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Do Tell: The Explicit in Queer, Feminist and Trans Aesthetics

By

Emily Sutton

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair

Professor Joshua Gang

Professor Damon Young

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Abstract

Do Tell: The Explicit in Queer, Feminist and Trans Aesthetics

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Do Tell argues that the rise of self-consciously queer, feminist and trans literature since the 1960s corresponded with a rejection of opaque modernist aesthetics in favor of the explicit. As restrictions on sexual representation eased, formerly taboo subjects moved from subtext to text and were accompanied by a shift toward more direct, even middlebrow, modes of expression. By "the explicit", I refer not only to frank literary depictions of sex but also to the direct citation of contemporary sexual politics and subcultures within the text itself. I understand the explicit not merely as a synonym for the pornographic but as a complex representational challenge that has preoccupied contemporary art and literature. Yet despite this turn toward the explicit in contemporary fiction, queer literary criticism continues to index the representation of marginalized sexualities and identities to oblique, avant-garde forms. If much of the literature about sexuality produced since the 1960s rejects opacity, our priority as critics must be to understand the significance of this turn away from modernist aesthetics. From the unapologetically queer declarations of English memoirist Quentin Crisp to contemporary novelist Sally Rooney's almost painfully close attention to heterosexual mores, *Do Tell's* three paired case studies analyze the aesthetic possibilities and conceptual limitations of explicit representation. I pair Crisp with the sexually explicit photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and argue that, despite their radically different sensibilities, they share an aesthetics of "self-evidence" which refashions an older gay aestheticist preoccupation with style and surface to directly represent queer experience. I then pair Rooney and her predecessor, Erica Jong's distinctly middlebrow fiction of heterosexual mores, and argue that their style of "telling, not showing" attempts to reconcile feminist sexual politics and the realities of desire. Finally, I argue that Leslie Feinberg's and Jordy Rosenberg's transmasculine fictions both reclaim a version of didacticism and intentionality as a distinctly trans mode, yet evince strikingly different, even incompatible, understandings of the relationship between queer content and oblique form. These case studies highlight how contemporary fiction has made the formally unrepresentable radically visible, while also grappling with the non-obviousness of the seemingly obvious. The explicit emerges both as a radically necessary mode and an aesthetic conundrum. It not only necessitates a re-evaluation of the tacit investments of conundrum criticism but also offers a striking new lens through which to understand what happens to literary representation after modernism.

For Mum and Dad

Figure 1: "Leslie Feinberg and Quentin Crisp at Club 58, NYC", 13 April 1995, Morgan Gwenwald, Lesbian Herstory Archives

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Introduction: Explicit Aesthetics

Gay sex is not just *a* secret, but *the* secret. This was the foundational insight of queer literary criticism. Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* begins with the breathtaking assertion that Western twentieth-century thought and knowledge production is structured by a "crisis of homo/heterosexual definition." (1) "By the end of the nineteenth century", Sedgwick argues, "knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets, there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy" (73). Sedgwick's claim that secrecy itself became constitutively homosexual is echoed in D.A Miller's equally foundational "Anal Rope." Miller argues that, "until recently, homosexuality offered not just the most prominent, it offered the only subject matter whose representation in American mass culture appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation" ("Anal Rope" 119). This elusiveness, "excites the desire for proof, a desire that, so long as it develops within the connotative register, tends to draft every signifier into what nonetheless remains a hopeless task. Hence the desire assumes another, complementary form in the dream (impossible to realize, but impossible not to entertain) that connotation would quit its dusky existence for fluorescent literality, *would become denotation*" (123). What happens, however, when literature comes out of the closet? What does a subject, ostensibly, structured by its very inexpressibility look like when it emerges into "fluorescent literality?"

It is not just gay male desire that has historically been defined by its inexpressibility or unknowability. Terry Castle famously categorizes lesbians as "apparitional" figures in the popular imagination, "elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent at the center of the screen. Some may even deny that she exists at all." (2) If gay male desire has been characterized as impossible to *represent,* Castle suggests that lesbian desire has often proven impossible to *see* at all, even when it is ostensibly visible. Even the literary representation of heterosexual desire has been structured by silences and absence. Claire Jarvis posits that the central problem for the nineteenth-century realist novel was in representing sexuality while remaining within the confines of literary respectability. While the dominant mode of the marriage plot places heterosexual desire itself as the primary concern of literary fiction, its representation was conditioned by indirection and "descriptive haze". As Jarvis argues, "waves, oceans, blooms, and illuminations mark the sexual act within the respectable novel and allow a writer to refer to sexual action without realistically describing the act itself." (vii) Before the rapid shifts in social mores and obscenity laws in the mid twentieth century, literary sex, in all its permutations, existed in the negative space of evasion and insinuation.

