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Homing Desires/Desiring Homes:

The Construction of Queer Domestic Space in Contemporary American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

David Michael Chase

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Homing Desires/Desiring Homes:

The Construction of Queer Domestic Space in Contemporary American Literature

by

David Michael Chase

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Arthur L. Little, Chair

The manifestation of a public “gay identity” at Stonewall has made possible the emergence of an openly gay literary tradition that continues to the present day. When viewed collectively, contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered writers exhibit extraordinary range in their choices of subject matter, form, and theme, yet critics have tended to categorize gay domestic narratives, particularly those written by “white,” “middle-class” men, as participating in a cultural project that promotes normativity through its representation of gay subjects as “assimilative” and “sexless.” In other words, these critics regard authors who concern

themselves with the homespace and with familial relationality as participating in a cultural project that makes “gay identity” palatable for straight readers, thereby rendering a more transgressive “queer” subjecthood virtually invisible. By examining the literary blueprints for queer homespaces that have been drawn up by several contemporary American male writers, this dissertation project aims to counter the assumption that a privileging of “gay” homelife necessarily results in an assimilative loss of queer-ness and sociopolitical potential. In reading Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (1964), Robert Ferro’s *The Family of Max Desir* (1983), Samuel R. Delany’s *The Mad Man* (1994), and Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) through the lenses of architectural studies, queer and feminist theories, poststructuralism, and affect theory, I seek to recover the queer homespace as an unsettled and disruptive site in which heteronormativity is challenged and the obscured connections among domestic practice, social oppression, and queer resistance are revealed. In so doing, I seek to expand notions of both queer literary identities and the material sites from which queer resistance has been and might be waged.

The dissertation of David Michael Chase is approved.

James A. Schultz

Lowell Gallagher

Uri McMillan

Arthur L. Little, Committee Chair

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2014

For Adikus

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Introduction

My resumption of work on this dissertation project after a long period of inactivity has been framed by two experiences in which my queerness was placed under attack (for lack of a better way of putting it); these are events that I would rather not, but feel like I must, detail here. Allow me to clarify my ambivalence on this matter. Obviously, due to the personal nature of the two occurrences, I cannot help feeling embarrassed (if not ashamed, but more on shame later) to be invoking these painful moments as my first order of business in an academic project. At the same time, to elide discussion of these incidents would feel like a refusal to acknowledge the complex ways in which my own embodied and sometimes upsetting experiences of queerness have informed and have shaped the investigations into sexuality and/in domestic space that I conduct within this dissertation. Both on a real and imaginary level, these acts of actual and symbolic violence have “hit home” for me, which is to say, they have become inseparable—and indeed should not be separated—from the more seemingly banal practices of everyday life upon which I focus in this project (and, indeed, that represent the bulk of my participation in the world). Moreover and more importantly, in articulating these experiences, I seek to admit at the onset that I believe that the homespace possesses a particularly “revolting” quality; by using the term “revolting,” I mean both that the homespace most often has been regarded by queer theory and politics as a source of considerable embarrassment and, as such, that it has not been figured properly as a site of tension in which either (or both) “assimilation” or “resistance” might be practiced.¹ The consequence either way is that “home” remains relatively unexamined in terms of its potential for queer mobilization.

The first experience of violence to which I refer inserted itself unexpectedly into a normal Sunday night, or at least one that was as close to normal as an evening gets in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. After having spent several hours in the dissertation trenches, I accompanied my partner to Café Lafitte in Exile, arguably the oldest gay bar in the United States, to enjoy a few cocktails with our friends. Despite the July heat, a good-sized crowd had gathered already, and we began to immerse ourselves in the boisterous energy of “Trash Disco” night. As nine o’clock approached, the bar became densely packed with people who were eager to participate in long-standing Sunday evening tradition of the “napkin toss,” which brings both locals and tourists together to mark the unofficial end to the gay weekend. By the time that the familiar strains of John Paul Young’s 1978 disco hit “Love Is in the Air” began to play and we giddily awaited our cue to launch our wadded-up napkins into the atmosphere, I remember becoming overwhelmed by an intense feeling of belonging. Not surprisingly, then, I found myself compelled to do a quick Facebook status update before we headed out the door toward the final stop of the evening. Three simple words seemed sufficient at that moment to convey my contented state: “Feels like home.”

An hour or so later, and I am living through Blanche DuBois’s famous final statement about “depend[ing] on the kindness of strangers” in the most horrifying way possible. “Mr. Chase, please stay very still. We are going to lift you onto the stretcher now,” someone I don’t know is saying to me as four pairs of unknown hands place their hands on my body and lift me up off the sidewalk. I am scared and terribly disoriented—aware that something bad has happened to me, but not knowing what it is—and anxious about the well-being and whereabouts of my partner. Although I will go in and out of consciousness for the next several hours, eventually my partner and I will be reunited, and he will tell me about the way in which we were

jumped from behind and brutally attacked while walking home hand-in-hand. Through tears, he will describe the scene of horror that he witnessed after he regained consciousness and successfully fended off his own assailant. He will force himself to recall his discovery of my bloodied body on the ground, sprawled out in apparent lifelessness, and of my attacker kicking me repeatedly in the face and head while spitting out, “All you fucking faggots need to fucking die!” Although my partner’s words (not to mention the venomous ones of my assailant which are spoken through him) add psychic injury to my already intense physical pain, I struggle to follow the rest of his story, in the futile hope that what has happened to us over the course of the evening will begin to make some kind—any kind—of sense. If I had felt like I was at “home” amidst the members of my loving and supportive community just a few hours prior, then where the hell am I now?

The answer to this question is, of course, painfully obvious: all of these things—my bloodied queer body; my traumatized lover; our hate-filled and homophobic attackers; the responding authorities; the emergency room—are, just like the bar filled with friends who provide me with such a strong sense of community, fundamental parts of the place that I call home. Despite all of the many strides that LGBTQ individuals have made in the past half-century or so, every day we still struggle in some way or another toward “extracting sustenance,” in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, from a “culture whose avowed desire” is often “not to sustain” us.² This tension between acceptance and intolerance is perhaps most dangerously pronounced in places like New Orleans (or, more precisely, in diverse and progressive neighborhoods within the city, such as the French Quarter, the Faubourg Marigny, and the Bywater), where the outrageous permissiveness of the local milieu can lull people like me and my lover into a false sense of security and a potentially deadly blindsightedness about the

passionate conservatism that otherwise surrounds us. At a historic moment where we are witness to unprecedented LGBTQ civil rights victories, there is enormous joy and satisfaction that accompanies our open displays of queerness and/in communities; unfortunately, there also is considerable peril, perhaps increasingly so.³

Flash forward several months, and my partner and I are organizing New Orleans' first "LGBT Rally Against Hate and Violence." Driven by our concerns that anti-gay violence is both increasingly prevalent and shockingly underreported in our city, we are attempting to mobilize people toward a heightened awareness of these matters and to start a conversation about possible solutions to these linked problems. In our description of the event, we express no particular agenda beyond wanting to show the city that the members of "LGBT community" are "united" in their "commitment" to one another and that we understand our role of responsibility in working to "overcome these crimes in our neighborhood." Imagine our surprise then when, a few days prior to the scheduled event, several local organizations who work on LGBTQ concerns begin to accuse us of advocating for "an increased police presence" in New Orleans and of thereby perpetuating "the continuing expansion of the prison-industrial complex," which is to say, the alliance of "government and companies" that "work together to control, punish, and torture poor communities and communities of color."⁴ The list of our alleged transgressions is extremely long—too long in fact to be included here—but it basically boils down to the assumption that we must be "white, affluent gay men" who are willing to sacrifice the most "vulnerable" members of our community—namely, "people of color, transgender, genderqueer and gender-nonconforming people, street youth, and sex workers"—based on our own selfish need to feel safe in the neighborhoods that we have gentrified.⁵ Never mind that we have never argued for increased surveillance of our streets; never mind that we are sympathetic to the fact

that the police, both in New Orleans and elsewhere, have an unfortunate history of brutalizing and/or otherwise treating unfairly the aforementioned groups; never mind that those who are planning to march with us represent a broad range of individuals in terms of their categories of belonging and social positioning (e.g., based on race, class, gender, sexuality, economic-level, education, ethnicity, religion, and nationality), the neighborhoods in which they live, their politics, and their opinions about the police.

Over the course of the next few days, tempers will flare on both sides, but no real dialogue will take place, nor will any efforts toward queer collaboration across differences succeed because the people speaking out against us refuse to relinquish their claim upon two suppositions about our apparent shamefulness: namely, that our “white”-ness automatically and absolutely prevents us from seeing beyond our position of privilege—although, curiously enough, their organization has at least as many “white” members as ours—and that our failure to take an antagonist stance against the presence of police at our march, despite the fact that they only will be on the scene because our permit from the city *requires* them to escort us, indicates our collusion with the most egregiously discriminatory practices of both local and national law enforcement agencies. By the time of the march, as I walk down the street on which I was attacked holding a photo that documents my injuries from several months ago (my slogan reads “This Is What Hate Looks Like”), I will find myself feeling beaten and bruised once again. This time around, however, the “violence” will “hit home” in an entirely different and differently disorienting way, because my queerness—or, more precisely, my (allegedly) insufficiently-developed queer political consciousness—has been held up as a spectacle of shame by the very people with whom I share, or with whom I imagine that I share, my most profound sense of community and solidarity.⁶

Two weeks after the march, as I sit at home and reflect on the significance of these events, I am struck by the force of my competing emotions—frustration at having my intentions misconstrued and anger at having been misrepresented in several public forums; sadness at having played a part (even if an unwitting one) in a moment of divisiveness within the local LGBTQ community; shame at the possibility of having failed to understand the issues at hand with sufficient complexity and/or via perspectives that differ from my own; pessimism that our attempt to unite effectively against heteronormative culture’s rampant homophobia has devolved into a competition over who is most oppressed within the queer community/ies—and by some disturbing yet undeniable links between the two moments of “violence” that I have experienced. Both “attacks,” after all, have occurred because I am not who or what someone else insisted that I should be. In both instances, someone observed the terms on which I make my queerness visible and deemed them loathsome, shameful, and insufficient enough that correction seemed necessary. Both are unsettling in the most literal sense of the world, because they strike at the very foundations of the care of my self (and others)⁷ and of the visions of hope and possibility that inform and impel my ongoing attempts to participate queerly in the world around me. For better or for worse, then, both of these unwelcomed disruptions bring me back to the place that is as close to home as I can imagine. For, if home is a space that holds its promises of comfort and security perpetually just out of reach, that is (in part) what makes it particularly queer. In other words, because “queerness is primarily about futurity,” as José Esteban Muñoz has argued persuasively, if my understanding of queer domesticity is to have “any value whatsoever, it must be considered visible only on the horizon.”⁸ As unsettling as it may be, the queer home must be a place that is always yet to be inhabited comfortably.

I have no doubt that my recollection of the above events sounds somewhat (if not entirely) defensive and that the correspondences I have drawn between two such disparate incidents of aggression are disconcerting, if not offensive. If I should feel a certain level of embarrassment at such a deliberate provocation of the reader, then let me at least put that shame to good use. That is to say, if shame is the affect, to follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential contention, in which "queer identity and queer resistance are both rooted" and which therefore "propels" us "into the performative space of activism" while failing to imbue our "identities" with "the status of essences,"⁹ then let me admit to my discomfiture at having become productively unsettled by these two experiences; or, to follow Sedgwick's more recent formulation of this same dynamic, let me recognize that the "constitut[ion]" of my queerness is an embarrassment to conventional understandings of identity, in that it is an ever-evolving collection of "metamorphic possibilities," one that it is always yet "to-be-constituted" in some final or stable form.¹⁰ Such a progressively mutable understanding of queerness seems particularly necessary and efficacious for resisting "the violence of assimilation"¹¹ of the present social moment, when many LGBT individuals are emphasizing their likenesses to (and thus downplaying their differences from) their heterosexual counterparts in order to gain access to the institution of marriage, which they regard as the final step toward the achievement of full civil equality. Because it now seems inevitable that these efforts will succeed—in the sense that marriage be reinforced as the sole means of "access to the support of a caring civil society"—it is all the more important for those of us "long for communities in which there is systemic affirmation, value, and nurturing of difference" to propose and practice alternative "possibilities in love, gender, desire, and sex"¹² in order to check the "homonormativity"¹³ that now threatens the erasure of queer subjectivity.

Let me further confess that my project is shamefully out of step with the “antisociality” that several of our most prominent queer theorists have touted as “what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us”¹⁴; it tends instead toward the more hopeful perspective that Michael Snediker has labeled “queer optimism”—which is to say, toward the valuing of “positive affects” and of recognizing the pursuit of “happiness” as “complicated” and “strange” and thus “interesting” and “theoretically mobilizable.”¹⁵ Moreover, let me acknowledge that, over and over again, I will make the seemingly “embarrassing and discreditable”¹⁶ decision to train my attention in a *homeward bound* direction in order to celebrate the “continuing queer lifeworlds” that we create whenever we “foreground,” to quote Elizabeth Freeman in a different context, “attachments” rather than experiences of “loss”; that is to say, in alignment with Freeman’s argument about how “queer relations complexly exceed the present,” I seek to reveal the queer home’s capacity for transforming the “predicaments” that otherwise would “bind” us—which is to say, the practices that otherwise would fix us within conventional understandings of time and space—into inventive opportunities for “pleasure.”¹⁷ Although the location of the homespace, where individuals bind themselves together within structures of belonging, has served as a source of embarrassment for the theorists who have preceded me, I nevertheless attempt to situate the processes of queer becoming within the daily practices of homing desires and of desiring home. Following Dennis Allen, Jaime Hovey, and Judith Roof in my conviction that an activist must be simultaneously “conceptually inside” and “outside” a structure—inside enough to see “it is worth changing” and to be able to “initiate protests” that are “comprehensible” to others within “the entity”; outside to the extent that she realizes that she is not “entirely” included in the “ideas” of this configuration, much less “the idea it has of itself”—I seek after a queer “infiltration” of the home in order to reveal that this

structure “is always already different from itself” in terms of the subjects and the systems of relationality that it contains.¹⁸

For twenty or more years at this time of this writing, the various practices that resist conformity from within the ostensibly “private” space of the home have tended to be hidden from view in ashamed silence, as queerness largely has been theorized by scholars and accessed by activists as a public identity made manifest through a variety of non-normative sexual practices.¹⁹ Although such efforts are rightly celebrated for their establishment of queer subjects as “bodies that matter,”²⁰ the decision to ground a “politics of difference” in corporeal experience has rather perversely allowed for an increased regulation of the persons and practices it claims to liberate.²¹ Because I regard such understandings of queer identity and practice as both misguided and restrictive, and because my project is primarily concerned with significantly *expanding* the parameters of what constitutes queer scholarship and activism, I both must engage with and frustrate these established modes of thinking. In so doing, I hope both to reveal a blindsightedness in the existing research and writing on queerness and to establish the substructure for the literary analysis in which my dissertation project engages. Such analysis will seek, above all else, to recover the queer homespace as an unsettled and disruptive site in which heteronormativity is challenged and the obscured connections among domestic practice, social oppression, and queer resistance are revealed.

Although various derivations of queerness have been advanced by a number of prominent scholars (e.g., Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, and Judith Halberstam, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Jaspir Buar) since the inception of queer studies/theory, I have chosen to focus my critique of this scholarship via a discussion of

David Halperin's and Leo Bersani's contentious struggle regarding Michel Foucault's concept of a queer ascesis, that is, of the ritualized process of "becoming gay" in which one participates daily. I am privileging this intellectual dispute between Halperin and Bersani for two reasons: first of all, I hope to demonstrate that Foucault's discussions of ascesis practices—daily rituals of "the care of the self" that are fundamentally personal, if not private—have much to say about the means by which individual subjects become queerly at home in the world; secondly, by revealing the ways in which Halperin and Bersani both labor (albeit in very different ways) to dissociate ascesis from the practices of everyday life, I intend to offer suggestions for why the delineation of queer homespace(s) too often has not been, but now must be, a central subject of analysis within queer theory and literary scholarship.

Halperin's and Bersani's spirited debate, which was enacted primarily in the pages of *Saint Foucault* (1995)²² and *Homos* (1995)²³—and, much more pointedly, in Halperin's review of *Homos* for the *London Review of Books*—was largely over the personal and political implications of Foucault's endeavor to define homosexuality not as "a form of desire but something to be desired"²⁴; as such, it has much to say about who exactly "we" as gay and lesbian and/or "queer" scholars and subjects are—or to invoke Foucault, are in the process of "becoming"—and upon which specific aspects, if any, of our "gay-ness" might our lives and works be (re)united. In their books, Bersani and Halperin analogize Foucault's distinction between "being" and "becoming gay" with the epistemological shift from "gay and lesbian studies" to "queer theory" and endeavor to locate precisely a distinctly "homo" or "queer" mode of resistance in an extremely narrow (and rather idiosyncratic) range of "gay" sex acts that are "self-shattering" (Bersani 101) and thereby personally and politically "transformative" (Halperin 106). In so doing, Bersani and Halperin, who write and speak with a considerable amount of

intellectual prestige and institutional support, have managed to cast an enormous—or more accurately, an enormously obscuring—shadow upon subsequent queer interventions in the realms of politics, academia, and popular culture.

Before his thoughtful consideration of “the uneasy—but largely inexplicit relation between these two books” devolves into an evangelical tract for Bersani’s intellectual superiority over Halperin *and* Foucault, Tim Dean astutely observes that “we can learn something significant about contemporary gay politics by examining the *difference* between [*Saint Foucault* and *Homos*].”²⁵ Yet I would argue that it is equally instructive—if not more so—to discover and interrogate the various *similarities* between these two studies; the most startling and efficacious discoveries we might make when bringing these two works into conversation with one another relate less to their seemingly antithetical positions on queer identity, scholarship, and activism than to their *unimaginative sameness* in adjudicating the means by which and the sites from which it is possible to “become gay.” Both the theoretical significance and political utility of Foucault’s process of “becoming gay” depend upon its intractable resistance to precise delineation—that is, upon its promiscuous ability to manifest itself in diverse forms, in unexpected places, and in “as yet unforeseen” ways.²⁶ Consequently, an underlying assumption of my dissertation project is that, by looking for “queerness” in unexpected places (among them, the home)—that is, by shifting our critical attention to the many sites, contexts, and relational configurations that heretofore have been left largely unexamined due to their “embarrassing” mundaneness and assumed complicity in the construction and maintenance of heteronormativity—we will be able to challenge a disturbing trend of increasingly proscriptive claims about how and where and, indeed, why queer identities are embodied and queer scholarship and activism are practiced.

Foucault's most useful articulations about the process of "becoming gay" derive not from his three-volume *History of Sexuality* (1978; 1985; 1986), but from his 1981 interview with *Le Gai Pied*. This conversation between Foucault and a French journalist serves, if not as the explicit impetus for the individual arguments of *Homos* and *Saint Foucault*, then as the most salient point of intersection in Bersani's and Halperin's struggles to encapsulate categorically the means by which queer identity is discovered through sexual practice. Recognizing the dangers and limitations associated with "gay" mobilization under an ethnic-minority model, Foucault suggests that the aim of sexual politics should be to imagine and create new "life-styles" or "way[s] of life" rather than to disclose the already-existing (but forever enigmatic) "truth" of our identities:

we must be aware of...the tendency to reduce being gay to the question: 'Who am I?' and 'What is the secret of my desire?' Might it not be better if we asked ourselves what sort of relationships we can set up, invent, multiply or modify through our homosexuality? The problem is not trying to find out the truth of one's sexuality within oneself, but rather nowadays, trying to use our sexuality to achieve a variety of different types of relationships. And this is why homosexuality is probably not a form of desire but something to be desired. We must therefore insist on *becoming* truly gay, rather than persisting in defining ourselves as such.²⁷

In terms that continue to resonate more than three decades following their original articulation, Foucault's emphasis here shifts attention away from the discovery of some fixedly determinable, authentically "gay" identity upon which a collective movement (i.e., a politics representing our "minority" concerns) might be founded toward an inclusive, dynamic, and open-ended process through which radical cultural transformation(s) will be effected. Although Foucault makes no specific reference here to homemaking practices, the key point to note is that he clearly directs his readers to locate resistance not within desire itself, but within the everyday relational practices toward which our desires lead us.

Through his conscientious refusal in this and other interviews to delineate specifically what such a program of resistance would look like, Foucault permits an abundant number of important questions about “queer” politics to remain unresolved²⁸ and leaves himself open to charges of utopian daydreaming. By remaining ambiguous about the means by which each of us might “work on ourselves and invent [as opposed to discover]...a manner of being that is still improbable,” Foucault’s clear intention is to keep the programs of queer resistance as open—and therefore as creatively transformative—as possible.²⁹ Foucault’s critics, however, have interpreted Foucault’s inability to forge a connection between the “personal” and the “political”—and thus to delineate precisely the program of social change toward which his late work gestures— as a lapse in his thinking that is the unfortunate byproduct of his anti-humanist conception of the subject. It is a well-known fact that Foucault is no champion of psychoanalytic and sexological models of sexuality. As Joseph Bristow keenly observes, the analysis of “the ways in which power is distributed, mediated, and produced in modern culture” which comprises *The History of Sexuality* might be fairly interpreted as a thorough refutation of such modes of thought which characterize sexuality as “a surging hydraulic force that Western culture struggles to repress.”³⁰ In order to supplant this “repressive hypothesis” with a productive understanding of sexuality’s discursive construction in culture, Foucault must strategically refuse to endow his subject with the psychological mechanisms and affective responses through which identity is conventionally understood to be assembled.

Yet Foucault’s unwillingness to grant interiority to the subject becomes extremely problematic when he attempts to locate the source of a larger cultural transformation—as he does in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* and in the late interviews with French and American journalists—within the highly individualized ritual of “homosexual

asceticism,” a rigorous program of self-discipline which he defines as “the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear that happily one never attains.”³¹ Although this systematic “care of the self” may be, as Foucault contends, the most viable means through which substantial change will be effected, the specific links between our individualized projects of “asceticism” and the collective invention of “a manner of being that is still improbable”³² remain thoroughly unarticulated. Not surprisingly then, the elisions in Foucault’s thinking here have caused no small amount of frustration among queer scholars who wish to transport his ideas about queer asceticism from the realm of utopian reverie into the sites of real social struggle.

Therefore, I wish to acknowledge at this juncture that Bersani’s and Halperin’s elaborations on the queer asceticism process represent significant and, in many ways, necessary gestures toward the practical application of Foucault’s ideas about queer “becoming.” Yet, through their elaborate contrivances and hyperbolic representations of the specific individual practices that will found and enact a quintessentially “queer” political agenda, Halperin and Bersani—and the vast majority of queer theorists who write both against and in alliance with these two most prominent thinkers—exhibit such an intense frustration with Foucault’s judicious observation that being “without a program does not mean blindness...[it] can be very useful and very original and creative”³³ that they misdirect their attentions away from the process of “trying to use sexuality to achieve a variety of different types of *relationships*” and back toward the more well-charted territory of “trying to find out the *truth* of [homosexuality] within [the queer subject].”³⁴ Among the indeterminate aspects of the “queer becoming” process that become disturbingly rigidified in *Saint Foucault* and *Homos*, and that accordingly serve as the touch points of my critique, are as follows: (1) the various components—or, to engage in a little word play, the actual experiences—that Halperin and Bersani marshal to exemplify a distinctly

“queer” mode of resistance; (2) the particular sites and the specific contexts in which they regard such practices as either subverting or re-idealizing hegemonic norms; (3) the intricate processes of physical and psychological transformation that they valorize for their symbolic embodiment of “homo-ness”/“queer-ness” and their contributory roles in a newly-invented mode of social connection; and (4) the kinship, if any, that each theorist allows for these new ways of “coming together” to have with already existing structures of relationality.

In the prologue to *Homos*, which presents a cogitative and persuasive analysis of the ways in which the politicized lexical substitution of “queer” results in the self-imposed erasure of “gay men and lesbians,” Leo Bersani seeks to counteract the “*desexualizing*” trend of this discourse through his discovery and illustration of a “revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality” that is “inherent in gay desire” (7). Through a line of reasoning which defies the famous axiom that serves as the opening line of his study —“No one wants to be called a homosexual”—and which counters the “assimilative rather than subversive consequences” of poststructuralist resignification efforts (5), Bersani hopes to direct our attention toward the truth-finding psychical processes of “bringing out, and celebrating, ‘the homo’ in all of us” (10). Yet, in what can only be described as a problematic invocation of Foucault, Bersani endeavors to locate and to install his “anticonmunal mode of connectedness” (10)—that is, his dystopian vision of a “gay becoming” process which might radically transform the political and social structures of the larger culture——within the essentialist, identity-consolidating notion of “being gay,” a referent of fixity to which Foucault demands our unequivocal resistance. Adamantly maintaining that the only consequence of “denaturalizing the epistemic and political regimes that have constructed us” (4) is self-effacement—that the primary effect of “playing subversively with normative identities” (5) is an assimilative loss of gay-ness rather than a subversive blow to

hegemonic categories of identity—Bersani enjoins us to organize and enact our resistance from *within* our ineradicable “habit of desire” (6). In sum, by redirecting our attention to irreducible truth of the “*anticommunitarian* impulses” that are intrinsic to “homosexual desire” (7), Bersani claims to discover the one fundamentally inclusive yet indisputably disruptive means by which we as a sexual community will finally (be)come (gay) together.

Yet Bersani’s relationship to Foucault becomes especially tortured, if one will pardon the pun, in the final two chapters of *Homos*, in which “gay sadomasochistic sex,” “nonrelational pederasty,” and “the fertility of rimming” (79; 123; 179) are spectacularly displayed as exemplary practices in the project of “reconstituting sociality” (177). Turning his interpretative gaze upon Foucault’s comments to French and American journalists about the “common fear” of the “gay lifestyle”—not of gay “sex acts” per se, but that “gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships”³⁵—Bersani constructs an amazingly labored counter-reading of these remarks that would seem to confirm unequivocally David Halperin’s observation that “Michel Foucault has become the sort of intellectual figure with whom it is no longer possible to have a rational or nonpathological relationship.”³⁶ Enormously suspicious of what he interprets as the “desexualizing of homophobia implicit” (77) in Foucault’s depictions of gay relationships as “blankly, superficially, radically, [and] threateningly happy” (79)—that is, as healthy domestic situations—Bersani positions the philosopher on the psychoanalytic couch in order to recover what Foucault “meant to say”—that is, what he repressed—about the specific bodily pleasures that capacitate “this enviable absence of any interpretive aftertaste” in the “two hauntingly happy and tender men” who serve to emblemize the intolerable felicity of the “gay lifestyle” (81; 79; 83). Diagnosing the conceptual flimsiness of Foucault’s comments here as an act of unconscious suppression, Bersani shifts the reader’s attention to Foucault’s professional and personal

investment in sadomasochistic sex acts, thereby attempting to locate the specific erotic practices and corresponding psychical processes in which this pair's euphoria has been consummated. Yet by insisting upon a direct correspondence between this emblematically "gay" couple's happiness and the "new possibilities of pleasure" that S/M practitioners, pederasts, and rimmers invent through and in "strange parts of their bodies,"³⁷ Bersani exhibits a characteristically anti-Foucaultian impulse, one that essentializes gay identities and deters rather than invites the proliferation of innovative models of desire and relational creativity.

Bersani's endeavor to identify and examine the psychical mechanisms at work within such "deviant" individuals, as well as in the cultural responses to the "subversive, revolutionary social rearrangements that gays [are] trying out" (78) via the process of "becoming gay," does in fact supply Foucault's empty subject with a much-needed psychological complexity for the purpose of recuperating him³⁸ as an agent of social change. Accordingly, I recognize the motivation behind Bersani's psychoanalytic augmentation of Foucault's modest remarks as a necessary and in many ways welcome intervention into the debate regarding the specific means by which (homo)sexual relations typify and effect truly alternative social forms. Nevertheless, the manner in which Bersani inserts himself into this ongoing conversation is fundamentally problematic, because it both decontextualizes and distorts Foucault's thinking on the process of "becoming," because it enchains homosexual desire to fundamentally antisocial behaviors, and because it equates queer identity with sexual action (and, to a lesser extent, with violence and impersonality), with feelings of intense self-loathing, with the psychoanalytic theory of "the death drive" in that it seeks to accomplish an utter (yet non-suicidal) annihilation of the self.³⁹ Bersani's apocalyptically-charged discussion of the ways in which "gay desire" enacts a radical redefinition of sociality may in fact function effectively as a seductive fantasy of civilization's

destruction and consequent rebirth; all the same, it is this unmitigated investment in the anti-relationality of “homo-ness” which denies the radical potential of more quietly subversive homosexual subjects, queer homemakers among them, and which renders his program of revolution virtually impracticable.

In the final chapter of *Homos*, Bersani claims to discover within Jean Genet’s *Funeral Rights* the “difficult and repugnant truth” (151) that homosexuality is a crime against civilization which is—or rather, becomes—politically-efficacious through its conferral of “relations that break with humanity” (172). Yet I maintain a well-considered skepticism regarding both the prudence and functionality of founding a program of resistance upon “intimacies [that are] devoid of intimacy” (128). In particular, I would like to interrogate Bersani’s supposition that such acts embody a “new erotics” that might serve as the *only*—or, for that matter, an even practicable or particularly desirable—means through which Foucault’s vision of a politically mobilized homosexual community will be materially realized. If, as Bersani contends, the “anti-identitarian” practices that he valorizes in his analysis categorically reject hegemonic understandings of “personhood” through their insurgent opposition to existing “relations of ownership and dominance” (128), does it not stand to reason that, when viewed as activist endeavors, such processes portend nothing less (which is to say nothing more) than the utter destruction of the queer community? If the incarnation and corresponding exhibition of homo-ness dictates, as Bersani insists it does in his reading of Gide’s *The Immoralist*, “that we move irresponsibly among other bodies, somewhat indifferent to them, demanding nothing more than that they be as available to contact as we are” (128), what does such a renunciation of self/other ownership gesture toward except a blissfully pleasure-centered form of anarchism?⁴⁰

In sum, then, to invoke Halperin's "charitable" description of the problem, Bersani's bewailing of "just how dreary, un-ecstatic, and unsexy queer politics has become" is grandiloquent while his own political program in *Homos* remains "underdescribed"⁴¹, a situation that becomes all the more ironic when we consider that Bersani is endeavoring to fill in the gaps left by Foucault's purported elisions. Seducing us with spectacular—almost apocalyptic—images of revolution that deflect our attention away from his project's dearth of viably innovative proposals for social reform that might be incorporated into our everyday routines, Bersani offers us a "new way of coming together" that ultimately and persistently registers in the visceral, but never in the visionary, sense of these words. My summoning of Halperin at this juncture is not merely fortuitous, as he has revealed himself explicitly as one of the fiercest critics of Bersani's politics, and as he has presented his work implicitly as an antidote to Bersani's theoretical abuses of Foucault. In his caustic review of *Homos* for the *London Review of Books*, Halperin has denounced Bersani's boisterous cry for "[n]othing less than revolution" as both naïve and ineffectual. Although clearly recognizing the sensationalist allure of Bersani's "sexy" exhibition of a self- and community-shattering *jouissance*, Halperin suggests that, in actuality, the "practice of transgression" is "more subtle, and more elusive" than most queer theorists and activists are willing to admit and/or able to perceive.⁴² Therefore, in terms that announce his unqualified rejection of Bersani's notions of both the means and ends of queer politics (i.e., the absolute destruction of relational structures and "victory" rather than "survival and resistance"), Halperin returns us to Foucault's *productive* understanding of the "inescapability of power relations," which is to say, he reminds us that the saturation of sexual meaning throughout the "entire social fabric affords innumerable, albeit unsexy, "opportunities for political intervention...[and] possible sites of entry into the political"⁴³; in so doing, Halperin

hopes to recover the “radical edge to [a modestly-conceived and locally-based mode of] sexual politics” that has been rendered (and consequently dismissed as) “apparently banal”⁴⁴ by and in comparison to the more “stirring” cultural analyses of which *Homos* is perhaps the most extreme example.

Insomuch as he demonstrates a keen awareness of the political futility of the “unconsidered and careless” polemic that *Homos* comprises, and insomuch as he recognizes the necessity of a queer politics rooted in everyday life, it is all the more disheartening to ascertain that in *Saint Foucault* Halperin rehearses a program of queer resistance that is more or less analogous to Bersani’s.⁴⁵ Although he attempts to preserve the dynamic non-referentiality of “queer” by defining it as an “eccentric positionality” that is “available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices” (62), Halperin nevertheless gives “concrete embodiment” (113) to this identity through his thoroughly prescriptive understanding of what constitutes queer praxis. In locating Foucault’s process of “ascesis” in the erotically-redistributive practices of S/M and fist-fucking and in the “transformative daily ritual[s]” of “gay male gym culture” (116), Halperin assembles and enacts an epistemic model of queer “becoming” that rivals Bersani’s in its absolute investment in (homo)sexual practice(s), which is to say, in the highly-particularized erotic behaviors that allegedly proceed from and make manifest “gay desire.”

Despite his conscientious disavowal of the “stirring” but ultimately impracticable delineation of the “queer becoming” process in *Homos*, Halperin’s articulation of the specific means by which queer culture (which, in *Saint Foucault*, is apparently synonymous with gay sexual practice⁴⁶) becomes a viable queer politics that “ultimately dispenses with ‘sexuality’ and

destabilizes the very constitution of identity itself” (96-7) is every bit as spectacularly insubstantial and as inattentive to the quotidian as Bersani’s. In particular, Halperin’s decision to focus exclusively on the processes at work in the idiosyncratic sexual practices of S/M and fisting, as well as to sexualize the otherwise “banal” ritual of gay bodybuilding, deflects attention away from his awareness that “sexual meaning saturates the entire social fabric” and thereby severely constrains the places and contexts in which we might see “queer resistance” as taking place. Halperin’s failure to deviate from hegemonic understandings of gay identity/practice is all the more disconcerting because, as both his trenchant critique of *Homos* and certain isolated moments in *Saint Foucault* reveal,⁴⁷ he clearly perceives our urgent need for expansive rather than limiting illustrations of the possible structural sites and relational configurations that our sexual politics can transform.⁴⁸ If sex, as Halperin contends, only functions at best “as a low-level form of philosophical activity” (94), must we not also (perhaps more imperatively so) direct our critical attention to the apparently “non-sexual” practices—e.g., our restructurings of familial units and homespaces, our contestations of the monogamous ideal as a necessary component of intimate and/or partnered relationships, and our community-based fundraising, activist, and social endeavors—through which, to return to Foucault, we “use our sexuality,” but not necessarily or even primarily through our engagement in sexual relations, “to achieve a variety of different types of relationships”?

It should be noted that even my most unequivocally censorious objections to Bersani’s and Halperin’s delineations of “homo-ness” or “queerness” represent not so much a wholesale rejection of these theoretical models, but rather my apprehension about their constricted figurations of the sites and relational negotiations in which the discursive deployment of sexualities might be resisted. Above all else, I am implicitly questioning why queer domestic

spaces, as well as a multitude of other structural formations, relational configurations, and lifestyle practices, have been disregarded by queer theory as possible sources and contexts for our resistance programs. So pervasive and deafening are the voices that would deny the home as a foundational space of queer subjectivity, and therefore as a site of potential resistance,⁴⁹ that I obviously have found it necessary to respond at length to these restraining enunciations of “queer-ness” before being able to introduce several literary models that articulate a possible alternate understanding of who (and from where) “we” might “become” together.

That said, my critique of Bersani’s and Halperin’s thinking does not aim to be a reactionary dismissal of but rather a strategic response to the predominant intellectual currents in contemporary queer scholarship. By shifting the reader’s attention to unexpected spatial and relational contexts in which a politically-efficacious queer identity might be invented and practiced, I am endeavoring to mitigate—if not counteract—the tendency of act-specific models of queerness to replicate unwittingly the hegemonic, normalizing discourses regarding our sexualities and to thereby reduce our lives to “fucking bodies”. The enduring and powerful influence of Bersani’s and Halperin’s formulations of queerness can be exhibited through sustained analysis of any scholarship (such as that of Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, and Judith Halberstam, to name a few) that implicitly or explicitly follows Bersani’s and Halperin’s leads in its presentation of queerness as a spectacularly “public” identity. Although their contributions to the field are enormously significant, and although I would be remiss in denying their influence on my own work, these theorists’ understandings of queer selfhood nevertheless tend toward the restriction of rather than the proliferation of diversely resistant sexual identities. Perhaps I am merely waxing nostalgic in my efforts to resurrect the notion that, to quote the rallying cry of Queer Nation, “we are everywhere,” including within the

embarrassingly mundane space of the home. Be that as it may, this introductory discussion is intended to serve as a reminder that both our queer identities and the spaces in which we are allowed to inhabit them have become alarmingly circumscribed. By refusing a logic that valorizes public transgression over private struggle (and that further interrogates the very distinction between private and public), my dissertation project attempts the difficult task of locating queer-ly disruptive subjects in unlikely and heretofore embarrassing places, namely, within the (un)settled fictive homespaces of contemporary American writings.

Above all else, my examination of a selection of literary texts that spans the last four decades of the 20th century, writings that are united by their delineations of the queer homespace as a place in which sexually transgressive acts are performed within the routines of everyday life, seeks to expand notions of both queer literary identities and the material sites from which queer resistance has been and might be waged.⁵⁰ Domestic narratives such as the ones I analyze in this project—particularly those written by “white,” “middle-class” men—most often are seen by critics as participating in a cultural project that promotes normativity through its representation of gay subjects as “assimilative” and “sexless”; because the homespace and the family structure are foregrounded in these texts, the authors are assumed to be strive toward the normalization of “gay identity” in order to make it more palatable for straight readers, thereby rendering a more transgressive “queer” subjecthood virtually invisible.⁵¹ By examining the “literary blueprints” for a queer homespace that have been drawn up by several contemporary American⁵² male writers, my project aims to counter this assumption that a privileging of “gay” homelife necessarily results in an assimilative loss of queer-ness and sociopolitical potential. Reading Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (1964), Robert Ferro’s *The Family of Max Desir* (1983), Samuel R. Delany’s *The Mad Man* (1994), and Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the*

World (1990) through the lenses of architectural studies, queer and feminist theories, poststructuralism, and affect theory, I seek to recover the queer homespace as an unsettled and disruptive site in which heteronormativity is challenged and the obscured connections among domestic practice, social oppression, and queer resistance are revealed. In these texts, the (queer) revolution truly begins at home.

It makes sense that the home would serve as a rich and versatile location for these authors' explorations of queer subjectivity, even as critics have too often looked away in embarrassment from these venues of "becoming." After all, by surveying the American literary output over the past two hundred years, one is able to discern the central importance of the home as a symbol of selfhood and of the individual's relationship to the larger community. Both a site of comfort and a site of conflict, the home embodies our nation's authors' most significant concerns regarding the tension between the romantic individualism that freedom affords and the altruism that the American democratic system requires. Dating back at least as far as Thoreau's posing of the question "What is a house?" in *Walden*, the literary positioning of the homeplace at the nodal point of competing discourses of individual possibility and communal obligation can be traced through examination of texts such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992; 1994), as well as through texts in which a vehicle stands in for the homespace (e.g., Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*).⁵³ Although not all of the aforementioned texts demonstrate an apparent interest in resolving these tensions between individualism and community, they consistently designate the home as the "locus of the central

conflicts of American life,”⁵⁴ including struggles related to race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and national identity.

The symbolic importance of houses and “the home” in our national literature closely corresponds with its metaphorical significance in American cultural life. As Gwendolyn Wright astutely observes, the “private” architecture of the homespace “has a distinctly public side” in the sense that Americans have always “been quite self-conscious about where they live and where their fellow citizens live as well.”⁵⁵ For centuries, Wright argues, “Americans have tended to see their homes as statements about their status and their domestic life, as settings that revealed the kind of family who lived there.”⁵⁶ More than just a place of comfort and security that is filled with familiar and/or life-sustaining things, the home functions as a mirror of “the good life” and “the American dream”—an ideal which includes, but is not limited to, a stable family structure, financial security, class stability, good taste, and honest ambition—that reflects a reassuring “family portrait” back to the national community.⁵⁷ Although actual housing structures and design have exhibited considerable diversity, both historically and contemporaneously, according to the divergent needs, resources, and social positioning of the families who have occupied them, our universalized abstraction of “the home” as an almost magical space which nurtures the personality characteristics that make our nation “great” has persisted resolutely. In short, the home is a fantasy space that is often, but not always, constructed within the real space of the house, and that has the important social function of “reinforc[ing] certain character traits, promot[ing] family stability, and assur[ing] a good society.”⁵⁸ It is no wonder, then, that it has occupied such a central place in our American literary history.

Modern American notions of domesticity, which emerged in the 19th century and have retained their power throughout the 20th century despite serious challenges to the nuclear familial structure for which the modern domestic space was originally designed, exhibit the single-family dwelling as a primary site in which personal identity is constructed through the compartmentalization of space. Through its delineation of sequential sites such as the master bedroom, the kitchen, and the family room, the American home both “presupposes and encourages heterocentric activity” and “orchestrates a social order of age, sexuality, and ownership.”⁵⁹ Thus, rather than standing apart as a haven from the outside world, the homespace is always at once both public and private because, as architectural theorist Sylvia Lavin asserts, “its design [is] burdened with the need to reinforce individual integrity while simultaneously demonstrating the individual’s relation to a larger social continuum.”⁶⁰ In other words, the home does not neutralize but rather has at play within its boundaries the very forces of gender, sexuality, race, and class that determine one’s perception of (and consequent ability to maneuver within) the broader cultural milieu.

Thus, although the original intention behind the design of the American single-family home was, as Lavin observes, to create a space for an “individualized and isolated interiority,” the material positioning of such a dwelling—whether it occurs on a congested urban street or on the winding lane of a suburban subdivision—inevitably forestalls the potential for privacy and autonomy. The re-enacting of this conflict in the design and placement of every dwelling ensures that “there is no such thing as a completely independent house” and establishes the homespace as ground zero for the performance of the “modern struggle for order.”⁶¹ The homespace’s unique positioning at the juncture between private and public spheres of existence thereby marks it as a site in which *either* the replication or disruption of predominating cultural

understandings might occur. Depending upon the everyday practices of its occupants, a home might become a site in which conventional gender and sexuality roles and hierarchical power structures are most rigidly sustained or it might become a space that encourages the re-invention of our most fundamental relational patterns.

Therefore, far from being as a retreat from engagement in sociopolitical concerns, writing about domestic space attempts to address such issues from one of their most localized points of convergence. In its existence as both a site of individual authority and a site governed by institutional authority, the homespace emerges as a place of vast potential for resisting what Henri Lefebvre has termed “‘the bureaucracy of controlled consumption,’ that is, the forces of late capitalist economy and their complicit governmental authority.”⁶² Lefebvre’s understanding of “the everyday” is particularly helpful for identifying the homespace as a site of political struggle and revolutionary promise. As Mary McLeod explains, Lefebvre’s concept of everyday life is, at its most basic, simply material life—it is the “here and now,” which includes such banalities as “sustenance, clothing, homes, neighborhoods, environment”—but with a “‘dramatic attitude’ and ‘lyrical tone.’”⁶³ Thus Lefebvre contends that his purpose in privileging the quotidian is not to render human existence banal, but “to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary.”⁶⁴ This inherent contradiction in everyday life accounts for its potential as a mode of re-visioning the world; that is, it “embodies at once the most dire experiences of oppression and the strongest potentialities for transformation.”⁶⁵ Moreover, as the writers that this study will consider collectively demonstrate, the homespace provides a superlative vantage point from which to unravel this apparent disparity; in Lefebvre’s words, it is the place from which “to decode the modern world, that bloody riddle, according to the everyday.”⁶⁶

In the literary texts that I have chosen to examine, the queer homemakers who are represented therein invent modes of inhabitation which do not necessarily negate accepted understandings of domesticity, but rather support the construction of spaces of queerness that creatively re-interpret what it means to be “at home” in the world. Through their recognition that “the interiority of [their ostensibly] private retreat[s] inevitably reaches a point where it confronts the public realm,”⁶⁷ these fictional characters build and inhabit homes that fail to designate a dividing line between the public and private; instead, such domestic spaces mark the site at which these structural concepts are most intimately aligned and most politically efficacious. Consequently, as if following Doreen Massey’s admonition to re-conceptualize the homespace “as an articulated moment in networks of social relations and understandings,” these queer homemakers are able to imagine more progressively their homes as “extroverted “ spaces possessing “a consciousness of [their] links with the wider world, which [in turn] integrates in a positive way the global and the local.”⁶⁸ In short, their homes become perpetually and productively “unsettled” sites in which political struggle locates itself from within the routines of everyday life.

My study of contemporary gay writers who invent queer homespaces in their fiction proceeds not only from the conviction that political struggle is most effectively waged from within the routines of everyday life, but from the notion that architecture and storytelling are closely related practices that perform similar cultural work. In short, the ways in which we construct and occupy our homes strongly correlate with the narratives we tell about ourselves and about our sense of belonging to the world around us. This alignment of architectural practices and interior design with literary endeavors is a particularly useful one because both processes share the ideological function of telling stories—and, more importantly for the

purposes of this study, of intervening in existing narratives—about “the ways subjects are constituted and managed in institutional space.”⁶⁹ In both architecture and literature, the choices we make between beauty and utility, innovation and mimicry, and austerity and adornment recite elaborate and distinct stories about both the ways we perceive the world and the terms by which we wish to be understood within it.

In her study of the symbolic functions of houses in American literature, Marilyn Chandler has argued that American writers “have generally portrayed the structures an individual inhabits as bearing a direct resemblance to the structure of his or her psyche and inner life and as constituting a concrete manifestation of specific values.”⁷⁰ My project’s implicit argument is that this narrative strategy becomes particularly conspicuous and thematically significant in the works of the “queer” writers that I consider. Both in the spaces of their narratives and in the dwellings and everyday practices their stories depict, the authors I consider inventively employ the “building materials” available to them to advance alternate modes of sexual desire, literary occupation, and worldly inhabitation. Collectively viewed, these writers—and, more importantly, the queer homemakers they present to us in their narrative spaces—demonstrate that “the home in American literature and culture is not an easily accessible or assessable idea”⁷¹; in short, the home is truly—or, more precisely, can truly become—what we choose to make of it.

It is entirely fitting then that my first chapter considers a text that was written and published during a time in which “gay identity” was in the midst of a pre-Stonewall renovation project of sorts. Christopher Isherwood began work on *A Single Man* (1964) at the start of the Cold War, when “many politicians, journalists, and citizens thought that homosexuals posed more of a threat to national security than Communists”⁷²; in order to counter this emerging

public perception of homosexuals as dangerous and anti-American, the Mattachine Society and other “homophile” organizations attempted to rehabilitate gay identity as normal, ethical, and in perfect sync with the values of the dominant culture. These attempts to rehabilitate gay identity as respectable and to assimilate homosexuals into mainstream society did not sit well with Isherwood, who had realized as early as 1949 that his recognition of himself as “a queer first and foremost”⁷³ demanded his outraged resistance to the forces of conformity. Through his first-person presentation of a day in the life of George, a British professor of Literature who lives and teaches in post-World War II Los Angeles (and who thus emerges obviously as his author’s fictional counterpart) and who becomes increasingly comfortable with his inclinations toward behaving badly, Isherwood thereby interrogates the efficaciousness of a mid-century model of American “gay identity” that can be seen to be working toward assimilation and thus against queer resistance.

Because it was written several years prior to the Stonewall riots, which are regarded commonly as marking the start of a modern gay rights movement that increasingly has focused on matters of LGBTQ “equality,” and because it follows its first-person narrator as he negotiates everyday experiences that demand his assimilation and/or resistance, *A Single Man* serves as a useful starting point for my project’s consideration of the homespace as a site for queer becoming. Throughout the course of the day, George is shown to wage war against the forces of normalization that surround him and to become increasingly comfortable with an unabashed celebration of the shame and abjection that his culture attaches to him when it identifies him as “queer.” By detailing the ways in which his narrator lays claim to the disrespectability of his queer subject position, and by revealing this apparent disenfranchisement as a potential source for radical social transformation, Isherwood provides George with a narrative trajectory that

serves as a roadmap that points toward the most efficacious “home” for queer politics within and in relation to the dominant cultural landscape. If Isherwood destabilizes the otherwise triumphant conclusion of his novel through his introduction of the possibility that George dies unexpectedly in his sleep, this ambiguous ending merely underscores the extent to which the ultimate course of queer politics was still largely uncharted in the early 1960s.

In marked contrast to Isherwood’s “single man,” who celebrates his abjection in order to wage his queer warfare against the cultural norms via which belonging and privilege are conferred, Robert Ferro offers the reader a male protagonist who insists upon inserting (and asserting) himself within his biological family, which is to say, within the structure of relationality through which heteronormative respectability is largely sustained. Thus, although it may be tempting to read *The Family of Max Desir* (1983) as a novel with assimilationist intentions, in that its central narrative concerns a same-sex couple’s attempts to find a place for themselves within the already existing kinship structures of a multi-generational Italian immigrant family, Ferro does not wish to provide a blueprint for a cooperative sharing of domestic space that would bridge the homosexual-heterosexual divide. Rather than participating in a series of negotiations that accomplish the evacuation of their queer oppositionality, Max and his partner battle the Desirs for the “space in which to continue living”⁷⁴ and, in so doing, accomplish the disruption of the entrenched inhabitation practices and affiliation narratives through which the family perpetuates itself.

Although Ferro was a member of the Violet Quill, an informal group of gay writers who enjoyed considerable success in the late 1970s and early 1980s, his fiction departs from the work of his peers in that tends not to emphasize the public “gay culture” that emerged in the aftermath

of the Stonewall rebellion. Ferro's choice to focus instead upon his characters' interactions and struggles with their families of origin tends to estrange him in the minds of critics from the central "world-making" projects of post-Stonewall gay literature and to render him vulnerable to accusations of writing fiction that appeals to straight readers through its de-sexualization of its gay characters. I argue in the second chapter of this dissertation that the misrecognition of Ferro's work as "assimilative" unwittingly provides an extremely advantageous entry point for a reconsideration of the homespace as a site of queer possibility. Because Max is shown to flout the predominant narrative trajectory through which a gay man would have come to feel "at home" during this time period—namely, that he would move through a "coming out" process that causes him to leave his family of origin, whether on friendly or unfriendly terms, and take up residence within new structures of chosen affiliation and/or kinship—Ferro can be seen to perform a useful correction to an exceedingly narrow understanding of the spaces and situations in which queer resistance might be practiced.

Although their approaches to doing so are radically dissimilar, both Robert Ferro and Samuel R. Delany endeavor to perform queer transformations to relationality from *within* our culture's established structures of belonging, making my turn from an analysis of *The Family of Max Desir* in Chapter Two to a consideration of Delany's excessively filth-ridden novel *The Mad Man* (1994) in Chapter Three more seamless in its logic than it would appear on the surface. Although *The Mad Man* defies easy categorization, Delany can be seen to present the reader with a "pornotopic fantasy" of New York City during the late 1980s that resolves gradually into a "funny and scary and kind of unbelievable" "love story"⁷⁵ between a philosophy professor and a homeless man; through his intentionally-excessive representations of a wide range of "extreme" sexual exchanges between these differently-classed individuals, Delany aims to transform the

alienating police state that was emerging from Manhattan's redevelopment efforts and its safe-sex initiatives into a fantastic, pleasure-affirming homespace that embraces the productive value of the "filthy" and the "perverse." By re-imagining this urban landscape as a place in any everyday occurrence has great potential for transformation into a sexual encounter, Delany's fantasizes spectacularly about a differently cut-up world in which new and exciting kinds of social contact, including those presently recognized as abject based upon their association with (the fear of) HIV transmission, have the space in which to prosper and flourish.

Thus, above and beyond his establishment of a site of inhabitation for his and his partner Leaky's daily practices of perversity, protagonist John Marr must labor to delineate a queer domestic space that is messy enough to accommodate the diverse range of individuals who have been displaced and dispossessed by the fear-laden discourse of/against desire that has sprung forth from our collective imagining of the AIDS epidemic. By relocating the filth and defilement of his "public" sex life into the "private" space of his home, Marr issues a powerful challenge to several of our culture's most tidy—and hence most exclusionary and oppressive—structures of distinction: cleanliness vs. filth; ownership vs. enslavement; citizenship vs. homelessness; familial relationality vs. sexual promiscuity. Refusing to be implicated as excessive and/or deadly, Marr endeavors to articulate, through his celebratory chronicling of his domestic life and of his and others' pleasure-seeking interactions in the city's sexual underground, what was virtually unspeakable at the time: sex is "[i]ncredibly good"⁷⁶ and socially-beneficial. Much like his aptly named partner Leaky, who is incontinent and who has been taught by his parents to recognize the productive value of "piss, shit, spit, cum, snot, [and] cockcheese,"⁷⁷ Marr learns to situate the key to his physical and psychological well-being in the literal and figurative "warmth" that accompanies the unbridled sharing of bodily fluids. Because such exchanges tend to confuse

and confound the race, class, and entitlement disparities that exist between individuals, Marr and Leaky engage in the daily defilement of the home that they share, so that traditional understandings of domestic partnership will have to cede space to their more expansive understandings of queer relationality.

The struggle to transform the “settled” space of the home into a site for queer becoming—which is to say, into a location where identity is “unsettled” productively—emerges also as a central theme in Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), a text that I consider in the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation. Having been born into and raised within family structures that extend collective security through the containment of individual aspirations, Cunningham’s characters (much like Robert Ferro’s) do not reject these models outright, but instead strive to make homes for themselves which resist domesticity’s seemingly inevitable tendency to constrict selfhood. That is, they endeavor to construct and *inhabit* structures—whether architectural or relational—that do not *inhibit*, but rather incite, their queer inclinations toward inventiveness and transformation. The complex and ostensibly inimical relationship between desire and domesticity serves as a central subject in each of Cunningham’s published novels, yet *A Home at the End of the World* comprises his most discerning look at both the imperative for and obstacles to the construction and maintenance of the queer homespace. In documenting the domestic conflicts of three ec-centrics (a bisexual woman, a bisexual man, and a gay man) whose identities emerge at the nodal points among competing discourses of sexual liberationism, Woodstockian socialism, and suburban conservatism, Cunningham contests the “outward” movement of post-Stonewall gay narratives and locates queer resistance not in the public realm, but within the ostensibly private space of the single-family dwelling.

Cunningham's choice to focus predominantly on the interior design of this invented household has earned him the derision of several prominent gay critics; in their estimation, this relentless attention to the quotidian vacates the queerness of Cunningham's narrative and exposes its intentions as more assimilative than subversive. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I argue that such readings proceed from an insufficient understanding of the constitutive relationship between everyday life and social transformation. In contrast to these critiques of Cunningham, which bear a striking resemblance to the various charges of accommodationism that were lodged against Robert Ferro several years prior, I demonstrate that *A Home at the End of the World* neither desexualizes nor depoliticizes its characters, but rather exposes the obscured connections among domestic practice, social oppression, and queer resistance. My examination of Cunningham's novel thus reveals that the desire for home need not be nostalgic nor regressive—that it does not always suggest, as Jonathan's mother Alice contends, a "lack of imagination"⁷⁸—and thereby rehabilitates queer homemaking as a transformative project. Countering the predominant inclination toward delimiting queerness within spectacular sexual acts that perform apocalyptic upheaval, my analysis returns to David M. Halperin's exceptionally useful observation that "apparent banality is precisely what gives a radical edge to sexual politics."⁷⁹ In other words, Cunningham's envisioning of contemporary queer existence reminds us that the revolution in many important ways both must begin and end at home. By dwelling in the rhythms and cycles of everyday life, the queer subject establishes himself/herself in what Bobby terms "the gap between what we can imagine and what we in fact create"⁸⁰; in so doing, s/he discovers the transformative potential of a homespace that is both "settled" and "shocking."⁸¹ Because it revels bravely in the inconsistencies, pleasures, and disappointments of everyday life, Cunningham's novel offers us perhaps the most serviceable

understandings both of the linkage between inhabitation practices and the stories we tell (of) ourselves and of the constitutive relationship between ordinary experience and social transformation.

Notes

¹ By using these particular terms, I am borrowing from a volume of essays edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore. See Sycamore, ed. *That's Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

² See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 1-37. The quotation is from page 35 of Sedgwick's introduction.

³ Several media outlets report that anti-gay hate crimes appear to be on the rise. Halfway through 2013, New York City police reported that the number of anti-hate crimes was on pace to double that of the previous year. Also in 2013, *Psychology Today* looked at national data from two different sources and concluded that "the past several years have in fact been the highest levels of reported anti-LGBT violence," and speculated that "[i]t could be that individuals who hate LGBT people are reacting violently to the community's progress," as evidenced in such victories as the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the greater availability of same-sex marriage. At least one recent incident in Michigan would seem to support *Psychology Today's* theory about a direct linkage between the progress being made by the LGBT community and the apparent rise in anti-gay violence. CNN reports that a 28 year old woman who married her female partner on March 22, 2014, the day after a federal judge overturned Michigan's ban on same-sex marriage, was "knocked unconscious by three men who kicked and punched her while shouting anti-gay epithets." The men targeted the woman after recognizing her from local news coverage of the wedding, asking, "Hey b----, aren't you that f---- from the news?" as they beat her. See, among other reports: Tina Moore, "Gay-bashing attacks on the rise in city, could double last year's total," *New York Daily News* 18 Aug. 2013; Brian Mustanski, "Are Violent Hate Crimes Against LGBT People on the Rise?," *Psychology Today* 12 June 2013; and Lorenzo Ferrigno, "Attack after same-sex marriage shines light on Michigan hate crime law. *CNN*. 4 Apr. 2014.

