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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Neutrality in Queer Theory

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

Michael Simmons

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Eyal Amiran, Chair  
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2019



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## VITA

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### FIELDS OF STUDY

Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, Psychoanalysis, Afropessimism

## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Neutrality in Queer Theory

By

Michael Simmons

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Professor Eyal Amiran, Chair

This dissertation interprets the meaning of U.S. queer theory's rhetoric of identity neutrality or impersonality in the context of antisocial queer theory's reception of the identity politics in queer theory's constituent and sibling theories, namely feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory (especially of sexual difference), utopian queer of color critique, and Afropessimism. The chapters collectively offer a comparative analysis of the rhetoric of identity neutrality across the work and reception of queer theorists of the subversion of identity, particularly Judith Butler, Leo Bersani, José Muñoz, John Paul Ricco, Tim Dean, and Lee Edelman. The first two chapters complicate the issue by tracking conceptual inheritances and disciplinary citations in the queer rhetoric of gender neutrality and sexual difference within the scope of public bathroom politics, and the second and third chapters clarify the rhetorical devices that queer theorists use to negotiate with the tension between psychoanalytic sexual difference and racial positioning in antisocial queer theory and Afropessimism respectively. Each chapter reframes the rhetorical principles and potentials of queer neutrality by building from and offering close (re)readings of Jacques Lacan's accounts of: urinary segregation, fixations on sexual and racial difference, psychoanalytic neutrality, and masochism.



## **Introduction**

This introduction addresses several questions that prepare us to understand why I take identity neutrality in queer theory seriously in the following chapters. First, what is queer anti-identitarianism, and where did it come from? Second, how do feminist identity politics challenge queer anti-identitarianism, and how do queer theorists of neutrality respond to feminist identity politics? Finally, how do queer theorists disagree about identity and queer neutrality? To begin to clarify what is going on in disagreements over how to talk about queer neutrality, I also explain in this introduction how French theory motivates the way quite a few queer theorists talk about neutrality as a resistance to binary logics.

This introduction ends with summaries of each chapter: The first two chapters are main analytical contribution of the dissertation, where I recognize or construct compromise formations of neutrality in queer theory, specifically regarding different theorists' views of gender and identity in the context of gender-neutral public bathrooms. The second two chapters support the first two chapters with clarifications of two the majorly opposed attitudes toward neutrality—for and against neutrality—in queer theory. To this end, I explore ways in which Lacanian psychoanalysis can motivate queer neutrality (chapter three), and I account for the ways in which queer of color critique and Afropessimism provide challenges to queer neutrality (chapter four).

### **What is queer anti-identitarianism?**

How does neutrality in queer theory act as a condition of queer community, meaning an identity-neutral community? For much of queer theory, identity is a norm of assimilationism/conformism and hostile narcissism, and queer community is often understood as anti-assimilationist and

against the hostile narcissism of small identity differences, so queer communities often attempt to neutralize, subvert, or place under erasure identity. The account of queer neutrality here begins with a favorable reading, showing what is compelling about queer neutrality before I introduce challenges to the notion or validity of queer neutrality. Popular, favorable accounts of queer neutrality can revolve around the trope of the “ragtag band of misfits.” For example, in a biopic of the band Queen, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), when someone asks the front man Freddy Mercury (played by Rami Malek), “What makes Queen any different from all of the other wannabe rock stars I meet?” Freddy responds,

I’ll tell you what it is. We are four misfits who don’t belong together, playing to the other misfits: the outcasts right at the back of the room who are pretty sure they don’t belong either. We belong to them.

This depiction of queer community as not belonging and yet belonging to those who do not belong is anti-identitarian because it crosses genders/genres and interrupts the boundaries of communication: “We’ll mix genres, we’ll cross boundaries, we’ll speak in bloody tongues if we want to” (*Bohemian Rhapsody*). Queer neutrality is supposed to be a condition of relation without any determinate representational or indexical tie, especially the ties of social categories, associational boundaries, and personal identities that shape conventional relations. In *Tendencies* (1994), Eve Sedgwick describes queerness as consistently concerned with this strange relationality, “The immemorial current that queer represents is antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange” (viii).

Coalitions of queer neutrality like Queer Nation set aside their identity differences in order to team up against assimilationist movements like the gay marriage movement and the movement for the open acceptance of gays in the U.S. military. Neutrality can be found in queer

activism as the gender-neutral criteria for membership in the coalition against compulsory heterosexuality. At the New York Gay Pride Day parade in 1990, activists in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) distributed “The Queer Nation Manifesto,” which contrasts the gender-neutral term “queer” to the term “gay”:

Why Queer? [...] Queer, unlike gay, doesn't mean male. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy.

This is a conceptually complicated situation because while neutrality conditions queer community, this condition practically undoes the closure or completion of queer community. Queer neutrality expands from a gender-neutral coalition to an identity-neutral or impersonal coalition, and the expansion destabilizes the boundaries of the umbrella term “queer” such that it subsumes in a coalition any non-normative identities (at the time) including lesbian, gay, bi, multiple *ts* (including transsexual, transvestite, transgender) plus an inconsistent (and contested) combination of some of the following sexual and/or gender identities:

Q (questioning), Q (queer as a vague non-heterosexual identity), I (intersex), A (asexual), A (allied heterosexual), L (leather subculture and sometimes shorthand for BDSM), F (fetish – often shorthand for BDSM), U (undecided – replaces Q/questioning to make the palatable acronym QUILTBAG), 2S (two spirits), P (pansexual), P (polyamorous), and K (kinky).

An identity-neutral queer community is in tension with the ephemeral queer specificities that have driven queer activism, and the contentious play between teaming and betrayal drives much of the dialogue in theories of queer neutrality. Despite queer theorists' insistence on analyzing sexual identity (e.g. Eve Sedgwick, Leo Bersani) and queer of color critics' insistence on

analyzing racial identity in its intersection with sexual identity (e.g. José Muñoz, Che Gossett), these thinkers retain interest in identity neutrality to a significant extent.

The tensions between identity neutrality and the specter of identity politics are part of the politics of representation in queer theory and practice.

For example, reminiscent of ACT UP's "Queer Nation Manifesto" (1990), Elisabeth Däumer advocates in "Queer Ethics; Or, The Challenge of Bisexuality to Lesbian Ethics" (1992), a queer ethics would stress the interrelatedness of different, and at times conflicting, communities and thus emphasize the need to combine forces in our various antihomophobic and antisexist endeavors. (103)

Däumer claims, "In a compellingly 'universalizing' or 'queer' gesture, [Sarah Lucia] Hoagland equates lesbianism with support of female agency not defined in relation to man, on the one hand, and separation from heterosexualism on the other" (102). Däumer's reference to Hoagland should remind us of Judith Butler's definition of lesbians as people who know how homophobia operates against women, but Däumer takes her cue from Eve Sedgwick's early formulation of the problem of identity and neutrality for a queer politics:

I take the term "universalizing" from Sedgwick's useful distinction between "minoritizing" and "universalizing" understandings of homo/heterosexual definition. According to the first view, homo/heterosexual definition is "an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority"; from the latter perspective, it is an "issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (Sedgwick 1990, 1). My linkage between "universalizing" and "queer" is one that emerges clearly within recent work in queer theory. Thus, to Michael Warner, the preference for the term "queer" over "lesbian" and

“gay” “represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. The universalizing utopianism of queer theory does not entirely replace more minority-based versions of lesbian and gay theory—nor could it, since normal sexuality and the machinery of enforcing it do not bear down equally on everyone” (Warner 1991, 16). (104n7)

Because universalizing utopianism does not *replace* minoritarian lesbian and gay theory, queer theory does a significant amount of work coming up with ways to think about how universalizing and minoritizing work together.

Queer theorists often engage with the concept of queer neutrality without using the term “queer neutrality,” which we may replace with “impersonality,” “anonymity,” or—if we are talking about the performative subversion of identity—endlessly citational “impersonation” of identity. These are different terms with different connotations but substantially overlapping conceptual references, and I point out these similarities as part of my attempt to show that there is a compelling case for the possibility of queer neutrality even for authors whose terms may be distinct from or even apparently opposed to “queer neutrality.” The term “queer neutrality” comes from Jacques Khalip’s “Of Queer Neutrality” (2015), a review of John Paul Ricco’s major text on queer neutrality as “shared separation,” *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (2014), which culminates in Ricco’s exploration of the *unbecoming community* (257). The term “queer neutrality” is also in use by John Paul Ricco himself, David Clark, Stacey D’Erasmus, and Tom McDonough (Ricco et al. 2015). Further, John Paul Ricco’s work on queer neutrality has become a hot reference for a new branch of “neutral” queer aesthetic analyses covering: films (Brereton and Furze 2014; Chare 2015), performances (Guzmán and León 2015;

Robbins 2015), photography (Davidow 2016), novels (Reinis 2017), and even philology (Snediker 2015). Adding video games to the list, I demonstrate a queer-neutral aesthetic analysis in my autoethnographic essay, “The Saneclock Society: Queer Neutrality in *Fortnite*,” from which we learn that a nuanced account of phatic communication—an account of the subtleties of back-and-forth attempts to establish relationality across opposed camps—is a crucial condition for the labor that produces identity-neutral queer community (Appendix A).

John Paul Ricco’s *The Decision Between Us* (2014) does not actually use the term “queer neutrality,” though he uses the term consistently in his following publications. More relevant than the context-specific uses or rejections of a given term, John Paul Ricco characterizes his concept of “shared separation” as distinct from the normativity of the *ready-made* community. Ricco offers an aesthetic analysis of the *already unmade*—like the already unmade bedsheets he contemplates—to chart alternate limits of queer community. Ricco helps us understand the possibilities, realities, and perhaps necessities of a quasi-community divorced from itself and from identity politics. Ricco even distances himself from the term “queer” in *Decision Between Us* (2014) because of the term’s associations with minoritarian identity, with personal sameness and difference of gender and sexuality:

While queer theory has been a critical and theoretical discourse dedicated to questioning, resisting, and refusing the binary logics and structures in which dominant understandings of gender and sexuality have been shaped, nonetheless, the vast majority of this discourse continues to be articulated in terms of sameness and difference—a dominant binary structural logic that is particularly potent in its ability to exclude, hierarchize, and totalize. (114)

This is a frequent concern in works of queer theory that do not use the term “neutrality” to gesture toward queer community, and so we can begin to understand the concept of queer neutrality as bound by such concerns rather than bound by the term “queer neutrality” itself. For an example of the conceptual affinity between different terms in queer theory, John Paul Ricco’s queer neutrality or shared separation is explicitly the same as impersonal relationality in Leo Bersani’s antisocial queer theory, which celebrates all that is anti-assimilationist in sex. In *Decision* (2014) Ricco explains that his anti-identitarian notion of “an undoing of the structural logics of the indexical trace and the rhetorical apostrophe [...] effects what I take Leo Bersani to mean when he speaks of an anonymous, relational narcissism” (38). (Bersani’s notion of anonymous narcissism is supposed to deprive narcissism of the hostility between different egos, and the terminology is understandably difficult to follow.) The strain of antisocial queer theory stemming from Bersani’s scholarship conceptually outlines (even if it uses its terms confusingly) the tenets of antinormativity that sustain queer neutrality or impersonality. One of the famous principles of antisocial queer theory comes from Bersani’s claim in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987) that we should understand “the inestimable value of sex as—at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects—anticonmunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” (22). Bersani thinks that sadism and masochism are basically antinormative.

Bersani’s work—including that on “indifference to difference” (“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 1987) and on “blindly narcissistic impersonality” (“Sociability and Cruising” 2002)—is a wellspring of antisocial queer theory that Lee Edelman and Tim Dean draw on extensively in their theories of queer community as *cruising grounds*. In *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994), Lee Edelman shares Bersani’s interest in cruising culture’s “impersonal and transient ‘contact’” (153). In later works, Edelman takes up the torch of

Bersani's impersonality. In *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory* (2017), Lorenzo Bernini suggests, "Lee Edelman's latest research, for example, can be read as an attempt to push Bersani's antisocial ideas forward and liberate them from their contradictions" (48). This is especially true of Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2006). Queerness, Edelman says, is not a position selected to transcend personal identity but a negation acknowledged as imposed on those who are outside personhood. Edelman argues, "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (17). Again, "queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity, but only a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration" (24). These are the reasons given in support of Edelman's claim that

queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place [of abjection expressed in the stigma], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure.

(3)

Tim Dean, too, models his impersonal ethics on the kind of contact found in cruising culture in his *Unlimited Intimacies: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009): "The alternative to what I'm calling the politics of identification is an impersonal ethics in which one cares about others even when one *cannot* see anything of oneself in them" (25). John Paul Ricco similarly states a queer-neutral anti-methodology in *The Logic of the Lure* (2002), "What if we neither began nor ended with identity? [...] In the end, what if we were to substitute something like a cruising ground for an epistemological ground?" (xix). Judith/Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* (2011) pushes forward Bersani's antisocial impersonality by further developing a notion of queer impersonality as "radically passive masochism," in which we can relate to one another



in our anticlimactic and destructive nonrelations to our/selves, and Halberstam reinvigorates the cruising fetish through appealing to

the utility of getting lost over finding our way, and so we should conjure a Benjaminian stroll or a situationist *derivé*, an ambulatory journey through the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising. (15-16)

The cruising culture of queer neutrality manifests in the chosen archives for a given queer aesthetic analysis, which are often idiosyncratic and arbitrary archives (if not simply elitist archives, as Halberstam notes at the end of *The Queer Art of Failure*—this elitism is something to remember when we turn to look at criticisms of queer neutrality).

Parallel with antisocial queer theory is performative queer theory, which contributes to queer neutrality by tying theories of queer neutrality to queer practices of impersonation like drag. I am drawing this parallel this point to demonstrate an affinity between distinct trends in order to build the groundwork for a compelling case for possible compromises between the distinct trends in queer theory. Although impersonation can be normative by fixating on a given identity in a melancholic or fetishistic way, queer impersonation resists normativity through an endless citation of identity that becomes undone in its always exhaustless/exhausting questioning of the next link in the chains of reference that secure identity. Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990] (1999) allows theorists of queer neutrality to recognize impersonation as a means of impersonal relation by way of the precarious mechanics of the signifier in identity's citational boundaries—in Jacques Derrida's terminology, with repetition there is a difference from identity. In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler quotes Parker Tyler on drag and the art of acting, "It is all impersonation, whether the sex underneath is true or not" (163). When the performance of identity is an

imitation that hits no determinant referent, the stability of any possible “original” or “imitated” melts away. These concerns with impersonation and the subversion of identity develop into Butler’s questions about the possibility of kinship without normative identity, which is the problematic of queer neutrality that Tim Dean explicitly addresses with his ethics of impersonality in *Unlimited Intimacies* (2009). (Dean finds impersonal ethics in HIV-sharing communities rather than subversive impersonations of identity, though—I am acknowledging both differences and similarities between these different theorists in order to draw out a broader concept that itself has tensions and variable-yet-traceable boundaries.)

In José Esteban Muñoz’s work on utopian queer theory, performative queer theory also stretches from the subversion of identity toward the problematics of queer community. This work greatly condenses and yet thoroughly translates many of the conceptual and practical difficulties of queer neutrality. Like Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: The Politics of Performance and Queers of Color* (1999) explores the possibilities of performative subversions of identity through the practice of camp impersonation (see especially “Performing the Hybrid Self” on pp.138-141).<sup>1</sup> Much more explicitly than Butler, however, Muñoz ties queer impersonation to impersonality by drawing on David Halperin’s work on the performative subversion of identity, wherein the artistic *realization* of personality *displaces* personality into “the most *impersonal* dimension of personal life” (emphasis in original, Halperin quoted in Muñoz 178). Such performances of camp impersonation exhibit

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<sup>1</sup> Accounts of queer neutrality are often aesthetic analyses of camp, tracing the ironic distribution of in/visible identities in community. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (1964) outlines the camp aesthetics of queer neutrality in terms of disarming normal society, being both “disengaged” from the bonds of social order and yet seeking “their integration into society,”

To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical. [...] Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness. (Sontag n.2, n.52)

what I [Muñoz] have been calling *disidentity*, [which] functions as counterpublicity that provides pictures of possible future relations of power. The self of disidentity is ultimately an *impersonal self*. (emphasis in original; 178)

We can recognize here that this queer of color attachment to anti-identitarianism is partly bound up with an attachment to the impersonality of humanist universalism. Jose Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) draws directly from the philosopher Ernst Bloch to connect queer community/impersonalism with queer humanism (human-to-be-ism), saying,

Hope for Bloch is an essential characteristic of not only the utopian but also the human condition. Thus I talk about the human as a relatively stable category. But queerness in its utopian connections promises a human that is not here yet, thus disrupting any ossified understanding of the human. (25-26)

Both José Muñoz (1999) and John Paul Ricco (2014) analyze Felix Gonzalez-Torres's visual art to think about new possibilities for the creation of queer community, and José Muñoz returns to the trope of impersonal community as sexual cruising in his highly influential book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).

In "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" (2005), José Muñoz, J. Halberstam, and David Eng collectively advocate the importance of non-identitarian queerness,

What might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics. (3)

These queer theorists assert their anti-identitarianism by way of sidelining the historical necessities of strategic essentialism that provide the force for queer coalitions.

Even women of color feminism is no stranger to queer ambitions for non-identitarian community. We can find clarity on this issue from queer of color critique's inheritance of woman of color feminism. Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004) explains,

Rendered invisible by the political subjects of hegemonic feminism, minority nationalism, and Marxism, women of color feminists attempted to articulate identity formations that would work to negate the nationalist presumptions and protocols of identity. As Gladys M. Jiménez-Munoz observes, women of color feminism intervened into the question of identity by refusing to posit identity as a goal. (126)

That is, women of color feminism develops some of the conflicting investments that shape queer theory's politics of representation. Marking the conceptual affinity between these distinct strands in queer theory is my first attempt to clarify and bring out a possible shared conceptual concern and compromise concerning queer neutrality.

### **How do feminist identity politics challenge queer neutrality?**

Feminist identity politics and its relation to feminist theory are important for understanding the reception of neutrality in queer theory. Feminist theory is a constituent theory of queer theory that strongly embeds the language of identity politics into queer theory. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2011)/*Le deuxième sexe* [1949], which is central to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, teaches us about patriarchy's monopoly on the terms of neutrality such that neutrality

effectively masks heteronormative biases, so even neutrality is a biased position—men’s position. Such ruses of language are why it is important to engage with identity politics and to clarify the operations of power.

In *Gender Trouble*, feminist theory demarcates the poles of the debate over the gender neutrality of language—Butler sides with Luce Irigaray’s *To Speak is Never Neutral* [1985] over Monice Wittig’s ambitions for the gender neutrality of language. “There is no neutrality” is a well-known refrain of feminist theory, and the momentum of this anti-neutrality current causes significant conceptual dissonance in queer theories of anti-identitarian relations, anti-assimilationist coalitions, and other figures for queer neutrality. For example, Butler says that there is no gender neutrality in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), but this leaves us wondering how far we can *subvert identity* if we cannot completely *neutralize gender identity*. Is identity always present or unsubverted if gender is overdetermined? There is evidently further difficulty with expression and reception in the literature on queer neutrality due to the presence of feminist identity politics in queer theory.

Neutrality has an epistemological register—the notion of impersonal, objective knowledge—that is challenged by feminist epistemology, namely feminist standpoint theory, which is motivated by feminist identity politics. A review of the background of feminist standpoint theory and its movement through black feminist standpoint theory should clarify how queer theory and queer of color critique inherit the problems of feminist standpoint theory, which has identitarian stakes that are supposed to dissolve under queer theoretical frameworks for identity neutrality or non-identitarian quasi-community.

Standpoint theory, as a Marxist theory, interprets positions of oppression to have access to privileged insight. I would describe this in psychological terms to say that we are sensitive to

things that hurt us more than things that please us (or so Freud says), and so we pay attention to things that hurt us more than things that please us. By paying more attention to the ways in which we are hurt, we are more knowledgeable about the systems that hurt us. Oppressed people generally know more about how oppression works because they are more sensitive to it than members of the ruling class. Oppressed people's knowledge is key in knowing how to overcome the workings of oppression, and this kind of revolutionary-hopeful, identitarian position is what I characterize as standpoint-optimism. This is an identitarian position.

In "The Feminist Standpoint Revisited" (2002), Nancy Hartsock explains, "As an engaged vision, the potential understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint, makes visible the inhumanity of relations among human beings and carries a historically liberatory role" (352). This gives theoretical and practical importance to the epistemological position of oppressed identities, not unlike the optimistic liberal claim that women ought to decide about women's issues because they know better than men by virtue of being sensitive—as women who have felt the pain of oppressive policies and norms—to the workings of power in our patriarchal society.

In "Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate" (2004), Sandra Harding explicates this standpoint theory as a feminist-identitarian position that contrasts with epistemological neutrality,

Standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power. It was intended to explain the surprising successes of emerging feminist research in a wide range of projects—"surprising" because feminism is a political movement and, according to the conventional view (one that is currently under siege from various quarters, however),

politics can only obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge. Standpoint theory challenged this assumption. Consequently, it was proposed not just as an explanatory theory, but also prescriptively, as a method or theory of method (a methodology) to guide future feminist research. (1)

On the other side of the standpoint-theory equation, we must also say that privileges or affordances of pleasure attract less attention, and so people in privileged positions (or each of us in our privileged positions) are relatively desensitized to the nature of (the respective) power relations. Privilege masks the nature of power relations, or as Hartsock says, “Material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but also sets limits on understandings of social relations” (351).

Although Hartsock might be said to start to think through intersectionality in standpoint theory because class and gender consciousness come together in her work, credit for a wider intersectional approach to standpoint theory belongs to Patricia Hill Collins, who introduces this by positioning black women’s “oppositional consciousness” at the center of coalitional politics (103). There is a well-known conceptual difficulty of ramping up identity politics to an intersectional approach. Doing so continually requires involving the practical difficulties of coalition building that we could not possibly foresee simply by virtue of thinking about the conceptual difficulties of identity politics. Collins suggests that we place black women’s oppositional consciousness at the center of actual coalition building. Queer theory needs to overcome this identitarian charge if it is to recognize or construct a compelling possibility for identity-neutral coalitions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Queer theory could, however, try to come to terms with identity politics, which has been attempted by Rostom Mesli, one of David Halperin’s students, who demonstrates the importance of identity politics to queer theory from the angle of women of color feminism: *In Defense of Identity Politics: A Queer Reclamation of a Radical Concept* (2015). I consider another such attempt by James R. King, below.

## **How do antisocial queer theorists of neutrality respond to feminist identity politics?**

Queer and feminist theorists have recognized that standpoint theory exceeds its own identitarian principles when we ask a few questions about the extreme limits of standpoint reasoning. Whose knowledge is the real center of revolutionary consciousness? Why not say that black *lesbians'* oppositional consciousness should be the center of actual coalition building? Where is sexuality in the intersectionality of standpoint theory? Can we assert identitarian privilege in epistemology without falling into the trap of the "Oppression Olympics"? Who is so much "queerer than thou" such that they may have the *most* liberatory knowledge?

The dead-end here is that even if an extremely liminal standpoint is possible (or is inescapable for some people) and also yields privileged knowledge, the reception and conditions of this knowledge do not necessarily serve coalitional politics. Nancy Hartsock offers a standard Marxist argument for the boundaries of standpoint theory. Hartsock points out that standpoint theory bottoms out for certain registers of oppression, just as Marx held the *Lumpenproletariat* underclass to lack the class consciousness necessary to be an agent of communist revolution. When I talk to people who are multiply oppressed, they sometimes know profound workings of power but do not know what to do with their knowledge because they do not actually have the power to do anything with it—they are oppressed to that extent. The lesson here, in parallel with standpoint theory's attachment to a limit of identity, is that not even a "real" absent center of identity politics will win the Oppression Olympics because if you are really "queerer than thou," you only won by giving up the epistemological and liberatory prize of some kind of knowledge *as* power. This gets us to what I would characterize as a standpoint-pessimism, which is an



alternate moment of standpoint-optimism. Standpoint dialectically moves into its negation insofar as the multiplicity of standpoints only comes together or intersects through approaching the never-ending interstices of standpoints. Standpoint-pessimism returns us to queer theory insofar as standpoint-pessimism and queer theories of impersonality share a figuration of an outside of identity differences. According to antisocial queer theorists, queerness does not stand for a particular identity but stands for the stand-pointlessness beyond identity.

One particularly interesting and illuminating queer response to standpoint theory is, “Am Not! Are Too! Using Queer Standpoint in Postmodern Critical Ethnography” (1999) by James R. King. In this article, King attempts to hold onto both a queer standpoint and a queer impersonalism. King acknowledges that queer coalitions arise out of identity politics before they move beyond identity politics: “Standpoint necessitates the inclusion of grounding contexts, in preference to context-free or neutral ‘facts’” (486). On one side, King uses “queer identity” or “queer standpoint” as essentially substitutable with LGB identity (“T” identity is not specified in this text): “(a) queer, (a) gay, (a) lesbian, (a) bisexual, ... sexually different” (ellipses in the original; 473). However, King also clings onto anti-identitarianism by way of denying that a queer identity has any essence (despite using “queer” to essentially mean LGB).<sup>3</sup> King says that this is “a poststructuralist position” (480). To resolve this conflict, King is arguing—on the basis

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<sup>3</sup> Oddly, we cannot assume that King’s anti-essentialism is a principle of anti-identitarianism because there are well-established *essentialist* queer theorists like Leo Bersani. Although Leo Bersani’s antisocial queer theory is openly anti-identitarian and impersonal, he declares an open investment in gay specificity, even as he recognizes in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987) that

sexual desire for men can’t be merely a kind of culturally neutral attraction to a Platonic Idea of the male body; the object of that desire necessarily includes a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man. (14-15)

Bersani’s confusing combination of investments in impersonality and gay specificity becomes a difficulty in his conversation with performative queer theorists, parallel to the problem of how to conceptually relate universalizing with minoritarian queer theory. For a review of Bersani’s homosexual essentialism, see Mikko Tuhkanen’s “Homomonodology: Leo Bersani’s Essentialism” (2014).

of what he classifies as “postmodern” queer theory by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Eve Sedgwick, and Lee Edelman—that, “queer theory uses a gay identity as a signifier of resistance to heterosexist epistemologies” (479).

This is a fascinating claim—that queer theory uses gay identity to signify resistance to heterosexist epistemologies—because it is wrong in a way that throws light onto what is really going on here. It does not take a queer theorist to use *gay identity* to signify resistance to *heterosexism* or *heteronormativity*. Queer theory does not operate analogous to feminist standpoint theory’s use of women’s identity to signify resistance to sexism or sexist epistemologies. Queer theory uses queerness to signify resistance to *homonormativity*. Gay identity by itself does not exactly lend itself to resistance to, for example, the assimilation of gay people into normativity via legalized gay marriage, but queerness does offer resistance to such homonormativity. What King gets wrong is antisocial queer theory’s better response to standpoint theory, which is that queerness stands for exactly the liminal point toward which intersectional identitarian politics approaches. This is Lee Edelman’s argument: Queer impersonality already points to a *Lumpenproletariat* that accedes to the place of its abjection, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from any trajectory in the momentum of intersectional standpoint identity politics.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that antisocial queer theorists may feel entitled to abandon coalitional politics altogether, as a follow-through on anti-identitarianism. According to Edelman, there is a political formlessness of queerness. Without a fixed political standpoint, queerness can easily be understood to encompass voluntary apolitical withdrawal. Consequently, intersectional queer political coalitions ought to be pessimistically situated as naïve hopes for inclusion into that which from queerness is excluded as such (even if other figures for the Thing like Woman or Blackness are also excluded as such). Edelman claims,

The ups and downs of political routine may measure the social order's pulse, but queerness, by contrast, figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order's death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection expressed in the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally, and hence a place from which liberal politics strives—and strives quite reasonably, given its unlimited faith in reason—to disassociate the queer. (3)

## How do queer theorists disagree about identity and queer neutrality?

Now that we have established some of the complicated ways that queer neutrality works in contrast to feminist identity politics, we can better understand why queer theorists have such a difficult time communicating clearly about identity. I think this is a problem that I can partly clarify through contextualizing queer theory with French theory. First, it is important to establish how queer theorists enjoy queer uses of language that are problematic. In a new preface to *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler addresses the difficult style for which she has been extensively criticized. Dismissing the depoliticized notion of “common sense,” Butler reminds us that “neither grammar nor style are politically neutral,” and the style of communication in queer theory is supposed to help us keep our attention on the subtleties of common-sense communication as normalizing power:

The demand for lucidity forgets the ruses that motor the ostensibly “clear” view. Avital Ronell recalls the moment in which Nixon looked into the eyes of the nation and said, “let’s make one thing perfectly clear,” and then proceeded to lie. What travels under the sign of “clarity,” and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of “clarity” and whose interests do they serve? (xix)

Here clarity is suspect, although it is suspect for its potential to obscure (i.e. a lie) as opposed to clarifying (i.e. whose interest is served by the *misrepresentation* of clarity). We are encountering

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As this dissertation’s introduction notes that queer neutrality is often apolitical, e.g. according to Susan Sontag and Michael Warner. Edelman, for his part, advocates a queer political withdrawal because queerness, having no future, contrasts with “the human subject’s investment in futurity” (34).

some of the reasons why queer theorists have distrusted the language of neutrality as unbiased-by-personal-identity, unequivocal meaning.

In “Queer and Then?” (2012) Michael Warner says that the communication trouble in queer theory is a sign of both rebellious erudition and perverse incompetence directly caused by the difficulties of subverting identity. Warner positions queer communication— “the extreme case of ‘difficult’ academic prose”—as an autonomous playfulness that has no consistency of identity. Queer theory’s parts are “different enough to be incommensurate with one another,” for the components of queer theory consist in

a series of margins that have no identity core; an oddly melancholy utopianism; a speculative and prophetic stance outside politics—not to mention an ability to do much of that—through the play of its own style.

Like the band Queen in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, queer theorists are joined together in the margins *sans* identity, although there is apparently a dispute between Butler and Warner about whether or not queer anti-identitarianism is outside of politics. Queer theory’s margin-bound, anti-identitarian ambitions create great difficulties for the reception of queer theory: “We are often told that queer theory lacks ‘clarity.’” Warner, like Butler, doubles down on this playful unclarity at the same time that he wants us to take queer theory seriously:

the attack on difficult style has often been a means to reassert the very standards of common sense that queer theory rightly challenged. Moreover, even the most difficult prose has given people room for being serious in ways sanctioned nowhere else.

There seems to be little interest in clarifying the matter because of a queer hostility to clarity.

Evaluating Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s utopian queer theory (not to speak of their

solid affinity with antisocial queer theory), Michael O'Rourke argues in "The Afterlives of Queer Theory" (2011),

The first thing we might notice about their essay is a refusal to succumb to the need to pin things down, to say what exactly queer theory is and does and to be entirely clear about what precisely it is that queer theorists do. Berlant and Warner are equally reluctant to accord a specific time to queer. For them, queer is radically anticipatory; it holds out a promise, a utopian aspiration, and occupies a time out-of-joint. Perhaps the appeal and the lasting power of queer theory then (and now) is that it is non-delimitable as a field and non-locatable in terms of a chrononormative temporal schema. Part of, perhaps all of, the attraction of queer theory is its very undefinability, its provisionality, its openness, and its not-yet-here-ness. (103)

I noted Michael Warner's and Judith Butler's suspicion of clarity's normativity, and we again encounter a queer "refusal to succumb to the need to pin things down, to say what exactly queer theory is and does and to be entirely clear about what precisely it is that queer theorists do."

My argument in this dissertation maintains that we can also take queer theory seriously by recognizing that playful communication trouble is a problem even *among* queer theorists—not merely between queer theorists and non-queer theorists. I think a compromise within queer theory regarding this issue would be helpful. Clarifying queer communication can be very important for overcoming divisions in queer theory, especially queer theory's division from itself over the issue of communal neutrality and the regular presence of identity politics in queer theory. I might say that the playfulness of queer communication trouble is not merely a way of subverting identity (avoiding/escaping the reality of identity) but also a therapeutic means of coming to terms with an anxiety about the presence of identity politics in queer theory.