Do Tell asks how identities and desires historically understood as fundamentally unrepresentable or unknowable are made radically *visible*. I argue that post-sixties art and literature have been characterized by their ongoing negotiation of what it means to make sexuality explicit. The easing of the final legal prohibitions on obscenity opened radically new aesthetic possibilities for the representation of sex and gender, while the contemporaneous rise of identity-based liberation movements made sexuality itself the object of renewed political interrogation. The explicit is not merely a political or a social problem, but an aesthetic one. The mere presence of the right historical

conditions for the creation of a newly liberated artistic and literary tradition does not resolve the fundamental problem of what properly explicit representation looks like. I understand the explicit as less an objective property of a text or a coherent aesthetic than a representational problem and a constantly moving target. To make sexuality obvious is far from a straightforward endeavor. This dissertation traces a series of case studies that grapple with this representational problem, from Quentin Crisp's 1968 memoir of a "self-evidently" queer life to the contemporary fiction of Sally Rooney and Jordy Rosenberg. These case studies in liberated sexuality are often characterized not by the oblique forms of modernist experiment or the evasiveness of metaphor, but by their mining of far more democratizing modes, such as the middlebrow, the sentimental, and the didactic. They are a series of imperfect aesthetic experiments in re-inhabiting and bending these forms to striking new ends. The literality that has made these forms aesthetically and critically suspect proves to be precisely the quality that lends them to explicit representation.

The case studies in this dissertation span identity categories and mediums, from the gay male eroticism of Robert Mapplethorpe's explicit photography, to Erica Jong's raucous account of the feminist sexual revolution, to the earnest, sentimental realism of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues.* Presented in three pairs, each part traces a particular aesthetic strategy for explicit representation (self-evidence, telling not showing, and intentionality) and its significance for a specific identity category (gay men, straight women, and transmasculinity). These divisions are not a comprehensive taxonomy, and, indeed, the point is that there are no neat conceptual groupings. The problem of explicit representation cannot be neatly siloed into the distinct subfields of queer, feminist, and trans literary studies, or even literary studies, art history, and media studies. Instead, it moves between and across them, taking on different valences and qualities depending on its context and medium. I am not, for example, only concerned with the representation of sex itself, but with sexuality and identity conceived more broadly. Despite their shared investment in making visible what was previously unrepresentable, a photographic image of a leather-clad man's backside is a rather different kind of explicitness from the life story of an effeminate gay man in mid-century London. In pairing distinct case studies, I emphasize the strikingly different stylistic outcomes that can result from similar aesthetic strategies and the effect of their relative emphasis on sex itself. Crisp and Mapplethorpe, for example, both attempt to resolve the problem of explicit representation by articulating a "self-evident" homosexuality that forecloses the plausible deniability intrinsic to earlier representations of homosexuality. Yet while Crisp cultivates a stylized, one-dimensional persona and disrupts the conventional forms of the *Bildung,* Mapplethorpe portrays startlingly graphic sexual acts with a cool, formalist precision. The explicit thus serves as an explanatory framework capable of drawing apparently disparate aesthetic projects into conversation.

My definition of the explicit also encompasses the direct citation of theory and politics. Medium and genre often determine the relative weighting of a more purely representational impulse and an explanatory one. The indexical quality of the photograph, for example, promises a far more direct representation of the sexual "real." The novel, by comparison, is far better suited to a more didactic or explanatory engagement with sex and identity. Texts such as Jong's *Fear of Flying* and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* incorporate the feminist theory in which their characters are steeped

at the level of the text, as well as the frank representation of sex itself. After all, the aesthetic preoccupation with the explicit that I trace was not simply the result of a newfound legal *ability* to represent sexuality, but also an outgrowth of the development of radically new ways of understanding sexuality itself. Despite their general rejection of modernist aesthetics, these texts nevertheless embrace a degree of theoretical self-reflexivity, though the form it takes is often resolutely realist. Much like Nicholas Dames' account of the contemporary novel's "theory generation," I argue that these texts' self-consciousness about politics and theory manifests not in their disruption of the realist novel's formal foundations, but at the level of content. They reflect the permeation of radically new modes of understanding gender and sexuality, such as second-wave feminism's interrogation of the politics of heterosexuality, into the fabric of the everyday. These case studies reflect varying degrees of ambivalence about politics and theory, from Feinberg's earnest and didactical Marxism to Rooney's more weary and cynical citation of poststructuralist theory and contemporary online discourse.