⁴ See letter posted on the blog for The Louisiana Justice Institute, available at <http://louisianajusticeinstitute.blogspot.com/2014/04/statement-from-lgbtq-march-and-rally.html>.

⁵ The quotation is from the letter that is referenced in note 4 above. The more direct charges of using "white privilege" to do violence against queers of color were made in various comments on Facebook and in person at the LGBT March Against Hate and Violence.

⁶ This situation bears some striking similarities to a breakdown in communication among queer scholars and activists at a 2003 academic conference held at the University of Michigan. Although the purpose of the gathering was to resist the tendency toward normativity that "gay pride" has increasingly promoted and to engage in dialogue about the affects, practices, and experiences that might "form the basis of a new, collective identity and a radical queer politics," the Gay Shame Conference ironically (and perhaps predictably) enough soon devolved into a weekend in which participants shamed one another and spent time arguing over "differences within the queer community" and questioning the "authenticity" of individual voices rather than collaborating on "antihomophobic work." The quotations are from pages 365 and 363 of Jennifer Moon's "Gay Shame and the Politics of Identity" in *Gay Shame*. In addition to *Gay Shame*, which documents the conference and includes some of its key papers and performances, as well as reflections on the proceedings, see the essays collected by David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, who were participants at the conference and are some of its fiercest critics, in *Social Text* 23.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2005).

⁷ Here, of course, I am invoking Foucault's notion of a queer ascesis, a daily practice of self-transformation to which I will return later in this Introduction.

⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, "Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 825.

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993): 14.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 60-61. The essay was written for and included in Sedgwick's 2003 book *Touching Feeling*.

¹¹ See Jason Ruiz, "The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore," *Radical History Review* (Winter 2008): 237-247.

¹² See "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships," in *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 9 (2008): 166.

¹³ "Homonormativity" is a term coined by Lisa Duggan to describe a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." See Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? : Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) 50.

¹⁴ Lee Edelman, "The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," *Narrative* 6.1 (Jan 1998): 30. See also Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004); anything by Leo Bersani; Judith Halberstam, "The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 823-825; and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 826-827; among many other works.

¹⁵ Michael Snediker, "Queer Optimism," *Postmodern Culture* 16.3 (May 2006): 13.

¹⁶ The quotation is taken from "Beyond Gay Shame" by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. See *Gay Shame* 11.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 23.3-4 (Fall / Winter 2005): 59-61.

¹⁸ Dennis Allen, Jaime Hovey, and Judith Roof, "Enactivism: The Movie," in *Gay Shame* 377-378.

¹⁹ As Heather Love has observed in her recent reflection on the history of queer studies, the term "queer" has been called upon "to designate a form of intersectional critique grounded in a politics of antinormativity...[and] to bring together a range of social outsiders united against the 'regimes of the normal.' At its most expansive, queer studies imagined a federation of the shamed, the alienated, the destitute, and the hated" (182). Although "the semantic flexibility of queer—its weird ability to touch almost everything—is one of the most exciting things about it" (183), in Love's opinion, many critics have argued against such a position, contending the non-specificity of the term tends to limit its efficaciousness. See Love, "Queers _____ This," in *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*, ed. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) 180-191.

²⁰ This is, of course, a somewhat ironic invocation of the title of Judith Butler's 1993 monograph, which questions "whether recourse to matter and to the materiality of sex is necessary in order to establish that irreducible specificity that is said to ground feminist practice." See Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 28-9.

²¹ See, for example, Janet R. Jacobsen, "Sex + Freedom = Regulation. Why?" in *Social Text* 23.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 285-308

²² David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1995) 7. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

²³ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995) 101. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

²⁴ The entire interview, which was first published in *Le Gai Pied* 25, April 1981, has been translated by John Johnston and collected as “Friendship as a Way of Life” in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989) 308-312. However, in this instance, I have chosen to follow Ed Cohen’s more readable translation of the excerpt, as it appears on page 172 of “Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming? ‘Gay’ ‘Identity,’ ‘Gay Studies,’ and the Disciplining of Knowledge,” *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁵ Tim Dean, “Sex and Syncope,” *Raritan* 15 (1996): 64, emphasis mine.

²⁶ See “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act” in *Foucault Live* 332.

²⁷ Again, I have chosen to follow Ed Cohen’s translation of this passage, as it appears on page 172 of “Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming? ‘Gay’ ‘Identity,’ ‘Gay Studies,’ and the Disciplining of Knowledge.”

²⁸ For example, in “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” Foucault responds to his interviewer’s request to provide specific examples of types of relationships that would be produced through the process of “becoming gay” by stating, “I am wary of imposing my own views, of setting down plans or programs. I don’t want to discourage invention, don’t want gay people to stop feeling it is up to them to adjust their own relationships by discovering what is appropriate in their situations.” See *Foucault Live* 333.

²⁹ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” in *Foucault Live* 310.

³⁰ Joseph Bristow, *Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1997) 171.

³¹ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 310.

³² Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 310.

³³ Foucault, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity” in *Foucault Live* 390.

³⁴ Again, this is Ed Cohen’s translation of the passage from the “Friendship as a Way of Life” interview; 172.

³⁵ Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act” 332-3.

³⁶ Halperin, *Saint Foucault* 5.

³⁷ “Michel Foucault: Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” interview with Bob Gallagher and Alexander Wilson, *Advocate* 400 (August 7, 1984) 27.

³⁸ My use of the masculine pronoun is deliberate here, as Bersani’s writing/theories develop from—and, in many ways, speak predominantly to/of—his “identity as a white, relatively prosperous gay man” (8).

³⁹ Lee Edelman has expanded this line of argument famously in his influential 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. For his part, Halperin has sought “to find ways of representing gay male subjectivity” in correspondence with Foucault’s notion of “ascesis” but “without necessary or automatic recourse to psychology and psychoanalysis.” See, for example *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 11.

⁴⁰ It is not surprising perhaps that Bersani’s latest rehearsal of this argument, which he has made in various forms for more than twenty five years, considers the controversial practice of gay barebacking. See “Shame on You” in Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁴¹ Halperin, “You Say You Wanna Revolution,” author’s manuscript 14. An edited version of this document was subsequently published as “More or Less Gay-Specific” in the *London Review of Books* on 23 May 1996.

⁴² Halperin, “You Say You Wanna Revolution” 16.

⁴³ Halperin, “You Say You Wanna Revolution” 14; 16.

⁴⁴ Halperin, “You Say You Wanna Revolution” 16.

⁴⁵ Halperin has returned to these ideas as recently as in 2007, when he observed that “[t]he kind of work of the self on the self that Foucault himself defined as spirituality is not opposed to, but actually consists in” everyday practices, including the “ongoing labor of analysis, understanding, political sensitivity and responsiveness, communication, and community” that are essential to the success of an HIV prevention program. See *What Do Gay Men Want?* 108.

⁴⁶ In terms that severely limit the possible choices, actions, and sites in/from which “queer-ness” can be said to proceed, not to mention the social structures that it can be said to transform, Halperin contends that “through the invention of novel, intense, and scattered *bodily* pleasures, queer culture brings about a tactical reversal of the mechanisms of *sexuality*.” See *Saint Foucault* 96, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ For example, in objecting to Bersani’s dependence upon “sexual practice” to elucidate his political program, Halperin reminds us that “[o]nly a fraction of human sexual behavior may be explicable in terms of ‘sexuality,’ or sexual orientation.” Even though the structuring of our culture makes it impossible to “dispense with notions of sexual orientation,” Halperin alerts us to the dangers of making these “notions do all the explanatory work we need them to do.” See “You Say You Wanna Revolution” 5.

⁴⁸ Halperin’s keen perception of and intellectual commitment to these concerns is confirmed by his return to this subject in his introduction to *Gay Shame*, throughout his argument in *What Do Gay Men Want?*, and in “Homosexuality’s Closet,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41.1 (Winter 2002): 21-54, among other places.

⁴⁹ For two notable exceptions to this trend, see Lee Quinby, “Resistance on the Home Front: Re(con)figuring Home Space as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 135-53; and Kath Weston’s anthropological study, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁵⁰ The most common narrative assigned to 20th century gay American history charts a gradual and collective “coming out” process that culminates in the Stonewall protests of summer 1969. Although recent scholarship attesting to the prevalence of multifarious homosexual subcultures throughout the century does much to complicate our notions of gay history and historiography, Stonewall continues to stand as the event that marks the appearance of a contemporary “gay identity” through which and by which a public “gay culture” has been constructed. Yet if Stonewall registers the historical moment in which “gay identity” apprehends a dramatic increase in its cultural legibility (if not legitimacy), it also records the emergence of the gay subject’s ongoing identity crisis. In other words, once “we” become visible in the public protests of Stonewall, “we” must begin to ask “of what and in whom does this visibility consist?”, or to put it in spatial terms, “where and how might ‘we’ situate ourselves in the world?” Not surprisingly, then, the manifestation of a public LGBTQ culture at Stonewall has made possible the emergence of a many-branched, openly “gay” literary tradition that continues to the present day. When viewed collectively, contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer writers can be seen to exhibit extraordinary range in their choices of subject matter, form, and theme.

⁵¹ Although such concerns are outside the parameters of this project, it would seem that domestic narratives written by “white” lesbians are not so automatically equated with “gay assimilation.” I’m thinking, for example, about the ways in which lesbian novels of the homspace such as Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (New York: Plume, 1992), Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1985), Sarah Schulman’s *People in Trouble* (New York: Dutton, 1990), and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) have been perceived as interrogating rather than affirming traditional family structures.

⁵² Or, in the case of Isherwood, a male author writing in and about an American context.

⁵³ For a full-length study on the symbolic importance of houses and homes in American literature, see Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). Although Chandler is not particularly interested in the ways in which the homespace might be re-invented as a site of political struggle, I am deeply indebted to her understanding of the symbolic function of houses in American literature.

⁵⁴ Chandler 6.

⁵⁵ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) xv.

⁵⁶ Gwendolyn Wright, "Prescribing the Model Home," in *Home: A Place in the World*, ed. Arien Mack (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993) 215.

⁵⁷ Wright, "Prescribing the Model Home" 215.

⁵⁸ Wright, *Building the Dream* xv.

⁵⁹ Jean-Ulrick Desert, "Queer Space," *Queers in Space: Communities / Public Places / Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997) 22.

⁶⁰ Sylvia Lavin, *Re: American Dream: Six Urban Housing Prototypes from Los Angeles* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995) 11.

⁶¹ Lavin 9.

⁶² Quoted in Steven Harris, "Everyday Architecture," *Architecture of the Everyday* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997) 3.

⁶³ Mary McLeod, "Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*: An Introduction," *Architecture of the Everyday* 13-14.

⁶⁴ Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," in *Architecture of the Everyday* 35.

⁶⁵ McLeod 14.

⁶⁶ Lefebvre 35.

⁶⁷ Lefebvre 11.

⁶⁸ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 155.

⁶⁹ Mark Rakatansky, "Spatial Narratives," *Strategies in Architectural Thinking*, ed. John Whiteman, Jeffrey Kipnis, and Richard Burdett (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 205.

⁷⁰ Chandler 10.

⁷¹ I am indebted to Arthur Little for this exceptionally useful way of conceptualizing the larger cultural project in which my chosen authors and texts participate.

⁷² See David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 4.

⁷³ Christopher Isherwood, *Lost Years: A Memoir 1945-1951*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (New York: HarperCollins, 2000) 190.

⁷⁴ Robert Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir* (New York: Plume, 1984) 2.

⁷⁵ Samuel R. Delany, *The Mad Man* (Rutherford: Yoyant Publishing, 2002) ix; 295.

⁷⁶ Delany 105.

⁷⁷ Delany 332.

⁷⁸ Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World* (New York: Picador, 1990) 288.

⁷⁹ Halperin, "You Say You Wanna Revolution" 16.

⁸⁰ Cunningham 336.

⁸¹ Cunningham 142.

Chapter 1:

Conscientious Abjection:

Christopher and His (Queer) Kind of Domestic Warfare in Isherwood's *A Single Man*

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex....A relation to others, in these contexts, begins in an acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock.

--Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (1999)¹

I spoke the truth, and now let them swallow it or not as they see fit.

--Christopher Isherwood, 7 September 1964²

On May 14, 1954, Kenneth Burns, the head of the Coordinating Council of the newly reorganized national Mattachine Society, declared that homosexuals must aim to adjust to a “pattern of behavior that is acceptable to society in general and compatible with [the] recognized institutions...of home, church, and state.”³ In making this statement, Burns announced his unequivocal rejection of recently-ousted founding member Harry Hay's community-mobilizing perception of homosexuals as “an oppressed cultural minority.”⁴ More significantly, his speech at the group's First National Convention can be seen to mark the beginning of the Mattachine Society's dramatic retreat from a radical identity-based politics that had demanded equal civil rights for lesbians and gay men and that had sought to promote the “highly ethical homosexual culture” that was in the process of emerging. According to the Mattachine Society's original “Missions and Purposes” statement (1951), this “ethical” homosexual culture “parallel[ed] the emerging cultures of [its] fellow-minorities – the Negro, Mexican, and Jewish Peoples” in that it shared each of these groups' unique capacities for “informing and enlightening the public at large” about the varieties of human experience; moreover, this “highly ethical homosexual

culture” could be seen to have its own distinctly “dignified and useful role to play in society” because it would consist of members who would be intensely “socially conscious” about the “ignorance and prejudice” that surrounds non-normative sexualities. Delivered only approximately three years after the emergence of the Mattachine Society, Burns’ speech represents a nearly absolute reversal of its founders’ defiantly-proud sense of themselves as individuals whose sexual identities serve as the basis for both an ethical position and an outsider perspective via which they might challenge dominant cultural attitudes that position the “social deviant” as morally inferior and thus deserving of the “discriminatory and oppressive legislation” to which their lives are subjected.⁵ Henceforth, setting both the tone and the agenda for the next decade or so of gay activism, the new regime of the Mattachine Society instead would seek to achieve equality via integration, declaring time and time again that homosexuals are men and women whose “only difference is an unimportant one”; in short, they should be seen as “the same...[as] anyone else” in that their sexuality is “irrelevant to [their] ideals, [their] principles, [and their] hopes and aspirations.”⁶

The assertions of the new leaders of the Mattachine Society—namely, that they were “not seeking to overthrow or destroy any of society’s existing institutions, laws, and mores” and that they were ready and willing “to be assimilated as constructive, valuable, and responsible citizens”⁷—must have come as a frustration and disappointment to Christopher Isherwood, who had been solicited for the organization’s board of directors in the summer of 1952. Although he declined the invitation on the basis that he was not a “joiner,” Isherwood “professed support” for the Mattachine Society’s founding members’ radicalized efforts to celebrate gay identity for its unique contributions to the larger culture; as a tangible demonstration of his endorsement to their cause, he both contributed money to the organization and “informed others of its existence.”⁸

The Mattachine Society's original intentions to "call for political rights" based on the "essential identity" of the homosexual⁹ most certainly resonated powerfully for Isherwood, who three years previously had meditated on the relative importance of the various components of his own personal identity following an invitation to participate in an event that was billed as "a conference for world peace," but that he regarded as "a political demonstration with a pro-Russian slant."¹⁰ Reflecting on the situation in 1971, Isherwood remembers experiencing a variety of grounds for objection to the conference stemming from his competing senses of his self as a "socialist," a "pacifist," and a "queer." Looking back, although he is humiliated to realize that the anti-Russian sentiment of his letter might have led "[Sen. Joseph] McCarthy and the red-hunters" to think that he was "on their side" in the cold war, Isherwood decides that this misunderstanding of his intentions was necessary to risk given his extreme "loath[ing of] the Soviet government for disowning the attitude toward the private life prescribed by Marx, and for persecuting its homosexuals." After all, while it may be true, he concludes, that he is "more [of] a pacifist than... a socialist," the fact remains that "he [is] a queer first and foremost."¹¹ As the central foundation of his identity and of his relation to the larger world, Isherwood's "queerness" thus asserts itself above the other means by which he recognizes himself and thereby determines the grounds on which he is most particularly outraged.

Although Isherwood's actual participation with the Mattachine Society was minimal at best—specifically, he provided the aforementioned financial support to the group, was familiar with (and most likely read) their publications, and was friends with several of its members and/or sympathizers¹²—I begin this chapter by establishing a connection between him and the group because it highlights his involvement (personally, intellectually, and politically) with the cultural debates regarding homosexual identity in the United States that intensified as gay men and

lesbians became increasingly visible following the end of World War II.¹³ The question of whether “the homosexual” should attempt to occupy a separatist or assimilationist position in relation to the dominant culture—and by extension, to develop or to disregard a “queer” way of life that performs a socially-beneficial critique of hegemonic thinking—most likely resonated doubly for Isherwood, being that he was marked by difference both in terms of his national origin (i.e., British) and his sexual identity. In other words, to conceptualize the issue within the theoretical framework of this study, just as he had begun a new expatriate existence in Southern California back in 1939, Isherwood can be seen at the start of the 1950s to be staking a claim for a home for himself as “a queer” within the broader culture, one that necessarily usurps his sense of self as a “pacifist” and that stands instead in proud resistance to the normalizing structures of inhabitation that surround him on all sides.

Approximately ten years later, Isherwood would channel his reflections on this need to engage in a queer kind of domestic warfare to inform the narrative of *A Single Man* (1964), which he regarded as his “masterpiece,” by which he meant that it was his “most effective coherent statement” and the moment when he most successfully “spoke the truth” about his daily existence as a gay man negotiating a homophobic world.¹⁴ On the surface, the novel seems to be primarily focused on the narrator’s attempts to mourn several painful losses—of his deceased lover, of his own youth, and of a bohemian free-spiritedness that has been overtaken and crowded out by the suburbanization of Los Angeles—and his struggles to survive, much less to discover moments of pleasure and hope, within a present moment so profoundly haunted by his recollections of past happiness.¹⁵ Yet in a very important sense, the novel is simultaneously future-oriented, in that George can be seen to engage in a series of small but significant battles—with his neighbors, with American and Southern Californian value systems, with his students and

colleagues, and, most importantly, with himself—in which he confronts what Michael Warner has termed “the politics of sexual shame”¹⁶ in order to critique and to subvert the normalizing tendencies of mid-twentieth century American culture. At a time when the idea of a politicized gay community was in its earliest inception, Isherwood suggests that the sexual “deviant” must lay claim to (rather than disavow) his queer disrespectability and to recognize his disenfranchised position as a place of great potential for the accomplishment of social upheaval. Although there are moments within the day when George, the 58 year old English professor living in Los Angeles who narrates the novel and who Isherwood imagined as his fictional counterpart, must pass strategically as a good and responsible citizen, he is only truly and (dis)comfortably at home with himself in the places where he embraces unabashedly his shame and abjection.¹⁷

Katherine Bucknell, the editor of Isherwood’s diaries and memoirs, confirms the “first and foremost” status of Isherwood’s queerness in her observation that “[g]ay liberation was the only movement for social change to which Isherwood ever felt personally and entirely committed.” Significantly, although the late 1940s and early 1950s marks the period in which he began to write “more explicitly and more sympathetically...about homosexual and bisexual characters” (most notably in his 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*), Bucknell notes, *A Single Man* represents Isherwood’s first sustained endeavor in writing “from the center of his own homosexuality”; that is to say, he can be seen here to become more fluent and more comfortable in speaking in “his own language” about his queerness and about its significance to his daily experience of the world, one that stands in contrast to the “foreign” “language[s] of psychology,” religion, and medicine that tended to regulate discussions of sexuality during the middle decades of the 20th century.¹⁸ As Edward Upward (a fellow writer and friend) remarked upon reading a

draft of the novel, Isherwood is “totally at home” in this “new manner” of writing, so much so that he “cuts the reader to the heart”¹⁹ with his fear-inducing articulations of George’s (largely) suppressed rage for the heteronormative culture in which he is forced to participate. In giving voice to the “unspeakable” (or, at least, the previously unspoken) thoughts, desires, and frustrations of “the homosexual”—which is to say, of “a single man” who recognizes both the unique insight and the subversive power that his categorization as a sexual deviant bestows—Isherwood thereby announces his intentions to wage war against a dominant mindset that encourages the thoughtless and excessive reproduction of the familiar through its misrecognition of the “normal” as the socially beneficial. Through his absolute refusal to behave according to prevailing standards of respectability, George lays the foundation for a queer revolution that aims to dismantle rather than concede to our culture’s fundamentally self-destructive and shame-based understandings of the relationship between sexual acts and identities.

My reading of Isherwood’s endeavors to employ his queer protagonist to challenge and undo the most prevalent American sexual attitudes that were circulating in the early 1960s is influenced heavily by Michael Warner’s argument in *The Trouble with Normal* (1999). According to Warner, from the early 1950s until the present day, the vast majority of prominent “gay political groups” have tended to “repudiate sex,” which is regarded as antithetical to “respectable personhood,” in their efforts to be seen as “normal” and to thereby “win acceptance by the dominant culture.”²⁰ Building upon the ideas elucidated in Gayle Rubin’s groundbreaking essay “Thinking Sex” (1984),²¹ Warner contends that the gay liberation movement’s failure to confront the “hierarchy of respectability” that upholds heterosexuality as “the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests”—and, by contrast, that regards homosexuality as “an indignity to be borne” that is both “unworthy” and “irrelevant to the normative organization of

the world”—has resulted in a politics that is “built on embarrassment” and that is “doom[ed]...to incoherence and weakness.”²² In other words, these efforts can be seen to have “neglected the most searching ethical challenges” of the “queer culture” that they claim to represent through their unintentional “reinforce[ment]” of “the shame of sex.”²³ Rather than engaging in a defiant celebration of the “shared condition” of “abjection,” Warner insists, “the official gay movement” has become “more and more enthralled by respectability” and has thus failed to achieve its goals of liberation, in that it has not forced the dominant culture to “mak[e] room for new freedoms, new experiences, new pleasures, new identities, [and] new bodies.”²⁴ In dramatic contrast to such normalizing efforts, Warner calls for the founding of “a queer ethic of dignity in shame,” one that will create “great intimacy” among “heterogeneous people” and thereby will allow for “alternative possibilities of life” that expose the “false morality” of “bourgeois propriety.”²⁵

Rather than “anticipat[ing] the gay-liberation perspective that would flower in the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall riots,” as Claude J. Summers has claimed as the novel’s achievement,²⁶ Isherwood in *A Single Man* can be seen to be uncannily prescient about the profound limitations and eventual ineffectualness of an identity-based politics that would unintentionally reinforce our culture’s hierarchies of sex in its efforts to gain acceptance through its insistence that gay people are essentially “normal” and “respectable.” Although it is true that Isherwood’s “vision of the sixties appears more jaded than celebratory” at times, as Joseph Bristow has argued, it is not because (as Bristow concludes) the novel fails to imagine “an emancipating future, one filled with the spirit of queer revolution.”²⁷ Instead, George can be seen to recognize that he must defend his queerness without compromise—which is to say, he must claim and take pride in the parts of himself that are rendered “abject” at present—in order to lay the foundation for the radical cultural transformation through which his sexual autonomy will be

gained. In the single day that the novel details, George is revealed to become increasingly comfortable in his negotiation of the world around him as he makes his decisions (to return to Michael Warner) via a generalized “refusal to behave properly.”²⁸ What begins at the start of the day as an elaborate and comical fantasy of the waging of apocalyptic warfare upon every segment of the culture that offends, fears, despises, or belittles him gradually evolves into George’s perversely delightful late-night performances of several taboo-shattering actions. The trajectory of the narrative thusly parallels the homeward course that Isherwood hoped that queer politics would follow on its path of social transformation. The ambiguity of the novel’s conclusion, in which George may or may not die, underscores Isherwood’s anxiety about the still-uncertain destination—that is, the home within the broader culture—toward which queer culture was progressing at the time he was writing.

Not only was gay culture engaged in a tense struggle to define itself and to find its place within the broader social structure at the time in which Isherwood was planning and drafting *A Single Man*, but Isherwood himself was in a period of strife and painful transition in his home life. Much has been made of the fact that the novel was written during a time period in which Isherwood was “wildly miserable” with fear that Don Bachardy, his much younger lover and domestic partner, was “gradually slipping away from [him].”²⁹ Having entered into his relationship with Isherwood while he was still a teenager, Bachardy felt some eight years later that he needed to assert his autonomy as a professional, as an individual, and as a sexual being. Faced with the knowledge that Bachardy’s efforts to achieve “a more complete fulfillment of self and of vocation” might make him so highly independent that he would desire the dissolution of their union, Isherwood can be seen in the novel, in Katherine Bucknell’s words, to “articulate[] his anxieties about living alone” and to make “his own bid for freedom” from his “grief over lost

love.”³⁰ Thus, as Isherwood himself put it at the time, *A Single Man* not only records the despair that he felt over the thought of losing Barchardy, whom he regarded as “unique” and “irreplaceable,” but also represents his proud declaration to “[him]self that [he] can still live alone and function.”³¹ As was often the case for him, Isherwood transforms autobiography into fiction in order to arrive at the most useful perspective through which to frame his experience of the world.

Yet, for as much as *A Single Man* originates most obviously from the domestic strife in which Barchardy and Isherwood were engaged during the early 1960s, the novel is much more deeply rooted in a more public incident of queer shaming to which Isherwood was subjected in December 1949. In his 1971 reconstruction of his daily life in post-World War II Los Angeles, Isherwood details an evening in which he and Jim Charlton, his friend and occasional sexual partner, were caught up in the police raid of a gay bar in Santa Monica. Under the instructions of a sergeant who “proved to be a foulmouthed bull of the old school,” Charlton and Isherwood were hauled off to the police station where they endured an “aggressive” interrogation via which the authorities (futilely) hoped to expose the two men’s regular patronage of “faggot bars,” their criminal records, and the “romance” they were conducting.³² Upon being taken into separate rooms, Isherwood and Charlton were each asked bluntly “[a]re you a queer?”; although Charlton defiantly quipped “[y]ou must ask my psychiatrist,” Isherwood disavowed his sexual identity with a simple “no.”³³ As a strategic move, Isherwood’s relative silence and his denial of his homosexuality is understandable—as he observes in the recollection of the event that he includes in his memoirs, “why in hell should you give yourself away to the Enemy, knowing that he can make use of everything you tell him?”—yet he continues to be “haunted” by the “ordeal” and to “feel bitterly ashamed” of himself more than twenty years later “for not having said that he was

queer.”³⁴ As the diary entry that he composed approximately two days after the event makes clear, his failure to stand up against the “utter brutality of those cops” leaves him feeling “cowardly, slack, weak, [and] compromised.” Rather than allowing himself to be cowed into a “guilt”-fueled act of self-repudiation, Isherwood observes that he “ought to have called their bluff, insisted on being locked up, hired a lawyer, taken the case to the Supreme Court, [and] started a nationwide stink.”³⁵ In short, Isherwood should have publicized his queer difference, as he reveals George to do with increasing confidence in *A Single Man*, in order to challenge and to critique the heteronormative value system of the dominant culture.³⁶

To my knowledge, Isherwood himself did not make any overt connections (i.e., in his journals, in his letters, or in his interviews) between his 1949 experience of queer shame and George’s defiant celebration of his abjection, yet the memoirs he began writing in 1971 nonetheless reveal an implicit and meaningful relationship between this incident and the fiction that he would produce some fifteen years following his police interrogation. In the journal entry from 6 December 1949 that details his and Charlton’s detention and questioning, Isherwood also records his experience of “getting up early” (presumably either the day after or two days after the raid) and “going down to the kitchen for breakfast.”³⁷ As unremarkable and mundane as this occurrence sounds, Isherwood notes that he later would draw on this very passage as the source material for the opening moments of *A Single Man*. If his simultaneous journal descriptions of a scene from daily life and of an extraordinary disruption to his routine are merely coincidental, it seems curious that Isherwood would happen to choose this particular entry (out of the hundreds of such everyday reflections that are contained in the voluminous journals that he produced over several decades) as the inspiration for introducing George, his defiantly queer narrator, to the reader. Moreover, Isherwood seems in this same entry to anticipate his later efforts to “write

about homosexuality in his own language,”³⁸ most notably in *A Single Man* and *Christopher and His Kind*, when he reflects on his frustrations with finding an appropriate narrative perspective—one that he can “believe in”³⁹—for a work-in-progress (namely, *The World in the Evening*) in which he represents non-normative sexualities in a more forthright manner than he had attempted previously.

None of this is to suggest that *A Single Man* represents some kind of literary “coming out” for Isherwood in terms of his treatment of same-sex desire. After all, as Joseph Bristow argues compellingly, “Isherwood’s homosexuality was not exactly located either inside or outside the doors of the closet” at any point in his lengthy career; although his writings prior to the 1950s are not particularly explicit, they nevertheless “make same-sex desire legible in a rather different set of terms,” for example, through the “doubled consciousness” of his narrator figure in the Berlin stories—who “remains detached from his world yet central to its very activity”—and through the use of camp.⁴⁰ Accordingly, it would be both unfair and misleading to claim that Isherwood found his “truest voice” for the expression of “homosexual emancipation” in 1964.⁴¹ At the same time, it would be wrong to conclude, as does Elizabeth Hardwick in her 1964 review of the novel, that Isherwood presents George as a figure of conciliation, which is to say, as “a homosexual who is, so to speak, just like everyone else” and who reveals through his daily activities that he wants nothing more than “to get by” and “to be allowed to go about his homosexual life” amidst his heterosexual neighbors.⁴² On the contrary, George is shown to engage in a strategic and joyously defiant exhibition of his abjection in order to contest and to disrupt the thoughtless routines through which his neighbors, students, and colleagues sustain their collective visions of “the good life.”⁴³ In this sense, although it may be true that the novel is not necessarily more liberated than his other writings on same-sex desire, *A Single Man*

nevertheless represents the moment in Isherwood's oeuvre in which his efforts to "convey [the] tremendous and varied emotion" of daily living⁴⁴ are aligned most productively with a narrative identity that is queerly politicized.

The novel begins at the beginning of a day in late 1962⁴⁵ as the narrator wakes up as a nameless "body" that "finds itself" at an "expected" location—specifically, "what's called *at home*"—but that only recognizes itself as a human individual—namely, as "George"—upon moving "into the world of the other people" where his "nakedness has to be covered" so as to make him both identifiable and "acceptable"; as is the case every morning, this "it" moves from an interior state and space of natural comfort into a public realm where "he" is distinguished (and distinguishable) by his responsibilities to those around him (9-11). On the surface, it is tempting to read the opening moments of the narrative as detailing George's daily surrender of some kind of essential self, in which he "[o]bediently" agrees to be "dressed up in [the] clothes" that endow him with the respectable persona through which he can behave as "expected" and by which others will recognize his "place among them" (11). Yet George's two hour refusal to become more than a "three-quarters-human being" (12)—that is, his decision to defer the application of the final brushstrokes of his "psychological make-up" until his arrival on campus to perform the "role he must play" (41)—demonstrates that he is keenly aware of the discrepancy between the naked self that serves as his primary residence and the guises he must wear on a temporary basis in order to be "recognized" and "named" within the dominant culture (41). Moreover, George's capricious decisions throughout the day to follow, to subvert, and/or to ridicule the established guidelines for socially-acceptable behavior reveal his general eagerness to defend his queerness against any efforts to regulate or to normalize it.

George's readiness to do battle against the individuals and groups who seek to assail his expressions of queerness is foreshadowed in his first domestic activity of the day. After grooming, dressing, and descending the stairs, George walks into his kitchen and discovers "more ants" than were present on the previous morning marching in formation from the floor up to his cabinets and ultimately "threatening the closet where he keeps the jams and the honey" (13).⁴⁶ Imagining himself as "an obstinate, malevolent, old thing" who is sanctioned by "the kingdom of evolution" to "impos[e] his will" upon lesser beings, George "[d]oggedly...destroys" the ants before pausing to consider that he might have as easily seen them as "natural allies" rather than enemies (13-14). George's immediate urge to annihilate the ants takes on added significance a few moments later when he reveals that he views his most recently-arrived neighbors, who have settled in his proximity following World War II, as organized insects who have "swarm[ed] out of the East" and have transformed the "original bohemian utopia" of Santa Monica into a "breeding ground" for the "litter after litter after litter" of offspring that they plan to produce (18-19). Being that he views this newest round of colonists as an "occupying army of Coke-drinking television watchers" whose "soul-destroying commercialism" has overwhelmed and decimated a landscape that was founded originally as "defiantly bohemian...and boundlessly tolerant" (18), George's first consequential deed of the morning can be seen as his symbolic attempt to retaliate against this invasion. Standing his ground in what has become enemy territory—where most of his original neighbors were "lucky enough to have died off" before their "cottages...reek[ing] of bathtub gin and reverberat[ing] with the poetry of Hart Crane" were replaced by "big new airy buildings" in which "the family's future is provided for" (18-19)—George is queer in the sense that his single-minded resistance to "the Great Change" (18) of the

landscape serves as a constant reminder to his neighbors that “breeding and bohemianism do not mix” (19) due to their competing value systems.⁴⁷

It is hardly incidental that George engages in his perversely pleasurable fantasy of his suburb-loving neighbors’ obliteration and expulsion while he is “[s]itting on the john” and enjoying an “agreeable” “bowel movement” (17). As he lingers in his second-story bathroom to expel that which his body does not need, George is able to “look out his window” (17) and survey the ways in which his (seemingly) continuously-reproducing neighbors are laying waste to the “utopian dream” (18) that had drawn him and his lover Jim to their “tightly planned little house” (12) near the beach several years previously. From his semi-private perch, in which “his head and shoulders” are visible but they cannot see “what he is doing” (17), George symbolically shits upon his neighbors’ relational structures, which have taken on entirely predictable patterns based upon their thoughtless “imitations” (24) of the constantly televised images of the “good life” (26) that circulate around them. Assessing the surroundings from his position as a partially-detached and skeptical outsider—in correspondence to the social estrangement that his sexual difference engenders, he is located on his “own island” in that his house is only accessible via a “bridge across [a] creek” (20), and this dwelling offers him a “sidewise privacy” that is preferable to “fac[ing] the street frontally, wide-openly” (24)—George is able to discern the dubious means by which conformity is reinforced on a daily basis within the territory to which he is adjacent. Through a parceling out of time and space along the lines of gender and of the family’s hierarchical structure, his neighbors are able to sustain the illusion that their routines adhere to a “schedule” that has its roots in nature and, in so doing, they conflate the “normal”—which is to say, that which occurs most commonly—and the “healthy” (23).

Thus, in direct simulation of “the singing commercials” that they see “on TV,” the youngest boys rule the early morning with their virile fantasies of “hunting for buried treasure” and of waging war with their friends, games that their mothers indulge under the mistaken notion that to interrupt would be to “interfer[e] with the anarchy of nature” (24). By “mid-afternoon,” these “tots” and the mothers who dote on them (25) will cede their place to the “big boys” who “return from school” (24) and rain destruction on the neighborhood—“they trample flowers, scramble over rock gardens, [and] burst into patios without even a thought of apology” (25)—during “the masculine hour of the ball-playing” when “their rights” to own the moment are so thoroughly unquestioned that traffic must stop rather than interrupt their games (25). Finally, the adult males will arrive home from jobs in professions that support the continuance and proliferation of the “good life”—whether that means “trying all day long to sell [a] piece of real estate” or heading up the operation of a “swimming-pool installation company” (25)—and bring a pause to everyone else’s activities because they “need desperately to relax” (26) after the “tensions” of their work days (25). The final hours of the waking day will belong to these men whose own cocktail-fueled antics resemble the games of their sons in that they exhibit a masculine sense of privilege—among other activities, they barbecue steaks, tell “astonishingly dirty stories,” and attempt the “more or less concealed pinching of other wives’ fannies” (26)—that reveals their collective pride in themselves as the rightful “co-owner[s] of the American utopia,” which they regard as the pinnacle of human civilization (26).

George astutely observes that the multi-generational, male proprietorship of time and space has the unfortunate consequence of relegating the women within this suburban milieu—which the men tellingly regard as “the *kingdom* of the good life” (26, emphasis added)—either to supporting roles or to superfluous inconsequentiality. For as much as critics have tended to

regard George as a misogynist, and for as much as certain entries in his diaries suggest that Isherwood himself did in fact hold some problematic attitudes toward women, the narrative nevertheless betrays considerable sympathy for the plights of these women whose identities are entirely dependent on the men to whom they are attached.⁴⁸ Whether it be the teenaged girls who “will do the weirdest things to attract [the] attention” of their schoolmates but who will be “disregarded, nevertheless” (25) or the housewives who have “grown wearily gentle” and “melancholy” from “toiling around the house at [their] chores” (21), George recognizes and laments the ways they have been forced to abandon their independent pursuits—for example, his neighbor Mrs. Strunk’s former “singing days on the radio” (21)—because the dominant social script demands such personal sacrifices from them as women. In a world where reproductive heterosexuality reigns supreme and where women are at least partially complicit in their demotions to secondary roles, there is little or no room left for self-articulation; as George grimly remarks, the women in his neighborhood have internalized their lesser statuses so profoundly that “if they live to be ninety,” they “will continue to call themselves” “The Girls” as they cheerfully shuffle off to the kitchen to clean up after their husbands (26).

This aggressive assertion of heteronormativity within the neighborhood’s everyday routine necessarily works toward the exclusion and disenfranchisement of those individuals who embody resistance to its hierarchical assignment of social positions. Hence, George is not in the least surprised to discover that “the doctor’s pretty sissy son,” who is “soft-spoken and gentle” (25), has been imparted with a role that is tenuous, temporarily, and, above all else, humiliating; while the other boys “loudly and harshly” make a public display of their virility (24), the boy who exhibits a double failure of masculinity, both in manner (“sissy”) and appearance (“pretty”), is cordoned off with the “giggling” girls who are engaged in the highly-feminized activity of

tying “ribbons” to the “curls” of a neighbor’s “poodle” (25). On a microcosmic level, Isherwood here is replicating the most prevalent psychological assessment of and the resulting cultural attitude toward effeminate men at the time of his writing. As John D’Emilio observes, homosexuality was most commonly figured in the popular imagination as a feminized behavior that signified “a large-scale ‘flight from masculinity,’” which is to say, as an unconscious attempt to escape the “external stresses” that were being placed upon men at the time, including “intense competitive demands” in the workplace and among peers, a “pressure to conform,” “shifting [gender] roles,” and “the generalized anxiety of the nuclear age.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, if the “sissy” boy has an accepted position within the social milieu that Isherwood re-presents, it is only because he serves as an instructive and illuminative contrast to the more successful and celebrated performance of masculinity that the girls are able to witness in their peers’ homosocial games.

In both his own mind and in the perspectives of his neighbors, however, George (who is both homosexual *and* masculine) occupies the much more dangerous and powerful position of the “monster” and “madman” who “live[s] alone” among them (21), appearing harmless enough, but all the while posing an “unspeakable” threat (27) to the “good life” that they believe to be both their supreme achievement and their sole prerogative (26). As George considers with perverse pleasure while continuing the process of the expulsion of waste from his body, despite their posturing otherwise, his neighbors are actually “afraid of” him (27) because he refuses to “be ignored, explained away,” or silenced (27) so that they can sustain their illusions of the moral superiority and the unquestionable normalcy of their lives. George’s queerness—that is to say, his defiant refusal to recede harmlessly into the shadows like the “sissy” boy does—stands as an perplexing and inexorable alternative to the course that his neighbors have chosen; his

audacious self-exposure before them as “the unspeakable” that “insists, despite all their shushing, on speaking its name” (27) contains the potential to annihilate their confidence in the enlightened status of the existences they have constructed. Being that his neighbors work tirelessly to fill their days with structured, repetitive activities in order to stave off their collective lurking awareness that they move through life like frightened children who “explore a dark unknown cave” (26), George delights in his ability to manifest suddenly as one of the figures from their worst nightmares—whether it be as the “fiend that won’t fit into their statistics, the Gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery, the vampire drinking blood with tactless uncultured slurps, [or] the bad-smelling beast that doesn’t use their deodorants” (27). By refusing to be contained via classification, to be made over into a socially-acceptable form, to be stripped of his fleshly desires, or to be masked by an artificial essence, George remains to his neighbors elusively and exceedingly queer—which is to say, he persists as the embodiment of “the darkness around them”—despite their ongoing efforts “to nail him down with a word” (27) in order to defuse the significant threat he poses to their tenuous claims of self-contentment.

Because “sitting on the john” (22) affords a view that fixes his attention directly on his most proximate neighbors “The Strunks” (24), George imagines himself in a symbolic, intimate relationship with the members of this family, a connection which is fraught with the broader cultural anxieties surrounding queerness. Thus, little Benny Strunk comes to stand in for all the young boys who thoughtlessly imitate “someone or other on TV,” thereby reducing their “tot-lives” to “nothing but a medley of...singing commercials” (24) through which images of the normal (and its corresponding inversion the abnormal) are constructed and perpetuated. Likewise, in George’s mind, Mr. Strunk embodies the archetypical company man of his time period, who reacts to the drubbing of his autonomous masculinity via an excessively strident

exhibition of homophobia. For as much as Mr. Strunk may participate willingly in the rampant homosociality afforded to him through his interactions with his male neighbors at their after-work cocktail parties, George observes that Strunk's unconflicted enjoyment of these activities depends upon his ability to recognize and either repress or expel any hints of the "*Queer*" (27) from these culturally-endorsed same-sex relations.

Although George finds it easy to dismiss Mr. Strunk's antipathy toward him as a kind of homosexual panic—humorously, he notes that although "psychologists disagree as to the conclusions which may be reached about the Mr. Strunks of this world, ...[t]he fact remains" that his college football photographs reveal him as a former "living doll" who presumably is no stranger to homosexual activity (27)—he nevertheless experiences considerably more difficulty when attempting to respond to "the new tolerance" of his queerness (27) that Mrs. Strunk presents in largely non-judgmental fashion. Being that Mrs. Strunk's accepting disposition mirrors a newly-emergent mindset that sought to recuperate the homosexual through the assumption that he is not "different" in any significant way, it is all the more imperative to George that he must respond to her efforts to effect his "annihilation by blandness" (27) with an aggressive display of his abjection. Although such an attitude is founded on the insistence—or more precisely, perhaps, *because* it is founded on the insistence—that there is "[n]o reason for disgust...no cause for condemnation" (27) when it comes to homosexuality, George refuses to accept Mrs. Strunk's sympathetic "understanding" of him as a "truly worthwhile" individual who is only "*warped*" because of his social mistreatment (28).

Hence, for as much as Mrs. Strunk may imagine herself in performing a valuable service by "exorcis[ing] the unspeakable out of George," and despite the fact that this purgation would

enable her to see him as her peer and to regard his relationship with Jim (who is conveniently “already dead”) as “almost beautiful” (28), George is keenly aware that to relinquish his execrability is to surrender the core of his identity. As he continues “squatting on the toilet” and proudly claims his position as the neighborhood monster “peeping forth from his lair,” George announces that “dear Mrs. Strunk[‘s]” “exorcism has failed” despite her best efforts (29). In short, through his renewed (and intensified) commitment to ensure that “[t]he unspeakable is still here—right in [her] very midst” (29), George embraces his “misfit” status (28) as a position of power and grounds his worldly participation in a repudiation of normativity. Moreover, via the simultaneity of this queer act of resistance and his production of human waste, George delivers an implicit message about his symbolic ability to stand in effective contrast to the dangerous excessiveness of the hegemonic culture. By insisting upon his right to practice his own unspeakability alongside the acts of reproduction and consumption in which his neighbors participate thoughtlessly and ceaselessly—that is to say, among routines that he insightfully recognizes as repugnant and destructive and thus shameful in their own way—George accomplishes a powerful interrogation of a cultural logic that aims to identify his homosexuality as a perversion of nature. As Jill E. Anderson has argued in her ecocritical reading of the novel, Isherwood’s “revision” to the established social script is an “important” one that “reassign[s]” moral authority by bestowing it upon his queer narrator; compared to the “unchecked reproduction, misuse of the land, and overextension of resources” that his “breeder” neighbors engender, the waste that George produces as part of his daily routine is both natural and relatively innocuous.⁵⁰

In labeling George’s shit as comparatively inoffensive, I do not mean to sanitize it in such a way that it loses its abject connotations; after all, George has been shown to take perverse

delight in using the occasion of his morning bowel movement to perform his harsh judgment upon the shortcomings and self-delusions of heteronormative culture. Moreover, it is George's ownership and re-signification of his culturally-assigned shame—his embracing of the “unspeakable” ways in which he contaminates his neighbors' understandings of the “good” and the “normal”—that serves as the foundation of his outraged queer ethos and its accompanying politics. Thusly bolstered by this conviction in his moral superiority, George enters into the “merging traffic” (34) of the outside world with his “criminal” identity strategically concealed; circulating freely among others, despite his actual affiliation with the wide spectrum of “Public Enemies” who pose a supposed threat to the culture, he will perform his perfect daily imitation of “a functioning member of society” as he “whisper[s] gleefully to himself, *Idiots—fooled them again!*” (33). George's affectation of “a posture of perfect relaxation” (35) as he drives to work belies his “rage” and “resentment” (40) toward the signs of supposed “progress” (36) that he either spies through his car windows or that he recalls having heard about in the news media. So intense is George's disgust for the things he sees through his eyes and in his mind that he imagines “launch[ing] a campaign of systemic terror” (38) that is shockingly graphic; among other fantasies, he visualizes contaminating “a huge, insolent high-rise building” that is “block[ing] the view” of the beach with a “virus” that will “eat through all [its] metal” (36-37) and kidnapping, torturing, and ensuring the sexual humiliation of the “newspaper editor” and “staff-writers” (38) whose sensationalized and libelous articles about “sexual deviates...like George” have resulted in an increased level of police brutality against homosexuals and in the collective impression that “they all, without exception, have syphilis” (36). In “this particular moment” at least, when “he is quite crazy” with hate toward the “three quarters of the population of America” that he regards as invading “vermin,” George envisions their destruction as fitting

retribution, being that “their whole way of life” has willed the eradication of the bohemian landscape that he and his lover Jim had inhabited queerly prior to the end of World War II (40).

By the time that he arrives on campus for the day to teach his classes, George has managed to put on “the psychological make-up” of mild eccentricity that is required for his role as a respectable academic (41), yet he continues to express displeasure at the depressingly banal permutations of mass culture that he witnesses around him. In striking similarity to Malvina Reynolds’ satiric 1962 song “Little Boxes,” George despairs at the ways in which the “little hills” surrounding his college campus have “had their tops sliced off by bulldozers” in order to accommodate “[t]ract upon tract of low-roofed dormitory dwellings” with which “the landscape is gashed” for inhabitants who willingly limit their self-expression to a choice of “several different colors” for their roofs and bathroom tiles (42).⁵¹ Also paralleling Reynolds’ critique of middle-class conformity is George’s observation that “[t]he storm center of all this grading, shoveling, hauling, and hammering is the college campus itself,” which has been designed as a “factory” that feeds “male and female raw material” (42) into an assembly line that produces workers that can be “packaged and place on the market” (47) and that thereby will be properly inserted into the broader culture.⁵² Although there are a few students “incredibly enough” who “persist in writing poems, novels, [and] plays,” George regards sadly how the vast majority of them are caught up within the circular logic by which his consumerist society operates, thereby convincing them that the purpose of attending college is to “prepar[e] themselves for life which means a job and security in which to raise children to prepare themselves for life which means a job and security in which” (47). Because he believes himself to be “a representative of the hope” to escape the predictable reality of “servitude to the must-be” (48), George discovers himself on a daily basis “impatient to be used” (rather than be “wasted”) as “a public utility” (49), which is

to say, as a voice that “whispers to them” about the existence of alternate courses in life, ones that might lead them into unexpected spaces of possibility.

George possesses a “genuine passion” for the subversion of the “brute basic indifference” (74) that generally characterizes his students’ attitudes toward their studies, and this fervor prompts him to enact a symbolic violence upon them that matches his fantasies of cultural terrorism in intensity, but that is more constructive than destructive; specifically, as he “blurt[s]” out various arguments to challenge their foundational assumptions about the world, George imagines himself “administer[ing]” his words and sentences “like strokes of a lash” in order to “whip” them all “awake” (73) so that they are better-equipped to resist the “infuriating sheep-obstinacy” that their conformist culture otherwise encourages (55). For a few fleeting moments, as the culturally-diverse class members use Aldous Huxley’s *After Many a Summer* (1939) as a framework for discussing minority oppression, George appears to succeed in his attempts to awaken the critical thinking processes of his students. In particular, George seems to forge a powerful and intimate connection with Wally Bryant, a “sallow-faced,” gay student to whom he directs “a deep shining look that says, I am with you, little minority-sister” (70); hoping “to teach him a lesson now that he’ll never forget,” George struggles to “turn Wally’s eyes into his timid soul” and to instill him with the “courage” to “face the truth of his life” so that he might embrace his “minority” identity and thus present himself as “some kind of a threat to the majority” (70). Yet just as he has worked himself up to a fever pitch about how the Wally Bryants of the world might channel their understandable hatred of “the majority” into organized resistance, George’s moment of apparent “triumph” (61) deteriorates abruptly into a “humiliating” experience because he is “running overtime” and his students now have shifted their attention to the “damned clock” that regulates their daily schedules (73).⁵³

Being that George is acutely aware of his own mortality—that is to say, he is not exactly afraid of dying, but rather “*afraid of being rushed*” (11)—the experience of time expiring before the conclusion of his lecture is a particularly unsettling one. Moreover, the fact that his students “all rise instantly to their feet, collecting their belongings, [and] breaking into chatter” as soon as he “[b]rusquely” ceases talking causes George, whose “feathers are ruffled,” to feel like a “silly enthusiastic old prof” whose ardent efforts to facilitate learning are wildly underappreciated (73). Comparing himself to a “performer at the circus” whose time on the flying trapeze has concluded, leaving him “grounded, unsparkling, unfollowed by spotlights,” George laments that he “has no theater curtain to come down and hide him”; as he rushes “toward the exit” after “the magic spell of his act” has been broken, he must suffer the double embarrassment of being both “plainly visible” and thoroughly disregarded by the audience members who are now focused on the next attraction (93-94). This sense of “anonymity” persists throughout the rest of his workday, to the point where George feels as if “his vitality is ebbing fast” as he walks to his car and prepares to leave campus (93). Although the “fatigue” that overtakes him at this moment is “not disagreeable” in that it is “a way of resting,” the consequence of ceding to this exhaustion is that George suddenly appears “much, much older” and feels as if he is “slow[ing] down” (93). As an act of resistance to the slackening of these physical processes and to his concerns about the limits of time, George “hums queerly to himself” as he walks and “emits quite loud, prolonged farts” (93). In short, George again refuses to behave properly and, in so doing, he is able to use his body to proclaim noisily his stubborn defiance of the normal.

Thus, in this seemingly insignificant moment, George asserts the means through which his queer body will do battle throughout the remainder of the day in order to resist recuperation within the structures of conformity, propriety, and mortality in which it is forced to circulate.

Although his schedule is regulated by a series of mundane obligations that are attached to the identity which makes him legible to others as “George”—after finishing teaching, he must visit a dying acquaintance in the hospital, go grocery shopping, and console a lonely and overbearing friend over dinner—George will subvert the preeminence of these respectability-conferring activities through his gradually-intensifying and increasingly-confidant performance of queer disreputability. For example, George is able to counter his body’s “recoil[ing] with...every nerve from the sight, the smell, [and] the feel” of the hospital (94), not to mention his horrified awareness that he is “*on the same road*” toward death as the person he visits there and that he will “*follow [her] soon*” (98), with an “indecently gleeful” (104) celebration of his vitality. Upon leaving the hospital, George discovers himself to be “proud” to “be counted” in “the ranks of that marvelous minority, *The Living*” (103); in playing with the idea of minority cultures when claiming this group identity status for himself, George productively aligns his queer marginality with a joyous embodiment of his broader humanity. As his “life-energy surges hotly through him,” George is thereby enabled to counter and to undermine the hopeless “business of dying” with which hospital patients are “preoccup[ied]” (97) with the “delight” and sexual “appetite” that result from his awareness that it is “good to be in a body...that still has warm blood and life semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh” as its distinguishing features (104).⁵⁴

George’s embracing of his corporeality at this moment is queer not only for the obvious reason that he imagines it as activating his desire to enter into a naked “wrestling bout” of “pleasure” with one of male hustlers whom he spies on the corner dressed in a “butch leather jacket, skin-tight levis, shirt and cowboys boots” (104); it is also, and perhaps more importantly, queer because it represents a refusal to be ashamed of his gleeful and “triumphant” realization that he has “outlived [his lover] Jim and [the now dying] Doris” and that thusly he retains the

capacity “to rejoice in his own body” (104), either by himself or among others. At this particular moment, it is less important for George to feel attractive to others than it is for him to “seduce” himself with a “naked” display of his body that announces that “*he hasn’t given up*” to the inevitable progression of time (106). It is not surprising then that George makes a deliberate choice not to act upon his lust for “the bought unwilling bodies” of the street hustlers, who would only make him feel like “a dodderer” or “a potential score” (106), and instead opts to “stop by the gym—although this isn’t one of his regular days” (104)—in order to enjoy the “easygoing physical democracy” that exists among the men who exercise, undress, take steam baths, and otherwise linger therein (109).

In the space of the gym (106), it is “taken for granted” that even the most “godlike” and “young” of the men experience continuous “anxiety” about their perceived physical deficiencies, despite their ongoing attempts to make their bodies as desirable as possible; yet this shared “[v]anity” paradoxically does not cause people to be “bitchy” or “ill-tempered,” but instead produces a “genuinely friendly” atmosphere in which everyone is “accepted as an equal” because “[n]o one is perfect and no one pretends to be” (109). In other words, the gym is a site in which “leisureliness” (107) and “empathy” predominate and in which the men are “not competing with each other” as they do in the outside world, but rather are sharing a life-affirming “energy” (108) that makes it feel “delightful” (109) to inhabit the bodies that they are working so hard to maintain. By revealing that “George feels more than unusually unwilling to leave the gym” (109) after his visit to the hospital, Isherwood seems to share David M. Halperin’s understanding of “working out” as a “strenuous, demanding, and transformative daily ritual which often alters the entire shape of one’s life.”⁵⁵ In other words, habitual gym-going is not “just a cosmetic recreation” but rather “a utopian political practice” because it contains the potential to transform

one's "patterns of work and sleep, friendships, social habits, sense of community, and sense of personal possibilities."⁵⁶ To that end, George can be seen to use his workout as a means of constructively queering his attitude toward the world around him; basking in his body's "satisfaction and gratitude" for "being forced to perform" beyond "normal" expectations, George enjoys an "uncomplicated relaxed happy mood" that makes him feel "that there's no need...to have to hate anyone at all" (110), which is to say, that provides him with a perspective on his surroundings that is radically affirmative.

This rehabilitation of George's worldview, however, is almost immediately and nearly completely annihilated by a series of ordinary experiences that leave him feeling defeated and "thoroughly depressed" (112). Hoping to recapture the "excitement and awe" he felt upon first coming to California, George takes a drive through the hills and instead finds himself "oppressed" by the city below, which "has spawned and spread itself over the entire plain" and "has eaten up" the "romantic" and "natural" features of the landscape (111). Although he endeavors to adopt an attitude of dismissive superiority toward this urban sprawl—a stance that is exemplified in his decision to stop and "take[] a leak" off a cliff near the top of the mountain—George is unable to shake the paralyzing sense that he is "a sad Jewish prophet of doom" (112) who sees but cannot prevent the destruction of a civilization that "will die of overextension" soon (111). Likewise, the frustrated desire that his subsequent trip to the supermarket prompts—both because "[e]very article on the shelves cries out to [him], Take me, take me" (112), thereby allowing him to "imagine [him]self wanted, even loved," and because he is assaulted by "shockingly vivid memories of meals shopped for, cooked, [and] eaten with Jim"—leaves George feeling so thoroughly conquered by "the overpowering sloth of sadness" that he envisions himself "going to bed" until he can "develop some disease" that will kill him

(113). George's mood is so "utterly perverse" by the time he finishes shopping that he calls his friend Charlotte, a divorced woman whom he has been avoiding because they are "in the same boat" in terms of their shared feelings of loneliness (129), and agrees to have dinner with her that evening, despite having declined her original invitation earlier in the day (114).