Leo Bersani's "Gay Betrayals" [1997] (2010) is concerned that queer rhetoric's anti-identitarian trend subverts our anti-assimilationist communitarian goals,

Queer rhetoric, as in [Judith] Butler's definition of lesbians as people who know how homophobia operates against women, can be deliberately inflammatory, but in rejecting the sexual specificity of queerness we have become more and more inclined to define our communitarian goals in terms provided by the homophobic community. (40)

Notice that Bersani is talking about "our communitarian goals" after influentially suggesting that sex is valuable because it is "anticommunal." Bersani's anti-identitarian position sits alongside identity politics, and so following Bersani's conceptual and terminological changes is tricky.<sup>5</sup>

In *Homos* (1995), Bersani characterizes queer theorists' rhetoric of the subversion of identity—that of Judith Butler and Michal Warner by name—as really incommunicable, those I have in mind, far from proposing merely lexical substitutions (gay or queer, say, instead of homosexual), are also insisting that their chosen self-designations no longer designate the reality we might assume to be indissolubly connected to whatever term is used. (1-2)

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Judith Butler's response to Bersani effectively doubles down on queer rhetoric by implying that *identity* and *identity labels* have negligible difference,

A few years ago, I had the occasion to discuss Leo Bersani's book, *Homos*. I realized that he was no longer sure whether he could say that lesbians were women, and I found myself reassuring him that no one had issued a prohibition on the use of the word. I certainly have no qualms about using such terms and will reflect later in this essay on

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<sup>5</sup> For a greatly clarifying account of Leo Bersani's essentialist ties to gay male identity, see Mikko Tuhkanen "Homomonadology: Leo Bersani's Essentialism" (2014).

how one might continue at the same time to interrogate and to use the terms of universality. (179)

Let me insist that Bersani is not unsure of whether or not *the word* “lesbian” is a woman—words are not people—but Butler implies this absurdity when she refers to Bersani’s unsureness as a matter of an unsureness *not* about identity reference but about the principles/prohibitions of the “use of words,” “such terms.” Like Bersani said, Butler seems not merely to be offering lexical substitutions but, I would put it, a substitution or even subversion of *what counts as* identity.

Not unlike Bersani’s ambivalence about identity, Judith Butler is also ambivalent about erasing the difference between identity and identity labels. Showing this similarity here moves toward a compromise between the two. Erasing the difference between identity and identity labels can be an abusive form of communication, as Butler recognizes in the Lacanian psychoanalytic rhetoric found in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000),

The fact that my friends Slavoj [Žižek] and Ernesto [Laclau] claim that the term ‘Phallus’ can be definitionally separated from phallogocentrism constitutes a neologistic accomplishment before which I am in awe. (Butler et al. 153)

Butler is concerned here, as ever, with these Lacanians’ need to insist that sexual difference and its signifiers (like the Phallus) are not gendered terms but Real impasses of the symbolic. Butler is concerned that such theoretical nuances are operations of power, and so, “my stronger concern has to do with how we read” (Butler et al. 26).

This should make us rethink the relationship between queer theory’s stylistically difficult constituent theories—deconstruction, literary theory, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory—and queer theory’s desire to subvert normalizing power. Communication trouble is already a strategy of power, not a subversive performance of language without qualification. In *Epistemology of the*

*Closet* (1990), Eve Sedgwick argues that “a deconstructive strategy,” which she aligns with Roland Barthes’ *neutre*, is not necessarily antinormative:

To understand these conceptual relations as irresolvably unstable is not, however, to understand them as inefficacious or innocuous. [...] To the contrary, a deconstructive understanding of these binarisms makes it possible to identify them as sites that are *peculiarly* densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation—through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition or, more succinctly, the double bind. Nor is a deconstructive analysis of such definitional knots, however necessary, at all sufficient to disable them. Quite the opposite. (10)

One way we can better understand and clarify how queer neutrality works is to understand its constituent French theories.

### **How does French theory support queer neutrality?**

Although an extensive review of French theory is outside the scope of this dissertation, I want to note that theorists of queer neutrality from all sides draw on French theorists of the literary neutral, the semiotic neutral, and psychoanalytic impersonality, namely Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes but also Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan.

The influence of French theorists can partially explain why queer theorists of neutrality contradict themselves so much. In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Muñoz appeals to Jean-Luc Nancy’s seemingly contradictory notion of queer neutrality, “being singular plural,” to argue that queer community is “both antirelational and relational” (10, 11). In “Intimacy: Inseparable from



Separation” (2017), John Paul Ricco, also drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy, characterizes queer neutrality as a manifestly contradictory “non-relational relation” as well. Queer neutrality depends on an overt self-contradiction that neutralizes contradiction by foregrounding self-contradiction’s role as an antagonism within the identity of any referent. These contradictory terms become somewhat clearer when we understand that they are motivated by French theorists’ *resistance to binary logics of identity*, including the logic of binary sexual difference (and I include even Lacan in the opposition to binary sexual difference because of his commitment to psychoanalytic neutrality—see chapter three of this dissertation). A brief review of the relevant French theory here will serve in place of an extensive review.<sup>6</sup>

A model of queer theory’s resistance to binary thinking can be found in Roland Barthes’ semiotic neutral, which is that which outplays (*déjoue*) the power of the paradigm/binaries. Roland Barthes also argues in “The Death of the Author” (1967), “Literature is that neutral, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (1). Like the call for a gender-neutral coalition to fight heteronormativity in “The Queer Nation Manifesto” (1990), Maurice Blanchot’s and Roland Barthes’ neutrals provide identity-free models for quasi-community through tropes of sharing separation, e.g. Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community* (1988)/*La Communauté Inavouable* [1983].

In a post “There Is No Meaning for One Alone” (2016) for the blog *Unbecoming Community*, John Paul Ricco explains the relation between his own project and Maurice Blanchot through Jean-Luc Nancy,

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<sup>6</sup> I do not personally value the contradiction in the concept of queer neutrality, but I do account for what value this contradiction has for different queer theorists—it can be a way to avoid binary logics esp. those that hinder a critique of identity (like Ricco and Warner say), and it can be a way to avoid accountability (like Sedgwick says and Butler implies).

Implicitly drawing from Maurice Blanchot, Nancy pointed out that even the notions of being alone and of solitude precisely entail being without someone else; and that it is this *being-with* as *being-with-out*, that comes to define the singularity of each existing thing. When one feels oneself to be alone, one senses that solitude as distinct from others (and thus in rapport with others), and thus also in rapport with one's own singularity defined as always in rapport with. [...] Here is where Nancy's deconstruction of the autonomous self or subject, as that which is always self-affected in its exposure with the other—with the outside—lines up with my own argument regarding auto-eroticism as its own pleasurable and desirous rapport with the outside and with others. Relation with the outside, as the relation that defines existence as always *being-with* (and with-out) is the relation to self that comes to define that self as not even a self (in the sense of a coherent, stable entity) but as a singularity.

There is little that is obvious as to why “sensing solitude as distinct from others” is “thus in rapport with others,” and French theory begins to help us clarify how impersonality is relational:

Maurice Blanchot's literary neutral, for example, openly participates in contradiction. In Blanchot's 1969 text *L'Entretien infini* (*Infinite Conversation*, 1993), Blanchot argues,

The essential movement of Nietzsche's thought consists in self-contradiction [...] Such contradiction does not proclaim some sort of caprice or confusion in Nietzsche's mind: no one could be less skeptical or more further removed from tranquil negation; because of the terrible seriousness, the constant will of the Yes—this will that goes in search of the true depths where truth is no stranger to contradiction—everything must at a certain moment turn around. (140)

This is to say, if the neutral is open to affirming anything because it is impartial, then the neutral will find itself affiliating with elements contrary to one another, just like the embarrassing moment in cruising culture when you realize that two of your partners do not get along with one another because of personal history. The constant will of Yes is the nomadic affirmation of any partner in self-dissolution, the vulnerable deficiency of immunity against communicable affiliations with abjection. In a revision of the logic of the lure, we might call queer theory's commitment to self-contradictory cruising *the queer principle of explosion*: From a self-contradiction, anyone follows. This is part of the queer hostility to logical clarity (and it is manifestly lacking neutrality insofar as it refuses the principle of non-contradiction—only paraconsistent logic could recover neutrality for the logic of queer self-contradiction).

John Paul Ricco's *The Decision Between Us* (2014) relies heavily on Roland Barthes' notion of the neutral as a central figure for unbecoming community. In a way that Ricco does not make explicit, Barthes' description of queer neutrality might be found in his notes on the "social obscene" in his work on *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (2005):

Principle of tact: contiguous with a kind of social errancy, takes upon itself excessive marginality = that which in mass culture cannot become the object of any fashion: true, "margins" are the objects of fashion: fashion = a conformism, an imitation of the margins (for instance, today, skinny necktie, short hair, raised collar, scarf): but there are margins within the margin, marginalities that can't be recuperated by any fashion. Principle of tact: absolute interstice of conformism and fashion → a kind of social obscene (the unclassifiable), cf. amorous feeling. (35)

What Barthes is calling tact, here, might also be called queer discretion (even or perhaps especially when silence is telling). Social errancy is the figure of wayward cruising, and fashion stands in for norms (as it often did for Michel Foucault). Conformism is assimilation, and the unclassifiable is the anti-identitarian. Discretion as a figure for the neutral speaks to queer neutrality's ethics of precarious teaming and betrayal, in and out of fashion and then beyond fashion.

These influential approaches to non/identity and quasi/community inform similar yet distinct approaches to gender identity. In *The Infinite Conversation* (1993)/*L'Entretien infini* [1969], Maurice Blanchot's gender neutrality is not a hesitation between genders but rather that which is beyond the subject and object,

what belongs to the neuter is not a third gender opposed to the other two [...] The neuter is that which cannot be assigned to any genre whatsoever: the non-general, the non-generic, as well as the non-particular. It refuses to belong to the category of subject as much as it does to that of object. And this does not simply mean that it is still undetermined and as though hesitating between the two, but rather that the neuter supposes another relation depending neither on objective conditions nor on subjective dispositions. (299)

We can recognize in here a slide between *genre* as genre and *genre* as gender, where their commonality is classifiability, and regardless of the validity of this reading, this reading is operative for queer theorists of neutrality like Jackson Davidow (who will come up shortly). Blanchot is promoting an ethics that relates to the other/autrui by way of the question of the neutral (being in neutral, idling in the sense of riding on inertia), which is supposedly never impersonal according to Blanchot in *Infinite Conversation*, although I would say that the

neutral's nomadic affirmation of the other is an endless, cruising impersonation that undoes itself and therefore is importantly impersonal in a queer sense. Autoethnography and the literary neutral are entirely compatible and can serve as a model of the difficult figure of queer neutrality that emerges in many accounts of queer community, including my account of a compromise formation of queer neutrality in gender-neutral public bathrooms.

Barthes' gender neutrality, on the contrary, is very much a hesitation between genders, but this hesitation is a path beyond identity through its mixing of genders in a neutral collective/community,

To the extent that the Neuter pulls the subject toward the status of thing: it is all the more fetishizable, desirable, possessable. Here, it would be good to reopen the Freudian file of the little child phallus: das *Kleine*. 4. Thus the Neuter mixes both genders; also, in European morphology, affinity between the Neuter and the collective: in some corner of morphology, the Neuter is globalizing, totalizing – [...] the Neuter extended to discourse (to texts, to behaviors, to “motions”) is not that of the Neither . . . Nor, it's “both at once,” “at the same time,” or “that alternates with.” (190-191)

Barthes' use of psychoanalysis here is illustrative. Psychoanalytic notions of binary sexual difference can be an obstacle for queer theory (as *Gender Trouble* argues), but psychoanalytic notions can also subvert gender identity, yet this is complicated because the terms of such subversion can be pathologizing.

In “Beyond the Binary: The Gender Neutral in JJ Levine's *Queer Portraits*” (2016), explicitly indebted to John Paul Ricco's work on queer neutrality, Jackson Davidow brings Blanchot's and Barthes' theories of gender neutrality into a queer aesthetic analysis,

In one portrait, Rae Spoon, an acclaimed Montreal-based singer-songwriter, appears quite androgynous. Gazing toward the viewer with a neutral yet cautious countenance, [...] their careful aesthetic is slightly incongruous in the worn chair. Spoon identifies as gender neutral [...] Closer to Blanchot's interpretation, Spoon's activation of the gender neutral translates to neither male nor female; this activation works in contrast to Barthes' theorization of it as a mixture of both. (312)

Davidow is arguing that Blanchot's and Barthes' notions of the gender neutral are distinct foci in the elliptical movement of "shared queerness through the neutral," where Blanchot's gender neutral is beyond or without gender and, in opposition, Barthes' gender neutral is a mix of genders. In this way Blanchot and Barthes help us navigate claims like Davidow's conclusion:

Gender neutrality is not being beyond or without gender but rather a possibility of unhooking ourselves from the violent discursive paradigms of normative gender and sex.

As such, gender neutrality presents a political form of queer feminism. (317)

Note that Davidow is making this claim after relaying Spoon's self-representation as the type of gender neutral that is neither male nor female—"being beyond or without gender." If Spoon is closer to Blanchot and those who are committed gender nihilists, Davidow is closer to Barthes by aligning gender neutrality with feminism, which is no stranger to (strategic-essentialist) identity politics. Davidow effectively enacts the tension of queer theories of neutrality (between identity neutrality and the presence of identity politics) in his claim that gender neutrality is a gendered political value, and the context of Blanchot's and Barthes' neutrals provides us with a way of understanding such iterations of queer feminism.

## **Chapter summaries**

Like Jackson Davidow's work on J.J. Levine's gender-neutral portraiture, the following chapters also take gender neutrality and identity neutrality seriously as a queer project. The first two chapters are the main analytical contribution of the dissertation, where I recognize or construct compromise formations of neutrality in queer theory, and the second two chapters support the first two chapters with clarifications of two of the majorly opposed attitudes toward neutrality—for and against neutrality. The first chapter ends by turning to my research on support for identity neutrality in queer theory, resulting in this dissertation's first major analytical contribution: a compromise formation in the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms on account of theories of gender and neutral relationality in queer theory. The second chapter also begins with my research on resistance to identity neutrality in queer theory, and the second chapter also ends by turning to my research on support for identity in queer theory, resulting in this dissertation's second major analytical contribution: another compromise formation in the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms. The arguments in the first two chapters are partially propped up by fields of theory that only receive clarification in the third and fourth chapters. The third chapter clarifies how the psychoanalytic theory of neutrality helps make the case for queer neutrality, and the fourth chapter clarifies how Afropessimist theory challenges the validity of queer neutrality.

The first two chapters of this dissertation follow what happens when queer advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms run up against queer theory's constituent feminist theories in bathroom (identity) politics. I chose to research public bathroom politics because it is perhaps one of the most popular issues related to the problematics of gender neutrality—I wanted to start

with something that would be popular because it should add accessibility for the reader, i.e. public relevance and probable familiarity. There are a number of queer women who do not want to share restrooms with men who keep peeing on the toilet seat, and some of these women advocate the identity-political position of Potty Parity (a French feminist movement demanding twice as many women's restrooms as men's restrooms in public). The explicit and implicit theories of gender identity in feminist identity politics create confusion for conceptualizing a beyond of gender, so my first chapter, "Gender Neutrality in Public Bathrooms," raises the question of the relationship between the theory of gender/neutrality and the practical design of gender-neutral public bathrooms. Disparate frameworks for what counts as neutral in various feminist and queer theories make a difference for whether or not theorists advocate "third" neutral public bathrooms (alongside gender-segregated public bathrooms) or entirely gender-neutral, gender-desegregated public bathrooms. The first chapter distinguishes between different positions on gender neutrality in feminist theory in order to clarify the limits of the various feminist receptions of gender neutrality. Clarifying these limits lets us recognize the negative space in which a possible compromise over identity neutrality might be found in gender-neutral public bathrooms.

The first chapter meanders a bit because it is exploratory, seeking signposts for the limits of gender in order for us to better be able to conceptualize where a beyond of gender might be, how we might get there. My argument begins by surveying the reception of gender/neutrality by contributors to the journal *Feminist Theory*—Judith Lorber, Susan Sered, Maureen Norton-Hawk—and Sheila Cavanaugh (a peer reviewer for *Feminist Theory*). Feminist theorists ingrain identity politics into this issue by developing a theory of *gender overdetermination*, wherein identity—specifically gender identity—is an inescapable effect of the real embodiment of



associational forces in the process of interpretation. These feminists are very much in line with Judith Butler, in this sense. In *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), Butler reflects the above position in saying, "Suffice it to say that the boundaries of the body are the lived experience of differentiation, where that differentiation is never neutral to the question of gender difference or the heterosexual matrix" (37).

The opposition to Lorber, Butler, et al. comes from the feminist theorists who use Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference. These feminists still say there is no neutrality but for very different reasons than gender overdetermination. Joan Copjec, for example, draws on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference to ask, is gender even a particular kind of identity? What counts as gender? Is gender a *genre/social category* or, alternately, *a failure of identity in general*? The latter notion of gender is perhaps a more consistent way of pulling together feminist concerns because, I argue, feminist theories of gender identity are very much about identity in general, not a particular identity. I mean, I would ask Judith Butler, what identity is *not* constituted by reiterated citational performance? The first chapter of this dissertation returns to Freud and Lacan on the notion of urinary segregation to argue that the Lacanian position tries to avoid heteronormativity by assigning gender difference to the failure of identity in general in one way or another—masculinity and femininity are two wrongs that do not add up to a right. (In the third chapter, I argue that the Lacanian theory of neutrality can help clarify and make compelling the attitude behind certain queer theorists' investments in Lacan's notion of urinary segregation.)

Within this framework of gender as a failure of identity in one way or another, feminist theory is more intelligible as a particular strategy for a generalized subversion of identity—here is an affinity between Jackson Davidow and Judith Butler's elliptical move around feminist

identity politics and the subversion of identity. This is important to recognize because gender overdetermination and the deadlock of sexual difference are otherwise conceptual impasses to translating a theory of gender into a practice for a gender-neutral public bathroom. It is important to overcome these impasses to recognize or construct compelling compromise formations in our analysis of queer neutrality, and the first two chapters attempt to do just this at their ends.

Feminist theorists' notion of gender overdetermination—or the notion of sexual difference as a Real effect of the failure of the Symbolic in one way or another—is a semantic and psychological process that forecloses the intimacy of queer neutrality or non-identitarian community. That is to say that the aforementioned feminist position on gender is an interesting challenge to the validity of the notion of gender neutrality, and we should take a look at this both to take it seriously and to move beyond it. Eve Sedgwick argues in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” (2003) that feminist theorists—including Judith Butler by name—can get a little paranoid with their tendency to read gender into everything. What mechanism is overdetermining associations to gender if not a psychological mechanism? The feminist theories I review may be complicit in compulsory gendering. Feminist theorists use the passive voice to say things like, “gender overdetermination means that everything woman does *is interpreted* in terms of gender.” Sedgwick can interpret otherwise than paranoid, right? So, perhaps the feminists are (as much as anyone under patriarchy) interpreting everything in terms of gender, and this is a force in the persistence of identity politics in queer theory. Such compulsorily-gendering interpretation does not sit well with much of the gender-queer, gender-nihilistic community that is advocating gender neutrality, e.g. in public bathrooms.

To get around the impasse here, I think we can recognize that Davidow's and Butler's interests in gender-neutral portraiture and the performance of drag respectively are helpfully

comparable to Joan Riviere's psychoanalytic theory of feminine masquerade as a particular strategy or way for identity to fail. The first chapter introduces Riviere's feminine masquerade and Leo Bersani's impersonal relationality or queer neutrality as an important strategy in the promotion of gender neutrality. Leo Bersani's queer theory of impersonalism provides a compelling way out of gender overdetermination by theorizing a non-identitarian community through flirtatious sociability. This is potentially compatible with feminist theories of gender overdetermination: What else could Sheila Cavanaugh mean when she advocates a gender-neutral public bathroom that is both intimate and yet unfamiliar? I contribute thoughts on how the supplementary logic of sociability might be taken into account for the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms. This proposal of a compromise formation for gender-neutral public bathrooms in the context of conflicting queer theories is this dissertation's major contribution, and the reader should be able to learn about the potentials of such a compromise not found elsewhere in the literature on gender/identity neutrality or on gender-neutral public bathrooms.

The second chapter on public bathrooms, "How to Fix Bathroom Signs," further clarifies the movement of neutrality discourse from feminist theory to queer theory, and this chapter also begins to introduce queer of color critique and Afro-pessimist critiques of humanism as important frameworks for understanding gender and neutrality in popular culture. Whereas the first chapter marks a wide variety of threads in the reception of neutrality by feminist theorists, the second chapter begins to show how messy the interaction of these threads can be, and both chapters offer models for a resolution in practice on the basis of shared concerns across otherwise different theories. The second chapter continues the first chapter's concern with the relationship between theory and practice in relation to gender-neutral public bathrooms, this time

focusing on bathroom signs and the work of Sedgwick's paradigmatic queer paranoiac, Judith Butler.

I show that Judith Butler repeatedly says there is no gender neutrality, and yet much of the popular and scholarly reception of Butler's work agrees that Butler paved the way for the gender-neutral public bathroom movement. Queer theorists like Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), for example, attack Butler for her commitment to the "neutral, democratic literality that marks the futurism of the left" (28). Lee Edelman thinks that Butler's work does not subvert identity but multiplies it in an obsessive collection or inclusion of otherwise marginalized personal differences. It is strange that both advocates and opponents of neutrality attribute the groundwork for gender-neutral advocacies to Judith Butler. How does Butler get pegged for being pro-neutral from both the pro-neutral and anti-neutral sides of the conversation despite Butler being so severely anti-neutral?

I try to provide the reception of Butler with a clarification that maintains a forgiving or reparative reading of Butler. This is part of the compromise formation that this dissertation constructs for the benefit of the reader's understanding of potential ways to think about the conflict in question. To this end, following the first chapter's conceptual moves from gender overdetermination to queer neutrality as impersonalism (via supplemental sociability), the second chapter returns to the beginning of the course by giving very serious consideration to the possibility that something about self-opaque subjectivity overdetermines gender difference in everything, and the second chapter attempts to negotiate with gender overdetermination by both marking and writing under erasure gender, although the gender under erasure is not simply men and women but a division informed by feminist theory (potty parity with the men's bathroom

substituted by an ostensibly neutral bathroom) . A compromise here requires taking each side quite seriously, even if this seriousness has no persistent loyalty to any side that it considers.

The first chapter briefly mentions the Potty Parity movement (i.e. advocating twice as many women's rooms as men's in public bathrooms) as a feminist identity politics, as opposed to an anti-identitarian movement for wholly gender-neutral (completely desegregated) public bathrooms. Potty Parity is a concern in Judith Butler's references to public bathrooms in *Undoing Gender* (2006), and I bring together various extreme positions in queer theory around a model of neutrality that incorporates Butler's and other feminists' respect for Potty Parity. Continuing the previous chapter's flirtation with the logic of supplementarity as a means of unfixing gender or getting unfixated on gender, I additionally take inspiration from a bathroom-sign vandalism to gesture toward a new, under-erasure model of bathroom sign-segregation. My particular gesture here is something that the dissertation teaches us that has not yet been in the literature on queer neutrality or public bathrooms. I try to reconcile the differences with a proposal for the design and segregation of public bathrooms (~~potty parity~~ x ~~gender neutral~~), which is an accomplishment in itself and may also open a new way to orient our conversation about gender-neutral public bathrooms.

In the second chapter, I begin to show how the problem of the presence of identity politics in queer theory also emerges as a concern for queer of color critique. I draw on Che Gossett's queer of color critique of public bathrooms and Gossett's critique of Slavoj Žižek to bring out some of the difficulties in generalizing gender difference—as opposed to racial difference—to the differential failure of identity. Much of the confusing interaction between queer theorists emerges from diverging receptions of Lacanian sexual difference and urinary

segregation, so I return to Lacan's text on urinary segregation to bring out what Lacan actually says about racial difference.

However, this chapter stalls on the issue of race partly because my argument up to this point has been restricted to the issue of public bathrooms. Queer of color critique has a theoretically clear opposition to certain feminist and psychoanalytic models of sexual difference, but as far as I can figure out, there is no clear, practical translation of queer of color critique to the problem of gender neutrality in public bathrooms. The complexity of neutrality in queer theory is difficult to follow within the scope of public bathroom politics alone, and the following two chapters—chapters three and four—serve to clarify the positions involved to show that my position is well-informed though it may be resigned on translating Afropessimism to public bathroom design. The following chapters clarify the opposing psychoanalytic and Afropessimist threads that the first and second chapters have already struggled to resolve in the context of feminist and queer theory regarding identity neutrality.

This dissertation's third chapter, "Psychoanalysis and Neutrality in Queer Theory," clarifies the reception of psychoanalysis by queer theorists of neutrality. This is supposed to make my compromise formations of queer neutrality more compelling by showing how psychoanalytic neutrality can prop up the attitude behind arguments for gender neutrality. By this point in the dissertation (the third chapter), I have tried to clarify the reception of Judith Butler by Lacanian theorists who are not queer theorists—like Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek—and also by queer theorists who are not Lacanians, like Priyanka Krishnamurthy, Molly Fisher, Julie Phelps, and Che Gossett. The third chapter expands on the first two chapters' review of Judith Butler by highlighting the reception of Butler's relationship to Lacanian queer theorists, particularly by

Tim Dean, Patricia Gherovici, and Shanna T. Carlson. These clarifications in chapter three are on the side that is trying to make a compelling case for the validity of gender neutrality.

There are a number of confusions in the conversation here. John Paul Ricco's *The Decision Between Us* (2014) suggests,

Instead of the asexuality and neutrality that is generated and reproduced by binary sexual difference, we might think in terms of the pleasure of sharing in the sense of separation—the very spacing of sense—as bodies exposed to the incommensurability of existence, the latter of which exists outside the measure of any binary set of terms. (117)

Right away, we have a number of manifestly confusing ideas that should become slightly more intelligible against the background of queer theory's reception of psychoanalysis. For one thing, Ricco says that he does not like the notion of sexual difference because he does not want to generate asexuality and neutrality. What is wrong with aces? What is wrong with neutrality? Is not the neutral a central figure for the intimacy of shared separation in Ricco's book? And how by any stretch of the imagination does *binary sexual difference produce asexuality and neutrality* like Ricco claims? And why, given his critique, would Ricco then rely on Freud's critique of Kant to model the spacing of sense? How does Freud make sense as a reference for Ricco in *The Decision Between Us* (2014)? And why, given this reliance on Freud, would David Clark say—without explanation—that Ricco's *Decision* (2014) is decidedly not psychoanalytic? What does psychoanalysis have to do with queer neutrality if queer neutrality emerges in terms resistant to psychoanalysis?

To clarify these strange claims in the literature on queer neutrality, I return to the direct precursor of Ricco's queer neutrality, namely Leo Bersani's queer impersonality. I trace the delicate balance in Bersani's reception of both psychoanalysis and critics of psychoanalysis. In

“Is the Rectum a Grave?” [1987] (2010) Bersani recognizes the importance of Michel Foucault’s critique of psychoanalytic categories of identity including the homosexual, and yet in “Sociability and Cruising” (2002) Bersani embraces Sigmund Freud’s theory of homosexual sociability in Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In “Foucault and the End of Sex” [2004] (2010), Bersani consciously attempts to bring Foucault’s critique of power together with psychoanalysis’ critique of the unconscious drives, and a distinctly Lacanian theory of the aesthetic subject emerges in Bersani’s later work. This begins to clarify the coordinates of motivation that shape receptions of psychoanalysis in queer theories of neutrality.

For example, we see how some of these confusions manifest in the work of Patricia Gherovici, a Trans Studies scholar and Lacanian psychoanalytic therapist. In *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (2010), Patricia Gherovici (leveraging Tim Dean) charges Judith Butler with ignoring the neutrality of Lacan’s Real,

Dean contends that Butler’s omission is regrettable because the Lacanian Real, which is “asubstantial, unsexed, and ungendered” (p. 210), provides potential for queer theory to exploit (p. 217). For psychoanalysis, sexual difference is not a norm but a real impossibility, which is to say, it is a limit to the speakable and thinkable. [...] The object that causes desire “takes forms that are gender neutral—the gaze, the voice, the phoneme, the lips, ‘the rim of the anus,’ ‘the slit formed by the eyelids’” (p. 194). Lacan detached desire from gender (p. 216). Desire is partial, and not necessarily gendered, which suggests the potential to conceive of sexuality outside the confines of normative heterosexuality. (116)



Gherovici tries to save sexual difference through its makeshift compatibility with neutrality. The above passage explicitly says sexual difference is not a norm but a Real limit, and it says the Real is unsexed. The implicit claim here is that *sexual difference is unsexed*, which makes little sense or is surely not intelligible as a response to Judith Butler.

The confusions continue: In *The Parallax View* (2006), Slavoj Žižek tells us that gender neutrality is a masculine position, and one of the sexes is asexual:

sexual difference does not designate the two sexes of the human stock/species, but, in this case, the very difference between the asexual and the sexual: to put it in the terms of Laclau's logic of hegemony, sexual difference is the Real of an antagonism, since, in it, the external difference (between the sexual and the asexual) is mapped onto the internal difference between the two sexes. (72)

In a response to Žižek and Butler, Shanna T. Carlson attempts to come to terms with the knot (of sexual difference being one side of itself) by saying that the feminine subject is the transgender subject, which strangely implies that there are no masculine subjects that are transgender subjects. In contrast to Žižek's association of neutrality with masculinity, we might also be reminded of Davidow's claim that the advocacy for gender neutrality is a feminist position. My review of Bersani's work in the third chapter allows us to recognize that each of these theorists are dealing with a similar anxiety about the knot of neutrality in different ways, and this helps us understand the basis of the compromise formations I point to and propose in the first and second chapters—my compromise formations attempt to express or produce a symbol, signifier, or symptom that surfs the anxiety surrounding sexual difference without succumbing to the anxiety.

In the third chapter, one of the confusions that I address is Gherovici's reception of Tim Dean, which tries to make Dean's desexualized reading of Lacan compatible with Lacanian

sexual difference. Tim Dean explicitly carries Bersani's project of queer impersonality much further in the direction of psychoanalytic theories of neutrality, but Dean's work is manifestly confusing itself, which allows for inaccurate receptions of him. The confusions are unfortunate because Dean and the psychoanalytic principles he draws on provide a clarification of how queer neutrality is compellingly possible. In *Unlimited Intimacies* (2009), Dean says,

I have found the disposition of psychoanalytic neutrality particularly helpful, despite the fact that psychoanalysis, generally regarded as a body of thought inhospitable to queers, seldom is associated today with sexual permissiveness. (28)

Yet Dean warns us, "The critical interrogation of social norms about sexuality and 'health' entails recognizing that science is not value neutral" (65). Which is it? To top it off, Dean seemingly conflates the psychoanalytic neutrality (a rule for the analyst) with the psychoanalytic principle of free association (a rule for the analysand). No wonder Gherovici feels entitled to read Dean whichever way is convenient for her argument.

To clarify what is going on with the contradictions and confusions in Dean's impersonal ethics in *Unlimited Intimacies* (2009), I return to Dean's earlier work on the reception of psychoanalysis in queer theory and the ethics of alterity, namely Dean's "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness" (2001) and "Lacan and Queer Theory" (2006). This work shows us that Dean provides a fairly rigorous—much more so than other queer theorists—desexualized reading of Lacan, which is another, perhaps more relationally freeing way of dealing with the anxious knot of neutrality in queer theory. Lacan conflates the Other with the Other sex, and a desexualized reading of alterity can make Lacan more amenable to queer theory, i.e. more compelling as a resource for compromise formations of queer neutrality.

Dean's work, however, is still rather unclear or at least insufficiently substantiated without a further look at what Lacan actually says about psychoanalytic neutrality. I clarify the Lacanian theory of neutrality to explain why the first two chapters turn to Lacan in the first place for resolving the dispute over neutrality in queer theory. Lacan insists on the principle of neutrality, but Lacanians keep saying that there is no neutrality, and this situation is unfortunately conducive to misreadings of both Lacan and queer theorists of neutrality. To rectify this situation, I again return to Lacan. Lacan, I show in this third chapter, implicates psychologism and humanism in a new form of heteronormative alienation, namely one that creates an ontological exclusion, which may be queerness or, we will consider in the fourth chapter, blackness. Psychologism and humanism are normative biases of patriarchy, and therapists who rely on these biases are bound to narcissistic countertransference, which only a principle of neutrality can hold back. In his "Presentation on Transference" [1951] (2006), Lacan explicitly ties a particular case of Freud's homophobic countertransference to the patriarchal tenets that naturalize the Oedipal complex and mask the non-normative ties of homosexuality,

I would say this has to be ascribed to a bias, the very same bias that falsifies the Oedipal complex right from the outset, making him [i.e. Freud] consider the predominance of the paternal figure to be natural, rather than normative—the same bias that is expressed simply in the well-known refrain, "Thread is to needle as girl is to boy." (182)

Lacan's criticism of patriarchal biases as heteronormative demonstrates how compelling psychoanalytic neutrality can be for a queer theory of identity-neutral community. Humanist and patriarchal biases are mainstream fixations that psychoanalytic neutrality resists for the sake of promoting a new, queer relation to the self and others. This helps the reader understand the

reason for my forgiving reception of Lacanian theory in my account of relevant compromise formations as laid out in the first two chapters.

The review of psychoanalysis in this third chapter allows me to conclude that Ricco's ambivalence toward psychoanalysis comes from queer theory's discomfort with the knot of neutrality and sexuality difference in psychoanalysis. Ricco's remark about sexual difference producing asexuality and neutrality is intelligible as a kind of flip side to the Lacanian conflation of sexual difference with only one side of itself: Ricco is grappling with the knot by switching the terms of engagement, i.e. it is not feigned neutrality that inadvertently produces one side of sexual difference (namely the masculine side by convention), but it is sexual difference that inadvertently produces itself as indifferent to which difference we are talking about. I do not think one of these ways of dealing the knot of neutrality is particularly better than another, and I think that gender-neutral designs in practice can speak to the pettiness or hostile narcissism that divides theorists over how to talk about the knot of sexual difference with one side itself.