This project is also an interrogation of the tacit assumptions about the relationship between sexuality and form that underpin contemporary literary criticism. If, since the sixties, art and literature have been characterized by a turn toward explicit, democratizing modes of representing sexuality, this body of work has been comparatively underrepresented in queer and feminist criticism. That the process of teasing out, for example, the implicit queerness in pre-Stonewall texts or in the margins of ostensibly straight contemporary culture, has proven more compelling than interrogating work that is already, evidently queer, is not surprising. The pleasure and critical satisfaction that these kinds of "symptomatic" or "paranoid" reading practices can provide have been dissected at length in recent scholarship about critical methodology. To locate the latent sexuality in a text that is reluctant to disclose it is an almost paradigmatic act of close reading. The problem, however, is how this critical fascination with the implicit becomes a tacit set of aesthetic and political values. Queer criticism, in particular, has never quite shed its investments in the modernist forms on which its foundational scholars cut their analytical teeth. The oblique representational strategies specific to the particular historical moment linger as prescriptive, rather than descriptive, critical truisms. Queerness and modernism have been yoked together as equivalent terms, as in Heather Love's influential assertion that "the indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production." The connection between the two terms, she argues, "has an air of inevitability about it." (745) The metabolization of this connection by literary critics has resulted in the experimental and the oblique becoming not just one way that queerness *has* historically been represented, but how it *should* be.

The sense that experimental form is both a more appropriate and more politically radical approach to the representation of gender and sexuality builds on an older conflict in feminist literary criticism. Toril Moi characterized criticism in the eighties as split between an Anglo-American model that emphasized the political value in realist representations of the lives of women and a French feminism that located the political in experimental style itself. The result was, as Rita Felski notes, the "reenactment of an ongoing dispute between what can be described as 'instrumental' and 'aesthetic' theories of the text" (3). That is, feminist criticism found itself reiterating the conflict between

Lukacsian and Adornian models of literary political value, between realism and modernism. Felski argues that "the conflation of questions of modern literary style with an ideology of the feminine as quintessentially marginal and outside the symbolic order is of little help in theorizing the historically specific locations of women in culture and society" (5). While it is no longer a live conflict, as such, the French feminist proposition that political value resides in experimental form rather than political content continues to underpin contemporary scholarship. It is apparent in Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Valerie Rohy's arguments that the formal subversion of teleological narrative is a queer reversal of the normalizing forces of heteropatriarchal society. Similarly, it is in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's valorization of "entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" as indicatively queer (558).

The privileging of oblique forms as inherently queer is particularly evident in the paradigmatic role that Henry James has played in queer literary studies. In large part due to Eve Sedgwick's bravura close readings, Jamesian late style has served as a model for queer form. Sedgwick, while hedging her bets about not making James "an exemplar of "homosexuality," does "nominate the James of the New York edition prefaces as a kind of prototype of, not "homosexuality", but queerness, or queer performativity" ("Shame" 61). The great undisclosed secret at the heart of *The Beast in the Jungle* – *the* secret – is perhaps the quintessential instance of how silence and elision structure the representation of queer desire in the era of criminalization. Kevin Ohi extends this reading to designate Jamesian style itself as definitionally queer:

> The daunting complexity of James's writing *is* its queerness: the erotic in his work can be most fully understood when it is considered in linguistic rather than representational terms. The queerness of Henry James's writing resides less in its representation of marginal sexualities – however startlingly explicit those may be – than in its elusive and multivalent effects of syntax, figure, voice, and tone, in its systematic challenging of the presumption that desire can be, or ought to be, represented (2-3).

Ohi argues that queerness and formal complexity are essentially analogous. Ohi's assertion that "elusive and multivalent" language is *more* queer than the explicit representation of marginal sexualities themselves is telling, though our definitions of what constitutes explicit representation clearly differ.