George's long, drunken dinner with Charlotte serves as the unexpected catalyst for the daring and dangerous assertions of his queerness that he will display later in the evening. Because there are several notable similarities between George and Charlotte—specifically, they are both British emigrates, they are both single by circumstance rather than by choice, and their "bohemian" cottages stand in defiant contrast to the "domestic squalor" (118) that their suburbanite "supplanters" (119) have added to the hillside—their conversation on the subject of whether Charlotte should return to her past home in England or struggle to create a new one for herself in California causes George to reflect intensely on his own situation. Ultimately concluding that Charlotte's plan to return to the safe familiarity of living with her sister, despite her recognition that she will be "miserable" doing so, is "utter drooling masochism" (142), George announces his own resolve to reclaim a joyous existence for himself in Los Angeles, one that rivals the happy life he shared with Jim. Feeling as if he has "escaped" (146) from Charlotte's nostalgia-tinged clutches—significantly, her final act of the evening is to kiss George "full on the mouth" in a desperate and misguided attempt to throw their "relationship right out of its orbit and send it whizzing off on another" (145)—George initially considers that his only reasonable option as a "drunk...stupid old thing" is to go "straight home...and right into bed" (146). George's sudden and impulsive decision to instead run "down the road, laughing, toward the ocean," a movement that he describes as act of defiance against the "Cortex" that normally serves as a "guardian" against such foolish behavior, signals his urgent desire for independence

from the sadness of his present existence; in short, like “a child wriggling free of a grownup” (146), George wishes at this moment to shake off responsibility and scamper off to play.

George’s appetite for playful diversion leads him to “The Starboard Side,” a bar adjacent to the beach that “has been here since the earliest days of the colony” and that has a rich history as a site for bohemian experimentation and for queer misbehaving. Although the “glory has faded” (149) from The Starboard Side since “its finest hours” near the end of World War II, when servicemen on leave were among the most visible members of the “jam-packed bar crowd” and when wartime blackouts provided a convenient “excuse for keeping the lights out at a gangbang” (147), George “can still detect...a last faint gleam” of its former splendor (149). To be sure, the servicemen are “mostly domesticated now” (148) and the “new television” in the bar works against meaningful social interaction and turns patrons into “blank-faced strangers” (149). Yet in the same way that George celebrates his abjection in order to assert his queer resistance to the conformist American culture of the early 1960s, The Starboard Side stubbornly refuses to cede its place on the “last block” before the beach, thereby ensuring the survival of the “bad neighborhood” in which it is located, one that “[r]espectable people avoid” and that “[r]ealtors deplore” (149). While concessions have been made to attract a customer base that is broader than “the last handful of surviving colonists” who remain in the bar’s proximity—namely, a modernized décor, a new juke box, and the aforementioned TV set—The Starboard Side nevertheless stands as a proud monument of queer “disorder” to the “true devotee[s] like George” who have borne witness to its historical struggles against respectability and normalization.

It is George's fond memories of the "magic squalor" (148) of the bar's glory years, along with his awareness that its "stretch of the shore is still filthy with trash," meaning that "discarded rubbers" are easier to find than "seashells" (149), that raise his expectations for a sexually mischievous end to his evening at The Starboard Side. After all, the bar and its adjacent beach—which Isherwood modeled after "The Friendship" and Will Rogers State Beach, both well-known sites for gay cruising activity in Santa Monica⁵⁷—were the locations of a "glorious Indian summer of lust" in 1946, during which George and Jim felt themselves members of a "vast naked barbarian tribe" who spent many "hot nights" together "swimming in the darkness...dancing to the radio, [and] coupling without shame on the sand" (148). Additionally, George's hopes for novelty and excitement are bolstered by the unexpected sight of at least three other "nonconformists" at the bar who, like him, are "unhypnotized" by the "cow-daze" producing television set (149) and who seek instead after real human connection. Among those to whom "the TV screen is invisible" is Kenny Potter, a "charming" college student to whom George is attracted, both because he is unconventionally "handsome" (60) and because he is "crazy" enough to act in a manner that is fundamentally "opposite" to the tendencies of "most people" in the culture (59). Upon learning that Kenny, who lives "over on the other side of town" has come to the bar (after arguing with his girlfriend, no less) in the hopes of running into him, George imagines himself "*invit[ing] him to stay the night at [his] place*" (153) and discovers that he is perversely delighted by the social impropriety of this notion. Although he does experience a brief moment of hesitation, in which he poses the question "[w]hat in hell do you think I am?" to the voice of temptation inside his head (153), George will from this point forward spend more time and energy in attempting to seduce Kenny and less in striving to behave appropriately.

In distinctly queer fashion, George both maintains and is aroused by the “polarity” of “Youth and Age” (154) that he and Kenny occupy in relation to one another. Recognizing that they only have something “to give each other” if the “difference” between them is preserved and celebrated (158), George is overcome by “pleasure” when Kenny insists upon calling him “sir,” thereby initiating a form of father-son role play between them (159). Paradoxically, however, George and Kenny’s playful enactment of these “symbolic figures,” who are regarded as “opposites” (154) within normative culture, fails to position the two men within the hierarchical power structure that generally would accompany these social roles. Because they both suspect the conventional wisdom that the father’s greater knowledge necessarily makes him more proficient at life than his son—that is to say, because they both refuse the heteronormative logic that “experience” is of “use” in the sense that it makes one more “wise” about the operations of the world (160)—George and Kenny are freed to become exceptionally “silly,” “wild,” and outside the bounds of social convention while in one another’s presence (161). Their mutual decision to go skinnydipping in the ocean, where the “waves and the night and the noise exist only for their play,” therefore represents a deliberate rejection of the sterility of the mainstream culture in which they circulate daily (163); by “stagger[ing] out...wide-open-armed” to “receive the stunning baptism of the surf,” George and Kenny can be seen to perform “rites of purification” that wash away their “whole selves” (162) and “entire lifetimes” so that they can become “cleaner” and “freer” creatures, ones who have “escaped across the border into the water-world” and who have escaped lives of “dryness” where “the dry” go “dryly to their dry beds” in “dry homes” on “the dark hillsides” (163). As they stand in the water like “fearless native warrior[s]” (162) before “an apocalyptically great wave” (163), George and Kenny appear

ready to bring a new world into being by battling against the forces through which normality is defined and policed.

Hence, by engaging in their “stark naked” (162) roughhousing in the surf, George and Kenny are reclaiming the beach as a homesite for queer becoming and possibility. Although he remains “aware of the lights and the possibility of cruise cars and cops,” thereby mirroring the actual threats of arrest and exposure that gay individuals faced on a regular basis at the time of the novel’s setting, George courageously (and perhaps recklessly) abandons his “last remaining minim” of “caution” and “strips himself clumsily” because “this dash from the bar can only end in the water” (162); in short, as an act of queer resistance against conformity, George’s midnight naked swim with Kenny represents the achievement of a personal objective toward which he has been striving throughout the course of the day. Although he “struggles” initially to establish his footing against the “undertow” that threatens to depose him (162), George soon surrenders himself “utterly” to the movements of the currents that draw him “out of his depth” (163) and, in so doing, transforms into “a water-creature absorbed in its element” (162), which is to say, into a being that is naturally at home within a space of mutability. Significantly, this scene is queer in that it is charged with an extremely high level of sexual energy; for example, as the “truly tremendous” waves curl up over George “in a thundering slap of foam,” making him laugh “with delight,” they become fundamentally indistinguishable from the “tremendous glimpses” he catches of a naked Kenny “arrowing down some toppling foam-precipice” (162). To be sure, the two men do not engage in any overtly carnal acts during their time in the water, yet the experience nevertheless assumes the transcendent state that is associated often with sexual ecstasy. Although he may feel momentarily as if the waves are “much too big” for him to negotiate and that he is thereby risking his own annihilation as “he is caught and picked up,

turned over and over and over” (163), George is able to recover his sense of direction through by catching sight of Kenny’s “tall slim torso with its heavy-hung sex” (164) and by grabbing hold of his young companion’s arm.

As they walk out of the water in an embrace, Kenny observes playfully that “[t]hey ought not to let [George] out on his own” because he is “liable to get into real trouble” (164); in so doing, Kenny confirms George’s queer potential for subverting the normal and the respectable. By the time they leave the beach and agree to go back to George’s place for the continuance of their drinking and interaction, the evening is filled with a more than considerable amount of sexual possibility. While George trades his wet clothes for a bathrobe and Kenny wraps himself in a blanket that keeps slipping off his shoulders, thereby “turning itself into a classical Greek garment” like “the chlamys” worn by the “favorite” “young disciple” of a “philosopher,” the two men engage in an increasingly intimate conversation about Kenny’s sex life with his girlfriend Lois and about how there are many “things [he] want[s] to do, first” before considering marriage with her (169). Isherwood’s allusion to Greek pederasty reinforces the homoeroticism of the scene and seems to suggest that Kenny—who, for all his playful engagement with George, possesses a sexual identity that is fundamentally ambiguous—is well aware of how “utterly, dangerously charming” he appears to his professor at this particular moment (169). The more frank and improper the two men’s conversation becomes, including George’s suggestion that Kenny and Lois use his guest bed for sexual encounters whenever he is out of the house because she is embarrassed by “all that stuff they put you through” to take a room at a motel (170), the more their interaction develops into something that is “positively flirty, on both sides” (169); the growing depravity of the scene is underscored by George’s feelings of being transfixed by Kenny’s “most teasing, penetrating grin” (169) and by Kenny’s awareness of his own

vulnerability, being that he now is “stranded without his clothes” (170) at the home of his gay professor.

The scandalous character of this late night encounter between teacher and student solidifies George’s position as a “dirty old man” (173), yet his categorization as such emboldens rather than dissuades him in the pursuit of his abject desires. Moreover, by embracing this culturally-shameful identity, George enters into “a new phase” of “communication” with Kenny, one in which he is “transformed” paradoxically into a figure of moral authority whose “inquisitorial” powers are so “formidable” that he possesses the capacity for “oracular” insights about the world and its relational structures (173). Based on his heightened perception of the “mess, semantically and every other way” into which American society has gotten itself—that is to say, because he realizes that we spend our time and energy “identifying each other with catalogues, like tourists in an art gallery” rather than forging difficult but potentially transformative connections across our observed differences—George must strive for a way to embrace his signification as “a dirty old man” without getting “entangled” within the “dreary categories” that encourage and sustain cultural division (174). In order to articulate relationality in a truly novel and revolutionary manner—a task that George seems ready to attempt when he describes himself as about “to speak with tongues” (173), thereby alluding to the Biblical story in which Jesus’s disciples first were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13)—George must resist the inclination to be “cagey” about his sexual experience and to “exchange” a “signal” with Kenny that is as blatantly queer, which is to say, as defiantly abject, as possible (174). In short, George must not “give a damn” whether Kenny is “shocked” or “utterly refuse[s] to understand [his] motives” when “puts the cards on the table” (175); he must defy their socially-constructed roles as “miserable fools and prudes and cowards” (174-5) and demand

courageously that Kenny take off “that damned blanket” and own up to the fact that he, like George, “came here this evening” (175) for spectacularly inappropriately purposes.

For as much as Kenny might pretend that his visit to The Starboard Side has been prompted by simple curiosity about his professor’s personal life, and for as much as he may “realize it or not” that he has come across town with the hope of getting “stranded out [t]here” (175), George recognizes that Kenny’s actual motivation is to acquire an understanding of the world that extends beyond his present range of experience, both sexual and otherwise. In essence, George discerns that his student is seeking a moment of true intimacy that will “transform [his] entire life” (177), yet Kenny’s inability to get beyond “the inexcusable triviality” of classifying George as “a dirty old man” makes this effort “tragically futile” (176) because it prevents a direct exchange of knowledge between the two men. As George observes keenly, Kenny possesses an exceptionally intense desire to resist conformity—so much so that he has orchestrated a drunken meeting with his professor in which they have shed their clothes in a private space where “there’s no one to disturb [them]”—yet ironically he is unable to take advantage of this moment that “may never happen again” (175) because he “can’t be bothered” to “know” what George is “about” (176) outside the systems of classification that label him deviant and thus morally suspect. Thus, an evening that “might be the most precious and unforgettable of [Kenny’s] young life,” one in which he might read his professor “like a book” and realize that George’s knowledge is inseparable from “*what [he] know[s]*”—which is to say, one in which he might comprehend the value of George’s minority perspective—is reduced to a mere “flirtation” with difference (176). Despite the fact that he regards Kenny as “the only boy” on “campus” with the capacity to appreciate the revolutionary potential of his queerness, George must concede that his student adheres too closely to “the enormous tragedy of everything

nowadays,” in which caution prevails and substitutes “flirtation” for “fucking” (176), which is to say, substitutes noncommittal trifling for a fully-immersive experience of mutual transcendence.

From this point forward in the evening, George recognizes that he cannot depend upon Kenny’s participation in his efforts to wage queer warfare against the forces of conformity and respectability. After Kenny excuses himself from the scene via a polite (albeit possibly disingenuous) letter that he composes while George dozes—“*That was great, this evening,*” he writes. “*Let’s do it again, shall we?*”—George experiences a “tickle in the blood” and in “the nerves of his groin” (178) that attests to the unfulfilled sense of queer possibility that the encounter with his student has initiated. As he discovers himself “suddenly hard hot” and begins to masturbate in response to the “deep down” throbbing of the blood in his groin, George starts to fantasize about the recently departed Kenny having sex with his girlfriend in George’s house but then almost immediately discards this conjured image because, even in his imagination, the younger man doesn’t “tak[e] his lust seriously” enough (179). In need of a “[q]uick” and arousing “substitute” in order to sustain his erotic pleasure, George transforms Kenny and Lois into a “big blond boy” and a Mexican man who he has witnessed earlier in the day engaged in “fierce animal play” on the campus tennis court (179). Unlike Kenny, who is simultaneously concerned with his private desires and the ways in which these feelings will be read publicly, these “young animals” (54) are so “isolated in the intentness of their game,” which is now conflated in George’s mind with the passionate sexual play that he imagines taking place in his bed, that they are “absolutely unaware” of any “passers-by” (52); their positioning in close proximity to one another results in an extremely intense “body to body” intimacy between them (53). Additionally, as he recalls his earlier glimpse of the two men “stripped nearly naked” with “nothing on their bodies” but “very short and close-fitting shorts” that mold “themselves to the

buttocks and the loins” (52), it is easy for George to transform the tennis court competition between the “sweet-naturedly beautiful” blond with “his classical cream-marble body” and the “lithe” and “muscular” Mexican (53) who moves like a “little gold cat” (179) into an erotic fantasy where they fight for sexual dominance. Moreover and most importantly perhaps, George’s emphasis upon the “sensual” “cruelty of the game—that is, his re-presentation of both the match and the scene in his bed as archetypal struggles for survival against “defeat and humiliation” (53)—can be seen not only to invigorate him physically but to reinstate his hope for a queer subversion of the norm, being that this display of male “beauty” temporarily makes “life” feel “less hateful” (54) than it seems during his typical experience of the everyday world.

As he persists in his fantasies about the two men, George moves from a voyeuristic position in which he “hovers above them, watching” (179) to an active role of full participation in their “embrace” (179). As if he has transformed himself into pure sexual energy, George “begins passing in and out of their writing, panting bodies,” so that he is “either” or “both” of them “at once” (179-180); George’s simultaneous occupation of these three different perspectives on the scene both intensifies his pleasure and instills him with a proud sense of queer community. The idea of a “perfect” and unmediated intimacy (179) being shared among the three men in this queer homespace, one that exists beyond the “dreary categories” (174) that work against such exchanges in everyday existence, is so immensely appealing to George—simply put, it feels “so good” (180)—that he immediately and powerfully climaxes. In his post-ejaculatory moment, George’s mind disparages him as an “old idiot,” yet he is glad to realize that “he is not ashamed of himself” (180) for the improper events of the night that have culminated in this ecstatic moment. Even if Kenny returns home and tells his girlfriend about how his professor has been “drunk as a skunk,” George discovers happily, he will not be

embarrassed—“No. Not a bit”—and will instead take pride in their assessment that he has behaved “as crazy as a kid” (180) throughout the evening.

As he reflects upon his increasingly confident refusal to perform according to the established norms of respectable behavior, George “smiles to himself” with “entire self-satisfaction,” thereby signaling his ultimate contentedness with his ec-centric social designation as a “crazy” person (180). Rather than making him feel foolish or ashamed, George recognizes that his marginalized, queer identity provides him with a “secret” reserve of “strength” which thereby emboldens him to announce defiantly that he is “about to get much crazier” in his actions (180). Thus, George can be seen in the final moments of the narrative to re-discover his self-sufficiency—to reference the novel’s title, at long last he embraces his position as “a single man”—as he declares his intentions to put his queerness on display and to treat himself to a debauchery-filled vacation in Mexico over Christmas break. By directly addressing his readers—specifically, by asking if they “dare” to “watch” as he acts progressively more scandalously (180-181)—George attests to his total lack of shame regarding his present location as a creature of animal desire whose most pressing objectives are that “he must love...[and] he must live” (182) in a manner that embraces his abjection. Because he finally “[c]lings” to the “Now” (182) as if it is the only available moment for self-potential and social transformation, an all-too-possible reality that Isherwood underscores through his subsequent “suppos[ing]” (185) that his protagonist dies unexpectedly during the evening’s sleep, George no longer despairs at having to “coexist” with the individuals who regard him as “other” (184). As the “long day ends” (184), George thus reaffirms his pride in his shameful cultural positioning as “separate and different” (183) and, in so doing, is able to accomplish his everyday occupation of a space of queer becoming.

Notes

¹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: The Free Press, 1999) 35.

² Christopher Isherwood, *The Sixties: Diaries 1960-1969*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) 341.

³ Quoted in John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* 2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 83. The excerpt is taken from Burns' opening speech at the First Annual Convention of the Mattachine Society, which was held from May 15-16, 1954 in San Francisco, CA.

⁴ Harry Hay first used this term in relation to homosexuals in his 1948 prospectus for the "International Bachelors' Fraternal Order for Peace and Social Dignity," a group that would later become the Mattachine Society. In the Mattachine Society's 1951 mission statement, the term is simplified as "oppressed minority." See, among many other sources that have documented the founding and development of the Mattachine Society, D'Emilio; Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Will Roscoe, "The Radicalism of Harry Hay," *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide: A Bi-Monthly Magazine of History, Culture, and Politics* (Nov.-Dec. 2013): n. pag.

⁵ Quotations taken from "Mattachine Society Missions and Purposes." Written April 1951 and ratified July 20, 1951. See Marvin Cutler, ed., *Homosexuals Today: A Handbook of Organizations and Publications* (Los Angeles: ONE, Inc., 1956) 13-14.

⁶ The excerpts are taken from Marilyn Reiger's "Delegates of the Convention," which dates from May 1953. Quoted in D'Emilio 79.

⁷ Southern California Area Council, "Aims and Principles." April 1953. Quoted in D'Emilio 84.

⁸ See D'Emilio 73.

⁹ Hurewitz 264.

¹⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *Lost Years: A Memoir 1945-1951*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (New York: HarperCollins, 2000) 189.

¹¹ Isherwood, *Lost Years* 190.

¹² In his diary entry from 5 April 1962, Isherwood mentions having to drive back to Laguna Beach while on a road trip, because an envelope containing *The Mattachine Review* and *ONE* (another homophile publication), which had been brought along to loan to a friend, had accidentally fallen out of his car. See Isherwood, *The Sixties* 175. Among others connected to the Mattachine Society, Isherwood was good friends with (and a one-time tenant of) Evelyn Hooker, the UCLA research psychologist whose studies of gay men and/in their communities challenged the prevailing scientific notion of homosexuality as a mental illness. At the same time as Isherwood, Hooker was invited to join the Mattachine Foundation's board of directors, but she declined based on her concern that "membership would compromise her research in the eyes of her colleagues." Nevertheless, she remained good friends with several Mattachine members, and the group later provided her with a "large pool of gay men" for her psychological studies. See D'Emilio 73-74.

¹³ Although many authors have detailed the gradual emergence of a more visible "gay community" in U.S. culture, John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983) remains the most comprehensive study of the period between World War II and Stonewall.

¹⁴ See Isherwood's diary entry from 31 October 1963 and the one from 7 September 1964, which serves as an epigraph to this chapter.

¹⁵ Joseph Bristow, for example, regards *A Single Man* as "an elegiac novel of loss" in which "there is not much of a future to be had" because George's "obsessive" mourning of the past leaves him "[w]ithout much to hope for." See Bristow, "'I am with You, Little Minority Sister': Isherwood's Queer Sixties," *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999) 145-163. Quotations are from 145, 161, 147, and 161 of Bristow's article.

¹⁶ Warner 74.

¹⁷ In his diary entry dated 18 September 1962, Isherwood notes how his lover Don Bachardy helps him past his "difficulties" in writing the novel through the "brilliant simple suggestion" that the narrative should be about "*The Englishman*—that is, [him]." From this point forward, Isherwood conceptualizes the novel as his attempt to offer "a day in the life" of his fictional counterpart, using Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* as a direct model for the presentation and structure of the narrative. There are many parallels between the experiences that Isherwood records in his diary and the occurrences in George's day. See *The Sixties* 223; 236; 217.

¹⁸ See Bucknell's introduction to *Lost Years* xiii; xiv; xxv; xxiv.

¹⁹ See diary entry of 9 August 1963 in Isherwood, *The Sixties* 284.

²⁰ Warner 48; 47; 50.

²¹ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora 1992) 267-319.

²² Warner 49; 47; 49; 31.

²³ Warner 49; 31.

²⁴ Warner 35; 24; 25; 12.

²⁵ Warner 37; 36; 48; 36.

²⁶ Claude J. Summers, "Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986)," *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993) 211-219. The quotation is from 214.

²⁷ Bristow 146.

²⁸ Warner 48.

²⁹ See diary entry of 9 February 1963 in Isherwood, *The Sixties* 265.

³⁰ See Bucknell's introduction to *The Sixties* xv; xvii.

³¹ See Isherwood's diary entry of 26 April 1963 in *The Sixties* 274.

³² To the sergeant's utter frustration, none of his charges applied to Isherwood or Charlton. They did not frequent the gay bars on a regular basis, neither had criminal records, and, despite their occasional recreational sexual encounters, they were friends rather than lovers. See Isherwood, *Lost Years* 216.

³³ Isherwood, *Lost Years* 216.

³⁴ Isherwood, *Lost Years* 217.

³⁵ Isherwood's diary entry of 6 December 1949, as quoted in *Lost Years* 217.

³⁶ This incident would seem to confirm Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's powerful understanding the links between shame and queer resistance. See Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993) 1-16.

³⁷ Isherwood's diary entry of 6 December 1949, as quoted in *Lost Years* 217.

³⁸ See Bucknell's introduction to *Lost Years* xxiv.

³⁹ Isherwood, *Lost Years* 217.

⁴⁰ See Bristow 146; 148.

⁴¹ This is a fairly common critical assessment of the trajectory of Isherwood's writing career, against which Bristow mounts a convincing argument. The quotations are taken from page 146 of Bristow's essay.

⁴² See Elizabeth Hardwick, "Sex and the Single Man," *The New York Review of Books*, 20 Aug. 1964: 4.

⁴³ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*. 1964. (New York: North Point Press: 1996) 26. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the book and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁴ The quotation is taken from Isherwood's journal entry of 26 August 1962, in which he expresses a desire to emulate Virginia Woolf's endeavors to represent the rich inner world of everyday life. See Isherwood, *The Sixties* 219. *A Single Man* is modeled explicitly after Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which Isherwood deemed "one of the most truly beautiful novels or prose poems or whatever" that he had read during his lifetime. "Could I write a book like that," he asked himself in his journal entry of 22 August 1962, "and keep within the nature of my own style? I'd love to try." See Isherwood, *The Sixties* 217.

⁴⁵ Most likely, it is late November or early December 1962, based on George's references to Christmas decorations in the stores and the streets and his observation that "[h]ardly more than a month ago...Krushchev agreed to pull his rockets out of Cuba" (102-103). The Cuban Missile Crisis ended with Krushchev's public announcement of withdrawal on October 28, 1962.

⁴⁶ Although it is tempting to view Isherwood's use of the word "closet" as a subtle reference to George's homosexuality, it is unlikely that this was his intention. As George Chauncey notes, the modern metaphor of "the closet" as the storage space for a secret identity did not come into use until sometime in the 1960s and did not become widespread until "the post-Stonewall era." See Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890- 1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 375.

⁴⁷ Jill E. Anderson makes a similar argument in her compelling and illuminative "queer ecological reading" of *A Single Man*, noting how "the utopian, bohemian, queer spaces of George's past" have turned "into spaces reserved for the sanctioning of the nuclear family and their impetus to consume in excess." In so doing, Anderson contends, "the breeders," who are "characterized as faceless, nameless mob that acquires endless objects," manage to erase "all traces of the natural landscape and the queerness that existed in George's bohemia" (59). See Anderson, "'warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh!': A Queer Ecological Reading of Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*," *The Journal of Ecocriticism: A New Journal of Nature, Society, and Literature* 3.1 (Jan. 2011): 51-66. Print.

⁴⁸ Katherine Bucknell, for example, describes George as a “raging misogynist.” See Bucknell, “Who Is Christopher Isherwood?” *The Isherwood Century: Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood*, ed. James J. Berg and Chris Freeman (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) 26. Similarly, Joseph Bristow argues that George’s resentment toward the ways in which 1960s American culture “glorifies femininity and sanctifies motherhood” results in his “virulent” and unwavering “hatred of women.” See Bristow 159; 158. The diary entries containing unflattering references to the women with whom Isherwood was acquainted are numerous and thus too extensive to be considered individually here.

⁴⁹ See D’Emilio 140. The term “flight from masculinity” is taken from Abram Kardiner, *Sex and Morality* (1954), which D’Emilio quotes in his text.

⁵⁰ See Anderson 62; 58.

⁵¹ Whether Isherwood had direct knowledge of Reynolds’ song while writing *A Single Man* is unknown. All the same, his descriptions of the hillside-dotted tract “homes” of the Los Angeles area, which were advertised according to George as “a new concept in living,” parallel the lyrics of “Little Boxes,” which was a hit in 1963 for Pete Seeger. Reynolds’ first verse contains the following lines: “Little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes made of ticky-tacky / Little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes, all the same. / There’s a green one and a pink one / And a blue one and a yellow one / They’re all made out of ticky-tacky / And they all look just the same.”

⁵² Reynolds’ second verse is as follows: “And the people in houses who went to the university / Where they were put in boxes / And they all came out the same. / There’s doctors and lawyers / And business executives / They’re all made out of ticky-tacky / And they all look just the same.” She expands on these ideas and carries them all the way through the life cycle in the final verse, stating: “And the boys go into business / And marry, raise a family / And they all get put in boxes / Little boxes, all the same.”

⁵³ George’s feelings of annoyance and failure seem to be shared by the colleagues whom he joins subsequently in the “listless, embarrassed, [and] “self-conscious” “quietness” of the faculty dining room (82). Although George observes that he and his peers should feel a certain degree of “satisfaction to be of use” to the culture—in that they are in the business of facilitating the intellectual development of students “who are still three quarters alive” rather than working “to turn out useless consumer goods”—the bleak reality is that even the “relatively young” among them feel “glum” and “defeated” by “the majority” and its insistent demand that any “knowledge” that they impart must have “practical applications” (83) for the marketplace. Yet for as much as he opposes the rampart materialism of American culture, George refuses to adopt or to endorse the “patronizing” (88) attitude of colleagues such as the aptly named Cynthia Leach, who is a desperate-for-attention colleague with a sense of superiority that resembles the mindset of a “dreary French intellectual who’s just set foot in New York for the first time” (90).

⁵⁴ Isherwood’s phrasing here appears to be an allusion (and tribute) to Walt Whitman’s poetic expressions of delight in the body in general and to “I Sing the Body Electric” in particular.

⁵⁵ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 116.

⁵⁶ Halperin 116; 115; 116.

⁵⁷ Isherwood writes in *Lost Years* about spending “much of [his] time” during the mid-1940s at The Friendship with friends and with his lover William Caskey (43). He notes that “The Friendship had been doing terrific business throughout the war years and it was still crammed every weekend with servicemen and their pursuers, female and male.” Since The Friendship was both the “chief neighborhood bar” and one of the only “gay bars” in West Los Angeles, one “had to be prepared to mingle with all sorts and conditions,” a reputation that ensured that “the more respectable Canyon dwellers” tended to “stay away” from the establishment (44). Isherwood also writes about The Friendship and the community it served in his 1952 essay on Los Angeles (published as “California Story” in *Harper’s Bazaar* and later included in his non-fiction volume *Exhumations* as “The Shore”) as follows: “The [Santa

Monica] Canyon is our western Greenwich Village, overrun now by various types of outsiders, but still maintaining an atmosphere of bohemianism and unpretentious artiness. And Doc Law's Friendship Bar is still, despite competition, the acknowledged stammlokal of the community." See Isherwood, *Exhumations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966) 162.

Chapter 2:

The “space in which to continue living”:

Imagining the Queer Domestic in Robert Ferro’s *The Family of Max Desir*

Max Desir loved his Italian-American family—even after his iron-willed father exiled him from its intimate inner circle.

Max Desir loved his lover, Nick, with whom he openly took up life first amid the enchantment of Rome, then amid the realities of New York.

Two loves so deeply felt—in a man so painfully divided...

--flap copy to paperback edition of *The Family of Max Desir*¹

In its overwrought description of a “painfully divided” man who must choose between his equal but apparently incompatible attachments to his lover and his family, the back-cover plot synopsis to Plume’s 1984 paperback edition of Robert Ferro’s *The Family of Max Desir* seems queerly intent upon situating the novel within the well-established literary tradition of the domestic melodrama. To be sure, the unattributed flap copy is merely a publicity tool that reveals nothing about Ferro’s own aesthetic and ideological intentions; the aim of its rudimentary and sensationalized plot summary is not to elicit reflection about the intricate concerns that inform and impel Ferro’s narrative, but rather to tender an attractive and saleable product to a precisely designated, and therefore quantifiable, group of readers. The consignment of Ferro’s book to the realm of the soap opera nevertheless warrants consideration beyond its intended purpose as a savvy marketing tool. By attending to the interpretative short-handing that is conducted on the back cover of *The Family of Max Desir*, we will begin to perceive and

interrogate the complex mechanisms through which Ferro's insightful (and indeed inciting) experiment in queer domestic fiction has been mistaken as an act of conciliation.

This chapter begins from the premise that Plume's misrecognition—or perhaps, more precisely, its mis(re)presentation—of *The Family of Max Desir* as domestic melodrama is symptomatic of several vexed and consequential issues pertaining to the interpretation and classification of Ferro's literary depictions of gay men and/in their families. To state it plainly, if a bit too simply, Ferro's very choice of recurrent subject matter—namely, the gay man's desire for a place to call home, and, more broadly, his struggle for a space of legibility within an already existing narrative of the family—tends paradoxically to effect his novels' displacements from, or, at the very least, to facilitate their misplacements in relation to, the more apparently “resistant” or “transgressive” modes of “queer” writing that are said to have emerged in the wake of the Stonewall rebellion.² Similarly, Ferro's decision to represent his characters' complex interactions within their families of origin would seem to position him against a pre-Stonewall narrative such as Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, which endeavors to construct queer subjectivity as a mode of becoming that opposes the normalized identities that are produced most frequently within our culture's existing structures of relationality. Consequently, although I can hardly imagine a more profound misreading of *The Family of Max Desir* than the one enabled by the paperback edition's flap copy, I nevertheless recognize its melodramatic conception of the novel's central tensions and conflicts as an advantageous point of departure for a critical reappraisal of the queer potential in Ferro's work.

In order to make productive sense of such an apparently counter-intuitive assertion, it is first necessary to consider how *The Family of Max Desir* does in fact lend itself readily to advertisements of its universal appeal and generic familiarity. Indeed, when viewed superficially,

Ferro's novel possesses no shortage of features that would appear to confirm its reassuring and formulaic rehearsal of status quo thinking, particularly on the subject of the ostensibly inimical relationship between homosexual identity and normative kinship structures. For example, although the provocatively named Max Desir does bear close resemblance to the adult Ferro, who by all accounts had an active and varied sex life,³ we are encouraged from the onset of the narrative to recognize Max not as a free agent who celebrates and is impelled by his "maximum desire," but rather as a son and a brother who is entrenched within and whose sexual identity is rendered problematic by the machinations of the relational structure that the book's title invokes. For the first thirty-five pages of the novel, Max barely registers as more than a supporting character in a large ensemble piece; as a result, once Max finally takes precedence in the unfolding story, the extent to which his *family* factors into his self-development and directly influences his perception of the world around him has become the subject of supreme importance. By the time the narrative finally pauses to focus upon Max's childhood years—something it does only after recounting an eighty year history of Max's extended Italian-American immigrant family, and after taking us to the sites of two separate family tragedies that occur during Max's adulthood—any inclinations that the reader may harbor toward recognizing Max as a singular, much less emblematic, figure who embodies some sort of imminent queer potential or unprecedented sexual possibility have been largely discouraged; he registers, if at all, in the novel's long opening section as a rather unexceptional and sexually-neutralized heir to the family's shared and, in many ways, restrictive history.

Nor is this elaborate attempt to contextualize Max's individual story within the already existing narrative structures of his family an anomaly in Ferro's fictional considerations of gay men and their families. In rough correspondence to Max's apparent hesitation to formulate an

identity that would eclipse his inherited one, Mark Valerian, in the opening pages of Ferro's final novel *Second Son* (1988), is shown to give up his membership in "the lifestyle"—that is, in the public culture of desire and of seemingly-limitless possibilities that in many ways epitomizes urban gay life in the decade after Stonewall and before AIDS—and to retreat back to the protected and settled space of his family's beach house. Thus, if Ferro can be seen to situate Max *outside* (or, when recounting his experience in childhood, *prior to*) the compulsions of the flesh, we might say that, in *Second Son* (which is, in many significant ways, a direct continuation of the narrative events and situational conflicts presented in *The Family of Max Desir*), he gives us a character who, after recently testing positive for and subsequently developing symptoms of HIV infection, considers his diseased body to be *beyond* the possibility of queer desire.⁴

Invoking the gothic to figure himself as Mrs. Danvers, the mysterious housekeeper of Manderley in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Mark Valerian makes it possible to romanticize and aggrandize his self-imposed seclusion from the world⁵; rather than "being alone and frightened" in his exile, he imagines himself as the "custodian and protector" of a haunted house, or more precisely, as the carefully-chosen guardian of "something alive and hovering" that is "vitaly interested in the goings-on" of his family.⁶ Faced with the disempowering knowledge that he is "ill, dying perhaps," Mark bolsters himself by believing that the "big enough never to be finished" house has pressed him into the special service of "keeping track" of it all, despite the markers of difference ("single," "gay," "AIDS victim," "artist") that would typically exclude him from such a principal caretaking role (*SS* 4; 16; 17).⁷

It would seem, then, that the respective openings of *The Family of Max Desir* and *Second Son* present less-than-auspicious points of entry for the critical rehabilitation of Robert Ferro as a resistantly queer writer. In both cases, after all, Ferro's complex narratives of multi-generational

families are set into motion, and thereby determine their shape and direction, by their fundamentally automatic driftings toward the established and self-perpetuating currents of conventional morality and inherited heterosexism. Dropped into narrative structures that are always already established, always already set in motion, the best fate that Ferro's gay male protagonists would seem to be able to hope for is to be taken up and propelled by (rather than be engulfed by and submerged under) the predictable motions of the unfolding family history. In other words, Max and Mark's only prospects for legibility within—that is, for identification with and self-recognition within—this established and apparently compulsory narrative structure would seem to reside in their willingness to attire themselves in the familiar guises of normative social roles and to perform the traditional offices associated with “son,” “brother,” “uncle,” and/or “husband.”

Clearly, then, Ferro's novels lend themselves to charges of being insufficiently gay-centric because they seem to proceed from the assumption that there is no sustainable subject position that might be inhabited completely “outside” of—or, for that matter, that might be constructed without direct recourse to—the model of relationality that the biological family enacts and seamlessly perpetuates. Even as adults, in uncontested accord with those who came before them, the titular sons of Ferro's novels have a lingering perception, as Mark best describes it in *Second Son*, of being “defined by who they [are] with” their immediate family members “as compared to who they [are] with the rest of the world” (SS 45); moreover, no matter however forcefully Max and Mark may attempt, in their self-generating acts of “coming out,” to define themselves in opposition to—or at least as radically different from—the rest of their kin, the identities that they come to occupy “in the outside world” remain dependent “to a great degree” on their familial relationships (SS 45).⁸

To be sure, Ferro's stories of gay romance are never privileged in his novels, but are instead largely subsumed within conventional narrative structures that center around and privilege the biological (and, hence, heterosexual) family. Accordingly, it is understandable for the reader to be suspicious of Max Desir's refusal to define himself in terms that would serve to eclipse his family's influence over him. Yet Max's apparent submission to familial authority is not at all what it seems. In *The Family of Max Desir*, the queer revolution begins—and, correspondingly, will be fought—at home; Max does not need to look *beyond* familial relationality for the strategic sites from which to launch his plan of resistance because he has already discovered—or, more precisely, will cause to emerge—numerous exploitable fissures *within* the structure of kinship that he has inherited. On many complex and inter-related levels, *The Family of Max Desir* is a novel about the primary character's struggles to own and to inhabit, to construct,⁹ and ultimately to transform a diverse collection of real and imaginary living spaces. Contrary to popular opinion, then, Ferro's novel is decidedly *non-assimilative* in that it refuses absolutely to imagine a co-operative sharing of domestic space by straights and queers. Instead, the gay protagonist of *The Family of Max Desir* is shown to engage in a never-ending battle with his family for the ownership rights to the “space in which to continue living” (*FMD* 2). The ultimate challenge for Max is not to leave his original home, but rather to rip open spaces of “outside belonging” in this household for himself and his partner Nick; that is, he must confront his own seemingly inevitable desire for acceptance within this familial structure, while simultaneously performing the queer differences that make him such a conspicuously resistant occupant of this cohabitated space.¹⁰

What then might we make of Plume's back cover inference of *The Family of Max Desir's* confidence in—and, indeed, its celebration of—the rectitude of heteronormative ideologies?

More importantly, how might we come to terms with the fact that its shorthanding of the plot—specifically, its assurance that Max will continue to love “his Italian American family,” even after he is “exiled from its intimate inner circle” because of his sexual difference—can be seen to correspond all too neatly to the most frequently rehearsed interpretations of Ferro’s novel as a text that settles into reconciliation and integration, rather than presents an unsettling vision of queer resistance and insurgency?¹¹

As further consideration of the flap copy will substantiate, the creation of Ferro’s reputation as a writer of “assimilative” gay texts dates back to the first published reviews of *The Family of Max Desir*, several of which have been excerpted for the Plume paperback edition. For the most part, the carefully-chosen blurbs for Ferro’s novel laud his “stunningly beautiful book” in fairly nonspecific terms, citing such “remarkable achievements[s]” as “the author’s powerful use of images” and “his direct, compressed style.”¹² However, the two excerpts that dare to reference directly Ferro’s treatment of “gay” subjects—blurbs that are relegated in telling fashion to the book’s inside cover—proceed to categorize the novel as “a stunning achievement” in *domestic fiction*.¹³ The cumulative impression to emerge from these excerpts is that Ferro’s novel is “not limited to the gay experience,” to quote James Fritzhand in his book review for *The Advocate*, “but touches upon the very nature of the human experience.” Thus, although *The Family of Max Desir* may concern itself initially with “the homosexual son’s conflict with his father,” Eliot Fremont-Smith warns us that we must not let this fact distract our attention away from the broader-minded—which is to say, the chiefly assimilative—intentions of the text; in short, Fremont-Smith insists that Ferro’s novel largely distinguishes itself through its movement away from its gay protagonist in order to “whirl[] into every corner of a family’s grief, desperation, and love.”¹⁴ Once again, we witness the invoking of Ferro’s self-conscious

affiliation with the domestic in order to substantiate his fiction's ecumenical aspirations and its universal relevance.

Obviously, Plume's decision to emphasize the broad appeal of Ferro's novel by crafting such flap copy and by featuring these particular reviews is primarily economically-motivated; the more his publishers are able to convince potential readers of the book's widespread concerns, the more sales will be boosted. Thus it is all the more striking and revealing that the two most recently published critiques of Ferro's writing continue to exhibit a misapprehension of his motives and purposes in locating the queer revolution at home; more than twenty five years after the publication of his final novel,¹⁵ Robert Ferro tends to be read and remembered—if at all—as an acquiescent supporter of normative morality and of established structures of power.¹⁶ For example, David Bergman, in *The Violet Hour* (2004), the only book-length investigation into the cultural significance of the Violet Quill writing group which Ferro co-founded, goes so far as to infer that *Second Son* confirms Ferro's ongoing ambivalence about—if not his outright homophobia toward—his gay protagonists, whom he represents as “aggressively out of the closet about their sexuality,” but guarded (if not dishonest) about their seropositive statuses; this refusal to name their disease, Bergman alleges, confirms Ferro's endorsement of “values [that are] quite common in American culture” and that project “meaning onto the meaningless of disease” in order to exhibit “the AIDS victim” as signifier of physical corruption and moral decay.¹⁷ Similarly, Ferro's intensifying reputation as an “assimilative” gay writer apparently has prompted Felice Picano, Ferro's close friend and Violet Quill writing group colleague, to take pains to chart—if not to exaggerate—the ideological distance between his and Ferro's work. In his published tribute to Ferro (which was commissioned by Edmund White, another Violet Quill member), Picano suddenly interrupts an affectionate remembrance of his friend—whom he

“loved...in a way that only siblings ever do”¹⁸—to make clear the distinction between Ferro’s “agreeable” literary pleas for mere “accommodation” (or, at most, for “a greater place”) within a “fundamental[ly] right[ly]” cultural system and his own “more subversive” attacks on the “rigidly established” assumptions of American culture.¹⁹

Felice Picano is an outspoken writer who has elsewhere bragged about his own work’s intentions “to critique the disaster of American heterosexuality” by “ignoring [its] dysfunctions,”²⁰ so his essential disagreement with Ferro over “the role of the family in gay life” is hardly surprising.²¹ More unexpected and disturbing, albeit theoretically instructive, are Picano’s tortured endeavors to discredit Ferro’s writing (which he once admired as “warm, personal, [and] terrifying”²²) as antagonistic to the Violet Quill’s objectives toward presenting a “brave gay new world in literature”²³ and to designate him as the literary vanguard to a regressive “faction [that] continues in the ascendant, under the preposterous sobriquet of Post-Gay” and that strives “to be just like all the rest of the dreary straight world.”²⁴ Given that Picano has remembered Ferro elsewhere as “the most delightful of [...] cerebral communicators”²⁵ and that Bergman otherwise has insisted upon Ferro’s central importance to the Violet Quill’s visionary endeavors to present its readers “with an idea of what gay life could be,”²⁶ we will do well to unravel the complex means by which (and indeed *for* which) they now both seek to malign Ferro’s emotional investments in and his intellectual commitment to the imagining of the queer domestic.

Being that they attempt to evaluate the significance of his work while exhibiting a clear bias against his choice of subject matter, recent reconsiderations of *The Family of Max Desir* and *Second Son*—Picano’s tribute and Bergman’s chapter among them—tend above all else to estrange Ferro from the central “world-making” projects of contemporary gay literature. Ferro’s

repeated expulsion from such spaces of affiliation is, of course, supremely ironic, since the most profound and enduring subject of his fiction is the gay man's desire to be "at home" in the world. At the same time, by first discovering Ferro in his homeless state—or, more precisely, as he takes up his enforced residency in the "assimilative" camp of gay writers—we are able to lay the groundwork for his eventual rehabilitation as a superlative literary architect of the queer domestic. Moreover, by interrogating the ways in which Ferro's literary experiments have become caught up in cultural debates about the "mainstreaming"—which is to say, the de-sexualizing—of gay identity, we pave the way for a reading of *The Family of Max Desir* that will recover (rather than cover up) Ferro's effort to imagine the "public" performance of queer resistance as originating in the "private" practices and situations of everyday life. In essence, then, the central contention of this chapter is as follows: by retaining the biological family and the "homespace" as imperative subjects in contemporary gay fiction, *The Family of Max Desir* not only *does not occlude* an expansive vision of the politics (and indeed of the political performance) of sexual difference, but also *amplifies our perception* of the diverse settings in which such struggles can—and must—occur.

What I wish to propose is that the fervent attempts to (de)politicize and, in so doing, to denigrate Ferro's personal and literary attachments to the domestic must be examined in the precise sociopolitical contexts of their original articulations; to be more specific, I suggest that our understanding of these repeated objections to Ferro's alleged conservatism cannot be assembled without recognition of his readers' own investments in a raging, multilateral cultural debate in which "sexually different" subjects have been and continue to be separated—often by their own choosing—into the oppositional categories of the good "gay" citizen and the "queer" outlaw.²⁷ For example, a careful examination of the aforementioned reading of *Second Son*

reveals that Bergman is less interested in evaluating the text as a literary response to AIDS than he is in exhibiting it as evidence of Ferro's alleged *personal failure* to deal honestly and directly, in his life or his art, with his seropositive status and its concomitant cultural disenfranchisement.²⁸ For his own part, Picano seeks no less than the elevation of his own literary reputation in taking great pains to distinguish himself from the "accommodation" seeking colleague whom he has been called upon to fête²⁹; thus, Picano can be seen to construct himself as a queer "revolutionary" who "joy[fully]" brandishes his desire as a weapon and who imagines in his writing, in direct opposition to the more "agreeable" and commercially-viable Ferro, no less than the complete overthrow of establishment structures.³⁰ Ultimately, then, we do well to realize that Bergman's and Picano's critiques of Ferro—e.g., for failing to give us characters who embrace their "homosexuality with the goal of tearing down society and starting all over again"³¹—reveal more about their own adherence to the precisely-drawn battle lines of discursive struggles over what the goals, objectives, and concerns of "gay culture" should be than about Ferro's innovative attempts to map a consistently overlooked site of queer resistance onto the cultural landscape.³²

Similarly, Reed Woodhouse's provocative but problematic essay "Five Houses of Gay Fiction" (1994) might be seen as a telling and necessary reminder of the perils associated with reading and ranking Ferro's work (and "gay literature" more generally) on the basis of its success in doing "justice to gay life *qua* gay."³³ Although Woodhouse's plan to identify distinctive subject choices and thematic trends within the "gay canon" is a potentially useful one, particularly considering the relative newness of gay literary study at the time of his essay's publishing,³⁴ his myopic valorization of "ghetto literature"—that is, of works that depict "the gay world at its furthest point of self-definition" while demonstrating "an astonishing, sometimes

arrogant disregard for the surrounding straight world”³⁵—betrays his profoundly confining understanding of the purposes (and indeed the possibilities) of gay writing. Being that his study equates (and indeed conflates) a text’s centrality to “the canon” with its “gay-density,”³⁶—that is to say, it assumes that, in order to be “successful,” gay fiction must focus exclusively upon separatist figures who “see their sexuality as a key to their lives”³⁷—Woodhouse renders himself ill-equipped to discover the complex meanings and objectives of novels such as *The Family of Max Desir* which offer a vision of the world that extends beyond the circumscribed geography, both literal and figurative, of the gay ghetto.

Although he criticizes all four of the lesser “branches” of gay fiction—named in his essay as “closet, proto-ghetto, assimilative, and ‘queer’”—for diverging from the simple, ghettoizing aims of the “distinguishable body of first-rate work” that comprises “the trunk...of our particular literary tree,”³⁸ Woodhouse saves his most thoroughly denigratory comments for those fictional texts—Ferro’s *The Family of Max Desir* among them—that allegedly enact the disappearance of gay identity as a consequence of their “deliberately integrative” ambitions to collapse the distance between the “gay” and “straight” worlds.³⁹ Proceeding from the questionable assumption that “a certain apartness is essential to a full homosexuality, as well as to the literature that celebrates it,”⁴⁰ Woodhouse arrives at the faulty conclusion that Ferro’s decision to depict “gay life within the implicit or explicit context of mainstream life” must necessarily render it “assimilitative”; in other words, it becomes “fiction *about* gay men *for* straight readers” that “tacitly appeals to mainstream values—especially those of the family, or of monogamous love—to bless its gay characters.”⁴¹ According to such reasoning, it is the very broadness and complexity of Ferro’s vision of the world that effects his work’s exclusion from the category of “gay fiction,” which Woodhouse typifies and endorses as the *only* literature that should be

written “by, for, and about gay men.”⁴² In Woodhouse’s estimation, the most troubling shortcoming of *The Family of Max Desir* would be its failure to “resemble[] the ghetto by embodying”—which is to say, its refusal to delineate a fixed and discrete location for the expression of—the homosexual’s distinguishing “virtues of separateness and pride.”⁴³ If “the ghetto is the closest we have yet come to a ‘home’,”⁴⁴ as Woodhouse argues about both gay life and literature in his essay’s conclusion, then Ferro and his fictional mouthpiece Max Desir emerge here as doubly dispossessed from this foundational site: in speaking about their desires, they risk exile from their families of origin; in speaking about their biological families, they are guaranteed exclusion from their sexual communities, which is to say, from the “families of choice”⁴⁵ that comprise their new structures of relationality.

Hence, if we wish to discover the unexpected spaces in which Ferro locates queer resistance, we first must recognize the ways in which *The Family of Max Desir* is both unavoidably implicated in and strategically inattentive to the complex and pervasive social tendency toward dualistic thinking in the arena of sexual politics. Max Desir may be shown to be driven by his desire to establish and maintain settled and delimited spaces of belonging and exclusion, whether geographical or symbolic, yet Ferro forces him to confront a world that fails to resolve itself in such neat or dichotomous terms. In refusing to preserve clear distinctions between the oppositional sites of “inside” and “outside” when mapping the spaces of his novel, Ferro strives to re-vision the world queerly, which is to say, he announces his profound resistance to the many collaborating modes of dualistic thinking that give our culture its present structure and form. Yet because alternatives to dualistic thought are still nearly impossible to imagine, much less to model or to articulate,⁴⁶ Ferro’s “extreme makeover” of the world renders his fiction exceptionally difficult to classify and, thus, easy to misinterpret. By forcing his

characters and, by extension, his readers to uncomfortably reside in (and perceive the world from within) the “unsettled” spaces of perplexity and mystification—that is, to quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in a different context, “near the boundary of what [they] can’t figure out how to say readily, never mind prescribe to others”⁴⁷—Ferro pushes us into the largely uncharted territory of the queer domestic.

In effect, then, it is not necessarily the case that the accepted readings of *The Family of Max Desir* are insufficiently reflective about Ferro’s personal, political, and literary convictions; rather, our ability to discern the rich complexities and productive possibilities of Ferro’s queerly *different* and non-dualistic vision of the world has been severely constrained by our attachment to a too-facile binarism. What I am trying to accomplish through the reading that follows is to productively re-align Ferro’s “domestic” narrative of a gay man and/in his family with the diverse traditions of frank and unapologetic queer writing that have begun to flourish in the past forty or more years. Refusing a logic that calls for a taxonomy—much less a hierarchical ranking—of these texts in terms of their differing levels of “success” in achieving a queer-centric perspective on the world, I aim to read *The Family of Max Desir* in such a way that it may occupy a conversant space *beside*—rather in opposition to— the narratives of Ferro’s literary peers (e.g., Felice Picano’s *The Lure* (1979), Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), Larry Kramer’s *Faggots* (1978), Edmund White’s *The Beautiful Room is Empty* (1988), and George Whitmore’s *The Confessions of Danny Slocum, or Gay Life in the Big City* (1985)) which reveal a more apparent investment in “gay culture” as it has been most commonly formulated.

By invoking the word *beside* here, I am drawing upon Sedgwick’s provocative understanding of it as a “salient preposition” that spatially resists dualism in that “a number of

elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them.”⁴⁸ To be clear, in proposing to read *The Family of Max Desir* beside the novels of Ferro’s more apparently “queer” contemporaries, I do not wish to suggest that any of these works particularly approximate one another in their specific intentions, nor that they possess an essential compatibility that would enable their peaceful co-existence as the emblematic “gay” texts of their particular cultural moment. As Sedgwick brilliantly conceives it, *beside* locates correspondences among divergent modes of thinking that are expansive rather than reductive; that is, it facilitates the conjoining of an “wide range” of connected but non-analogous perspectives and life practices, yet insists upon a “spacious agnosticism” about “the linear logics”⁴⁹ that would otherwise compel us to understand these phenomena in dualistic relation to one another.

Above all else, then, this chapter endeavors to highlight Ferro’s significant contributions to an unequivocally proud and public “gay” literary movement that began to thrive in the wake of Stonewall.⁵⁰ To be sure, *The Family of Max Desir* is marked by—or marred by, as some critics would have it—difference in its singular preoccupation with the subject of a gay man at home with his family of origin.⁵¹ Yet Ferro’s choice to focus primarily on Max’s domestic existence should not be misinterpreted as his attempt to disengage from the more politicized concerns of his literary peers; rather, in deciding to concentrate upon the everyday details and mundane concerns of his character’s home life, Ferro can be seen to break new ground in the articulation of queer subject positions. Unlike (but nevertheless *beside*) those writers who would uphold positive visibility as the paramount achievement of gay culture, Ferro seeks in his writing to shift the emphasis from a singular, essentialist pride in *being* “out” or “openly gay” to a “pragmatic” insistence upon modes of sexual invention and queer *becoming*.⁵² In his queerly domestic narratives, Ferro attempts to open up textual spaces in which the established limits of

representation are productively transgressed and strategically re-defined. Above all else, then, Ferro's writings direct our attention toward the localized sites in which the diverse and unexpected performances of queer sexualities might contest and disrupt the discursive forces that delineate our culture's structures of belonging and that perpetuate its systems of sexual classification.

In *The Family of Max Desir*, the literal struggle for a queer inhabitation of domestic space—or, more precisely, for the ownership of one's emergent self in the place(s) we call home—is figuratively approximated by the frequent and surprising collisions of generic forms (e.g., “realism” vs. “fantasy”) that punctuate the narrative. Because Max desires above all else to incorporate himself into his family without disappearing into, or losing his queer specificity within, their structures of belonging, he must learn to survive in spaces that are characterized by a perpetual tension between inclusion and eradication. These unsettled but inhabitable spaces of contradiction become, in the self-creating processes of autobiographical storytelling, the superlative sites of queer disruption and defiance, in that exceptionally productive collisions between realist depiction strategies and the representation of the inexplicably fantastical always occur there. On the one hand, *The Family of Max Desir* is concerned with “realism,” although not in the sense that it strives for verisimilitude; rather, Ferro endeavors to capture the “real” complexities of human psychology in general and to envision a queer vantage point in particular, much as E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, and Christopher Isherwood did, each in his or her own way, long before him.⁵³ On the other hand, and much more interestingly so, we see that Ferro labors to sabotage, dislocate, and ultimately de-stabilize the carefully-constructed “psychological realism” of his novel by introducing unabashedly “fantastic” elements into his queer protagonist's life experiences. By equipping Max with an

unrivalled capacity for the perceptive appreciation of the universe's most outrageously fantastical phenomena, Ferro endows him with the imaginative power to interrupt the familial narratives—which is to say, the more established and thus familiar stories of lineage and descent—that propend to emplot him as an outsider on the basis of his sexual difference.

The Family of Max Desir begins in media res, with the description of a near-fatal automobile accident involving Max Desir's uncle. In addition to signaling readers to recognize Max as always already embedded in a multi-generational family structure, the opening depiction of Dan Defilippo's misfortune efficiently foreshadows a potentially self-destructive collision toward which the adult Max is proceeding. Ferro's narrative appears at first to have captured Dan in the most banal of moments—namely, as he is driving through the countryside on his way to Philadelphia for a sales appointment; yet within minutes, Dan can be seen to be advancing toward his own seemingly inevitable ruin. Upon meeting a “long gentle curve in the highway” that passes by “the remnants of an orchard” (*FMD* 1), Defilippo suddenly experiences an uncontrollable and inconvenient bodily sensation—that is, “a tingling [that] rise[s] up his left arm and shoulder” (*FMD* 1)—which causes him to lose his grip on the steering wheel. Separated from its charted course, his car immediately slams into a “certain ancient apple tree” that has “survived,” as the narrator describes it, for this one “last purpose” (*FMD* 1-2).

The fact that Dan's vehicle collides with an “ancient” tree can hardly be taken as arbitrary and insignificant once we later discover that Max disastrously clashes with his religious father over the “advertisement” of his homosexuality on the Desir family tree.⁵⁴ Just as the apple tree both literally and figuratively stands in the way of Dan's survival, John Desir's adamant resistance to the “unnatural” inclusion of Nick Flynn's name on Max's branch of the family tree will emerge as the greatest obstacle to Max's exultant occupation of a resistantly queer identity

that might complement rather than annihilate his inherited subject position(s).⁵⁵ My point here is not to suggest that Ferro equates Max's queer sexuality with Dan's biological malfunctioning, nor that Dan's apparent stroke (which causes the car to impact with the tree) marks him as inimically "different" from the rest of his family in the same way that Max's homosexuality is thought to do so, but rather that the novel's opening sequence presages the ways in which Max's seemingly unalterable desires will set him on his own collision course toward the possible disintegration of his hard-won understanding of himself. Will Max, like the now-comatose Dan, lose his struggle for the "space in which to continue living"? (*FMD* 2) as his emergent identity collides disastrously with the paternal authority via which the home is sustained traditionally, or will he chart a new course of direction that arrives at a place where queer resistance and familial belonging are aligned productively and creatively?

