, the voices, the food. These black things have a name, *soul: soul music, soul food*) (87; 62). Black culture, refracted through soul, provides Garréta with the possibility of a language that is not beholden to the subordinating logic of French. Blackness comes to stand in for an identity that is more American than the soulless, sanitized Americanness of what the narrator describes as "l'Amérique blanche, anglo-saxonne et puritaine" (white, Anglo-Saxon, Puritan America) (87; 62). Black Americanness consequently permits a greater distance from French and from France, whose "universal" citizen is configured as white, heterosexual, and male. By contrast, black skin, black language, and black culture exemplify a language that offers a promised land of freedom and equality. The narrator's desire for a differently racialized body is not so much the desire for a different kind of body as it is the desire for a language and culture less dependent on difference than French language and culture. Black language provides a model for what Garréta is trying to do with French, that is, to undo its gendered and gendering operations. While this racializing might be positive in its valence of a certain black superiority, it remains grounded in an essentializing difference. One form of difference is swapped out for another, and we wind up right where we began, stuck in difference.

The true allegory of *Sphinx* is not the allegory of black alterity as a difference that might create more fluid ways of being human; it is an allegory of the invidiousness of all forms of difference. To read *Sphinx* laboriously, to read it as a complex text, we have to reject the narrator's reading of race as the allegorical production of a better kind of alterity. Rather than be taken in by a difference that promises to transcend other differences, Garréta rejects racial difference as the lure that would lead the reader back into the trap of difference. Garréta's polarized stereotypes and the caricatures they form offer parodic representations of black language that are not meant to be swallowed whole, taken as they are. A necessary condition of the Trojan horse is that it resembles closely enough the object it claims to be—a statue of a horse, in the Trojans' case, a racist and reductive

rendering of blackness, in Garréta's—in order to be let inside the city walls (the reader's mind) to launch its attack. That is, for Garréta to reject racial difference as the lure that would lead the reader back into the trap of difference, it must first be able to pass as an alluring difference.

Garréta's attention to the language of black difference, which assumes a more important role than black skin, points to the crucial role language plays in creating and reifying forms of difference. When she places language that eliminates sexual difference in relation to language that shores up racial difference, Garréta exposes the equally constructed nature of these differences. By bundling racial difference with cultural difference, she shows how easy it is for us to slide from the cultural, to the biological, to the essential. The social order has primed us to identify difference and then compels us to perform it. Once the reader sees Garréta's use of stereotypes for what it is, it becomes difficult if not impossible to accept her construction of blackness. This leads us to examine the tendency to bundle differences, as if we could impute a more complex identity to individuals by doing so. Why, she forces us to ask, must we insist on transforming bodies into signs? According to this reading, in distinction to her narrator, Garréta is saying that bodies are not simply meant to be read and identified so much as to be lived in. In a Foucauldian gesture, she invites us to consider her novel as the site for new "bodies and pleasures."[21]

Why, she forces us to ask, must we insist on transforming bodies into signs?

Garréta challenges her reader to resist the instrumentalization of bodies that occurs when we inscribe them with difference through signifiers of identity. Rather than giving us access to richer, fuller subjectivity, difference deadens our subjectivity, quite literally, in *Sphinx*: A*** dies tragically, as does A***'s mother, and with them, the kinship structure based on the redemptive difference ironically described in *Sphinx*, and the salvific relationality it contained. In a nod to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels that are Garréta's academic specialty, she ends this novel by also murdering her narrator, as if to say that the narrator must pay for the knowledge that may have been gained.[22] Reading Garréta, the early modern specialist, with these eighteenth-century heroines in mind, her killing both the narrator and the narrator's love object can be read as a repudiation of knowledge and a warning against the kind of misleading knowledge that identity, founded in difference, is mistakenly thought to provide. Both race and gender exemplify such a promise of knowledge, where a person is knowable or known, where being identifiably something makes one identifiably someone. In *Sphinx*, the spectacular removal of gender and the display of race work together simultaneously to make clear the extent to which we, as socialized subjects, equate knowledge with identity. Indeterminacy, as enacted in the novel, is preferable to the fatal determinacy of presuming to know. For the anti-identitarian Garréta, literature is the site of not knowing rather than the site of revelation.

We can also view the death of the narrator as an inevitable consequence of a writerly commitment to a certain vision of the aesthetics of literature, which is what Jacques

Rancière argues in his essay, "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed."[23] In Rancière's analysis of the relationship between Flaubert and Emma, Emma must die because she betrays the novelist's aesthetic by trying to translate the pure sensations captured by literature into a concretely pretty, pedestrian life. Because Emma tries to concretize the aesthetic experience she finds in literature and incorporate it into her life by buying trinkets, furniture, and dresses, thereby missing the point of literature, she must be killed to teach the reader a lesson about literature. In Garréta's case, the aesthetic stakes concern difference, not literariness. Garréta's narrator's death reprises Emma's death at Flaubert's hands, insofar as it serves as a warning to the reader. The narrator of *Sphinx* is shown to be invested in the aesthetics of difference, retaining racial difference in the narrative despite getting rid of sexual difference. In this, the narrator betrays Garréta's literary vision of freeing experience and sensation from the identitarian categories through which they are understood and processed, and has to be killed.