If many of the (British, at least) literary texts that have proved foundational to queer studies were published in the period between the passing of the Labouchère Amendment (which criminalized "gross indecency" in 1885), and the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 (which decriminalized private homosexual sex), it is not surprising that the version of queer aesthetics that emerged from these readings emphasized opacity and secrecy. My argument here is similar to Alan Sinfield's contention that Oscar Wilde appears to us as "the apogee of gay experience and expression, because that is the position we have accorded him in our cultures. For us, he is always-already queer" (2). Sinfield contends that his "typicality is after-the-effect" and that "the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image" (3). That is,

Wilde appears quintessentially homosexual now because it was *he* who crystallized our understanding of what homosexuality looks like. Similarly, the emergence of a recognizably modern queer identity was coextensive with its overt criminalization, and the queer critical emphasis on literature from this period will necessarily associate queerness with secrecy and silence.

Yet the point of this critique of existing critical paradigms is not to launch a polemical argument for the aesthetic and political superiority of the explicit over the implicit. I do not want to simply reverse critical hierarchies. Rather, I take account of what explicit modes of representation make possible and, just as interestingly, what they cannot do. We need a critical vocabulary for the explicit, not because it is better or more radical, but to understand *why* artists and writers turn away from a modernist aesthetic to directly represent sexuality. While my case studies testify to the aesthetic potential and complexity of explicit representation, they also trace its limitations and the aesthetic dead ends it produces. The explicit is not purely obvious, monolithic, or crude. As Linda Williams' foundational reading of pornography has taught us, there is no such thing as simply presenting the raw stuff of sex. Explicit representation is not merely lifting the veil that had previously obscured sexual content to reveal what was hiding there all along. It requires the construction of a complex series of representational strategies and, indeed, a grappling with the stakes of representation itself. Indeed, the central aporia at the heart of this project is the non-obviousness of the apparently obvious. The direct representation of the sexual body, for example, is both a revelation and a dead-end that leaves the mystery of desire stubbornly intact. These gaps, failed experiments, and exhausted limits do not suggest that the explicit is a redundant category, but serve as productive entry points into questions about the nature of literary and artistic representation itself.

Evidently, I am not claiming that literature is capable of straightforwardly, uncomplicatedly signifying the real. Yet literary language and visual representation clearly do not exist purely at the level of connotation. Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt argue that ostensibly denotative language – conceived in their argument as primarily technical and referential – is no less complex and meaningful an object for literary critics than figurative speech. It is strange, now, to see Roland Barthes observe in *S/Z* that "connotation has not had a good press," so entirely have his arguments that connotation is "the way into the polysemy of the text" been internalized in contemporary criticism (7). Barthes defines connotation as "a deliberate 'static,' painstakingly elaborated, introduced into the fictive dialogue between author and reader, in short, a countercommunication" (9). It is no surprise, as Miller himself has argued so compellingly, that Barthes takes *Sarrasine* and its fundamental question of gender indeterminacy as his object for making this argument (*Bringing Out* 12-13). If we privilege the connotative qualities of language alone, the desire on the part of contemporary queer, feminist, and trans authors to explicitly represent that which was previously unspeakable can only ever be dismissed as naïve. There is necessarily a translational gap of some kind between sex itself and its representation, even in indexical media like the photograph. The texts I investigate often seem preoccupied with closing this gap, or at least rendering it as minimal as possible. The fantasy of a purely denotative, undiluted kind of representation serves as a horizon towards which a text can move and against which it can push. It serves as a propulsive source of tension rather than a naïve goal of absolute self-evidence.

Nevertheless, something *did* concretely, materially shift in the representation of sex during the latter half of the twentieth century. As Damon Young argues, "at the level of representation, a paradigm shift occurred toward the end of the 1950s" (2) as sex moved out of the private sphere and became public. There is no single social or literary turning point after which explicit representation became possible, but the gathering momentum of shifts in sexual and social mores throughout the 1960s. It is the sexual revolution and the subsequent feminist critiques of it. It is the Kinsey Reports, Masters and Johnson, and the birth control pill. It is the decriminalization of homosexuality and the Stonewall riots. It is the end of the Hollywood production code and the birth of the X-rated picture. It is Christine Jorgensen, ex-GI turned Blonde Beauty. More specifically for literary studies, however, there was a radical change in the legislation of obscene publications. Over the course of a decade, a succession of high-profile trials on both sides of the Atlantic effectively ended the overt legal censorship of literature.[1] In 1959, New York federal courts ruled that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not obscene. The following year in the United Kingdom, the same novel was ruled not to contravene the *Obscene Publications Act* in a blockbuster trial. A series of rulings in the United States ruled in favor of the publishers of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl,* William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch,* and Henry Miller's *The Tropic of Cancer.* In 1962, *Manual Enterprises v. Day* ruled in favor of a publisher of gay pulp novels and physique magazines. By 1968, Charles Rembar declared in his aptly named *The End of Obscenity* that (in the United States) "so far, as writers are concerned, there is no longer a law of obscenity." (490) Building on the 1957 decision of *Roth v United States* that a work was only obscene if it was "utterly without redeeming social importance" and "whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to the prurient interest," the obscenity trials of the 1950s and 1960s relied on expert witnesses like critics, publishers and professors to attest to the inherent artistic value and "social importance" of sexually explicit literature. The *Roth* ruling, while hardly offering a radical vision of literature, nevertheless authorized the idea that explicit representations of sex could be a credible component of literary fiction.