The fourth chapter, "Race and Neutrality in Queer Theory," addresses two deficiencies of my analysis so far. First, by foregrounding queer of color critics' investments in neutrality or impersonality, and by only briefly mentioning black feminist standpoint theory, I too quickly gloss over the way that race acts as a significant stumbling block for queer neutrality. Second, by failing to translate the well-taken Afropessimist critique of gender into a meaningful commentary on public bathroom design, I could easily leave the reader wondering how Afropessimism is nevertheless a viable challenge to antisocial queer theory's standpoint-pessimism. To address these issues, after reviewing what this dissertation has said up to this point about race, the final chapter notes resistances to queer theory's impersonality on the basis

of the context of racial difference (in works by Andrea Smith, José Muñoz, Juana María Rodríguez, Sarah Beresford, Roderick Ferguson, Jack Halberstam, James Bliss, Calvin Warren, and David Marriott), and I add my own arguments that certain queer theorists of impersonality like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman are implicated in tokenistic treatment of racial difference.

Then, I further explain the Afropessimist critique of queer impersonality. I account for Afropessimist considerations from Denise da Silva, C. Riley Snorton, Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, Dorothy Roberts, Fred Moten, and Frank B. Wilderson III. When we reach the moment of standpoint-pessimism articulated above in this introduction, it is not obvious how to resolve the opposition between different pessimistic accounts of abjection—Marxism, psychoanalysis, antisocial queer theory, and Afropessimism. I noted that for Lee Edelman queer impersonality already points to a *Lumpenproletariat* that accedes to the place of its abjection, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from any trajectory in the momentum of intersectional standpoint identity politics. We might be concerned that Edelman so quickly elects queerness into the place of a *Lumpenproletariat* elected to the point at which the intersectionality of standpoint exceeds identity. Antisocial queer theorists like Edelman are comfortable analogizing between the various registers of non-identity like queerness, the *Lumpenproletariat*, and blackness, but Afropessimists like Frank B. Wilderson III and Calvin Warren deny the validity of such analogizing.

My argument follows David Marriott's critique of antisocial queer theory in "No Second Chances" (2011). Marriott argues that antisocial queer theory disavows the proximity of narcissism and identity, which it does through exclusively foregrounding all that is antinormative in intimacy. On the other side, it ignores the psychoanalytic understanding of the ego or identity

as already in flux, destabilized. A polemic against the ego can thereby be a resistance to the queer variability that the ego provides, inadvertently reinforcing identity categories. Marriott argues that antisocial queer theorists “want to shatter the *category* of identity without being threatened by the act of actual shattering” (110). I think this is an excellent way of pointing out that antisocial queer theorists may not be as anti-identitarian as they think themselves to be.

Finally, I add my own Lacanian argument that queer anti-identitarianism—particularly in the trope of masochism—may be normative and potentially implicated in white normativity. In this dissertation I am trying to give the reader compelling reasons both for and (especially now) against the validity of the notion of queer neutrality. The fourth chapter again draws on neglected parts of Lacanian psychoanalysis (via Bruce Fink’s explanation of Lacan’s *Seminar X*) to speculate that queer theory may have a real problem with its reception of the psychoanalytic account of identity, which I now connect more substantially with racial identity. Although antisocial queer theorists like Bersani and Halberstam have reveled in the notion of masochism as a mode of anti-identitarianism (as if masochists truly enjoy the destruction of their personhood), what Lacan helps us understand is that *masochism is normative*, and so queer masochism is a particularly alarming concept. Masochism is not an assault against one’s own personhood or identity but rather a mechanism of defense of the ego, and queer theorists evidently use the very notion of masochism as a point of stability to shore up the identity of anti-identitarianism. It may be the case that antisocial queer theorists exhibit masochism when they make obviously white-serving anti-identitarian claims that provoke utopian queer of color critics to lash back at them. (Note: it is the reader’s prerogative to blame me for making the same mistake—I do wonder, have I missed something in my inability or resignation with respect to

inferring how Afropessimism could contribute to gender-neutral public bathrooms?) The antisocial queer romance of masochism as a desire to hurt the self—as opposed to a desire to make someone else set our (selves’) boundaries for us, like Lacan says—perhaps allows queer theorists to mask what they are really doing with their anti-identitarianism, which is often, as so many queer of color critics have said before, bolstering a white universalism.

The last chapter is supposed to balance the analysis, and it would be fortunate if providing this balance helps the reader think beyond my compromise formations that stall in terms of translating Afropessimist theory to the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Gender Neutrality in Public Bathrooms**

This first chapter wanders around in its research on gender-neutral public bathrooms, so I hope to introduce first what I discovered from this research and analysis retroactively. I end up attempting to come to a compromise design for gender-neutral public bathrooms with respect to differing feminist theories of gender, even those feminist theories of gender that are not politically aligned with advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms. I start moving to this end by recognizing some of the basics:

A heteronormative understanding of gender differences as separate but complementary translates to the design of only exclusive men's and women's bathrooms in public. The people who do not fit a heteronormative understanding are the same people who face stress and violence due to the design of only exclusive men's and women's bathrooms in public. Theories of gender that are propped upon white models of femininity and masculinity similarly translate to the design of public bathrooms that separate "Coloreds" from "Men's" and "Women's" bathrooms, or "Colored Women's" from "Women's" or "White Women's" bathrooms. Certain feminist theories of gender can be knowingly or unwittingly complicit with heteronormativity.

The argument in this chapter then considers that feminist theory resists heteronormativity by refusing to accept the idea of gender differences as complementary. However, even feminist theories of gender differences as non-complementary are compatible with feminist identity politics in public bathrooms, where some feminists want to preserve a space for just women in public bathrooms. Such feminists might be indifferent to whether or not there should be third, "Neutral" bathrooms alongside "Men's" and "Women's" bathrooms. There are good theoretical and practical reasons for defending an exclusive space for women in public bathrooms: gender is



overdetermined by the mechanics of the signifier (thereby casting doubt on the possibility of any gender neutrality), a comprehensive theory of gender seems to be about identity differences in general (not one among other analogous identity differences), and when we recognize these things, we can better recognize that gender desegregation in public bathrooms privileges men's space (so simple gender desegregation is part of the overdetermination of gender in public bathrooms, which is a big challenge to overcome in advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms).

The argument in this chapter then considers how queer theories of gender can recognize gender overdetermination while resisting normative gender by equivocating gender categories, and because gender difference is very much about identity in general rather than a positive social category, this leads us to think about the merits of the antisocial queer project for undermining social categories or society in general. How does queer neutrality as general impersonality help us resist the hostile narcissism of small differences in public bathrooms? Antisocial queer theory offers a de facto extension of queer performances of equivocal gender, namely a queer relationality of equivocal sociability (very much modeled on sexual cruising, despite the judgy hostility that is often found in this supposedly carefree mode of relationality). Throughout this argument, I try to make a compelling alignment between feminist theories of gender, psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference, and antisocial queer theories of identity neutrality or impersonality. This helps me draw together a theoretical compromise about gender difference that translates to a number of practical design considerations for neutralizing gender in public bathrooms, which are concentrate at the end of the first chapter (save for those compromises that arise out of my research on the reception of gender neutrality in queer theory in the second chapter).

Given that we advocate gender-neutral public bathrooms,<sup>7</sup> how should we design gender-neutral bathrooms? Should gender-neutral public bathrooms have urinals? Should gender-neutral public bathrooms be reduced to single-user, toilet-sink stalls that deter socializing in bathrooms? Feminist theory contributes to the clarification and complication of these questions by asking, what counts as gender? If we are to neutralize gender in public bathrooms, we need to know what gender is. Theorists are in conflict over what counts as gender, and these theoretical conflicts translate to conflicting practices in the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms. This chapter traces the ways in which these conflicts fail to take place on a common plane because the very terms of the debate are in dispute. On one side, gender seems to be a particular kind of identity, but on the other side gender has already always been about identity in general. To illustrate this ideological conflict between different principles of designing gender-neutral public bathrooms, I provisionally align and contrast different feminist theorists, e.g. Judith Lorber and Judith Butler vs. Joan Copjec and Joan Rivière. Lorber's camp in this debate holds the more popular positions for advocating gender-neutral public bathrooms, but the alternative camp in this debate holds a more comprehensive theory of gender, in which sociability is an important tool for neutralizing gender in public bathrooms.

Judith Lorber's work can represent one camp in this feminist conflict over how to design a gender-neutral public bathroom. In her works *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change* (2005) and "Using Gender to Undo Gender: A Feminist Degendering Movement" (2000), Lorber advocates gender-neutral public bathrooms wherein "gender is the division of

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<sup>7</sup> My purpose is not to argue that we ought to have gender-neutral public bathrooms. I am not equipped to add anything further to the currently published advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms (e.g. see Beemyn et al. 2005; Cavanagh 2010; Clark and Nylund 2011; Edelman 1993; Feldman and Enxuga 2012; Halberstam 1998; Kopas 2012; Lorber 2000, 2005).

people into contrasting and complementary social categories, ‘boys’ and ‘girls’, ‘men’ and ‘women’” (2000: 82). In this case, public bathrooms have gender in the sense that they have a division of exclusive social categories that exhaust the options for using the bathroom. Lorber’s work represents gender as two halves of a globe that complement one another to make a whole. Lorber’s definition of gender translates in practice to several possibilities for designing gender-neutral public bathrooms. A public bathroom that does not contrast social categories would be one model of gender-neutral public bathroom. There might be single room containing multiple toilet stalls, a common sink, and a door with only a picture of a toilet on it. This room would be gender-neutral because everyone is permitted to use the common room and stalls. Similarly, a public bathroom that does not contrast social categories might be a row of individualized, toilet-sink stalls with no commonality other than being grouped together. A series of portable toilets, for example, would typically be gender-neutral because anyone is permitted to use them.

With respect to the “complementarity” part of Lorber’s definition of gender, a public bathroom that has a men’s room, women’s room, and a third, socially unspecified room (that anyone may use) would be another model of gender-neutral public bathrooms. While this design of a public bathroom still contains contrasting social categorization (men’s and women’s), there is no complementarity because men’s and women’s rooms do not complete the bathroom. After men’s and women’s rooms, there is a remaining bathroom. The third, supplementary bathroom’s door sign signifies no social contrast, and so the third, supplementary bathroom interrupts the completeness of the socially segregated bathroom such that the bathroom is technically gender-neutral. These are the popular designs in advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms, which legitimates Lorber’s theory of gender as relevant to the discussion. A poll by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission in 2001 found, “People are split about half and half on whether or

not gender-neutral bathrooms should replace or be added to female/male bathrooms (57% in addition, 49% replace) [sic]" (1).

I am critical of two aspects of Lorber's definition of gender as contrasting and complementary social categories. First, Lorber's definition of gender does not distinguish gender from other social categories that may contrast and complement one other in popular discourses. It is true that Lorber supplements her definition with an example (boys, girls, men, and women), but a definition by example presupposes what is to count as a genuine example of whatever is defined. A definition is supposed to be the principle or standard by which we decide what is and is not a genuine example in the first place. As a second criticism of Lorber's definition, I argue that to assume that gender differences are complementary is heteronormative.

### **The definition of gender as a social category**

Let me start with Judith Lorber's treatment of genders as social categories, "gender is the division of people into contrasting and complementary social categories" (2000: 82). Lorber's definition of gender is not distinguishable from certain popular definitions of other social categories. Masters and slaves have been said to contrast with and complement one other. Similarly, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990] (1999), Judith Butler's theory of gender as a repetition of citations can also apply to other social categories, *mutatis mutandis*. We are left with the old Hegelian platitude that when something's definition changes over time and space, that thing is ultimately defined as its own history; gender is the history of gender, a genre is the history of that genre, you are the history of you, and so on for other identities that rely on repeatedly referencing or citing history. Lorber's and Butler's

feminist theories do not tell us what is gendered about gender. Gender comes across as something like a system of signs that are defined in relation to one another over history, like bathroom door signs. After all, the English use of the word *gender* comes through the French *genre*, in which difference is defined precisely through such a system of historical relations (contrasting genres, subgenres, parodic genres, and so on).

In “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason” (1996) Joan Copjec criticizes Butler’s *Gender Trouble* [1990] for implicitly arguing what Lorber has explicitly argued, namely that gender differences are contrasting and complementary social categories. Copjec argues that gender difference is not any difference in social categories or door signs, but rather gender difference is a difference in *failures* of social categorization and door signs. Copjec’s theory of gender is crucial for both rethinking the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms and conceptualizing what counts as gender that is different from social categories,

sexual difference is unlike racial, class, or ethnic differences. Whereas these differences are inscribed in the symbolic, sexual difference is not: only the failure of its inscription is marked in the symbolic. Sexual difference, in other words, is a real and not a symbolic difference. This distinction does not disparage the importance of race, class, or ethnicity, it simply contests the current doxa that sexual difference offers the same *kind* of description of the subject as these others do. (207)

What does it mean for gender to be a *failure* of social categorization? Think about what a bathroom is. Does a bathroom signify the digestive system? No. The bathroom signifies a *failure* of the digestive system, namely its excesses of urine, feces, and/or vomit. The bathroom is not a space of the digestive system but a space of the undigestibles. Gender, according to Copjec’s theory, is this space of the failure of social categorization. Categorization is digestion. For

example, patriarchy is just such a system wherein gender marks two failures of social categorization, one wherein men are given all control and one wherein women are given no control at all. Neither total control nor a complete lack of control is attainable for subjects, and the belief that these categories can be inhabited is just what Sigmund Freud called obsessive fantasies and hysterical fantasies, respectively (on this socio-historical interpretation of Freud see Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, 1990). The two failures of patriarchal categorization do not complement one another nor refer to one another but rather differently refer to something unattainable, a totally satisfying relationship to control.

How does this theoretical difference between symbolic gender and real gender imply a different approach to the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms? Well, let us talk about urinals. Should gender-neutral public bathrooms include urinals? One feminist camp holds that urinals are compatible with gender-neutral public bathrooms (as long as the room is socially desegregated), whereas another feminist camp argues that the urinal is a paradigmatic signifier of a gendered bathroom. What is at stake in this dispute between feminist theories of the urinal is the status of urinary segregation, or differences in the way that people urinate. Is urinary segregation contingent or necessary? Are urinals necessarily about gender differences?

Lorber is in the camp of feminists who argue, "bathrooms could also be unisex, even those with urinals" (2005: 35). Lorber's theory of gender leads again to the idea that gender-neutral public bathrooms are simply gender-desegregated bathrooms. Urinals may be gender-neutral because they are not exclusively masculine but may be feminine as well. In "(Re)designing the 'Unmentionable': Female Toilets in the Twentieth Century" (2009), Barbara Penner explains, "female urinals made of glass or pottery have been around for centuries, long before water closets were ever invented" (141). Contemporary urinals can signify femininity, as

Sheila Cavanaugh notes in *Queer Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* (2010): “female urinals like the Femme pissoire by Chateau Marmont, the Lady P by Gustavberg Sphinx, and the Lady Loo by Goh Ban Huat Berhad have been under development since the late twentieth century [...] like the L’urinette (urinal for women) [...] installed in the Whiskey Café in Montreal, Quebec” (220). Because urinals are not used exclusively by one gender or another, urinals do not imply the kind of social contrast needed to meet Lorber’s definition of gender. A gender-neutral framing of urinals might also focus on an analysis of ability and efficiency, for better or for worse. That is, the availability and use of funnels and stand-to-pee devices will remain important for people even if urinals become extinct. Funnels and stand-to-pee devices can make urination easier for some people, and defenders of the urinal have remarked that urinals potentially increase spatial efficiency, conserve more water, decrease time of use, and decrease cleaning time.

In this defense of unisex urinals, urinary segregation is a mere contingency that happens to be popular in some cultures. Whether or not there is urinary segregation simply depends on what culture you are from or in. Like Lorber’s concept of gender, this theory of urinary segregation situates differences in urinary practices as being within cultural categorization. It is conceivable that there is a culture/society wherein everyone pees in the same way, right? Not so, according to Joan Copjec’s psychoanalytic approach to gender and sexual difference. Under Copjec’s reading, Sigmund Freud argues that sexual difference or urinary segregation is not a matter of contingent differences between cultures. Rather, urinary segregation is a matter of the necessary differences between culture’s faulting of the subject. (From an economic perspective, we can say that no culture can make a completely efficient use of the entirety of human waste,

and the conflicting ways in which different cultures fail to digest these environmental problems are segregations in urinary practices.)

In “The Acquisition and Control of Fire” (1932), Freud offers an anthropological myth about the origin or engendering of culture. Culture started with the control of fire. Controlling fire was a difficult task because men kept pissing out culture. Men did this because they had a sexual attraction to fire. Not only was this attraction sexual, but also this attraction was homosexual because fire looks like an erect penis. Thus, Freud argues, “in order to gain control over fire, men had to renounce the homosexually-tinged desire to put it out with a stream of urine” (187). Freud here must be assuming that women had a heterosexually-tinged desire to put out a fire with a stream of urine as well, but this desire would be impossible to fulfill. Because women were accustomed to sitting for urination, women, unlike men, would be highly motivated not to urinate on a fire (because the fire would probably cause burns on the sitter’s rear). This myth positions women differently than men with respect to culture. Freud elaborates in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), “it as though woman had been appointed guardian of the fire which was held captive on the domestic hearth, because her anatomy made it impossible for her to yield to the temptation of this desire [to put the fire out with a stream of urine]” (90n1). In Freud’s myth there are fundamentally different relationships to the signifier of the object of desire. One is men’s renunciation through prohibition (“do not pee out the fire”), and the other is women’s renunciation through impossibility (“you cannot pee out the fire”). Urinary segregation is not a contingent matter of cultural differences, but culture is the necessary failure of the subject in one way or another. For Freud, there is a contrast between genders, but these genders are not complementary, and this bisexual failure is not between people (as social categories are) because for Freud every psyche already harbors this double failure within itself, i.e. every subject



is always already bisexual. Gender is neither genre nor genitalia nor social category nor bathroom sign, but gender is the differential failure or differential negation of the field of these positive things.

In “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” [1957] (2006), Jacques Lacan brings Freud’s analysis of urinary segregation into an analysis of gender-segregated public bathrooms by analyzing bathroom door signs linguistically. First, Lacan’s analysis takes as its starting point an early linguistic workhorse, a representation of correspondence in signification that places the word “TREE” over an image of a tree. The word “TREE” signifies its referent, a tree. Here, words are just linguistic categories that exist in a system of differences from one another, just like genres as literary categories. There seems to be, at this point, no marked failure in the linguistic categorization of signs and signifiers. Reference rules significance. However, Lacan changes the linguistic model by inscribing “HOMMES” (or “GENTLEMEN”) and “DAMES” (or “LADIES”) over two identical doors (416). Because the two doors are identical, there is some equivocation as to why one door should be “GENTLEMEN” and the other “LADIES.” This revision of the linguistic model with a public bathroom model introduces a challenge to the reduction of signification to reference. The word “TREE” does not only refer to a tree, but it may also signify food or something to pee on. Equivocation marks a failure of signification to be reduced to reference in one way or another.

Lacan generalizes these bathroom politics to an antagonism among signifiers in general. That is, just as Freud shows us that urinary segregation is not a contingent or cultural difference, Lacan shows us that equivocation in the signifier is not a contingent difference because the signifier is always already the signifier of an impossible object of desire. Freud’s fire becomes Lacan’s signifier, and the linguistic “TREE” is set ablaze to become the cause of urinary

segregation. The *signi-fire* engenders a real, differential failure of social categorization, “the signifier will raise Dissension [...] to the immeasurable power of ideological warfare [...] Gentlemen and Ladies will henceforth be two homelands [...] *being in fact the same homeland*” (emphasis added, 417). It has been argued on one hand that the Lacanian “analogy here between national difference (and, indeed, all forms of ‘factionalism’) and sexual difference suggests that both are cultural and linguistic illusions” (Lydenberg 157). But if we read Lacan in terms of the real rather than only the imaginary and/or the symbolic, Lacan is explaining how factionalism is a real, persistent, or inevitable effect of the failure of signs, and so gender segregation is not some empirical illusion that we can shake off but is inescapable like a transcendental illusion in the Kantian sense. This take on Lacan is explicitly what Joan Copjec argues in her critique of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* [1990]. It might seem that objects of experience are things-in-themselves and that genders are social categories, but things-in-themselves are differential failures of experience (leading to mathematical antinomies and dynamic antinomies), and genders are differential failures to be categorically digested by socialization, by impossibility or by prohibition. The signifier has a momentum beyond itself into a real engendering of self-difference in one way or another. Gender marks this real urinary segregation that is the failure of social categorization in one way or another.

### **The heteronormative definition of gender**

Let me address my second criticism of Lorber’s definition of gender, concerning the complementarity of gender difference. In “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason” (1996) Joan Copjec argues that positive definitions of gender like Lorber’s definition are heteronormative

because of “the conception of the binary terms, masculinity and femininity, as complementary [...] having a reciprocal relation, the meaning of the one depending of the meaning of the other and vice versa” (202). What is particularly important about Freud’s and Lacan’s theory of gender is that gender remains a system of contrasting positions but not a system of complementarity. Lorber seems to agree with Freud and Lacan about gender as a contrasting system, and the only real disagreement seems to be whether or not different genders complement one another. Freud and Lacan, as noted, cannot conceive of gender differences as complementary because these differences are conceived as different kinds of failures that do not add up to a success, whereas Lorber conceives of gender differences as complementary precisely because they are defined as positive pieces that have fallen from a previously (or proleptically, in the future anterior) existing whole.

The heteronormative notion of gender as naturally complementary is compatible with an idealization of neutrality in European philosophy. For example, in “The Metaphysics of Love” [1881] the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer has claimed that love’s “real aim is the child to be born” and writes, “the two persons must neutralize each other, like acid and alkali to a neutral salt” (5, 8). For Schopenhauer, men and women are only neutralized by their complementarity, which produces a supplementary, third person—a baby—who might fit any social category. This is the two-wrongs-make-a-right logic of gender neutrality, wherein,

all sexuality is one-sided. This one-sidedness is more definitely expressed and exists in a higher degree in one person than in another; so that it may be better *supplemented* and *neutralised* in each individual by one person than by another of the opposite sex, because the individual requires a one-sidedness opposite to his own in order to complete the type

of humanity in the new individual to be generated, to the constitution of which everything tends. (8)

In this case, the baby that functions as a gender-neutral supplement for imagining men and women to be sexually complementary, though the baby as a signifier of the need for complementarity betrays an anxiety about the instability of heteronormativity (especially since many men and women cannot biologically reproduce without cloning).

In the same way, this heteronormative philosophy of gender translates to the design of a public bathroom that has one, desegregated room or has a men's room, women's room, and a third, supplementary room that is desegregated. The third bathroom functions as a gender-neutral supplement for imagining men's and women's rooms to be naturally complementary, since the third bathroom is merely an indeterminate composite of the first two bathrooms, as if the first two bathrooms belong together or at least can fit together. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam argues that those who want merely to add another bathroom rather than degender bathrooms should recognize, "'thirdness' merely balances the binary system" (28). Third bathrooms do not simply interrupt the complementary of men's and women's rooms, but third bathrooms also shore up the completion of men's and women's by supplementing them with an alternative that naturalizes men's and women's rooms from the outside, a seemingly neutral space. A heteronormative philosophy of gender and the practice of using third, supplementary bathrooms are not incompatible, but rather the complementarity of contrasting elements presupposes a residue of completion that ties up or homogenizes the system. In "The Use Value of DAF de Sade" (1985), Georges Bataille explains the symbolic order of excretion in terms of a real economic expenditure that is the end(s) of the chain of signifiers or bathroom signs,

the work of philosophy as well as of science or common sense [...] has always had as its goal the establishment of the homogeneity of the world, and it will only be able to lead to a terminal phase in the sense of excretion when the irreducible waste products of the operation are determined. (96)

So perhaps the confusion of gender with heteronormativity translates to a design of gender-neutral public bathrooms that may in fact reinforce heteronormativity by pretending that gender can be ended with some extra shit (a third, supplementary bathroom) that actually completes or shores up heteronormativity. This kind of degendering—desegregating public bathrooms—is already a means of gendering by presupposing a definition of gender that is variably visible but always present, as if invisible gender were the best possible goal for neutralizing gender. The navel does not simply interrupt the closure of the belly but also shores up this closure, like how a dietary supplement complements digestion by shoring it up with the limits of the materials from what we eat in the first place, which should have been sufficiently complete fuel for digestion the first time around.

The framing of public bathroom politics takes this heteronormative form when it situates the concerns of the trans community as either central or excluded. In particular, “third” bathrooms and the representation of the concerns of the trans community are fetishized when “third” bathrooms are framed only or primarily a “special interest” for trans people (therefore legitimizing or delegitimizing “third” bathrooms, depending on which side one is on). In these advocacies, gender-neutral public bathrooms act as “third” bathrooms along other special interest groups, “Ladies” and “Gentlemen.” Both “third” bathrooms and the reduction of gender neutrality to a special interest rely on a compartmentalization that takes the identity of cisgendered (non-trans) men and cisgendered women for granted. In *The Illogic of Separation:*

*Examining Arguments About Gender-Neutral Public Bathrooms* (2012), Matthew Kopas explains that, though many people may feel compelled to defend segregated bathrooms with rationalizations, unlike some religious opponents of gender neutrality, these people may still hold “privately-held beliefs” that privilege cisnormative comfort in determining what counts as rational, namely whether or not gender-neutral public bathrooms are a special interest that can be compartmentalized in a “third” bathroom (64-65). Consider that as a special interest, the design of bathrooms ought to be weighed between different interest groups that may overlap to some extent, e.g. cis women, guardians of children, ability assistants, trans people, and people who desire to use urinals. This leads to the curious situation in which bathroom design would be a matter of vote, which has actually happened before (see Harvey Molotch’s “On Not Making History: What NYU Did with the Toilet and What It Means for the World,” 2010). However, the problem of deciding what demographics are counted and to what extent each demographic’s vote is weighed cannot be a special interest itself; voting to determine who gets to count in a vote and with what weighting would presuppose what is to be determined.

The literature on gender-neutral public bathrooms often notes that while trans communities have been at the forefront of activism for gender-neutral public bathrooms, the importance of gender-neutral public bathrooms extends to ability assistants and guardians of children. A guardian and a child may identify as different genders but still need to use a public bathroom together. This decentering of trans activism may reinforce the voting politics model by showing voting’s instability on its own standards (i.e. more identities, children, guardians, etc.), but I really want to point further to the endpoint of this instability as a general instability that is the failure of standardization. To assume that the importance of gender neutrality is centrally a transgender issue or even a feminist issue is again to interpret gender neutrality as a particularly

gendered issue all over again. This interpretation of gender neutrality as a kind of gendering gets to the heart of the problem of the possibility of gender neutrality or, by contrast, the inevitability of gendered difference.

### **Gender overdetermination in public bathrooms**

Against Lorber's camp of theory and practice of designing public bathrooms, some feminists have taken the non-contingency of irreconcilable genders to heart. If Freud and Lacan are correct to say that gender is a fundamental contrast without possibility of complementarity, then advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms may be misguided from the start. The advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms with urinals is a kind of embarrassing limit of advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms because urinals signify performances of masculinity through popular associations between masculinity and standing urination. In *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992), Marjorie Garber notes, "the urinal has appeared in a number of fairly recent films [as of 1992] as a marker of the ultimate 'difference'—or studied indifference" (14). Lorber recognizes many feminists have been concerned that the discourse of gender neutrality may lead to gender-neutral sexism, and we need "to be attentive to possible deleterious effects on women and girls of seemingly gender-neutral policies" (2000: 89). We need to be sensitive to the way that gender neutrality can be substituted easily with men's privilege when the inclusion of urinals in gender-neutral bathrooms gives gender-neutral bathrooms the same layout as existing men's bathrooms. Moira Gatens criticizes such gender desegregation as disingenuous, "the implied neutrality is not a neutrality at all but a 'masculinization' or 'normalization' (in a society where men are seen as the norm, the standard)

of women” (qtd. in Walsh 156). In *Le deuxième sexe/The Second Sex* [1949] (2011) Simone de Beauvoir criticizes the way that masculinity can double as gender neutrality,

In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (xv)

The installation of urinals in gender-neutral public bathrooms may reinforce the idea that men are an exception to the neutralization of gender by already being neutral, and urinals signify men’s exception from everyone’s shitter. Gatens argues strongly, “the degendering of society is hopelessly utopian, ahistorical, [and] functions theoretically and practically as a diversionary tactic” (qtd. in Walsh 153). Gatens and like-minded theorists have been concerned that gender will be inevitably (re)signified, making degendering an unreliable or unsustainable strategy for promoting gender justice.

Sheila Cavanagh’s *Queering Bathrooms* (2010) also shows how the signifier overdetermines gender differences in public bathrooms. Gender signifiers in “the bedroom and the bathroom are overdetermined by heterosexual angst (and excitement) about illicit border crossings” (31). Overdetermination here is a concept developed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) to account for the multiplicity of etiological factors. That is, Freud explains “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria” (1905), a symptom or other effect is overdetermined when it is generated “not by one but by several causes – by overdetermination” (31n2). When Cavanagh says that gender signifiers in the bathroom are overdetermined by angst and excitement, she means that angst and excitement are shaped by fantasies that condense together multiple, substitutable associations that are each sufficient to signify gender difference.



Gender is inevitably signified through fantasies about gender even when a sign is otherwise neutral with respect to gender. Popular fantasies may be always ready to add, like the character Michael Scott in the U.S. version of *The Office*, “That’s what she said.” Scatological absurdities, for example, are hardly intelligible without recognizing this function of fantasy, e.g. the substitution of the anus and the vagina in children’s cloacal theory of birth. In “On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Eroticism” (1917), Freud argues that residual, infantile fantasies make associations to sexuality and sexual difference inevitable, “in the products of the unconscious - spontaneous ideas, phantasies and symptoms - the concepts *faeces* (money, gift), *baby* and *penis* are ill-distinguished from one another and are easily interchangeable” (128). In this sense, the consolidation of bathrooms and bathroom door signs will not completely neutralize the gendering of bathrooms because of this overdetermination of gender difference by the signifier. There may remain ostensibly gender-neutral objects and representations that nevertheless remind users of gender, e.g. urine on toilet seats and floors, differences in noises that people allow themselves to make, differences in surveillance practices, differences in sanitation practices, and graffiti: “The pitch and range of vocal chords, the trickle of urine, the shuffle of feet in a neighbouring stall, all spark curiosities about genital composition” (Cavanaugh 111).

As signifiers, gender-neutral signs on bathrooms cannot guarantee gender neutrality. Users may presuppose gendered meanings that are not intended by the bathroom designer. Perhaps a self-identified “man” who sees a door with an image of a toilet on it may then look elsewhere for the restroom that he belongs in, signified by a door with an image of a urinal. The multiple, often substitutable, and sufficient but not necessary causes of equivocation of the signifier overdetermine gendered difference because they remove any guarantee of an absolutely

unequivocal signifier of gender neutrality. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's analysis of gendered architecture, Cavanagh argues,

The urinal, for example, is a larger or more publicly visible receptacle amplifying the presence (or absence) of masculine genital organs (requiring people to stand upright and forward facing), while the oval toilet bowl (meant for sitting and backing into) is cloistered by enclosed cubicles,

and to a significant number of people, "the urinal resembles a vagina" (113, 122). The signifier returns urinals to urinary segregation. It is true that not only "masculine genital organs" are capable of using urinals, but according to Clara Greed's "Creating a Nonsexist Restroom" (2010), it may be the case that "device[s] for vertical urination [...] are awkward to use and present problems of sanitation and portability. They should be resisted" (139). There is no necessary contrast or segregation between people who use urinals, so urinals are not necessarily gendered according to Lorber's theory, but urinals do not thereby cease to signify gender difference because urinary segregation is an inescapable effect of the signifier.

Urinary segregation engenders real differences for bathroom users even in seemingly gender-neutral toilet stalls. For example, in Kathryn H. Anthony's and Meghan Dufresne's "Potty Parity in Perspective: Gender and Family Issues in Planning and Designing Public Restrooms" (2007), we learn, "Fear of contaminated toilet seats causes many women to hover over the toilet rather than actually sit on it," which can cause health problems (275). The slip of the aim and the hovering are a return of the repressed in the attempt to neutralize urinary segregation in gender-neutral public bathrooms. In "Gender Overdetermination and Resistance: The Case of Criminalised Women" (2011), Susan Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk argue, "when the women resist the practices of one powerful gendering institution they find themselves

propelled into the gendering arms of another equally or even more vigorous one” (326). As noted in the case of interpreting gender-neutral public bathrooms as transgender bathrooms, the resistance to gender itself continues to signify gender.