Dan Defilippo's unfortunate accident also serves an explicitly functional purpose in the narrative in that it marks "the beginning of a long progression, a spiral, a ripple effect" of events for the extended Desir family, each leading "inexorably to the next" (*FMD* 11-12). By the time that Marie Desir, Dan's sister and Max's mother, is diagnosed several months later with an inoperable brain tumor, Max begins to believe that his family has been singled-out for grand misfortune. To be a Desir at this present moment is, in Max's mind, to be in perpetual "danger" (*FMD* 13); that is, for unknown and perhaps unknowable reasons, their lives have become fundamentally enchained to tragedy, illness, and death: "Everyone [is] sick and dying: his mother, his uncle Dan, perhaps himself and anyone else who [comes] too close" (*FMD* 13). Death looms largely over the Desir family, and the stories of both its present members and its antecedent ones are punctuated sharply by the themes of loss and mourning.

Max's desire to escape the terminal progression of his family history is shown to date back to his childhood, first manifesting itself around age nine or ten in the form of a recurring dream of a white horse that collects him each night for excursions to fantastic destinations. Much to his disappointment, the young Max discovers that he is unable to sustain "the image of the horse" amid the "banal reality of the morning"; all the same, his realization that the horse comes "from a place inaccessible to everyone else—his own dreams" provides him with his first glimpse of the "real" and secret powers of his imagination (*FMD* 38). That is to say, Max recognizes the dream horse as a potent means for private expression; his nightly adventures both articulate and temporarily satisfy his urgent need for freedom from, or at least greater mobility within, the scripted limits of the Desir family narrative.

Because of its symbolic importance to him, Max's relationship with his dream horse soon begins to border on the "obsessive," and his parents respond (following the suggestion of a psychiatrist) by presenting him with a series of equine figurines through which he might initiate "a process of transference" that will re-establish his connection to the world of reality. Rather than serving as "a way out of [his] dilemma," however, Max's obedient efforts to delight in these poorly-made figurines only serves to confirm in his mind the superior value of—which is to say, the more substantial reality of—the horse that provides nightly transport in his dreams. Upon his disgusted recognition of the cheap materiality of these statuettes, Max "hurl[s]" a "particular bronze" one "deep into the woods," only to retrieve it moments later (*FMD* 38). Max's contradictory actions here would seem to suggest a profound internal conflict: although he recognizes the inadequacies of both the dream itself and its residual approximation in the figurine, he nevertheless retains an imaginative appreciation of a world that extends far beyond the "banal and frivolous" limits of his everyday experience (*FMD* 55).

By the time that Max reaches the age of thirteen, he has supplemented, if not replaced, his dreams of the horse with a more practical but still imaginative aspiration to “go to New York and become a gypsy, a chorus boy” or “a professional dancer” (FMD 43). Although his fantasies of “stardom on the musical stage” comprise a more mature and realistic plan of escape than his visions of the magical horse, Max’s public exhibition of these dreams through his increasingly “arty” dance performances has the unwelcome consequence of marking him—in the minds of his father, his siblings, and his classmates—as “effeminate,” which is to say, as “a fairy” (FMD 43). Upon realizing that he has broadcast his sexual difference inadvertently “over the footlights,” Max immediately and irrevocably abandons his dance lessons and recitals; for the remainder of his adolescence, Max will deem it necessary to conceal the details of his fantasy life—including his “overpowering desire to touch” (FMD 44) his neighbor Donny (and later his classmate Scott)—within a private place in his mind that bears striking resemblance to a “small dark interior space” that he has discovered previously in the back of “his father’s closet” (FMD 35). By invoking the metaphor of the closet, and by noting that this “tiny hidden” compartment “enhance[s] the house” by giving it an air of mystery and glamour, Ferro raises questions about the ways in which both father and son keep their self-perceived differences hidden in order to augment their daily existences, which is to say, to give them access to “the implements of another life, in another world” (FMD 35). If John can be seen to keep his private desires secreted away in order to assert and sustain his paternal authority over the homespace, Max on the other hand articulates—however surreptitiously—his awareness of the unspeakable differences within himself that are likely to accomplish his expulsion from this site of belonging.

Giving an affectionate nod to fictional texts in which the sexual awakenings of domestically confined individuals are initiated through their international travel experiences,

Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1878) and E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) among them, Ferro stages Max Desir's gradual development of a queer identity that is "miraculously easy and comfortable" for him to inhabit publicly (*FMD* 56)—during the course of a post-graduation trip to Italy. Max's enraptured participation in the sexual underground of Florence initiates a process of self-transformation through which he strives to unlearn his "wrong attitudes ... about himself, ... about his education, ... and about sex" (*FMD* 54). Ferro's initial appeals to the language of the theatrical to describe these sexual dallies—for example, Max is said to emerge into the nighttime cruising grounds of the Piazza della Signoria as if "slipping onstage" (*FMD* 54), and, once there, he awaits the "upstage" appearance of his objects of desire (*FMD* 55)—emphasize the performative aspects of Max's queer subjecthood. The extent to which his sexual identity is self-inventive (which is not to say self-invented) becomes apparent through Max's recollection of his feelings of having "stepp[ed] out of himself, as from behind a wall through which he had peered as through the false eyes of a portrait" following his first act of penetrative sex with a man (*FMD* 56).

Although Max may experience his sexual awakening as the emergence of his more authentic self, his appeal to theatrical symbolism reveals the extent to which his first "real" performances of queer identity are enacted within a realm of artificiality and pretense. To be sure, real and substantial changes are shown to be taking place in Max's character; however, it is essential to recognize that Max's process of transformation originates within an imaginary playspace in which real world concerns are eclipsed by romantic notions of queer possibility. Through his nightly cruising of the Piazza della Signoria, Max develops several "romantic friendships" (*FMD* 55) that provide for his entry into an extensive, underground social circuit in which class difference disappears—or at least is rendered inconsequential—in the face of the

sexual sameness of its participants; in bringing together “the titled queens and the working class,” these nocturnal gatherings call into being an egalitarian fantasy space in which individuals can perform their queerness free from the constraints of experience and history (*FMD* 56).⁵⁶ In its earliest formulation, then, Max’s performance of difference becomes an act of expatriation, in that it facilitates his estrangement from the scripted roles that he has played at home, both in the national and familial senses of the word.⁵⁷ At the same time, however, Max’s developing sense of self-awareness initiates his increasingly “absorbed interest in the goings-on of the world” (*FMD* 57). In establishing this connection between Max’s performance of queerness and the emergence of his social consciousness, Ferro emphasizes the real and substantial consequences of his protagonist’s formulation of a non-normative sexual identity. In order to claim his queerness as a site of everyday inhabitation, Max will have to find a way to practice his difference within the structures of belonging from which he separates himself presently.

Max’s movement away from the imaginary world of queer privilege and social equality begins abruptly with his arrest and subsequent imprisonment for initiating sex with a plainclothes policeman. Yet Max’s violent expulsion from the sexual underground of Florence has the unexpected effect of immediately propelling him into another realm of romantic fantasy. Following a sexually-charged chance encounter in the shower with a fellow American, Max is spared miraculously from the harsher realities of *La Stella Nera* (which translates ominously as “The Black Star”). Once again, the real and the fantastic can be seen to collide in Max’s life as Nick Flynn—who is described as looking like a “statue” that marks “the entrance to something fabulous” (*FMD* 62)—not only secures his and Max’s immediate release from prison, but also

effects the erasure of their respective crimes, through the improbable intervention of Lydia, Nick's benefactress and the Italian president's sister.

In the immediately succeeding narrative moments, as Max and Nick seclude themselves in a presidential villa and begin to go from 'falling in love' to "being in love" (*FMD* 71), Ferro's narration of the two men's emergent domesticity vacillates between a need to expose the deficiencies of gay separatist fantasies and a desire to succumb to their considerable allure. Although Ferro's intentions may be merely to capture the unabashedly romantic nature of newfound pleasure, his ensuing depiction of Max and Nick's virtual retreat from the real world— either through the joys of domestic bliss or by participating in the elitist affairs of Lydia's social circle—seems at first to endorse a vision of gay life that rivals that of the "ghetto novel" in terms of its absolute insularity and its exaggerated lyricism. Upon taking an apartment in Rome, Max and Nick's activities are shown to be evenly divided between—and absolutely restricted to—two self-contained spheres of dream-like existence: they are either "settling in" together (*FMD* 71) behind the closed doors of their "grand little place with balconies off every room" (*FMD* 68-9) or making costumed appearances as the objects of desire for "the rich and sophisticated" guests of Lydia's elaborately theatrical (and decidedly campy) dinner parties (*FMD* 74-5). Either way, their self-proscribed movements betray an evident desire (if not an imperative need) to make a place for themselves that will protect them from, rather than connect them to, the vicissitudes of daily life. Max and Nick's initial vision of queer domesticity is thereby limited to a honeymoon fantasy of the "single, continuous act of making love" to one another; as such, the world in which they imagine themselves to exist extends no further than "the borders" of "each other's body" (*FMD* 67).

Yet by describing Max and Nick, in a clever play on words, as “*bent* on inventing a reasonable replica of life” (*FMD* 71), Ferro initiates a subtle critique of this altogether too restrictive formulation of queer domesticity, which he views as fundamentally regressive—not to mention personally confining and politically dangerous—in that it seeks to sustain fantasies of idealized separatism rather than to envision and to enact practicable plans of engaged resistance.⁵⁸ To be sure, Ferro remains sympathetic to Max and Nick’s desires for a place of their own, yet he insists upon the absolute necessity of a queer exploding of the myth of the homespace as a settled space of comfort and retreat. Although he is careful to acknowledge the incredibly seductive allure of nostalgic visions of family life—which is to say, the dominant imaginings of home as a safe haven from the world which derive from “movies or dreams,” as well as from other expressions of the imagination, or from actual childhood experience (*FMD* 71)—Ferro nevertheless impels his characters toward the gradual recognition and inhabitation of unsettled spaces in which notions of belonging and exclusion, and of inside and outside, can be sharply contested.

By situating themselves in these borderland sites, Max and Nick will work toward the productive revision of, rather than the mere simulation and the unthinking perpetuation of, existing cultural models of domesticity and relationality. Thus, as seductive as it may be for him to imagine Max and Nick (and indeed for them to imagine themselves) in permanent, romantic estrangement from the world and from their families—that is, as queer expatriots who are “alone and on their own” and who are “particularly” “interested” only in each other (*FMD* 72)—to do so would run counter to Ferro’s endeavors to envision an inhabitable model of resistant domesticity; instead, by troubling and ultimately confounding Max and Nick’s statuses as outsiders, Ferro equips them to play their parts as queer activists (rather than gay victims⁵⁹) who

confront and begin to unravel the tangle of homophobic discourses that converge in, if not originate from, the prototypical homespace.

Motivated by a profound awareness of the limitations of separatist thinking in the realm of sexual politics, Ferro thus initiates a narrative trajectory in which Max and Nick's fantasies of autonomy must be challenged and disrupted by the repeated intrusions of decidedly materialist concerns. The first imposition upon Max and Nick's idyllic visions of queer self-sufficiency comes in the form of a letter received from Max's father that "shriek[s] with silent alarm" in reaction to their plans to stay in Rome indefinitely (*FMD* 69). Max and Nick make an impressive show of solidarity in the face of John's despotism and profound homophobia by "work[ing] on the reply message together, as they now d[o] everything together," yet their defiant response—in which they declare "their intention to stay together always" (*FMD* 69-70)—reveals a naïve attachment to the belief that the love they share is sufficient to render them exalted and invulnerable.⁶⁰ It is true that, for several months, Max and Nick have been able to subsist according to Nick's "tourist" philosophy, meaning that their lives have been organized by his guiding principle that, by simply "wander[ing] from place to place with open mind[s] and high expectations, important and lucky things w[ill] happen to [them]" (*FMD* 74). Yet Max and Nick's fantasy of a permanent vacation becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of mounting pressures from the world they had hoped to leave behind. Their dreamlike existence ultimately disintegrates—or, more precisely, Max and Nick allow it to collapse—following the simultaneous occurrence of three discrete events: two of Lydia's party guests drop dead in their presence, Nick receives an unexpected job offer in New York, and John Desir discontinues Max's allowance. Rather than write these things off to coincidence, Max and Nick imagine them "like so much in their lives...to have some larger meaning" (*FMD* 77); in other words, the same

mysterious forces that have been given credit for bringing together Max and Nick are now said to be directing them to “let the current carry them home” (*FMD* 78), where their performance of difference will open up a space of productive conflict between the extraordinary and the mundane.

Through his depiction of Max’s first private encounter with his father upon returning home from Italy, Ferro underlines both the definite need for and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to queer resistance in the homespace. In the process of reacquainting himself with the Desir mansion—a structure that the narrative tellingly links to prejudicial systems and exclusionary processes by describing it as “the size of a small country club” (*FMD* 6)—Max is said to observe how “everything, inside and out, [is] in perfect order” (*FMD* 79); at the same time, both father and son are shown to be acutely sensitive to the potential of Max’s defiant profession of his homosexuality and of his love for Nick to upset the perfect symmetry and organization of this emblematic and foundational space.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, then, the ensuing quarrel between John and Max represents above all else a squaring off over space, a point that Ferro underscores through his interspersing descriptions of the two men’s appraisals of their relationships to their immediate surroundings. For his part, John invokes his ownership rights, both literal and figurative, to the family estate through his adamant and unbending objection to Max’s “fucking nerve” in “coming *in here*” to flaunt his reprehensible “lifestyle” (*FMD* 79; 80, emphasis mine); John’s rigid model of familial belonging—which is to say, the system through which he secures and maintains his patriarchal authority—is able to accommodate (albeit uncomfortably so) an “unhappy” son who pretends he is straight, but it has no room for the happily-partnered and openly-gay Max.⁶² On his end, Max recognizes himself “at an enormous disadvantage” in a space where “everything [i]s his father’s,” which faces him with the choice to

either fight or flee (*FMD* 79); by suppressing his initial impulse to search the room for possible escape routes, Max takes a small but significant step toward the resistance of his father's attempts to police his desire and to confine him within narrowly-scripted categories of identity.

This initial confrontation between father and son ends in an anticlimactic stalemate; ultimately, neither John nor Max can be coerced to “bend” from their fundamental stances regarding the acceptable expressions of the latter's sexuality, and “the moment” simply “passe[s]” (*FMD* 80). Over the next several years, John and Max's mostly peaceable relationship will be carefully sustained by an unspoken mutual resignation to the basic irreconcilability of their positions, rather than progressively developed through an arduous process of compromise and resolution. As such, this uncomfortable armistice between father and son portends an eventual resuming of open conflict, with John's initial threat of literal violence against Max—“How would you like me to come over there and break you in half?” (*FMD* 80)—looming symbolically over Max's subsequent attempts to reconcile, rather than feel divided among, his various and seemingly incompatible relational identities.⁶³ To be sure, certain key aspects of Max's experience in the Desir family—for example, the unqualified approval he and Nick receive from Max's nieces, who delight in the flamboyance and playfulness of their “exotic” uncles (*FMD* 89), and John's “slowly evol[ing] attitude toward Nick from cold politeness to paternal respect (*FMD* 94)—do allow him to imagine himself as both acknowledged (as “different” or “queer”) and accepted (as “family”) within this established structure of belonging. Yet the individual but consistent failures of Max's father and siblings to recognize his partnership with Nick as *equal* in value to (albeit *dissimilar* in character to) their own spousal relationships attests to the discomfiture and anxiety that lurks beneath their façades of tolerance and ultimately explodes Max's illusions of familial support in his processes of queer becoming.

Just beyond the novel's midpoint, Max is shown to be edging ever closer to an ultimate confrontation with his family over his and Nick's prerogative to place their disorderly narratives of flexible affiliations beside the Desir's more established (and fundamentally linear) accounts of familial belonging. In order to convey the complex implications of this conflict, Ferro takes care to remind us of the various idiosyncrasies that queer Max from—which is to say, that construct him as productively strange in relation to—the other members of his family. Tellingly, Max's deviations from the norm—including, but not limited to, Max's ongoing conversations with an extraterrestrial being, which inspire “rich, violent, and informative dreams” about the future of our planet⁶⁴; his and Nick's decision to practice “ethical non-monogamy” as a defining characteristic of their lifetime commitment to one another⁶⁵; and Max's participation in voodoo healing and cleansing rituals with his part-time lover Clive⁶⁶—are distinguished not by their sensationalized depiction, but by the marked objectivity and understated tone of the narrative voice.⁶⁷ The resulting impression is that Max's supernatural experiences and unconventional practices appear to be seamlessly fused with all that which is thoroughly banal⁶⁸; in other words, these extraordinary phenomena warrant no special justification from the narrator (nor do they demand an excitable reaction from the reader) because they are shown to represent everyday occurrences in the character's life. By Ferro's way of thinking, to fixate upon whether Max's visions are “real” or “imagined” and whether his and Nick's affairs are constructive or merely “diversionary” (*FMD* 108) would be to miss the point completely; instead, he strives to shift our attention to Max's unique capacity for the daily inhabitation of alternate spaces (domestic and institutional; literal and symbolic) in which such distinctions are purposefully collapsed or, at the very least, are rendered inconsequential.

At the same time, Ferro endows Max's everyday queerness with the capacity to reinvigorate family narratives that are otherwise typified by mundanity and fatalism; the novel's most sustained documentation of Max's practice of a "lifestyle" of which John Desir "do[es] not approve" (*FMD* 80) thereby functions as a buoyant and disruptive counterpoint to the bleakly realistic narratives which frame it, namely, to the tales of Marie's slow decline and of the consequent dissolution of the Desir family structure. Although he is shown to grapple in private over the seeming irreconcilability of the "three separate parts of his life—his dying mother, Nick and Clive" (*FMD* 108), Max remains consistently aware of the fact that it is the story that the world tells about him, and not the story that he tells of himself, that causes these feelings of personal fragmentation: "Is *everybody* [else] wrong [in their disdain for homosexuality]?", John Desir asks the son who has just come out to him; "Yes! Everybody's wrong!" (*FMD* 79) is Max's defiant answer, both in his immediate response and in his lifelong rehearsal of a mode of resistance that seeks to re-invent the world queerly. Significantly, Max Desir's endeavors to assemble and make sense of his seemingly incongruent life experiences through the self-creative act of personal storytelling emerge as the extensions of his struggles to resolve the issue of his relationship to his family⁶⁹; thus, his most personal and pressing motivation for insisting upon the validity of his own ec-centric position and perspective might be understood best as a desire to inscribe difference upon—that is, to queer—the normalizing discourses through which his sense of "belonging" (or lack thereof) has been largely determined.⁷⁰

More so than in any other place, Ferro underscores the queer storyline's capacity to suspect and to disrupt the overreaching authority of narratives of family lineage when he details the Desirs' emotionally-charged conflict over an embroidered family tree that Andrea, Max's sixteen-year-old niece, makes and presents to her grandparents at Christmas. Given the family's

heightened level of sentimentality in the face of Marie's imminent demise, the trapunto tapestry is welcomed by all as the holiday's "most important gift" (*FMD* 112); almost immediately following its unwrapping, arrangements are underway to have it elegantly framed for display in the Desir family mansion. Under John and Marie's supervision, Max is called upon to reorder "all the prints, plaques, needlepoint, photographs, silhouettes and inspirational sayings" that already hang on the main wall of the family den (*FMD* 114); being that "the whole pictorial archive of the family" can be said to be "summed up in this new piece," it makes sense that the family tree should occupy "the center" of and thus serve as the focal point to a "*new arrangement*" of the various images that comprise the Desirs' history together (*FMD* 114, emphasis mine). Ferro's use of the term "new arrangement" is profoundly symbolic here, as the reader soon discovers: although the embroidered tree clearly has been designed to visualize—or, more precisely, to substantiate—the corporate structure from which the Desirs' substories derive and in which their individual narratives converge, the late discovery of Andrea's ingenuous stitching of "Nick Flynn's name" on a branch "with [that of] Max" (*FMD* 115) unexpectedly calls into question the very models of kinship that give shape and meaning to their lives together. In short, Max and Nick's conspicuous linkage on the family tree queers and unbalances the others' claims to a "natural" superiority of their marital bonds; their entire structure of belonging is thereby rendered exceptionally vulnerable, being that its heterosexist roots are now exposed.

Thus, John Desir's fears of public embarrassment—which he articulates as his reasons for confiscating the tapestry from its prominent hanging place, stating, "I don't want everybody asking me who Nick Flynn is" and "I don't want *My son is a homosexual* written on [my wall]" (*FMD* 116)—merely scratch at the surface of the complicated and substantial issues that are raised by the documentation of Nick and Max's partnership on the Desir family tree. Although

John's simple dread of having to explain Nick and Max's relationship to "every Tom, Dick and Harry [who] ask[s]" him about it (*FMD* 116) may explain in part his hasty removal of the embroidery, his subsequent conversations with Max and with his psychotherapist daughter Robin reveal his internal struggle to be considerably more complex. Upon hearing John's demand that Nick's name be taken "off that tree or it won't go up on the wall," Robin reminds her father of the longevity of Nick and Max's relationship, but John discounts the significance of the two men's fifteen year relationship by invoking the technicality that "[t]hey're not married" (*FMD* 116) and thus not equal in status to their heterosexual counterparts.⁷¹

At first glance, John's insistence that Nick's name does not belong on the Desir family tree seems merely to endorse prevalent cultural mindsets that single marriage relationships out (to the exclusion of all other types of committed partnership) for special privilege and protection on the basis of the "sacred" and "foundational" character of the institution itself.⁷² Above and beyond exposing his collusion with prejudicial attitudes toward non-normative sexualities,⁷³ however, John's words and actions betray the profound crisis of meaning which has been prompted by the unexpected "advertise[ment]" of not only Nick and Max's connection to each other, but of John's "relationship with [these] two people" (*FMD* 117). That is to say, Nick and Max's queerness can be seen to rattle John's established sense of himself as the head of a home and family, raising serious and upsetting questions about the security of his ideological positioning at the top of this relational structure: what does Nick's occupation of the branch with Max say about the terms by which familial belonging is determined?; is Nick "like a son to [John and Marie] or a wife to Max?" (*FMD* 116). Essentially, then, in being forced to acknowledge that Nick's name "is on the tree" whether he "like[s] it" or not (*FMD* 119), John must also concede

that the inherited paradigms through which lineage and kinship traditionally have been bestowed are no longer sufficient and in desperate need of revision.

Ferro presents his most convincing evidence for this need of a radically transformed family structure through his documentation of the close (albeit discomfited) interaction among the Desirs as they confront the exigencies pertaining to Marie's imminent demise. By and large, the family's arrangement of the many requirements of Marie's caretaking is shown to be functional and cooperative. Yet Ferro subtly reminds us that, despite the family's machine-like efficiency in the confrontation of this crisis, the relational structure that binds them together is continuing to disintegrate because of the unsettled enmity among them. A few weeks following the initial dispute over the tapestry, Max is keeping his mother company as she watches a "word game" (most likely *Password*) on television, in which a celebrity partner gives clues to help the show's contestant guess a secret word. As Max and Marie are watching, the word "*Needlepoint*" appears at the bottom of the screen, prompting the celebrity to present the hint "Crewel" as an approximate synonym (*FMD* 123). Given that a work of embroidery so recently has instigated animosity and division within the Desir family, it is uncanny that the contestant makes a homophonic substitution in her mind—whereas "crewel" becomes "cruel"—and consequently offers "Mean" as her reply. Nor is the profound irony of this misapprehension lost on the speech-impaired Marie, who "point[s] to the screen" to express her frustration and concern about the connection between cruelty and embroidery in her family's life, and who cannot fall asleep until the players have achieved the proper—which is to say, a more constructive and beneficial—outcome. Just as Robin previously has informed Max of the likely inconsequentiality of his decision to disaffiliate from the family, being that "there [won't] be much to leave after Mom dies" (*FMD* 121), Marie's silent pleadings attempt to warn Max that, in the same way that

terminal illness is coursing through and ravaging her body in unchecked fashion, the unresolved tensions among Max, his father, and his siblings are bringing all of them nearer to the family's eventual dissolution and to the splintering of personal identity that must accompany it.

Yet despite weeks of family discussion which arrive at a general consensus that, as articulated here by Robin, the proposed concealment of the “symbol” of Nick and Max’s commitment to each other is “the same as removing the people themselves” (*FMD* 117), John nevertheless decides that maintaining the family’s *bella figura*—which is to say, keeping up the “good face” or “best appearance” that reveals itself via adherence to established cultural standards—is more important than arriving at a concession or compromise that will mitigate the two men’s feelings of erasure and exclusion. Rather than accepting this refusal as just the latest manifestation of his father’s lifelong homophobia, Max instead “blame[s] everyone” in the family for allowing, if not silently encouraging, the symbolic violence to which they all have been witnesses (*FMD* 120). In Max’s mind, the stakes have now become so high that nothing less dramatic than outright warfare will suffice as a response: “You should have stopped him,” he screams at his brother Jack upon learning of the tapestry’s removal. “You should have held him down” and “stuffed his mouth with rags” (*FMD* 120). Wholly frustrated by his siblings’ failures to present a united front against their father, Max forces each of them into the admission that, despite their halfhearted protests otherwise, they furtively regard Nick and Max’s partnership not only as “not the same” as theirs (in that it involves two men rather than persons of opposite genders), but as therefore possessing “less” value than their own heterosexual unions; upon exposing the Desir family’s complicity in the processes by which “difference” becomes degeneracy, Nick and Max will be placated no longer by the siblings’ mere professions of tolerance.

The apex of Max's lifelong struggle with his family over their mutual (albeit productively disharmonious) occupation of domestic space has now been reached: "Either you talk to [Dad] now...[and] threaten him and convince him he's wrong," begins Max's heartfelt and desperate plea to his siblings, "or I'll never see...any of you again" (*FMD* 121). Their collective refusal to take action in response to Max's ultimatum confirms the tremendous extent to which their lives are invested in and their identities structured around established patterns of relationality, which are neatly documented for them on the family tree. At the same time, despite their incalculable preservation of the traditional structures of kinship, Max's siblings remain largely dependent upon (albeit fundamentally ungrateful toward) his performance of "alternative service[s]" within the family, which critic David Bergman describes as Max's conspicuous practice of "difference" in his relationships with them, by which he "pays homage to the family without [merely] reproducing it."⁷⁴ In other words, the members of the Desir family are clearly shown to need Max as much as (if not more than) he needs them, because it is he who supplies the inventive alternatives through which their collected lives might be *restored* and *revitalized*, rather than merely perpetuated in automatic and tedious fashion. Among his other provided services, Max can be seen to re-write traditionally hierarchical relationships (e.g., uncle/nephew, uncle/niece, parent/child) as peer interactions; to steer or to captain (rather than to anchor or to cede responsibility for) the household affairs of the family's ship-like property at the shore; and to uphold, if not to titivate, the personal dignity and the legacy of the mother who symbolizes the family's frustrated desire for survival in the face of adversity.

Thus, Max's various insistences upon his and Nick's equal recognition within the family—specifically, his demands for "a letter of apology...to Nick" from his father, for the re-establishment of "the tapestry back on the wall" (*FMD* 127), and for his siblings' unqualified

acceptance of the legitimacy of their petitions (*FMD* 121)—are shown to be reasonable and fair requests, to say the least, given the two men’s invaluable contributions to the constructive revisioning of the family history beyond its scripted limits. To be sure, Max does manage to win some minor concessions from his father, who reluctantly agrees to deliver a letter of apology to Nick and, eventually, to re-hang the tapestry. Yet John’s gestures of reconciliation ultimately prove to be hollow ones. Having been “asked to do it,” John writes to Nick that he is “sorry for hurting [him] (*FMD* 170) by “[r]emoving Angela’s masterpiece from the wall,” and he labors to characterize the “incident” of the tapestry as something that “just happened” by accident, rather than as an intentional slighting of Max and Nick that “develop[ed] by design” (*FMD* 171). At the same time, the letter—which, in the opinions of Nick and Max, does “little more than restate the issues” (*FMD* 173)—plainly evidences John’s continuing and profound conflictedness over the “queering” of familial relationality that Nick’s documented presence on the family tree enacts. On the one hand, John acknowledges his wrongful motivations in confiscating the tapestry, and he further confesses his sensitivity to the fact that Nick—whom John “look[s] upon...as one of the family,” which is to say, as his “son”—would interpret the removal as meaning that he is “rejected and not accepted in the family” (*FMD* 171). On the other hand, John’s refusal “to make amends in any way” (*FMD* 173), despite his obvious awareness of the destructive ramifications of his actions, belies his unshakable commitment to the “bigotry and intolerance” that “the large world” perpetuates in order to establish its oppositional categories of belonging and exclusion (*FMD* 172).⁷⁵ John’s ultimate decision to re-hang the tapestry “in a dark hallway no one ever use[s]” is thus emblematic of the limits of his tolerance (*FMD* 173); he is willing, if not exactly eager, to *acknowledge* Nick and Max’s legitimate claim for familial inclusion, provided that this gesture both leaves his paternal authority unchallenged and absolves him of his responsibilities

to “advertise” (*FMD* 119) their difference—or, more precisely, their different performance of kinship—to the world.

From this point forward in the narrative, Max can be seen to labor to accept (and to attempt to emerge from the wreckage of) his apparent failure to effect a substantial revision to the mechanisms through which familial belonging is determined and articulated; although he struggles to maintain his fantastic sense of the world’s creative possibilities and of the potential for self-invention, Max feels increasingly burdened by the “real” stories which comprise his everyday life: namely, by the stories of his and Nick’s rejection by and erasure within the family, of John’s intractable adherence to his position of paternal authority, of Marie Desir’s fatal illness, and of the splintering of familial relationships in the wake of her death. As a direct consequence of being emplotted in his family’s narrative structures, Max’s individual project of queer subjectivity—that is, his endeavor to open up a narrative space of outside belonging in which to inhabit his “authentic” self—becomes largely characterized by (and threatens to collapse under the weight of) its fragmented structure, its representations of mourning, and its pessimistic tone. To be sure, Ferro continues to present Max’s endeavors to achieve “bliss” in his couplings with Nick and with Clive (*FMD* 177) and in his spontaneous encounters with strangers as the keys to his queer transcendence over the “complications” of family life⁷⁶; yet Max’s performance of such desiring practices no longer invigorates him. Instead, “the enormous difference between the way he live[s] and the way his family live[s]” is said to “weigh on him constantly,” and to estrange him from “the simplicity” and “the unthinking force” of his desire (*FMD* 177). Accordingly, by the time we arrive at a late moment in the narrative, in which Max and his father are depicted as they stand facing the gravestone upon which “D E S I R”—or is that desire?—is being etched (*FMD* 184), it would seem that Max’s lifelong endeavor to enact a queer

circumvention of the familial narrative's projected terminality has been thoroughly and irrevocably defeated.⁷⁷

Henceforth, as Max confronts the painful knowledge that his repeated attempts to “str[ike] out in some new direction” (*FMD* 177)—that is, to rip open a space in which his particular brand of queer domesticity might flourish—have ended in seeming disaster, he is shown to become increasingly suspicious of his desire's potential to intervene creatively in the affairs of his family, much less in those of the world. In marked contrast to the novel's earlier, laudatory treatment of “the whole theme of the flesh”⁷⁸ as a constructive force in the enactment of real and lasting social change, Ferro can be seen here to strategically reinstate the entirely familiar (which is to say, the fundamentally regressive and largely destructive) conventions that have been associated historically with the literary representation of non-normative sexualities. Max's now-furtive expressions of his queerness no longer serve as, much less symbolize, his defiant acts of resistance, but as his self-protective reactions to his overwhelming feelings of victimhood. In other words, Max's desire no longer connects him to the world, but rather allows for—perhaps even insists upon—his escape from it, which is to say, it provides him with both a means of “*retreat*” from his sorrow over his mother's death (*FMD* 178, emphasis mine) and a way to *cover* his “disappointments” regarding his own “aging” and therefore “diminished” body (*FMD* 176). All in all, the forces of invention that once re-mapped the world into a series of connected but non-analogous sites of self-inhabitation now reveal the landscape as a shambles of disconnected and contradictory parts.

As the novel's penultimate chapter commences, so pronounced are Max's senses of disintegration and defeat that he no longer can resist the strangely seductive (but fundamentally morbid) allures of the stasis that characterizes his daily existence. Rather than effecting the

dynamic “integrat[ion of] his talents and his needs” (*FMD* 187) toward the invention of new modes of inhabitation, Max preoccupies himself with the fearful knowledge that “his life is half over” and that “his bones have begun to settle” and “shift like an old house” (*FMD* 186). Ferro accentuates this sudden and shocking regression of his protagonist from engaged activist to withdrawn victim by situating Max’s crisis over his supposedly disappearing potential for queer intervention within the claustrophobic confines of his and Nick’s cluttered Manhattan apartment, which is described here for the first time. Max’s own feelings of entrapment within the incurable tedium of his daily existence, in which he writes “fiction that doesn’t sell” and performs the “demeaning” work of a waiter (*FMD* 187), are mirrored neatly in the narrative’s grittily realistic illustrations of the oppressive neighborhood sounds that serve as the constant backdrop to Max’s life; whether he is intruded upon by the disembodied voices of music students which float up from the apartment below—a noise that Max perceives as “different voices experiencing the same tortured giftlessness” as they perform their “ghostly exercises” of “long falling scales” (*FMD* 186)—or by the “wild sound” of usually-friendly dogs, who seem to “snarl and rasp themselves into a stupor” (*FMD* 187) at any perceived threat to their territory, Max is reminded—or, more precisely, he becomes hypersensitively aware—of his incapacity to transcend the squalid monotony of his material circumstances.

At the same time, the apartment itself, which Max perceives as “simple, small and somewhat shabby” when “compared to Hillcrest [his father’s house] or his brother Jack’s place” (*FMD* 188), continues to function “like an old yacht” for its two inhabitants, meaning that it still offers them the possibility of a movable vantage point from which to confront the world that is fixed in place around them. Sadly, the overwhelming gravity of Max and Nick’s predicament—namely, that they only have been successful in “approximat[ing]” the kind of unconventional and

self-determined life that they have “hoped for themselves” (*FMD* 187)—has forced them instead, at least for the time being, into a dramatic re-evaluation of this space; rather than seeing it as adorned by the “trophies” that celebrate their ongoing victories over established standards for the occupation of domestic space, they view their apartment as littered with the “detritus” that commemorates the lost battles of their past (*FMD* 188). Although Max and Nick attempt to motivate themselves into the “extravagant” renovation of this homespace, their disastrous attempts to inhabit the world queerly have left them so exhausted and jaded that they now imagine such an “overhaul” as “*impossible*” to accomplish (*FMD* 188, emphasis mine). To put it another way, given that the “surviving pieces” of their lives now “sag” under the tremendous weight of their daily disappointments, Max and Nick are shown to feel profoundly disenfranchised from the processes through which they once invented themselves in/to the world; instead of charting a course of direction that arrives at the yet-to-be-imagined space of the queer domestic, they are set adrift “in a sea of benign neglect” (*FMD* 188), which is to say, in the deceptively comforting waters of their lately acquired apathy.

By this point in the narrative, to say that Nick and Max’s life together has become conspicuously “domestic” is to invoke this term’s most negative connotations; at home and at work, their daily routines are distinguished by confinement, stagnancy (if not regression), predictability, and banality. Rather than fulfilling his ambitions on the stage and screen, Nick fails to move “beyond the level of a TV soap opera actor” (*FMD* 187), which suggests that, even in his career, he has become entrapped in the illimitable minutiae of quotidian existence. Likewise, Max’s employment as a “pantryman” and “waiter” for a Manhattan catering service represents a “distortion” of—which is to say, an extreme reduction of—his “expectations” for himself (*FMD* 188); rather than allowing him to assume his rightful place (or so he thinks)

among the culturally elite, Max's catering jobs—or, as he calls them, his “one-night stand[s]”—force him to perform “repellant act[s] of subservience,” in which “he feels only humiliation”⁷⁹ at such prestigious locations as the Clear Meadow Country Club and the Guggenheim (*FMD* 189).⁸⁰

In a strategic inversion of the novel's larger and more progressive vision of queer domesticity, Ferro takes care here to underscore the constitutive link between Max's homosexuality and his impressive talents for food preparation and service. Upon arriving for duty at his first catering assignments, Max is said to “br[ing] with him the enthusiasm and concentration of a domestically, yes, a homosexually inclined teenager helping his mother” (*FMD* 189); Ferro's deliberate conflation of queerness and domestic servitude should not be overlooked, being that it both substantiates Max's initial aspiration to use his sexuality toward the “service” of his family and reiterates his eventual resignation to a position of “calm and cynical” disenfranchisement within that relational structure (*FMD* 189). Moreover, Ferro's revelation that all of Max's co-workers are gay—a phenomenon that Max explains (in disturbingly assumptive fashion) on the basis that “such people c[an] be counted on to want to ingratiate themselves, and to do their jobs properly” (*FMD* 189)—is further complicated by the fact that the exploitative owner of the catering service, who “d[oes] not pay [his employees] well [yet] assume[s] they should be grateful” is himself gay (*FMD* 190). By exhibiting Max and his employer as complicit in the stereotyping and the oppression of their “own kind” (*FMD* 189), Ferro suggests that gay men themselves must bear much of the responsibility for their continuing subjugation; after all, why should they expect the world to treat them “like the anomalies they all [are]—princes of the stage, of the word, the voice, the face” (*FMD* 190)—if they fail to envision

themselves beyond the “present circumstance[s]” (*FMD* 189) of their indentured service to existing structures of kinship, power, and privilege?

Fortunately, Max Desir reaches the limits of his tolerance for such a service-oriented model of queer domesticity upon witnessing its most extreme manifestation in the actions of a fellow waiter with whom he tricks one evening. Despite the significant difference in their ages, Max and Rocco are shown to have a great deal in common, including family histories that have intersected somewhere in the distant past. Just as in Max’s apartment, Rocco’s walls and surfaces are covered with the artifacts of his European forebears; yet whereas Max simply surrounds himself with such relics of the past, Rocco has become “obsessed by his history” (*FMD* 190), so much so that he confesses his sexual “interest” in Max to be “ignited” not by his perception of Max’s physical desirability, but by his awareness of their shared heritage as members of the esteemed “Delfilippo” family. More caricature than character, Rocco maintains an absurdly ostentatious sense of his self-worth not on the basis of his own accomplishments, but by “trac[ing] his family back to Venus” (*FMD* 190); in his own mind at least, “Rocco’s potential [is] worldwide” because his genealogical investigations have proven his rightful claim to an ancestral line that, in its longstanding and continuous production of remarkable leaders, has served as the “taproot to the juices of the world” (*FMD* 191). In short, whereas Max has sought to apply his ec-centric positionality toward a queer circumvention and subsequent re-invention of the kinship structures that lay claim to him, Rocco is merely content to be an eccentric archivist of his already-determined family history.⁸¹

Although he is initially amused by Rocco’s “delv[ings] into every corner of” his genealogy (*FMD* 190), Max quickly progresses from “insouciance” to disquiet and irritation upon his sudden recognition of Rocco’s unquestioned attachment to the oppressive ideologies

that justify the moral supremacy of “the family” in the determination of cultural standards for belonging and exclusion. Pointing to a “street cobblestone” from the Vatican City that lays at Max’s feet, Rocco paraphrases the Biblical passage—“I will build a fortress on that rock”⁸²—that is most often quoted to validate papal authority over Christianity, thereby implying his essential agreement with (and, ironically, his fervent desire to partake in) a belief system that recognizes his *performance* of sexual difference as the grounds for his expulsion from the life of the community. Much to his surprise and anger, Max realizes that Rocco’s strict adherence to Roman Catholic doctrine on homosexuality—that is, to the church policy that was in place at the time which makes an important (and rather idiosyncratic) distinction between the “disorder” of an individual’s “homosexual condition” and his “choice” to “liv[e] out...this orientation” through the “sin” of “homosexual activity”⁸³—bears a striking resemblance to the John Desir’s official stance on the matter of Max’s homosexuality: he admits that it is “not [Max’s] fault for being what [he is]” (*FMD* 209), yet he ultimately cannot and “do[es] not approve of [his] lifestyle” (*FMD* 80) because it goes against his inherited understanding of God’s natural order for the world.⁸⁴ Thus, “sprawled naked” after sex in his trick’s museum-like apartment (*FMD* 191), Max is provoked into a sharpened awareness of how his queer desire has become mired within (and continues to be frustrated by) the self-perpetuating systems through which the world is organized.

Much more importantly, however, Max’s discovery that Rocco has constructed and maintains his identity through his devotion to the idea of an objective “natural law”⁸⁵ (in which homosexuality is regarded as an abhorrent deviation from the “norm” of heterosexuality) reminds him of his extraordinary opportunity—and indeed his awesome obligation—to re-vision the world in resistance to the narratives that presently structure it. Taking his cue from Rocco’s

summoning of the biblical mythology that allegedly corroborates the legitimacy of the Church's claims to moral supremacy, Max begins to imagine composing different foundational narratives—or, more precisely, foundational narratives of difference—that would support considerably more expansive understandings of human progress; thus, Max's cheeky proposal to build "the fortress" of this re-invented culture on a site "[i]n the Pines or the Grove"⁸⁶ (*FMD* 191) indicates both his blatant disregard for existing myths of origin and his regained confidence in the transportive powers of self-inventive storytelling. Max's recovery of himself as a queer activist who confronts, rather than falls victim to, the overarching ambitions of the family history becomes increasingly apparent when he leaves the apartment clutching "a piece of paper on which Rocco ha[s] written Max's family names" (*FMD* 191-2); in "taking back...all of" the various members of his family (*FMD* 192), Max can be seen to reclaim the raw material that he will assemble into a truly inventive narrative of relational belonging.

From this point forward in the novel, Ferro returns to his original strategy of productively colliding the "real" and the "fantastic" in order to open up a narrative space that I have termed the "queer domestic," being that it allows for Max's defiant occupation of his non-normative sexuality within—or, at the very least, in a place of "outside belonging" *beside*—the existing structures of kinship. In detailing his protagonist's gradual resumption of his localized practices of queer resistance, Ferro takes care to emphasize the consequentiality of Max's evolution from "reader" of the knowable past and present to "writer" of the imaginable future. Still reeling from the pain caused by his father's elaborate efforts to conceal the documentary evidence of his relationship with Nick, Max can be seen to take little solace in his historian friend Arthur's opinion that "[o]ne always has to read between the lines for the queer bits" (*FMD* 193); instead, Max uses his knowledge of a historically recoverable queerness—in particular, he depends upon

his familiarity with Arthur's apparently factual account of a "beautiful" British man who walked "through the Amazon in 1832, traveling from tribe to tribe as a [pan]sexual deity," only to have the written account of his adventures destroyed by Charles Darwin (*FMD* 194; 195)—to inform and to inspire an innovative mode of imaginative writing that is "no less personal than a journal" (*FMD* 194), in that it presents its writer with the mythical vision of his own liberation and enfranchisement.

Joining the ranks of what Ferro has described elsewhere as "a growing army of writers whose work [...] help[s] to redefine the psychological, social, sexual, [and] spiritual makeup of American gay people,"⁸⁷ Max thus begins to recognize that the past only becomes useful upon being taken back from those to whom it has been entrusted; in other words, Max's self-inventive acts of "autobiographical fiction" must re-write the past in order to initiate a present unfastening of the myth of the homosexual from its historical associations with unspeakability and victimhood. Being that he now participates in an emerging tradition of writing that strives to accomplish nothing less than a radical "restructuring of the gay ethos" from "victim to activist,"⁸⁸ it is only appropriate that Max should make the transition from "narrated" to "narrator" at the conclusion of *The Family of Max Desir*. Thus, in the final section of the novel, Ferro provides us with two different versions of a first-person story that Max bases upon the Amazon adventures of "Arthur's blond man" (*FMD* 194); a careful examination of the several discrepancies that exist between these competing adaptations—with a particular emphasis upon the divergent ways in which Max writes (and writes himself into) the narrative voice of each account—reveals Max's increasing access to the emotional and intellectual processes through which the queer subject begins to see himself at home in the world as an agent of social change.

In Max's first telling of the British explorer's story, which is meaningfully entitled "The Tribe," the narrator supplies a richly detailed eyewitness account of his failed tenure as a "sexual deity" in an uncharted portion of the Amazon basin. Being that the story is addressed to—and indeed has been recorded for the further edification of—Charles Darwin, whom the narrator encounters immediately following his emergence from the jungle, the narrative mainly comprises an objective anthropological study of the rituals and customs of the unnamed tribe; although the narrator's recollections of his experience are precisely graphic, so much so that he (rightly) fears that Darwin will find them "offensive" (*FMD* 194), he labors throughout to maintain his air of detachment and bemused passivity as he documents his accidental admittance into the intimate life of this community. Although, technically speaking, the sexual explicitness of this story renders the task of "read[ing] between the lines for the queer bits" wholly unnecessary, the narrator's reticence regarding the unsettling consequences of his participation in the ritual life of the tribe nevertheless betrays his failure to appreciate (and thus to exploit) the constructive significance of the "different" vantage point from which he perceives, experiences, and interprets the world around him. Terribly afraid at the thought of "being left in the middle of the jungle with nothing" and no one around him (*FMD* 200), the narrator aims to secure his place in the community by collapsing the distance between himself and the tribespeople who receive him as their god; yet his struggles to assimilate himself into the tribe—which is to say, his endeavors to portray himself as conforming to their existing patterns of relationality—paradoxically effect his estrangement and eventual expulsion from the life of the community. Hence, if there is a discernably queer subject position articulated in Max's first telling of the blond man's story (as the reader's special knowledge of Darwin's subsequent destruction of the "offensive" account would seem to suggest), it is a narrative presence that inadvertently enacts its own disappearance

through its surprising failure to recognize its own uncommon value, which is to say, the value of its own uncommon-ness.

As if to remind Max, the novel's reader, and its author alike of the "real" and complex issues at stake in the emergence of a domestically-situated, queer subject position, Ferro interposes another bitter father-son confrontation—which comprises, significantly, the final dispute over the terms and conditions of Max's inclusion in the life of the family—between the novel's concluding presentations of the original and revised fictionalizations of the blond man's story. As part of the process of settling his own worldly affairs, the monastery-bound John Desir⁸⁹ is shown to approach his son with a generous offer to clear Max and Nick's mounting debts. Max's refusal to accept his father's gesture of apparent conciliation, on the grounds that they now "live in different world[s]" from each other "because of everything that's happened" between them (*FMD* 208; 209), confirms his regained level of confidence in the constructive advantages of the queer vantage point. At the same time, Max's ultimate inability to "say he d[oesn't] care what his father d[oes]" or thinks (*FMD* 209) substantiates his ongoing commitment to the notion (and indeed the practice) of resistance *from within* the family structure. Turning John's "cockeyed" idea of "help" on its head, Max works to disrupt a family economy that offers support to the homosexual at the exorbitant price of self-effacement: "I won't be a hypocrite," Max informs the father who claims to love and to "respect" him *despite* "what [he is]" (rather than *for* who he is), "just to make it easier on you" (*FMD* 208-9). Above all else, then, Max's clear-cut stipulation for unqualified acceptance by his father—"I want you to be proud of me" (*FMD* 209)—embodies a demand for a sufficient amount of symbolic "domestic space" in which to cultivate and to coalesce the multivalent components of his identity.

The final paragraph of *The Family of Max Desir*, which consists of a provocative excerpt from the revised first-person narrative of Arthur's blond man, gestures toward the fulfillment of Max's lifelong quest to occupy his constantly-evolving queer subjectivity within—or, more precisely, in productive resistance to—the well-established, ritualistic patterns of familial relationality. Imagining himself as a shape-shifting, supernatural presence—“[d]epending on the moon, [he might be] the flood, the harvest, the hunter's god” (*FMD* 217)—the narrator records his invited attendance at and vital participation in the diverse ceremonies that organize the tribe's cultural life and that are believed to determine their fortunes. Although he may not “understand all of what they think [him] to be, or wish [him] to do for them,” the narrator nevertheless recognizes and delights in the knowledge that his multifaceted exhibition of *difference* represents a “specific and immediate way of propitiation” (*FMD* 217)—which is to say, a means of reparation and salvation—for the tribespeople who are favored to observe it. “All that cannot be explained,” rather than the components of personal identity which can be categorized, psychologized, or otherwise contained within the structures of narrative realism, is said to be responsible for making the narrator “holy” (*FMD* 217) and, by extension, for substantiating Max's vision of an empowered and esteemed queerness. Thus, the novel's concluding passage—which may seem, upon first reading, to be underdeveloped in its ideas, baffling in its meaning, and enigmatic in its intentions—actually represents Robert Ferro's most ambitious attempt to imagine that which is not (yet) imaginable: an alternate mode of storied existence that would defy and ultimately re-map the scripted limits of our inherited master narratives.

That said, one cannot help but feel a bit disappointed by Max's ultimate representation of the queer domestic as an imaginary site that is only inhabitable within the narrative structures that re-vision (but do not change) his relationship to the world around him. In upholding his

difference as “holy,” Max can be seen to express renewed faith in the alternate services that queer individuals provide to their “tribe[s]”; yet Max’s final situation of queer possibility within a timeless, exotic realm betrays his profound awareness of the real and present obstacles to the acceptance of sexual difference within dominant structures of familial relationality. Written in 1982 and set a few years prior, *The Family of Max Desir* thus emerges as a preliminary, courageous effort to imagine in fiction a resolution of conflict that seemed presently impossible in reality: the resistantly queer subject’s eventual, triumphant return to the structures of belonging that have long insisted upon his estrangement from his family and from himself.

Sadly, the continuation of this process of queer homecoming (whether in life or in literature) would be disrupted, complicated, and deferred by the sudden emergence—and the subsequent devastation—of the “gay cancer” that we now recognize as HIV/AIDS. Robert Ferro’s growing sense of frustration regarding this interruption to his project of queer domestic resistance is confirmed, in heartbreaking fashion, in a letter that he wrote just weeks before his untimely passing.⁹⁰ Taking time to reflect on his life and work, Robert Ferro upholds and celebrates the gay writer’s impulse (and, indeed, his responsibility) to establish “a place of [his] own” amid the surrounding “ignorance of the people in charge,” yet begins to despair about the widespread silencing of queer voices—his among them—that the AIDS pandemic portended: “We were, we are, the guardians, the givers of the alarm; and of course nobody listened. Listen to the fagoons?”⁹¹ Yet more than twenty five years later, this chapter seeks to affirm that some of us still do listen to—and that we all still have much to learn from—Ferro’s endeavors in *The Family of Max Desir* to imagine the queer domestic both as a sustainable narrative position and as an inhabitable site from which to confront the world.

Notes

¹ Robert Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir* (1983; New York: Plume, 1984). All subsequent references to this text correspond to this edition, which will be cited parenthetically and abbreviated as *FMD*.

² For a telling example of such subjective valuing of texts in the assembly of a “gay canon,” see Reed Woodhouse, “Five Houses of Gay Fiction,” *The Best of the Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, ed. Richard Schneider, Jr. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997) 217-36. A more objective and thoughtful consideration of prominent trends within contemporary gay writing can be found in Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

³ By all accounts, Robert Ferro and Michael Grumley’s long-term relationship was a committed but open one, allowing them to experience both shared and individual sexual adventures within Manhattan’s gay underground. In his recent tribute to his friend, Felice Picano recalls the striking impression that Ferro—or *Max*, as he was known in this world of private parties—made as follows:

Robert’s equinely handsome dark bearded face, his aristocratic, erect bearing, his slender, well-muscled quattrociento physique and long straight mane of brown hair made him an immediate standout in an era of what in retrospect seems to have been a stunning number of natural, distinctly beautiful men. At that time, I recall him being referred to as “Max” by my artist friend David Martin, who had already painted Robert, and later—fittingly—drew him as a centaur for an invitation to a Black and White Men Together Party. (119)

Similarly, in “A Place of Their Own,” Andrew Holleran recollects his surprise at how unaccountably seldom his and the Ferro-Grumley’s paths seemed to cross within the thriving but self-contained social scenes of Manhattan and Fire Island:

Both [Robert] and Michael had, I felt sure, a sexual and social life that did not require the throngs of moustached men who filled the gyms, baths, and bars I went to; they had, I suspected, their own contacts.... Years later... I learned that Robert did have a life downtown, tangential to the circuit, but it was a particular subculture that consisted of private parties, and men of color. He became a sort of cult figure among these people... (401)

See Felice Picano, “Robert Ferro,” *Loss within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*, ed. Edmund White (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) 113-130, and Andrew Holleran, “A Place of Their Own,” *The Violet Quill Reader: The Emergence of Gay Writing After Stonewall*, ed. David Bergman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) 398-407.

⁴ Although Ferro strategically and emphatically refuses to name HIV/AIDS in his novel, using the simple and non-descriptive “It” in its place, his careful description of Mark’s (and later Bill’s) illness—including its onset and development, its likely means of transmission, its accompanying symptoms and conditions, and, most tellingly, its cultural stigma—allows no room for doubt about the disease’s specificity. For more on the complex issues surrounding the discourse(s) of AIDS and the means by which “not naming the disease enables... authors [such as Ferro] to push AIDS... to the edge of the work and place the relationships of gay men... at the center,” see James W. Jones, “Refusing the Name: The Absence of AIDS in Recent American Gay Male Fiction,” in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁵ In his own life, Ferro similarly romanticized his family’s beach house at Sea Girt, NJ. Both Felice Picano’s and Andrew Holleran’s tributes make mention of how Ferro dubbed the mansion “Gaywyck,” after Vincent Virga’s gay gothic novel of the same name. See Picano, “Robert Ferro,” 114-19 and 130; Holleran, 403; and Vincent Virga, *Gaywyck* (New York: Avon, 1980).

⁶ Robert Ferro, *Second Son*. 1988 (New York: Plume, 1989), 5; 11; 4. All subsequent references to this text correspond to this edition, which will be cited parenthetically and which will be abbreviated as *SS*.

⁷ For more on the various types of “alternative service” that gay characters provide to their families, as represented in recent American fiction, see Chapter 10 in David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) 188-209.

⁸ Thus, the unnamed copy editor of *The Family of Max Desir* would seem to be absolutely on target when assuring us, in the kind of purple prose that would put a Harlequin Romance novelist to shame, that Ferro’s narrative will revolve around the archetypal struggle between an “iron-willed father” and the son who must be “exiled” for unspoken reasons from the family’s “intimate inner circle.” Although the flap copy’s anonymous scribe warns us of the need to first bear witness to Max’s unabashed taking up of a “life” with his male lover “amid the enchantment of Rome,” he promises us compensation in the prodigal son’s eventual return to “the realities of New York”. In this reasonably familiar territory, it is implied, Max will find the means to confront and resolve the tension between his “deeply felt” loves for “his lover Nick” and “his Italian-American family”. Although the passage’s concluding ellipsis shrouds Max’s decision in silence, it nevertheless promises an end to the turmoil that now leaves him “painfully divided” between two worlds. Based upon his choice, Max Desir *either* will initiate his rehabilitation into *or* will instigate his expulsion from the structures of belonging, privilege, and authority. The controlling systems of the world, the flap copy seems to suggest, cannot be changed nor contested; Max must resign himself to an “insider” or “outsider” status in relation to them.

⁹ Or, alternately, to de-construct and subsequently re-construct.

¹⁰ For more on this provocative and useful site of inclusion/exclusion, see Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹ See, in addition to the reviews and essays discussed in this chapter, Joseph Dewey’s entry on Ferro in *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993) 128-39; and Joseph P. Consoli, “Robert Ferro,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader’s Companion to the Writers and Their Works, from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Henry Holt, 1995) 270.

¹² The first excerpt comes from an unspecified and uncredited review in *The Los Angeles Times*; the second is from *Publisher’s Weekly*.

¹³ James Fritzhand, in his book review for *The Advocate*, claims that *The Family of Max Desir* is a “stunning accomplishment” that “renews faith in the American novel,” while Eliot Fremont-Smith, in *Diversion*, deems it “a literary accomplishment on the order of Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*.” Although Stead’s 1940 novel of a disintegrating family in Baltimore went unnoticed for twenty-five years after its publication, it is now widely regarded as her masterpiece and as a major achievement in 20th century fiction.

¹⁴ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from the inside cover copy of the Plume paperback edition of *The Family of Max Desir*.