While the easing of obscenity laws cleared a path for sexually explicit fiction by and about heterosexual men, perhaps most famously Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), I am more specifically concerned with explicit writing about previously marginalized and newly liberated sexualities and identities. The "end of obscenity" was contemporaneous with the rise of the women's and gay liberation movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new body of fiction emerged that was either explicitly associated with or made possible by these liberation movements. Novels like Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963) and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) spoke increasingly frankly about women's sexuality. By the 1970s, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) would represent both lesbian and heterosexual sex, respectively, with an unprecedented level of graphic detail. Simultaneously, the women's liberation movement produced the new, short-lived genre of the "consciousness-raising novel." Novels like Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977) – marketed as the book that would change your life – and Alix Kate Shulman's *Memoirs of an*

[1] For a more detailed account of the legal changes, see Edward de Grazia's *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* and Loren Glass's *Counterculture Colophon, Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the, Avant-Garde.*

Ex-Prom Queen (1972), charted the dawning political consciousness of their white, middle-class "everywoman" heroines.

Simultaneously, as Guy Davidson argues, the celebrity of novelists such as James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Christopher Isherwood, and Gore Vidal was inseparable from their homosexuality in the popular imagination, even if they did not directly avow it. While slightly earlier texts, such as John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963) and Quentin Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), were explicitly gay, the category of gay literary fiction proper solidified in a rush in 1978.[2] Dubbed an "annus mirabilis" by Christopher Bram, this year saw the publication of a series of novels that explicitly represented contemporary urban gay life: Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance,* Larry Kramer's *Faggots,* Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City,* and Edmund White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples.* Explicitly trans literature, by comparison, was dominated by life writing until the 1990s. Partly a product of a medical imperative to produce a coherent life story and partly due to a lack of interest from publishers in trans fiction, the genre was exemplified by memoirs like British travel writer Jan Morris' *Conundrum* (1974). In 1993, Leslie Feinberg published *Stone Butch Blues,* the first really notable transgender novel, but a substantive corpus of transgender fiction has only begun to coalesce in the last ten years.

There is a risk of flattening this literary history into a liberal progress narrative, and of drawing too firm a historical line between implicit and explicit representation. The publication of books about marginalized identities is clearly not correlated with the end of that marginalization. Of course, texts that were explicit about sex were published before the sixties, and the end of obscenity did not mean that publishers were immediately eager to snap up narratives about newly liberated sexualities. Insisting on too neat a teleological movement towards increasingly explicit, liberated representation would be particularly naïve in a political climate where school libraries across America are acquiescing to parental demands to remove "explicit" books and NEA funding for queer and trans art is once again being withdrawn. Far from being resolved, the problem of explicit representation remains a live concern. The gesture of "bringing out" that which was previously hidden can only be repeated a finite number of times before becoming aesthetically stale, yet continuing to repeat this gesture can feel like a continued political imperative. What comes after the explicit is a problem my case studies often struggle to resolve. As such, the final chapter in this dissertation uses Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) as an anomalous counterexample, precisely to trouble the stakes of explicit representation in the present moment. Unabashedly modernist in its form and steeped in queer theory, the novel approaches trans representation through alternate history, metafiction, and fantasy. Its radically different approach to my other objects brings into question the continued viability of the explicit as a preoccupation or aspiration for contemporary literature.