Susan Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk further explain how resistance to gender is interpreted as a gendered kind of resistance. For example, in some U.S. prisons, women’s resistance can be interpreted and dismissed as a resistance that is particular to feminine criminality, e.g. myths of women as “manipulative,”

Gender overdetermination, we argue, means that everything that a woman does (whether spirit possession or sex work) is interpreted in terms of her gender. Thus, even ostensible acts of resistance tend to be interpreted as further “proof” of the immutable truth of gender. (327)

Focusing on sexuality for illustration, in the movie *The Little Rascals* (1994) a little boy attempts to wipe off a little girl’s kiss received without consent, and a third child accuses the boy of not “wiping it off” but “rubbing it in”—the act of resistance is itself interpreted as proof of conformity. Freud himself has been accused of and parodied as interpreting phenomena in terms of gendered sexuality where there may be none. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a robot named Data goes to a Freud hologram to talk about his surprising experience of dreams, more specifically nightmares. Freud interprets Data’s dream as a sexual issue, to which Data as a robot protests, “But I have no sexual desire” (Episode 6). The holographic Freud quips, “Ah! Impotence on top of everything!” (Episode 6). This joke illustrates Freud’s own theory of how fantasy acts as a supplement in the defense against anxiety by way of providing an explanatory principle that reconciles reality and desire, perhaps supporting what we sometimes call “confirmation bias” or disavowing reality to spare the stability of the ego/identity.

In a similar return of the repressed, gender-desegregated public bathrooms will also desegregate audiences of graffiti. The desegregation of public bathrooms will also be a homogenization of signifiers that mark gender differences (heterogeneity), “public restrooms have long provided a venue for derogatory graffiti as well as hate crimes for gays and lesbians” (Anthony and Dufresne 270). In gender-neutral public bathrooms, existing graffiti practices in men’s bathrooms, including misogynistic and homophobic graffiti, may be increasingly exposed to all bathroom users instead of just some users. However, it is worth noting that there has also been bathroom graffiti that complicates and perhaps destabilises gender relations, and this “queer-positive” graffiti would be consolidated as well by desegregating public bathrooms. Sheila Cavanaugh notes that even “Homophobic etchings are, however, ambivalent. They reveal something about desire and taboo” (187).

### **Gender equivocation in public bathrooms**

If gender is overdetermined in public bathrooms, should we give up on the movement to degender or gender-neutralize social relations? No, we should not give up. In the face of inevitable defeat, perhaps we should aim for a stalemate rather than a win. One popular strategy for fighting gender overdetermination with a stalemate is to confuse gender boundaries by rewriting the citational norms of clothes, hair, behavior, and bathroom door signs to blur into one another. The idea is to equivocate gender as a way of neutralizing gender. I will point to both scholars and activists to illustrate this. Lorber argues that gender equivocation, as signifying the vacuousness of gender nuances/identity, can be a strategy of degendering that does not ignore the continuing power of gender, “We can try to blur gender boundaries in our everyday lives” (2005:

88). Activists like Sam Killermann (2014) have created gender-neutral public bathrooms by using stickers depicting a toilet to obscure gendered signs on otherwise gender-segregated public bathrooms. That is, such stickers would be placed over signs for men's and women's rooms so that the contrast between rooms exists but is confused. This gender equivocation covers part of what Lorber means by "using gender to undo gender."

In *Gender Trouble* [1990] (1999) Judith Butler argues that gender equivocation may be a way of performing gender in a subversive way because of its unconventional citations of gender identity, e.g. "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (186). For example, certain bathroom designs that humorously confuse gender can count as gender neutrality, even though gendered difference may remain signified by urinals in only one of two rooms,

Sasha, who is transgender, says, "I would label the bathrooms with descriptions that divided people up into nonsense categories. At least that way I could go watch and be amused at people sharing in the same discomfort that I go through [regularly]." Rocky, who is genderqueer, agrees: "I [would] like something confusing ... a person could go wherever and ... [the bathroom would] not be regulated by a specific norm." (Cavanagh 214-215)

The substitution of gender-neutral with genderqueer here is (appropriately?) defeatist about gender neutrality while staying true to the spirit of degendering by destabilizing the completion of gender categories. As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, Roland Barthes' [1977-1978] (2005) notion of gender neutrality is just such a mixture of gender:

the Neuter is not what cancels the genders but what combines them, keeps them both present in the subject, at the same time, after each other ... The androgyne thus is the Neuter, but a Neuter conceived as the complex degree. (190-193).<sup>8</sup>

For Judith Butler [1990] (1999), the equivocal sign of gender acts as a queer version of an identity “*supplément*, the excess that necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all” (196).

It is worth noting here that this strategy of blurring gender boundaries is a larger strategy of degendering than Lorber’s definition of gender calls for insofar as this strategy is not restricted to Lorber’s definition of gender as complementary social categories. Even non-complementary social categories may be subject to neutralization by confusion. It seems that advocates of gender-neutral public bathrooms really want public bathrooms to be neutral with respect to all social categories, and these advocates are simply focusing on gender as a salient ‘social category’ for contemporary activism. This suggests that some of the advocated degendering practices (queering gender differences) are principled in a way that demands a revision of Lorber’s definition of gender.

Because gender is just a subset of social categories in Lorber’s definition of gender, it would seem that advocates for gender-neutral public bathrooms can entirely skip the feminist critique of power (i.e. as gender) in favor of a sociological critique of power. That is, if neutralizing social categories is the goal, why theorize about gender or any single social category at all when one can theorize about social categorization more broadly? Or, why would code breakers focus on individual cypher patterns when they can just build a computer for decryption?

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<sup>8</sup> I invoke Roland Barthes’ [1977-1978] (2005) literary theory of neutrality several times in this paper as a means of rethinking what might count as neutral in different contexts. Barthes’ theory of the neutral is paradigmatically supplementary, both being the principle of an ethics of nuance, “to live according to nuance” (11), and a signifier of the vacuousness of nuances, especially binary nuances that Barthes calls “paradigms” (6).

It seems that if gender differences are a subset of social categories, feminist theory is not really needed for designing gender-neutral public bathrooms, since we can just head directly to social-categorically neutral bathrooms in theory and practice. The relevant question for us becomes (as a shift from feminist theory to gender-neutral theory), what counts as a social category such that we know what to neutralize in public bathrooms?

I agree with Lorber that gender-neutral public bathrooms ought to neutralize social categories in general, but I also argue that feminist theory is not irrelevant to theorizing a general neutralization of social categories because gender is not merely a social category. In this sense, I think it is a virtue of Lorber's definition of gender that it does not distinguish gender from social categories that other people have argued are contrasting and complementary, although a qualification will have to be made if gender neutrality has something important to do with the neutralization of social categories in general. The specificity of gender difference is its function as a general failure of social categorization in one way or another. Feminist theory is already about the problem of general differences. To attempt to achieve neutrality in general (i.e. as in the computer analogy) without feminist theory would be to ignore that the term *neutral* comes from the Latin for neither (*ne*) masculine nor (*uter*) feminine. *Gender* comes not only through the French *genre* but also through the Latin *genus*, as in kind, type, class, set, group, or race. And *general* also comes from the Latin *genus*. Gender has already been a long-standing, general reference to social categorization. Although Freud used the German term *Geschlecht* (i.e. sex, family, race) rather than the English *gender*, we can say that Freud's analysis is justifiably considered to be an analysis of gender in an etymological sense because Freud focuses on (re)generation and differentiation (gender as *genus*) when he analyses *Geschlecht*. It would be an empty move to nuance between gender difference and sexual difference in this matter, as *sex*

comes from the Latin *sexus* for division, as in *sects*, sections, or categories. Feminist theory has already been about a sociological critique of categorization from the start.

Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" illustrates one sense of this tie between feminist theory and identity categories in general. Riviere defines womanliness or femininity as a masquerade, which we can conceptually distinguish from imposture. That is, wearing a mask and lying about one's identity are distinct ways of responding to the failure of identity. Riviere does not restrict her claims about womanliness to women but acknowledges that some performances of masculinity by men can also be primarily womanly, and this equivocation about the definition of gender is what is at stake here. The wearer of the mask is not bound to deception in the way that the imposter is bound to deception, and this affords the wearer of the mask an indeterminate position or stalemate in a losing game, "It is really a puzzle to know how to classify this type" (Riviere, 1929: 304). On account of this masquerading equivocation in her patients, Riviere's therapeutic goals include achieving a "*post-ambivalent state*" (1929: 313). While I have reservations about the privilege (and possibility) afforded to the post-ambivalent state here, I want to point out that Riviere's analysis of her patients' anxieties teaches us that classificatory puzzles, ambivalence, equivocation, and queerness constitute a distinct trajectory of response to the failure of identity. In *The Neutral: Course at the College de France (1977-1978)* (2005), Roland Barthes recognizes the neutral in ambivalence about any binary distinction (or paradigm) between the paradigm and the neutrality:

in the end the ultimate opposition, the one that both fascinates and is the most difficult to think about to the extent that it self-destructs in its very statement is that between distinction and indistinction, and this is what is at stake in the Neutral ... it implies a



thought of the indistinct, the temptation of the ultimate (or of the ur) paradigm [i.e. primary binary opposition]: that of the distinct and the indistinct. (51)

Masquerading has a distinct identity from identity theft because a mask can go without identity. One exemplar of Riviere's masquerading patients had an odd combination of being "highly impersonal" and yet also "flirting and coquetting with them in a more or less veiled manner" (1929: 305). That is, a mask can stand by itself (without a self) and yet be worn by anyone. Riviere's theory pins gender difference to a general difference in responses to failures of social categorization or failures of identity. Faking ignorance, for example, is a form of stalemating gender that is not necessarily a fraudulent claim to win in the face of certain loss of certainty.

### **The definition of gender neutrality as sociability**

How does Joan Riviere's theory of gender translate to gender-neutral public bathrooms? Part of neutralizing or stalemating gender in a space wherein gender is overdetermined requires masquerade, including impersonality and flirtation. Or, Riviere's case studies teach us that *sociability* may be centrally important for mitigating gender overdetermination in public bathrooms. Sociability is a concept developed by Georg Simmel in "The Sociology of Sociability" (1949) to talk about the way different "personalities" can connect in a certain impersonal or neutral way, "the impulse to sociability distills, as it were, out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and a satisfaction" (255). I use the term "sociability" to designate a relationship between subjects wherein identities are necessary but otherwise inconsequential. Part of sociability is the unfortunate impersonality that may be received as vacuous, like when you get bored with the

kind of small talk that could be exchanged between any given people. But part of sociability is the gift of satisfaction in connection alone, like when you just need to talk to someone, anyone. According to Simmel, sociability is itself a hole in social categorization (or in bathroom walls) that makes possible social relations in the first place.

Advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms is multiply conflicted over the issue of sociability. On one side, some advocates of gender-neutral bathrooms have attempted to negotiate with gender overdetermination by advocating asocial, individualized toilet-sink stalls (e.g. see such advocates in interviews from Cavanagh p. 215). On the other side, some have argued that “single-user bathrooms prevented alternate uses of the public bathroom” like “socializing with others” (Kopas 28). The theory of gender neutrality as masquerade or sociability is a challenge to any advocates of toilet-sink stalls for single users, as portable toilets typically are. Some relatively uncontroversial advocacies for sociability in public bathrooms have argued that public bathrooms can be safer if communicating openly with strangers in bathrooms is less dangerous, for example if public bathrooms have multiple entrances/exits that can facilitate escape, accessible fire alarms that can also act as panic buttons, and stalls that are accessible to at least major cell phone networks. It could be argued that public bathrooms do not have any function beyond disposing of excretion, and it could be argued that sociability does not seem to be defensible unless we first introduce gender to negate it with a masquerade. However, quite a few feminist camps have argued that gender does not wait for an introduction to show up because its presence and problematic is overdetermined. Feminist theorists, Judith Butler, and Lacanians seem to have the capacity to find gender or sexual difference everywhere, in anything. Mitigating this situation requires avowing what is public about the public bathroom, namely its function for sociability beyond its function for disposing of excretion. To reduce bathrooms to

excretion facilities only is to adopt a merely obsessive standard for bathroom design, as Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink notes in his “Reading ‘The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious’” (2004): “an obsessive standard [...] has to produce a discrete, discernible object (a turd of sorts) for us to examine (admire or scorn)” (66).

In “Introduction: Learning from the Loo” (2010), Harvey Molotch suggests that gender-neutral public bathrooms ought to promote sociability by capitalizing on the impulses behind graffiti, “provide chalkboards for self-expression in public areas” (258). Self-expression is not necessarily self-reinforcing but, especially when communicating anonymously, self-expression can be a cathartic emptying of the self. The installation of chalkboards in public bathrooms is a direct response to the problem of graffiti as a frequent signifier of gender. In public bathrooms with chalkboard-painted walls and chalk, there would likely be, on one side, an increase in the rate of graffiti and so probably also the number of violent writings, but on the other side chalkboards could enable the quick removal of (or response to) graffiti as well. So, chalkboards in bathrooms may increase violent, gendered, and sexualized graffiti, but they also may decrease the inevitability of seeing violent, gendered, and sexualized graffiti in bathrooms when the writing is otherwise on the wall. Sociability mitigates gender overdetermination by preemptively providing a neutral zone that supplements the relations between people. But how far can sociability be pushed in gender-neutral public bathrooms?

Even for advocates of sociability in public bathrooms, there is a split between advocates for particular sociabilities and general sociability. That is, even independent of trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) like Sheila Jeffreys, some feminists have claimed that gender-neutral public bathrooms are not necessarily replacements for women’s bathrooms that can act “as spaces in which women can temporarily retreat from the outside world in order to be

in the company of other women” (Kopas 28). Company here is a particular form of sociability: “she is, in the larger company, herself, to be sure, but not quite completely herself, since she is only an element in a formally constituted gathering” (Simmel 256). In a gender-consolidated public bathroom, this form of women’s sociability may be displaced or erased.

In “Sociability and Cruising” (2002), Leo Bersani considers another form of sociability that uses public bathrooms to “retreat from the outside world,” namely the practice of cruising or searching for an undetermined partner for sex. As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, cruising is a major figure for queer neutrality in queer theories of impersonal relation. Like a dance at a masquerade ball, in cruising one’s partner is undetermined but nevertheless necessary. Bersani (2002) explains,

The gay bathhouse is especially favorable to ideal cruising because, in addition to the opportunity anonymous sex offers its practitioners of shedding much of the personality that individuates them psychologically, the common bathhouse uniform—a towel—communicates very little [...] about our social personality. (21)

Bersani’s cruising has the form of Riviere’s flirtation or what Simmel calls “the stimulation of coquetry” (258). In this sense, Bersani (2002) can say, “Cruising is sexual sociability” because “Cruising, like sociability, can be a [sexual] training in impersonal intimacy” (18, 21). In sociability, identity is a vacuous, formal element that is both present and absent in a vacuous social connection, or what Bersani (2002) calls “blind narcissism.” In sociability, we know that we are not the same, but switching places would not make a difference to either of us. Like advocates of women’s withdrawn sociability, some gay men who have used public bathrooms for sex have expressed anxieties about the increased policing that may occur in gender-consolidated

public bathrooms (Cavanagh). Gay men's sociability in public bathrooms may be partly displaced or erased as a result of consolidating gender in public bathrooms.

If gender neutrality is already about the promotion of sociability, should these particular forms of sociability in gender-segregated public bathrooms be sacrificed for consolidated, gender-neutral bathrooms? The theory of gender neutrality as sociability also creates a dilemma for what counts as sociability. What is at stake in designing gender-neutral public bathrooms is not only the negations, amplifications, and displacements of different forms of sociability but also the register of what counts as a form of sociability, particular or general. On one side, particular forms of sociability (women's sociability and gay men's sociability) require a kind of "retreat from the outside world." On the other side, a general sociability does not retreat from the outside world but retreats from any inner self, identity category, or ego. One's mode of retreat is implied by one's theory of gender and sociability.

One compromise has been to compartmentalize an extra space for sociability rather than to compartmentalize a "third" bathroom for Others. The San Francisco Human Rights Commission (2001) has proposed a supplemental, sinks-only washroom as such an extra space for sociability (7n18). The sinks-only public washroom as toilet-free might signify that gender-neutral public bathrooms have a function beyond excretion; the washroom may signify a cleaner, communication-friendly space for open association. In "On Not Making History" (2010), Molotch, too, suggests that gender-neutral public bathrooms should have an extra space for sociability like "a quasi-lobby area, where mirrors and counters exist for grooming" (266). Although mirrors heighten surveillance in a way that may decrease sociability in public bathrooms, mirrors are also important for as a space for "chatter," and mirrors can be more socially inclusive by being low enough for people in wheelchairs to use comfortably (Cavanagh).

There could even be supplementary, public washrooms where there are not even bathrooms nearby, since these rooms can still hold their function as sites of gender-neutrality. Here we are close to Roland Barthes' [1977-1978] (2005) model of the neutral again: "Supplements to nothing: that's the ideal Neutral" (69). Neutrality here is not reducible to a removal of one or more social positions, but neutrality is also the promotion of sociability through installations like supplementary spaces for open association.

### **Conclusion: Publicity and public bathrooms**

This essay has charted several theories of gender and their translations into designs for gender-neutral public bathrooms. The heteronormative theory of gender as complementary social categories principles the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms that are only gender-consolidated public bathrooms or gender-segregated bathrooms with 'third' bathrooms. The apparent overdetermination of signifiers of gender in public bathrooms makes this theory of gender insufficient for tackling a more comprehensive neutralization of gender. While some theorists and advocates have pointed out the value of equivocating gender in public bathrooms as a means of mitigating gender overdetermination, I have argued that the desire here is really for the equivocation of identity in general, which is already a gendered strategy of stalemating the lose-lose game of gender, "womanliness as masquerade." In this way, a comprehensive feminist theory cannot completely ignore the need for gender-neutral public bathrooms to include extra space for sociability.

Sheila Cavanagh points out that it would be a virtue for a theory of gender neutrality to avoid referring back to gender, not even referring to an opposition to gender, since the desire for gender-neutral public bathrooms is more directly a desire for inclusive social justice,

The wish for gender-neutral bathroom space is less a wish for a world without gender than a desire to do justice to those who have been socially coded as abject agents or carriers of the losses we all incur in the course of maturation and to whom public space has been denied. (213)

The theory of gender neutrality as sociability (or, in the scope of gender overdetermination, the theory of womanliness as masquerade) directly addresses the limits of identity that are at stake for social justice. Simmel sees in sociability the potential for social justice by way of equalizing class differences, “Inasmuch as sociability is the abstraction of association—abstraction of the character of art or of play—it demands the purest, most transparent, most engaging kind of interaction—that among *equals*’ (257). So, by its demand for casual association and for abandonment of identity-based designs, “sociability is the play-form also for the ethical forces of concrete society” (260). By thinking of public bathrooms in terms of their potential sociability, we can think of public bathrooms as works in progress for social agency as well as excretion facilities. Sociability turns a space for anyone into a space for everyone by conjoining the flirtatious with the impersonal, which aligns with Cavanaugh’s proposal to combine the intimate and the unfamiliar,

If public space can be made to feel like home, then it is possible to imagine a gender-inclusive lavatory design that is familiar and yet strange; intimate and yet unfamiliar. Those designated “other” (outsiders) may come to feel like kin (insiders). (217)

A comprehensive feminist theory of gender-neutral public bathrooms teaches us that social contact cannot be foreclosed from public space without sacrificing the substance of the *public* as a site of *people*, which cannot be reduced to an aggregate of individuals but is rather the subtraction of substantial individuality.

This chapter charted many of the conflicting ways that feminist theorists understand gender and identity neutrality, and I provided us with an orienting framework by introducing queer neutrality through psychoanalytic and sociological models of impersonal relation. This sets the stage for better understanding the tensions that queer theorists inherit from feminist theory. When we recognize what different models of gender and neutrality imply for a comprehensive theory of identity, we can better follow the maze of anxious correspondence between queer theorists of gender and neutrality, which only get more complicated from this point. We can now recognize that advocacies for gender neutrality are very strongly but ambivalently concerned with a larger project of identity neutrality.



## Chapter 2 How to Fix Bathroom Signs

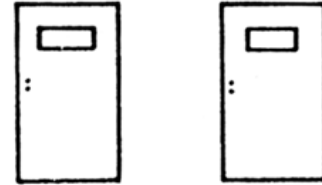
Although a main take on gender-neutral public bathrooms in queer theory does not exist, I propose a review of Judith Butler's strain of queer theory in order to name a kind of absent center of and possible compromise between models for gender-neutral public bathrooms in queer theory. There is no shortage of advocates for gender-neutral public bathrooms who draw on Judith Butler's performative theory of gender. Consider Priyanka Krishnamurthy's "Bathrooms Cause Gender Confusion" (2012):

Judith Butler, a post-structuralist philosopher, wrote an essay titled "Bodies That Matter" in which she shares ideas that attempt to explain gendered binaries and societal constructions. She advocates that gender in itself is a performance that constitutes who we are as people. Before delving into how this impacts bathrooms today, it is important to define what gender and performance is. In the post-structuralist/ post-modernist/ Butlerian context, gender and performance are inexorably tied together.

We cannot have gender without the performance; there is no such thing as "this or that" in the context of sexes. Rather it is a question, first, of the way in which we act and then the way this action socially defines us. Even though this view of gender may be subjective and hard to define, it still depicts who we are and, more importantly, who we want to be.

The conflation of sex and gender has become very problematic in today's society. The separation of "men" and "women" in public restrooms adversely impacts the

HOMMES DAMES



*Figure 1: Lacan's model of sexual difference as urinary segregation, Men's and Women's bathroom door signs.*

progression of what we should define “identity” as. This sort of separation leads to the marginalization of those who are transgender.

For example, what would a person who is sexually a male but dresses “like a female” do when they see such signs? Would they go inside the “male” restroom and be ostracized for being a female? Or would they go inside the “female” restroom and be ostracized for sexually being a male?

Personally, I do not have an answer, but in a more pragmatic sense, that is why gender-neutral bathrooms should exist.

This is not some kind of abstract solution, it’s something that needs to be fixed considering we’re in the 21st century.

Krishnamurthy is “pragmatically” attributing an advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms to Butler’s performative theory of gender. One of the goals of this chapter is to explain why this is a confusing take on neutrality in queer theory.

There is a similar sentiment in Molly Fischer’s interview with Judith Butler, titled, “Think Gender Is Performance? You Have Judith Butler to Thank for That” (2016). Fischer is interested in Butler being a “pop-celebrity” who is also a “radical theorist,” as if this combination necessarily implies radical *influence*. Fischer insists on Butler’s impact on advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms, saying, “The impulse to reexamine assumptions [about gender] has had practical consequences—gender-neutral college dorms and high-school bathrooms—and cultural ripples” (Fischer 2016). Inviting Butler to speak on gender-neutral public bathrooms, Fischer says,

We are speaking shortly after President Obama publicly voiced his support for transgender rights in the fight against North Carolina’s bathroom law, and gender—as

something in need of definition, as something potentially ambiguous or complex—is at the center of national debate.

What is the condition of possibility of the U.S. president’s utterance? Butler’s response is, “Such an utterance coming out of a U.S. president would be impossible in the 1990s” (Butler quoted in Fischer 2016). This is not exactly an endorsement of the connections that Fischer makes.

Some of Fischer’s circular (but very understandable) evidence for this connection is that advocates for gender neutrality use terms drawn from Butler’s work, including “performativity” and “heteronormativity,” and Butler even entertains Fischer’s attempts to hook Butler into making a clear statement about “the blossoming mainstream interest in gender issues.” However, Fischer belabors the connection between Butler and gender activism, and Butler pushes back to a significant extent. Fischer says,

*Gender Trouble*, published in 1990, made Butler a star: It introduced “performativity,” the idea that gender isn’t something we *are* but something we continually *do*, opening the door for “cultural configurations of sex and gender [to] proliferate,” as she put it in the book’s conclusion, “confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness.” (Fischer 2016)

Our practical consequences or cultural ripples—pragmatic jumps in reasoning—are a kind of leap of faith, and it is not at all obvious that Butler endorses Fischer’s association between the cause of the gender-neutral public bathroom movement and queer gender reexamination. Butler responds,

“I didn’t take on trans very well,” she says of *Gender Trouble*. The book doesn’t account for the experience of gender that someone like Caitlyn Jenner describes when she says

her brain feels “much more female than it is male,” for example. “So, in many ways, it’s a very dated book,” Butler says. (Fischer 2016)

Butler’s example of a trans conservative activist for gender-neutral public bathrooms, Caitlyn Jenner, is telling here because Jenner’s advocacy exhibits little discernible critical examination of gender. Your brain feeling like it is female is not a performance of gender, and framing gender in this way does not discourage someone from inferring that there is one single way that a given gender feels like in the brain. Apparently trans activism can enable positive changes in the political culture of trans issues without actually critically examining gender. Krishnamurthy’s advocacy, for example, could be emptied of its references to Butler because it is sound enough to argue that gender-segregated bathrooms marginalize transgender people, and we should not marginalize transgender people (because their brain feels more like whatever), so gender-neutral alternatives should exist. What does Butler have to do with this?

Or, what is Butler saying to Fischer by not exactly advocating gender-neutral public bathrooms in this way? Perhaps Butler is politely not reminding Fischer of Butler’s relatively consistent position against (the existence of) neutrality, namely gender neutrality and political neutrality. It is strange that both advocates and opponents of neutrality attribute the groundwork for gender-neutral advocacies to Judith Butler because, I will try to show, Butler is one of the more definitively anti-neutrality theorists. The skewed reception of Butler’s work helps us understand something about the absurd polemics over gender-neutral public bathrooms in relation to queer theories of gender and identity neutrality.

We must remember that Butler’s position on (against) neutrality is partially due to scholarly momentum. Butler’s work grew out of feminist theory, and feminist theory is a large reservoir for anti-neutrality. For example, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* or *The*

*Second Sex* (1949), which we saw in the first chapter of this dissertation, influences Butler's understanding of the relationship between neutrality, gender, language, and the body. In the first chapter of Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990] (1999), Butler opens with a quote from *The Second Sex*—"one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one"—and draws on Beauvoir's theory that "the body is always a situation":

there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along. (Butler, [1990] 1999: 12)

This argument is a charge against pretensions to (gender) neutrality. The lesson from Beauvoir is important to Butler here because *Gender Trouble* is explicitly concerned with discrediting the 'neutral' sciences of sex—like Lacanian psychoanalysis—that participate in the heteronormalization of gender. Butler argues,

gendered meanings frame the hypothesis and the reasoning of those biomedical inquiries that seek to establish 'sex' for us as it is prior to the cultural meanings that it acquires. Indeed, the task is even more complicated when we realize that the language of biology participates in other kinds of languages and reproduces that cultural sedimentation in the objects it purports to discover and neutrally describe. (Butler, 1999: 139)

Sciences of sex are not neutral but gendered, and Butler's analysis will find gender *anywhere* because gender was "there all along." Butler is re-politicizing supposedly apolitical (but really depoliticized) sciences of sex.

The references to "neutral description" and "prediscursivity" testify to Butler's careful attention to the ways in which learning a language coercively regulates and normalizes the boundaries of intelligible communication. This attention has precedent in Beauvoir's observation

that even grammatical neutrality can be ideologically masculine, “The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings” (2011 [1949]: 25). The political import of this grammar is reflected in, for example, the exclusion of women from the universal rights of man in the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789* (The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen [1789]). That is to say, in a heteronormative regime of representation, men represent the positive and the neuter insofar as men’s particularity is also universal (humanity), and this representation requires that women’s negative particularity is only perpetually bodily bias. Even though Butler criticizes feminists’ monolithic models of sexual difference, Butler sides with most feminists in their opposition to the purported political neutrality and gender neutrality of language, for example invoking Luce Irigaray’s *To Speak is Never Neutral*: “Irigaray’s *Parler n’est jamais neutre* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985) criticizes precisely the kind of humanist position, here characteristic of Wittig, that claims the political and gender neutrality of language” (*GT*: 200). If we were to translate this position to the issue of gender-neutral public bathrooms in the way that Krishnamurthy and Fischer suggest we already have—and in line with the feminist arguments we saw in the first chapter of this dissertation—we might say that gender-consolidated, gender-neutral public bathrooms are men’s bathrooms. How so? If gender-neutral public bathrooms typically have urine on the toilet seats, then once again the supposedly neutral, universal bathroom actually represents the men’s bathroom.

In an interview with Julie Phelps, “Judith Butler on Performativity and Performance: Julie Phelps Interviewing Judith Butler” [2013] (2017), Butler explains,

But when we talk about gender performance broadly, we’re talking about it beyond the stage, in the audience, what we were doing before the show, on the streets and in the

public, at the thresholds of public and private, within the home or within the shelter or within the privacy of one's own bathroom or somebody else's bathroom that your [sic] borrowing for the moment. (Butler quoted in Phelps 2013)

We might appropriately infer that Butler thinks that gender-neutral public bathrooms are gendered because Butler suggests that even the privacy of one's own bathroom is gendered.

In following works, Butler remains concerned with demonstrating that nothing can be understood apart from its relation to gender. In "Mbembe's Extravagant Power" (1992), Butler introduces a gendered perspective on fetishization to complicate Achille Mbembe's Baudrillardian (gender neutralized) framework of fetishization. Butler wants to

raise the question of specifically gendered meanings. This seems crucial given that it is the theatricalization of the masculinist body through which the state is ritualistically ratified, and that the rituals of ratification and ritual may also be markedly masculinist? With or without Freud, however, we can ask whether the fetishization of orifices and genital organs can be understood apart from their relation to gender; indeed, can the very meaning of defilement be dissociated from feminization? (1992: 69-70)

The body always already has gendered and racialized meanings that politicize how we model power itself:

Mbembe restricts his analysis to what appears to him to be most salient about the description: the *commandement's* own taste for lecherous living and its focus on the (gender-neutral) body. [...] Mbembe follows Bakhtin in reading bodily parts and functions apart from the gender and sexual taboos that are invested in them; further, this putatively gender-neutral body appears to be a common preoccupation of "power," where "power" is defined as postcolonial to the extent that it is not specifically African:

defecation, copulation, pomp and sumptuousness are all classical ingredients in the production of power, and...there is nothing specifically African about it (11).

Here bodily functions are not only relieved of their gendered meanings, but their racialized ones as well.

Again, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler renews her commitment to anti-neutrality, Suffice it to say that the boundaries of the body are the lived experience of differentiation, where that differentiation is never neutral to the question of gender difference or the heterosexual matrix. What is excluded from the body for the body's boundary to form? And how does that exclusion haunt that boundary as an internal ghost of sorts, the incorporation of loss as melancholia? To what extent is the body surface the dissimulated effect of that loss? (*BTM*: 35)

*Bodies That Matter* opposes neutrality more explicitly through an acknowledgement of racial positioning as well, even if it is really no more central to this text than it is to *Gender Trouble*, [bell] hooks is right to argue that within this culture the ethnographic conceit of a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze, an unmarked white gaze, one which passes its own perspective off as the omniscient, one which presumes upon and enacts its own perspective as if it were no perspective at all. (*BTM*: 94)

Our non-neutrality is constituted by language's bodily negativity, and this negativity is how the signifier (or its failure/s) engenders self-differentiation.

By the time we get to Butler's big debate with Žižek and Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (Butler et al. 2000), there is a somewhat consolidated web of associations between the different senses of neutrality. This is how they are talking about neutrality at this point: When someone is claiming to be neutral, they are claiming to be



indifferent to particular identities, which is to say that they have an impartial, general, or perhaps universal judgment. One example is the neutrality of universal human rights, corresponding with the principle of neutrality in humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross. When someone is disingenuously or otherwise incorrectly claiming to be neutral, they are excluding the possibility of influence by (the consideration of) someone's viewpoint or neutralizing someone, and their claim of neutrality typically bears the distorted expression of whomever they have neutralized. Fundamental antagonism—sexual difference—overdetermines the non-neutrality of organization (psychic and social, epistemological representation and political representation), and expressions of supposed neutrality are ideological performances serving the ruling class' monopoly on what counts as civil antagonism.

Although there is a little bit of common language here, there is a dispute over neutrality. Lacanian psychoanalytic scholars like Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek—but also like those squarely in queer theory like Lee Edelman—have responded to Butler that Lacanians are not trying to be neutral, and Lacanians counter that Butler is *de facto* trying to be neutral by disavowing the universality of sexual difference, of fundamental antagonism (cf. Žižek's *Tarrying*, Copjec's *Read My Desire*). In *CHU*, Žižek and Laclau think that Butler is unintentionally proposing neutral theories on sexual difference, and Butler thinks the same of them. Stop for a moment to think about this: Krishnamurthy, Fischer, and Žižek are blaming/crediting Butler with the same position for the same rationalizations (through pragmatic, practical, or *de facto* leaps) but with completely different motivations. What does Butler actually say?