¹⁵ Robert Ferro died of complications from AIDS on July 11, 1988

¹⁶ Ferro also tends to be remembered for his membership in the Violet Quill writing group, a fact that further complicates the endeavor to make sense of his literary output. After all, as David Bergman has observed, the “VQ and its constituents have become lightning rods for criticism from both the right and left of the literary spectrum.” See Bergman, *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004) 21. It is not my intention here to rehearse and/or defeat the many and varied charges of elitism, social irresponsibility, and moral corruption that have been levied against the group during the past four decades. In doing so, I inevitably would lend credence to the popular but largely inaccurate constructions of the Violet Quill as a modern-day Bloomsbury Group or, more implausibly, as a “Fag-Lit mafia” that wrested control of the mainstream publishing world and ruthlessly capitalized upon the market demand for openly gay literature which increased dramatically following the Stonewall riots of June 1969. Although the seven writer friends who comprised the Violet Quill—namely, Ferro, his life-partner Michael Grumley, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, Edmund White,

Chris Cox, and George Whitmore—did in fact share a common middle-class heritage that is reflected in their work, and although all of them would have been culturally legible as “white” men, it does not go to follow that their writings *necessarily* replicate, whether deliberately or unconsciously (or, for that matter, whether individually or collectively), the racism, sexism, and consumerism that arguably sustains and invigorates bourgeois culture. Simply put, if Violet Quill writing can be said to have a distinct character at all, it does not derive from the group’s common vision of (or consistent agreement about) “the gay man’s experience,” but rather from a shared commitment to the representation of individual gay lives in the most accurate, singular, and unapologetic terms possible.

As such, the Violet Quill should be remembered, if at all, not as a literary movement that dictated the form and content of its members’ fiction (much less that of writers outside but peripheral to the group who similarly labored to produce “gay literature”, or at the very least, to advance its cause), but rather as a short-lived and exceptionally informal forum in which, according to member Felice Picano, “seven gay men who knew each other socially and happened to be writers” were able to discuss the representational challenges associated with their pioneering efforts to present the “brave new gay world in literature.” Even if, as the surviving members recall it, the primary motivation for showing up at each meeting was to sample the increasingly elaborate desserts that were offered as refreshments, the VQ nevertheless provided an absolutely vital support system and opportunity for feedback—not confined, by any means, to the actual meetings at one another’s apartments—for the seven writer friends who felt “alone [...] and first” in their attempts to write openly and matter-of-factly about the role of desire in their lives. It is this common impulse to write frankly “autobiographical fiction”, rather than a formal charter or common credo, that united the VQ originally and that continues to provide us with a readily-available, albeit highly problematic, critical apparatus by which to assemble their diverse and often incompatible visions of the world. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Felice Picano, “The Real Violet Quill Club,” in *The Best of The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, ed. Richard Schneider, Jr. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997) 166.

¹⁷ David Bergman, *The Violet Hour* 232.

¹⁸ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 130. Hackneyed as this structuring metaphor may be, Picano’s conception of Ferro as a brother serves at least two important functions in the endeavor to attain a more precise understanding of the cultural significance of Ferro’s life and work: first, the metaphor serves as an important reminder that the first generation of openly gay writers did in fact perceive themselves as a some kind of “chosen family”; second, the recognition of an intense and consequential sibling rivalry between Ferro and Picano provides a potentially satisfying explanation for Picano’s perplexing need to belittle his fallen “brother’s” literary production. Above all else, Picano portrays himself in the essay as a misunderstood, visionary sibling who contests his family’s unaccountable partiality toward a more insipid and narrow-minded brother. Although he gives Ferro some credit for his *apparent* “double betray[al] [of] his origins” in the radical acts of “being a homosexual” and “becoming an artist” (124), Picano contends that, *in actuality*, his brother “secretly” (125) and shamefully “accepted the fundamental rightness of the [compulsorily heterosexual] system”(124). By merely calling for “a greater place within” (124) a heterosexist cultural system that otherwise remains intact, Ferro has established himself, in Picano’s mind, as the family favorite, which is to say, as one of the most “agreeable” (125)—that is, as one of the most homophobically-complicit—voices of the post-Stonewall, “gay” literary scene.

¹⁹ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 125; 124.

²⁰ Picano, “The Real Violet Quill Club” 168.

²¹ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 125.

²² The phrase is taken from a journal entry dated 7/31/80. Republished in Felice Picano, “Rough Cuts from a Journal,” in *The Violet Quill Reader* 65.

²³ Picano, “The Real Violet Quill Club” 167.

²⁴ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 125. In suggesting that Ferro’s contemporary readers are status quo, Picano means that they “seek the same ends Robert wanted—to marry, to have families, to serve in the military.” For the record, there

is no documented evidence to suggest that Ferro specifically “wanted”, much less publicly advocated for, any of these particular “ends” during his lifetime.

²⁵ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 114.

²⁶ Bergman, *The Violet Hour* xii.

²⁷ Perhaps the most famous—or infamous—discussion of the implications of this ongoing debate occurs in Leo Bersani’s *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995). See also Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and the Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001); David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds., *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Mathilda Bernstein Sycamore, ed., *That’s Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2008); and Ryan Conrad, ed., *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010) and *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014), among many others.

²⁸ Bergman, *The Violet Hour* 232. By Bergman’s standards, Ferro’s strategic refusal to name the disease, rather than being an act of defiance, reveals his complicity in established regimes of “good taste” regarding the discussion of disease and sickness. Bergman is similarly troubled by Ferro’s alleged conflation of physical beauty and moral rectitude, arguing that *Second Son* insists upon “the equation of moral, aesthetic, and bodily soundness” in a manner that is similar to photographer Tom Bianchi’s “apologia for the spiritual perfection of muscle queens” in the text and images of *In Defense of Beauty* (New York: Crown, 1995).

²⁹ Felice Picano’s attempts to rehabilitate his reputation as a writer may be, in part, economically motivated in that they aim to boost the sagging sales of his books. Although I do not have any comparative sales figures for the two authors’ works, Picano expresses obvious dismay that Ferro’s novels “continue to win favor and [to] be read by a younger generation of gay people,” while his own “more subversive” books are widely ignored. See Picano, Robert Ferro 125.

³⁰ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 125.

³¹ Picano, “Robert Ferro” 125.

³² For a provocative albeit problematic discussion of the ways in which the original goals and distinguishing characteristics of a singular “gay culture” have been diluted and/or replaced by the competing practices and value systems of multiple LGBT subcultures, see Andrew Sullivan, “The End of Gay Culture,” *New Republic* 24 Oct 2005.

³³ Woodhouse 235.

³⁴ The specific study of gay literary texts was in an especially embryonic state in 1997, when Woodhouse’s essay was published originally.

³⁵ Woodhouse 218.

³⁶ Woodhouse 217.

³⁷ Woodhouse 218. Such a critical assumption corresponds to a tendency among lesbian feminist theorists of the 1970s and 1980s to celebrate texts that re-vision the world from a woman’s perspective.

³⁸ Woodhouse 218. The figure of the tree that Woodhouse invokes here is just one of several structural metaphors that stand in for gay literature in his essay. It is only after his elaborate consideration of the figures of the tree (“trunk” and “branches”), “the closet,” “the fortress,” “the bridge,” “nowhere,” and “the ghetto” that Woodhouse

finally identifies, in a rather bizarre mixing of metaphors, the “branch” of “ghetto fiction” as “the largest and most livable of the existing ‘houses’ of gay fiction” (236).

³⁹ Woodhouse 219.

⁴⁰ Woodhouse 235.

⁴¹ Woodhouse 220.

⁴² Woodhouse rehearses this definition of gay literature several times in his essay, beginning on its first page.

⁴³ Woodhouse 218.

⁴⁴ Woodhouse 236.

⁴⁵ “Chosen family” is perhaps the most common term used to describe the alternate relational structures that members of the GLBT community form for themselves, often to supplement, extend, revise and/or replace the functions generally associated with the biological family. These inventive networks of relationships—which endow close friendships with privileges and responsibilities that are generally reserved for “family” members—have been the subject of many diverse studies. However, the first major anthropological study of this alternative kinship structure, and still one of the most influential examinations of “chosen families” to come out of any discipline, was Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁴⁶ As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has observed, “[e]ven to invoke nondualism...is to tumble right into a dualistic trap.” See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) 2.

⁴⁷ Sedgwick 2.

⁴⁸ Sedgwick 8.

⁴⁹ Sedgwick 8.

⁵⁰ That said, it is not my intention to read Ferro’s delineation of queer domestic spaces in *The Family of Max Desir*—that is, his staging of the sexual revolution at home—as an explicit critique or refutation of his peers’ absolute investments in the literary representation of the nascent gay separatist culture; instead, I aim to present Ferro and his contemporaries as loosely but productively affiliated, that is, as fighting *with* and *beside* one another in their efforts to articulate—and ultimately incorporate—themselves in/to a world that until this moment had rendered their desires, and to a large extent their very lives, “unspeakable” (or, at the very least, unpublishable).

⁵¹ By no means do I wish to imply that Ferro’s contemporaries have nothing to say on the subject of gay men and their families. After all, in both Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (New York: Dutton, 1982), the first volume of his fictionalized memoirs, and Andrew Holleran’s *Nights in Aruba* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1983), an autobiographical, coming-of-age novel, the narrators delve extensively into their relationships with their respective birth families. White, however, conceptualizes the biological family as a relational structure that is, in many significant ways, incompatible with (and an impediment to) gay identity; therefore, it ultimately must be left behind in order to come (out) into one’s own sense of a sexual self. Similarly, in Holleran’s narrative, the central gay male figure must temporarily must cast off or suppress his gay identity in order to perform his role as a dutiful son in his (not incidentally Catholic) family of origin. Only in Ferro’s novels do we glimpse the possibility of an inhabitable “gay identity” that neither prohibits membership in nor depends upon estrangement from one’s biological family.

⁵² For more on Foucault’s useful distinction between sexual *being* and sexual *becoming*, see the Introduction to this dissertation.

⁵³ In particular, see E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (1913-14; pub. 1971); James Baldwin, *Another Country* (1962); and Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (1964).

⁵⁴ The fact that the apple tree is described as “ancient” is significant to note, particularly as it invokes the Judeo-Christian creation myth as recorded in the book of Genesis. God forbids Adam and Eve, his first created human beings, from eating from the Tree of Knowledge, which becomes an apple tree in subsequent retellings of the story. In disobeying God’s edict, Adam and Eve are said to acquire the knowledge of good and evil, as well as a shameful awareness of their naked bodies. The Judeo-Christian concept of “original sin” originates from the Edenic myth and has supported the historic development of church teachings that enchain sexuality to immorality, suffering, and death. See, among other texts, Ken Stone, “The Garden of Eden and the Heterosexual Contract” in Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (ed.), *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 48-70.

⁵⁵ And vice versa.

⁵⁶ This sexual underground bears at least some resemblance to the cruising spaces depicted in Samuel R. Delany’s *The Mad Man*, in which the “interclass contact” among participants produces both intense personal pleasure and new forms of social relationality that result in an enhanced quality of life for all. For a more thorough consideration of Delany and queer space, see the third chapter of this study.

⁵⁷ In drawing a correspondence between homosexuality and estrangement (e.g., national, familial), Ferro invokes—and subsequently attempts to undo—a construction of the homosexual as the perpetual expatriate. For a classic example of the literary figuration of queerness as alienation, see James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956).

⁵⁸ It is possible that Ferro also is calling into question the literary intentions of some of his Violet Quill colleagues (most notably, Andrew Holleran and Felice Picano), whose “ghetto” narratives can be said to celebrate the stereotypical narcissism, superficiality, and myopia of post-Stonewall/pre-AIDS “gay culture.”

⁵⁹ See Ferro, “Gay Literature Today” in *The Violet Quill Reader* 389.

⁶⁰ Upon learning of Max and Nick’s relationship, the distraught John links his son’s homosexuality to the influence of Florence and demands that Max return home immediately, reasoning that “to be homosexual was one thing; [but] to be an expatriate [i]s quite another, although perhaps in an unsavory way they [a]re linked after all” (*FMD* 70).

⁶¹ Max has “come out” to his father previously in a letter from Italy, at which time he disclosed his relationship with Nick. The scene described in this paragraph, however, represents the first face-to-face discussion between father and son of Max’s homosexuality.

⁶² John Desir is repeatedly singled out in the narrative as a longstanding subscriber to (and vigilant policer of) the heterosexist and homophobic discourses that structure mid to late 20th century American culture. Not insignificantly, John’s first important professional advancement occurs as the direct result of his “nauseated” discovery and subsequent reporting of his boss having sex with a night watchman. When the foreman is forced to resign in shame, John is promoted immediately to his position. See *FMD* 31.

⁶³ Here, of course, is more evidence to suggest that Ferro is not seeking, nor even particularly interested in, assimilation within the larger family structure. Max’s narrative does not end with his and Nick’s homecoming; if anything, the couple’s return from Europe represents the initiation of—rather than the denouement of—the novel’s central conflicts.

⁶⁴ Uncannily, in one of Max’s dreams “the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center” become the site of an event that changes the world forever; rather than predicting the widespread destruction and loss of life occasioned by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, Ferro’s novel imagines a process by which the WTC is transformed into “the docking slots of a huge ship of lights from space”: anyone wishing to leave Earth and travel to the planet Iala can simply “take the elevators to the top of the towers and come aboard.” See *FMD* 100-101.

⁶⁵ It is important to note, of course, that Max and Nick would not use the term “ethical non-monogamy,” (which most likely would be anachronistic to them) to describe their relationship; “ethical non-monogamy” is a term used (along with its variant “responsible non-monogamy”) by the certain members of the “polyamory” community to describe sexual and/or emotional non-exclusivity that is practiced honestly with the mutual consent of all involved parties. For general discussions of polyamorous relationships and their contestations to and/or transformations of traditional kinship structures, see Deborah M. Anapol, *Polyamory: The New Love without Limits* (San Rafael, CA: Intinet Resource Center, 1997) and Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt, *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (Oakland: Greenery Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ If considered independently, rather than as an integral component of Ferro’s complex representation of Max’s multivalent otherness, the depiction of this ongoing relationship with Clive arguably might be seen as an instance in which the author unthinkingly conflates queerness and racial alterity.

⁶⁷ For example, Chapter VI, which details Max’s telepathic conversations with the Ialan Voice, as well as his first coincidental meeting with Clive, begins with the banal statement, “Max first heard the voice while he was shaving.” Although Max is understandably “startled” to hear the Voice, he never questions the veracity of the experience, nor does Ferro’s third person omniscient narrator. See *FMD* 99-102.

⁶⁸ As David Bergman has observed about *The Family of Max Desir*, “the two strands [i.e., the real and the fantastic] are not so different. Primitive rites and mysterious coincidences occur in the domestic portions of the novel, and the gay narrative is replete with homey little details.” See Bergman, “Alternative Service: Families in Recent American Gay Fiction,” in *Gaiety Transfigured* 197.

⁶⁹ In strikingly similar fashion, Andrew Holleran has described his friend Robert Ferro as employing the art of “autobiographical fiction” to “brilliantly juxtapos[e]” the disparate elements of his own gay life “on that most unifying of places, the page.” See Holleran, “A Place of Their Own” 404.

⁷⁰ For more on the use of the term “ec-centric” in postmodern, feminist, and queer theories, see Teresa de Lauretis, “Eccentric subjects: feminist theory and historical consciousness,” *Feminist Studies* 16. 1 (1990) 115-150, and Linda Hutcheon, “The Postmodern Ec-centric: The Centre that will not Hold,” in *Feminism and Institutions: Dialogues on Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Kaufman (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 141-165.

⁷¹ John makes his first appeal to Robin first because Andrea, the tapestry’s embroiderer, is her sixteen year old daughter; although John manages to convince a “reluctant Robin” to ask her daughter to “erase Nick’s name from the branch,” Andrea refuses, stating that “her grandfather could do what he liked with the tapestry, she didn’t care, but she wasn’t going to erase anything.” See *FMD* 116-17. In addition to its fictional purposes in demonstrating the emerging generation’s more progressive attitudes toward sexuality, Andrea’s adamant support of her uncle and his lover pays tribute to the exceptionally close and respectful relationship that Ferro had with his actual niece. The figure of the open-minded and compassionately defiant niece returns and serves a similar narrative purpose (i.e., to non-judgmentally confer an equal status upon her uncle and his partner’s relationship) in *Second Son*. In the latter novel, the niece is named Sarah.

⁷² The various expressions of such a mindset are exceptionally well-known and too innumerable to be documented here.

⁷³ To be certain, Ferro’s narrative repeatedly underscores John’s religious conservatism as a major contributing factor in his attitudes and actions toward Max and Nick’s relationship.

⁷⁴ See David Bergman, “Alternative Service: Families in Recent in American Gay Fiction,” in *Gaiety Transfigured* 188-209.

⁷⁵ The wording here comes from Nick's written response to John Desir. Nick's letter attests to his and Max's likemindedness on the matter of their relationship to the family; assimilation and tolerance most definitely are *not* their goals, but rather the fair and equal—albeit unsettling—cohabitation of domestic space:

Your act displayed a kind of rigidity and cruelty that I was simply not prepared for. By seeking to destroy what was a beautiful and loving gesture by a beautiful and loving child, you betrayed more than our relationship, you betrayed fifteen years of family. Part of the pain of all this is that the large world seems intent on this same lesson of bigotry and intolerance....I don't know where we go from here. Self-respect is such a hard commodity to come by; I am in no hurry to risk mine again. I would like to think there is some path back to what was; I would like to think there is some good that can come out of this. But I don't know what it is." (172)

⁷⁶ For example, while accompanying his father on a trip to Vermont, Max encounters "one of the most beautiful" men he has ever seen working behind the counter in an airport coffee shop. When breakfast arrives at the table, "the counterman ha[s] arranged the bacon on Max's plate in the shape of a question mark." Max cannot act immediately on his intense desire for the man, given that he and his father have an appointment in the quarry shop where his mother's gravestone is being carved; but he later imagines having exceptionally vigorous sex with the man whose "body [is] reserved for the transubstantiation of visiting angels." (See *FMD* 181-85.) David Leavitt has infamously and wrongheadedly criticized this sexually-charged scene (and has held it up as a model of all that is wrong with gay literature) in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories*, eds. Leavitt and Mark Mitchell (New York: Penguin, 1994), claiming that it is a distraction from Ferro's more noble purposes, which is to say, it exemplifies how Ferro's "erotic obsessiveness routinely intrudes on the family drama that is the novel's ostensible centerpiece." Ferro's novel would be more "edifying," Leavitt maintains, if it were to focus upon the transformation of "homosexual experience into human drama" instead of upon "fawning over angels made flesh." That is to say, in Leavitt's opinion, Ferro should have written "gay literature that was literature first and gay second." Although "writers might constantly be distracted by the sight of pretty boys behind breakfast counters," Leavitt concedes, "they could afford to be distracted; a work of literature cannot" (xix, all quotations).

⁷⁷ A more positive reading of this graveside scene and of the seeming narrative exhaustion that accompanies it, of course, might strive to demonstrate how Max's naïveté about the world-changing possibilities of queer desire is shown to be giving way to a more mature and pragmatic understanding of the actualities that largely determine the shape and character of individuals' lives, regardless of their perceived, articulated, and/or performed sexual identities. Were we to endorse this more optimistic interpretation of Max's change in attitude toward his sexual desire, we might find a way to apprehend that his thoughts of "Death" while "on the point of coming"—to be specific, Max's climax now is said to be accompanied by the image of "the floor open[ing] and [...] his mother fl[y]ing up at him" (*FMD* 178)—represent yet another of Ferro's exceptionally productive collisions between seemingly inimical forces; in other words, we might perceive these unsettled and unsettling moments of discord and mourning as presagers to the difficult rebirth that will follow (and in many ways compensate for) the recent near-annihilation of Max's identity. What is important to bear in mind, however, is that these depictions of Max's revised perceptions of his desire are, as he himself puts it, decidedly "not sexy" (*FMD* 178); that is to say, Ferro takes special care to militate against any constructive implications that we may wish to derive from them.

By extension, although a bit beside the point here, Max's dramatic change in attitude can be seen to parallel a necessary "growing up of gay culture" that resulted from increasingly widespread concerns about AIDS infection, beginning in or around 1981. Although *The Family of Max Desir* is set in the late 1970s, it was published in 1982, a year that is often referenced as the "start" of the AIDS epidemic in North America. Ferro demonstrates his awareness of the new moral obligations of the gay writer in responding to the pandemic via his inclusion of a somewhat anachronistic passage that documents Max's lately-emergent fears about his anonymous sexual encounters:

Besides the agreeable convenience of his arrangement with Clive, he no longer enjoyed the pressures and risks of parading himself through bars and discos or up and down the hallways of bathhouses. The threat of disease was frightening, the free sexuality of unattached men a medical disaster. His desire for sex now lacked the simplicity, the unthinking force of his youth. (*FMD* 176-77)

⁷⁸ A theme which, as Ferro articulates in his “Gay Literature Today” speech, give gay writers access to “something new,” which is to say “a territory of our own” (391).

⁷⁹ The work, in Max’s mind, is humiliating, because “he does not exist” or, at least, “is not perceived” as an authentic and unique individual; in short, “he is in disguise” (188).

⁸⁰ Clear Meadow is the name of a small community on Long Island, NY; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, or the Guggenheim for short, was originally known as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting and is world-renowned for its collection of modern and contemporary art. Moreover, the museum’s main galleries are housed in a Frank Lloyd Wright building (c. 1959) at 5th Avenue and 89th Street in Manhattan that is widely-regarded as one of the most significant architectural structures of the 20th century.

⁸¹ Obviously, this encounter with Rocco revisits most of the key components of the Desir family tree drama. This time around, however, the gay man can be seen as complicit in his own exclusion. Whereas Max risks his place within the family by demanding that his queer subjectivity be recognized, Rocco effectively erases himself—along with any claim he may have to subjecthood—via his unreflective acceptance of his position within the history of his family.

⁸² Matthew 16:18-19

⁸³ The quotes are taken from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), section 2358; and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” 31 October, 1986, respectively.

⁸⁴ For more substantial discussion on the broader implications of historic and ongoing distinctions between “natural” and “unnatural” sex acts, see Leonore Tiefer, *Sex is not a Natural Act, and Other Essays* (Boulder: Perseus, 1995) and Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 1992).

⁸⁵ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, section 2357.

⁸⁶ Dating back to the 1920s (if not prior), Cherry Grove and The Pines, communities on New York’s Fire Island, have been popular vacation destinations for lesbians and gay men.

⁸⁷ Ferro, “Gay Literature Today” 389.

⁸⁸ Ferro, “Gay Literature Today” 389.

⁸⁹ Following his wife’s death, John surprises and shocks his family by announcing his intentions to become a Catholic monk in order “to prepare [him]self spiritually for Death” (*FMD* 212). Above and beyond these personal motivations, John’s decision reinforces the extent to which his attitudes toward Max’s queerness both originate in and are sustained by his Roman Catholic understanding of God’s intended order for the world.

⁹⁰ Andrew Holleran quotes from this letter, the last that he has from Ferro, in “A Place of their Own” 405-6. Holleran and Ferro shared a lengthy if sporadic correspondence that dates back to 1967, soon after their meeting at and graduation from the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop. Interestingly, both writers adopt the overwrought tone, campy wit, and mournful lyricism of their personal letters for the prominent epistolary sections of *Dancer from the Dance* and *Second Son*. The character of Matthew Black in *Second Son*, a writer friend of Mark Valerian who lives in Gainesville, Florida with his disabled mother, bears striking resemblance—in terms of both his circumstances and personal neuroses—to Andrew Holleran.

⁹¹ Holleran 406.

Chapter 3:

The Animality of Being Human:

Valuing “Filthy” Housekeeping in Samuel R. Delany’s *The Mad Man*

The *bios philosophicus* is the animality of being human, renewed as a challenge, practiced as an exercise—and thrown in the face of others as a scandal.

--Michel Foucault (1984)¹

You know what it feels like, to be pissed on by nine guys at once while you lie spread-eagle on your back in a bathtub...I mean, more than anything else? It feels warm!

--Samuel R. Delany, *The Mad Man* (1994)²

“[I]t is certainly better to be clean than dirty,” Suellen Hoy establishes in her introduction to *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*.³ Setting out to record “the first general history of cleanliness in the United States,” Hoy presents “America’s dirt-chasing saga” as both explanation and metaphor for our nation’s gradual ascendance to the pinnacle of global power. Through our “century and a half” long efforts to triumph (through a wide range of private practices and public initiatives) over the pre-Civil War living conditions that Europeans regarded as “dreadfully dirty and frequently disgusting,” Hoy argues, Americans have distinguished themselves as a people who are “obsessed with cleanliness”⁴; in so doing, we have succeeded in constructing and projecting a self-image by which the world perceives us (and by which we perceive ourselves) as an exceptionally civilized nation. To put it plainly, as one of Hoy’s “well-traveled” friends observes wryly about her “infuriating” experiences with European bathroom facilities: “Europe may have its castles and cathedrals, but America has its plumbing.”⁵

Hoy's study presumes that the progression of a civilization depends in part upon its eradication of dirt and filth; according to such a logic, then, clean *is* "better" than dirty not (only) because of its "real" health benefits, but because of its fantastic ability to put one's nation's moral superiority and cultural refinement on clear display. It goes without saying that Hoy's unabashed celebration of America's "love affair with cleanliness" is highly problematic, particularly in the way it naively privileges and idealizes a white, middle-class mentality that equates cleanliness with go(o)dliness while paying scant attention to the means by which this dominant ideology oppresses and excludes individuals whose material conditions prevent their full participation in a national quest for the "cleanest clean." I begin this chapter on Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man* (1994; rev. 2002) with a consideration of the underlying assumptions of Hoy's study of American cleanliness not because her argument is in any way remarkable or original, but because it so effortlessly rehearses a simple and commonly accepted narrative (i.e., the more hygienic one is, the more civilized one becomes) which Delany spectacularly challenges via his narrator's/protagonist's queer defilement of his domestic space.

In *The Mad Man*, Delany can be seen to agree with William A. Cohen's argument in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life* (2005) that the positioning of filth as something antithetical to, prior to, or outside the boundaries of civilized society is an understandable but misdirected gesture that stems from the human fear of contamination and abjection. For as much as we may wish—perhaps may need—to believe otherwise, Cohen insists, as does Delany via his narrative's feculent excessiveness, filth is more usefully apprehended when we recognize it as a term of deprecation that "has always been a fundamental part of [i.e., not *apart from*] civilization,"⁶ that is, as a label by which we categorize the always already present, albeit "utterly repulsive and

alien”⁷ components of our material lives. Hence, filthiness should be regarded not as a debased animal condition from which we arise heroically as we become increasingly civilized, but rather as “an enduring—perhaps a foundational—feature of human existence.”⁸

Through his excessively dirty “pornotopic fantasy” (ix) of a late 20th century Manhattan sexual underground, Delany challenges his reader to develop a radically different relationship to foulness, decay, and disorder⁹; the only “reasonable” (155) and “sane” (158) response to the fear of contagion that AIDS portends is to acknowledge filth as “an inchoate part of people’s lives” (156). Following the same logic that informs Mary Douglas’s argument in *Purity and Danger*, Delany’s novel proposes that our abhorrence of dirt does not originate simply from an “anxiety to escape disease”; rather, because dirt is essentially “matter” out of place—which is to say, it is anything that “offends against order”—it becomes a powerful symbol that forces us into unwanted, ongoing reflection on “the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.”¹⁰ We would rather not acknowledge the fundamental messiness of our human existence, Douglas posits and Delany concurs, and so we develop “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing” dirt as a means of “impos[ing] system on an inherently untidy experience.”¹¹ For Douglas and Delany alike, chasing dirt is therefore best perceived as “a creative movement”—which is to say, as “an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience.”¹² Yet this purification process is as constructive as it is destructive because the imposition of order inevitably produces “rejected bits and pieces” that are labeled “dangerous” and “objectionable” so that they may be “vigorously brushed away.”¹³

Hence, to follow Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic reading of Douglas in *Powers of Horror*, to designate something as “filthy” is not to identify much less to claim any particular

“quality” for an object; rather, it is to jettison whatever “does not respect borders, positions, rules” to the “margins” of our symbolic order so that the “fragility” of this system will not be exposed.¹⁴ Looking at the matter from a more individualized perspective, we can see how filth becomes a term of derision that allows the subject to renounce whatever s/he apprehends as “the immoral, the inappropriate, the obscene, or the unaccountable.”¹⁵ To announce someone or something as filthy is to “ascrib[e] alterity” to the object, which is to say, to identify it as “unassimilably other”¹⁶; saying “That is filthy” is, in essence, saying “*That* is not me.”¹⁷ Yet this very act of repudiation is paradoxically an acknowledgment of one’s own filthiness; to borrow from Cohen’s discussion of the psychical mechanisms at work in designations of filthiness, in order to distinguish oneself from filth, one inevitably must “rub up against it” and, consequently, be “besmirched by it.”¹⁸ By the same token, however, because filth “endangers the subjective integrity of the one who confronts it,”¹⁹ it tends toward the retention of at least some of its value as a signifier of contamination. To acknowledge much less to celebrate oneself as filthy—to embrace a version of oneself that is “so fundamentally alien that it must be rejected”²⁰—therefore would seem to comprise a kind of psychological suicide that is followed by rebirth, in that it “challenges the very dichotomy between subject and object” in an endeavor to accept that which is repulsive (and, accordingly, that which “demands to be rejected and denied”) as “conceivably *productive*.”²¹ It is precisely such a process of self-destruction in the service of self-transformation—what Leo Bersani would call a “self-shattering” that produces a *non-suicidal disappearance of the subject*” and what Michel Foucault would term a queer ascesis or “becoming”²²—that Delany’s deliberately and excessively filthy accounting of his narrator’s

movement from a state of “pristine naiveté” (18) to one of “mystical” enlightenment (142) aims to document for its readers.

The Mad Man is narrated through the first person perspective of John Marr, a graduate student of Philosophy whose dissertation concerns Timothy Hasler, a brilliant theorist and science fiction writer. The key underlying premise of Hasler’s writings is that “the messy,” which is to say, that which we apprehend as lacking form and logic, is not the antithesis of order, but rather the source of the energy that is necessary to make the systems of the world “coherent and stable” (215). Although his research is supposed to produce a “careful, concise, straightforward description of the ideas” in Hasler’s published work (11), Marr instead finds himself increasingly preoccupied—arguably even obsessed—with the graphic descriptions of sexual encounters with homeless men that the philosopher, who was fatally stabbed in a hustler bar in 1973, has recorded in his journal. Seeking to discover the circumstances surrounding Hasler’s messy and violent death Marr first emulates and then exceeds what Marr’s advisor describes as Hasler’s “unbelievably nasty sex life” (40-41). The more filthy contact he has with others, the more Marr comes to recognize sex as “a stabilizing and balancing force” that “fulfill[s] many, many psychological functions” (152). This knowledge enables Marr to “obliterate” his “heavy, nervous, and interminably obsessive wheedling *fear* of AIDS” (157) and, more importantly, sets him on a course that will lead to the eventual apocalyptic defilement and reorganization of his homespace, both as a material location in which he resides and as a symbolic structure toward which he “tr[ies] to reach” with two different men who are named after bodily waste (respectively, “Piece o’Shit” and “Leaky”).²³

Delany charts Marr's personal renovation project—which is to say, the “untying” and “reweaving” (157) of his psyche—through what William Haver refers to as “a congeries of multiple intersecting, but by no means coterminous, frequently contradictory, narratives”; *The Mad Man* alternately presents itself as “a detective story”; as “a sentimentally satisfying love story”; as “a philosophical *Bildungsroman*”²⁴; as “a pornotopic fantasy” (ix); and as a book (that is not) “about ‘safe sex’” (ix) and AIDS (5). Arguably, then, a contextualized close reading of any one of these narrative trajectories is likely to yield a fruitful and intellectually satisfying discussion of Delany's apparent interest in reclaiming “filth” as the foundation of a radical ethos, if not politics. For the purposes of this study on the queering of domestic space, however, I am confining my analysis to the ways in which Marr's desire to learn what it is “to be a real philosopher” (12) impels and informs the “funny and scary and kind of unbelievable” “love story” (295) that occupies the last third of Delany's expansive and messy text.

Ironically, despite his professional status as a graduate student (and later professor) of Philosophy, it is only through Marr's construction of a queerly domestic partnership with Leaky, an incontinent and largely illiterate homeless man (and, to a lesser extent, via his thwarted desire for such an alliance with “Piece o' Shit”), that he finally understands and can begin to practice the *bios philosophicus*; to employ some key terminology from the Michel Foucault epigraph that precedes the first section of the novel, Marr and Leaky establish and maintain a home that can accommodate “the animality of being human,” which is to say, that can reconcile the life of the body and the life of the mind; in so doing, they mount a “scandal[ous]” challenge to several of our culture's most tidy—and hence most exclusionary and oppressive—structures of distinction:

cleanliness vs. filth, public vs. private, ownership vs. enslavement; familial relationality vs. sexual intimacy.

Marr's initial, unthinking acceptance of these structures of division is immediately apparent in his introduction of himself to the reader. Following an effusive description of his emergent academic persona—in which he self-identifies as “a young, bright, moderately middle-class black kid from Staten Island” who begins graduate school “naively certain” that his thesis will be “a 500-page tome on psychology, history, reality, and metaphysics, putting them once and for all into their grandly ordered relation” (8)—Marr tentatively and parenthetically confesses: “(Another way to put it I suppose: an underweight black cocksucker—with glasses...)” (8). Considered out of context, Marr's relegation of his identity-producing sexual behavior to a self-deprecating aside might be easily mistaken for an obvious indicator of his internalized homophobia. Yet time and time again throughout the opening pages of his narrative, Marr celebrates himself as a sexually “precocious” adventurer who has delighted in having “sex with men weekly, sometimes daily...since [his] teens” (6; 5). Thus, Marr's separation of his intellectual aspirations and his sexual experimentations emerges less as a symptom of shame than as a crisis of “shifting identifications” (11): is he, essentially, he ask himself, “the dumb-ass nigger with the glasses” (12) who sucks men off in public restrooms, or is he the ambitious thinker whose “grand Hegelian” probings into the “systems of the world” (10) will distinguish him as “a *real* philosopher” (12)? Although he never articulates it directly, the most pressing question facing Marr at the start of the narrative seems to be as follows: How will he ever manage to reconcile two such apparently incommensurate aspects of his personal experience? In short, what does the life of his body have to do with the life of his mind?

It is hardly surprising, then, that Marr's advisor's horrified discovery of Hasler's indulgence in "the most degrading—and depressing—sexual 'experiments' [with] bums on the New York City streets" (18) has such a profound impact on Marr's sense of his emerging self. By the time that Irving Mossman, who also is writing Hasler's "full critical biography" (10), has unearthed his "upset[ting]" material about Hasler's unconventional sexual practices—in which "the dirtier the better," according to Mossman, seems to be the "only criterion" for possible partners (18)—Marr reluctantly has permitted Mossman to commit him to a dissertation project that overviews the key ideas of the esteemed philosopher's published works. The only genuine enthusiasm that Marr can muster for the project originates from his contemplation that, "Maybe...if [he] studie[s] Hasler, [he] might *learn* what it [is] to be a real philosopher" (12). Thus, although Mossman's unexpected discovery of Hasler's homosexuality and sexual perversity initiates a crisis "of confusion, disillusion, and degradation" for the conservative biographer—"Really, John, I have to consider seriously whether Timothy Hasler is a man I want to be writing about," Mossman ultimately confesses to Marr (18)—it becomes a defining moment of invigoration and purpose for an already awe-struck Marr. By his own description, Marr recognizes his acquisition of knowledge about Hasler's sexual depravity as a "self-shattering" of the most profound and productive kind: it "marks a kind of beginning for me," Marr confides to the reader, "even as it marks an end to [my] pristine naïveté" (18) about the constitutive role of bodily experience in the making of a real philosopher. From this point forward, things will get messy for Marr, deliberately and ecstatically so.

Marr's first order of business following his moment of revelation is to secure an apartment—significantly, by "suck[ing] off...two very friendly sanitation workers" (19), one of

whom is the cousin of the landlord—in the same building where Hasler resided at the time of his unfortunate death. Although Marr offers little other information about the circumstances leading up to his acquisition of the flat, his motivation in leasing it seems to be to duplicate the philosopher’s domestic situation as closely as possible: Marr delights to learn that the two apartments’ layouts are “identical” (19) and that he has now “moved as close as [he] c[an] get” to Hasler’s former “living quarters” (20). Upon settling into his new home, Marr finds himself “rereading Mossman’s letter for the fifth time” in a week, and wondering “what the hell [a]re ‘degrading sexual experiments’ supposed to be, anyway?” (21). Mossman’s derisive specification of the apparent sexual availability of “destitute alcoholics in Riverside Park” (18) prompts Marr’s Sunday afternoon scoping of that locale, although he recognizes the difficulties associated with following “Hasler into *this*” with only “Mossman’s synopsis” (rather than Hasler’s first-hand account) as a guide (22, emphasis mine). The inadequacy of language here is provocative and telling, as if in wondering to himself how one “do[es] this” (22), Marr finds himself entering into such completely uncharted territory that any further elaboration of his current positioning at its margin becomes a virtual impossibility. Clearly, “this” new world has a system by which it functions—a fact that is confirmed by our narrator’s inept initial attempts to solicit potential partners—but Marr still lacks any real and useful knowledge of its intricate workings. He will need to do a considerable amount of potentially dangerous exploration in order to discover a new kind of relationality that he can practice within the homespace.

Despite his ingenuousness about the public sex culture of the park, Marr finds the courage to proceed with this “experiment,” and, through a process of trial and error (in which one error—his solicitation of a violence-prone Hispanic—almost proves fatal), begins to

discover the means by which to acquire an affirmative, suspicion-free response to his simple query: “you want me to suck your dick?” (22). In order to achieve a felicitous connection between the offerer and recipient, it is essential for Marr to remove any hint of exploitation from the equation. For example, on this particular occasion, Marr and his intended partner achieve intimacy by agreeing to a kind of linguistic game-playing that facilitates a reduction of each individual to his essential role in the exchange. “Might as well call me ‘cocksucker’,” Marr explains to his chosen partner, “[s]ince that’s what I do,” which is met with the deal-sealing reply “You call me a Piece o’Shit, and you’ll be callin’ me a lot better’n what most people done called me most of my life” (26). This name-calling between Marr and his soon-to-be sexual partner levels, at least temporarily, the power differential that otherwise exists between them, and clears the way for their good-natured and mutually-beneficial exchange of pleasure. In a jointly-created, imaginative play zone, the straight, but largely undesirable “Piece O’Shit” (“You can’t get no chicks when you’re poor, bald, toothless, an’ ugly”) is now free to pretend that the “big-mouthed, liver-lipped nigger...nursin’ on [his] fuckin’ peter” (25) is in actuality a “beautiful pussy” (28), whereas the “cocksucker” can indulge his filthy “illusion” of a “universe” consisting of nothing except “the odor of unwashed man” (34). Despite the many and obvious “real” differences between them, these two men have made contact, at least for a moment, in the realm of “pleasure,” which Delany has elsewhere called the “greate[st] field and force...[that] human beings [can] share.”²⁵

This initial encounter between Marr and “Piece O’Shit” sets the stage for the novel’s subsequent episodes of “pornotopic fantasy,” which is to say, for its imaginings of an excessive variety of pleasure-based exchanges (of fluids, of waste, of good will) between differently-

classed individuals that re-configure radically our culture's structures of relationality and that initiate the defilement and subsequent transformation of our accepted models of domesticity, queer and otherwise. Yet it is important to remember that, despite its overwhelming abundance of historically-accurate narrative detail, *The Mad Man* is not, nor does it purport to be, "a realistic portrayal of life on New York's Upper West Side"; its world may be "confusable with realism," Delany concedes, "But it *is* a confusion nevertheless."²⁶ Both in his published comments about the novel and in his text-opening "Disclaimer," Delany insists upon the acceptance of *The Mad Man* as "a serious work of pornography"²⁷ that imagines "a set of people, incidents, places, and relations among them that have never happened and could never happen for any number of surely self-evident reasons" (ix). Although such assertions would seem on the surface to frustrate one's desire to read *The Mad Man* as a visionary plan for queer resistance and cultural transformation, a closer examination of Delany's statements, particularly in relation to his extensive critical musings on the cultural work that is performed through interclass contact, reveals the opposite to be true. Although the "pornotopia" (which Delany defines not as the "good sexual place," but simply as "the place where any relationship can become sexualized in a moment"²⁸) that serves as the "venue" for *The Mad Man*'s remapping of social relations does not and perhaps cannot yet exist, the novel carefully and explicitly chronicles the process by which the habitual practice of good-natured acts of reciprocal defilement will begin to bring it into being.

To apprehend the means by which Delany seeks to reconfigure relationality within the structure of the queer homespace, one first must understand his investment in what he terms as "interclass contact." In "... Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red," the more theoretical

half of the argument that he presents in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* about what gets lost in urban revitalization efforts, Delany pauses approximately two-thirds of the way through his lament for the “erosion of contact”²⁹ in midtown Manhattan that has accompanied Mayor Rudy Guillian’s “redevelopment” of the area to ask the important question: if we “are in a period of economic growth, ... [w]hy, then, isn’t *my* life more pleasant?”³⁰ His complex answer to this question (a query which parallels the vital concerns of John Marr in *The Mad Man*) might be summarized as follows: “pleasantness” is dependent on our encounters with differently-classed strangers “on many levels, including the sexual.”³¹ At the same time, our culture’s longstanding assumptions about desire—specifically, our fear that “prostitute[s]” and “pervert[s]” embody an excessive corporeality that privileges pleasure over social accountability, thereby unleashing the “red Edenic forces of desire” that will “topple society, destroy all responsibility, and produce a nation without families, without soldiers, without workers”³²—impel and insist upon the wholesale obliteration of opportunities for random exchanges across the social spectrum. Should we wish to “promote more contact,”³³ and Delany believes that we should because “[c]ontact and its human rewards are fundamental to cosmopolitan culture, to its art and its literature, to its politics and its economics; to its quality of life,”³⁴ we need to “try cutting the world up in different ways socially and rearranging it so that we may benefit from the resultant social relationships.”³⁵ Delany’s “pornotopic” re-visioning of a late 1980s Manhattan landscape in *The Mad Man* thus represents, above all else, his attempt to fantasize about such a differently cut-up world in which new and exciting kinds of social contact, including those presently recognized as filthy and/or perverse, will have the space, which is to say, a home, in which to prosper and flourish.

As a subscriber to the poststructuralist assertion that it is “language (and/as social habit) that cuts the world up into the elements, objects, and categories we so glibly call reality,”³⁶ Delany recognizes the ways in which his “serious” pornography must help to enact “a necessary deformation”³⁷ of our culture’s existing discourse(s) of desire. In order to perform what is presently “unspeakable”³⁸—namely, the affirmative representation of and consequent liberation of a “range of subjects frequently marginalized under the rubric of ‘the perverse’”—Delany linguistically constructs a parallel world for *The Mad Man*, one in which a shame-driven system of “sexual reticence” gives way to the proliferation of discursive practices that “foreground detailed sexual honesty, imagination, and articulation.”³⁹ To put it spatial terms, the action of *The Mad Man* might be most accurately described as taking place at the limits of everyday experience, which is to say, at “a boundary [that is] located at least one step beyond the forbidden.”⁴⁰ Thus, if Delany’s “pornotopic fantasy” is going to succeed in its efforts to re-map the world of social relations (sexual and otherwise), it must thrust the reader into a linguistically-constructed universe that is strangely familiar to his/her own; in short, this world must be distinguished by “verisimilitude,” even as it chronicles a radical mode of coming-together that is presently “preposterous” (ix).

Hence, when Delany takes care in his “Disclaimer” to distinguish *The Mad Man* as “a work of fiction—and fairly imaginative fiction at that” (ix), he is not renouncing his novel’s political timeliness nor diminishing its social relevance; rather, he is drawing attention to his strategic plan to transform the alienating police state that has emerged from Manhattan’s redevelopment efforts and its safe-sex initiatives into a fantastic, pleasure-affirming playspace that embraces (rather than refuses) the productive value of the “filthy” and the “perverse.” To be

sure, Delany freely acknowledges that his sexualization of virtually everything fails to address and to ameliorate the harsh realities that attend disenfranchisement in the present social moment; for example, Delany confesses that he has conveniently omitted “scenes of winter,” and that he has elided all discussions of “the criminally inadequate attempts by the municipality to feed, clothe, and shelter” the homeless, so that his book’s pornographic intentions will not be deflated by the depiction of such “substantially darker” matters (x). At the same time, Delany’s refusal to consign his homeless characters (as the “real world” inevitably would) to marginalized existences of “continuing devastation” and perpetual “dark[ness]” (x), and rather to re-present them as the central agents of change in his excessively hopeful fantasies of a more “pleasant”—which is to say, a more pleasure-producing—social landscape, are in and of themselves significant acts of cultural intervention. After all, the (not so) simple act of talking differently about sex, filth, and perversion can be seen to initiate (or, at the very least, can be seen to attempt to model) the radical process of *imaginative* resignification that must serve as the necessary foundation to any and all *actual* transformations of cultural attitudes and institutional policies regarding these matters.

Lest the reader of *The Mad Man* forget what is at stake in the endeavor to perform this “necessary deformation” to the discourse of desire, Delany intentionally disrupts (and effectively derails) John Marr’s and “Piece O’Shit”’s playful encounter in the park with the unexpected arrival of three substantial packages—“two *bulging* book mailers” and a “*heavier*” carton (38-9, emphasis mine)—sent by Irving Mossman. Although Marr has only returned to his apartment in order to acquire a six-pack of Colt 45 for his and “Piece O’Shit”’s enjoyment, he finds himself torn between his “eager[ness]” to return to Riverside Park and his “curio[sity]” (39) to discover

the meaning behind and the contents within Mossman's parcels. His natural inquisitiveness soon wins out, and Marr makes the unwelcome discovery of his advisor's profound intolerance when it comes to matters of sexual deviancy. Mossman begins his letter to Marr by announcing that he has abandoned his biographical work on Timothy Hasler because he no longer wants "to wrestle with this deeply unpleasant material" (40). Although Mossman is willing to concede that Hasler may have been "an extraordinary intellect" (although not perhaps "the world-class one that, a few years ago, a good number of us thought"), he cannot disregard his revulsion for "the *kind* of gay man he was," nor can he seem to shake the conviction that Hasler "was just not a very savory human being" (40). In other words, despite his concerted struggle "to separate the sexual practices from the thinking,"⁴¹ Mossman nevertheless arrives at, and cannot seem to shake himself from, a shockingly unsympathetic final assessment of Hasler's character: "He was an obnoxious little chink with an unbelievably nasty sex life" (40-1).

Although Mossman clearly recognizes the "awful[ness]" and the inexcusability of his thinking, and although he furtively acknowledges his own "sexual oddities," the limits of his compassion have been exceeded by Hasler's ebullient descriptions in his journal of performing oral sex on a Doberman, of drinking the urine of a "black wino," and of "fantasizing about sex with nightmarish creatures who aren't even human" (41).⁴² No matter that Hasler's accounts of bestiality and of being ravished by hideous demons are obviously fictitious, as Marr will unquestionably confirm upon examining the first-hand documents for himself; the unspeakable messiness of Hasler's sexual practices has clearly defied (and indeed defiled) Mossman's understanding of the boundary between the everyday and the unspeakable, and he responds by cataloging what would need to be present in order to render these scenarios acceptable:

You know the sort of person I am, John. Most people don't find me short on compassion....If two people love each other, if two people are committed to each other, if two people have each other's best interests at heart and want to join their lives to one another's, I would be a very small-minded man if I cared seriously that they happened to be of the same sex. Or even if their age difference were that great—hell, Sam⁴³ is fourteen years younger than I am; and *we* love each other! (41)

As we can see in this excerpt from his letter, Mossman's ability to muster his tolerance and compassion depends upon the fulfillment of several moralistic conditions, none of which are met in Hasler's journalistic recordings of his various encounters, whether real or fictitious. Above all else, Mossman must be able to discern the presence of "love" and "commit[ment]" in any given sexual scenario before he can situate the act within the realm of approvable behavior. Hence, it is not surprising that Mossman's discovery that Hasler "has the nerve" to think of the "black wino" as "his 'friend'" (41) would elevate the letter's tone to its most hysterical level; in a parenthetical aside that bespeaks an irrationality—a *madness* if you will—at which we are clearly encouraged to smirk, Mossman remarks *sotto voce*: "As far as I can tell, they didn't even know each other's names!" (41) Thus, "what sort of compassion" (41)⁴⁴ indeed should Mossman have to summon for a man whose practices of desire so flagrantly disregard the matter of social responsibility?

Through a series of actions that speak much louder than any words could, John Marr responds to "Mossman's self-righteous drivel" (42) about the limits of tolerance by throwing the letter down, grabbing his six-pack out of the refrigerator, and hurrying back to Riverside Park in search of his new friend. Although Marr's anger and defiant resistance here are largely self-explanatory, the intense desperation that fuels his search for "Piece O'Shit" is not, particularly after his life is threatened by a "crazy, one ball Puerto Rican" (44) who has rejected Marr's advances previously, but who now demands "money" or "beer" in exchange for the privilege of sucking his cock. As the nameless Hispanic chases him from the park—his wild swings of "a

length of plank” that has “half a dozen [rusty] nails st[icking] from the business end” (43) are accompanied by, and lend substantial force to, his steady stream of homophobic epithets—the reader is surprised to learn that Marr’s most pressing concern is not for his personal safety, but over the possibility that “Piece O’Shit” (who has been waiting for him at this point for more than an hour, although Marr had promised to return within fifteen minutes) might wander off and be lost to him forever. What is it about “a dirty, smelly, clubbed-fingered, bald, barefoot bum with bad teeth” (27), Delany encourages the reader to consider, that prompts Marr to value him as “something good” enough (39) for which to risk his life? To what extent is Marr’s “plan” to sneak back into the park, to track “Piece O’ Shit” down, and to “invite him home” whether he is “awake or asleep, drunk or sober” (45) driven by his animal desire and/or his personal feelings?; to what extent is it fraught with questions of politics and power?

By the time he reluctantly returns to the confines of his apartment, Marr’s despondency is palpable, and his sudden realization that “the Hispanic with the plank” and Mossman are “blood brothers” (45) provides an illuminating glimpse into his present state of mind. Clearly, the afternoon’s rapid succession of events has prompted Marr into a profound awareness of the hostile, even murderous, forces at work against those whose practices of pleasure exceed or otherwise violate the established limits of tolerance. Suddenly for Marr, the outside world becomes a tense battlefield, poised at any moment to obliterate his newfound bliss—whether that violence comes in the form of Mossman’s hateful speech or through the literal and figurative swipes that are doled out by a disturbed vagrant hardly matters at this point. Marr’s largely instinctual but queerly resistant response to this perceived danger is to locate the most recent

object of his desire (i.e., the “Piece O’Shit”) and to bring him home, so that the deviant pleasure they have shared will have a protective space in which to be privately re-enacted.

Marr ultimately fails to recover the friend whom he seeks, yet his resulting discovery (as “looking” gives way to “thinking”) of the “intricate concatenation of loss, desire, and absence” (46) that has fueled his search in the first place has its own substantial rewards. Although it is true that “Piece O’Shit” has largely become an “abstraction” to Marr some thirteen hours after their initial acquaintance, the “specifics of [the] situation” nevertheless prompt him into a “diffuse” but constructive reconsideration of a matter of real importance, which is to say, of the uneasy imbrication of his desire and of “*The Systems of the World*” writ large (46, emphasis original). Since he cannot lay claim to his desire outside this system, Marr commits himself here to the supremely ethical agenda of practicing and publicizing his deviancy in as many locations as possible within it. By following (and largely exceeding) Hasler’s intellectually-informed model for “an unbelievably nasty sex life,” Marr hopes to perform a “revision” to Mossman’s “basic” understanding—which to say, his entirely too mundane perception—of the philosopher’s legacy (94). For Hasler and for Marr, the practice of philosophy ultimately requires one’s *messy* participation within, rather than one’s *neat* detachment from, the systems by which the world functions.

Although Irving Mossman’s and the plank-wielding Hispanic’s acts of violence against Marr are unmistakable in their destructive intentions, Delany also takes care to document the more subtle ways in which his protagonist is oppressed by well-meaning but misinformed individuals and institutional policies. Soon after the above-mentioned incidents have taken place, Marr receives an unexpected but largely affectionate letter from Sam Mossman, his friend from

graduate school who has since married (and who is presently in the process of divorcing) Marr's advisor. Sam resumes her communication with Marr, in a letter dated 3 October 1984, in order to express her concern and support for her gay friend as he deals with "this AIDS business that...sounds just so terrible" (97). Although Sam takes solace in her assumption that "philosophers just don't carry on the way you apparently have to in order to get it,"⁴⁵ she nevertheless concludes that Marr must be paralyzed by fear, because that AIDS puts "gay men into a situation that women have occupied since the beginning of time: where every sexual act carries the potential for life or death" (97). Above all else, Sam wants Marr to know that she "think[s] of [them] all"—meaning all gay men—"very warmly" (97), with the underlying implication being that straight women and gay men can better identify with one another now because the cultural discourse on AIDS has enchained their sexual lives to the specter of death. "[B]ecause we love you," Sam writes in order to express her generous intentions toward a friend whom she assumes desperately needs such assurances, "stay safe and healthy" (96) In short, she kindly beseeches him, be good.

Upon discovering himself to be extremely "bothered" (97) by both the tone and the content of Sam's letter, Marr attempts to work through his anger and frustration by composing a 64 page response to her "comments on AIDS" (98). I wish to give considerable attention here to this epic letter,⁴⁶ which Marr composes over a period of six weeks, because it details the "inner drama" (152) through which he strives to remodel himself (which is to say, through which he attempts to re-structure his *self*) into the kind of filth-loving individual who might come to inhabit the productively-defiled space that Delany upholds as his vision of the queer domestic. In satisfying his "urge to talk about some things in [his] own life" about which Sam "ha[s]n't asked

to know” but that “want to be told” (98), Marr begins to perform the “necessary deformation” of the cultural discourse on desire that will usher in a “best of all possible worlds” (161) in which the distinction between the unspeakable and the everyday has no exploitable meaning. To state it another way, Marr’s unflinching depictions of a wide range of perversities—not only his own perversities, but those of others whom he meets in sex clubs, in public parks, and in the pornographic theaters of midtown Manhattan—can be seen to “put his communication” with Sam, and with the systems of the world that she represents, “on a new footing” (98); in seeking to redefine the terms of self-disclosure between himself and his friend, Marr aims to articulate a radically new means of worldly engagement in which the actions of the individual (sexual and otherwise) are no longer divisible into the self-policing realms of “[one’s] public life, [one’s] private life, and [one’s] secret life” (161).

In a delightfully provocative (and provoking) maneuver, Marr begins his letter with his playful response (albeit a response with very serious intentions) to Sam’s declaration of “very warm” feelings for John and his gay compatriots. After immediately launching into a graphic description of the “pretty strange stuff” (99) that one witnesses and in which one participates at the Mine Shaft’s monthly “Wet Night” events, Marr confronts his correspondent with a question whose primary intent seems to be to shock and, quite possibly, to offend: “You know what it feels like, to be pissed on by nine guys at once while you lie spread-eagle on your back in a bathtub, Sam—I mean, more than anything else?” In his deceptively simple reply to a question that Sam could not possibly answer, Marr throws his friend’s words back at her, thereby initiating a process by which they might be productively resignified. Although Marr’s three word response—“It feels warm!” (100)—accurately describes the sensation of being pissed on, his

strategic co-opting of Sam's terminology reveals his intent to deform the meaning of "warm" so that it may serve as the symbolic basis of a new, pleasure-affirming discourse of sexual desire. In a direct affront to Sam's "warmly" offered suggestion that John should shun "promiscu[ity]" in order to "stay safe and healthy" (97), Marr locates the key to his physical and psychological well-being in the literal and figurative "warmth" of the unbridled exchange of bodily fluids.

To be sure, Marr's refutation of Sam's patronizing attempts to police his practices of desire would be personally beneficial under any social conditions; that is to say, Marr's gleeful rejection of Sam's attempts to curtail his sexual behavior enacts the affirmative psychical process through which he—as a self-identified, and thus interpellated, gay man—is able to recognize, to situate, and, ultimately, to proudly claim his queer self.⁴⁷ Yet it is important to remember that Marr's individual process of self-transformation through defilement occurs within and, in many important ways, as a direct response to the widespread social hysteria that has been initiated by the AIDS epidemic and that figures all modes of gay desire as potentially contaminated and dangerous.⁴⁸ Much more is at stake, then, than Marr's relationship with his friend and/or his ability to articulate his pleasure to her (and, indeed, to himself) with entirely shameless abandon. Having been implicated as filthy and excessive by the fear-laden discourse of/against desire that springs forth from the epidemic, Marr must dare to speak what is presently, virtually unspeakable: sex still is and still feels "[i]ncredibly good!" (105). Having been forced into a world that seeks to place "a mantle of death and resignation" on him for simply "doing what [he] was doing" before the outbreak of disease (153), Marr thus discovers—in an ironic twist on the "Silence = Death" slogan around which early AIDS activists rallied—that his uncensored articulations of his sexual escapades represent another kind of "safe sex" practice, in that they

preserve our awareness of the productive value of pleasure (perverse and otherwise) in our daily lives.