>> New Forms

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Garréta, like Wittig, chooses a sculptural figure as her operative metaphor: the mythical sphinx is best known to us through its sculptural representations, and the Trojan horse was able to function as a war machine because it was received as a wooden sculpture, as a work with aesthetic qualities. Existing in three dimensions, the sculpture's form and materiality are apprehended immediately, while the medium, be it stone, or wood, or metal, is recognized as raw material, or "matériau brut" as Wittig puts it, that has been worked.[24] With a title associated with the sculptural, Garréta insists on the importance of form for literature, an idea foundational to Wittig's theorization of the literary text as a Trojan horse, a war machine that "pulverize[s] the old forms and formal conventions."[25] Wittig's logic and literary practice manifest her conviction that the pulverization of old forms and formal conventions can lead to the pulverization of social forms and conventions as well. This vision of a political literature is distinct from so-called committed literature for its attention to literary form and its drive to work on language in innovative ways: for Wittig, the use of language is itself an eminently political act, and literary work on language, or aesthetic work, has a political dimension. This coming together of the political with the aesthetic, or literary, can be seen in *Sphinx*, in Garréta's work against difference and in her stance of "fuck difference." Garréta's mobilization of the novel to engage in literary formal experimentation that does this political work of dismantling identity follows Wittig's interpretation of Marcel Proust.

Wittig characterizes *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) as a Trojan horse that infiltrated a straight Parisian society and homosexualized it; the act of reading forced Proust's readers to acknowledge that despite themselves, the novel was constituting a homosexual subject as undeniably real. In order to read the *Recherche*, they had to assume Proust's homosexual point of view as their own and enter fully into the work's homosexualized textual reality. Through literature, Proust was able to alter the

terms through which an entire social order viewed itself, making the straight world and the straight mind interpellated by Proust no longer quite so straight.[26] If Proust had this effect, Wittig maintains, it is only because he used his artistry to universalize his particular, homosexual point of view and present it so that it could take the place traditionally occupied by the universal straight white male. Wittig explains what it took for Proust to get his Trojan horse past the walls of Parisian society:

> History, I believe, intervenes at the individual and subjective level and manifests itself in the particular point of view of the writer. It is then one of the most vital and strategic parts of the writer's task to universalize this point of view. But to carry out a literary work one must be modest and know that being gay or anything else is not enough. For reality cannot be directly transferred from the consciousness to the book. The universalization of each point of view demands a particular attention to the formal elements that can be open to history, such as themes, subjects of narratives, as well as the global form of the work. It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine.[27]

For Wittig, the literary work emerges through the particularity of the writer's point of view. For the work to shape the world, however, to "operate as a war machine upon its epoch," it cannot stay particularized: the literary work must open up onto something larger.

Ultimately, Garréta's novelistic experiment in indeterminability operates more as a Trojan horse than as a sphinx, which serves as the guardian of thresholds, determining who can or cannot pass. Instead of drawing in certain readers and ignoring and blocking others, Garréta's literary language constructs the novel as a universalizing war machine. Rather than homosexualize the reader, as Proust does, or lesbianize the reader, as Wittig does, Garréta's novel confronts the reader with an indeterminable identity. At first, there appears to be a difference to rally around—racial difference—but that difference functions as a Trojan horse. Just as the original Trojan horse is a sculpture that announces its facture, its materiality, Garréta's novelistic Trojan horse shows that it is made of language. If Garréta demonstrates that language creates difference as it becomes discourse, she then asserts that discourse, and hence difference, can be returned to language by destroying sexual difference and hollowing out racial difference. In doing so, she gestures toward a Wittigian universalism that sees literary language as the means by which the writer might "tear open the closely woven material of the commonplaces, and . . . continually prevent their organization into a system of compulsory meaning."[28]

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Sphinx rejects the idea of insurmountable difference or differences and supersedes individual identity in order to create new forms of indeterminacy that address everyone and no one in particular. As Wittig sees it, if a novel is to have political impact and

staying power as literature, it must be able to speak to all readers: it cannot screen readers for whatever configuration of differences would constitute an ideal reader—it cannot be a gay novel, or a feminine novel, or a black novel. For Garréta, as for Wittig, this universalization is able to come about in the novel precisely as it permits readers to reenact the writer's task of separating language from discourse. Through the act of reading a Trojan horse, the reader is able to break open the particular categories discourse creates and circulates, to access language as language, in all its potential. *Sphinx* invites us to disallow identity as a valid concept despite how costly it may be to do so. It overdetermines racial identity to show the reader that the inability to determine identity is preferable to fixing it.

I want to end by returning to the scene where Garréta stages a sexual encounter while refusing sexual difference. In this dark novel of loss and punishment, where the protagonists' sexual indeterminateness is not able to eradicate the sexed and raced nature of society, that scene stands out as a rare, utopian suspension of the compulsory difference of the social order. As the narrator describes the combining of bodies, seeking to recall the feeling of indeterminate flesh against indeterminate flesh, not only is sexual difference refused, but—so subtle as to be easily overlooked—racial difference disappears as well.[29] In this sexual encounter where the narrator and A*** are rendered equal, where both act and are acted upon ("ce que je fis . . . ce dont je fus l'objet"), Garréta, who first evokes the protagonists' skins in racialized terms, refrains from doing so in describing this contact of black skin against white skin. This places the scene firmly under the sign of "fuck difference," driven by a vision where race, far from being fetishized or reified, is also to be dismantled.

This scene gives us a glimpse of a world in which we do not consent to difference, where we are able to experience and encounter an other without structuring that experience through readymade concepts. Where Foucault's utopian gesture in *The History of Sexuality* imagined bodies and pleasures that operate outside the "austere monarchy of sex,"[30] Garréta's is even more expansive, envisioning the overthrow of that other austere monarchy, the monarchy of race. The hope is that we will not consent to be subjects of a monarchy that does not serve us and instead refuse familiar scripts for identities that limit us to a predetermined set of possibilities. Just as Foucault does not offer a blueprint for how to overthrow the monarchy of sex, Garréta does not offer instructions for how to overthrow sex and race. She instead creates a horizon of possibility and shows us that however we get there, if we ever get there, it will have to be through language, through working to break down and let go of the well-worn language that has made us who we are so that we might become who we've never been.