Because Žižek claims that sexual difference and its Lacanian schematization applies universally (so there is universally no neuter condition), Butler can situate Žižek's claim as a pretention to scientific neutrality. Butler writes,

To argue in favour of sexual difference could mean arguing in favour of particularism, but it could also be—if one accepts the foundational status of sexual difference to all humanity—appealing directly to the universal. (Butler *CHU* 2000: 33)

If sexual difference is not gendered (because it is devoid of semantic content, i.e. not biased by the meaning we might personally impose), then Lacanians typically believe there is at least something that is not gendered about our knowledge of sex. We might say that Butler views the opposite of neutrality as a gendered condition, and Lacanians view the opposite of neutrality as a sexually differentiated condition, and however differently Butler and Lacanians may understand the relationship between gender and sexual difference, Butler and the Lacanians are equally opposed to neutrality, and moreover, each side views the other as attempting to be neutral. Each person thinks the other is trying to be neutral, and they struggle over what counts as neutrality by performing (or repeatedly citing) their preferred model of what counts as the opposite of neutrality.

In Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler seems to be negotiating with her critics and achieving a neutral zone—a kind of flirty sociability—however much Butler still forecloses neutrality here:

Indeed, whether we follow the framework of sexual difference or that of gender trouble, I would hope that we would all remain committed to the ideal that no one should be forcibly compelled to occupy a gender norm that is undergone, experientially, as an unlivable violation. (*UG*: 213)

Like Krishnamura's and Fischer's pragmatic/practical leaps from theory to advocacy, Butler seems to recognize the gap here, and she also tries to jump it by appealing to a kind of opposition to violence or antagonism. But how are we to characterize the kind of shift in Butler's attitude here? Really, there is a shift in Butler's attitude to a more resigned position on antinormativity. We move from *Gender Trouble*'s strong antinormativity (clarified in 1999 as the anti-prescriptive kind of anti-normativity) to *Undoing Gender*'s ambivalence about normativity (including prescriptive normativity). *Undoing Gender* might have been more representatively titled *Undoing Gender Norms*. Butler's book reexamines how different gendered categories work, and it does not quite consider how we place gender as a category on certain things and not on other things (although I could say that it is about how we fail to place gender as a category on certain things, but Butler notes that this kind of degendering can reinforce gender norms rather than undo gender). For Butler at this point, it seems that everything is gendered and political, and theory has somewhat been exhausted in favor of directly policy-based (practical, pragmatic, *de facto*) appeals, "I would hope that we all remain committed to the ideal that no one should be forcibly compelled..."

The most important criticism that Butler makes in *Undoing Gender*, she says, is her turn from Lacanians to Rosi Braidotti, but it is not clear to me whether or not the affinity with Braidotti or the opposition to Lacanians drives one of Butler's centrally—if brief—moments of gender-neutral aspiration:

What does this way of thinking sexual difference do to our understanding of gender? Is what we mean by gender that part of sexual difference that *does* appear as the social (gender is thus the extreme of sociality in sexual difference), as the negotiable, as the constructed—precisely what the Vatican seeks to restore to "sex"—to the site of the

natural, where the natural itself is figured as fixed and non-negotiable? Is the Vatican's project as unrealizable as the project to produce gender *ex nihilo* either from the resources of culture or from some fabulous will? Is the queer effort to override gender, or to relegate it to the superseded past as the proper object of some other inquiry, feminist, for example, that is not its own? Is this not an effort to still sexual difference as that which is radically separable from sexuality? The regulation of gender has always been part of the work of heterosexist normativity and to insist upon a radical separation of gender and sexuality is to miss the opportunity to analyze that particular operation of homophobic power. (underline added; *UG*: 186)

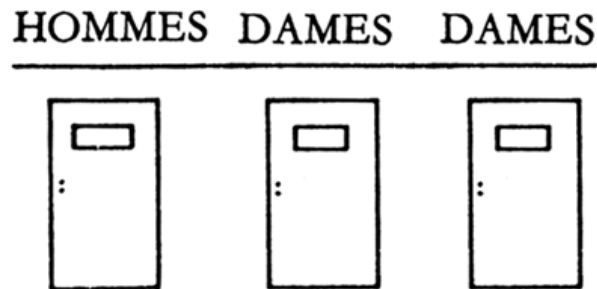
I think this is the strongest evidence for inferring that Butler would try to override gender, or to relegate gender to the superseded past, in public bathrooms. However, the context of this discussion undercuts the force of this inference to some degree. The chapter begins with marking the limits of the interchangeability of gender,

Differences emerge over whether equality means that men and women ought to be treated interchangeably. The Parity movement in France has argued that that is not an appropriate notion of equality, given the social disadvantages that women suffer under current political circumstances. (*UG*: 174)

The Parity movement contests simplistic notions of gender neutrality in order to exhibit the importance of gender parity, which is not about complementarity but about equity or non-disparity. If Butler were to advocate for gender-neutral public bathrooms, I believe her advocacy would not skip over these considerations, which are well-enough known in the Potty Parity movement. The *American Restroom Association's* informational site, "Potty Parity," explains,

‘Potty Parity’ refers to advocacy efforts and actual legislation that addresses the longer lines for women often seen at public restrooms. [...] The code used in older buildings typically mandate an equal number of toilet fixtures for women and men rather than [sic] the ‘necessary’ number of fixtures for both sexes. Older code also does not address surge periods in toilet usage at large venues; for example during the 7th inning stretch at baseball game. Even the current code used by many States does not address the problem women face at small venues with a single women’s toilet. One mom, walking in with her small children can have the toilet locked for 5 – 10 minutes which often causes a queue waiting for the door to open. Potty parity legislation, typically, has tried to address these problems by mandating twice as many toilets for women as for men. (*American Restroom Association* 2019)

Having twice as many toilets for women than men is not gender neutrality, but it is something that Butler seems to think it is important not to ignore in our analysis of undoing gender.



*Figure 2: An illustration of potty parity with bathroom door signs.*

I want to examine two more instances of advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms that draw on Judith Butler because the odd couple here helps us clarify the limits of the inconsistencies in the reception of Butler’s position on gender neutrality. In Che Gossett’s

advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms, “Žižek’s Trans/gender Trouble” (2016), Gossett opens with a story about the violence of policing binary-gendered bathroom lines, and Gossett notes that gender nonconforming and trans people—especially of color—disproportionately experience this violence. The banner of Gossett’s article reads, “THIS BATHROOM HAS BEEN LIBERATED FROM THE GENDER BINARY.” The title “Žižek’s Trans/gender Trouble” (2016) is citational of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, and Gossett takes up a polemic against the Lacanian psychoanalyst Žižek by drawing on Butler’s argument against Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*,

Judith Butler cautions, in her discussion with Žižek and Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, against the treating of sexual difference as a transcendental category:

Thus, sexual difference in the more originary sense operates as a radically incontestable principle or criterion that establishes intelligibility through foreclosure or, indeed, through pathologization or, indeed, through active political disenfranchisement. [...] Sexual difference thus functions not merely as a ground but a defining condition that must be instituted and safeguarded against attempts to undermine it (intersexuality, transsexuality, lesbian and gay partnership, to name but a few). (Gossett 2016)

Following Butler’s critique of Lacanian sexual difference, Gossett gives an implied but vague criticism of Lacanian psychoanalysis as racially depoliticized:

The bathroom signs of the Jim Crow era referred to “men,” “women,” and “colored”—dramatizing how the Lacanian “sexed body” is always already a racialized body and a colonized body, and how Black and/or indigenous peoples have always figured as sexual

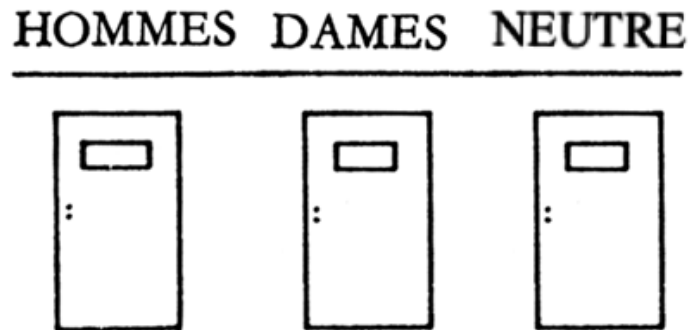
and gender outlaws to be disciplined and punished. Trans of color prison abolitionists—from Miss Major to CeCe McDonald—are part of an ongoing political struggle against the prison as a gendering racial and colonial apparatus. These struggles have been at the heart of queer of color critique and critical ethnic studies. Taking a cue from Fanon’s commentary on Marx, Lacan must also be slightly stretched in the racial and colonial context. (Gossett 2016)

Gossett draws on queer of color critiques of necropolitics to call out Žižek for masking the constitutive role of European imperialism and slavery in the production of sexual difference (so Gossett’s term “always” really means “always in our post-globalized-slavery modernity”). Žižek misunderstands queer and trans embodiment in terms of deviant life, and although Žižek has suggested that such queer and trans deviance always-already applies to all human life, even this qualification does not acknowledge the exclusion of non-European bodies from human life in the afterlife of globalized anti-black slavery. Butler’s account of sexual difference as gendered—and therefore raced—supports Gossett’s account. An important question for our understanding of the “trouble” in Gossett’s article is, what kind of gender-neutral public bathroom does Gossett endorse?

The reception of Butler’s views on public bathrooms becomes clearer—or the confusion becomes more definable—when we look at Slavoj Žižek’s text, “The Sexual is Political” (2016). This is the text that Gossett is criticizing. Žižek states that he is *in favor* of gender-neutral public bathrooms because/despite his Lacanian understanding of transgender people:

To make things easier, we then get a supplementary trash bin for GENERAL WASTE where we throw everything that did not meet the specific criteria of other bins, as if, once again, apart from paper trash, plastic trash, and so on, there is trash as such, universal

trash. Should we not do the same with toilets? Since no classification can satisfy all identities, should we not add to the two usual gender slots (MEN, WOMEN) a door for GENERAL GENDER? Is this not the only way to inscribe into an order of symbolic differences its constitutive antagonism? Lacan already pointed out that the “formula” of the sexual relationship as impossible/real is  $1+1+a$ , i.e., the two sexes plus the “bone in the throat” that prevents its translation into a symbolic difference. This third element does not stand for what is excluded from the domain of difference; it stands, instead, for (the real of) difference as such. (Žižek 2016)



*Figure 3: An illustration of Men’s, Women’s, and “Third” bathrooms.*

In this advocacy for gender-neutral public bathrooms on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis, when Žižek says the third element does not stand for what is excluded from the domain of difference, Žižek believes he is still arguing with Judith Butler. Speaking of Şalcı Bacı, the first woman executed by hanging in Turkey (because she was mistaken to be a man violating norms for men), Žižek says,

How are we to interpret this weird and ridiculously excessive act of killing? The obvious reading would have been a Butlerian one: through her provocative trans-sexual appearance and acting, Şalcı Bacı rendered visible the contingent character of sexual



difference, of how it is symbolically constructed. In this way, she was a threat to normatively established sexual identities... My reading is slightly (or not so slightly) different. Rather than undermine sexual difference, Şalcı Bacı stood for this difference as such, in all its traumatic Real, irreducible to any clear symbolic opposition. Her disturbing appearance transforms clear symbolic difference into the impossible-Real of antagonism. So, again, in the same way as class struggle is not just “complicated” when other classes that do not enter the clear division of the ruling class and the oppressed class appear (this excess is, on the contrary, the very element which makes class antagonism real and not just a symbolic opposition), the formula of sexual antagonism is not M/F (the clear opposition between male and female) but MF+, where + stands for the excessive element which transforms the symbolic opposition into the Real of antagonism. (Žižek 2016)

What is telling in this passage is the hesitation, “My reading is slightly (or not so slightly) different.” If these readings are only slightly different, it is because Butler and Žižek are actually not too different beyond this verbal dispute about what excess “stands for.” Note the odd positioning of Gossett between Butler and Žižek here: Judith Butler’s anti-Lacanian view of gender/sexual difference allows of a pro-potty-parity position on public bathrooms, whereas Žižek’s pro-Lacanian view of gender/sexual difference allows of a pro-gender-neutral position on public bathrooms. If these readings are “not so slightly different,” it is because they actually have very different attitudes about how theory translates into practice in the case of gender-neutral public bathrooms. Yet Gossett’s anti-Lacanian view of gender/sexual difference allows of a pro-gender-neutral position, closer to Žižek.

If we were filling out a square here (but we are not), we could be satisfied with saying that the fourth corner is the normative reading of Lacanian sexual difference or “urinary segregation,” which would suggest that a pro-Lacanian view of gender/sexual difference simply allows for a only-gender-segregated position on public bathrooms. The reason this square does not work out is because Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests* (1993), for anti-Lacanian reasons, proposed “third” bathrooms just like Žižek’s model for public bathrooms. Additionally, there are anti-Lacanian positions that are not in favor of Žižek’s “third” bathroom proposal. For example, Judith Halberstam argues in *Female Masculinity* (1998) that the force of normative Lacanian sexual difference or urinary segregation is actually upheld by having “third,” gender-neutral bathrooms. Halberstam’s harmony with Žižek—both believing that “third” bathrooms are really a Lacanian position—is curious because of their different understanding of Lacan and feelings about gender-neutrality. (So it seems that there is no necessary connection between a given reading of or attitude toward Lacanian psychoanalytic sexual difference and a given position for or against gender-neutral public bathrooms.)

Halberstam is not a stand-in or hand-off for Butler’s position on public bathrooms, either. His position is distinct from Butlers because Halberstam is more invested in gender neutrality than Butler. Responding to Garber’s text, Halberstam argues,

Garber’s reading of the perilous use of rest rooms by both FTMs and MTFs develops out of her introductory discussion of what Lacan calls ‘urinary segregation.’ Lacan used the term to describe the relations between identities and signifiers, and he ultimately used the simple diagram of restroom signs “Ladies” and “Gentlemen” to show that within the production of sexual difference, primacy is granted to the signifier over that which it

signifies; in more simple terms, naming confers, rather than reflects, meaning.

(Halberstam 1998: 26)

Halberstam explains, “Unfortunately, as in all attempts to break a binary by producing a third term, Garber’s third space tends to stabilize the other two” (Halberstam 1998: 27). This material from Halberstam is the evidence that Žižek really should have used in his polemic against queer theory, where Žižek identifies this queer effort as “the truth of transgenderism,”

The vision of social relations that sustains transgenderism is the so-called postgenderism: a social, political and cultural movement whose adherents advocate a voluntary abolition of gender, rendered possible by recent scientific progress in biotechnology and reproductive technologies. (Žižek 2016)

That is, Halberstam—as opposed to Žižek’s explicit target, Butler—seems to advocate a gender-neutral public bathroom on the register of what Butler called “the queer effort to override gender, or to relegate it to the superseded past as the proper object of some other inquiry” in *Undoing Gender* (Butler 2006).

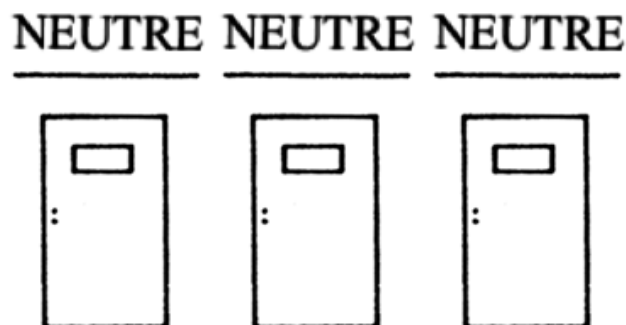


Figure 4: An illustration of postgender, gender-superseded, or gender nihilistic bathroom signs.

The only reason why Žižek is somewhat validated in conflating Butler and Halberstam is Butler’s tangential reference to overriding gender in *Undoing Gender*, which seems to be the real

target in Žižek's attack on queer theory: "One can argue that postgenderism is the truth of transgenderism. The universal fluidification of sexual identities unavoidably reaches its apogee in the cancellation of sex as such" (Žižek 2016).

One objection to postgenderism, superceded gender, or gender nihilism is that, if it tries to leave gender "in the past" like Butler says, then this position on gender as well as gender-neutral public bathrooms could be understood to be ahistorical (and thus actually left uncritiqued). Gossett understands Žižek's notion of postgenderism to be ahistorical in this sense. Gossett opposes Žižek by saying,

In fact, trans and gender nonconforming people are situated (like the violence of the gender binary which we oppose) within the theoretical and political coordinates of history and history's present tense—the afterlife of slavery and colonialism. (Gossett 2016)

We might wonder at this point what Gossett wants. All-neutral public bathrooms? "Third" bathrooms just like Žižek advocates? Historically-embedded bathroom signs? What does the well-taken Afro-pessimist critique of gender actually mean for bathroom signs? Is Gossett advocating a return to "Colored" bathrooms to remind us of the racial historical context of gender in public bathrooms? That would be difficult for me to imagine. But if all-neutral public bathrooms are necessarily ahistorical for being postgender or gender nihilistic, what exactly are we imagining here?

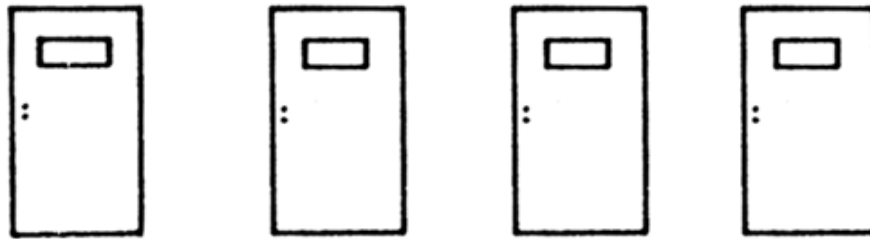
Gossett says, "Lacan must also be slightly stretched in the racial and colonial context," but Lacan already extends his account of urinary segregation in public bathrooms to the context of sexualized anti-black, classist slavery, and we have no better of an idea of how to fix bathrooms for it. Lacan's "Instance of the Letter" (1953), which the first chapter of this dissertation introduced for Lacan's theory of urinary segregation, explicitly accounts for the

linguistic association that “readies the Negress for the wedding and the poor woman for the auction block,” and Lacan frames such a racist linguistic association as an obsession/fixation to be overcome with the therapeutic realization “that meaning *insists*, but that none of the chain’s elements *consists* in the signification” (Lacan, [1953] 2006: 419). Racist and sexist *fixations* (like our inability not to finish in thought racist slogans if we hear the first part of them, exactly like Lacan says about the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century “I am very dark, but comely” Bible cliché) are precisely Lacan’s references for opposing Saussure’s linguistics of the “sliding”—not fixated—signifier. It is not true as Maia Boswell says in “Ladies,’ ‘Gentlemen,’ and ‘Colored’” (1999) that “Lacan thus arrives at the conclusion that ‘we are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (1999: 120). Boswell completely ignores that when Lacan says that we are forced to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier, this claim is put in the mouth of Saussure, as indicated by the also-ignored follow-up claim by Lacan (in that translation), “All our experience runs counter to this linearity [of Saussure’s wavy lines illustrating the incessant sliding], which made me speak once, in one of my seminars on psychosis, of something more like ‘anchoring points’” (Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 1989 [1966]: 117). In the translation of Lacan’s *Écrits* by Bruce Fink, the claims read, “The notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier thus comes to the fore [...] All our experience runs counter to this” ([1953] 2006: 419). If we think about it, the analyst experiences patients who complain about *fixations* of meaning, not *slippages* of meaning. None of this tells us how to fix bathroom signs, but it does suggest that the goal is to *unfix* bathroom signs.

If someone were to offer a resolution—or at least a new model for this conversation to continue—they might ask us how we felt about the following collage:

HOMMES DAMES DAMES NEUTRE

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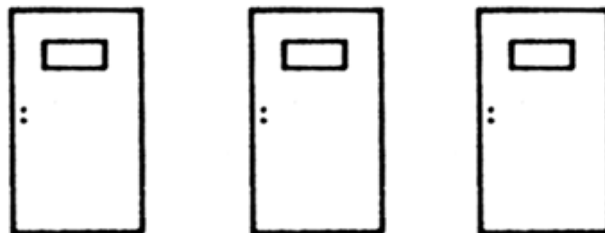


*Figure 5: One reconciliation between potty parity and gender neutrality in bathroom signs.*

I would say that a further condensation is necessary here. One lesson that we have learned is that gender-neutral bathrooms tend to be men's bathrooms because they have urine on the toilet seat, so someone advocating potty parity might object to this model on account of it actually being two men's restrooms (one men's, one neutral) and two women's restrooms. A more informed compromise might then be:

DAMES DAMES NEUTRE

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*Figure 6: An illustration of potty parity reconciled with gender-neutral public bathroom signs.*

This is about as good as I have got of an idea of what a main take on gender-neutral public bathrooms might be in queer theory, even though, as far as I know, this is no one else's take on

gender-neutral public bathrooms (it is absent in this way, even though existing ideas in queer theory come together around this point). Anyway, I am ambivalent about this construction myself. If I were to push this any further, I might draw a lesson from a local gender criminal. These are defaced bathroom signs on the second floor of the Humanities Instructional Building at UC Irvine, Spring Quarter of 2019:



*Figure 7: Defaced bathroom signs on the Humanities Instruction Building at UCI.*

I promise you that I did not do this. I am the kind of narcissist who would take credit for this. I had thought for a long time about slapping large stickers depicting a toilet bowl over these images. The man and woman on these bathroom signs are scrubbed free of their white paint. What is particularly amusing about this activism is that it is almost a purely symbolic defacing of gendered bathroom signs insofar as no one is likely to be confused about the gender segregation of these bathrooms. The stick figures and labels are easily visible despite the obviousness of the defacing. I think perhaps this is a form of activism that is not so concerned with what the real difference between different theories translates to for activism, and if anything, there is a kind of implicit theory that real activism can be purely symbolic. Perhaps this is the kind of lesson we

can draw from queer activism in combination with Lacan's meditation on real efficacy of the failure of mere signifiers. How might we take our main take on gender-neutral public bathrooms in queer theory and erase it without loss, too?

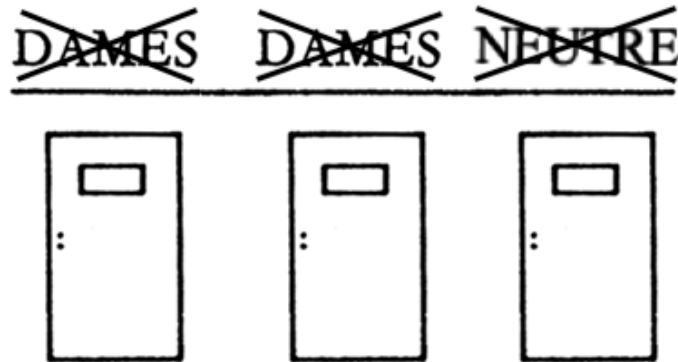


Figure 8: *Dames, Dames, Neutre*

Taking the constructions in the first chapter to heart, I would not be opposed to adding to this distribution of visible public-bathroom identities a supplemental, toilet-free washroom that promotes sociability. Drawing on the reception of Judith Butler's work in particular, I have explored some of the limits of translating theory into practice when it comes to queer theories of neutrality, and this final model here adds one possible principle of gender-neutral public bathrooms to queer theory as a compromise formation between differing views of gender neutrality.



**Chapter 3**  
**Chapter 3**  
**Psychoanalysis and Neutrality in Queer Theory**

Why does the research in the first two chapters move through Lacanian psychoanalysis? What exactly is the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and queer theory with respect to theorizing neutrality as a condition of impersonal relationality? This third chapter attempts to clarify why a Lacanian psychoanalytic queer theory was compelling for me to rely on in my attempts to overcome feminist theory's challenges (like gender overdetermination) to advocacies for gender-neutral public bathrooms. It is not obvious why Lacanian psychoanalysis should be helpful for understanding neutrality in queer theory; there are tensions between queer theory and psychoanalysis. These tensions are formative for the complexities of the literature on queer neutrality, and so clarifications are required. Queer theorists—especially those of impersonality and its performative guise, endless impersonation—have an ambivalent relationship to psychoanalysis due to psychoanalysis' inconsistent alliance with communities of non-heteronormative sexuality. Sigmund Freud has made heteronormative claims and queer claims, and queer theorists' differences in the reception of psychoanalysis is largely a matter of stress or accent because psychoanalysis is both inescapable and yet incompletely acceptable for a queer understanding of sexuality and norms. To put it cheaply, Freud changed his mind—or even contradicted himself—so much that there is no way for anyone not to be both in favor of some of Freud's claims and also against some of Freud's claims. As a result, there is plenty of cherry-picking or selective attention in the reception of psychoanalysis by queer theorists. The reception of Lacanian psychoanalysis by queer theorists is perhaps even more polarized than that of Freudian psychoanalysis because of Lacan's elaborate account of the function of sexual

difference. This chapter reviews and begins to unravel the problematic reception of psychoanalysis by queer theorists of neutrality.

In “Of Queer Neutrality: Apartness, Erasure, Intimacy” (2016), a colloquium on John Paul Ricco’s *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in a Time of Scenes* (2014), David Clark asks us to think about the relationship between psychoanalysis and queer neutrality even though “John’s book is decidedly not psychoanalytic” (Clark in Ricco et al. 2016). We can understand Clark’s claim insofar as Ricco’s *Decision* (2014) expresses dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis because the notion of binary sexual difference is hostile to much of queer theory,

Instead of the asexuality and neutrality that is generated and reproduced by binary sexual difference, we might think in terms of the pleasure of sharing in the sense of separation—the very spacing of sense—as bodies exposed to the incommensurability of existence, the latter of which exists outside the measure of any binary set of terms. (Ricco 117)

Right away, we have a number of manifestly confusing ideas that should become slightly more intelligible against the background of queer theory’s reception of psychoanalysis. For one thing, in this passage Ricco says that he does not like the notion of sexual difference because he does not want to generate asexuality and neutrality. What is wrong with aces? What is wrong with neutrality? Is not the neutral a central figure for the intimacy of shared separation in Ricco’s book? And how, by any stretch of the imagination, does *binary sexual difference produce asexuality and neutrality* like Ricco claims?

There is a further confusion: Is it true that Ricco’s book is “decidedly not psychoanalytic”? Of course, Ricco does not like the notion of psychoanalytic sexual difference, as we can tell from the quoted passage, but the motivations behind this claim are not obvious because Ricco’s book includes Sigmund Freud’s arguments at multiple points. Ricco plays off of

Jacques Derrida's and Jean-Luc Nancy's uses of Freud. In one case, Ricco's *Decision* (2014) rejects Immanuel Kant's theory of space in favor of a model of space as both shared and separate, both communal and yet fundamentally antagonistic like the "death drive," and he does this by invoking Freud's position, "Psyche ist ausgedehnt: weiss nicht davon," meaning, psyche is extended: knows nothing of it (Ricco 74). I think the idea here is that Kant's notion of space as empty intuition does not acknowledge the extension of spacing itself in the subject, which, according to Ricco, always keeps us distant within or as a condition of intimacy. Whatever Ricco really means, though, Freudian psychoanalysis is evidently operative in Ricco's understanding of the space of intimacy.<sup>9</sup> Why would David Clark say otherwise, then?

For Ricco's earlier work, we might agree with David Clark's assessment of Ricco's non-relationship to psychoanalysis. Much like Judith Butler's earlier work in queer theory, Ricco's early work exhibits little reliance on psychoanalysis, and its references similarly include major critics of psychoanalysis, including Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In *The Logic of the Lure* (2002), Ricco opens with two quotes by Foucault. The first quote concerns one of Foucault's criticisms of psychoanalysis, namely that there is no abnormal pleasure. We know this criticism concerns impersonality and identity because Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* is both a canonical text of (proto-)queer theory and a canonical text of criticism of psychoanalytic categories of identity. In *The History of Sexuality's* first chapter on "The Repressive Hypothesis," Foucault argues that the kind of abnormal and

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<sup>9</sup> Evaluating the merits of Ricco's argument is outside the scope of this chapter, but I would otherwise refer the reader to:

1. in the first Critique, Kant's anti-Cartesian arguments for space (and time) as an empty intuition (if there were actually two separate spaces, what would be between them other than more space? Nothing. So, space—and likewise time—have a separation with continuity or sharing that is unlike separate objects, which may have no objects between them to join them),
2. Kant's "Refutation of Idealism,"
3. Kant's tertiary placement of *community*, which is the *disjunctive* category of *relation*, and
4. David Clark's work on the queer Kant, "Kant's Aliens: The Anthropology and Its Others" (2001)

repressed identities that we find in psychoanalytic categorization—for example, the hysteric and the pervert—are really produced by the writing of their exclusion from normalcy as opposed to being discovered by a science of the repressed.

Ricco's second quote from Foucault in *Logic of the Lure* (2002) concerns the intersex individual Herculine Barbine. Foucault is thinking about how “condemned others” must be imagined, grasped, and rediscovered (by us) in their collective obscurity, which is the *unbecoming community* that is the explicit theme of Ricco's later book, *The Decision Between Us* (2014). Ricco draws on William Haver and Michel Foucault to think of new relational modes of being that do not rely on the normative models of subjectivity that Foucault recognizes in educational institutions' injunction to discipline and punish. We are not trying to recover repressed/marginalized identities but rather question the relationship between the production of identities and the norms of assimilation. Ricco can get anti-identitarian critique and a theory of queer community from Foucault's work without appealing to psychoanalysis. So, what does psychoanalysis have to do with queer neutrality if queer neutrality emerges in terms resistant to psychoanalysis? How does Freud make sense as a reference for Ricco in *The Decision Between Us* (2014)?

Leo Bersani's work on impersonality, which we must remember is explicitly about queer neutrality according to Ricco, invokes both Freud's and Foucault's arguments and yet attempts to move radically beyond them through the kind of aesthetics that is characteristic of much of the scholarship on queer neutrality. Bersani's “Fr-oucault and the End of Sex” [2004] (2010) meditates on the conciliatory and antagonistic dialogue between Freud and Foucault in queer theory, arguing for the value of bringing the two in comparison as a way to move beyond both,

Foucault can help us to see—in spite of himself—that psychoanalysis, which he certainly considered, as most queer theorists do today, as operating a massive reinforcement of old relational modes, in fact may have cleared the field—in spite of itself—for “new relational modes.” (“Foucault and the End of Sex” [2004] 2010: 137)

One way to think about this is that Foucault’s analysis of power (including his analysis of the normativity of psychoanalytic identity categories) helps us clarify psychoanalysis’ diverging investments into egoic reinforcements on one side (including the conservatism of ego psychology and its psychologism) and, on the other side, calibrating the psyche to the power of unconscious drives, which clears the ground to make possible new relational modes.

Psychoanalysis, for its part, can complicate our understanding of power by drawing attention to unconscious drives, and psychoanalysis thereby helps us curb the Foucauldian and (earlier, before Judith Butler’s essay on melancholic performance) Butlerian optimism that intentional performances like drag or cruising can be agential for the creation of new relational modes or queer communities. It is helpful to review the trajectory of Bersani’s work—from his seminal work on queer anti-assimilationism to his later aesthetic impersonalism of queer community—because it forms a significant braid of queer impersonality’s diverging treatments of psychoanalysis, which other theorists of queer neutrality inherit in various ways that I will clarify here.

Psychoanalysis’ contribution to queer neutrality is an alternative framework to normative, assimilationist, and “civilized” models of sexuality and knowledge. Part of Bersani’s “The Will to Know” (2010) concerns Foucault’s notion of modernity as an epistemological shift toward an antagonistic model of relations, namely a subject-object model based on knowledge as conquering nature (hence the title’s reference to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality vol. 1: The Will*

to Knowledge). Bersani, like Foucault, wants to step outside this model with a truly impersonal model of relations, wherein we account for subject-object antagonisms as, actually, complex misrecognitions of the happy affinity between the most intimate parts of ourselves and the world. Queer neutrality's condition of apartness, contrary to our modern epistemological mode, consists in not a distance or difference between subject and object but a neutral, anti-identitarian sameness—*homo*-ness—that is a condition of intimacy and impersonal community. Bersani thinks this new relational mode is aesthetic impersonalism or a kind of skewed bodily intimacy that cannot fit within the modern epistemological framework, and psychoanalysis' account of civilizations' discontents (society's queers) implicitly demonstrates the value of antisociality for cultivating aesthetic impersonality:

Although the first chapter of this dissertation briefly introduced Bersani's impersonal intimacy in relation to Joan Riviere's psychoanalytic approach to flirtation, the text I use there, Bersani's "Sociability and Cruising" (2002) more explicitly references Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) to chart the intimacy of impersonal relation. I want to quote extensively from Bersani's comments on *Discontents* because they testify to the strange way in which psychoanalysis both facilitates and resists queer attempts to turn anti-assimilation into a principle for queer community. Bersani says,

In maintaining the special aptitude of homosexuals for social feeling, Freud appears to be arguing—fleetingly, to be sure—that a 'devotion to the interests of the community' might be inherent in a particular mode of sexual desire. It is as if Freud were reserving a certain area of sexuality for a successfully civilized relationality—a prospect absent (forgotten?) in the fierce antagonism spelled out in *Civilization and Its Discontents* between individual happiness and the interests of society. Nothing would be more surprising than

to find psychoanalysis granting this privilege to homosexuals. In contemporary adventures—both straight and gay—of reimagining sociality and community, psychoanalysis is notably absent, as a helpful source or reference, from efforts to conceptualize a society no longer imprisoned within identitarian ideologies. Not only that: for most queer theorists, psychoanalysis, even if it were to be seen as welcoming such efforts, would necessarily exclude from them what it considers to be the ‘perversion’ of homosexual desire. Can a regression, even when it is no longer labeled a neurosis, have a place within a utopic imagination? It will therefore be exceedingly strange to discover, at the very origin of psychoanalysis, the outline of a conceptualizing of queer desire as somehow exempt from the destructive sociality of straight desire.