As Jeffrey Allen Tucker argues in his own compelling discussion of *The Mad Man*, Marr's letter thereby "performs the valuable cultural work of representing sex as pleasurable, redemptive contact between bodies, militating against an anti-sex conservatism that is both unrealistic and ultimately unhealthy."⁴⁹ In other words, to quote what Delany himself has stated about the letter's importance, Marr's honest and detailed description of his sexual life can be seen to represent an unequivocal challenge to a "dominant heterosexist discourse" that uses "AIDS as an excuse to armor the body in silence, ignorance, and rubber."⁵⁰ Although Marr rightly acknowledges that it would be highly irresponsible for him to prescribe the "entirely blind gambles" of his sexual choices "to anyone else with any suggestion of probable safety" (156), given our largely incomplete knowledge of transmission vectors for the HIV virus, he nevertheless insists upon the individual's right to develop (and his ethical obligation to articulate) a "reasonable" course of action in response to AIDS. In order to "act as sensibly as [one] can" (157) in "a gay male world" that has been radically changed both in thinking and in practice by the rampant spread of disease (160), each person must determine for himself which specific sexual activities remain in the realm of the "possible" (155). Having arrived at the "mystical" "revelation" that "any course of action is more or less a gamble" with his health (156), Marr manages to obliterate his irrational terror of AIDS (and to replace it with sensible "concern") by taking wholehearted pleasure in his exchange of "warm" bodily fluids with a select circle of partners⁵¹; above and beyond their purpose in satisfying his sexual appetite, such

acts fulfill the restorative “psychological functions” (152) of making Marr feel “peaceful,” “content” (105) and, above all else, “very sane and good” (158).

Delany effectively collapses the distinction between the unspeakable and the everyday by situating Marr’s near-mystical experience, through which he acquires a “New Feeling of Power and Strength” (157) by “ceas[ing], somehow, to be terrified” of AIDS (153), within a fairly unremarkable, two-hour session of cruising at the Variety Photoplays, a popular pornographic theater near Manhattan’s Union Square. From an outside perspective, what happens to Marr in the theater is “simple” (142): he merely experiences the “general satisfaction” of a “kind of an average day’s cruising” (152). Yet Marr more “complexly” participates in an “inner drama,” which he attempts to “re-inscribe” (for Sam’s benefit) over the more superficial descriptions of his bodily activities, through which he becomes able to conduct an “intellectual analysis” of the beneficial role that desire plays in his life (152), as well as in the lives of the “crazy and damned” fellow denizens of his sexual underground (153). Marr’s surprising and joyful discovery is that there is nothing necessarily self-destructive about being driven by one’s sexual appetite. Even in—perhaps especially in—the era of AIDS, desire remains a source of edification and a subject of sufficient value to “engage the serious mind” (152). Thus, in happily laying claim to his filthy desire, Marr accesses “a stabilizing and balancing force” that helps him to “deal with any number of tensions,” including his terror of infection (152).

Marr describes his transformation in perspective as a kind of rewiring of his internal circuits, as a feeling of his “whole brain...untying itself, thought fragment by thought fragment, neuron by neuron, if not synapse by synapse—and reweaving itself into a new pattern,” with the end result being that the new system bypasses his “heavy, nervous, and interminably obsessive”

anxiety regarding the possible health risks associated with his practices of desire (157). More relevant to the scope of this study is Marr's further elaboration of his psychological progress in terms that suggest a radical renovation of a symbolic homespace. In a manner that directly anticipates the novel's eventual delineation of an inhabitable space for an extremely messy kind of queer domesticity, Marr figures his formerly corrupted relationship to sexual desire as "an ugly, unfunctional, and depressing room, with...shredding wall paper, broken light fixtures, and cracked molding," which is to say, as an outdated and unserviceable interior space that has now "vanishe[d]" entirely, and felicitously so, because "the house that contained it" has been condemned and leveled (157). In short, rather than rehabilitate this structure, Marr must explode it; in doing so, he makes way for the construction of a more wholly inhabitable (which is to say, a less internally-partitioned) model for the queer self that he is becoming.

Delany's metaphorization of Marr's internal transformation as a radical home renovation project is hardly a casual gesture, a point that becomes readily apparent if we turn to the beginning of the second and longest section of the novel.⁵² Immediately prior to receiving Sam's letter of concern for his well-being, Marr observes that our experience of "the world (that hyperbole for urban U.S.A. plus the suburban residents concerned with what goes on there)" (81) has been altered dramatically—in effect, has become cut up differently—by two seemingly coincidental reporting trends in the American press and, hence, in our cultural discourse. At almost the same cultural moment that AIDS becomes "one of the most mentioned diseases" in mainstream journalism, Marr posits, "bums, hoboes, derelicts, and winos" are collapsed by media reports into the catch-all category of "'the homeless'" (81). By Marr's logic, the resulting effect upon cultural attitudes in our media-saturated society is that both populations of anxiety-

inducing otherness—“the homeless” and the “AIDS victims”—become almost entirely defined in terms of their perpetual exclusion from that sacred (albeit “most distant and ephemeral”) institution of insider-ness that we shorthand as “Home” (81).⁵³ Above and beyond his discovery of a site of inhabitation for his own filth-loving perversity, Marr must labor to delineate a queer domestic space that is messy enough to accommodate those individuals who are presently dislocated (and who have been historically situated) as “the marginal, the dispossessed, [and] the underclass” (81). In order to bring such a supremely democratic system of relationality into being, Marr must re-locate the filth and defilement of his “public” sex life into the “private” space of his home.

Accordingly, by the time that Marr announces, in the penultimate section of the novel (tellingly entitled “The Place of Excrement”⁵⁴) that “[t]he remainder of this tale is a love story” (295), the stage has been carefully set for the romance narrative to have revolutionary implications for the structures of relationality in which it takes place. In much the same way that Marr is able to re-vision his ideas about the *bios philosophicus* by modeling his sexual behavior after that of Timothy Hasler, his “funny and scary and kind of unbelievable” (295) courtship with Leaky grants him access to an unprecedented mode of domestic experience which will challenge his long-held understandings of the obligations of partnership, the meanings of family, and the boundaries of the homespace.⁵⁵ Significantly, Marr’s first two street sightings of the “thick and hirsute giant” (277) whom he will come to know as Leaky take place in front of a four-foot piece of plywood on which “I AM THE DOOR!” is spray-painted (278; 296). Although Marr is sexually attracted to Leaky’s “huge, hairy, bearded, grimy” figure and has “already decided” at the time of their second encounter to engage him in conversation (296-7), he seems to believe

initially that the sign's function as the backdrop to both their initial meetings is more ironic than prophetic: "You...are the door. Yeah—*sure* you are," Marr remarks to himself after his first sexual exchange with Leaky (318). All the same, once Leaky follows him home that evening (thereby consummating the higher and more substantial level of intimacy that Marr desired from, but failed to achieve with, "Piece o'Shit"), Marr's reasonable skepticism regarding the transformative potential of the connection already can be seen to dissipate.

Delany encourages the reader to recognize a clear linkage between "Piece o'Shit" and Leaky by endowing the two men with several strikingly similar characteristics; although the list of parallels between the characters is too lengthy to be rehearsed here, it is worth noting that both have been discriminated against and thoroughly disenfranchised upon being read as "different" at early ages, both share a sexual proclivity for pissing on or in "black cocksuckers" (37; 299), and both possess oversized, uncut penises whose foreskins have been stretched and expanded through the wearing of "yoni rings" (30-33; 298).⁵⁶ Yet Marr's intense attraction to and almost immediate decision to cohabit with Leaky exceeds his simple need or desire to replace (or to save and/or recover, albeit symbolically) "Piece o'Shit," who has been irretrievably lost to him after succumbing to AIDS-related illnesses. That is to say, while Marr's awareness of the resemblances between "Piece o'Shit" and Leaky may prompt his initial interest in the latter, his ability to distinguish Leaky as a potential domestic partner is heavily dependent on his subsequent recognition of two things: first, that there are substantial differences between the two men and, second, that he himself is in the process of becoming a "different" man in the wake of his transformative experiences at The Mine Shaft's Wet Nights and during his cruising sessions at the pornographic theater.

To be sure, Marr's first sexual encounter with Leaky commences with a series of gestures and articulations that closely duplicate the productively playful exchange that he has shared with "Piece o' Shit." Leaky initiates contact with Marr by exposing "[a]n inch-and-a-half wide and two-and-a-half inches long...leathery cuff [that] hang[s] off his meat"; this spectacular display of flesh is sufficiently familiar "to send [Marr] back six years to that sunny Saturday in the park" that he spent with "Piece o' Shit" (298). Moreover, Leaky's soon-expressed desire to "piss on a nigger" who has just sucked his dick (299) bears an uncanny resemblance to the contact-facilitating role playing in which Marr and "Piece o' Shit" have engaged previously. Being that he recognizes the same good-natured spirit in his new partner as he did in "Piece o' Shit," Marr is more than happy to oblige Leaky's introduction of racial epithets and acts of defilement into their sexual exchange. Whereas in other contexts such articulations and practices would bespeak hatred and enact violence, here they promote intimacy and warm feelings by performing a momentary leveling of the power-coded disparities that accompany each man's respective social position.

The encounter between Marr and Leaky most likely would be limited to an "incredibly hot" sexual experience (301)—one that both literally and figuratively conveys casual warmth, as has been the case in each of the narrative's previously documented exchanges of bodily fluids among strangers—were it not for Marr's intuitive discovery of the "thing" (303) that registers most profoundly for Leaky, which is to say, the (sexual) idiosyncrasy that both brings him to orgasm and satisfies his deep-seated need for the unmitigated acceptance of his perverse difference. After a lengthy and intense session in which he fellates Leaky and drinks his copious streams of urine, Marr is surprised to discover that his partner is nowhere close to coming. As a

dedicated “cocksucker,” Marr worries over his partner’s failure to climax, and offers “to finish [him] off,” but Leaky contends that although “[it] felt pretty good...[he] just take[s] too long to come” (302). Leaky’s immediate addition that he is “just not too smart” at first seems to be “a non sequitur” (302), yet Marr moves from perplexity over the comment to knowledge of its clandestine meaning(s) by discerning the accompanying look of pride and pleasure on Leaky’s face.

What might be in another context a shameful admission of total disenfranchisement—“Even niggers can call *me* dumb” (302)—here becomes an erotic cue, for what Leaky most fervently desires in this moment of contact is for his partner to recognize and value him *for* his “defilement”/“worthlessness” (as seen by the eyes of the world), rather than in spite of it. The excess and perverse pleasure that Marr takes in humiliating him assures Leaky of his new partner’s unique capacity for “get[ting ahold of [his] thing”; Leaky’s thoroughly contented response to this knowledge is effusive in the most literal sense, as he “erupt[s], thick and copious” (303) into the mouth that articulates his difference. Prior to his and Marr’s sexual encounter, Leaky already has contended that, if he were to find “a nigger” who loves to be pissed on, he “wouldn’t want to turn him loose for a long time” (300). Yet it is only after Marr invites him home, both in the sense that he relocates their actions to the confines of his domestic space and that he intuits Leaky’s basic need to be acknowledged as filthy within the context of their sexual exchange, that Leaky begins to understand—and consequently to communicate to Marr—how his fantasies of establishing something “permanent like” (324) with his new friend might be able to become a reality.

Taken out of context, Leaky's vision of his ideal domestic situation might seem to replicate rather than resist dominant ideologies that afford positions of power on the basis of skin color. "You like to do for a big, dirty guy like me, don't you?", Leaky asks while shoving his filthy foot in his new partner's face, to which Marr nods his assent. And indeed, Leaky's elaboration of their possible domestic routine seems, at least on the surface, to envision Marr as a kind of sexual slave, rather than as a reciprocal partner:

That's good. That's the way it should be—for you and for me, I mean. An' I like a nigger doing for me—little things: getting me a fucking beer, opening it for me, rubbing my feet, playing with my balls when I beat off, lickin' the cheese from out my fuckin' yoni when my dick gets *too* fuckin' filthy, going to sleep with my dick in his mouth so I don't have to worry about pissing the goddamn bed. Waking up with a nigger sucking on my big, fat dick....Man, about the best thing in the world is to have you a nigger you can piss on, anytime you want. (324)

Yet Leaky's qualifying statement "for you and for me, I mean" is important to note here, as it seems to suggest his awareness of the fact that what might be appropriate for the situation at hand—provided, of course, that Marr consents to the terms of their interaction—would be problematic and offensive if presumed and practiced as a more generalized mode of worldly engagement. Moreover, Leaky's immediately subsequent comments reveal his own position of vulnerability in the exchange, as he both betrays his level of desperation for their connection—"I'd do anything for that [i.e., to participate in the domestic situation he has just described]—I swear, just about anything" (324)—and re-establishes the necessity of his own humiliation (i.e., by a "nigger...who's real smart and can call me stupid too...!") to maintain an equal distribution of power in their sexual role-playing, as well as in their everyday interaction.

For his part, Marr is understandably skeptical about the scenario's potential to confound rather than enforce the racist ideologies promoted by dominant cultural discourses; "it [*is*]n't that bad" (324) seems to be the most positive stance that he can summon presently toward Leaky's

desire to derive pleasure from their mutual denigration. Personal reservations aside, however, Marr's ever-present desire to acquire more sophisticated knowledge about "the systems of the world" and the ways in which they function⁵⁷ manages to pique his intellectual curiosity about Leaky's "strange" opinion that interracial relations can be enhanced through such acts of sexual perversity (326). From this point forward, the academically-trained Marr will position himself as student to the semi-literate Leaky, so that he might understand the complex ways in which the latter's penchant for "piss[ing] on niggers" demonstrates his genuine affection for "black guys" and his concern "with how they're treated socially—and politically" (326). Being that Leaky's radical notions about race relations, sexual exchanges, familial structures, and domestic partnership proceed from his exceptionally "strange" experience of the world, Marr will discover himself in the exploration of largely uncharted emotional and intellectual territory. In many significant and complex ways, Marr will need to continue the transformation of himself that began at The Mine Shaft and in the Variety Photoplays—to shake off his own lingering conservatism in order to continue his process of "becoming"—so that he can co-inhabit the queer spaces (both real and metaphorical) that are brought into being through his interaction with Leaky.

Marr acquires his first discomfiting glimpse into Leaky's radical understanding of queer domesticity through a post-coital conversation in which his partner details how his "different" upbringing (303) has promoted the development of his largely shame-free attitudes about both sex and excremental exchanges. To be sure, Leaky is sensitive to the fact that, in telling his story of being reared in rural Maryland by his "dad and a nigger what he met in the reform school" (332) to the highly-educated Marr, he runs the risk of exposing himself and his family as

“ignorant” “hillbilly” trash (331; 327). Yet Leaky’s adamant refusal to accept Marr’s simple and moralistic initial reactions to his “strange family stor[y]” (328) clearly exhibits his perceptive understanding of the productive value of the developmental experiences that he narrates. ““You want to hear how I was raised?...Or you want to tell it yourself?”” (328) is Leaky’s confident rejoinder to Marr’s horrified repudiation of the idea that Leaky and his father could have the same mother. Likewise, Leaky effectively defends Billy Sowps’s and Big Nigg’s unorthodox childrearing practices against Marr’s charges of exploitation by noting the limitations of his friend’s definition of “child abuse” (330-1; 340): “At least when I was with my daddy and Big Nigg, nobody ever tied me down and fucked me up the ass. Nobody ever busted my face open ‘cause I didn’t wanna suck no dick—or locked me in a fuckin’ cement cellar room with no lights....My daddy and Big Nigg loved me, man” (331). Moreover, he exposes the unexpectedly classist assumptions that both inform and distort Marr’s assessment of the situation; “just ‘cause they live on a little shit-ass dirtfarm where the fuckin’ house always smells like piss, that don’t mean they ain’t good people” (331), Leaky reminds his ostensibly more “sophisticated” partner.

Throughout the duration of Leaky’s storytelling, Marr can be seen to experience a profound internal conflict, in which the intense sexual arousal and “goofily joyous” mood that he feels (333) remain in tension with his intellectual resistance to the taboo-shattering content of his friend’s tale. Not insignificantly, Leaky’s earliest memory is of his “daddy, standing up on the porch drinking a beer, his dick in his hand, pissing on [him]” (328), an occurrence that he recalls fondly with the same emphasis on “warm[th]” that Marr attaches to his remembrances of the Mine Shaft’s wet nights. When Marr interrupts this recollection to note the social inappropriateness of what Leaky describes—namely, his “daddy and Big Nigg,” who are “jack-

off buddies” if not full-fledged sexual partners, “standin’ there, laughin’ and pissin’ all over [the toddler Leaky]”, as he responds to their “game” with unmitigated delight (329-30)—it becomes clear to the reader that Leaky’s telling of “his whole life story” (327) pressures Marr’s ideas about the acceptable limits of sexual freedom with an intensity that rivals his own aggressive challenge to Sam Mossman’s misdirected notions about “the gay experience.” In the same way, then, that Marr aims to cure Sam’s naivety by confronting her with an explicit knowledge of his “deviancies, . . . abnormalities, . . . [and] perversions” (138), Leaky defies his friend’s defensive resistance to his story’s subject matter in order to assume the voice of authority and experience that will accomplish the unambiguously corrective purpose of “tryin’ to explain somethin’” to Marr about the “shit . . . [he’s] been in . . . all [his] life” (340; 330).

The important “somethin’” that Leaky attempts to communicate through his personal narrative is that what Marr has enjoyed recreationally up until this point—namely, the “pitchin’” and “catchin’” (330) of excremental matter—comprises a fundamentally serious way of life for him: “all this stuff you like, that’s just *home* to me” (341, emphasis mine). In other words, Leaky’s most foundational sense of his personal identity—what he calls the “fuckin’ truth” about himself—proceeds from his conviction that he was raised by “good people” whose most notable and loving parental accomplishment was in teaching him to recognize (rather than to resist) the productive exchange value of “piss, shit, spit, cum, snot, [and] cockcheese” (332). Billy Sowps and Big Nigg embrace the “animality of being human” in a completely shameless fashion and, in so doing, help to develop “a big, dirty guy” (324) who delights in being perpetually “leaky,” in the sense that he cannot conceive of anything “more personal” that he might offer to a partner than his free and copious bodily excretions (332). More than anything, then, Leaky’s

incontinence, which he seems to have inherited (or to have learned) from his fathers, might be said to introduce a necessary dose of everyday reality into Marr's experimental sexual practices. That is to say, although Marr's and Leaky's queer domestic partnership may be initiated through their "warm" exchange of bodily fluids, being at home with one another inevitably depends upon Marr's capacity for "lyin' on [the] wet, cold couch" (332) that serves as the commemorative site of their messy coupling.

In refusing his new friend's offer to sleep on the floor "[l]ike a big ol' dog" (341) and by inviting Leaky instead to share (and almost certainly to soil) his bed, Marr takes a small but significant step toward the construction of a filth-tolerant, if not downright filthy, domestic space that will promote rather than obstruct intimacy between the two men. That is to say, by adopting the etiquette rules of the Sowps farmstead, where "nobody cares who pisses up the fuckin' bed" (341), Marr makes his apartment feel "just a little like home" to Leaky (342), and in so doing, commences the apocalyptic process through which this space will be utterly defiled in order to become thoroughly transformed. Yet in order for such a radical home renovation project to take place, Marr must first shake off the lingering vestiges of his own "moderately middle-class" (8) value system, which insists on the symbolic if not literal abolishment of filth from the relational structures that it perpetuates, so that he may guiltlessly inhabit the messy everyday situations of which life with Leaky will consist.

In a manner that is consistent with his prior experiences at the Mine Shaft and in Manhattan's pornographic theaters, Marr's post-coital discovery of himself suggests a seamless, shame-free integration of the (debased) life of his body and the (elevated) life of his mind. As he relaxes after orgasm, Marr delights in Leaky's "furry *warmth*" pressed against him and feels,

above all else, “like someone who [i]s in his right and proper place” (344, emphasis mine). Although he claims not to be “religious,” Marr invokes the metaphor of God here because the only way that he can conceive of his mind-body experience is in mystical terms; more than anything else, it seems like he is “doing what God intended [him] to do—like [he is] filling the space God intended [him] to fill” (344). Marr’s “reward” for engaging in the filthy acts through which his desire is [f]inally satisfied” is the knowledge, which is to say the truth, that sets him free (344-5). Although the fantasies of his perverse exchanges have been, and perhaps must always be, “drenched in shame,” his actual performances of these acts confirm that “no one has been harmed, no one has been wounded, no one has been wronged” (345). It is only in such a queer space, a site of play and invention that provides for the “peace[ful]” (344) cohabitation of Marr’s mind and body, that the “‘home’ that Leaky’s scabrous childhood [is] trying to reach for in its bizarre recounting” (345) can begin to come into existence.

From this point forward, Marr and Leaky will begin to engage in a domestic routine that is anything but conventional or repetitive. By devising and implementing everyday practices that confuse and confound the race, class, and entitlement disparities that exist between them, Marr and Leaky militate against the supremacy battles and rites of ownership that might otherwise accompany their domestic partnership. For example, in exchange for the labor and financial resources that Marr expends cooking breakfast for the two men, Leaky hand-feeds the meal to his partner, thereby making the moment “more homey-like” (350), which is to say, less power-coded. Likewise, although Leaky is ostensibly “the top” in their relationship, being that he takes the more assertive role in their sexual exchanges, he nevertheless requests that Marr purchase him a dog collar to wear as a symbol of their reciprocal belonging to one another. Although

Leaky maintains that it generally does not “matter *who* wears [the collar]” in the relationship—being that top and bottom are mutually-dependent categories that afford a different (but equal) kind of ownership to each partner—“it would be fuckin’ stupid for [Marr] to wear it” in their case, being that Marr’s greater access to money and housing confers his obvious status as “the one in charge” (351). Yet because he performs it as an elective and symbolic gesture, wearing the dog collar functions here to restore Leaky’s feelings of self-worth, rather than to serve as a source of his denigration and shame; simply put, it makes him feel like he is “a fuckin’ human being again” after years of not “mean[ing] something” to another individual (353).

Leaky articulates his feelings about donning the dog collar in terms that are strikingly similar to Marr’s descriptions of the “mystical” state that is accessed through certain good-natured sexual exchanges. “Even if you...kick me out tonight, this feels pretty good,” Leaky effuses, “[I]ike now I’m where I’m supposed to be” (354). Although he may lack the sophisticated vocabulary and philosophical training that Marr invokes to analyze his own moments of transport, Leaky’s account of his experience nevertheless similarly values the peacefulness and contentment that proceeds from such a transaction. Moreover, for the first time in Delany’s novel, we are witness to a *dialogue* regarding the complex dynamics of these exchanges (i.e., rather than the *monologue* form of Marr’s letter to Sam and of his first-person storytelling); this narrative device serves to remind the reader of the reciprocal benefits that are equally tendered to both the “giving” partner and the “receiving” one. Accordingly, when Marr responds to Leaky by assuring him that he could not “kick [him] out after just putting something like [the collar] around [his neck],” he is not stating that he considers himself somehow obligated to his partner, but rather that he too benefits, in that he “feels better” (354) as the result of their

contact with one another. Yet despite the fact that their exchange is a “warm” one, Marr articulates a lingering sense of discomfort that their playful parody of the domestic ownership ritual may replicate unconsciously the “buying and selling [of] slaves” (354). Leaky’s thoughtful rejoinder to Marr’s expressed concerns—“Naw... That’s about makin’ people what don’t got nothin’ do all the fuckin’ work. This is somethin’ else.”—deftly levels the playing field between the two men, in that it articulates his more nuanced understanding of the meaning of their exchange; once again, then, the street-savvy “vagrant” accesses his different experience of the world in order to act “like some kind of teacher” to his school-trained, philosopher friend (354).

Above all else, Leaky’s understanding of his and Marr’s mutual possession of one another can be seen to resist and re-vision, rather than to endorse and to participate in, the culturally-legitimated practices through which ownership rights (exclusive or otherwise) are routinely conferred as mechanisms of control. Thus, when Leaky states that “[y]ou own me now, nigger” (358), he is not envisioning a scenario in which he relinquishes authority over his own body; rather, by granting permission for Marr to “do anything...[he] fuckin’ want[s]” with him (358), Leaky expresses his profound confidence in his partner’s desire and ability to act magnanimously in order to achieve the fulfillment of their mutual pleasure. In much the same spirit is Leaky’s wanting to “turn [his partner] out” as a kind of sexual party favor among his friends from the park, in that the acquiring of “some other dicks” for Marr to suck has as much to do with Leaky’s desire to acknowledge and to satisfy the needs of his “stoned cocksucker” boyfriend as it has to do with deriving his own voyeuristic pleasure from his witnessing of the spectacle (359).

Upon being left alone in the apartment while Leaky assembles his party guests, Marr reflects upon the implications of his partner's radical notions of ownership; his exhilarating (and somewhat fearful) discovery is that his "own routine and rigid world systems" are beginning already to be displaced—which is to say, they are losing "their edge and order" (360)—and are making room for Leaky's more expansive understanding of a domestic "possessiveness" that celebrates individual expression rather than seeking to confine it. Marr's meditation on the vexed issues of ownership and possession reaches its culmination in his thoughtful consideration of the contextualized meaning of Leaky's dog collar. Although such a symbolic tethering would generally signify the "terrible" truth that he is Leaky's exclusive "owner," Marr decides, the fact he that both puts a collar on Leaky and still "allows [him] to roam" militates against the "appalling connections" that the gesture otherwise would have with the "[h]istorical, political, and bloody" institution of American slavery (364). In short, Marr's and Leaky's different practice of collaring re-vision the "phatic figure" that it casts traditionally—"you are my owner. You own me"—into a "*true* sign of belonging" that designates collaboration and reciprocity between partners rather than the repressive control of one individual over another (364).

All the same, because "the systems of the world" revolve "eternally" around conventional notions of "possession, truth, and the home," Marr worries (rightly so, as we will see) that his endeavors to inhabit the world queerly with "a man whom the world call[s] homeless" can only be accomplished through considerable struggle, a process in which outright "violences" may be perpetrated against them on the basis of their perceivable differences (364). What Marr and Leaky have in mind, after all, amounts to nothing less than a domestic apocalypse—a deliberate and thorough defilement of their homespace—through which the culturally-legitimated notions

of exclusive ownership will be obliterated by and replaced with a more expansive understanding of queer relationality. Leaky and Marr initiate this apocalyptic defilement of their shared space by playing a party game with Leaky's friends from the park, in which sexual partners must be bought and sold for the price of a penny. Although the game accomplishes the desired effect of transforming Leaky's and Marr's homespace into a sexual playground that can accommodate a seemingly endless array of intimate "combinations and permutations" (390), it nevertheless renders the inhabitants of this space exceedingly vulnerable to the real world mechanisms that militate against such a free exchange of bodies. The game may be "warm" and "fun" while it is being played (391), yet its broader consequences for its participants are deadly serious.

In setting each man's price at a penny, no more and no less, the participants in the game perform a democratic exchange of bodies that considers each individual to be equally valuable by having "nothin' to do with...how much [someone is] *worth*" in the outside world (370). As is the case with all rituals, this trafficking of individuals introduces a kind of "structure" to the proceedings, yet the virtual worthlessness of the penny ensures that no one will prosper incommensurately and rather that everyone will "feel better" in the parody of ownership that "this endless systematic interchange" enacts (391).⁵⁸ Moreover, should one person somehow accumulate "pretty much everyone's pennies," as Leaky does at one point while playing the game, "the wealth" is "simply redistributed" among the participants in Marxist fashion (391). Yet the fundamentally fantastic nature of the game's evacuation of the exchange value associated with the sexual act is soon revealed through the tragic events that occur when one of its participants follows Marr to "The Pit," the hustler bar where Timothy Hasler was murdered some seventeen years prior. According to its longtime bartender, the "philosophy" of "The Pit"—

which is to say, the foundational set of ideas that “makes this whole place possible”—is as follows: “sex...is scarce. Because it’s scarce, it’s valuable. And because it’s valuable, it goes for good prices” (313). Thus, when Crazy Joey, an exceptionally-endowed, self-identified “fuckin’ pervert” (237) who needs to masturbate to orgasm at least six times per day (223) pursues Marr to the bar and offers his sexual services for free, the operating system of “The Pit” is violently upset as two competing sexual economies collide with deadly consequences.

In bitterly ironic fashion, while Marr gathers information about the bar’s intricate regulatory system for the exchange of pleasure, an unidentified hustler punishes Crazy Joey for his infractions against this code (i.e., through his gratis distribution of sexual goods) by stabbing him to death in the back room of “The Pit.” In witnessing this virtual re-enactment of Timothy Hasler’s violent demise,⁵⁹ Marr is forced into a painful recognition of the potentially lethal repercussions of his and Leaky’s endeavors to practice a mode of queer domesticity that resists conventional notions of ownership and belonging. Because the sexual economy of “The Pit” represents, above all else, an extreme manifestation of the historical appropriation of desire as a mechanism of control, the horrific spectacle of Joey’s death shocks Marr into a profound awareness of his continuing participation in “the systems of the world,” even as (perhaps especially as) he strives to resist the controlling influences of such forces over the life of his mind and his body. If his connection with Leaky is in fact “the door” to a presently “preposterous” (ix) mode of domestic existence—as Marr “hope[s] to hell” that it is, as he returns home from “The Pit” (425)—it is not because this opening provides a miraculous means of egress from established regulatory systems, but rather because it frames the passage to a site

of queer inhabitation where its occupants can begin to make a small but productive “mess” of the world’s structuring mechanisms.

Upon returning to a homespace that has been defiled by the copious excremental exchanges of Leaky’s friends, Marr discovers himself in the process of doing “some funny things” (425) in response to Crazy Joey’s brutal murder. As if to express gratitude for the “presents...[f]rom inside the body” that his friend has left behind, Marr eats what is left of Joey’s shit, sucks the corner of a paperback that he has “peed on,” and tastes a “smear of blood” that stains the shirt that he wore to the bar (426). More than simply providing him with the means to say goodbye to Joey, Marr’s ingestion of Joey’s bodily emissions commemorates the temporary re-mapping of relationality that their party games have accomplished. Yet Joey’s unfortunate demise cannot help but serve as a painful reminder of the incompleteness of this project, and Marr underscores his feelings of frustration and disappointment in the face of this knowledge by “scrap[ing] up some more of Joey’s shit” to write “EKPYROSIS” on a wall mirror (426). By invoking Heraclitus’s term for the apocalypse—which is to say, for the cosmic conflagration that ends each cycle of history and signals the beginning of a new era (273)—which Hasler himself had scrawled in excrement immediately prior to his own untimely death, Marr not only pays tribute to the “remarkable” man and philosopher whose work has inspired him, but also reveals his desperate hope that something good and useful will result from Joey’s sacrificial obliteration.

The “all-consuming, all-cleansing Hericlitean fire” (426) of the apocalypse is personified in the form of Mad Man Mike, who arrives at the apartment after having been transformed into a raging beast of “sexual violence” (428-9) as a consequence of Crazy Joey’s death. Despite his insistence that Joey’s death is no one in particular’s fault, Mike is so “mad [that] the kid is dead”

(427) that he becomes “an out-of-touch, hurtful, and outraged sexual creature” (430) who attempts to satiate his outrage by destroying Marr’s apartment and by raping him in the mouth. Marr subsequently contends that his “single claim to being a moral being” (430) is that he refuses to hold Mad Man Mike accountable for his monstrous actions; by failing to “accuse” Mike for his atrocious behavior, Marr demonstrates his sympathetic understanding that he and his aggressor are merely caught up in the turbulent process of “one entire system of the world turn[ing] on another and tr[ying] to obliterate it” (430). Thus, rather than concerning himself with the ways in which the experience has affected him personally, Marr conceptualizes the rape as a necessary act of purgation, one that exposes the extent to which he “owe[s] it” to Mad Man Mike for being “part of the world” (429) which inflicts careless violence on him and on his friends from the park. More productively speaking, by “cooperat[ing]” with the sexual assault, Marr can be seen both to insert himself into and to recover himself from the ekpyrosis that Mad Man Mike embodies at this moment. As Delany himself has stated, the figure of an all-consuming fire is called upon here to function “not only as a symbol of the end of things but also as a symbol for the beginning of things.”⁶⁰ Marr’s ultimate task as a survivor of this experience will be to use the knowledge (of the world, of himself) that he retrieves from the inferno as the basis for a more expansive vision of everyday queer resistance.

The notion that Marr’s and Leaky’s domestic life transforms radically in the wake of this “ekpyrosis” is underscored by Delany’s decision to expand the final section of *The Mad Man*, which almost exclusively considers the “love story” between the two men, for the novel’s revised paperback editions.⁶¹ That is to say, by “spend[ing] more time portraying John and Leaky’s life together *after* Joey’s death,”⁶² Delany aims to provide the reader with “a more

rigorous and productive sense” of the ways in which the two men’s relationship both survives this symbolic apocalypse and thrives as a result of their first-hand experience with defilement and destruction.⁶³ In an interview in which he discusses his authorial intentions, Delany contends that “it is important for [his] allegory” that readers recognize that such defilement and destruction “*surround*” Joey’s murder, rather than causing or “climax[ing]” it⁶⁴; in so delimiting the interpretative parameters of the symbols that he deploys, Delany paves the way for Marr’s and Leaky’s productive recovery of their “filthy” selves (and of their “perverse” relations with one another) from the wreckage of this potentially devastating life event. Once again, Leaky can be seen to instigate the further progression of the two men’s domestic partnership by spending the morning after Joey’s murder in the laborious process of etching ““Property of John Marr”” on the copper plate of his dog collar (438).⁶⁵ Above all else, Leaky’s unsolicited affirmation of Marr’s ownership rights over him indicates his continuing and intensifying commitment to his partner, despite his increased awareness of the world’s profound resistance to the re-mapping of relationality that their affiliation seeks to accomplish.

That same morning, Marr gets an unexpected opportunity to mirror Leaky’s public acknowledgment of their relationship when Irving Mossman, who is attending a conference in Manhattan, shows up unannounced at Marr’s apartment. Yet rather than provide an honest account of the messy sex party that has ended in tragedy, Marr explains away the defiled condition of his living quarters by concocting a story of “[t]hree black guys...[who] barged in, roughed [him] up, [and] wrecked the place!” (431). Although Marr considers the possibility that his elaborate “prevarication” may be motivated by a concern “not to upset Irving,” he also struggles with the feeling that it somehow betrays his relationship with Leaky; in a telling

parenthetical aside, Marr reveals his conflicted state of mind by imagining himself as a coward who hides “in some sexual closet smelling of old socks, dried piss, and shitty underwear” (432). Marr cannot prevent the constitutive filth of his domestic space from seeping out of this closet, yet he labors in Mossman’s presence to disclaim his culpability for its production.

Marr’s reticence and deception in the face of Mossman’s unanticipated visit seem to insinuate his continuing struggle over the respectability of his relationship with Leaky. Yet Marr can be seen to make considerable progress toward a less shame-filled acknowledgment of their connection when he and Mossman encounter Leaky rooting through a city garbage can for his afternoon meal. Although it must be tempting to downplay his attachment to such an unkempt individual, Marr takes the opportunity to introduce “[his] friend, Leaky” to “[his] friend, Professor Mossman” (435). In presenting each man to the other as his friend, Marr designates them both as significant figures in his life; by regarding the two men as equals, Marr not only disregards the boundary line between Leaky’s and Mossman’s antithetical realms of experience, but he also effectively collapses the distance between the two worlds in which they separately reside.

If judged on the basis of outward appearances, the foraging figure of Leaky—with his “flat, hairy buttocks” and his “dinner plate” sized urine stain showing through his ill-fitting pants (435; 434)—would seem to bespeak animality, or “the life of the body,” while the immaculately groomed, bookish and mousy Irving Mossman would cast the impression of eminent civility, which is to say, of a person who embodies “the life of the mind.” However, in claiming both Leaky and Mossman as his “friend[s],” Marr looks past their apparent discrepancies in order to acknowledge his appreciation of their different but equally valuable contributions to the *bios*

philosophicus, which is to say, to the thoughtfully resistant practices that Foucault shorthands as “the animality of being human.” Rather than endorsing “the systems of the world” that require his commitment to one mode of being to the exclusion of the other, Marr positions himself (and, by extension, Mossman and Leaky) in a productively unstable space that facilitates the interclass conflict that makes “life more pleasant”⁶⁶ through its affirmation of both the mind and the body. More importantly, in insisting upon Mossman’s recognition of Leaky’s unique significance, Marr initiates the process through which the homeless man might be reintegrated into, and yet not rehabilitated by, the world that has discarded him as trash.

In a small but significant gesture, Marr returns Mossman’s qualified approval of Leaky—“The homeless situation in your city...is astonishing....But I like your friend there.”—with a bold declaration of Leaky’s value to him: “Leaky’s great....I love him” (435-6). From this point forward, Marr will make no attempts to conceal his relationship with Leaky, regardless of any potential consequences to his cultural positioning or to his academic standing. In audacious fashion, for example, Marr will present Leaky as his partner at departmental functions and at “academic parties,” creating scenarios that have all the makings of “a charming novella of manners,” as the self-identified “dummy” matches wits with—and unwittingly trounces—members of the intellectual elite (456). Likewise, in a fitting coda to his epistolary attempt to put his relationship with Sam “on a new footing” (98), Marr invites Mossman’s ex-wife (and her lesbian lover) to dinner at his and Leaky’s home, thereby giving her a first-hand glimpse of the productively filthy places that have been opened up through his process of sexual experimentation.⁶⁷ Whenever and wherever they appear together, Marr and Leaky will exhibit themselves as a thoroughly convincing argument for the many substantial benefits of “interclass

contact,” not the least of which is feeling “terribly good” (483) as a result of their daily “warm” exchanges with one another and with the individuals among whom they circulate.

Given Delany’s interest in making a productive mess of domestic space, it is fitting that the conclusion of *The Mad Man* would concern itself with a journey home to the filth-affirming farmstead on which Leaky was raised. Having listened to Leaky’s outrageously perverse stories of his home life, Marr is understandably “nervous about spending a weekend on [this] redneck hillbilly farm” (451); upon making Billy Sowps’s and Blacky’s acquaintance,⁶⁸ however, Marr finds them distinguishable not for their “orgiastic excesses” (475) nor for their performance of “rampant exhibitionistic bestiality” (465), but rather for their ongoing practice of an extraordinarily progressive version of queer domesticity. To be sure, the available evidence would suggest that Leaky’s stories of his family’s moral degeneracy are fundamentally accurate, if slightly embellished for erotic effect⁶⁹; moreover, Billy’s and Blacky’s lack of education and relative isolation from the world⁷⁰ positions them as members of an “eccentric American margin” (466) whose activities have little, if any relevance, to the politics of difference. All the same, Billy’s and Blacky’s shameless commitment to the empathetic practices—that is, to the warm exchanges and taboo violations—which produce and sustain their feelings of “extraordinary contentment, satisfaction, and steadiness” (465) can and should be perceived as a thoughtfully-resistant response to circumscribed notions of familial relationality.

Although their living conditions might be best described as primitive, Billy and Blacky exhibit a level of sophistication that is surprising even to Leaky when they attempt to satisfy Marr’s inquisitiveness about their affective practices and their sexual activities. For example, by marking a sharp distinction between heterosexual and same-sex marriage relationships, Billy

demonstrates his astute recognition of the contributory role of gender in the creation and sustenance of partnered intimacy; although he and Big Nigg were “married” for “a *long* time,” Billy preserves the unique character of their conjugal bond through his insistence that they were not joined together “like a man and a woman” but rather “like two men” (467). Similarly, Blacky complements and complicates his recreational (and largely submissive) function as the household’s dick-crazy “black cocksucker” (466) by assuming a supervisory role over the mundane domestic activities—including the cooking and the caretaking—that “ke[ep] the place together” (465). Hence, although their farmhouse may remain sufficiently “messy” for its visitors to worry about exposure to “salmonella” (461; 463), Marr ultimately celebrates Billy, Big Nigg, and Blacky for having created and for now imparting a “complex family tradition” (468)—in other words, a queer re-visioning of the domestic—that presages the endurance of his and Leaky’s own filth-friendly affiliation.

Having heard his father’s ideas about marriage and having observed Billy’s and Blacky’s tender ministrations to one another, Leaky appreciatively quips that his “folks...done got a little more *civilized* than [he] remember[s] (467, emphasis mine). The word choice of Leaky’s apparently off-the-cuff remark takes on added significance when considered in relation to Delany’s broader intentions in *The Mad Man*; that is to say, by having him describe the unabashedly deviant members of the Sowps family as “civilized,” Delany captures Leaky in the act of contravening (albeit unwittingly) the longstanding assumption that filth stands in the way of human progress. In short, we watch Leaky as he performs “a necessary deformation” to our cultural discourse on (perverse) desire.⁷¹ Moreover, Leaky’s perception of the progressive character of his family’s messy interactions attests to the “real world” relevance and the practical

utility of a largely experimental relational structure that has developed and that maintains itself in relative isolation from our dominant cultural systems. Thus, although Delany may be tempted to devise a pastorally romantic ending for his lovers—for example, to provide a final vision of secluded domestic bliss that would rival Maurice’s and Scudder’s infamous, fantastic disappearance into the greenwood in E.M. Forster’s posthumously published “gay” novel—the success of his narrative project ultimately depends upon Marr’s and Leaky’s return to the “goddam behavioral sink” (411) of which contemporary urban culture consists as dedicated, enlightened filthmongers. By declaring their attachment to “a set of people, incidents, places, and relations that have never happened” (ix) in “civilized” society because of their unspeakable relationship to filth, Marr and Leaky attempt to usher in a new era of queer possibility, to bring “the city’s glittering dream” to life (485), and to exhibit their messy system of housekeeping as a microcosm of a differently cut-up world.

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, "Collège de France Lecture." Collège de France, Paris, France. 14 Mar. 1984. Keynote Address.

² Samuel R. Delany, *The Mad Man* (Rutherford: Yoyant Publishing, 2002) 100. All quotations are taken from this expanded and revised version of Delany's novel, which was published originally in 1994, and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

³ Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) xiv.

⁴ All quotations are from Hoy xiv.

⁵ Hoy xiii.

⁶ William A. Cohen, "Introduction: Locating Filth," *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) viii.

⁷ Cohen x.

⁸ Cohen viii.

⁹ Mary Catherine Foltz, for example, has argued about *The Mad Man* that "[i]nstead of calling for greater cleanliness or further vigilant innovation in the 'war' against contamination and filth, [Delany] gives us a radical, scatological imperative that forces us to think about our interactions with waste" (43). See Foltz, "The Excremental Ethics of Samuel R. Delany," *SubStance* 37.2 (2008): 41-55.

¹⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966) 2; 5.

¹¹ Douglas 4.

¹² Douglas 2.

¹³ Douglas 160.

¹⁴ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1980) in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 229-263.

¹⁵ Cohen x.

¹⁶ Cohen ix.

¹⁷ Cohen x.

¹⁸ Cohen x.

¹⁹ Cohen x.

²⁰ Cohen ix.

²¹ Cohen x; emphasis in original.

²² For more on these terms, see the Introduction to this dissertation.

²³ Although he is not concerned with the novel's representations of the queer domestic, Robert F. Reid-Pharr observes keenly that the naming of Piece o' Shit and Leaky after bodily waste is an indicator of Delany's "refusal to turn his attention away from those individuals and those parts of our society that others regard as not so much unclean as used up" (682). See Reid-Pharr, "Introduction," *American Literary History* 24.4 (Winter 2012): 680-685.

²⁴ William Haver, "Of Mad Men Who Practice Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility," *Queer Theory in Education*, ed. William F. Pinar (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998) 352-3.

²⁵ Samuel R. Delany, "Times Square Blue," *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999) 56.

²⁶ Samuel R. Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview," *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999) 133.

²⁷ Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview" 133.

²⁸ Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview" 133.

²⁹ Samuel R. Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red," *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue* 175.

³⁰ Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 173.

³¹ Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 173.

³² Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 186.

³³ Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 175.

³⁴ Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 198-9.

³⁵ Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 193.

³⁶ Delany, "...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" 192.

³⁷ Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview" 123.

³⁸ For a provocative discussion of the relationship between the unspeakable and the everyday, see Delany's two columned "Mobius text" essay, "On the Unspeakable [The Capri Theater, Times Square, 1987]," in *Shorter Views* 58-66.

³⁹ All quotes are taken from Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview" 123.

⁴⁰ Delany, "On the Unspeakable [The Capri Theater, Times Square, 1987]" 61.

⁴¹ Significantly, Mossman's epistemological approach differs sharply here from that of Marr and of Hasler, who learn to be "real philosopher[s]" by blurring the distinction between the life of the mind and the life of the body.

⁴² Obviously, the exceptionally judgmental language here is Mossman's, not Hasler's.

⁴³ Sam is short for Sally-May Wallace, Marr's friend (and briefly his girlfriend) from graduate school, whom Mossman has since married.

⁴⁴ This clause, or a variation of it, is repeated three times in the two-page excerpt of Mossman's letter that Marr's first-person narrative furnishes for the reader.

⁴⁵ "[A]t least, that's what Irving says." This conversation about AIDS has taken place between Sam and Irving following the news of Michel Foucault's death and the public speculations (and widespread disbelief) surrounding its possible causes. Foucault died in Paris of AIDS-related complications on 26 June 1984.

⁴⁶ The letter contained in the novel is, according to Delany, "a combination of three actual letters that [he] wrote in the early eighties, two to women and one to a man, the three of them cobbled together into a single, fictive document." See Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview," 130. The actual letters are collected in Samuel R. Delany, *1984: Selected Letters* (Rutherford: Voyant Publishing, 2000).

⁴⁷ Delany discusses this process on pages 189-91 of "... Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red."

⁴⁸ The cultural meanings associated with AIDS, and the negative impact of such figurations on the development of treatment and cure options for the disease, have been written about extensively and need not be rehearsed again here. For a couple of early (and now famous) examples of such writings, see Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) and the essays collected in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ Jeffrey Allan Tucker, *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) 275.

⁵⁰ Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview" 125.

⁵¹ Although Delany insists that *The Mad Man* is "not a book about 'safe sex'" (ix), he nevertheless represents John Marr as abstaining from passive anal sex, being that its status as a vector of HIV contagion is seemingly well-documented in the few monitored medical studies that are available presently. See the novel's "Disclaimer" and "Appendix."

⁵² In addition to a "Proem" and an "Appendix," the revised edition of *The Mad Man* has five major sections ranging from 75 to 130 pages in length.

⁵³ Although he is largely concerned with reading *The Mad Man* as a utopian text—which is to say, one that suggests "that certain modes of urban queer eroticism might be seen as embedded alternatives to dominant modes of late capitalist sociality" (13)—Guy Davidson shares my conviction that the "central preoccupation" of the novel is "with the interrelations of home and homelessness" (17). See Davidson, "Utopia and Apocalypse in Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.1 (Fall 2008): 13-32.

⁵⁴ The section's title is taken from a line in William Butler Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," as follows: "But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement; / For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent."

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Marr's relationship with Leaky is based upon Delany's long-term partnership with Dennis Rickett. When the two men first met in 1990, Delany was the Chair of the Comparative Literature department at University of Massachusetts-Amherst and Rickett, who had been homeless for six years, was selling books from a blanket on 72nd Street in New York City. In February 1991, Delany and Rickett began living together, thus entering into a non-monogamous domestic partnership that continues to the present day. Delany chronicles the early months

of their relationship in a 1999 graphic novel with drawings by Mia Wolff. See Delany and Wolff, *Bread & Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2013).

⁵⁶ In a compelling reading of the text, albeit one that delves into body modification issues that are outside the scope of this study, Mary Catherine Foltz argues that the yoni ring “turn[s] society’s understanding of male bodies inside out” (51) in that it transforms the penis into “both a vagina to explored and a breast...that produces the substance that becomes cheese” (49). See Foltz, “The Excremental Ethics of Samuel R. Delany.”

⁵⁷ As previously mentioned, the novel functions in many significant ways as a pornographic version of a *Bildungsroman*, in which Marr’s increasingly “filthy” sexual experiences contribute to his general intellectual development, as well as to his more specialized knowledge of what it means “to be a real philosopher” (12).

⁵⁸ William Haver makes several astute observations about this scene in his essay on *The Mad Man*, as follow: “A penny, the shit of the U.S. economy, can buy nothing—except a man....This is therefore an economy of pure exchange, an economy unhinged from any essential connection to the intersubjective recognitions of a bankrupt humanism that made shit of them in the first place.” (360)

⁵⁹ Significantly, the “mystery” of Hasler’s death has just been revealed to Marr, and he now knows that Hasler was killed while attempting to intervene against the vigilante justice being enacted upon his own domestic partner (Mad Man Mike), who had unwittingly violated the bar’s behavioral codes

⁶⁰ Delany, “The Thomas L. Long Interview” 131.

⁶¹ For the author’s comments on this decision, see Delany, “The Thomas L. Long Interview,” 131. *The Mad Man* was first published in hardback form in 1994 by Richard Kasak Books. In 1996, Rhinoceros books published a “somewhat revised...mass market paperback” edition of *The Mad Man*. The source text for my discussion is Voyant’s “heavily revised and expanded trade paperback edition,” which was published in 2002. The publication history of *The Mad Man* is listed on the copyright information page of the Voyant edition.

⁶² Delany, “The Thomas L. Long Interview” 131.

⁶³ Delany, “The Thomas L. Long Interview” 132.

⁶⁴ Delany, “The Thomas L. Long Interview” 131.

⁶⁵ This process is especially taxing and time-consuming for Leaky because of his illiterate status. Significantly, he asks “a minister” to help him spell out the words; the clergyman’s assistance in inscribing Marr’s ownership rights provides a mundane fulfillment to Leaky’s perverse fantasy of pissing on his partner “in the fuckin’ church” in order to signify that they are “married or somethin’” (355).

⁶⁶ See Delany, “...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red” 173.

⁶⁷ To be fair, Sam does not get to tour the two men’s bedroom, the most literal site of their combined filth. “It’s kind of off limits to guests,” Marr explains, noting that “the room’s just got a kind of smell that gets to some people.” (456)

⁶⁸ Big Nigg, the other of Billy’s “life-companions” (461), has recently died, thus occasioning Leaky’s and Marr’s visit to the Sowps farmstead.

⁶⁹ The complete list of this evidence is too lengthy to rehearse here. The most relevant items for this study are as follows: “Billy Sowps looks like Leaky’s twin,” which seems to confirm that they share the same mother (461); Marr catches Blacky “rubbing his broad, bare foot” across the family dog’s penis, thereby suggesting that Leaky’s

stories of bestiality are true (465); and Billy's and Blacky's practice of watersports is implied in a conversational exchange between the two men as they head up to bed together (467).

⁷⁰ Billy and Blacky do not have a telephone nor do they own a television set, and their home is located at least fifteen miles outside the nearest town in rural Maryland (459; 464; 327). Billy Sowps and Big Nigg meet in reform school at age eleven, become "best friends" and "jack-off buddies", and run away together before completing their education (329). Blacky, Big Nigg's brother, is abused by his father and placed in the "crazy hospital" before coming to live as the resident "cocksucker" at the Sowps farm (333-4).

⁷¹ See Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview" 123-5.

Chapter 4:

A “settled life and a shocking one”: Revolutionizing Queer Domesticity

in Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World*

We are stardust, we are golden,
And we got to get ourselves back to the garden...
To some semblance of a garden.

--Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (1969)¹

After the previous chapter’s consideration of Samuel R. Delany’s visionary attempts to make a productive mess of queer domestic space, it may seem regressive if not counterproductive to turn our attention to Michael Cunningham’s more genteel and apparently mundane delineation of the queer homespace in *A Home at the End of the World* (1990). Whereas Delany’s “pornotopic fantasy” imagines the possibility of a differently cut-up world in which queer domesticity is celebrated for its inherent filthiness, Cunningham’s more bleakly realistic narrative proceeds from the recognition of an apparently unbridgeable “gap between what we can imagine and what we in fact create.”² That is to say, the three members of the novel’s experimental family are forced into a perpetual awareness of their project’s failure to transcend, or at least to supply unique pleasures that would compensate for, the inevitable disappointments of daily living. In profound contrast to *The Mad Man*’s reassuring promise of a radical, post-apocalyptic reconstruction of queer relationality (or, for that matter, to *The Family of Max Desir*’s vibrant use of fantasy to contest the terminal progression of family narratives), *A Home at the End of the World* might seem to suspect rather than to express confidence in the creative potential of its characters’ practices of resistance in the homespace. The novel’s

foregone conclusion is that the queering of familial relationality is accompanied inevitably by a profound sense of disenchantment; our actual human achievements always pale in comparison to the more expansive visions and desires that inspire us.

In other words, as the novel's apocalyptic title suggests, Cunningham can be seen to figure the homespace both as the symbolic destination to which his characters aspire in order "to take up lives of risk and invention" (37) and as the material site in which these hopes are thwarted seemingly by everyday experiences of stasis, loss, destruction, and change. As such, it is possible to view the unconventional family that Clare, Bobby, and Jonathan attempt to create as an exercise in frustration that is driven by a complex force that Laurent Berlant has termed elsewhere as "cruel optimism."³ Although "[a]ll attachment is optimistic" in that it "moves you out of yourself and into the world," homing desires such as the ones that drive the action of Cunningham's novel are best recognized as "cruel" ones, as Berlant sees it, because they direct characters to envision and seek after the occupation of spaces that are ultimately impossible to inhabit. The inherent contradiction of the homespace as so conceived is that, to use Berlant's terminology, it is simultaneously an "object/scene" that "ignites a sense of possibility" in which "fantasies of the good life" flourish⁴ and the space in which these fantasies cannot help but dissipate as "ordinary" life piles "one happening...on another" until "the present moment" begins to feel like either an "impasse" or an "extended crisis."⁵ According to such a logic, an experimental homemaking project like the one depicted in Cunningham's novel may commence as an inspired project that seeks nothing short of "expansive transformation," but it will always necessarily be reduced to no more than a weary struggle for survival. If viewed as such, *A Home at the End of the World* qualifies as "optimistic" only in the weakest sense of the word; at the

end, the characters may not be” defeated” per se because they have figured out how to continue in the face of the “proliferating pressures” of daily life, however, their ongoing sense of disappointment has become so pronounced that they will mistake any simple act of “adjustment” for a significant “accomplishment.”⁶

Thus, it is easy to see why Reed Woodhouse, in one of the only published studies of *A Home at the End of the World* (and to my knowledge the only reading of the novel that attempts to situate the text in relation to an emergent “gay canon”), would express concern about the queer potential of Cunningham’s novel, being that the text would seem to depict the queer re-visioning of the family as such a “doomed from the start” endeavor.⁷ As Woodhouse observes acutely, Cunningham’s four first-person narrators are united in their sense of “some ur-gloom hanging over” them⁸; having witnessed and felt powerless to stop “the worm[s] of dissolution working from within” their biological families, Clare, Bobby, Jonathan, and Alice (Jonathan’s mother) strive continuously—and sometimes fail—to shake off their lingering fears of being inclined toward the repetition of these cycles of destruction.⁹ Yet it is one thing to say that Cunningham’s narrators are profoundly aware of the forces against which they struggle and another thing entirely to conclude, as does Woodhouse, that these characters embody “resignation” as their “default emotion” in the face of such knowledge.¹⁰ As this chapter will demonstrate, it is not the case that Cunningham’s characters lack (or, to follow Berlant’s argument, *lose*) a “vision of what the good family might be,”¹¹ nor that they fail to imagine practicable alternatives to heterosexual domesticity; Bobby, Clare, Jonathan, and Alice accept but do not resign themselves to their daily disappointments, and thus can be seen to enact their embodied resistance from within the times and spaces over which “cruel optimism” and

“mundanity” preside. Moreover, because their intentions are to “queer” the rhythms and cycles of everyday life, it is not at all surprising that the battles these individuals wage are characterized necessarily by a greater degree of banal discontent than energetic excitement. Frustration may seem a less than auspicious emotion from which to drive a plan of queer resistance, and yet this chapter will argue that proceeding from a certain attentiveness to disappointment and apparent defeat is what provides Cunningham’s project with its uniquely valuable contribution to the literary construction of queer domesticity.

Being that Cunningham situates queer resistance within the realms of the private and the everyday, it is not unfair for Woodhouse to conclude that *A Home at the End of the World* represents a “deviation” from “the preoccupying questions of Stonewall literature: gay identity, coming out, sexual exploration, [and] friendship with other gay men.”¹² Yet it is equally important to note that Cunningham’s apparent indifference to the central concerns of these “inaugural stories” of gay liberation does not necessarily make him, to quote Woodhouse, “a traitor, a quisling, [or] one who has deserted” the causes of the queer community, nor does it make his novel “evasive or even homophobic.”¹³ Rather, more so than any other text under consideration in this dissertation, Cunningham’s novel can be seen to confirm queer theorist David M. Halperin’s assertion that “apparent banality is precisely what gives a radical edge to sexual politics.”¹⁴ By insisting in his novel that the queer revolution begins (and, to a certain extent, ends) at home, Cunningham contests the outward movement of post-Stonewall narratives in order to expose the exploitable, albeit often obscured, connections among everyday living, social oppression, and queer resistance. In choosing to locate the queer revolution not in the public realm, but within the ostensibly private space of the single-family dwelling, Cunningham

seeks above all else to augment our woefully insufficient understanding of the constitutive relationship between everyday life and the processes of queer transformation.