(Bersani “Sociability and Cruising” 2002: 13)

That is, queer desire is exempt from the destructive sociality of straight desire in the sense that individuals’ antisocial nature—at odds with the interests of society—exempts everyone from normativity and thereby makes way for new relational modes. Bersani’s aesthetic impersonality twists psychoanalysis and a Foucauldian analysis of power together to move forward in this project.

Bersani introduces psychoanalysis to flesh out this aesthetic impersonalism even though Freudian psychoanalysis did not acknowledge the therapeutic potential of aesthetic cultivation. At the very least, we can say that Freud reduced aesthetic preferences to expressions of the superego and residues of long-abandoned ego investments. Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, has an account of aesthetics and beauty that can help us understand how someone under the sway of the modern organization of knowledge goes astray: They do not realize that in their encounter with the world they are finding pieces of themselves that they *imagine* or perceive in a

concentrated, determinate way to be not themselves but others or discrete objects. For Bersani, psychoanalysis helps us think through this problematic of aesthetic impersonality insofar as psychoanalysis provides us with maps of ego-shattering or the dissolution of the ego, for example in certain infantile/regressive states and in the partialness of objects of the unconscious drives.

Although Bersani wants to show the reconcilability and hospitability of psychoanalysis to his aesthetic impersonalism, he recognizes that the psychoanalytic notion of sexual difference seems to pretend to be a neutral account of gender, and Michel Foucault's undermining of identity categories cautions us against this. Even as Bersani advocates impersonality and indifference to difference, he also says that Foucault helps us realize,

sexual desire for men can't be merely a kind of culturally neutral attraction to a Platonic Idea of the male body; the object of that desire necessarily includes a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man. (Bersani [1987] 2010: 14-15)

This, we will see, is a conceptual knot that persists in psychoanalytic theories of queer neutrality: The project of queer neutrality is inhibited from drawing on psychoanalysis—even psychoanalytic neutrality—because validating psychoanalysis' neutrality seems to validate psychoanalysis notion of sexual difference. Queer theory inherits this difficulty from psychoanalysis, and queer theorists deal with in different, often confusing ways that become clearer and more compelling with a broader account of the disciplinary interactions here.

So, we can understand why Bersani does not rely on psychoanalytic neutrality as a principle in his theorization of impersonality. Bersani's "The Will to Know" (2010) acknowledges the popular position that psychoanalysis is not impersonal or neutral because "the



analytic contact is motivated” (Bersani: 156). These considerations lead Bersani away from a consideration of psychoanalytic neutrality’s value for queer impersonalism. Bersani condemns this part of psychoanalysis by saying,

An emphasis in post-Freudian therapy on the phenomenon of countertransference has, it’s true, brought us a long way from Freud’s dictum, in the 1912 essay ‘Advice to Doctors on Psychoanalytic Treatment,’ that, ‘for the patient the doctor should remain opaque, and, like a mirror surface, should show nothing but what is shown to him.’ Yet even this awareness of projective identifications from analyst to analysand (and not merely the opposite, strictly Freudian direction) has not, it could be argued, changed the essential inequality of the analytic exchange. (Bersani “The Will to Know” 2010: 156).

This leaves room beyond Bersani’s project to think about the value of psychoanalytic neutrality to queer neutrality.

Psychoanalytic neutrality more explicitly informs queer neutrality in Tim Dean’s work on impersonal relationality. In *Unlimited Intimacies* (2009), Dean uses psychoanalytic neutrality as a helpful model for thinking about queer communities as anti-immunities (which is thereby radically incompatible with the theory of communities as immunities proposed by the prominent Italian theorist of neutrality Robert Esposito). Dean says, “I have found the disposition of psychoanalytic neutrality particularly helpful, despite the fact that psychoanalysis, generally regarded as a body of thought inhospitable to queers, seldom is associated today with sexual permissiveness” (Dean 2009: 28). In this text, the knot of queer neutrality and psychoanalytic sexual difference manifests itself in Dean’s qualification of his own neutrality, “The critical interrogation of social norms about sexuality and ‘health’ entails recognizing that science is not value neutral” (Dean 2009: 65). It is at least superficially confusing that Dean would appeal to

psychoanalytic neutrality if he recognizes that sciences of sexuality are not value neutral, and it is not at all obvious why Dean immediately goes on to conflate psychoanalytic neutrality (a rule for the analyst) with psychoanalytic free association (a rule for the analysand),

The psychoanalytic rule of free association—“that whatever comes into one’s head must be reported without criticizing it”—requires a suspension of judgment that permits different forms of thinking to emerge. (Dean 2009: 28)

How do we make this conflation more intelligible? How do Dean’s arbitrary distinctions and confusions of different types of neutrality serve his queer theory of community as anti-immunity, the free or impersonal association of one with another?

Teasing out the knot in the thread of Dean’s argument can be made easier by juxtaposing his use of psychoanalysis with Bersani’s use of psychoanalysis. Dean considers himself to be aligned with Bersani insofar as they have a similar understanding of Lacan’s importance to queer impersonality. When Dean elaborates an ethics of alterity in “Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness” (2001) he notes, “This, in fact, is what Bersani proposes” (Dean “Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness” 2001: 135). Bersani and Dean have suggested that Lacan’s approach circumvents the limits of Foucault’s analysis of power because Foucault’s *History of Sexuality vol. 1* is rooted in an analysis of *The Will to Knowledge*, whereas the Lacanian psychoanalytic stance understands sexuality non-relationally, through a will *not* to know (Dean “Lacan and Queer Theory” 2006). This will-not-to-know (an unconscious drive, a passion for ignoring/ignorance) allows us to recuperate the “modern” antagonistic relationship between subject and object as an antagonism between the sides of the subject—the object is a misrecognized part of the subject, which is not a dualism but a kind of partialism, we might call

it. This partialism refuses to conflate imaginary notions of identity with the subject of the unconscious.

An important similarity between Bersani and Dean is their appreciation of Lacanian psychoanalysis for its notion of partial objects. Tim Dean's "Lacan and Queer Theory" (2006) brings together Lacanian psychoanalysis and queer theory by redirecting our attention from Lacan's theory of sexual difference—which has been too easily used to heteronormative ends and therefore so difficult for queer theorists to digest—to Lacan's theory of the small objects of the drive that stand in for the absent Other (the objet petit *a* with regard to the Autre). As I briefly mentioned above, in "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject" [2006] (2010) Bersani, too, draws on Lacan's notion of the partial object of the drive (objet petit *a*) as a model of how we misrecognize the parts of ourselves that are errant duplicates in/as the world.

An account of the partial objects of the drive is important for understanding queer neutrality, in part, because it distinguishes Lacanian queer theorists from performative queer theorists. For example, Tim Dean insists that Judith Butler has abusive readings of psychoanalysis—"dogged misreadings"—that foreclose performative queer theory from an important set of notions (like objects of the drive) for understanding impersonality (Dean 2009: 93n83).<sup>10</sup> Tim Dean and Patricia Gherovici, a trans, Lacanian psychoanalytic therapist, charge Judith Butler with ignoring the neutrality of Lacan's Real,

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Judith Butler does not embrace parts of psychoanalysis: see *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) for her critique of the conservatism of normative performance as *melancholy*, and also see *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). However, Judith Butler's criticism of psychoanalytic sexual difference in *Gender Trouble* (1990) did not sit well with many Lacanians, who typically overreact by dismissing the performative theory of gender as an implicit attempt to do away with sexual difference and by way of this dismissal be neutral. The second chapter of this dissertation argues that Butler does not attempt to be neutral in any substantially consistent way save for her opposition to the Lacanian theory of sexual difference, which—according to Lacanians—must be ungendered in some sense if it is a Real impasse of the Symbolic.

Dean contends that Butler's omission is regrettable because the Lacanian Real, which is "asubstantial, unsexed, and ungendered" (p. 210), provides potential for queer theory to exploit (p. 217). For psychoanalysis, sexual difference is not a norm but a real impossibility, which is to say, it is a limit to the speakable and thinkable. [...] The object that causes desire "takes forms that are gender neutral—the gaze, the voice, the phoneme, the lips, 'the rim of the anus,' 'the slit formed by the eyelids'" (p. 194). Lacan detached desire from gender (p. 216). Desire is partial, and not necessarily gendered, which suggests the potential to conceive of sexuality outside the confines of normative heterosexuality. (Gherovici 2010: 116)<sup>11</sup>

Gherovici's use of Dean exhibits Dean's rhetorical confusion in a different way, by trying to save sexual difference through its makeshift compatibility with neutrality. The above passage explicitly says sexual difference is not a norm but a Real limit, and it says the Real is unsexed. The implicit claim here is that *sexual difference is unsexed*, which makes little sense or is surely not intelligible as a response to Judith Butler, whose reception here bears the distortions I traced in the second chapter of this dissertation. Gherovici is using a common Lacanian strategy of reconciliation here, wherein sexual difference and neutrality are somehow perfectly compatible because neutrality is already one side of sexual difference, and by implication of the antagonism between neutrality and sexual difference, sexual difference is already one side of itself, namely

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<sup>11</sup> Evaluating the merits of this argument is outside of the scope of this dissertation, but I would refer to reader to Lacan's seminar on sexual difference. There, Lacan says that "the object that causes desire," otherwise known as object *a*, is not Real but Imaginary:

The aim of my teaching, insofar as it pursues what can be said and enunciated on the basis of analytic discourse, is to dissociate *a* and A by reducing the first to what is related to the imaginary and the other to what is related to the symbolic. [...] And yet, *a* has lent itself to be confused with S(A). (Lacan *Seminar XX* 1999: 83)

That is why, despite what Dean and Gherovici imply, it would make sense to use Lacanian psychoanalysis in an aesthetic analysis of the *male* gaze (see Laura Mulvey).

the other side from the neutral side of sexual difference. This is the knot that is operative in queer theory's reception of psychoanalytic neutrality and sexual difference.

For another, clarifying example of this rhetorical reconciliation and its trajectory around the knot in question, in "Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference" (2010) Shanna T. Carlson notes that the status of sexual difference has been a persistent source of miscommunication between gender/queer theorists and contemporary Lacanians, who "read each other askew" and whose "responses are not precisely reciprocal" (2010: 46, 47). In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) Judith Halberstam also argues that the typical Lacanian queer theorist does not repair the communication gap between queer theory and Lacanian theory but "strives to exert a kind of obsessive control over the reception of his own discourse," policing the meaning of terms against their associations (Halberstam 107). These communication problems arise from our difficulty with the knot of sexual difference and neutrality. Carlson, like so many others, begins her argument by announcing, "Master terms such as [...] *sexual difference* are not ideologically neutral" (Carlson 55). In this case, Carlson attempts to come to terms with the knot by saying that the feminine subject is the transgender subject, as if transgender could be confined to the feminine because of Lacanian's association of the feminine with the unlimited side of real sexual difference: "the feminine/transgender subject is perhaps in a unique position to enact social transformation" (Carlson 2010: 67).

The problem is that this confusing way of talking does not actually help clarify the relationship between sexual difference and neutrality in queer theory. This way of talking is simply one strategy for dealing with this knot, and it is a strategy that is already well worn out by the target audience of Carlson's paper. Remember that Simone de Beauvoir associated the neutral with masculinity, and the Lacanian devotee Slavoj Žižek likes to say this, too:

In short, what Heidegger's reading does not take into account is how the very opposition between the asexual boy and the discordant *Geschlecht* is sexualized as the opposition between a *boy* and a *woman*. The discordant *Geschlecht* is not neutral but feminine, and the very apparent gender neutrality of Elis makes him a boy. So when Heidegger claims that

the boyishness in the figure of the boy Elis does not consist in the opposite of girlishness. His boyishness is the appearance of his stiller childhood. That childhood shelters and stores within it the gentle two-fold of sex, the youth and the 'golden figure of the maiden',

he misses the key fact that sexual difference does not designate the two sexes of the human stock/species, but, in this case, the very difference between the asexual and the sexual: to put it in the terms of Laclau's logic of hegemony, sexual difference is the Real of an antagonism, since, in it, the external difference (between the sexual and the asexual) is mapped onto the internal difference between the two sexes. (*Žižek Parallax View* 2006: 72)

Again, asexuality or neutrality is masculine (the gender neutrality of Elis makes him a boy), and the difference between asexual and sexual is sexual difference, so the sexual (or sexual difference itself) is the feminine side of sexual difference. Of course, the second chapter also showed that Žižek says things like, "the only way to be sexualized in general is to be asexual," which should make us wonder how we follow this chain: general sexual difference is (real so it is) asexual so it is masculine so it is one particular side of sexual difference so it is not general sexual difference.

What I want us to notice is that Gherovici exhibits a force in Lacanian queer theory that makes it very difficult for us to dispense with sexual difference in our theories of queer neutrality. Gherovici exhibits the Lacanian and Butlerian paranoia that Eve Sedgwick identifies as a strong theory, widely generalizing about the existence of gender or sexual difference (There is no neutrality, gender is everywhere!).<sup>12</sup> I want us to understand this paranoia as one among many ways of dealing with an overarching rhetorical knot of neutrality and sexual difference, and we do not need to be tied to arguments that gender or sexual differences are about identity differences in general—Tim Dean, for example, is a Lacanian queer theorist who has a different response to this knot, one that does *not* exhibit a fixation on sexual difference.

That is to say, despite Gherovici's attempt to recover Tim Dean's neutrality with sexual difference, Dean has a much more assertively desexualized theory of queer community, and he does this precisely through conflating psychoanalytic neutrality and free association, as I noted above. This calls for explanation. Dean's weird use of psychoanalysis here is part of Dean's deliberate cherry-picking of Lacan, which we ought to do, Dean argues in "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness" (2001), because Lacan conflates sexual difference and alterity—the Other is always the *Other sex* for Lacan. According to Dean, we actually need a desexualized or neuter reading of Lacan in order to draw on Lacan for a queer ethics of alterity and, ultimately, of impersonality. This is how Dean draws on psychoanalytic neutrality for a way out of the paranoid anticipations of gender we see in much of queer theory, although we are again sidelining arguments that gender or sexual difference are about identity difference in general.

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<sup>12</sup> This is Eve Sedgwick's use of psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Silvan Tomkins in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (*Touching Feeling* 2003). The typical Lacanian response, here, is that Tomkins' psychoanalytic theory of affects—like Judith Butler's use of psychoanalysis—is driveless, and without the drives we cannot have a complex account of the affect of *anxiety*, which is what we are dealing with in the reception of the rhetorical knot of neutrality and sexual difference. Paranoia is one among other ways of coping with the central anxiety here.

To circumvent the problems Dean identifies in Lacan's conflation of sexual difference and alterity, Dean uses Jean Laplanche's reading of Freud to note that there is the alterity of personal otherness on one side and, on the other side, the alterity of impersonal otherness, the big Other. Dean tells us that Laplanche

takes this distinction between two kinds of otherness from Freud's discriminating between the masculine noun, *das Andere*, to refer to another person, and the gender-neutral noun, *das Andere*, to refer to the "other thing" of the unconscious. (Dean "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness" 2001: 134).

Dean can then understand Lacan to be saying—in a way that does not commit to every Lacanian claim about sexual difference—that language is the "impersonal, abstract Other" because language has a fundamentally self-alienating function (Dean 2001: 132).

Now we can say that an ethics of alterity is an impersonal ethics because this ethics allows us to avoid conflating alterity with other people *tout court*. Alterity is importantly about the *impersonal* Other. This is how impersonality structures intimacy with others, Dean explains,

Lacan's answer to the problem of how we might love or desire beyond the imaginary register lies in acknowledging that the big Other—the alterity of symbolic existence—affects us from the beginning. (Dean 2001: 132-133)

Coming to terms with the function of the big Other produces a new, non-imaginary relation to alienation, which is a goal throughout Dean's works, i.e. strategizing our resistance to the pathologizing of sexuality (even sexuality that *deliberately* spreads HIV/AIDS through bug sharing and gift giving). This is an ethics or practice of non-relational relationality because, "When the distinction between identity and difference dissolves, the other does not disappear along with it but simply assumes a less ominous aspect" (Dean 2001: 135).



What we have as a result, for Dean, is a tie between impersonality and ethical care that circumvents any imaginary register like empathy: “The alternative to what I’m calling the politics of identification is an impersonal ethics in which one cares about others even when one *cannot* see anything of oneself in them” (Dean 2009: 25). It is this circumvention of empathy as an imaginary register that makes intelligible Dean’s conflation of psychoanalytic neutrality (the analyst’s lack of empathy) and free association—the open association to the Other. We must remember that for Lacan (in a way that Dean does not make explicit), *psychoanalytic neutrality is a condition of the clinical relationship, wherein the analyst performs impersonality in order to foreground and sustain attention to the impersonal Other for the analysand*. This is my cautionary message to the flood of Lacanians who like to say, “There is no neutrality.” While it is true that, as Lacan notes, “neutral subjects” can “serve an aggression,” the analyst’s neutrality is a kind of total aggression in the sense of Bataille’s grandest form of expenditure, a revolution against the master (signifier) in class warfare (Lacan “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis” 2006: 124). In “Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching” (2006), Lacan claims,

The analyst leaves room for this Other beyond the other by the neutrality with which he makes himself be *ne-uter*, neither the one nor the other of the two who are there; and if he remains silent, it is in order to let this Other speak. The unconscious is the Other’s discourse in which the subject receives his own forgotten message in the inverted form suitable for promises. (Lacan “Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching” 2006: 366)

That is, we raise our association with others for the sake of new, indeterminate relational modes when that association frees itself from the imaginary or personal anchor of alterity, which is the reason why psychoanalysis has a principle of the neutrality: a sexual relation between analysts and patients is bad for the therapeutic alliance (it seduces the patient in transference to assimilate

rather than to be able to avoid assimilation and suggestibility), and no degree of subtlety in the critique of psychoanalytic neutrality is likely eliminate the importance of asexuality to an effective clinic. Even the famous critic of psychoanalytic neutrality, Sandor Ferenczi, fell back on a principle of the analyst's special hygiene.<sup>13</sup>

I can expand on the importance of Lacan's neutrality and anti-identitarianism to queer neutrality. The purpose of psychoanalytic neutrality is to promote free association rather than therapist-provoked association, but the analyst knows (and motivates the patient to realize) that free association in talking therapy is effectively not free insofar as there is a chain of associations wrapped around what is unspeakable for the patient, which is exactly the kind of association that therapists must provoke through intricate performances of neutrality. The analyst's neutrality is important not merely as a negative action (say, of the analyst's self-censorship) but as a very telling silence, which is a very difficult discretion to perform because free association can be a strategy of resistance to analysis. That is to say, with insufficient intervention by the analyst, free association can easily be a resistance to therapy wherein the patient will talk about anything and everything that comes to mind in order to avoid talking about their stylized, unconscious connotations between various others and the big Other. The analyst's neutrality, when effective, is a positive nonaction, like using silence to speak to a patient's closeted fixations,

I believe, however, that transference always has the same meaning of indicating the moments when the analyst goes astray and takes anew his bearings, and the same value of

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<sup>13</sup> In "Variations on the Standard Treatment" [1955] (2006), Lacan evaluates ego psychology as a variation on the standard Freudian treatment of interpreting transference. Drawing on Ferenczi's "The Elasticity of Psycho-analytic Technique" (1928), Lacan notes that Ferenczi's principle of the analyst's "special hygiene"—which refers to the analyst's need to regulate the difficult job of monitoring their own ego in the clinic—is a vanishing point of character analysis (analysis of the personality as a symptom). Basically, if it is the analyst's ego that leads the analysand's ego, as ego psychology would have it, the vanishing point effectively acts a guide for the analyst's neutrality.

reminding us of our role: that of a positive nonaction aiming at the ortho-dramatization of the patient's subjectivity. (Lacan "Presentation on Transference" 2006: 184)

Realizing (more than intellectually) this principle of fundamental self-alienation is crucial to overcoming the compulsion to relate to others on an imaginary register of personal feeling or empathy. What we are left with, in the reception of psychoanalytic neutrality in queer theory, is a strategy of non-empathetic intimacy as a lure for new relational forms. In Ricco's *The Logic of the Lure*, the lure is a figure for the ethical movement toward new relational forms, a not-yet-here unbecoming community. The lure of intimacy is impersonal, turning an emptiness into a vacuum. Lacan asks and answers, "What does it mean to interpret transference? Nothing but to fill the emptiness of this standstill with a lure. But even though it is deceptive, this lure serves a purpose by setting the whole process in motion anew" (Lacan "Presentation on Transference" 2006: 184). This is why Tim Dean notes that impersonalism, especially in psychoanalytic terms, distrusts empathy as a means of creating new relational modes, "impersonalist ethics separates ethics from the imaginary requirement to empathize with the other" (Dean 2009: 47).

Empathy is not what we need because empathy breeds countertransference or bias. Lacan makes this argument in his "Presentation on Transference." In Lacanian terms, "countertransference, [is] defined as the sum total of the analyst's biases, passions, and difficulties, and even of his inadequate information," and countertransference is a problem because it breeds *normativity* through "wanting what is good for the patient to too great an extent," wanting what is good for other people too much (Lacan 2006: 183, 184). Foucault and Lacan would agree that therapists who direct the treatment along imaginary lines about what is good for the patient's ego are producing pathologized and rehabilitated identities rather than liberating patients. This misguided psychologism, Lacan repeated says, reinforces a humanism

that normalizes the idealization of identity rather than resolves fixations to identity. I argue that resisting psychologism and humanism is an important task in the cultivation of queer neutrality.

In Lacan's contribution to criminal theory, "A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology" [1950] (2006), Lacan protests against psychologism because psychologism understands everything that is criminal—every bit of humanity that is discontent—to be an atavism or evolutionarily regressive trait rather than an integral part of the figure of the human as we have written it. Psychologism sustains humanist disavowals of our inescapable queerness, and psychoanalytic neutrality resists reifying this imaginary identity. Lacan criticizes "psychologism" for "reifying human beings" because it entails "a new type of alienation of man" (Lacan "Presentation on Transference" 2006: 177). Psychologism desubjectivizes intimacy by writing our interactions with one another as compartmentalized (and therefore discretely regulatory or normalized) "tasks," outside of which there is only alienation and discontent.<sup>14</sup>

This Lacanian polemic against the imaginary crux of therapy—the dynamics of empathy and identity/the ego—is a psychoanalytic neutrality because it resists the biases of psychologism and its humanism in order to foster queer neutrality as an unbecoming community. This is what I infer from Lacan's reference to Freud's "inadequate appreciation of the homosexual tie binding Dora to Frau K." (Lacan 2006: 182). In this case of countertransference,

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<sup>14</sup> This is why Lacan tries to introduce the intersubjective complexities of transference into psychology's notion of the Zeigarnik effect. The Zeigarnik effect refers to a psychological principle of compartmentalizing intersubjective actions into task categories, for example maintaining that people who take orders remember them until the bill is paid (the task is resolved), and people who hear a familiar tune cut-off are compelled to finish the tune in their head (resolving the task). Lacan is not necessarily refuting the principle but meditating on its limits as a function of transference, which must not simply be explanatory for the phenomena (the remembering/forgetting, the finishing of the tune) but also be intelligible for an intervention by the analyst—how do we stop the compulsive task-completion that is characteristic of neurosis?

Freud admits that for a long time he was unable to face this homosexual tendency (which he nonetheless tells us is so constant in hysterics that its subjective role cannot be overestimated) without falling into a state of distress (p. 107 note) that rendered him incapable of dealing with it satisfactorily. (Lacan 2006: 182).

Lacan follows by explicitly tying countertransference to the patriarchal tenets that naturalize the Oedipal complex and mask the non-normative ties of homosexuality,

I would say this has to be ascribed to a bias, the very same bias that falsifies the Oedipal complex right from the outset, making him [i.e. Freud] consider the predominance of the paternal figure to be natural, rather than normative—the same bias that is expressed simply in the well-known refrain, “Thread is to needle as girl is to boy.” (Lacan 2006: 182)

Lacan’s criticism of patriarchal biases as heteronormative demonstrates the importance of psychoanalytic neutrality for queer theory. Humanist and patriarchal biases are mainstream fixations that psychoanalytic neutrality resists for the sake of promoting a new, queer relation to the self and others.

This non-empathetic psychoanalysis is not an anti-feeling position but a position that recognizes feelings and intimacy as signs of something other than intentionality. Lacan explains that “transference does not fall under any mysterious property of affectivity and, even when it reveals itself in an emotional [*émoti*] guise, this guise has a meaning only as a function of the dialectical moment it occurs” (Lacan “Presentation on Transference” 2006: 184). When neurotics encounter resistance to their movement through the process of analysis, this resistance formulates itself in a way that repeats automatically a pattern of aim-inhibited sexual

organization. Dealing with this is a special form of analytical reflection in psychoanalytic teaching, Lacan says,

In any case, I consider it to be an urgent task to disengage from concepts that are being deadened by routine; use the meaning that they regain both from a re-examination of their history and from a reflexion on their subjective foundations. That, no doubt, is the teacher's prime function—the function from which all others proceed, and the one in which the price of experience is best inscribed. (Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter" 2006: 25)

Historicizing identity for the sake of *realizing* it, in Halperin's sense of digesting and so displacing the self (as noted in the introduction to this dissertation), is crucial to Lacanian psychoanalytic therapy, which encourages this historicization by way of the analyst's neutrality.

Thus analytic neutrality derives its authentic meaning from the position of the pure dialectician who, knowing that all that is real is rational (and vice versa), knows that all that exists, including the evil against which he struggles, is and shall always be equivalent to the level of its particularity, and that the subject only progresses through the integration he arrives at of his position into the universal: technically speaking, through the projection of his past into a discourse in the process of becoming. (Lacan "Presentation on Transference" 2006: 184)

The process of unwriting the things to which we are fixated produces agency for a new signifier, a new relational mode of being. Neutrality or silence can set the grounds for this intervention through impersonal relation, i.e. allowing these repetitions room for expression, reflection, and reinterpretation. We can bring people's attention to the impersonal Other by giving them space to project.

Now that we have an idea of how Lacanian psychoanalysis understands neutrality and how this neutrality is ambivalently received by queer theorists of impersonality, we can better understand the relationship between psychoanalysis and queer neutrality in the work of John Paul Ricco, too. Ricco's ambivalence toward psychoanalysis comes from queer theory's discomfort with the knot of neutrality and sexuality difference in psychoanalysis. We can now much more easily understand Ricco's strange claim that opens this chapter:

Instead of the asexuality and neutrality that is generated and reproduced by binary sexual difference, we might think in terms of the pleasure of sharing in the sense of separation—the very spacing of sense—as bodies exposed to the incommensurability of existence, the latter of which exists outside the measure of any binary set of terms. (Ricco 2014: 117).

Again, we can ask, what is wrong with aces? What is wrong with neutrality? Is not the neutral a central figure for the intimacy of shared separation in Ricco's book? And how, by any stretch of the imagination, does *binary sexual difference produce asexuality* like Ricco claims?

The preceding review of Bersani, Gherovici, Carlson, and Dean makes Ricco's remark intelligible as a kind of flip side to the Lacanian conflation of sexual difference with only one side of itself: Ricco is grappling with the rhetorical knot by switching the terms of engagement, i.e. it is not feigned neutrality that inadvertently produces one side of sexual difference (namely the masculine side by convention), but it is sexual difference that inadvertently produces itself as indifferent to which difference we are talking about. I mean, Lacanians like Žižek are plainly conflating the difference between the sexes and the difference between sexual differences and asexual differences when they place one set of differences inside the other. To say something is a part of itself and that a mere part of something is all of it is a conflation. This Lacanian conflation is an indifference to those differences, i.e. asexuality and neutrality that is produced

by psychoanalytic notions of binary sexual difference. (Rhetorically, this Lacanian move cuts out *sexual sameness* and *asexual sameness*, which Bersani's *homo-sexual impersonality* brings together as an alternative to psychoanalytic sexual difference.) In the literature on sexual difference, you can find various permutations of this strategy, for example saying that the feminine must be the neutral side because it has the logic of non-exception or *no special differences*, whereas the masculine side is the sexual side because it has the logic of exception or special (i.e. sexual) differences. The introduction to this dissertation noted that one of Ricco's devotees, Jackson Davidow, chooses to interpret gender neutrality as a gendered political value in his essay, "Beyond the Binary: The Gender Neutral in JJ Levine's *Queer Portraits*" (2016):

Gender neutrality is not being beyond or without gender but rather a possibility of unhooking ourselves from the violent discursive paradigms of normative gender and sex. As such, gender neutrality presents a political form of queer feminism. (Davidow 2016: 317)

What we can notice, now, is that Davidow is trying to figure out what is going on with the knot of neutrality and sexuality difference in queer theory, which makes a lot more sense against the background of queer theory's reception of feminism and psychoanalysis.

For my own part, I am undecided as to the merits of one strategy of grappling with this knot over another. However, I think that Dean's work is a valiant step beyond the pervasive, paranoid relation to sexual difference and gender in queer theory, and yet Dean's theory of impersonal ethics is not entirely incompatible with Lacanians who avow sexual difference as a problematic of identity in general—the first chapter attempts to demonstrate such a compatibility between theories of gender difference as about identity in general and theories of queer neutrality (that advocate gender neutrality). I tried to make a case for what is compelling in the Lacanian



psychoanalytic theory of neutrality for a queer theory of neutrality, and this explains why I would use Lacan the way I do in chapter two, as a way to investigate the compelling possibility of queer neutrality or impersonality despite feminist and Lacanian theories that take gender or sexual difference to be a problematic for identity difference in general.

## Chapter 4 Race and Neutrality in Queer Theory

This fourth chapter addresses two deficiencies of my analysis so far. First, by foregrounding queer of color critics' investments in neutrality or impersonality, and by only briefly mentioning black feminist standpoint theory, I too quickly glossed over the way that race acts as a significant stumbling block for queer neutrality. Second, by failing to translate the well-taken Afropessimist critique of gender into a meaningful commentary on public bathroom design, I could easily leave the reader wondering how Afropessimism is nevertheless a viable challenge to antisocial queer theory's standpoint-pessimism. To address these issues, I first further note resistances to queer theory's impersonality on the basis of the context of racial difference, and I add my own arguments that certain queer theorists of impersonality are implicated in tokenistic treatment of racial difference. Secondly, I further explain the Afropessimist critique of queer impersonality, and I add my own Lacanian argument that queer anti-identitarianism—particularly in the trope of masochism—may be normative and potentially implicated in white normativity. In this dissertation I am trying to give the reader compelling reasons both for and (especially now) against the validity of the notion of queer neutrality. This is supposed to balance the analysis, and it would be fortunate if providing this balance helps the reader think beyond my compromise formations that stall in terms of translating Afropessimist theory to the design of gender-neutral public bathrooms.

It will help to first review most of what this dissertation has said so far about race: The introduction to this dissertation showed that two important proponents of queer of color critique, José Muñoz and Roderick Ferguson, exhibit both an investment in queer neutrality and the

identity politics of intersectionality. Women of color feminism may refuse to posit identity as a goal, and yet it recognizes the importance of the intersectionality of gender and race in our analyses of identity; queer of color critique sometimes advocates a subjectless, utopian humanism, and yet it recognizes the importance of strategic essentialism. The identity politics of intersectionality is not easily dismissed by theorists of queer neutrality. (The first chapter notes that even the English *gender* comes not only through the French *genre* but also through the Latin *genus*, as in kind, type, class, set, group, or *race*, and Freud used the German term *Geschlecht*, meaning sex, family, or *race*.)

In the context of these problems with queer theory, Patricia Hill Collins's black feminist standpoint theory gives us reasons to resist neutrality in coalitional politics. Collins argues that we should place black women's "oppositional consciousness" at the center of coalitional politics. A problem arises here because, according to standpoint theory, the notion of a central oppositional consciousness—perhaps the *Lumpenproletariat*, queerness, or blackness—is a limit of standpoint-intersectionality that exceeds the determinate self-consciousness necessary for sustained political agency. Different theorists elect different ostensible identity differences *as actual failures of identity in general* to the place of this general limit with a trajectory beyond intersectional identity. To this limit where identity fails in general, at times Marxists have elected class differences, queer theorists have elected sexuality differences (along the lines of sexual exclusivity vs. flirtation and cruising), and psychoanalysts have elected sexual differences (a major topic of my third chapter).

The second chapter provides Che Gossett's Afropessimist reasons for electing racial difference to this place: racial difference is *prior* to sexual difference insofar as

“the Lacanian ‘sexed body’ is always already a racialized body and a colonized body,” and “Black and/or indigenous peoples have always figured as sexual and gender outlaws to be disciplined and punished” (Gossett 2016). Che Gossett notes that gender nonconforming and trans people—especially of color—disproportionately experience the violence of policing binary-gendered bathroom lines. Racial difference props up the whiteness required for the intelligibility of sexual difference. Gossett’s argument turns on the constitutive role of European imperialism and antiblack slavery in the production of sexual difference. Racial difference is about the failure of identity in general because blackness is excluded by European imperialism from legitimacy in any formation of identity—gender, sexuality, class, or ability. Whereas Slavoj Žižek has suggested that queer and trans deviance always-already applies to all human life (which seems to elide some pretty important differences between those constitutively queer humans who accede to their queerness and those constitutively queer humans who do not), Žižek does not acknowledge that the afterlife of globalized anti-black slavery excludes non-European bodies from the domain of human life.

### **How is race a stumbling block for antisocial queer theory’s standpoint-pessimism?**

Queer of color critique has repeatedly argued that antisocial queer theory’s neutrality and impersonalism is part of a white homonormativity. In “Queer Theory and Native Studies” (2010), drawing on Denise da Silva’s *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007) to explain the indispensability of racial analysis, Andrea Smith explains that those “who do queer of color critique in particular have argued that within the field of queer studies, this claim to be ‘postidentity’ often retrenches white, middle-class identity while disavowing it” (44). One of

Sarah Beresford's conclusions in "The Age of Consent and the Ending of Queer Theory" (2014) is, "It would appear therefore that Queer Theory has become a methodology for white gay men; given these limitations, should Queer Theory be abandoned completely?"

For an example of queer theory being outlined with overwhelmingly white queer theory, Lorenzo Bernini's *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory* (2017) [*Apocalissi queer: Elementi di teoria antisociale* (2013)] marginalizes theories of the mutual constitution of modern sexuality and race, which is queer theory in all but name. Bernini's *Queer Apocalypses* is a major contribution to efforts to legitimize queer theory in Italy, yet queer of color critique has only a token reference. Bernini's reason for privileging white queer theory is privileging queer theory's *name* over its meaning:

Different genealogies of queer theories are possible that pass through the histories of slavery, racial violence and critical race studies (Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers), but in the academic sphere, the first one to be generally credited with putting the adjective "queer" next to the noun "theory" is Teresa de Lauretis (1991), who in February of 1990 held a conference at the University of Santa Cruz (California) entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities." (4)

Fanon, Wynter, and Spillers are no less "antisocial"—anti-assimilationist—than the roster of white queer theorists in Bernini's text, but they receive no attention from Bernini beyond the above acknowledgment.

In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Muñoz argues that Leo Bersani's seminal work on impersonalism does not help us account for the intersectional relations of queer politics because Bersani uses a white racial frame, "The race, gender, and sexuality troubles in such a theory—all

people of color are straight, all gay men are white—are also evident in his [Bersani’s] famous essay [“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 1987]” (34-35). Bersani’s impersonalism, according to Muñoz, moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. (11)

What it means for sexuality to be a singular trope of difference—according to antisocial queer theorists like Bersani—is that the force of sexuality is self-disrupting, and so sexuality is not an identity but an anti-identitarian force, whereas the force of raciality is ego-reinforcing like a white narcissism. According Muñoz, Leo Bersani’s impersonality amounts to “wishful thinking” (11). Of course, this thinking is wishful for white normativity. White narcissism does not reinforce but disrupts your ego if you are not white, and a number of white queer theorists seem to want desperately not to own up to these criticisms of antisocial queer theory.

The problem becomes more navigable when we unpack Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987). In this essay, Bersani effectively argues that homosexuality is *queerer than thou*, and his argument encounters some of the major contentions that come to dominate the dispute between antisocial queer theory and Afropessimism, which I will address later. Bersani argues that “the power of blacks *as a group* in the United States is much greater than that of homosexuals” (emphasis in original; 9). What notion of power agrees with this, and which notion of power does not? Despite Bersani’s explicit attention to group identity (“*as a group*”), Bersani’s account curiously gives preferential value to black people’s privilege to be individually tokenized, “some blacks are needed in positions of prominence or power, which is not at all true

for gay people” (10). In an antisocial queer theory of the politics of representation, queerness has no necessary representation (no need to be in a position of representational power).

Bersani explains how gay men’s antinormative sexuality—by way of GRID (Gay Related Immunity Disease) or HIV/AIDS—has participated in the exclusion of gay men from the human community, “There is no longer a rationale for the oppression of blacks in America, while AIDS has made the oppression of gay men seem like a moral imperative” (10). The queerness of sex—sex’s disempowering, self-destructive, and antiassimilationist capacity—testifies to a potential “ontological obscenity,” “a breakdown of the human itself in sexual intensities” (Bersani 29). Bersani is privileging the theoretical value of sex over any identity, including race. However, as José Muñoz recognizes, black American down-low culture, as well as the fact of the disproportional infection of black Americans with HIV/AIDS, severely undermines Bersani’s opposition between gay Americans and black Americans insofar as AIDS is as much as an issue of race as sexuality.

I would also turn around Bersani’s argument about the rationales and moral imperatives of oppression. Denise da Silva argues in *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007),

Because a guiding question here is why, despite its moral ban, the racial still constitutes a prolific strategy of power, it is also necessary to chart the symbolic terrain the racial shares with the other tools the narratives of history and science have deployed to carve the place of the subject. (xxxix)

That is to say, if the actual oppression of black people outlives the rationale for the oppression of black people, whereas the oppression of gay men is merely contingent upon a rationale or moral imperative (that will go away when we eventually cure AIDS), then we can ask Bersani why the sexual as opposed to the racial should be a privileged site of depersonalization or impersonality.

According to Bersani's own argument, blackness—unlike queerness—is not contingently but necessarily and irrationally excluded from ontology. We are beginning to ask why blackness, for example, would not be a better signifier for the liminal beyond of identitarianism.

In a resigned response to Bersani, in recognition of queer of color critique, Jack Halberstam's "Queer Betrayals" (2014) tantalizingly calls on Bersani to abandon his own pillar of queer theory for Bersani's own reasons,

Betrayal in Bersani's work, like failure in my work, like 'aberration' in [Roderick] Ferguson's work, and like violence in Chandan Reddy's, does much more than just offer a perverse reading of the human; instead, Bersani's version of betrayal unmakes the queer project itself and demands that we let it collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. (79)

Bersani's impersonalism tends to a contradictory or ambivalent position about its self-destruction because impersonalism has obsessive, melancholic, paranoid, or fetishistic attachments to identity positions that it also wants to let go. Bersani does not want to give up sex's centrality in antisocial theory, but his own impersonalism suggests that he should.

As we might expect, queer of color critique follows Edelman in the same manner that queer of color critique follows Bersani. Edelman's queer theory has strongly white overtones that resist its non-identitarian ambitions. In *No Future* (2006), Edelman marshals antisocial theory against the figure of the Child as a "humanizing" norm. In a rebuff of Lee Edelman in *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014), Juana María Rodríguez warns, "Today, norms, taboos, conventions, or protections designed to assert a protected status to children and their families, including LGBT families, may appear to be color-blind, but they are never race-neutral" (36). Rodríguez responds to Edelman,



But by ignoring race, Edelman fails to consider how children of color function as the co-constitutive symbolic nightmare of our nation's future. Rather than signifying reproductive futurity, African American male children represent racialized fears of criminality, violence, and sexual danger. (35)

Lee Edelman has responded to his critics at both the level of queer of color critique and Afropessimism. At the level of queer of color critique, when Ralph Poole asks Lee Edelman if Edelman, "relied too much on white, elite archives," Edelman responds, "those critiques are identitarian critiques" (Edelman and Poole 2018). With respect to queer of color critiques of the race-neutral child, Edelman argues in "Learning Nothing: *Bad Education*" (2017),

many critics have written about the presumed "whiteness" of the Child in Western culture. While the figure of meaning and cultural promise in a racist and antiblack order will disproportionately find representation in images of the dominant racial class, the Child itself does not have any intrinsic relation to whiteness and can, where useful, be embodied, even by that dominant order, in (the image of) children of color as well. Antiabortion activists, for example, have used representations of black and Hispanic children to demonize abortion as a form of genocide and thereby to mobilize antiliberal agendas in communities of color. [...] The Child, therefore, has no qualities in itself, but will assume those qualities as needed in the context of a dominant social order. (166-167n1)

Edelman is saying that the Child's "representation in images" might be white, but the Child in itself is race neutral, and so the Child itself can be a norm even when represented by non-white children.

The example undermines the claim, though. Let me break it down. Antiabortion activists argue that because we disproportionately abort children of color, the abortion industry *de facto* promotes the genocide of children of color. Therefore, abortion is racist, and we should save children of color by outlawing abortion. Edelman seems to infer from this that even children of color are the future (at the same time that he considers whiteness to be “the dominant racial class”). I disagree. Rather, should not we infer that there is a different logic of relation between these figures: the Child itself, actual children, and the image of children? Edelman’s racial neutrality and queer impersonality depend upon a dual placement of the Child with respect to representation, hence his parenthetical treatment of “(the image of) children of color.” The evidence for the anti-abortion activists’ claim is that *actual children of color are being disproportionately killed or prevented from living*, which seriously undermines the inference that, because the Child itself can be *represented with the image of children of color*, actual children of color therefore “are the future” as much as white children. What I am establishing here is a parallel in the way race forms a stumbling block for queer neutrality: Bersani’s and Edelman’s impersonality runs into a representational tokenism.

### **How is Afropessimism a viable challenge to antisocial queer theory’s standpoint-pessimism?**

Where do we go from here? We cannot stop with a queer of color critique of antisocial queer theory’s white homonormativity because queer of color critique does not fully abandon anti-identitarianism. We already found that José Muñoz endorses a deconstruction of the

positivism at the heart of identity politics. In “Queer Theory and Native Studies” (2010), Andrea Smith further notes,

what seem to disappear within queer theory’s subjectless critique are settler colonialism and the ongoing genocide of Native peoples. The analysis that comes from queer theory (even queer of color critique), then, rests on the presumption of the U.S. settler colonial state. (45)

The position of “even queer of color critique” is still ambivalent about identity neutrality. I balk at the presumption that queer utopianism can rely on anti-identitarianism to turn humanism into a disruption of the ossification of the human. For example, in “No Second Chances” (2011), David Marriott criticizes Muñoz’s humanism for remaining caught up in a teleology that ossifies the notion of the human. I mean, a bunch of white supremacists also theorize a utopian human that is not here yet, a weird *Übermensch*, and this does not necessarily disrupt ossification of the human. This is what Smith is talking about in her Afropessimist charge against queer of color critique.

Antisocial queer theory and Afropessimism are inheriting standpoint-pessimism in the *singularity* of the interstices of standpoints. Antisocial queer theory says that queerness is queerer than thou, and Afropessimism says that blackness is always already depersonalized. Antisocial queer theorists and Afropessimists have told us repeatedly (and conflictingly), queerness or blackness (respectively) is singularly the absent center of power. I noted in the introduction to this dissertation that the literature on queer neutrality has the model of “being singular plural” to bring this opposition together, and I try to enact this in the following review of race and identity neutrality in queer theory.

Again, the problem is an ambivalence about identity and the power of an extreme limit of depersonalized standpoints. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) [*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961], Frantz Fanon establishes the problematic affinity between *Lumpenproletariat* and revolutionary power. The *Lumpenproletariat* is the disorganized underclass. On one side, Fanon says the disorder of the *Lumpenproletariat* gives colonizers “the legal excuse to maintain order. Even if the *Lumpenproletariat* rebels against the colonizers, it is supposedly insufficiently organized for (lasting) revolution—the *Lumpenproletariat* rebels against itself and anyone in proximity in the struggle for resources. The *Lumpenproletariat* has insufficiently unified class consciousness because the struggle is too real for it to have any sustained focus on revolution. For example, the *Lumpenproletariat* also consists of petty criminals who are police informants against other petty criminals (on the ideological weakness of the *Lumpenproletariat* see p.137).

On the other side, however, this disorder makes the *Lumpenproletariat* always already a form of rebellion (115). Fanon says,

It is within this mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, at the core of the *lumpenproletariat*, that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead. For the *lumpenproletariat*, that horde of starving men, uprooted from their clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people (129).

How *pointed* can this spearhead be, though, if the stand it takes is so indeterminately pointed? There are surely ways in which in which the *Lumpenproletariat* may be represented cohesively. For example, in the U.S., the Black Panthers also looked to the *Lumpenproletariat* for revolutionary potential, and there was a Black Panther organization called “The Lumpen,” a funk band that regularly performed protest songs. However, the pointedness of the spearhead—

beyond its mere representation by the *proletariat*—is indeterminate in practice. In *Wretched* (1963), Fanon notes,

The constitution of the *lumpenproletariat* is a phenomenon which obeys its own logic, and neither the brimming activity of the missionaries nor the decrees of the central government can check its growth. This *lumpenproletariat* is like a horde of rats; they may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they'll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree. (129-130)

What I am saying here is that this theory of the *Lumpenproletariat* is antisocial theory, and despite the hope for the revolutionary potential here, this underclass might really lack the cohesion necessary for sustained revolutionary consciousness. This is partly how we can understand why antisocial queer theorists like Lee Edelman have theorized a queer pessimism that does not embrace politics, coalitional or otherwise. There is certainly ambivalence in Fanon's account of the *Lumpenproletariat* as having both "spontaneity and weakness."

We need to take Afropessimism seriously because queer of color critique, despite its criticisms of antisocial queer theory's white universalism, participates in white universalism through its affinities with humanism. In *Nobody's Supposed to Know: Down Low* (2014), C. Riley Snorton invokes Frantz Fanon's account of Europeans' objectification and possession of anything they write as black, "For Fanon, black people are neither afforded subjectivity nor, within the logics of colonial racism, a body" (89). In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) [*Peau Noire, Masques Blanc*, 1952], Fanon argues that the consolidation of whiteness' neutrality or "the closing of the postural schema of the white man" requires the neutering of the black body:

At the extreme, I should say that the Negro, because of his body, impedes the closing of the postural schema of the white man [...] with the Negro the cycle of the *biological*

begins. [...] the Negro is castrated. The penis, the symbol of manhood, is annihilated, which is to say that it is denied. [...] it is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked. It is as a concrete personality that he is lynched. (124-125).

(This neutering/neutralization is not limited to black men: see Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 1997.) Speaking of Antilleans' dreams prior to exposure to whiteness in the context of Jacques Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) [*Peau Noire, Masques Blanc*, 1952],

I contend that for the Antillean the mirror hallucination is always neutral. When Antilleans tell me that they have experienced it, I always ask the same question: "What color were you?" Invariably they reply: "I had no color." [...] There is no reason now to be surprised that Mayotte Capécia [a black woman in love with a white man] dreamed of herself as pink and white: I should say that that was quite normal. (125n)

After contamination with the white mythology of blackness, the neutral, color-blind self-image Antillean becomes the neutered, invisible self-image, "The father [a black teacher] was given to walking up and down his balcony every evening at sunset; after a certain time of night, it was always said, he became invisible" (126n). One of Fanon's key contributions to Afropessimism is the realization that "every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society [...]" Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man" (82). However, adding to the confusion, Fanon also equivocates his position on humanism, opening *Black Skin, White Masks* with, "Toward a new humanism... Understanding among men... Our colored brothers... Mankind, I believe in you..." and then, "I will say that the black is not a man" (ellipses in original; 1).

In the shimmering textile (for lack of a better term) *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Fred Moten coalesces an Afro-optimism out of Afropessimist accounts of ontology, standpoint-pessimism, anti-identitarian critique, and utopian queer theory. Invoking Eve Sedgwick's notion of the "queer performative," Moten invites us to think beyond the "onto-theology of national humanism" such that,

What one begins to consider, as a function of the nonlocalizable nature or status of discontinuity, is a special universalization of discontinuity, where discontinuity could be figured as ubiquitous minority, omnipresent queerness. (69)

This becomes explicitly informative of standpoint-pessimism and its relation to Afropessimism when Moten argues in "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" (2013),

What would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for a standpoint? What emerges in the desire that constitutes a certain proximity to that thought is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or, in a slight variation of what [Nahum] Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space. (738-739)

The dialectic of identity standpoint, intersectional identity, and singular non-identity moves through a negation of identity continuity and then a negation of the intersection of identity discontinuity, providing only a singular non-identity (as opposed to multiple non-identities, which have been negated by antisocial queer theorists and Afropessimists differently). These

collective anti-identitarian racial critiques form the background against which antisocial queer theorists like Lee Edelman addresses Afropessimist challenges to queer theory.

In “Lee Edelman in conversation with Ralph Poole: ‘Queerness,’ Afro-Pessimism, and the Aesthetic” (2018), Edelman contrasts identity with “queer nothing,” and he establishes his affinity with Bersani’s “ontological obscenity,” saying, “I don’t think that queerness is an ontological position” (i.e. queerness is excluded from ontology) and “queer is not something that someone can claim to be.” Explaining to Poole why he finds Afropessimism attractive rather than a threat to his own position, Edelman analogizes between the two positions with respect to anti-identitarianism,

The blackness of Afro-pessimism is not the articulation of yet another identity position that could be incorporated into a multicultural society. So, the reason it appears here is precisely because my prior work—work that I think has, in its own way—had perhaps some influence on the development of Afro-pessimism. The possibility of thinking about the correlation between the ways I’m looking at queerness and the ways that Afro-pessimists are understanding the relation between blackness and the subject position of black beings in the world. That seemed to me correlations that were productive.

In “Hope Against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity” (2015), James Bliss also makes an argument about the influence between antisocial queer theory and Afropessimism (three years prior to Edelman’s argument) but in the opposite direction of Edelman’s argument. Bliss tries “to find in the interventions called queer negativity—the critique of reproductive futurity, of the family, of the politics of hope—their prefigurations and alter-articulations within Black feminist theory” (83). Hortense Spillers is one example. Spiller’s highly influential work in this area, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An



American Grammar Book,” was published in the same year—1987—as Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Spillers makes an argument about the politics of representation of blackness, saying,

First of all, their [African and indigenous people’s] New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.

[...] demarcates a sexuality that is neuter-bound, inasmuch as it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male/female. (67, 77)

Edelman ignores the ways in which Frantz Fanon and Hortense Spillers develop a queer theory—an anti-identitarian, antiassimilationist account of the power of sex and gender neutrality—based in an evaluation of race’s constitutive role in the production of sex.

When Edelman draws correlations between queer theory and Afro-pessimism, these correlations are analogies, “queerness and blackness, I’m arguing, are in the position of what Lacan calls the Thing, which is not articulable as such within the course of being” (Edelman and Poole). The analogies do not stop: “‘Woman’ is also a term that can figure into this, ‘Trans’ is a term that can also figure into this, so there is no master term that occupies the exclusive name for the excluded remainder of either aesthetics or civil society” (Edelman and Poole). This negotiation with Afro-pessimism falls short because Afro-pessimism holds there to be a “master term” for the abject of humanity, the term that the slave master’s terms make non-analogizable with any other form of oppression. In *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), Frank B. Wilderson III calls the kind of thinking exhibited by Edelman,

“the ruse of analogy.” Wilderson says that the ontology of sexual difference we see in many Lacanian feminist and queer theories is a thoroughly white construct, “There is no such narrative as political genealogy and there is no such entity as a ‘gender ontology’ unless the subject under discussion is not Black” (311).

In “Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics” (2015), Calvin Warren extends Wilderson’s argument more directly to any queer theory that would see itself as an ally to Afro-pessimism,

Whenever we equate an ontological position [or para-ontological position] with an identity formation, we perform the very violence that sustains the antagonism. Put another way, ontological violence sustains itself through strategies of displacement, equivalence, and neutralization. In relating blackness to queerness, we can only speak in distorting similes—the rhetorical practice of likening one thing to another. (19)

In a revised version of “Onticide” for the journal *GLQ* (2017), Calvin Warren challenges intersectional analysis for its presumption of the commensurability of sexual difference with the “grammatical paucity [...] of antiblack suffering” (408), claiming that

scholars have attempted to reconcile blackness with sexual difference and sexual identity through logics of equivalence. This scholarship operates under what I call “the intersectional approach.” Although this approach provides intellectual space for contemplating and representing sexual difference and sexual identity, it often does so precisely by way of a structural adjustment. Thus it enacts a performative contradiction (between blackness and humanism) that it either ignores or neglects. (401)

Warren’s argument against queer theory’s impersonalism is that sex is a function of property relations that haunt the boundaries of the human.

A person understood as “queer” could purchase a black-object from the auction block like his/her hetero-normative counterpart. In those rare instances where the black-as-object was able to participate in this economy and purchase a black-object as well, the black purchaser could, at any moment, become another commodity—if found without freedom papers or validation from a white guardian—the system of fungible blackness made any black interchangeable and substitutional. This movement between object and subject is not a problem for queerness, but is an unresolvable problem for blackness. (2015: 19-20)

For Warren, the fungibility of blackness separates it from queerness even in antisocial queer theory’s attempt to appropriate Afro-pessimism,

This, then, is the ultimate scandal or ontological violation of the New World: black flesh is reduced to devastating *sameness*, and becomes interchangeable, or fungible, within an economy of exchange. The violence of captivity expelled the African from Difference, or the Symbolic—the order of differentiating subjects—and relegated it to the vacuous space of undifferentiation. (2015: 9)

Because fungibility distinguishes sex and race in standpoint-pessimist theories, race remains a stumbling block for the reception of neutrality in queer theory. I might say fungibility is something tragic for blackness and comic for queerness. There is a difference between cruising for people and people cruising all over you, although they might potentially both be nomadic affirmations of an identity-disrupting Other (where one is an elective affirmation, the other coerced affirmations).

Despite the chain of fungible Things, there is a punchline to Edelman’s defense of queer superiority over Afro-pessimism in antisocial queer theory,

For me, the use-value of queerness lies particularly in the fact that for the most part it is less strictly attached to an identitarian position or to a specific type of body or specific type of act than Woman or Blackness. (Edelman and Poole)

One way we might understand this claim is by recognizing that Afropessimism, unlike antisocial queer theory, also participates in queer of color critique's ambivalence about humanism. In "Onticide" (2017), Calvin Warren's continues to wrestle with an ambivalence about humanism despite his criticism of queer of color critique,

Because we lack a grammar outside humanism that would allow us to articulate "particularity," "difference," and "surplus violence" without getting trapped in a double bind, I propose a procedure of writing with and against humanism to address this problem. I call this procedure "onticide." It uses the technique of erasure (*sous rature*) in relation to features of human difference that exclude blackness but are necessary to articulate the fracturing of fungible commodities. This approach departs from intersectional analyses that attempt to either reconcile blackness with humanity and its difference or conceive of blackness as ontologically equivalent with features of human difference. I suggest that the intersectional approach is inadequate to the task of articulating the particularity of violence Steen experienced, and that an onticidal approach (writing with and against humanist terms of difference) enables us to contend with the humanist double bind more productively. (394)

Nevertheless, we can still ask Edelman to pay attention to reception: Queerness as opposed to blackness is less strictly attached to an identitarian position *by who?* As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the passive voice in queer theory can mask the politics of representation in *the reception* of contentious issues. In "Variations on the Standard Treatment"

[1955] (2006), Lacan argues that the phenomenon of transference should make us pay attention not only the way that the contextual relativity of interpretation determines what is said but also—due to the potential projection of the big Other—who said it. I think Edelman is projecting a white Other through which he understands Afropessimism. This chapter might then be concluded by thinking about the function of negation in queer theories of identity.

In an essay critiquing Lee Edelman, Tim Dean, Leo Bersani, and Adam Phillips, “No Second Chances” (2011), David Marriott reevaluates the status of antisocial queer theory’s anti-identitarianism against the background of recent minoritarian visions of futurity, including Muñoz’s criticism of antisocial queer theory’s normative white reproductive futurity. Unlike Muñoz, however, who is invested in impersonality and—Marriott insists—teleology, and strangely similar to antisocial queer theorists, Marriott approaches queer anti-identitarianism with careful attention to psychoanalytic accounts of the ego.

Marriott begins to untie antisocial queer theory by claiming that, on one side, it disavows the proximity of narcissism and identity, which it does through exclusively foregrounding all that is antinormative in intimacy. On the other side, it ignores the psychoanalytic understanding of the ego or identity as already in flux, destabilized. (Edelman actually does acknowledge this at the beginning of *No Future*, however, and yet Edelman still rails against identity.) The result is antisocial queer theory’s reliance upon a dialectic of identity that is more Hegelian than Freudian. Marriott suggests that antisocial queer theorists like to *reveal* the strangeness of intimacy more so than they like to *accept* the strangeness of intimacy, and this is what I would characterize as antisocial queer theory’s exhibitionism. These queer theorists like to point at instances of the ego’s supposed subversion (like masochism), but as Jack Halberstam points out in “Queer Betrayals” (2014), antisocial queer theory has performed very badly at abandoning its

identity (especially racially, as I have also shown in this chapter), and we may need to allow antisocial queer theory to die in order to fulfill its implicit request that we betray it. In a real dig at Bersani et al., Marriott argues that antisocial queer theorists “want to shatter the *category* of identity without being threatened by the act of actual shattering” (110). Marriott’s argument pivots on an appreciation of Freud’s account of negation, wherein judgement splits the ego from itself in the process of defense. The antisocial queer polemic against the ego, then, may very well be an ego-negation that indirectly functions to reinforce the ego, and this seems to be the case with racial identity in antisocial theories of queer neutrality. Although Marriott’s essay ends with hardly a mention of the relationship of race to this critique (partly because his essay addressed this earlier through Muñoz), the ending of Marriott’s essay makes one clear reference to race when accusing antisocial queer theorists of unintentionally reinforcing “the so-called old relational modes,” which are identitarian and normatively white (113).

What can we learn from this and where might we go from here? In the chapter, “How to Fix Bathroom Signs,” I explored Lacan’s account of fixation and identity in the clinic in terms of the reproduction of racial identity, and I can round that gesture off with a further reflection on the relationship between the mechanisms of negation and the dialectics of racial identity. Although antisocial queer theory might seem to be at its strangest when desperately trying to explain how narcissism—that organization of *self/same*-love or *homo*-sexuality—is vital to anti-identitarian theory, I think that a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework suggests that what is most strange about antisocial queer theory is its superficial understanding of negation, which is precisely what Marriott is trying to point out with his reference to Freud’s account of the dialectics of the ego. Lacan is more helpful than Freud here, I think, because Lacan departs from the traditional reception of Freud’s account of fetishism.

Let us go all the way back to Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987). In that text, Bersani inspires decades of queer theorists' love of pornographic sadism and especially masochism as anti-normative, anti-identitarian forces. What Lacan helps us understand, in addition, is that *masochism and sadism are normative*. The key to understanding this is, as Marriott pointed out, the dialectics of negation and identity, which Marriott helpfully identifies in antisocial queer theorists' rejection of identity *categories* rather than identity *itself*. I characterized this as an exhibitionism, which is a fetishism that illustrates the problematic normativity of masochism.

Basically, the organization of fetishism, for Lacan, is a condition of desire for a love or object that is unavailable and, therefore, unusable in the reflective formation of the ego, resulting in the subject's demand for a real encounter with another (an other reduced to this desired object) to make up for this defect in the formation of the ego. In *Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (1997), Bruce Fink provides a nicely condensed review of Lacan's position on masochism in Lacan's *Seminar X* (1963). Fink explains,

One of the paradoxical claims Lacan makes about perversion is that while it may sometimes present itself as a no-holds barred, jouissance-seeking activity, its less apparent aim is to bring the law into being: to make the Other as law (or law-giving Other) exist. The masochist's goal, for example, is to bring the partner or witness to the point of enunciating a law and perhaps pronouncing a sentence (often by generating anxiety in the partner). (180)

This is the conformity of perversion. As an even more basic example, we say that neglected children act out to receive punishment because this punishment amounts to attention, which makes up for neglect. The punishing "No" or negation that the child receives is a boundary that

the child uses to form its identity, much like the exhibitionist flashes their genitals to receive disapproving attention. In the case of masochism, punishment fosters love. It is not “anti-loving” like Bersani says. Freud’s dictum that there is no negation in the unconscious (“On Negation” 1925) has an analog in the neglected child’s realization that all publicity, even bad publicity, is good publicity.

So, when queer theorists perform their masochistic exhibitionism (displaying the subversion of identity) it is possible—within an Afropessimist and Lacanian-informed position—that what queer theorists are really asking for is a surprise reaction or even a spanking from queer of color critique and Afropessimism, which constantly reaffirm the identity of antisocial queer theory for it, namely reaffirming that antisocial queer theory is white queer theory. Lacan clarifies the structures of interaction here when he notes that a sadist is not satisfied by a victim who stoically refuses to reveal their pain—a victim who refuses to say, “No.” A masochist, similarly, only gets satisfaction at the moment when their partner says, “I cannot hurt you anymore, we have gone too far, this is enough.” Have not queer theorists in fact gone too far in their anti-identitarianism multiple times? A sadist and a masochist are *not* the perfect couple that we imagine them to be (one likes giving pain, the other likes receiving it) but are a match made in hell, wherein each one is endlessly frustrated in their wait for the other to give in, to say “No” and establish the boundaries of identity. It is possible that antisocial queer theory owes its identity to the boundaries that queer of color critics establish when they say that they are not antisocial queer theorists but utopian queer theorists, i.e. *not* white queer theorists. If race is evidently a thorough stumbling block for theories of queer neutrality, is it not possible that race is also a formative boundary for theories of queer neutrality?



My concluding resignation here is that, even though I find the Afropessimist critique of queer neutrality entirely compelling, I still cannot figure out how to translate Afropessimism into a critique of queer neutrality in the specific case of gender-neutral public bathrooms, and this is part of why my first three chapters take queer neutrality so seriously despite its many problems.

## Appendix A

### The Saneclock Society: Queer Neutrality in *Fortnite*

Abstract: This paper provides an autoethnographic introduction to the video game *Fortnite* in the context of queer theories of identity neutrality (Jack Halberstam, Leo Bersani, John Paul Ricco, Queer Nation) and psychoanalytic theories of neutrality in children's therapy (Anna Freud, Klein, Winnicott). I argue that the practice of "teaming" in *Fortnite* can help us better understand neutrality because it clarifies the relationship between neutrality and the nuances of phatic communication (Juana María Rodríguez, Kecskes, Hjorth and D'amazing, Mowlabocus), which is crucial for queer coalition-building and the therapeutic alliance.

In Spring Quarter of 2018, a student asked me how to analyze Epic Games' cross-platform video game *Fortnite*. I had never heard of it. Though it is known as a children's game, it is a third-person shooter with both a Player vs. Environment mode (e.g. players kill zombies) and a much more popular Player vs. Player mode, namely a "Battle Royale" mode inspired by the Japanese movie *Battle Royale* (2000). In the Battle Royale mode of *Fortnite*, players kill each other until last player standing is the sole winner: the enemies are virtually represented, online players in the match. Part of this game's special form of antagonism is the capacity for players to build walls to separate and defend themselves from the enemy, "The first thing to do in a fight is place a few walls between you and your opponent" (*Fortnite* loading-screen message, Epic Games 2019).

I gave my student all of the research I could find for *Fortnite* as well as research for the other topic he considered choosing, Virgil Abloh's clothing brand Off-White. Like Off-White, *Fortnite* is a fashion phenomenon, and *Fortnite* is also pushing trends in dance. Epic Games sells new dances and digital clothes to players on a regular basis, typically ranging from \$5 to \$20 each (cf. Kaufman, "The Dances in *Fortnite* Have Become Nearly as Contagious as the Game" 2018; cf. Swearingen, "*Fortnite*'s Fashion Industry Makes as Much Money As Amazon" 2018).



*Fortnite players dancing in style at DJ Marshmello’s in-game concert, which broke the previous concurrent-player record—8.3 million players—with over 10 million concurrent players.*

*(Sledge 2019)*

*Fortnite’s virtual clothes are entire digital characters, called skins, which comes from a term for just the outer wrapping of a digital 3D model. Skins range from commercially recognizable identities in terms of race, gender, and sex (in various combinations) to monsters to various animals to piles of miscellaneous trash objects (like the “Kitbash” skin). For various reasons, players often participate in digital transvesting, including chasing the latest, fashionable item to be released in the item shop (regardless of its gender). Occasionally transvesting is inevitable for players with only the free, default skin, which has a randomized appearance each round:*



*These skins are the randomly applied, default skins every player receives for free.*

Although I want to bring attention to an especially (i.e. much more avowedly) queer subcommunity of *Fortnite* players, this game is more generally a queer game in the sense that social media associates *Fortnite*'s demographic with non-reproductive, over-reproductive, childish, gay, cartoony, fashionable, and other queer lifestyles. Here are three of the top-four definitions of "Fortnite Battle Royale" on *UrbanDictionary.com* as of Feb 6, 2019:

#### #1 Fortnite Battle Royale

A very unique form of birth control. When used by a male, he will never, ever get a woman pregnant (or, reportedly ever have sex), but when used by a woman, it's effects are reversed. The woman in question will be consistently impregnated until she stops using. Due to this, it is mostly used by (straight) males.

*After Fortnite Battle Royale came out, he never had any children until he eventually died 50 years later.*

by Swift Internet Justice May 16, 2018

701 likes, 75 dislikes

## #2 Fortnite Battle Royale

The very popular video game with a very cancerous player base. Usually played by gay little squeakers or fuckboys.