A brief consideration of Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* confirms the extent to which we continue to operate with an underdeveloped sense of the substantial ways in which queerness and the practices of domesticity intersect. The central argument of Halberstam's study is that "[q]ueer uses of time and space develop...in *opposition* to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."¹⁵ Despite her book's expressed intention to identify the means by which sexual subcultures "open up *new* life narratives and *alternative* relations to time and space," Halberstam here can be seen to rehearse an all too common understanding of "queerness" as an embodied practice that develops outside of—rather than from within, albeit in resistance to—our existing structures of affiliation and experience.¹⁶ In order to become queer, according to the logic of Halberstam's argument, one must leave behind "the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance."¹⁷ Thus, in Halberstam's formulation, the move *toward* queerness is a move *away* from culture and community, which is to say, from "reality" as we know it.

Not surprisingly, Halberstam contends that a "family" can never be "queer," regardless of the sexual orientations and/or resistant practices of its participants, because the structures through which it functions take form according to "a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality."¹⁸ As a process that is founded in "conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification," the construction of the alternative family always and primarily aims, according to Halberstam's thinking, to secure "respectability" and "assimilation" for its "fairly

conservative” members.¹⁹ Whereas “queer life modes,” Halberstam insists, manage the production of “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices,” gay families sustain heteronormativity by pathologizing “modes of living” that deviate from “mainstream” understandings of adulthood, stability, and civic engagement.²⁰ By representing the diverse and substantial ways in which resistance can and does occur from *within*, rather than in simple opposition to, our culture’s existing “institutions of intimacy,” *A Home at the End of the World* therefore serves as an important and necessary supplement to Halberstam’s understanding of the times and places in which queerness can be said to mount an effective challenge to the “conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility.”²¹ In sharp defiance to the binary logic by which facile distinctions between the “assimilative” and the “alternative” are made possible, Cunningham’s novel calls for nothing less than the thorough reconsideration of the lived spaces in which, and the situated practices through which, queer revolution can be said to occur.

To be clear, I do not wish to suggest that it is Cunningham’s intention to exhibit his characters’ practices of resistant domesticity as more valuable than—much less more politically efficacious than—the various individual and collective “public” acts of cultural subversion that generally are said to constitute, to use Halberstam’s terminology, “queer life modes.” If Cunningham fails in his novel to pay much attention to our culture’s most readily apparent models of queer insurgence, he does so not to accomplish the denigration of these efforts, but rather to direct his readers toward the more subtle and largely unexamined modes of localized resistance that originate from within the realm of the domestic experience. In rejecting the prevalent tendency to imagine cultural upheaval as a spectacular and public occurrence,

Cunningham can be seen to fix our attention on the ways in which resistance, particularly as it is practiced from within the space of the home and in the context of family life, *also* and *often* materializes as a mundane, everyday process. Cunningham endows his characters, to quote Henri Lefebvre in a different context, with the collective desire “to extract what is living, new, [and] positive” from “the negative elements” of their shared experience; in so doing, he exposes the radical (but often overlooked and/or misapprehended) potential of a mode of resistance that embraces and attempts to transform, rather than offers the spectacular “illusion of escape” from, the concomitant “alienations” and banalities of everyday living.²²

The complex and largely unexamined relationship between domesticity and resistance emerges as a central concern in all seven of Cunningham’s published novels (*Golden States*, *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, *The Hours*, *Specimen Days*, *By Nightfall*, and *The Snow Queen*), yet *A Home at the End of the World* comprises his most discerning look at both the imperative for and obstacles to the construction and maintenance of the queer homespace.²³ Through his choice to document the domestic conflicts of three ec-centric “half-lovers” (109)—Clare, a bisexual woman; Bobby, a bisexual man; and Jonathan, a gay man—whose identities emerge at the nodal points among competing discourses of sexual liberationism, Woodstockian socialism, and suburban conservatism, Cunningham reminds the reader that because the home is situated at “the middle of everything” (33)—which is to say, because it plays a constitutive role in the construction of individual identity and in the configuration of relational belonging—it must not be underestimated nor disregarded as a key battlefield in the queer revolution. The central importance of the home is underscored in Clare’s first narratorial statement, in which she confesses her desire for both “a settled life and a shocking one” (142).

Above and beyond its articulation of her simultaneous (and seemingly contradictory) attraction to mundanity and excitement, Clare's declaration expresses the fundamental questions with which each of the novel's central characters can be seen to wrestle: is the desire for home a necessarily regressive and nostalgic one that hinders one's processes of queer becoming? Or might one's gravitation toward domesticity be marshaled to serve as the productive basis for the queer transformation of the self and of the world in which one lives?

Through his first person accounts of Jonathan's, Clare's, and Bobby's participation in the creation, ongoing struggles, and eventual restructuring of a "queer" family unit, Cunningham seeks to re-vision the home, both as a symbolic structure and as a site of cooperative inhabitation, as a place for queer becoming rather than for the constriction of selfhood and for the solidification of sexual identity. Although there are marked dissimilarities in their backgrounds, Jonathan, Clare, and Bobby are shown to share a common suspicion of domesticity, in that they have each borne witness to the ways (as Jonathan puts it) in which "love [has] ruined [their] parents" by "deliver[ing] them to a life of mortgage payments and household repairs; to unglamorous jobs and the fluorescent aisles of a supermarket at two in the afternoon" (172). Above all else, then, Jonathan, Clare, and Bobby are brought together by their collective desire to re-define the home as something more than—or, more precisely, as something different from—a "reasonable destination" point toward which one proceeds inevitably, lured on by the false promise of love's ability to "bestow dignity and direction" upon those who are willing to trade passion for domesticity (254-5). While hardly immune to the allures of comfort and security, Jonathan, Clare, and Bobby are driven primarily by a homing desire that represents a significant departure from the one that has impelled their parents in that its object is something

yet to be created rather than already established; in the words of Jonathan at the moment when he, Bobby, and Clare make their decision to attempt an experimental family, their primary intention is to open up a new kind of domestic space in which their “aching but chaotic love” for one another will “refuse[] to focus in the conventional way” (255).

The almost insurmountable difficulties associated with the creation of a homespace that serves as a “place to go to in [one’s] own direction” (to quote from a Wallace Stevens poem that Cunningham includes as the epigraph to his novel)²⁴ are well-established in Jonathan’s and Bobby’s initial accounts of their respective childhoods in Cleveland during the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, in Bobby’s first brief remembrance of his family,²⁵ he focuses on the day in which his father arrives at home with a convertible after “decid[ing] to be the kind of man who buys a car on a whim” (3). Although Bobby immediately apprehends the vehicle’s symbolic value as a substitute homespace—that is, as a “moving metal landscape” which offers both “acres of molded silver car-flesh” to explore (3) and transport to a world that “is gaudy with possibilities” (4)—he also recognizes its significance as a source of “embarrassment” for the Morrow family, in that it exposes his father’s “manic joy” to escape the “thrifty” and “tame” routine on which their daily existence is predicated (3). For as much as he wishes to share his older brother Carlton’s “wild with excitement” emotional response to this impulsive re-directing of the family’s predictable course, the five year old Bobby discovers himself “skeptical” about his father’s actions because they represent an effort to move the Morrrows into completely uncharted territory (3). If his father “would buy a car on a street corner”—which is to say, if he would deviate from a script that assures his practicality and responsibility—“what else might he do?”; if he is a man who would allow his own desires to take precedence over the needs of his

dependents, “[w]ho does this make him” (3) in terms of his culturally assigned position as the head of the home and family?

Likewise, Jonathan’s first recollections of his early family life present the home as a site that simultaneously propels and curtails the individual’s movements toward the fulfillment of directional aspirations, which is to say, toward the achievement of the goals that he/she designates as “the right things [that sh]ould happen” (9). Jonathan’s father Ned, the owner of “a single, unprosperous movie theater” in Cleveland (8) is both emboldened and enslaved by his conviction that he is “always on his way somewhere, always certain that things [will] turn out all right” (6). Although much more of a worrier and a realist, Alice, Jonathan’s mother, similarly believes that she can will herself into feelings of security and contentment through the perfect performance of her pre-scripted homemaking duties as a wife and a mother. Yet despite their public exhibition of a “normal family life”—a theatrical performance that is successful enough to warrant a photographic documentation of one of their “perfectly” accomplished mealtimes in “the Sunday supplement of the *Cleveland Post*” (19)²⁶—the Glovers are bound together not by their shared, expansive vision of the good life, but rather by their crushing sense of frustration at having “been promised something” that is “grander” than what they have accomplished actually (14). Whether this disappointing reality manifests itself in the “canceled ticket” of a stillborn child (13) or in the inscrutable gender non-conformity of their only living son—who sees himself as “not ladylike, nor...manly,” which is to say, as “something else altogether” (10)—the Glovers inhabit a world that they perceive as “shrinking” (19) and ultimately unfulfilling.

The extent to which the characters are constricted within competing and often contradictory notions about the home and its relationship to individual happiness and human

progress is explored further in Bobby's first extended description of his experience of growing up "in the middle of everything" (20) during the late 1960s. The ironically named Morrows, who "are not a fruitful or many-branched line" in Bobby's estimation—he observes that between his sixteen year old brother Carlton and his nine year old self, there are "several [unborn] brothers and sisters, weak flames quenched in [their] mother's womb"—live in a tract of "neat one- and two-story houses" that are "painted optimistic colors" but that border a cemetery (20). The geographic positioning of the Morrow's home at the edge of a burial ground is significant on a number of levels. First and most obviously, it both acknowledges and interrogates the symbolic valuing of the suburban tract home as a beacon of postwar "aspiration," "prosperity," and security," which is to say, as the site in which "the child-centered family" performs "an investment in the future" and, in so doing, quells "insecurity, instability and discontent."²⁷ More precisely within the context of Cunningham's narrative, it establishes the fundamental tension between hope and despair that the characters experience in their endeavors to develop and sustain lives for themselves while memorializing the ghosts of the past.

For the young Bobby, who idealizes his hippie brother Carlton, Cleveland is also located "in the middle of everything" in a much more allegorical sense, being that "one of the beauties of living" there is that "any direction feels like progress" (25). Inspired by Carlton's vision of a future distinguished by its "bright, perfect simplicity" (22), Bobby imagines himself as someone who is "going places" (21), which is to say, as someone who is moving symbolically if not actually closer and closer to Woodstock, New York, where there is a "different country for [them] to live in" because even though "[t]he concert's over, ... people are still there" (22) and presumably are continuing the communal experimentation of the iconic 1969 music festival.

Under the “counsel” of Carlton, who “believes in shocks” and in “taking risks” (21), Bobby makes sense of the world he lives in by seeing it as an ongoing “adventure” (28), and his exposure via his brother to controlled substances and to sex makes him “the most criminally advanced” member of his fourth-grade class (21). The two brothers’ experimentation with the aptly-named “windowpane” variety of LSD results in a “clarity of vision” (21) that allows them act as “undercover agents” who perform “a gorgeous imitation of normality” (23) while dreaming of a “life among the trees by the river” in which they and their fellow citizens of the “Woodstock Nation” will “get released from [their] jobs and schooling” (22). While under the effects of the drug, Bobby discovers his “ability to see every room of [his] house at once” (23) and perceives himself as a “new person, renamed Frisco” (22), who is “a character in a story told by Carlton” (25). Thus narrativized as a visionary leader whose name suggests a safe haven,²⁸ Bobby imagines himself as taking “momentary leave of the earth” as he knows it and propels himself into an alternate dimension where “[m]iracles are happening” (24), particularly in terms of the ways in which people inhabit and cohabit in domestic spaces.

In focusing on the brothers’ hallucinogenic drug trips, Cunningham reveals how profoundly Bobby’s and Carlton’s emergent self-identities are influenced by a countercultural “ethics” that was “proclaimed in the late 1960s” and that aimed to imbue the world with what Timothy Miller has characterized as “a radical change of outlook” that “constituted a fundamentally new way of getting at living [and] at seeing the world.”²⁹ It is essential to realize, as Peter Braunstein and Michael William Coyle have argued, that what we tend to shorthand as the “counterculture” was not a “social movement” per se, but rather “an inherently unstable collection of attitudes,...‘lifestyles,’ ideals, [and] visions” that were practiced and publicized by

people who “defined themselves” in terms of “what they might become.”³⁰ For as much as it focuses on “communal values,”³¹ the countercultural mindset is nevertheless highly invested in individual processes of self-transformation, believing that social revolution will be accomplished “one person at a time.”³² In order to escape the “psychic straightjacket[s]” that ensure the historical repetition of “war, injustice, poverty, racism, and sexual repression,” according to the tenets of counterculturalist thinking as summarized by Peter Braunstein, the individual must seek to accomplish a “deconditioning” of her “adult, middle-class programming” and replace it with a “new set of behavioral options.” More precisely, she needs to become a “child-adult” who lives “in the moment,” thereby achieving the “true psychological maturity” that presents the “route to personal and societal salvation.”³³

Given the countercultural emphasis on presentism, it is not surprising that its luminaries (including Aldous Huxley, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Timothy Leary) would advocate for the use of LSD and other hallucinogenics. After all, psychedelic drugs change an individual’s perception of objects and images in such a way that he fails to position them within “hierarchies of value”; that is to say, he experiences a “nonjudgmental openness to phenomena” that produces a new and almost exclusively present-focused “child-adult” perspective of the world.³⁴ “Dope,” as the hippies termed any substance that “heightens sensory awareness” in a manner that results in “vision and clarity,”³⁵ therefore provides the basis of “an entirely new way of thinking,” one that encourages daily practices that make the “reverting to former patterns” unlikely if not impossible.³⁶ In the same way that “dope” is seen to transform an individual via “mental pleasure,” sex is said to do the same, in countercultural thinking, for physical pleasure.³⁷ Additionally, because it makes people “feel good” on both a physical and an emotional level—

because it creates a “situation,” to quote John Sinclair (manager of the band MC5 and co-founder of the far-left political collective The White Panthers), in which people feel “like they’re *alive* again in the middle of this monstrous funeral parlor of western civilization”—rock music is also held up as an essential “weapon of cultural revolution.”³⁸ Thus considering the importance of dope usage, sexual experimentation, and rock music to the hippies, it becomes clear how music festivals such as Woodstock, which “provided the best opportunities for massive indulgence” in the aforementioned “sacraments,” would take on an almost religious significance among “the countercultural faithful,” much like a pilgrimage or a revival meeting would have in another context.³⁹

The equation of Woodstock to a revival meeting seems particularly apt upon examination of the ways in which the 1969 music festival was figured apocalyptically in the contemporary discourse surrounding the event, both by participants (e.g., its promoters, organizers, performers, and attendees) and by observers (e.g., in the widespread press coverage before, during, and after the concert). Within a few days of the conclusion of Woodstock, participants were already proclaiming it as a world-changing event, one that (in the words of an unidentified attendee) “the historians will have to reckon with” because it serves as the impetus for a cultural rebirth in which “young revolutionaries [now] are on their way...to slough away the life-style that isn’t theirs...and find one that is.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Abbie Hoffman, co-founder of the Youth International Party (the “Yippies”) and a volunteer at the concert, invoked the 20 July 1969 Apollo 11 space mission to describe “the Woodstock experience” as a “trip to our future” and as “the first attempt to land a man on the earth,” after which time “[f]unctional anarchy” and “primitive tribalism” will replace our current “odious...boring [and]...worthless” ways of working, acting, and living

together.⁴¹ For their part, within a month of the August 1969 festival, journalists already were reporting on Woodstock as “a confused, chaotic founding of something new,” which is to say, as a cataclysmic event that “boggles” the minds of both participants and observers. Because the concert boldly and spectacularly announced to the world that “limits have changed” and “priorities have been re-arranged” in a radical and unalterable manner, cultural critic Greil Marcus noted in the 20 September 1969 issue of *Rolling Stone*, its witnesses must deal with its wide-ranging cultural implications, chief among them that “new, ‘impractical’ ideas” about the ways in which we co-exist “must be taken seriously.”⁴² In sum, as expressed by John “The Swede” Hilgerdt in his eyewitness account of the festival for the *East Village Other*, because Woodstock confirms that countercultural adherents actually can “live together as [they] had only done previously in [their] fantasies,” it feels like “com[ing] home” to a place that is new and unprecedented, which is to say, that is still in the process of becoming inhabitable.⁴³

It is his desired occupation of an innovative and different kind of homespace, one that follows Woodstock’s model of “how good we will all feel after the revolution,”⁴⁴ that inspires Carlton Morrow to invite his friends—whom Bobby describes as “a pack of young outlaws, big-booted and wild-haired”—to “invade” the spring party that his parents throw in order “to celebrate the sun’s return” (30). Although Bobby informs the reader that the Morrow’s social gathering is planned as a “mannerly affair” for his parents’ “Ohio hip” schoolteacher colleagues to come together to drink wine and sing folk songs, Carlton adds his own “dope-smok[ing] and sly-eyed” friends to the mix with intentions to derail “the reliability of the evening” (30) and to transport the partygoers into an uncharted social space “in which young and old have business together” (31). As Bobby keenly observes, the “blind date” that Carlton has arranged between his

“parents’ friends and his own” is a quintessentially “Woodstock move” (31) in that it forces “propriety” (32), which constructs social hierarchies (e.g., adolescents vs. adults) and maintains distinctions between deviant and “decent behavior” (32), to give way to a “wildness” that brings into being a future that is “rich” with “possibility” for everyone. (33). The more that the elder Morrow’s friends—who share a common sense of unfulfilled aspirations and who “have agreed,” as Bobby puts it, “to impersonate teachers until they write their novels, finish their dissertations, or just save up enough money to set themselves free” (30)—give themselves over to the “new music” (i.e., The Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, The Doors, and The Grateful Dead) that Carlton “throws...on the turntable” (33), the more that “[l]ife” can be seen to be “cracking open” in such a way that “no one will be quite the same” in the aftermath of the party (34).

For as much as this section of the novel celebrates the revolutionary ebullience of late 1960s countercultural thinking, Cunningham also can be seen to interrogate the naivety of individuals and/or collectives who would believe that Woodstock’s three days of communal experimentation can be easily translated and applied to, much less sustained within, the complexities of everyday living. It is certainly the case that once “the invaders are suffered to stay” and “start to mingle”—a situation that Bobby tellingly describes as “the outlaws” being “house-sanctioned” (31), thereby implying that the adults have approved the homespace as a site for cultural revolution—the party initially gains momentum and manages to open up a space in which young and old begin to “give up” their social conventions and inhibitions in order to “see what they can learn” from one another (32). For a few brief hours, the celebration “start[s] to roll” (32) and the energy “rises higher and higher” (33), giving the impression that people are “changing” so rapidly and completely (34) that a new world is taking shape that promises many

“more nights exactly like this” (33). Yet the fragility and instability of this space of “possibility” where “[t]he future shines for everyone” (33) will be thrown into sharp relief almost immediately after the new world’s formation by a series of seemingly random occurrences at the party that confirm the extent to which established patterns of relationality present a real, substantial, and dangerous threat to the liberation and transcendence that Woodstock envisages.

During an acid trip that he and Carlton have taken together several weeks before the party, Bobby claims to have discovered “the secret of flight” as follows: “you have to do it immediately, before your body realizes it is defying the laws” (24). However, for as much as the Morrow’s partygoers may share Bobby’s desire to take “momentary leave” of the planet on which they live daily (24), they soon discover that their attachments to existing social structures make the transcendence that has been celebrated and promised by countercultural thinkers difficult if not impossible to achieve. Although they may be “dreaming of flight” (33), their understandings of themselves as relational beings (e.g., as girlfriends, as brothers, as mothers, as children) will pose significant challenges to the processes of individual becoming via which they might succeed in “setting themselves free” (30) from the trappings of the familiar. Just as many actual hippies attempted but ultimately failed to overcome their social conditioning in order “to live lives based on choice rather than inevitability,”⁴⁵ Cunningham’s fictional partygoers are shown to fall short of their visions to break free in an ecstatic instant from their material histories, obligations, and habits.

For example, despite her emotional and intellectual investments in the peace- and love-driven tenets of the countercultural movement to which she subscribes, Carlton’s girlfriend (an expatriate of New York City) can be seen from her “confident” entrance (30) to fall back upon

her well-established sense of social superiority, thereby projecting not camaraderie but rather the arrogant and hierarchy-reinforcing demeanor of someone who has been “sent to teach the whole party a lesson” (31). Furthermore, she situates herself throughout the evening as Bobby’s fierce rival for Carlton’s affections, rather than as a happy accomplice, once again falling short of the Woodstock Nation’s expansive notions of intimacy and cooperation. Carlton’s girlfriend’s insecurities regarding the brothers’ connectedness are so pronounced that she can be seen to take every opportunity to ensure Bobby’s exclusion from the world-changing experimentation in which the partygoers participate. Bobby initially maintains his ground, insisting on his right to stand by “Carlton’s side” (albeit the one “unoccupied by his girlfriend”) as they work collaboratively to turn the gathering “into a real party” (31).

In blatant disregard for the social scripts surrounding acceptable interactions between adults and children,⁴⁶ Bobby follows in the footsteps of Carlton and his friends when he invites a “big, lipsticked woman who has devoted her maidenhood to ninth-grade math” to dance (30) and thereby positions his partner and himself in “the middle of everything” revolutionary that is occurring at the party (33). Yet any social upheaval that occurs here is both short-lived and largely illusory, as Bobby is soon singled out by Carlton’s girlfriend and by his mother as a child who is “hours past [his] bedtime” and who must therefore “leave the party” (33). Through the seemingly mundane action of Mrs. Morrow “pluck[ing]” Bobby from the grasp of Carlton, to whom he has “run...for protection” (33), the “future in which young and old have business together” (31) is abruptly derailed, for Bobby at least, by the present’s “business of the usual kind” (33), which is to say, by the established rules and patterns of domestic life. What, after all,

could be more typical than the scene of a “flailing, too furious to cry” child (34) “running from [his] bedtime” (33) before his parents scoop him off the scene?

Despite Bobby’s premature and unwelcome displacement from the party, the celebration nevertheless continues to intensify, so much so that by midnight “everyone is so delirious” that the reported sighting of “a flying saucer hovering over the back yard” is an entirely “expected” occurrence in that it can be seen to represent “an answering happiness from across the stars” (34). Because this fantastical and seemingly miraculous disruption to the partygoers’ “reality” initiates a series of events that culminates in Carlton’s tragic and untimely death, Cunningham here can be seen to display his highest level of skepticism for any and all plans for social upheaval that are insufficiently mindful of the tensions between the visions to which we aspire and the actualities that we inhabit. Carlton is so enraptured by his naïve sense of future possibility, both in terms of his erroneous perception of the UFO,⁴⁷ which causes him to leap the back fence into the cemetery in case the aliens decide “to take someone with them” (34-35) and his subsequent rushing “back to the music and the people, [and] the noisy disorder of continuing life” (35), that he fails to regard the invisible but impassable barrier—literally, a “sliding glass door” that “[s]omebody has shut” (35) during his absence—that marks the boundary between his present Cleveland existence and the future space(s) toward which he progresses. Shattering the glass with an “explosion” that Bobby compares to the experience of “hitting water from a great height” (35), Carlton enacts a devastatingly ironic inversion of his brother’s earlier observation that “[l]ife is cracking open” in the Morrow house (34) as a result of the invasion of the party by “young outlaws” (30). In painful and hopeless opposition to the “lives of risk and invention” (37) that celebration is supposed to have heralded, Carlton instead has broken through to a future that

“turn[s] out differently” from what the Morrrows have “planned” (36), one that ushers in the erosion of familial relations—as Bobby describes it, in the years that follow, his mother will establish a “life of separateness behind the guest-room door” and his emotionally-detached father will “mutter[] his greeting to the door as he passes” (36)—rather than their re-invention.

In spite of Carlton’s death and the splintering of the family that it causes, Bobby is shown to persist in his adherence to the countercultural belief that social revolution proceeds from individual consciousness changes caused by habitual exposure to mind-altering stimuli such as dope and psychedelic rock music. In the years that follow, because he distinguishes himself from his peers with his stoned, hippie demeanor—at their first meeting, Jonathan notices above all else his “dark hair hanging almost to his shoulders” and his “pink and watery” eyes (38)—Bobby will present a “weird” (40) and seemingly “dangerous” (38) threat to the conformity-breeding environment of his suburban middle school. It is these “ragged and wild-looking” qualities of Bobby that make him exceptionally attractive to Jonathan, who has entered the seventh grade having “made certain resolutions regarding a new life” of exhilarating experiences through which he might overcome his socially-conditioned “mistrust of the unfamiliar” (38). Jonathan’s simultaneous aptitude for, suspicion of, and desire to transcend social propriety are reflected in the figure of his childhood companion Adam, the “son of a taxidermist” (38) who insists through his words and actions that the world has a “continuing responsibility to observe the rules of cleanliness and modesty” (41). Despite (or perhaps because of) Adam’s limited capacity for unconventionality, Jonathan has cast him as the boyhood “sidekick” who accompanies him on “mild adventures” that enable him to achieve his “romantic ideal” of being “exotic” and “daring” (40-41). Yet it is his ongoing encounters with Bobby—which revolve around pot smoking,

listening to music, growing his hair out, acquiring a new fashion sense, and otherwise learning “the habits of the age” (45), and which are auspiciously timed at “childhood’s end” (38)—that usher Jonathan into a world of adult experience that re-visions the activities he has categorized previously as advanced “criminal activities” into “pathetically small-time” offenses (42). In short, by remaking himself in Bobby’s nonconformist image, Jonathan aspires to propel himself into a future in which he will leave the “modest expectations” (26) of Cleveland far behind.⁴⁸

For his part, Bobby’s aligning himself with Jonathan represents an opportunity to regain a partner for his countercultural project of self- and world- transformation, thereby filling the immense void that Carlton’s sudden and untimely death has caused within him. No longer a child, both due to onset of adolescence and the loss of innocence that his familial tragedy has effected,⁴⁹ Bobby would seem to be exceptionally well-positioned to assume the role of the more criminally-advanced older brother who leads his younger (or at least less experienced) sibling into new and uncharted territories (or, as Jonathan puts it, into “waters much deeper than” (42) those he has discovered on his own). Yet Carlton’s demise, which in his surviving brother’s memory is inextricably linked to—if not caused by—“an accident of history and the weather” (32) that converted his parents’ house party into a momentary realization of the “Woodstock Nation,” has traumatized Bobby so profoundly that he subsequently has developed an obsessive fixation on domestic security that stands in dramatic contrast to his projected image as a non-conformist. Jonathan’s mother Alice both notices and fears the ravenous desire for a home that she detects within Bobby, describing him as “a stray dog” and comparing his “appetite” to that of termites who devour the “wooden scrollwork” of houses in New Orleans until the “intricate carving[s]” are rendered without substance and thus break away in one’s “hands like sugar” (54).

So intense is Bobby's longing for the stability that the Glovers seem to epitomize and so great is his need to escape his own obliterated homespace that he becomes a semi-permanent guest in Jonathan's bedroom and finds it hard to imagine an existence in which he no longer "like[s] this house and Cleveland and everything, just the way it is now" (46).

It is not incidental that Cleveland bears a homophonic implication as the place to which one adheres unwaveringly, being that Bobby's homing desire has become so pronounced by this point that he "[e]xert[s] no visible will" (42) to transcend the safe and the familiar. Thus, it is Jonathan who must emerge as the "older brother" guide and reinstate within Bobby an intense longing for an alternate existence in nature where they will feel themselves "growing lighter [and] taking on possibility" as they stand "scrawny, naked, and wild" (50) together; it is Jonathan's vision of their cohabitation in this transformed future that drives the boys' decision to hike to a quarry three miles out of town for a swim to celebrate the arrival of spring. Immediately prior to this excursion, Jonathan has realized that his "interest" in Bobby has "turned to love," awakening within him an intense curiosity about "what it [i]s like to be inside his [friend's] skin"; in other words, he desires to alter his consciousness temporarily so that he might see "Bobby cracked open" as he moves "through the world in a chaos of self" that is unique to him (47).⁵⁰

Even though the water in the quarry is still dangerously frigid, Jonathan is so intent on taking a leap into the unknown with Bobby—and so fearful that they will "do no more that day than smoke a joint, fully clothed, beside a circle of dark water" (49)—that he acts with "a raw abandon" that he has "never felt before" (49) and dives naked off a twenty foot cliff. Both his motivation for jumping (i.e., "for the sake of Bobby, [and] for the sake of [his] new life") and the

results of his actions (i.e., he breaks through the “invisible” “membrane” of the surface, causing ice to “splinter” all around him) mirror Carlton’s fatal movements in crashing through the sliding glass patio door (50), thus encouraging the reader to interpret Jonathan’s dive as a desperate and dangerous attempt to reach a state of being that transcends the tedium of “everyday life” (51). This time around, however, Bobby’s “wrath” at the idea of losing Jonathan to “the sky and the cliffs, [and] the mute trees” prompts him into quick action, and he rescues his friend from the icy water and then keeps “his arm around [him] all the way home” (51). Although the expedition falls short of Jonathan’s expectations for radically-transformed experience of the world, the tentative sexual encounter that it prompts—a mutual masturbation session proceeds from a complex mixture of “sorrow” and “fear and pleasure” (52)—can be seen to forge a queer kind of familial bond between the two friends; in other words, their participation in the “illegal practice” of “love between boys” marks the beginning of their lifelong project to establish and sustain a homespace that will accommodate both the “commonplace” and the “criminal” (53).

For as much as Bobby and Jonathan will be linked together—as brothers, as lovers, and as queer outsiders—from this point forward in the narrative, their competing adolescent needs for predictability (in Bobby’s case) and novelty (in Jonathan’s case) initially set them on two very different paths as they move toward adulthood. Disappointed by his perception that “nothing’s ever happened” to his family, which is to say, that his home life has been disturbingly calm and predictable in comparison to the “bad” things that the Morrows have experienced (64), Jonathan follows a fairly typical developmental pattern of gradual autonomy; as Alice’s basic knowledge of psychoanalytic theory allows her to observe, he “need[s] to escape from his father and [mother], to sever the bonds: to murder [his] parents, in a sense, and then resurrect [them]

later” (67). So pronounced is Jonathan’s desire to experience something fresh and remote from his experience that all of the colleges to which he applies are “at least a thousand miles from Cleveland” (97), leading him to his eventual enrollment at New York University and to a promising career as a journalist. Bobby, on the other hand, has been so thoroughly ravaged by his family’s destruction that he cannot escape—or, at any rate, does not wish to escape—the gravitational pull of the Glover’s “nourishing, semi-clean house” where “[t]hings catch and hold” (78). Rather than applying to any colleges, much less “even mention[ing] the possibility” (97), Bobby instead places himself under the tutelage of Alice, who teaches him to cook and to bake and who supports his enrollment in culinary school and his “ill-fated” attempt (103) to open a restaurant—one that he tellingly conceptualizes as a “family place” (100)—in a failing strip mall in downtown Cleveland.

By the time that his father (and the last surviving member of his biological family) “burn[s] himself and half his house by falling asleep with a cigarette” (104), Bobby’s sense of possibility is so thoroughly diminished that he takes a low-paying job at a bakery and rents a room from the Glovers, who are experiencing “dwindling fortunes” (102) as Ned’s single-screen movie theater fails to compete with the emerging multiplexes. Refusing the common desire of young adults to make futures for themselves “out of the raw material at hand,” Bobby can be seen to settle into an entirely regimented daily existence where, as Alice describes it, “[s]ave for the hours he puts in” at work, he is “always *home*” (106; emphasis mine). Yet above and beyond his apparent, fear-driven desire for a sheltered and unexceptional existence, Bobby retains “a subvert, slightly dangerous quality” (80) that has a transformative effect on those individuals (chief among them, Jonathan’s mother Alice) with whom he has ongoing contact. As Alice

observes, despite his attempts to “imitat[e] a clean, personable young man” (101), Bobby is unable to manage “the complete transition” (80) into one of those “pallid suburban boys” that “mothers are supposed to delight in” (81). In other words, for as much as he may try “to assimilate” and to render himself inconspicuous, Bobby cannot entirely mask his lingering (albeit submerged) sense of himself as “an outlander” who challenges “the local ways of making do” (82) through his persistent “ravenous and watchful” (80) longing for change and excitement.

In direct correspondence to the countercultural emphasis on the mind-expanding potential of rock music, it is when Bobby is dancing that he reveals himself most clearly as “an original” who possesses “a voluptuous certainty” (81) about the specific type of cultural revolution necessary to make the world “a better place” (87). On one momentous afternoon while the boys are still in high school, Jonathan tries to “blow” Alice out of his bedroom and back into “the familiar sanctity of dirty dishes and vacuuming” (83) by playing Jimi Hendrix at high volume, but Bobby takes the opportunity to dance with her instead. Significantly, the song is “Foxy Lady,” and the moment grants Alice access to a “secret” life of intergenerational friendship (involving pot smoking, rock music, and raucous dancing) that makes her feel “young and slender” and “full of devious promise,” particularly in comparison to the women she encounters at the supermarket. Delighted by the idea of being perceived as “the scandal of the neighborhood”—which is to say, as an “unfit, scandalous, [and] degenerate” mother who gets “stoned with her son”—Alice discovers via Bobby’s assistance a “buoying” and exhilarating” vision of her future home, one that promises “a life after Cleveland” (87) and an autonomous identity that will eclipse her present position as Ned’s wife (105).

For as much as he inspires the self-transformation projects of others, Bobby so thoroughly gives into the “urge to do nothing and not change” that he is surprised to discover himself “almost eight years” later (127) still working at a bakery and living with Alice and Ned. In ironic contrast to his inadvertent encouragement of risk and invention in the lives of those around him, Bobby himself has become addicted to mundanity “[l]ike a drug,” which is to say, he is made to feel “full and complete” by a “repetition” of daily events whose “gorgeousness” derives from “their perfect resemblance, each to the other” (127). Cunningham’s decision to have Bobby figure the “daily beauty” in which he delights (128) as a drug is highly significant, considering the countercultural distinction between “dope” (which was good because it included substances such as LSD and marijuana “that were perceived as expanding consciousness”) and “drugs” (which were “bad” because they were the “things that made the user dumb”).⁵¹ In a gesture that confirms the extent to which her own perspective has been enlarged, Alice—who no longer takes comfort in the seemingly “logical” pattern of “doing just one thing and then the next” (99) and who is planning a new life in Arizona with Ned—pushes Bobby “out of the nest” and brings him to a sudden awareness of how “slow and oafish” he has become with the abrupt question “[d]on’t you want more of a life than this?” (128). Without his “supply” of the “drug” that the Glovers have become for him—Bobby confesses his dependence on the “regularity” of Ned and Alice as follows: “I needed their house to clean, their dinner to cook. I needed them to protect and to care for”—Cleveland reveals its truer face as a “place where things fail[] to happen” and where the “air reek[s] of disappointment” (128-129).

With his “Cleveland life” running out on him—significantly, rather than the other way around—Bobby must either retreat further into his disillusionment like his regular bakery

customers who “stuff whole cakes into their sorrow” or make the difficult resolution that he is not “ready to be a ghost so soon” (129). Prior to this moment, Bobby has felt himself “embarrassed” by the way that his awareness of Jonathan’s more daring existence in New York City puts his own present reality “in a miniaturizing light” (129); Bobby now comes to recognize that Jonathan, who is “quick and bright, going places” (129), is uniquely well-positioned to help him launch a “new life” that is so entirely unfamiliar that he will feel like “an exchange student” (132) arriving in a foreign country. Although his “nervousness” about being rejected (129) almost prevents him from even asking Jonathan if he can stay with him in New York, Bobby’s imaginings of his “possible Cleveland future”—where his most significant emotional connections would be with his co-workers and customers—force him to confront his fears and hop a train to the city; he chooses this particular means of transport deliberately so that he will be able to “see exactly how much distance [he is covering]” (131). Upon returning to the city with the intention to stay rather than merely visit, Bobby can be seen to exchange his “comfortable” “tourist” perspective of New York—where he was “interested in it” but it was “only about [him] in the most indirect way”—for a more immediate awareness of the ways in which Manhattan “blow[s] itself to bits, over and over again”; in short, he discovers himself more precisely attuned to its ongoing processes of destruction and reinvention (132).

Bobby’s receptivity to the creation of an entirely new existence for himself is apparent in his conscious decision to travel very light for his journey into New York City. Once again revealing his alignment with the countercultural belief that “feel[ing] good all the time”⁵² must be the basis of any real and lasting social change, Bobby fills his only two suitcases not with clothing or with other belongings, but with his record collection; as Jonathan observes in joking

fashion, Bobby deems these vinyl recordings of rock music so essential to his ongoing survival that they are “what [he would] bring into a bomb shelter” (134). Jonathan confirms the absolute importance of this music to Bobby’s existence and well-being when, after seeing his friend’s disappointment in learning that they “don’t have a turntable...[j]ust a cassette player,” he insists that they “take care of the importance business” of replacing some of Bobby’s vinyl at “the biggest record store you’ve ever seen” before doing any other unpacking (134). Passing through the revolving doors into “a room as big as a church,” Bobby is unsurprisingly awe-struck by the three-story store that spans an entire city block and that broadcasts its utter “importan[ce]” by delighting the ears, eyes, noses, and hands of the individuals who immerse themselves in its “rows and immaculate rows of albums” (135). In Bobby’s estimation, because it is within these walls that the city’s “molecules [a]re most purely and ecstatically agitated,” the record store presents itself as “the heart of New York City”; it is a sacred place of possibility where the smallest particles of our individual substances are happily excited for the revolutionary cause (135).

Bobby’s arrival in New York is timely and beneficial not only because it reinvigorates his own sense of possibility, but also because it effects a transformation to Jonathan’s domestic partnership with his roommate and “half-lover” Clare (109). Specifically, Bobby’s presence can be seen to interject an authenticity and “urgency”(109) into Jonathan’s and Clare’s homelife where, up until this point, they have been playing house together in the sense that they have been “talk[ing] a good deal” about building a family, but they have not actually “ma[d]e plans” (111). Bobby observes both the artificiality and theatricality of the roommates’ relationship upon his first entrance into their living space; when the two men return from their record store shopping

trip, Bobby significantly notes that Clare greets Jonathan “[l]ike a wife” when she calls out “Hello, dear” from “offstage” (135). For his own part, although Jonathan describes his connection with Clare as his most “profound” “attachment,” one that instills his life with “domestic warmth” (122), he also realizes that it is both lacking and temporary. On the one hand, because they are “not lovers in the fleshly sense,” it is easier to cohabit peacefully in “love’s bright upper realm,” a space that is characterized by its absence of pettiness, uncertainty, and jealousy; on the other hand, they can be seen to resemble “sisters in old stories” who wait somewhat impatiently to see if one or both of them will be claimed by someone for “the other, more terrifying kind of love” (109). Such are the conditions of Jonathan’s and Clare’s daily existence in “the *dead* center of the Reagan years”; however, “[t]hen Bobby c[o]me[s] to live in New York” (126; emphases mine), thereby initiating a disruption of this routine and, in so doing, pushing all three of them into an unsettled site of promise.

As Bobby astutely observes, Clare and Jonathan are both versatile “performers” who enjoy “an audience” for their semi-ironic enactment of domesticity (139); at the same time, they share a profound anxiety about the ways in which the embodiment of a domestic “persona” (125) represents a situation of “lost...possibility” (121), in that the scripting of a self necessarily restricts one’s “sense of a limitless future” (124). Thus, as an act of self-protection, Jonathan compartmentalizes his “capacity for devotion” in such a way that it “focuse[s] *actually* on Clare and *hypothetically* on” a variety of nameless men he sees in his daily maneuverings, all of whom resemble Bobby in that they are “strong-looking,” seemingly unworried, and do not “aspire to conventional fame or happiness” (114, emphasis mine). Jonathan confesses his “worst secrets” and “most foolish fears” (109) to Clare as a “substitute” for the deep intimacy that “other couples

[might] glean from sex” (122), while making himself emotionally unavailable to the men with whom he couples, including his “other half-lover” Erich (114). In so doing, Jonathan achieves an “intimacy” with men that is “devoid of knowledge or affection” and that thus poses no threat to his simulated domesticity with Clare, which is to say, to his “other life” in which they argue “over how much television [their imaginary] child should be permitted to watch” (125). For her part, Clare—who, at thirty-eight, is eleven years older than Bobby and Jonathan—moves through the world with an “ironic good cheer” (110) that attempts to mask her fearful awareness that her invention of “a life of [her] own,” one that defies the cultural pressure to “train [one’s] desires in one direction or another” (142), has positioned her on the cusp of forty without any clear sense of what “exactly” she is “doing in the world” (145). Having witnessed desire’s potential to “foul” her own relationships with a string of lovers, as well as to ravage the marriage of her parents, Clare has made the conscious choice while in her “early thirties” to “retire[] from love” (145), yet she now worries that this decision has caused her to drift in such a way that she is “likely to end up with nothing” to show for her life (142).

Although he claims that New York isn’t “open to the hopelessness and lost purpose that drift[s] around lesser places” (146), Bobby nevertheless initially struggles to find a meaningful new direction for himself in the city. His “second new life” (146) thus begins rather inauspiciously, in that he spends his days in a “housewifely” manner: sending Clare and Jonathan off to work, straightening up the house, listening to music and/or watching television, buying groceries for dinner, and then cooking and serving the evening meal (147). Yet when Clare suggests that he needs “a new haircut” (148), one that will help him to look more like himself, Bobby begins to realize his need “to lose the thread of [his] old life” (148) and to

embrace the potential for change that his new existence affords him. Once again linking this transformative process to the tenets of the countercultural movement, Cunningham has Bobby remark on the “musical effect” that Clare has on him, by which he means that she “enter[s] [his] brain” in such a way that he experiences an internal rewiring that makes it difficult to distinguish his desires from hers (151), so that both “the state of [his] hair” and “[his] future” are “taken out of [his] hands” temporarily (150). Through the assistance of Clare, who gives him a crew cut that gives him his “first good look at [himself] from the outside,” Bobby brings himself to a sudden realization of how “particular” his “features” are (150); made strange to himself, “the ordinary order of things” explodes and he sees “the possibilities that ha[ve] been there all along,” in close approximation of the transformation of his perspective that used to occur while taking acid (153). Recognizing that, since the loss of his brother, he has been more dead than alive in that he has practiced a “distant form of participation in the continuing history of the world,” Bobby now makes himself a promise to live his “own future and [his] brother’s lost one as well” (152). Feeling “wonderful” as the result of imagining himself as a combination of Carlton and himself, Bobby makes his most significant emotional progress in fifteen years and believes that he has finally achieved his brother’s intention to break “through a pane of glass” and reach “the party” of “a surprising future,” rather than being trapped in the “graveyard” of the past merely “thinking” he is “alive” (153).

Having arrived at a vision of his new self—a figure that Jonathan calls “dangerous” and a “Bobby for the eighties”—there is no longer a “need to stay married to the everyday” and certain “changes” thus seem “easy” for Bobby to accomplish (153), such as a revised wardrobe of vintage clothing, the addition of an earring, and a growing “reputation” (due to his characteristic

silence) for “inner knowledge,” “mystery,” and “immovable calm” among Clare’s circle of eccentric, artist friends (155). Almost immediately, Bobby feels a sense of almost total disconnection from his Cleveland identity; when he catches sight of his reflection, he sees his “own rough twin,” which is to say, he sees a man who would neither “have written ‘Happy Birthday’ on ten thousand cakes” nor have “lived contentedly” in someone else’s “upstairs bedroom” in a suburban housing development (154). Yet Cunningham once again takes the opportunity here to remind us of the complex ways in which the exigencies of daily life tend to obscure and diminish our expansive ambitions for an exultant future existence. As Bobby confesses to the reader, his “embarrassing secret” is that he still is only able to “inhabit” a vision of his “future self” for “a few minutes at a time” (156); the instant that he loses his “concentration” on the particulars of this imagined position, he falls “right back into [his] present life” where he feels “content” with his everyday routine (157). Although he may claim to be “simply and purely happy” (155), Bobby’s actual daily existence plays out as a complex struggle in which his past experiences and present obligations threaten to overwhelm his future possibilities.

Yet for as much he struggles to maintain his focus on the specific details of and through which his future will be made, Bobby nevertheless persists as the novel’s most profound embodiment of the optimistic impulse that is necessary to accomplish the queering of familial relationality and of the domestic space in which the queer family resides. To that end, Bobby can be seen to start to come into his own—or, more precisely, to return to the sense of possibility and hopefulness that he possessed as a child—at the point in the narrative in which death and the passage of time begin to emerge as more pressing concerns for Bobby and Clare. At thirty eight

years old, Clare realizes that she can no longer “think of [her] life as still beginning” and that she is most likely running out of both time and viable opportunities to conceive the baby she has been thinking about having since she was twelve (161). Simultaneously confronted with the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic and his father’s rapidly declining health, Jonathan is brought into a painful awareness of his own mortality and worries that something is “wrong” with him; in his twenty seven years, he has had many lovers, but has never been in love (except during adolescence with Bobby), making him fear that he “lack[s] some central ability to connect” (184). Because he worries that he has spent his early adulthood “making some kind of extended mistake” that represents “a *tangent* [he can] never return from” (190), Jonathan starts to fantasize about walking out on his life, so as “to leave behind his father’s death, his mother’s ironic loneliness, [and] his own uncertain future” (194). In exceptionally sharp counterpoint to Jonathan’s and Clare’s more chronophobic thought patterns, Bobby’s “half child,” relatively “innocent” perspective (166)—which is to say, his simultaneously present-focused and future-oriented outlook—surfaces as the means to guide them all (albeit with a considerable amount of struggle) to their “unique and solitary home.”⁵³

Given this discrepancy in perspectives, it is not surprising that Bobby is alone initially in his belief that his commencement of a sexual relationship with Clare, after also resuming his “brotherly kind of lovemaking” with Jonathan (159), makes the three of them into “a family” (177). For Bobby, who feels that an evening of naked play with Jonathan on the roof of their apartment building marks a moment of “new possibility” (160) and who becomes sexually attracted to Clare upon learning that she attended the Woodstock music festival (166), their triangulated desire knits them together as a household because it means that “now all three of

[them] are in love” (177). Whereas Clare tends at first to minimize the importance of her decision to take Bobby as a lover—believing at alternate moments that they are either just “sleeping together” recreationally (177) or that she is using him to get pregnant and to turn her attention away from the fact that she is “aging woman in love with [a] gay man” (161)—Jonathan almost immediately exaggerates it in a manner that ensures his own exclusion from the reconfigured relational structure. Upon hearing the news from Bobby, Jonathan feels “dry and empty, like sand falling into a hold of sand” (178), and he takes a certain amount of perverse delight in imagining a grotesque future vision of the couple where Clare becomes “an eccentric, hopped-up old woman in an outlandish hat and too much makeup,” while Bobby is “potbellied and balding” (179). Jonathan’s “peevish” reaction (177) to Bobby’s and Clare’s announcement of their relationship stems from his confusing (and confused) desire for both of his friends and from his failure to construct a domestic narrative that would situate the three of them together. The irony here is that Jonathan is all too aware that “[w]e become the stories we tell about ourselves” (179), yet he is unable to devise a tale that deviates from the stereotypical plot of a couple who has “children” and “unexceptional jobs” and who can be seen in the signature action of “pushing a cart through the fluorescent aisles of a supermarket” (180).

Rather than recognizing that Bobby’s and Clare’s emergent partnership offers him the opportunity for membership in a family, albeit one that radically departs from his image of such a structure, Jonathan believes that his friends’ coupling will transform him into “a ghost” in the space that they inhabit together; that is to say, he fears that he will be relegated to the shadows of their daily lives, thus positioning him in such a way that he will “apprehend but never quite reach the lights of home” (201). Cunningham’s word choice (“apprehend”) is significant here in that it

conveys Jonathan's simultaneous and contradictory feelings of understanding, dread, and confinement in relation to Clare's and Bobby's ascendance (or, more precisely, their perceived ascendance) within the hierarchy of the family. Thus, by the time that Clare begins to share Bobby's vision of "a new kind of family," which is to say, a "big disjointed one, with aunts and uncles all over town" (204), Jonathan already has convinced himself that his present state of affairs is a "canceled ticket" and that he must move out in order "[t]o get a life" (202) because it is "[j]ust the two of [them]" who "are the family" (203). For her own part, Clare believes that the source of "Jonathan's trouble" is "simple"; he has "let his life get divided up into too many different compartments," meaning that "more areas of overlap" (204) are needed in order for him to appreciate the rich and fulfilling complexity of his situation. To that end, she convinces a reluctant Jonathan to invite his lover Erich over for dinner, during which time Bobby and Erich bond over music and the four of them sing and dance for hours on the rooftop. Despite the fact that the evening is not remotely close to the "disaster" (208) that he fears it will be—or perhaps because it is not a disaster, thereby forcing him into the anxiety-inducing realization that their unconventional home life is "starting to work out" (213)⁵⁴—Jonathan chooses the next day as the moment to "slip[] through the fabric of his life" (212) and to exit as if "through a trapdoor" (214) from the three roommates' ongoing performance of domesticity.

Ironically enough, it only after (and because of) Jonathan's disappearance that Clare starts to fear the "unvarying domestic routines" that she and Bobby are likely to develop as a couple (205) and that Bobby begins to feel himself "slipping back to [his] old Cleveland mode" of a "life made up of details" in order to occlude his lack of hope for "better things to come" (214). Being that Clare's and Bobby's relationship has now lost its queer edge—as Bobby puts

it, Jonathan takes “something out of the air when he le[aves]”—they instead develop a “certain mild kindness” to connect them together that is “the living opposite of desire” (215). In other words, they commence the practice of a thoroughly domesticated version of “love between a man and a woman” (216) that rivals the relationships of their parents in terms of its predictability and sterility. Moreover, because their daily life is no longer “riotous” (214) nor surprising—that is to say, there is “no one to gossip about or worry over, except one another” because “[n]o one but Clare and [Bobby is] ever coming home” (216)—they can be seen to lose their “sense of the past and the future” and to begin “to drift” (215) rather than propel themselves into a future life of possibility and creativity. It is clear that they both need Jonathan, who finally confesses that he has left because he thinks it “hopeless” to have “fallen in love with [Bobby] and Clare together” (218), to construct a life together that is more than “a succession of details” that lacks a “central point” and that is “regular” (215) in the most disappointing sense of the word.

By the time that the three roommates are reunited at Jonathan’s father’s funeral, a now pregnant Clare is contemplating leaving Bobby, while Jonathan can be seen to be “turning into” his mother Alice, at least in his attempts to “cultivat[e] a life” that is “orderly and cut off” from any particularly meaningful human connections (224). Additionally, Jonathan has built up an enormous amount of resentment for Bobby—whom he regards as having stolen his “entire former life” (226) by becoming Clare’s lover and by being a “better son” to Jonathan’s parents—and Clare—whom he begrudges for “let[ting] [him] fall in love with” her and then starting a sexual relationship with his “best friend” (227). When the pronounced friction between them erupts into violence, the moment threatens to initiate a final splintering of their triangulated connection, yet Bobby’s realization that Jonathan has “been alone too much” for many months

intensifies his desire for the reinstatement of their life together, and he literally stops Jonathan in his tracks as he tries to run away from the site of conflict (228). Although the emotionally-charged struggle elicits a long-overdue apology from Jonathan, as well as the re-introduction of laughter into their relationship, Clare remains skeptical about any plans to re-form a “lopsided family” that is based on “mingled love and friendship,” seeing it as “another foolish episode” (232) that merely confirms their common lack of direction.

Despite her reservations about re-assembling their unconventional family, Clare agrees to accompany Jonathan and Bobby on a cross-country road trip that returns them from the Arizona funeral to New York City. For Jonathan, the travel experience renews his faith in the “possible”: he believes that he can “still travel, change jobs, read Turgenev,” and participate in “[a]ny kind of love” (252). Likewise, the journey inspires in Bobby a vision to acquire “a place out of the city,” which is to say, “a house [they can] all live in” together (253). Clare’s kneejerk reaction to this proposal demonstrates the extent to which she scorns what she perceives as a naïve childishness on Bobby’s part; although she denigrates it immediately as a dated experiment in “commune” living, thus linking it to the failed experimentation of the countercultural movement, Bobby confidently responds that they would be “more like a family” (253). In her terse reply that they “are nothing like a family” and in her subsequent ordering of Bobby to “stop the car” so that she can begin walking “with fierce determination” away from their intended (literal and figurative) endpoint (253), Clare can be seen to recognize and to resist the complex ways in which the three of them have begun to rewrite the social scripts for domestic relationality. Having been schooled in the dominant cultural narrative that romantic love works to “bestow dignity and direction” to people’s lives, Clare is simultaneously “scared,” “furious,” and

“embarrassed” by the unexpected “zaniness of her life” (255). Thus feeling like “a fool” because of her life’s failure to follow one of the sanctioned paths for the creation of a family—as she laments, “I should either be in love with one person, or I should have a baby on my own” (255)—Clare discovers herself “in the middle of open country, with no reasonable destination at hand” (254) and thus without a clear direction for moving forward.

While Bobby and Jonathan find themselves similarly “confused and homeless and lacking a plan,” they already have resolved to “[b]e brave” in the face of the “unusual” configuration of intimacy with which they have been “beset”; although their “aching but chaotic love” may refuse “to focus in the conventional way” (255), they have begun the process of reclaiming their shared childhood belief that there is no such thing as “going too far” (245) into uncharted territory. At the end of this episode, Clare ultimately signals her willingness to join them on this journey into the unknown when she “sh[akes] her head, not in denial but in exasperation” and begins walking toward a patch of forest (255), a scene which hearkens back to Bobby’s early imaginings of the Woodstock-inspired life of “bright, perfect simplicity...among the trees by the river” (22). Not surprisingly then, the three soon find themselves buying an old house standing “on a solid foundation” and “a motherly, slightly insane dignity” that is approximately five miles outside of Woodstock, New York (260). Bobby describes the acquisition of this real estate as the purchasing of “a fresh start,” via which they hope to “g[e]t rid of everything [that is] worn out or broken” (260) and/or that epitomizes a “too complicated” pleasure of the city (259); in exchange, they will obtain a largely unspoiled site of inhabitation where light “float[s] through the rooms as if the passage of time [i]s man’s silliest delusion” and where well water that is as “clear and cold as virtue flow[s] from the taps” (260). Interestingly,

despite the fact that she claims to “hate scenery” and to be disappointed to have “end[ed] up as...an old hippie” (262), Clare nevertheless emerges as the driving force behind their new mode of existence since she has the financial means to make it possible; at least in material terms, despite her ongoing skepticism about the plan, she becomes the primary investor in their collective future when she uses her inheritance money to procure the house and to fund the small restaurant that Bobby and Jonathan open together and that they meaningfully name “the Home Café” (263).

In many significant ways, the Home Café is a business enterprise that epitomizes the particular mode of queerness that Jonathan, Bobby, and Clare attempt to practice in their domestic existence together.⁵⁵ On the surface, the restaurant seems to be a “simple” endeavor (300) that offers a comfortable space for relaxation, neighborly conversation, and nourishment where Jonathan and Bobby pride themselves on serving “honest food made by human hands” (300) as opposed to the “dead, thawed and microwaved” meals (247) that they have discovered at roadside cafés on their cross-country road trip. Yet a closer examination reveals that the café operates in “a continual state of crisis,” one that involves the battling of “decay and parasites,” the constant threat of human error, and the warding off of mechanical failure in order to accomplish the seemingly “unexceptional” task of getting a “simple” breakfast or lunch selection served on a “white ceramic plate” (301). The trio’s “eccentric little café” thus mirrors their home life together in that each day is characterized by a pronounced tension between the temptation to surrender to the “more practical, seductive kind of defeat” (301) that everyday existence predictably offers and the desire to strive toward the creative production of objects of sustenance and of pleasure. That is to say, for as much as their daily routines involve the mundane

performance of domestic rituals and the struggle for order, Clare, Jonathan, and Bobby nevertheless strive to retain their inclinations to live “convoluted, neurotic lives” (300) that are more focused on the possible than on the actual.

Not surprisingly then, although all three of them have differing attitudes toward the significance of the metaphor, Bobby, Clare, and Jonathan share a common sense of themselves as “pioneers”(266) who have brought their “talents and tools and [their] belief in a generous future” to the frontier in order to see what this space “can become” (264). According to Clare, Bobby additionally interjects a “religious quality” to their homemaking endeavor, in that he endows the project with “visions of reinventing society on a patch of ground far from the site of the old mistakes” (276). So “intensely focused” is Bobby on this process of cultural renovation via individual transformation that he perceives those around him (including his daughter Rebecca) as “part of a movement”; in other words, he tends to fix his attention on their capacities to become “citizen[s] in his future world,” rather than to regard them more simply as co-inhabitants of his present one (276). Although Clare discerns this Woodstock Nation-inspired perspective as “outdated” and “weird” (263)—thus causing her to suffer occasional fits of panic where she feels like she is “standing on an airplane wing...[a]t thirty thousand feet” (264)—Bobby feels entirely at home with his vision of their family’s political import and with his awareness that dominant thinking would label them as “perverse” (273). For Bobby, their daily existence in Woodstock represents the “revised future” because it models what communities “were supposed to become before the old future got sidetracked and a new one took its place” (268). Bobby, his chosen family, and his neighbors are thus united in their “cheerful determination to live in ways that are mainly beside the point” (269); in short, they have made

the intentional decision to “drop out” from the mainstream in order to embody an innovative mode of coexistence.⁵⁶

Bobby claims at this moment to have arrived finally at the place to which he has “been on [his] way...since he was nine” (268). To paraphrase Joni Mitchell’s 1969 composition “Woodstock,” which Bobby frequently sings to Jonathan and Clare, it seems that at long last and through a tremendous amount of effort they have become “stardust” and “golden,” which is to say, they have attained a dreamlike, romantic, and largely uncritical sense of well-being; moreover, they have reached mostly unspoiled and blissful space in which to live, one which approximates a return “back to the garden” of Eden.⁵⁷ In actuality, however, all is far from well within the structure of the family because Clare begins to find herself consumed by a love for her daughter that is “so ravenous [that] it’s barely personal” (274); this “weighted, unsettling” concern for Rebecca’s well-being—and, more precisely, for Clare to feel herself solely responsible for her daughter’s continued existence—becomes so intense that it can be seen to undermine the queering of familial relationality that Clare, Bobby, and Jonathan have worked to accomplish. Clare’s unexpected realization that to be a mother is her “life’s adventure” (275) transforms her into a self-described “monster of care” (320), which causes her to doubt the value and purpose of her role as “an unorthodox lover” because she now perceives it as a less essential position within the family structure, one that feels “tame and ordinary” in comparison (275).

Moreover, this need for Rebecca’s “safety...completely [and] all the time” (278) causes Clare to resent Bobby’s and Jonathan’s attempts to be “good, responsible fathers” and to look forward to the times when they are busy at the restaurant, so that she can feel “stretched and beset” by her daughter’s absolute dependency on her (276). Clare’s investment in her identity as

a mother becomes so profound that she feels as if a “district in [her] brain” that she regards as the inhabitation site of her core being has been “sucked clean” and replaced with a “steady uninflected drive to do what is needed” for Rebecca (319). Once Jonathan’s former lover Erich, who is now HIV-positive and in failing health, takes up residence in their house to engage in “the complex business of his dying” (315), Clare becomes so consumed with the need to ensure Rebecca’s protection that she begins “like a criminal” (324) to plan to disappear permanently with her daughter. Although Clare attempts to justify their departure by telling herself that she is protecting her toddler from “coming into herself” in an atmosphere of loss—specifically, that she fears what it will “do to her if her earliest memories revolve[] around the decline and eventual disappearance of the people she most adore[s]” (322)⁵⁸—her own reflections on the situation suggest that her motivations are a more complex mixture of altruism and self-interest.

To be sure, Clare has convinced herself that she is acting selflessly with Rebecca’s best interests in mind, so much so that makes peace with her awareness that her daughter is likely to hate her for providing a life of solitude that is not “easy” and that lacks “a back yard and a rec room and a father” (327). At the same time, Clare’s actions can be seen to be supremely selfish, being that her escape will grant her both her autonomy and the two things she now realizes that she has “wanted, after all”: a “baby of her own” and a clearly established “direction” in which to move forward (328). Although Clare recognizes that with Bobby and Jonathan she has “love, and a place on the earth”—which is to say, a “family” (279)—she nevertheless fears that “a certain ability to invent [their] own futures has been lost” because they are now “following a plan” that is equally “haphazard” (273) and tedious. For as much as Bobby, Jonathan, and Clare have created a “safe haven” for themselves and for their daughter, in Clare’s mind the “simple

friendliness” of their home life causes their daily existence together to be characterized both by “predictable” occurrences (273) and by “subtle but pervasive lacks” (280). As a means of coping with her high level of dissatisfaction with her present reality, Clare can be seen both to romanticize her own family history and to express a surprising and self-destructive wish to repeat the mistakes of her parents; in so doing, she convinces herself—arguably, via an act of willful blindness, since she knows all too well the psychological damage that her home life has inflicted on her—that it will be better for Rebecca to be thrust into an unstable atmosphere of “violent wrongheadedness” than to be “well cared for” (279) through the disorderly “good intentions” (280) of an unconventional family.

By the time Clare packs up their belongings and begins to drive away with Rebecca, ostensibly for a three-day visit to Clare’s parents but actually to take up a new life in “San Francisco or Seattle...[in] an apartment where strangers argue[] on the other side of the wall” (327), it would seem that Bobby’s, Jonathan’s, and Clare’s attempts to invent an inhabitable space of queer transcendence have finally crumbled under the weight of many years’ worth of daily disappointments and frustrations. Although Clare is fully aware that her actions are those of a “coward” if not a “criminal” (324), she nevertheless can be seen to align herself ultimately with a conservative and narrow-minded worldview that would view the composition of their family not as “a life”—and thus as an organic mode of cooperative existence—but rather as a “life-style” (323)—and thus as an artificial and capricious deviation from the natural order of things. Clare further denigrates the real and substantial accomplishments of the family when she imagines herself “as Snow White living among the dwarfs” and presumes that her escape will

allow her the opportunity to meet “someone life-sized” (280), as opposed to the diminutive and unfinished “boys” (328) who have served as her most intimate companions.

Cunningham seems further to endorse this notion of the family’s eventual (and perhaps inevitable) failure through his narrative’s confirmation of several observations that Alice makes when Jonathan visits her a few months prior to Clare’s sudden and secret departure. Because she believes that Jonathan has inherited his father’s tendency to be “pleasantly enthusiastic and to keep things rolling along” (284), Alice fears that her “unfinished-looking” son (282) is “being exploited” (285) and is likely to get “squeezed out” because “[t]hree is an odd number” and because people “have a hard enough time staying together as couples” (292). From Alice’s perspective, which is informed by almost sixty years of life experience, “history teaches” (293) that “there are universal laws” that cannot be violated and “certain limits” that cannot be exceeded (292), particularly in terms of the structures of intimacy through which relational identities are assigned. Although Jonathan informs his mother that their “lives are more different than [she] can imagine” (291), thereby implying that it is Alice—who regards her son’s “yearning for a home” as derivative and “*kitschy*” (288)—who has a faulty and “old-fashioned” (285) understanding of how and why people stay together, she nevertheless can be seen to predict correctly that Clare “won’t share her baby” with her two male partners (292). Jonathan may declare defiantly that the historical preponderance of the monogamous couple is merely “a self-fulfilling prophecy” (293), yet Clare subsequently will tell the reader that her “decision” to disappear with Rebecca feels like it “com[es] to” her “against [her] conscious will” (321), thereby suggesting that Alice’s understanding of the world indeed may be the more accurate one. In other words, despite our desires to change our lives in such a way that we are able “to have

everything we can” imagine (293), it appears that intransgressible limits always threaten to prevent our success in these endeavors.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Clare’s departure is actually a narrative device that Cunningham employs in order to underline the accomplishment and endurance of his novel’s queer family rather than to exhibit its fragility, breakdown, and dissolution. When the three of them first move into the house together, Bobby’s realization that there is “room” for their “daily peculiarities” (263), which is to say, for the unique eccentricities that each of them embody, becomes a source of unusual and tremorous joy—in his words, “a rogue spasm of happiness” (263)—for him. Moreover, Bobby insists that their deliberate and thoughtful efforts to invent their relationships with one another (rather than to fit themselves into familial roles that are familiar) infuses their enterprise with a hard-to-classify but nevertheless real form and structure; “[w]e’re *something* now,” he claims (263), thereby suggesting a materiality that is both queer—in that it is odd and unconventional—and actual. Seeing that Clare subsequently acts on her impulse to flee the scene after two and a half years of fruitful cohabitation—during which time the house becomes more comfortable, the “restaurant prosper[s], and Rebecca cut[s] new teeth” and exhibits healthy development (316)—the final sections of the novel can and should be read as Cunningham’s attempts to confirm Bobby’s assessment that they have performed a transcendent queering of domestic space that outlasts and endures beyond their daily disappointments, myopic misperceptions, and anxious decisions. As Jonathan confesses in the novel’s penultimate chapter, he has “wanted to be something that wasn’t dying,” to which Bobby responds (and which Cunningham thus challenges himself to demonstrate), “You are” (333).

In order to apprehend the collective achievements of the family members at the center of Cunningham's novel, it is necessary to evaluate Bobby's perception that they have created "something" enduring and revolutionary together; in his words, the queering of familial relationality that they have accomplished "mean[s] [they] won't just blow away if one of [them] takes a notion" (263). Thus, as Jean-Ulrick Desert argues about queer space more broadly, our focus must be on their efforts to "redefine the parameters of domesticity" through the construction of "new spaces" within their home that make a productive mess of "heterocentric" hierarchies and replace them with arrangements "of great permeability and flexibility."⁵⁹ Ultimately then, we must consider the ways that Bobby, Jonathan, and Clare transform their home in such a way that (to quote Ira Tattelman in a different context) they construct "a parallel world...filled with possibility and pleasure" and replace the "fixed principles and binary modes of thinking" that are characteristic of "the world of dominant culture" with a "means of worldly inhabitation" that is more "flexible, unspecified, and unpredictable."⁶⁰ According to Tattelman, "[t]emporality" and "the dissolution of substance" become "virtues" within a space that has been transformed in this manner; it emerges as a site that "breaks down compartmentalization" in such a way that the "quest to be queer" becomes a "creative process" empowered by a "vision of architectural possibility" that depends equally on "real-time experience" and "'memory, illusion, and imagination."⁶¹ In short, the queering of the home can be seen to be accomplished when this relational structure becomes both flexible and resilient enough to endure beyond the individual everyday movements within, away from, and toward the space of eccentric belonging that a family has imagined together.

To that end, it is Erich's arrival at and taking up "residence" in the novel's homespace (314), rather than Clare's and Rebecca's departure from it, that is the key to understanding the ultimate success of the project. After being written off by his biological family upon revealing his HIV status and having lost most of his close friends "in, like, six months" (310), Erich has an urgent need to be incorporated into a new structure of relationality that will provide a nurturing and "private" space "for the complex process of his dying" (315). Although previously Erich has been "practically a stranger," in that his tenuous connection to the family was based on his separate and strictly sexual relationship with Jonathan, Bobby recognizes that he must become "attached to [them] now" (314), so that they can "hold him for a while" (312) and provide support as his health declines. That is to say, in Bobby's "private economy" (314), the queering of the household comes with an obligation to claim an outcast such as Erich as "a member of the family" and to act compassionately and generously toward him, even if "a little time in the country" is all they have to offer (313). Because Bobby voluntarily assumes "the main responsibility for seeing to Erich's comfort," the two of them can be seen to embark "on a kind of courtship" that defies easy classification and that creates a new and "doggedly affectionate" relational affiliation within the structure of the family (314). For his part, Erich perceives the house as a kind of "paradise," which is to say, an idyllic final destination toward which he has been "working [his] way" for his entire life (304) and that he now regards with a bitter irony since the site to which he has aspired has become the place where his body will labor to "giv[e] itself up to the past" (312).

Thus, it is significant both that Clare extends a last minute invitation to Bobby to escape with her to a new and presumably more conventional life with their daughter and that Bobby

declines this offer on the basis that they are compelled to “take care of Erich” (326). For as much as she claims to resent Bobby for being “innocent and well-meaning” (325) and “a sap” (326), Clare’s sudden “wild idea” to take Bobby with her betrays her ongoing belief in his “optimistic” perspective (326) that revised forms of intimacy are both possible and necessary. To be sure, she half-jokingly dismisses Bobby as a “deluded asshole” (325) and later states that her last perception of Jonathan and Bobby is as “a pair of beatniks...in a remote, unimportant place” with “the 1960s about to explode around them”—which is to say, they have not commenced (much less accomplished) the new mode of existence promised by the counterculturals, but instead are “standing at the brink” of “a long storm of love and rage and thwarted expectations” (327) that historically resulted in failure. Nevertheless, in her moment of departure Clare can be seen to apprehend (but not endorse) their vision of a “new world” in which they “can do anything [they] can imagine” (325). For his part, even though Bobby is aware “before they le[ave]” that “Clare and Rebecca aren’t coming back” after a three day visit to Clare’s parents, he strategically refuses to say anything about the secret plan because he fears that “the house” they have taken so “long to build” will “break up” before Jonathan comes to realize that the two of them still “belong [t]here, together” and still “have work to do” to improve its structure (331). While he grudgingly may relinquish his daughter to the “noises and surprises” of the outside world to which Clare has taken her, Bobby believes that his present responsibility is to work with Jonathan to provide an inheritance for Rebecca (who “will be back someday”) in the form of a future “house” that is situated in “a quieter place,” one that is “more prone to [the] forgiveness” of human frailty and fallibility (331) than the urban milieu in which she now will be raised.

The “home at the end of the world”—or, at least, the home that Bobby and Jonathan come to occupy together at the end of Cunningham’s novel—ultimately emerges not only as a site of future inhabitation, but as a present means of transportation toward previously undiscovered destinations. The image of the house as a vehicle that propels its passengers becomes especially important when, on a moonless night, Jonathan and Bobby walk into the open space adjacent to their house in order to find the “perfect place” for Ned’s ashes to be scattered (333); in the “deep black” of the night, they experience the sensation that the house is “afloat” and “sailing through” the starry sky (332) and that they themselves are “[w]alking onto the grass” like astronauts who “move with a light-headed, space-walk feeling” (333) as they step out into the vast unknown. The description of their movements as space exploration is exceptionally fitting, not only because it invokes the novel’s previous metaphors of intergalactic travel and Abbie Hoffman’s figuration of the Woodstock musical festival but because Bobby and Jonathan are searching for something that has been elusive thus far; even before Ned’s death, Jonathan has been seen to struggle to imagine the proper location for his father’s remains, which is to say, to find the proper “home” for them. More importantly, the figuration is apt because Jonathan and Bobby have engaged in a lifelong enterprise to discover a perspective of their immediate surroundings that is “black enough...to see the future” (336); in other words, they have been striving to develop a present-focused outlook that reveals how their everyday activities are not (just) mundane, but are rather the foundational undertakings through which their still obscure prospects will be determined. Although the “gap between what we can imagine and what we in fact create” (336) may remain unbridgeable in the end—meaning that this state of perfect alignment between our inspired designs and our resulting accomplishments is both

perpetually and ultimately elusive—our homing desires nevertheless serve as the engine that drives our progress in the world.

The brief, concluding section of the novel that is told through Jonathan's perspective is about as mundane as one can imagine. On an April afternoon, Jonathan and Bobby take Erich—whose health has declined to the extent that he is merely “several months” away from death—to a pond deep in the woods so that he can share in their “tradition,” dating back to their adolescence, of the “[f]irst swim of the season” (339). Being that the description of this outdoor swim almost immediately follows an accounting by Bobby (in the previous chapter) of his and Jonathan's administration of a bath to Erich, it is revealing to consider these two scenes together. In his detailing of the indoor bath, Bobby notes how Erich has become a “slippery presence” (329) who often “loses track of himself” and acquires a “look of mute incomprehension, as if he can't quite believe the emptiness he sees” (330). Believing that Erich nevertheless will respond to music, a human touch and “the sensation of bathing” (331), Bobby and Jonathan dance to “an oldies station” while the tub fills and hope that he will “smile[,]” “nod[] his head in rhythm” or otherwise join them in a “small way,” but he keeps “staring into a hole that keeps opening and opening” (331). The ironic musical backdrop to this moment is Van Morrison's 1968 song “Madame George,” which has a “stream of consciousness” narrative that is difficult to comprehend, but that documents the “spiritual feeling” one experiences when saying goodbye to the past and moving forward into the future.⁶² No such transcendent closure can be seen to occur here, however, as Erich remains “lost in his own mystery” (330) and Bobby senses that any joy that might be derived from Jonathan's and his “continuing life” together accordingly will be overwhelmed by their “agitation” about Erich's imminent demise (330).

Despite the fact that their worst fears have been confirmed by the time of the swim in the woods, in that Erich has become “frail” and “the disease” can be seen to be “racing through him more quickly than it move[s] in most people” (339), Jonathan’s final narrative contribution reveals that his ultimate level of hopefulness may approximate (if not surpass) that which he experienced some twenty years ago when he “dove” into an icy pond “for the sake of [his] new life” (50) as Bobby’s partner in love and in crime (53). In this idyllic moment, Jonathan is overcome with compassion for Erich and takes hand in order “to protect both of [them]”; as a result of this gesture, he feels “intimate” with his lover for the first time (342) as the two of them wade like “fools” through the “icy water” with Bobby following behind them (342). As they stand naked together, Erich declares “[t]his is good” (342) in a direct allusion to the Judeo-Christian creation story as detailed in Genesis 1 and in an indirect reference to Joni Mitchell’s admonition in “Woodstock”—which Bobby has sought to live by for most of his life—that “we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden [of Eden],” or at least “[t]o some semblance of a garden.”⁶³ As they watch “the unbroken line of trees on the opposite bank” of the pond (342), again invoking a vision of countercultural revolution by echoing Carlton’s description of the “Woodstock Nation” as a life of “bright, perfect simplicity...among the trees by the river” (22), Jonathan remarks that this is “all that happened” on the day when they took Erich for “his last swim” (342), and yet there is much more to the story.

As he stands there, something “crack[s]” *within* Jonathan (342; emphasis mine) during a moment that “inhabits” him “completely” (343), thereby suggesting that at long last he has accomplished the full internalization of the process of self-shattering that his first visit to an icy pond with Bobby has initiated. Although he may claim that the incident is “unextraordinary,”

except for the fact that he is “merely present, perhaps for the first time in [his] adult life” (342), Jonathan and Bobby have “been on [their] way here for a long time” (336) and they finally seem to have arrived. It is perhaps tempting to read this ending as a “nostalgic turn” that confirms Cunningham’s “hyper idealization” of everyday life and that raises important questions about whether he “sees the possibility of a ‘real’ place” in which the queering of the homespace might be practiced and accomplished.⁶⁴ To be sure, because the ending returns the characters to a fantastical space of unsustainable optimism—so much so that Bobby announces that “the minute [wa]s up” almost as soon as it has begun—it does appear to fall short in terms of elaborating a credible plan for the radical, ongoing transformation to the structures of daily existence.

Yet it is essential to note that the final scene of the novel remains rooted in the heartbreaking realities of the early years of the AIDS pandemic, and the characters are shown to be painfully aware of the high stakes associated with their most fleeting attempts to transcend a present existence that is characterized by fear, loss, and death. Because Erich’s “compromised body” and Jonathan’s indeterminate HIV status mean that plunging naked into the frigid water could be “a good way to get pneumonia” (340), their final swim in the woods represents a dangerous event that is as likely to hasten their deaths as to jump start their futures. Moreover, in an ironic inversion of the ways in which Ira Tattelman argues that the communal nakedness in “queer spaces” such as “the bathhouse” work to “erase the boundaries” (e.g. “class”) that “divide people,” thereby offering “gay men the safety and freedom within which to explore a multiple set of interrelationships,”⁶⁵ Jonathan must struggle to overcome an initial “revulsion” (341) toward Erich’s unclothed body that threatens to initiate his fearful retreat from—rather than his courageous embrace of—the future that is waiting for them. That is to say, Jonathan must arrive

at a hard-won perspective that resists reading the marks of illness on Erich's body according to the dominant (at the time) discourse on HIV/AIDS, which would interpret the lesions on his body as signs that his "humanity [i]s being eaten away and replaced by something else."⁶⁶ In working past his long-established pattern of withdrawal, Jonathan is finally able to make the "gesture" to empathize freely with Erich because he views him as someone who is as queerly-prepared "to face his mortality" as he himself is (341). At long last, then, Jonathan discovers within himself a queer potential for re-visioning what it means to be at home with others, in and (perhaps) at the end of the world in which he lives.

Notes

¹ Joni Mitchell, "Woodstock." *Ladies of the Canyon*. 1970. Vinyl recording.

² Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World* (New York: Picador, 1990) 336. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 1. Berlant does not herself engage in a reading of Cunningham's novel; at least one of text that she does consider in her project (i.e., Geoff Ryman's *Was*), however, centers around several characters' attempts to discover, invent, and/or reclaim homespaces for themselves.

⁴ Berlant 2; 3.

⁵ Berlant 3; 7; 4; 7.

⁶ Berlant 10; 8; 3.

⁷ Reed Woodhouse, *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998) 177.

⁸ Woodhouse 177.

⁹ Woodhouse 177.

¹⁰ Woodhouse 177.

¹¹ Woodhouse 174.

¹² Woodhouse 183.

¹³ Woodhouse 183.

¹⁴ David Halperin, "You Say You Wanna Revolution," author's manuscript, 14.

¹⁵ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005) 1, emphasis added.

¹⁶ Halberstam 1.

¹⁷ Halberstam 6.

¹⁸ Halberstam 4. Julie Tarrant makes a similar argument (albeit one with a Marxist frame of reference) about "the new family," which she defines as "the ensemble of multicultural, polysexual and multigenerational relations that have come to characterize 'family' life in the late 20th century"; being that it merely "represents changes in the division of labor in capitalism, rather than the transformation of capital," Tarrant contends that the new family ultimately fails to disrupt or to change a culture's patterns of social relations. See Tarrant, "Why Is the New Family So Familiar?," *The Red Critique* 11 (Winter/Spring 2006).

¹⁹ Halberstam 4; 153-4.

²⁰ Halberstam 153-4; 1; 4-5.

²¹ Halberstam 13. The term “institutions of intimacy” is taken from an essay by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, but it figures prominently in Halberstam’s argument. See Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 553.

²² Henri Lefebvre, “Work and Leisure in Everyday Life [1958],” *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002) 233; 235.

²³ See Michael Cunningham, *Golden States* (New York: Crown, 1984); *Flesh and Blood* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1995); *The Hours* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1998); *Specimen Days* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2005); *By Nightfall* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2010); and *The Snow Queen* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2014).

²⁴ The Wallace Stevens poem is titled “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” and was published originally in 1954.

²⁵ The account is just over one page in length and serves as an informal prologue to the novel’s action.

²⁶ After Alice nearly dies while in labor with her second child, she becomes increasingly withdrawn from Ned, so much so that Jonathan imagines that a “force field ha[s] grown up around her, transparent and solid as glass.” Unable to abide an intimate relationship with her husband, she instead invests her energies into the “perfect” execution of her daily domestic responsibilities, chief among them her cooking, which gets “better and better,” “hit[s] ever more elaborate heights” (16), and becomes locally “renowned” (19). Eventually, this theatrical performance of the “normal family life” becomes less “awkward”—which is to say, it mimics their previous life together with astonishing verisimilitude—and Ned and Alice “invent a cordial, joking relationship that involve[s] neither kisses nor fights” and that resembles “the easy, chaste familiarity of grown siblings” (19).

²⁷ The quotations are taken from pages 11 and 12 of Clare J. Richfield, *The Suburban Ranch House in Post-World War II America: A Site of Contrast in an Era of Unease, Uncertainty, and Instability*. MA thesis. Barnard College, 2007.

²⁸ The late etymologist Peter Tamony traces “Frisco,” the often maligned and controversial nickname of San Francisco, back “to the Middle English term *frith-soken*—Old English *frīp-socn*—meaning ‘refuge of peace,’[or] ‘place of sanctuary,’ . . . Frisco may be age-old in the vocabulary of northern and English-speaking seamen, available for application to havens such as the Bay of San Francisco” (193). See Tamony, “Sailors Called It ‘Frisco,’” *Western Folklore* 26.3 (1967): 192-195.

²⁹ Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991): 5; 4.

³⁰ Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, “Introduction: Historicizing the American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s” in Braunstein and Doyle, ed., *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 10.

³¹ I.e., as opposed to “the formidable Western tradition of setting the individual on a pedestal.” See Miller 4.

³² See Braunstein and Doyle 10-11.

³³ See Peter Braunstein, “Forever Young: Insurgent Youth and the Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation” in Braunstein and Doyle, ed., *Imagine Nation*: 243-273. The quotations included here are from pages 253-254 of Braunstein’s article, and the term “deprogramming,” as Braunstein notes, was coined by William S. Burroughs.

³⁴ Braunstein 253.

³⁵ “Dope” was conceptualized in opposition to “drugs,” such as alcohol and nicotine, which “turn you off, dull your senses” and provide the necessary numbness to “face another day in Death America.” The quotations are from a 1969 article by Tom Coffin, as published in *The Great Speckled Bird*, an Atlanta countercultural/underground newspaper that he founded with his wife Stephanie, Howard Romaine and Gene Guerrero Jr. See Miller 26.

³⁶ Miller 35.

³⁷ Miller 53.

³⁸ See John Sinclair, “Rock and Roll Is a Weapon of Cultural Revolution” in E. A. Swingrover, ed., *The CounterCulture Reader* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004): 43-45. The quotation is from page 43 of the article.

³⁹ Miller 82.

⁴⁰ The words are those of an unidentified festival participant, as relayed by New York post columnist Max Lerner in an article from the Woodstock issue of *Rolling Stone*. See Jan Hodenfield, “It Was Like Balling for the First Time,” *Rolling Stone* 20 Sept. 1969.

⁴¹ Abbie Hoffman, *Woodstock Nation: A Talk-Rock Album* (New York: Random House, 1969) 13; 19.

⁴² Greil Marcus, “The Woodstock Festival,” *Rolling Stone* 20 Sept. 1969.

⁴³ John Hilgerdt, “That Aquarian Exposition,” *East Village Other* 20 Aug. 1969. The *East Village Other* was an underground newspaper published in New York City from 1967-1971.

⁴⁴ Andrew Kopkind, “I Looked at My Watch...,” *Rolling Stone* 20 Sept. 1969.

⁴⁵ Miller 35.

⁴⁶ And, for that matter, between teachers and students.

⁴⁷ The UFO sighting turns out to a “trick of the mist and an airplane” (34).

⁴⁸ The phrase “modest expectations” is from Bobby’s previous first-person narration; he uses it to describe an attitude he has inherited from his mother, who “grew up on a farm in Wisconsin and spent her girlhood tying up bean rows, worrying over the sun and rain.” Even in adulthood, Bobby’s mother engages in a daily struggle to “overcome her habit of modest expectations” (26).

⁴⁹ In the aftermath of Carlton’s accidental death, Bobby’s mother fatally overdoses on prescription medication and his father becomes an alcoholic.

⁵⁰ This desire corresponds implicitly to the countercultural longing to achieve a transformed perspective via mind-expanding drugs such as marijuana and LSD.

⁵¹ Miller 25.

⁵² Sinclair 43.

⁵³ The words here are from the Wallace Stevens poem (“The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”) that serves as the epigraph to the novel.

⁵⁴ Notably, Clare observes “an injured, glowering look, something between anger and sorrow” on Jonathan’s face as the four of them sing Frederick Loewe and Alan Lerner’s “Get Me to the Church on Time,” a celebration of middle-class respectability and the convention of marriage from the 1956 musical *My Fair Lady*.

⁵⁵ Tellingly, Bobby and Jonathan even use the term “the Homo Café” as their private nickname for the restaurant. See 267.

⁵⁶ Here, of course, Cunningham is alluding to the mantra (“Tune In. Turn On. Drop Out.”) that Timothy Leary popularized in 1967 when he used it during his speech at the Human Be-In, a gathering of 30,000 hippies in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. As Leary explains in his 1983 autobiography, “‘Turn on’ meant go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. ‘Tune in’ meant interact harmoniously with the world around you - externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. ‘Drop out’ suggested an active, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. ‘Drop Out’ meant self-reliance, a discovery of one’s singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change. Unhappily my explanations of this sequence of personal development were often misinterpreted to mean ‘Get stoned and abandon all constructive activity.’” See Leary, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1983): 253.

⁵⁷ See Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock.” *Ladies of the Canyon*. 1970. Vinyl recording.

⁵⁸ In addition to Erich, with whom Rebecca spends her days watching videos and playing games, Jonathan possibly has been infected with the HIV virus, although he has no symptoms of illness.

⁵⁹ See Jean-Ulrick Desert, “Queer Space,” in *Queers in Space: Communities / Public Places / Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997): 17-26. The quotations are taken from page 22 of Desert’s essay.

⁶⁰ See Ira Tattelman, “Presenting a Queer (Bath)House,” in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, ed. Joseph A. Boone, Martin Dupuis, Martin Meeker, Karin Quimby, Cindy Sarver, Debra Silverman, and Rosemary Weatherston (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000): 222-258. The quotations are taken from pages 223-224 of Tattelman’s essay.

⁶¹ Tattelman 237.

⁶² The quotations represent Van Morrison’s own observations about his song. See Ritchie York, *Into the Music* (London: Charisma Books, 1975) 60-61.

⁶³ Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock.”

⁶⁴ I am indebted to Arthur Little for these insightful observations and for pressing me to engage in a more critical reading of the novel’s conclusion.

⁶⁵ See Ira Tattelman, “The Meaning at the Wall: Tracing the Gay Bathhouse,” in *Queers in Space*: 391-406. The quotations are taken from pages 394 and 399 of Tattelman’s essay.

⁶⁶ This scene thus parallels the moment in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika*, when Hannah Pitt—a Mormon—performs a surprising resignification (and destigmatization) of the apocalyptic “horror” of Prior Walter’s visible indicators of his HIV infection (i.e., his Kaposi sarcoma lesions) by perceiving them as “cancer. Nothing more. Nothing more human than that.” In so doing, Hannah restores a certain degree of humanity back to Prior, allowing him to transition productively from a self-perception as an “AIDS victim” to a PWLA (person living with AIDS). See Kushner, *Angels in America* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003) 236.

Coda:

Queer Sorts of Homecomings

And your heart beats so slow
Through the rain and fallen snow
Across the fields of mourning to a light that's in the distance.
Oh, don't sorrow, no don't weep
For tonight at last I am coming home.
I am coming home.

--U2, "A Sort of Homecoming"¹

But then again, no one, not even I, can ever really get *there*—wherever that may be.
The thrill happens in the search.

--Karen Tonsong, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (2011)²

As I have argued in the third chapter of this dissertation, Samuel R. Delany in *The Mad Man* imagines an apocalyptic defilement of domestic space that radically queers our culture's existing structures of relationality, thereby "cutting up the world in different ways socially"³ so that new and "filthy" forms of interpersonal contact will have a home in which to thrive and proliferate. Being that his novel accomplishes such a spectacular obliteration of conventional domesticity, and being that the last third of its story concerns the (literally) messy everyday existence that John Marr and his incontinent partner Leaky are able to share in the wake of this ekpyrosis—which is to say, in the space that has been cleared by this "all-consuming, all cleansing Heraclitean fire"⁴—it is perhaps all the more striking and meaningful that Delany positions the couple as *headed for* home rather than *at* home in the narrative's concluding moments. More so than in any other text under consideration within this project, *The Mad Man* makes a productive confusion of the structures that shape and sustain our ongoing experiences of

intimacy and belonging; what might it mean then that the figures at the center of Delany's comprehensive rehabilitation of domestic life are still journeying toward their queer homespace, and using public transportation to get there no less, when we last see them? If Marr and Leaky are still on their way to the location where they can be queerly at home in the world, what hope, if any, is there for the success of the far less ambitious renovation projects that Christopher Isherwood, Robert Ferro, and Michael Cunningham have proposed in their respective novels?

The final two pages of Isherwood's *A Single Man*, after all, seem about as bleakly fatalistic as one can imagine, as the narrator "suppose[s]" (albeit in "wildly improbable" fashion) that George's attempts to reclaim his life in a self-transformation process through which he becomes increasingly comfortable inhabiting his queer abjection is all for naught because he will die in bed that evening in a moment of "instant, annihilating shock."⁵ George's efforts to salvage the parts of himself that others regard as waste are thus turned on their head in bitterly ironic terms, as his body is finally reduced to the level of a "cousin to the garbage in the container on the back porch" (186). If the reader were to take these descriptions of the protagonist's ultimate disposition seriously, she might be tempted to view his attempt to inhabit the world queerly as a failure, since "the nonentity we called George" winds up "homeless" and soon "will have to be carted away and disposed of" like trash" (186). Yet it is important to note that the narrator warns against such a literal interpretive position, both in its imperative that we must "suppose this, merely" and in its assurance that the "body on the bed is still snoring" (185); thus, George's story *actually* ends at the moment of his decisions to be "as crazy as a kid" (180) and to travel to Mexico for Christmas (181) in order to find "love" (182) and to experience sexual excitement. That is to say, *A Single Man*, much like *The Mad Man*, concludes with its protagonist headed

toward the *possibility* of a queer homecoming—in George’s case, toward the recovery of the queer inhabitation practices that he shared previously with his partner Jim—rather than with him having arrived in the place where he has achieved (or has failed to achieve, as the narrator “suppose[s]”) this radically transformed mode of daily existence.

Similarly, in *The Family of Max Desir*, Ferro’s final re-enactment of the struggle for the “space in which to continue living”⁶—which is to say, of the central strife that Max experiences as a gay man with/in his multi-generational, Roman Catholic family—is conceptualized in a journey that the Desir siblings and their father make in a “small cortege of cars” (204) to the cemetery where mother Marie is buried in order to dedicate the monument that marks her gravesite. As they travel from the church on the highway, the siblings are “scattered in different lanes in no particular order,” yet the father’s car “remain[s] in the lead,” (204) thereby asserting John’s ongoing refusal to relinquish his position as the commander of their individual and collective destinies. Moreover, Max’s older brother Jack suddenly cuts him off “before entering the gates of the cemetery” (204), a movement that betrays his desperate need to preserve his ascendant position within the “natural” hierarchical order of familial relationality. Although “[i]n the end everyone’s car door slam[s] more or less at the same time,” thus hinting at the possibility of an eventual and equitable resolution to the longstanding power struggles within the Desir family, Ferro undercuts the hopefulness of the moment by describing the sound of the synchronized door closures as “clipped percussive reports” that resemble “a fusillade of pistol shots” (204). This moment will be instrumental in Max’s final efforts to imagine a space of outside belonging for himself and his partner Nick through writings that collide the “real” and the “fantastic,” as I have argued in chapter two of this dissertation, yet Max’s queer homespace,

like George's and like Marr's and Leaky's, remains just out of reach and still waiting to become actually inhabited.

Even in *A Home at the End of the World*, which offers the most meticulous descriptions of the daily activities that construct and sustain the homespace as a location for queer becoming, the reader lastly perceives Bobby, Jonathan, and Erich in a moment of temporary retreat from their regular site of inhabitation. For as much as the three men's "[f]irst swim of the season"⁷ is linked both to natural cycles of rebirth and renewal and to a Woodstockian vision of pleasure-based, communal living, the spectre of Erich's AIDS-ravaged body looms over the scene so profoundly that the future portends painful despair rather than hopeful possibility. In this sense, Cunningham's novel figures the apocalypse in a manner that parallels its deployment during the first years of the AIDS pandemic. Rather than bespeaking a "transformation of space and time from old to new, from corruption to new innocence, from death to rebirth,"⁸ the apocalypse in 1980s AIDS discourse, particularly in American politics and media culture, more often was invoked to hold gay men and other "immoral" individuals responsible for God's judgment upon and destruction of the world as we know it. None of this is to suggest that Cunningham endorses and/or otherwise colludes with this symbolic violence against HIV-positive individuals; instead, he provides us with a powerful reminder of the harsh realities that threatened to occlude any efforts to achieve queer transcendence in a historical moment when people's lives were characterized largely by uncertainty, fear, and "the sense of an ending."⁹ It is easy to understand, then, why Jonathan's lifelong habit of living "for the future, in a state of continuing expectation" comes "suddenly to a stop" (342) in this place of thwarted possibilities; what is harder to discern

is how his willingness to let the present moment “inhabit[]” him “completely” (343) sets him back on the course toward his “home,” which is to say, toward a space of queer potentiality.

A more extensive examination of Marr’s and Leaky’s final journey from the Sowps farm in rural Maryland to their filth-accommodating apartment in Manhattan helps to produce an understanding of why the queer homespace remains—or, more precisely, seems to remain—so elusive at the conclusion of each of the texts that I have chosen for consideration in this dissertation. Above all else, Delany’s lengthy description of this trip, a journey which significantly is accomplished via public transportation, serves as a powerful reminder that queer homemaking efforts are less about arriving at final destinations and/or accomplishing the delineation of particular spaces than they are about participating in the processes of becoming through which we use our desire to reconfigure relationality and, in so doing, to invent new possibilities for mutually-beneficial exchanges. In other words, by ending *The Mad Man* in this suspended manner, Delany can be seen, to quote Sara Ahmed in a different context, to locate the queer homespace as “elsewhere” in the sense that it is “not the space of inhabitation” but rather the place “where the self is going.” The queer subject, then, is always on a homecoming journey of sorts, as he discovers himself on a daily basis as “not yet arrived,” which is to say, “as almost, but not quite, at home.”¹⁰ Although Marr and Leaky literally may be “away” from home because they are on a Greyhound bus at the conclusion of the narrative, they nevertheless confirm Ahmed’s understanding of “the lived experience of being at home” as like “inhabiting a second skin” in such a way that “the boundary between home and away” becomes “permeable” and inconsequential.¹¹

Thus, in attempting to locate the queer subject “at home” at the end of this dissertation—and, more specifically, the queer couple at home at the end of Delany’s novel—I will be less concerned about geography and spatiality and more focused upon affect and relationality. To invoke Ahmed’s influential argument about “narratives of migration and estrangement” once more, I will seek to demonstrate that Marr’s and Leaky’s homecoming journey, in which they travel from Leaky’s original homestead to their chosen, shared space of inhabitation, could actually be a trip to anywhere, in that the sense of “being at home” for the queer subject is ultimately a “matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel.*”¹² In other words, to return to Foucault’s understanding of the ascesis process, the queer home might be seen as the “something” that only can exist in a “to be desired” location, which is to say, as the imagined place of “*becoming*” toward which we are moving perpetually as we are “consistently trying to use our sexuality to achieve a variety of different types of relationships.”¹³ Because Marr and Leaky always are striving to inhabit their queer home, and to have their queer home inhabit them, they are able to transport their messy practices of domestic relationality easily from the “private” confines of their New York City apartment to the public and mobile setting of a Greyhound bus. That is to say, they are “sort of” at home—or, more precisely, engaged in a homecoming process of a “queer sort”—in either of these spaces, because their processes of queer becoming are, by definition, always to be in transit and never to be completed.

The (trans)portability of Marr’s and Leaky’s queer homespace becomes readily apparent as they settle into their seats at the back of the bus and converse about Marr’s impression that on the ride to the station Leaky’s “dad just *might* have had it the back of his mind to get [him] to suck his dick” (476). Without missing a beat, Leaky proudly admits that he is behind this almost

accomplished sexual encounter. At some point during their visit to the farm, Leaky has told his father that “he ought to try [Marr] out there” because he is “a better cocksucker” than Billy’s partner Blacky (476), thereby confirming his absolute commitment to the reconfiguration of family relationality that their messy housekeeping practices aim to accomplish. Leaky’s motivation for lending Marr out to his father is three-fold, at least. On a primary level, he wishes to restructure kinship bonds in a playful manner by affirming his partner’s sexual attraction to his father; moments prior to this conversation, Marr has confessed to the reader that “if he’d dropped a hand to his overalls crotch just then, I’d have offered Billy a blow-job” (475) despite (or perhaps because of) its social inappropriateness. Additionally, he intends the gesture more simply as a friendly and warm exchange that makes both participants feel “incredibly good” (105). Finally and perhaps most importantly, Leaky aims to transfer his ownership of Marr temporarily to his father, in the hope that the pleasurable sensation of “a little fresh meat around his pecker” that his partner provides so generously and good-naturedly “might cheer the ol’ fuck up” (476), which is to say, might represent an unexpectedly agreeable form of contact that alleviates Billy’s grief over the loss of his recently deceased life partner.

Tellingly, the blowjob between Marr and his partner’s father *almost* happens but ultimately stays confined within the realm of each man’s imagination, thereby returning us to Delany’s opening “disclaimer” that *The Mad Man* is a work of “pornotopic fantasy,” in that it represents “a set of people, incidents, places, and relations among them that have never happened” (ix) and that will remain impossible to achieve until a differently cut-up world has been brought into being. In the meantime, and as a significant and necessary contribution to this world-making project, we bear witness in the final moments of the narrative to Leaky’s and

Marr's public performance of some of the "filthy" and "deviant" sexual practices that serve as key components of the queer domesticity that they practice daily. Almost as soon as they have seated themselves at the rear of the bus, the driver suspects them of impropriety, and warns them if they "want [him] to look the other way" as they drink their way through the "case-and-a-half of Bud tallboys" that is Billy's "parting gift" to them that they must "keep it calm," act discreetly, and share some of the beers with him (476). After Marr suggests that they should do "something nice" for the driver in appreciation of his tolerance (476), Leaky decides to surprise his partner by turning him out for the price of a penny, thereby inviting this stranger to participate in the ritual through which their notions of ownership and individual value are constantly being reinvented. On the one hand, Leaky is submitting to the directive of his "owner" to "do something nice for the guy"; on the other, he is exhibiting his selfless desire "to take care of [his] cocksucker" by providing him with a pleasurable experience that serves as both a departure from and an extension of the coupled configuration that is the basis for their ongoing intimacy (477).

Although the bus driver declines Leaky's invitation in the truck stop restroom to "piss in [Marr's] mouth" (477), the two passengers subsequently can be seen to engage in this "warm" exchange, which bespeaks peacefulness and psychological well-being, throughout the remaining duration of the trip.¹⁴ Marr's admission of concern for what their fellow travelers may think about his partner's failure to "make a show of going into the bathroom" to relieve himself is met with Leaky's playful rejoinder of "[s]hut up with that nonsense, nigger, and *drink* my goddamn piss! Don't you know I'm too fuckin' stupid to use that thing?" (478). It is unclear from Marr's narration whether anyone detects what is transpiring between the two men; all the same, Leaky's

unabashed willingness to proclaim his various perversions (e.g., his desire to piss on “niggers”; his thrill at being called dumb) on this vehicle of public transportation reveals the couple as close to “home” as possible within a world that is still moving forward toward an acceptance of their non-normative identities and sexual practices. As we hear Leaky “[c]huckling” and see him “thumb[ing]” in playfully dismissive fashion toward the bathroom he would be expected to use if Marr were not there for “carryin’ [their combined bodily waste] in there and dumpin’ it for [them] both” (478), we catch sight of a man who refuses to abide by societal standards and who further refuses the consequent expulsion of his self by this culture as “worthless” and “homeless.” The “inch of [fore]skin” that hangs defiantly “out the bottom of his fly” (478) thus might be interpreted to indicate the ongoing potential for Leaky’s queer abjection to erupt unexpectedly and to make a productive mess of things as the two men journey home.

In a provocative play on words, Marr remarks that he is “feeling expansive” (478) after he drinks his lover’s urine within close proximity to the other passengers on the bus. Not only is Marr swollen from his consumption of Leaky’s bodily fluids, but his resulting affective state makes him both effusive and prone to contemplation of the wide-ranging potential of the queer homemaking project in which the two men are engaged. Having had his curiosity piqued by a conversation with Billy Sowps on the ride to the bus station, Marr asks Leaky whether he still “think[s] about women” in a sexual manner (478-479). Leaky’s initial response that he fantasizes about women “just about every time [he] come[s]” (478) belies the fact that his desires actually are considerably queerer than those of the gay-identified Marr. Correspondingly, despite his lack of formal education and textbook knowledge about social history and politics, Leaky can be seen to be somewhat ahead of Marr in terms of his progress toward feeling “at home” with

inclinations and imaginings that are labeled at present as deviant, perverse, and/or filthy. Thus, *The Mad Man*'s concluding moments make clear that for Marr to continue toward a more joyous occupation of his queer subject position—which is to say, for him to become increasingly at home with his abjection—he will have to follow Leaky's lead toward an “elsewhere,” to quote Karen Tonsong in a different context, that cannot “ever really” be reached; ultimately, then, it is “all about the ride” in the sense that it is “the inevitably aimless transport of accidental reverie” and the “companionship” that comes from the person(s) Marr is “riding with,” rather than the hope of arriving at an unattainable destination, that must serve to “thrill” him and to propel him forward.¹⁵

Appropriately enough, then, although Marr expresses a desire to speak in the aftermath of the two men's piss exchange, he judges it wise to do considerably more listening than talking during the conversation that ensues. Because he makes the conscious decision to appreciate the value of the observations and insights that Leaky has gained through his unconventional experience of the world, rather than simply dismiss them as “crazy bullshit stories” (476), Marr can be seen here to move toward a deeper and more complex understanding of his lover's thoroughly ec-centric perspectives on personal identity, sexual practice, and the relationship between a joyously transportive fantasy life and the harsher, earth-bound reality from which it proceeds. Marr discovers, for example, that Leaky's imaginings of sex with women have always been exceptionally queer in that they involve a “fuck gang...in [his] head” (480) consisting of a changing cast of men from his daily life—including his friends from the park, his father Billy, and his father's partner Nigg—with whom he shares an experience that otherwise might fall within the rubric of the “straight” (480). Moreover, he learns how Leaky uses these imagined

experiences to achieve actual transcendence over the labels—most notably homosexual, heterosexual, and/or bisexual—that otherwise would fix his identity and, in so doing, would rob him of the privilege to not “care what [others] call” him and to proclaim proudly “[i]t’s just *me*” (480).

Finally and most importantly, because these lifelong fantasies invariably have involved a “little black feller”—specifically, a “cocksucker” “who could get [his] load” and who enjoys being on the receiving end of someone “as free and loose with [his] water as [he is]” (480)—Leaky regards his joining together with Marr as a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy, in the most felicitous sense of that term. To be sure, Leaky acknowledges that his experiences with his partner will not always rival the excessively filthy images of group sexual play that his imagination conjures; yet he insists nevertheless that with Marr, he is about “as close as” he wants to be to the “perfect...fantasy” (480) that served as the means of his ecstatic transport since early adolescence. If he were to come “[a]ny closer” to the actual achievement of these visions, Leaky maintains, “except as a now-and-then thing,” he “wouldn’t be comfortable” (480), thereby suggesting that he is most at home in a space where the most comprehensive fulfillment of his queer desires is still to be accomplished and just out of reach. Striking a careful “balance” between what he has “got in real life” and what he “like[s] to do in [his] head” (480) thus emerges as the most persistent and pronounced challenge associated with Leaky’s daily attempts to be(come) queerly at home in the world. From Leaky’s standpoint, it is not Marr’s exceptional agreeability as a “cocksucker” and his insatiable thirst for piss that make him “just *right* for [his] imagination”; rather, it is the subtle but predictable lacks that ensure that their actual sex is never “as good as it is when it’s in [his] head” that drive them perpetually toward a “*better*” place,

which is to say, toward a vision that will sustain them “over the long haul” (480) of their queer homemaking project.

The extent to which Leaky’s filthy mind serves as the impetus for the two men’s attempts to effect a queer transformation of the world is confirmed by his “use” (480) of “a Hispanic mother” (481) in a fantasy scene in which he and “his imagination guys...fuck the shit out of her” while Marr “suck[s him] off and gets [his] load” (480) just before they arrive back home in Manhattan. In the simplest sense, Marr’s choice of this woman after Leaky asks him to “pick one out for [him]” (480) represents his magnanimous desire to please his partner through his demonstration that, to quote Leaky, he’s “really *got* his number” because he recognizes that he “like[s] ‘em with *real* fat asses” (482). Yet Marr’s decision to identify this particular woman from among their fellow passengers is considerably more complex and more meaningful because he himself finds her both unattractive on a physical level and problematic in terms of her psychological responses to filth. Upon one of his visits to the bathroom “to void Leaky’s and [his] urine,” Marr has discovered that this woman apparently has instructed her young sons to “stand on [the toilet] and squat” rather than to risk getting one of the ““diseases”” that “you can get...from sitting on a public toilet seat”; her germaphobic directive results ironically in a further befouling of the space: now “the metal floor [is] slippery with un-aimed kid pee” and the seat is marked both with “[t]wo shit dabs” and “the black waffle-prints of kid-sized sneaker” (481). Although he claims to blame “neither the mother nor [the children]” (482) for their “public rudeness” (481), Marr is angered by the scene he encounters and disgusted by the ignorance that it represents; above all else, he recognizes that their misapprehension of the means by which bacteria and illness are spread will result in the sons maturing into sexually fearful adults who,

because they will “learn” from “hearsay” rather than science about how “one contracts AIDS”, are likely to have their desires “kill them” (482).

Accordingly, the “public prophylaxis” (482) that Marr performs upon discovering the condition of the bathroom is less about using “a handful of undersized tissues” to “squeegee[] the shit and the pee-sprinkles” from the “commode” (481) and more about taking the measures necessary to stop the spread of the psychically unhealthy understandings of “forbidden” (482) sexual practices that are promoted by well-intentioned but misinformed individuals like the Hispanic mother. When he returns to his seat and picks the woman out as the sole female participant in a fantasy scene involving himself, Leaky, and Leaky’s “imaginary sex gang” (480), Marr is “turning her out” in the sense that he is attempting to locate her within a system of relationality that differs radically from the one in which she circulates presently, one that would celebrate filthy pleasure rather than recoil from “abjection” (483). Although he post-coitally jokes with Leaky that the woman has been “one of the most unproblematic sexual relationships [he’s *ever* had—with anyone” (483), it becomes apparent that Marr still is working to resolve his feelings toward her and toward the cultural attitudes about disease to which she subscribes when he sights her again at Port Authority Station. Although initially he feels inclined to offer the woman a penny for the imaginary sexual services that she has performed, thereby recalling the means through which pleasure is exchanged democratically in the game that he has played with Leaky and others, Marr almost immediately discovers himself overcome with bitterness and declares that it would be more fitting if she were to offer him “a dollar of three...for cleaning the john up after her and/or her kid” (483).

Rather than extending “the most generous of inclusive gestures” (483) toward her and thereby moving himself and Leaky closer toward the achievement of a differently cut-up world that promotes cross-cultural contact, Marr can be seen in this moment to bolster the existing systems of relationality that encourage suspicion, resentment, division, and selfishness. Yet almost immediately after apprehending his “hostility” toward the woman, Marr tells himself “[t]hat’s just not who you are” and instead imagines himself smiling and speaking kindly to her (“Don’t be silly. You’ve got your children. I was happy to do it for you. It wasn’t any trouble”). In so doing, Marr is able to forge an empathetic bond with the woman that makes him feel “terribly good about [him]self” (483) because he has stepped outside his own subject position in order to perceive the world from another perspective or, more precisely, from the perspective of an “other.” In so doing, Marr returns to his more “expansive” understanding both of the exigencies, inequities, and forms of oppression that give rise to our culture’s current “barbarousness” (483) and of the ways in which his and Leaky’s attempts to inhabit the world queerly might work toward the creation of new relational structures that would militate against these widespread incivilities. In short, after a brief but expedient detour, Marr resumes his progress on the always yet-to-be-completed journey toward his queer homespace.

It is not surprising then that Marr’s thoughts return immediately to his “final workout with Leaky”—that is, the recent sexual experience on the bus that Leaky has described as a “perfect” “balance” of “fantasy” and “real life” (480)—and that this perspective shift transforms his moment of feeling “terribly good about [him]self” into a more ebullient and transportive affective state that he characterizes plainly as feeling “terribly good” (485). As they pass through a bus station in which city officials have removed all the seats and public benches in a “cut[] off

your nose to spite your face” (484) gesture that intends to “keep [homeless people from sleeping...in the waiting areas” (483) but that also denies rest to weary travelers, Marr and Leaky undoubtedly are profoundly aware of the ways in which they continue to “r[i]se toward,” rather than arrive at, “the consummation” of their homeward journey (484). In this sense, the two men are forever traveling across what the U2 song that serves as one of this Coda’s epigraphs characterizes as “the fields of mourning,” which is to say, across a landscape of sadness and loss that becomes more navigable through their shared apprehension of a “light that’s in the distance”; yet their expedition to this space is bittersweet and always only “sort of” complete because they remain perpetually in the process of “coming home,” rather than succeeding in the achievement of this destination.¹⁶

Because there is “no rest” (484) on, and no rest from, Marr’s and Leaky’s homeward journey, the two men must continue to strike a delicate balance between the “real” and the “imaginable,” so that they are able to “see and feel beyond” what José Esteban Muñoz has termed “the quagmire of the present” in which the “here and now” becomes a seemingly inescapable “prison house.”¹⁷ The “queerness” of Marr’s and Leaky’s partnership manifests itself most powerfully and most consistently as a homing desire—which is to say, as a desire for home—that functions as “a longing” for a “something” that “is missing,” to return to Muñoz’s argument, from their present experiences of reality.¹⁸ Because they are guided by their fantasies of “other ways of being in the world,” Marr’s and Leaky’s homeward-focused modes of queerness emerge as the particular forms of desiring with the greatest potential to “propel [them] onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present.”¹⁹ By locating themselves with their sights set upon the “new and better pleasures” that their ongoing processes of queer

homecoming promise to “dream” and to “enact,”²⁰ Marr and Leaky come as close as possible to Foucault’s “use” of queerness to make possible “a variety of different types of relationships”²¹ and of Delany’s aspiration for our achievement of a differently cut-up world.²²

The yet-to-be-achieved goal of a differently cut-up world is not only fittingly apt to describe Marr’s and Leaky’s final position in relation to their homespace, but also to characterize the “political” accomplishments of each of the other queer homemaking projects under consideration in this dissertation. That is to say, although the progress that each novel makes toward the transformation of relationality is limited necessarily by an authorial decision to focus upon the fairly confined and “private” space of the home, rather than to imagine the more sweeping and spectacular changes that might occur within the realm of “public” culture, these experiments in queer inhabitation practices nevertheless perform an incision within current structures that is both noticeable and consequential. Scott Herring has characterized this localized mode of queer activism as “*paper cut politics*”²³ in order to make a compelling case for its powerful and invaluable efficacy within the broader context of the social progress that is perceived through more measurable forms of evidence such as policy changes, legislative actions, judicial decisions, shifting cultural attitudes, and the like.

As Herring observes, a paper cut might be dismissed by some as merely trifling and “annoying” because it “rarely does significant damage because it never punctures the body’s deep tissue.” At the same time, however, the experience of a paper cut is one of “considerable...discomfort” and thus difficult to ignore. As such, “an aggregate of paper cuts” on a single body might be able to “interfere, prod, agitate, and pester” on such a profound level that a single “point of distraction”—which is to say, an irritation that could be ignored or

discounted—becomes transformed into “another country” containing multiple sites of associated “disruption.”²⁴ The limited space of this dissertation only has afforded me the opportunity to consider a scant number of possible locations in which relationality is being unsettled productively through the everyday processes of queer becoming. Taken individually, these queer homemaking projects of Isherwood, Ferro, Delany, and Cunningham might be dismissed as inadequately incisive reconsiderations of our culture’s structures of relationality. However, when viewed as a series of apprehensible but nevertheless unattainable locations for the processes of queer homecoming, this collection of texts emerges as a still developing roadmap that provides a sense of possible direction—or, more precisely, a direction toward possibility—as we move forward on our individual journeys. We will never feel entirely “at home,” because home is always elsewhere and because the process of queer becoming is, by its very definition, always yet-to-be-completed. All the same, we might discover ourselves closer to the affective space in which queer possibility presides over present disappointments.

Notes

¹ U2, “A Sort of Homecoming.” *The Unforgettable Fire*. Island Records, 1984. CD.

² Karen Tonsong, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: NYU Press, 2011) 214.

³ Samuel R. Delany, “Times Square Blue,” *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999) 193.

⁴ Samuel R. Delany, *The Mad Man* (Rutherford: Yoyant Publishing, 2002) 426.

⁵ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*. 1964 (New York: North Point Press, 1996) 185-186. All quotations are taken from this edition of the novel and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Robert Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir*. 1983 (New York: Plume, 1984) 2. All quotations are taken from this edition of the novel and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World* (New York: Picador, 1990) 339. All quotations are taken from this edition of the novel and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁸ Douglas Robinson, *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985) 3.

⁹ Here, of course, I am paying tribute to Frank Kermode’s influential study of the fictions of apocalypse. See Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967).

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, “Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2.3 (1999): 331.

¹¹ Ahmed 341.

¹² Ahmed 341.

¹³ The interview in which Foucault makes these comments, which was first published in *Le Gai Pied* 25, April 1981, has been translated by John Johnston and collected as “Friendship as a Way of Life” in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989) 308-312. However, in this instance, I have chosen to follow Ed Cohen’s more readable translation of the excerpt, as it appears on page 172 of “Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming? ‘Gay’ Identity, ‘Gay Studies,’ and the Disciplining of Knowledge,” *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁴ For an extended discussion of the significance of water sports within the narrative of *The Mad Man*, see the third chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁵ Tonsong 214.

¹⁶ U2, “A Sort of Homecoming.”

¹⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 1.

¹⁸ Muñoz 1.

¹⁹ Muñoz 1.

²⁰ Muñoz 1.

²¹ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life”; translated and quoted by Cohen in “Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming? ‘Gay’ ‘Identity,’ ‘Gay Studies,’ and the Disciplining of Knowledge” 172.

²² Delany, “Times Square Blue” 193.

²³ Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010) 23.

²⁴ Herring 23.

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