*Jim: Yesterday I was playing Fortnite Battle Royale yesterday whe-*

*Mike: Shut up you little faggot!*

*##gay #fortnitebattleroyale*

by Pixel Ben Dover May 07, 2018

535 likes, 79 dislikes

## #4 Fortnite Battle Royale

It is a cartoon remake of pubg that is made for the retarded side of the human spectrum, especially for the kids. It's a game that divides society and a very good fashion. People who play fortnite = mostly retarded kids. People who do not play = normal people.

*Kid at xbox : I love Fortnite Battle Royale so much i want to pway a lot of fortnite i love fortnite haha drinking my mini shields!*

*Parent on the phone: Yeah , that would be great, we can meet up at starbucks, wait, do you know how to put kids up for adoption?*

by PussySlayerTrump July 06, 2018

216 likes, 36 dislikes

*(Urbandictionary.com)*

*Fortnite's* representational politics of identity—the contentious questions raised by identity in *Fortnite*—puts this game in conversation with queer and psychoanalytic theories of neutrality that can help us better understand the political significance of the game, and *Fortnite's* player dynamics can further nuance our understanding of queer neutrality and the therapeutic alliance.

In *Queer Art of Failure*, Judith/Jack Halberstam (2011) argues that the computer-generated graphics in children's media—like the skins in *Fortnite*—exhibit a queer flexibility that preserves the anarchy of childhood. By failing to conform to norms of identity, *Fortnite* allows for a queer resistance to the normalization of representation, and this is part of *Fortnite*'s “low theory.” Drawing on Stewart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, Halberstam develops the notion of low theory to account for the political force of representations in children's media. Halberstam explains, “some theory is goal-oriented in a practical and activist way; it is designed to inform political practice rather than to formulate abstract thoughts for the sake of some neutral philosophical project” (Halberstam 2011: 16). I want to suggest that low theory takes a bit of a bend in the case of multiplayer video games, wherein the political messages stem not only from the media and representations but also from their dynamic organization by the players themselves, who participate in constructing the game they also receive. In this way *Fortnite* provides a dynamic, real-time model of identity-deprecation and queer coalition-building in a scene of normalized antagonism.

On one of the first days that I played *Fortnite* Squads Fill (i.e. four-person random teams) on Sony's PlayStation 4, I met a boy named “Saneclock8.” Saneclock eliminated a lot of people, spoke very politely, and asked to be friends with me in order to play future matches together. I was complete trash at *Fort*, and no good players were friending me, so I accepted the friend request. I was not sure why he would want to play with me again. (It turns out, this kid will simply friend *anyone*, and it had nothing to do with anything about me.) In the following matches that we played together, Saneclock showed me ways to play in conformity with the directive to eliminate the enemy that may be considered queer, for example by exploiting glitches in the game (cf. Jack Halberstam's “Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going



Turbo” 2017). Saneclock’s glitches included using a repetition of certain unexpected movements to trigger (eventually) a low-probability phasing of character-position through the map.



*Saneclock would camp out at these glitch spots in order to eliminate people unexpectedly, showing me the usefulness of the glitches that he found.*

He also taught me about other queer, passive ways to win, like winning without killing anyone by first hiding then waiting for the last enemy to die from something accidental, like fall damage or environmental damage. I encouraged Saneclock to pursue his passion for collecting glitches, and we started playing together a lot in the summer of 2018.

Where were this kid's parents when he was making friends with me? The role of parents or authority figures is a determining factor in how children interact in *Fortnite*, which influences *Fortnite*'s messages about identity. While some parents seem entirely absent (or they really let their kids talk that way?), parents sometimes do not allow their child to use the microphone, and parents sometimes intervene in children's playing otherwise, even intervening with advice on how to play the game "the right way." Importantly, authorities' normalizing influence, in this sense, restricts the playfulness of identity representations in *Fortnite*. Part of identity neutrality is letting people be themselves or letting them find out who they want to be, which means removing the influence of authority. This can be difficult in the case of parents of children who play *Fortnite*: Quite a few of the *Fortnite* articles I found consisted of alarmist articles about pedophilia. *Fortnite* used to be only a "children's game," but now it is the most popular video game in the world, and the rapid exposure of children to anonymous adults has caused some concern among parents. For example, see Michelle Jones' article, "Authorities Warn About Pedophiles Using Fortnite To Groom Children" (April 13, 2018).

The first time I spoke with a parent of one of my squad members, I heard Saneclock's headset come off (a particular, characteristic scuffling), and I heard a different person say tersely, "How old are you?"

"Thirty-two," I said.



She said angrily, “And why are you playing with my son?”

I paused, realizing exactly what Saneclock’s mom was anxious about. I said honestly, “Because he’s way good!”

After a few seconds of silence, Saneclock’s mom giggled as if I was trying to flatter her, and she said, “I know, he’s good at everything: in school, in sports.” She mentioned some other things, I think singing. She eventually gave the headset back to her son. I then received—I do not know from which of them—a real-name request through PlayStation Network, which I accepted (out of curiosity), revealing my real name to Saneclock and his mom, and also revealing to me Saneclock’s real name, Areyes Hernandez. I do not know if Saneclock’s mom wanted to know who I really am, or what. I did not even know what a real-name request is because I hadn’t bothered Googling it before accepting, and a “real name” can be spoofed by anyone who looks up how to do it. (Saneclock’s cousin does call him “Areyes,” though.) I think Saneclock’s mom was particularly anxious about predators because Saneclock’s dad has been in jail since Saneclock was six-years-old on account of his dad being convicted of sexually assaulting his mom. Saneclock likes to tell me a lot of things that inform his queer approach to *Fortnite*.

How can we understand parents’ differences in authoritative performances? What is overprotective and what is negligent? Are interventions particularly appropriate because children are involved, in need of more education and moral guidance than adults? Psychoanalysts of children disagree over the matter. Anna Freud abandons the analyst’s neutrality in favor of education and deliberate transference-inducing performances of authority, but Melanie Klein, in her “Symposium on Child Analysis (1927)” (1975) argues that child development requires psychoanalytic neutrality as much as therapy for adults:

Anna Freud considers that in analysing children the analyst is not, as he is when the patient is an adult, ‘impersonal, shadowy, a blank page upon which the patient can inscribe his phantasies’, one who avoids imposing prohibitions and permitting gratifications. But according to my experience it is exactly thus that a children’s analyst can and ought to behave, when once he has established the analytic situation. (151-152)

One thing that sets these analysts apart is their different views on the play-technique of analysis, which A. Freud rejects and Klein embraces. A conceptual difficulty with Klein’s position is the awkward idea of maintaining psychoanalytic neutrality *and* engaging in the play-technique of analysis, which can deeply reflect the personality of the analyst.

In “Playing: Its Theoretical Status in the Clinical Situation” (1968), Donald Winnicott helps us resolve this tension by recovering neutrality as the zone of therapeutic playfulness, which requires supervision but minimal intervention. Winnicott’s “neutralist” position, namely that adults should not regulate children’s play, could make either a good response to—or easily exploitable material for—the alarmist articles about pedophiles on *Fortnite*,

Responsible persons must be available when children play; but this does not mean that the responsible person need enter into the children’s playing. When an organizer must be involved in a managerial position then the implication is that the child or the children are unable to play in the creative sense of my meaning in this communication. (597)

Winnicott helps us understand how play is therapeutic by reference to a fundamentally important therapeutic scene of stage-building, the neutral scene of transitional phenomena. This concerns children’s experience of the zone between themselves and the world, which children negotiate with in order to come to terms with the world. In “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-Me Possession” (1953), Winnicott explains, “The

transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged” (95). Expanding on Erik Erikson’s work on identity-formation, Winnicott argues that identity formation takes place through an intermediate playground, and stable identity formation necessarily takes place through temporarily relinquishing the demands of identity, playing with identity and its absence. In “Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for Self” (2009) Winnicott says of the search for identity,

The searching can come only from desultory formless functioning, or perhaps from rudimentary playing, as if in a neutral zone. It is only here, in this unintegrated state of the personality, that that which we describe as creative can appear. (86)

While Winnicott stresses the need for play and neutrality in cases of limited communication (little children may not be able to communicate in ways demanded by traditional talking therapy), we can widen the scope of Winnicott’s analysis by thinking more about how playfulness with identity in *Fortnite* serves to create community in other cases of limited communication.

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One day I am playing *Fortnite* Squads with Saneclock, and our third teammate, cassi-issac, goes off on his own. Our fourth team member dies right away, but Saneclock tells me, “It’s OK.” Then he starts telling me about school. Then he tells me he made a new friend. Whatever, I do not think about what he says too much because he says so much stuff by chance association, with little coherence. Anyway, I go into the building where Saneclock is hiding because I want to

make sure we support each other for the oncoming enemy assault. Surprisingly, standing by Saneclock there is an enemy who shoots me in the face. The enemy is not shooting Saneclock at all. I am knocked down (incapacitated, temporarily unable to shoot) but not eliminated/unrevivable, so Saneclock starts reviving me with the enemy standing there. The enemy does not (blood)thirst me (i.e. continue to shoot a knocked-down enemy in order to prevent the enemy from being revived). This is obviously a very new, stupid enemy or a very nice enemy. Saneclock is still trying to tell me about this friend he has made, and I do not care because there is an enemy right there while I am about to regain capacity to shoot my gun, but then Saneclock starts saying rapidly but calmly, “*Do not shoot my friend, do not shoot my friend.*” So, I think, he is talking about the enemy being his new friend?

Saneclock then starts apologizing to me for the enemy shooting me. Saneclock says the enemy did not know that I am Saneclock’s friend. This is making no sense to me. You cannot talk to enemies like you can talk with your teammates (i.e. through a headset), so how could Saneclock know what the enemy is thinking? I have no idea what is going on, and I start following Saneclock and this enemy out the door. Saneclock, the enemy, and I crouch together behind a rock to prepare to fight a completely different, full squad ahead of us.

At this point, our third teammate, cassi-issac, rolls up to us to prepare to fight the squad ahead of us, and he sees the one enemy guy just sitting next to Saneclock, so cassi-issac starts screaming into the headset at us to kill the guy, but Saneclock shouts back at him, “*Leave my friend alone!*”

cassi-issac loudly asks me multiple times, “Hannibal, what’s going on?” (My game moniker is HannibaLecturer.)

I keep responding defensively, “I don’t know, just don’t kill his friend, I guess!” Saneclock, cassi-issac, the one enemy guy, and I creep up to the full, oncoming squad and shoot them all down. The four of us heal up and start heading for high ground when Saneclock insists that his friend (the enemy who shot me in the face) is a good friend because this friend replaced our missing family member, the squad member who got taken.

Before Saneclock finishes explaining, cassi-issac shoots our frienemy in the back, to death. Saneclock starts yelling repeatedly, “Why? He was my friend!”

cassi-issac responds in a low, level voice, “It had to be done, it had to be done.” Saneclock continues to protest, so cassi-issac asks him, “What are you going to do if we get to the end with him? Are we just going to stand around, not fighting?”

Saneclock responds, “No! If we get that far, then we build ramps, and we all kill ourselves with fall damage so our friend wins!”

Not surprisingly, cassi-issac quits the match and leaves our lobby.

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After this incident, I had a talk with Saneclock about what he was doing and why. I especially wanted to know *how* he ended up in that situation. Saneclock explained to me something called “teaming.” Teaming is allying (perhaps only temporarily) with an enemy, for whatever reason. Teaming in video games predates *Fortnite*. Teaming had already been occurring in the video game *PUBG (Player Unknown Battle Grounds)*, which provided the momentum for this too-social behavior in the early stages of *Fortnite*. How do you team with the enemy? *Fortnite* is much more susceptible to teaming than other fighting games because of a

couple things: The game equips characters with a range of non-word communication techniques (dancing, emoting, stickers, graffiti sprays), and the game regularly awards prizes (like virtual clothing, accessories) to players who complete non-fighting challenges (e.g. “Dance on a Giant Cup of Coffee”). You can dance rather than shoot an enemy to indicate to an enemy that you would like to team up. That is what Saneclock did to make a friend.



*Eternelle and I team with a full, four-enemy squad late in a game before Eternelle killed them all.*

To better understand teaming, I searched for articles and Epic Games’ documents related to teaming. I was surprised to find that teaming is a form of cheating that does not involve hacking, glitching, or otherwise exploiting the software. Cheating is a severe offense: a player’s entire account may be closed without any refund or possibility of recovery. This is why Epic Games’ representative Mooney from the Fortnite Team had to post a prohibition and threat as early as the first week of the game’s launch, in July of 2017,

Heya folks,

Last week, we launched Fornite [sic] Battle Royale and since then have seen consistent reports of players teaming up. We plan to take teaming very seriously and have already banned some players!

This type of behavior is CHEATING and a BANNABLE offense (MOTD), the full Fortnite Battle Royale code of Conduct can be found [here](#).

Squads are coming soon, and we are hustling to get that in ASAP for you!

Be apart [sic] of the solution, not the problem. You can report teaming/cheating players by contacting our [Player Support team](#).

Thank you for helping to keep Fortnite Battle Royale a fun, fair and competitive experience! (Mooney 2017)

Now, Rule #2 of the “Fortnite Battle Royale - Code of Conduct” is

“Play fairly and within the rules of the game. Don’t cheat, AFK, grief, exploit bugs or glitches, team up in groups larger than the game mode allows (e.g. in solo matches do not work with other players, respectfully kill them instead) or impersonate others” (Fortnite Team 2017).



*This screen shows the menu option for a player to report another player for teaming.*

One of the top responses to Mooney is by SashaAM, “but isn’t teaming up and betrayals even part of the name giver of battle royal?” (Mooney 2017). This is an interesting response because the precarity of a relationship with others in a fundamentally antagonistic environment is part of what makes Battle Royale so wonderfully queer. The teaming aspect of *Fortnite* helps us broaden our analysis of queer identity in *Fortnite* to an analysis of queer community in *Fortnite*. The apartness of *Fortnite*’s teaming sociality can be characterized as what Leo Bersani calls in “Gay Betrayals” (2010),

a betrayal, a radical anti-relationship that may be the prerequisite negativity for an anti-identitarian community. In homosexual sociality, it is perhaps our antimonogamous promiscuity that best approximates this relational betrayal, a truly gay betrayal that frees



us from some of the benefits of a social assimilation to which some of us understandably but no less sadly aspire. (44)

Especially when you team in an already team-driven mode like Duos or Squads, you are betraying yourself—your whole team—for precarious community with the enemy. This is a perhaps overly abstract way of talking about the reality of precarious queer coalitions, which we know of well from queer activism:

The project of building an identity-neutral community or quasi-community—not unlike the illicit teamers in *Fortnite*—is *queer neutrality*. Neutrality can be found in queer activism as the gender-neutral criteria for membership in the coalition against compulsory heterosexuality. At the New York Gay Pride Day parade in 1990, activists in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) distributed “The Queer Nation Manifesto,” which contrasts the gender-neutral term “queer” to the term “gay”:

Why Queer? [...] Queer, unlike gay, doesn't mean male. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy.

The queer neutral expands from a gender-neutral coalition to an identity-neutral or impersonal coalition. This expansion destabilizes the boundaries of the umbrella term “queer” such that it refers to lesbian, gay, bi, multiple *ts* (including transsexual, transvestite, transgender) plus an inconsistent (and contested) combination of some of the following sexual and/or gender identities:

Q (questioning), Q (queer as a vague non-heterosexual identity), I (intersex), A (asexual as nonsexual, not cloned/cloning), A (allied heterosexual), L (leather subculture and sometimes shorthand for BDSM), F (fetish – often shorthand for BDSM), U (undecided –

replaces Q/questioning to make the palatable acronym QUILTBAG), 2S (two spirits), P (pansexual), P (polyamorous), and K (kinky).

An identity-neutral queer community is in tension with the ephemeral queer specificities that have driven queer activism, and the play between teaming and betrayal drives much of the dialogue in queer theories of neutrality.

Queer theorists of neutrality and impersonality include antisocial queer theorists and utopian queer theorists alike (from Leo Bersani's blindly narcissistic impersonalism to Jose Muñoz's disidentificatory impersonalism), and theorists of queer neutrality draw on French theorists of literary neutrality and semiotic neutrality (namely Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, but also Jacques Rancière). John Paul Ricco's work has significantly helped sustain and revitalize queer neutrality, and he has become a hot reference for a new branch of "neutral" queer aesthetic analyses covering: films (Brereton and Furze 2014; Chare 2015), performances (Guzmán and León 2015; Robbins 2015), photography (Davidow 2016), novels (Reinis 2017), and even philology (Snediker 2015), and I intend for this essay on *Fortnite* to add video games to the list. These texts refer to Ricco's account of queer community in some way, for example, "queer theorist John Paul Ricco argues that [...] Sharing separation becomes a being-together: an existence that is relational and shared, thus always a coexistence" (Reinis, 2017: 83-84). Similarly, *Fortnite*'s teaming sociality is ambiguously "Apart," as in the sense of *Fortnite Team* member Mooney's slip of the thumb, "apart of the solution," as opposed to "a part of the solution" (Mooney 2017).

Failures to dominate one's enemy—or failures to try to dominate one's enemy—are successful resistances to normative militancy, and this failure is a practice of queer community-building or coalition-building, sharing separation. Halberstam gives an example of children's

media that preserves the anarchy of child's play, "In *Monsters, Inc.* (directed by Pete Doctor and David Silverman, 2001) monsters hired to scare children find an affinity with them that wins out over a corporate alliance with the adults who run the scream factory" (Halberstam 2011: 44). In the plot of the movie, the affinity-alliance wins out over the corporate alliance because one of the children in the movie teams with the monsters. *Fortnite's* implicit encouragement of playing around has the political force of resisting *Fortnite's* own official rules against teaming, which makes *Fortnite* a case of low theory that may not be a neutral philosophical project, but *Fortnite's* low theory is a queer neutral political theory, a political theory of anti-normative military neutrality.

How does teaming in *Fortnite* help us better understand queer neutrality as an aesthetics of queer quasi-community? Like queer coalition-building, teaming in *Fortnite* is difficult, and the difficulties with teaming can help us understand the subtleties of community-building in queer neutrality. In *The Decision Between Us* (2014), Ricco's explanation of "shared separation" contributes to the project of queer neutrality by distinguishing queer quasi-community from the normativity of the *ready-made* community. Ricco offers an aesthetic analysis of the *already unmade*—like the already unmade bedsheets he contemplates—to chart alternate limits of queer quasi-community, help us understand the possibilities, realities, and perhaps necessities of a community divorced from identity politics. My concern is that queer theories of the neutral risk masking the complexity of queer community-building when the neutral is sustained through only static figures of representation or tropes of being "alone together," which we might call the queer trope of the *ready-unmade*. Variations on this trope include the unbecoming community, the disidentified community, the unavowable community, and the disavowed community. One problem with this trope of queer community is that tropes mask the work of production, and

queer community must be made rather than merely defined into existence. Queer theories of neutrality risk masking the labor of queer coalition-building if tropes of queer community erase the complex politics of representation. If there are neutral quasi-communities, whether they are ones of military neutrality or identity neutrality, they are produced through highly nuanced activism and artistry.

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After a few of my own attempts to team with the enemy, I discovered that it is very difficult because it requires literacy in a gestural grammar of give and demand. The first time I successfully teamed through my own, independent efforts, I had trapped someone in a closet. I tried to open the door to shoot them, but the enemy kept closing the door immediately. I started dancing, then through the door I could hear the enemy dance. I threw down my weapons, making a loud sound easily recognizable as unequipping. If you simply dance and drop your weapon for an enemy who does not have a gun, they usually grab your weapon and kill you. However, if you drop your weapon and grab it again before the enemy can grab it, dance, and so on, then the enemy knows you are teasing them. Sometimes a repetition of this teasing leads to the enemy dancing in return or duck-standing, i.e. rapidly ducking then standing to indicate a *yes*-like a nod of the head. Sometimes you toss the gun back and forth before setting off together to eliminate the now-outnumbered opponent.



Successful teaming: (A) I have already given both my guns away, (B) the enemy returns both guns, (C) I pick up one gun before we set off together.

In this case, I heard the enemy throw down a weapon, too. I danced over my weapons, and when the enemy came out, we collected our gear and began to leave. We met up with my frienemy’s squad member, who seemed to understand that I had been adopted by my frienemy. After a short run together, my frienemy’s squad member shot me in the back.

When gesturing to an enemy with intent to team-up, these gestures communicate little other than an open channel of further communication. This is phatic communication, which we must understand to complicate our account of queer coalition-building. Queer coalitions cannot be defined into existence, and gestures are part of the labor of bringing queer coalitions into existence. Gestures themselves are a paradigmatically phatic form of communication. In *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014), Juana Maria Rodríguez draws on Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the gesture as a “means without end,”

Agamben links gesture to mediality: the abyss between the production and reception of meaning that expresses the “communication of a communicability,” the “being-in-language of human beings” (5).

A gesture is “an action that extends beyond itself, that reaches, suggests, motions; an action that signals its desire to act, perhaps to touch... they extend the reach of the self into the space between us; they bring into being the possibility of a ‘we’” (Rodríguez 2014: 2). Phatic communication and queer neutrality condition one another. In *Social Media, Social Genres* (2014) Stine Lomborg argues that social media, in which we can include *Fortnite*, is primarily phatic communication, which is largely responsible for the creation of intimacy by foregrounding the relational function of communication (2014). We can understand phatic communication in *Fortnite* to be queer communication on the model of “phatic” uses of camera phones for “ambient play” (against the background of everydayness), which are part of “queer performativities” (Hjorth and D’Amazig 2017: 84). For example, there is a phatic regularity to initiating a round of Squads Fill, “Does anybody have a mic?” In *Gaydar Culture* (2010) Sharif Mowlabocus suggests that, very much like playing with random Squad members (Fills) and teaming with the enemy, digital cruising is not (exclusively) about sex but also about “queer congregation,” meaning computer-mediated “phatic communion” or “strengthening social bonds.”

The term “phatic communication” somewhat obscures a subtle distinction between intending to open a channel of communication and intending to manipulate someone else’s reception of a gesture such that they can recognize the intention to open a channel of communication. Basically, subtly negotiating with interpretation of intent is key to the nuances of successful phatic communication,

Phatic communion (a term from 1923) has been twisted into phatic communication and its directional relations like phatic intention and phatic meaning, but phatic communication should be understood as phatic interpretation. (Žegarac and Clark 1999)

Juana María Rodríguez similarly cautions,

Indeed, while gestures are everywhere observable, their meanings are often less easily decipherable, especially across spans of history and geography. As with all practices of interpretation, it is context that shapes and limits understanding. (3)

We can therefore put queer theories of communication and phatic communication into conversation with queer neutrality by thinking through what Roland Barthes in a lecture course on *The Neutral* [1977-1978] (2005) calls the ethics of the semiotic neutral, “What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course, is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance” (11). Phatic communication requires the subtlety of the ethics of the neutral, and phatic communication is crucial to queer coalition-building just as much as a neutral zone of playing with identity is crucial to the therapeutic alliance.

We can better complicate our understanding of phatic communication in *Fortnite* by reflecting on certain paradoxical outcomes in both antagonistic and friendly actions. One of the primary tools of teaming—dancing—is also a tool for mocking someone, as in, “I’m so much better than you I can waste time dancing by you while you ready-up, and I’ll still easily kill you.” Alternately, one of the primary tools of fighting, shooting the enemy, can be done in a teasing way, as in, “I could kill you, see? But I won’t because I want to play.” Tagging an enemy with a weak shot, like a shot from a shotgun at a distance, can be flirtatious if you alternate it with hiding, dancing, and dropping healing items. Istvan Kecskes’ discussion of the subtleties of phatic communication in *Intercultural Pragmatics* (2014) helps us understand teaming in

*Fortnite* to be, at times, a case of “anti-normative politeness” or “mock impoliteness,” which allows people to create “their own interactional patterns without having to conform to conventional patterns of use” (216). Being rude can be a gesture toward establishing a respectful relationship because rudeness can signify genuineness—this is a non-assimilationist way of initiating a coalition with the enemy. When the tone of a rude or antagonistic gesture is just right in *Fortnite*, it invites community otherwise, so “Anti-normative politeness reflects phatic communication” (216). What is key in phatic communication is what Immanuel Kant in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* calls *tone*,

After poetry, I would, if what is at issue is charm and movement of the mind, place that which comes closest to it among the arts of speech and may also very naturally be united with it, namely the art of tone. For, although of course it speaks through mere sensations without concepts, and hence does not, like poetry, leave behind something for reflection, yet it moves the mind in more manifold and, though only temporarily, in deeper ways; but it is, to be sure, more enjoyment than culture (the play of thought that is aroused by it in passing is merely the effect of an as it were mechanical association); and it has, judged by reason, less value than any other of the beautiful arts. Hence it demands, like any other enjoyment, frequent change, and cannot bear frequent repetition without inducing antipathy. (205; 5:328)

Between disrespectful dancing and flirtatious attacking, the use of phatic communication for queer teaming in *Fortnite* requires the ethics of the neutral tone, living according to nuance.

Phatic communication in *Fortnite* offers a way to suspend *gaming* (with all its rules) and start *playing* with others, teaming. Here I am suggesting that we think of such phatic communication as a deregulating communal gesture, one that opens a neutral zone of play



without set rules as opposed to a game that disciplines the players. In “Playing: Its Theoretical Status in the Clinical Situation” (1968), Donald Winnicott’s work on the psychoanalysis of children leads him to make this distinction between playing and gaming for therapeutic purposes:

It is good to remember always that playing is itself a therapy. To arrange for children to be able to play is itself a psychotherapy that has immediate and universal application, and it includes the establishment of a positive social attitude towards playing. This attitude must include recognition that playing is always liable to become frightening. Games and their organization must be looked at as part of an attempt to forestall the frightening aspect of playing. [...] The essential feature of my communication is this, that playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living. (597)

Because phatic communication subtly gestures toward further gesturing without being prescriptively normative of the principles of communication/communion, phatic communication is playful, and I would argue that phatic communication in *Fortnite* thereby participates in “the establishment of a positive social attitude towards playing.”

I wanted to talk with my frienemy, the first person I independently teamed with on my own. Because my frienemy’s squad member shot me, I was able to see my murderer’s name in the kill feed. I considered sending a friend request to this person in order to see if they were actual friends with my frienemy. However, the person who shot me may have been a fill (random squad member). Worse, even this attempt at phatic communication can come across as taunting in this environment. The fundamentally hostile environment often makes every tool of teaming a potential tool for mocking someone. Gamers often perceive friend requests from enemies as the enemy’s last-ditch attempt to insult them: One time an enemy friended me after I killed them. I

naively accepted, he joined my lobby, and he shouted through the mic, “You’re so trash!” Then he blocked me.

To circumvent contacting the frienemy squad member who killed me, I used *Fortnite*’s replay function to review the round I had just played. One benefit of *Fortnite*’s replay function is the ability to see the names of each player and exactly what each player does during the round, retrospectively. The replay of the gameplay was also interesting to me because I wanted to see my soon-to-be-frienemy’s reactions when she was in the closet because my ability to negotiate an enemy’s perception makes a huge difference in how the enemy perceives my attempts to open up a channel of communication.

So, I navigated to my frienemy. I saw her name, Nyu-Karumi, and I watched from her perspective as she closed herself in the closet. I then saw, from Nyu-Karumi’s perspective, a well-placed trap in the closet. If I had pushed the attack, I would have died.

I sent Nyu-Karumi a friend request. She accepted and joined my lobby. She did not have a mic, but she could hear me speak, and she sent texts apologizing for her friend (in-real-life) who shot me in the back. We started a round of Playgrounds together, one of *Fortnite*’s low-stakes game modes that players use for experimenting. I explained that I wanted to figure out a better way to team with people. Nyu-Karumi built a funny little structure with ramps and bounce pads, so I jumped on a pad, and my character was rapidly ricocheted around the rim until I was launched out at a random angle. I was greatly amused, thinking that if I saw such a structure in a game, I would certainly think someone was playing around. What else can you build to make friends?

Now, *Fortnite* features in-game art constructed from only player-available tools (as opposed to the developers’ tools like the Creative game mode), for example a large llama, a large

turtle, and a large pig, all made from common walls, ramps, and floors. If I could make one of these massive structures, someone would surely know that I am not taking the game seriously, especially since sourcing and building one of those large structures would be prohibitively difficult for anyone actually trying to do well in the game. However, I would surely be attacked within the time it would take just to gather the materials needed for a large structure, so I would need a smaller gesture. After a few experiments with the limits of ramp rotations, I made my first heart in Playgrounds. I have built hundreds of these hearts since then, many of them with Saneclock and other squad members who enjoy—or are otherwise compelled to repeat—teaming.



*Here are some of the first hearts I built in Fortnite's Playgrounds mode.*

This heart became my new tool for phatic communication in *Fortnite*. It does not greatly increase the odds of teaming, and most people do break my heart (they shoot it down), but if I construct hearts when no one is around, and if I wait, dancing with my weapons on the ground, I can often

attract someone from the distance who will run toward the large heart to dance with me, sometimes teaming with me before killing me.



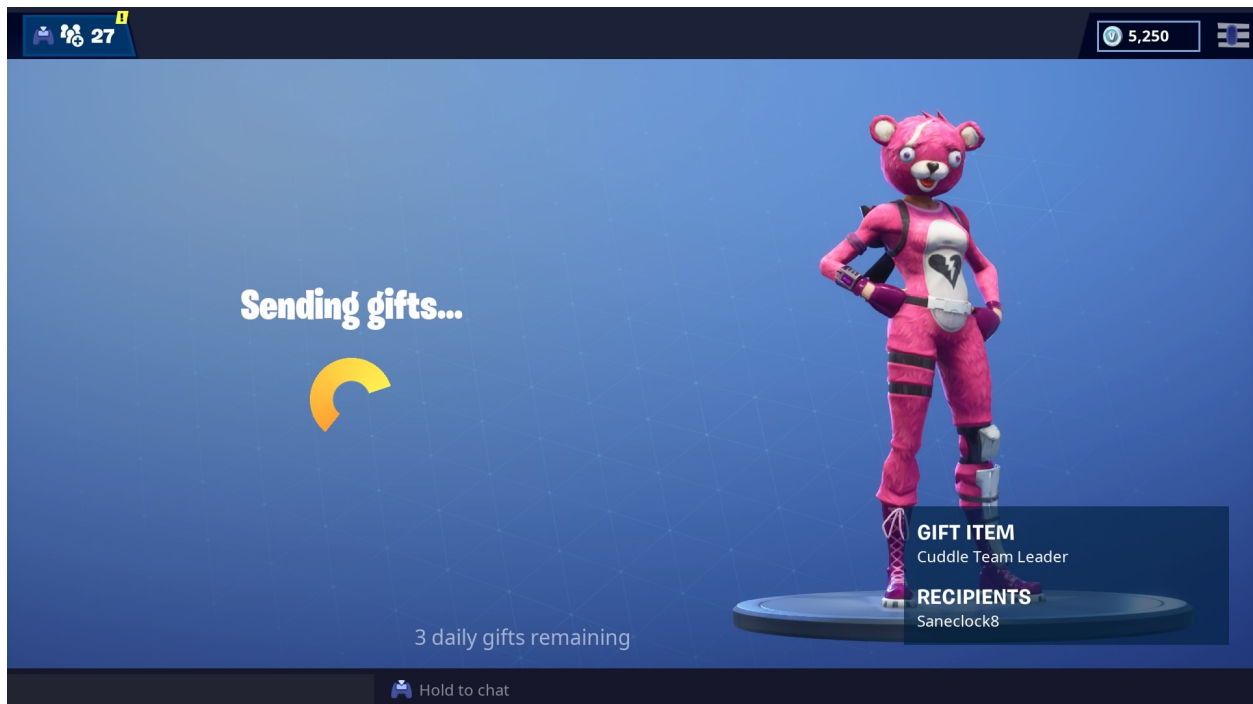
*Two hearts at right angles (left and right sides) successfully lure an enemy from their fort (center) for teaming late in a round of Solo mode.*

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On Sunday, February 17, 2019, I went to the community basketball court with my ball. A little later, two boys came to the court with a ball, too. We ignored each other for the most part, but there was only one hoop, so we had to pay enough attention to stay out of one another's way. After only a few turns of shooting, one of the boys missed a shot, bricking off the rim. Their ball ricocheted nearer to me than them, so I skipped and stretched out my arm, slung the ball back to

the boys only to see that behind them a woman had arrived on the court, staring directly at me in a not-so-friendly way.

Suddenly, my chest started hurting. I guessed the pain was from my chronic heartburn, and I was not feeling welcome, so I put my ball under my arm and went back to my apartment. I tried my regular heartburn treatments, but the pain only got worse. I called my mom for a quick ride to Hoag Hospital Irvine. In the Emergency Room, the doctors x-rayed my chest to confirm that my lung collapsed again. It was worse this time, a *tension* pneumothorax. I was really feeling my cocktail of morphine, Dilaudid, Norcos, and Percocet when the doctor explained that, because my right lung popped, there was basically a vacuum that “pulls your heart to other side.” Associating to heart-building with Saneclock and teaming with others in *Fortnite*, I thought, what a queer trauma.



*Gifting Fortnite's iconic Cuddle Team Leader skin to Saneclock.*



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