My concern with the continued aesthetic viability of existing aesthetic modes, as well as the limited utility of existing critical frameworks, resonates with the broader re-evaluation of the once radical critical frameworks that have underpinned gender and sexuality studies for decades and have

[2] This is not to say that there are not historical outliers. James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943) prefigured this wave of openly gay fiction.

begun to show their age. Other projects have also returned to the women's and gay liberation movements as a source of alternate models of representation and conceptual possibility. While rightly critiqued by a nascent queer studies and third-wave feminism for their identitarianism and narrow scope, critical feelings towards the art and politics of these liberation movements have softened into a more nuanced engagement with the archive. Steven Ruszczycky's *Vulgar Genres,* for example, takes up the explicit sexual gay fiction of the period and similarly begins with the premise that the "end of obscenity" precipitated a fundamental aesthetic shift in the representation of sex. He argues that "the attenuation of federal obscenity law established the conditions for gay pornographic writing and gay literary fiction to emerge in relation to one another; thus, any attempt to understand contemporary gay literary production must do so through an understanding of its fundamental connection to the genre of gay pornographic writing" (3-4). Ruszczycky's extensive archival work illustrates the richness and depth of a largely undertheorized archive of sexually explicit gay men's fiction. Similarly, Ramzi Fawaz's *Queer Forms* asks a question relevant to my own project: "what happens when we attempt to formally represent the experience of being a gender and sexual outlaw" (6)? Rather than serve as a normalizing force, queer and feminist adoptions of popular forms "alter, retune, or enlarge the sensorium by allowing us to feel and experience gender and sexual nonconformity in new and surprising ways" (5). Fawaz argues that critical prescriptions about the radically queer nature of fluidity and formlessness can prevent us from properly engaging with the vibrancy of the archive of queer and feminist art and literature.

After all, despite the desire for it to be perennially remade anew, queer criticism does now have a three-decade-long history of its own. In Judith Butler's foundational "Critically Queer" they argue that "if the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively" (19). Now, perhaps, we are reaching the point at which queer theory begins to yield to newer frameworks for understanding gender and sexuality. Many recent interventions suggest that the very fluidity, unruliness, and anti-normativity that were supposed to keep queer criticism at the perpetual cutting-edge no longer resonate. Teagan Bradway, for example, argues that, counter to the prevailing orthodoxies of queer criticism, we need not understand "narrative as a conservative form that contains the unruly energies of sexuality" (711). Guy Davidson similarly questions "the reflexive valorization of instability, indeterminacy, and opacity that has come to dominate queer studies" and positions his own work as "a revision of queer studies' antiliberation bias and its critique of gay visibility and audibility" (3). Rather than being inherently normalizing, there is also something productive (even radical) in the structure afforded by both narrative legibility and cohesive identities.

The valorization of deviance, antinormativity, and indeterminacy also limits how we engage with the archive of queer cultural production itself. Kadji Amin argues that queer studies has responded to a historical "legacy of shame and stigma by loudly idealizing the alternatives that emerge from deviance", only to render many potential queer objects of studies insufficiently transgressive. (6)

These critiques suggest that the values and interpretative frameworks of "classical" queer theory have proven surprisingly unhelpful in taking account of culture itself. Amin suggests that queer criticism has confused the prescriptive with the descriptive. He observes that "one refrain in queer scholarship is that theory lags behind culture. What scholars mean by this assertion is that queer cultures abundantly generate alternative imaginaries and political potentialities that it is the theorist's humble work to recognize, document, and translate into the idiom of scholarship" (6). Culture, however, has a bad habit of failing to live up to our theoretical ideals. Miller, for example, is extraordinarily good at mapping how homosexuality is prevented from definitively entering the field of vision in pre-code cinema. Yet his writing about contemporary cinema that *does* explicitly represent gay sex, such as *Call Me By Your Name* and *Brokeback Mountain,* dismisses it as part of "an exasperating tradition… of the mainstream gay-themed movie" ("Elio").

Yet the aesthetics of high modernism have not proven a particularly viable medium for the explicit representation of sexuality. Instead, these texts have more often gravitated toward far more democratizing forms. As Jaime Harker argues of Christopher Isherwood, attempting to categorize him as a queer modernist neglects his indebtedness to distinctly middlebrow genres and the principle of readability (xiii). Tom Perrin defines the middlebrow as a productive repudiation of modernism:

> Middlebrow novels productively misread the modernist literary project as a mere gesture of empty rebellion. Through this misreading they attempt not merely to reproduce but to revise the conventions of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century model of prose fiction for a twentieth-century world. Influential postwar US opinion-makers such as Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald argue that twentieth-century modern society was so different from what preceded it that it required a radically new—modernist—artistic paradigm to represent it. By contrast, middlebrow novels reject this view, opting instead to adapt the conventions of realism in order to represent modernity (2).

My readings of Jong, Rooney, and Feinberg, particularly, reveal the complex, multifarious qualities of this middlebrow realist mode. While these texts are all broadly middlebrow, they manipulate a disparate range of realist traditions, each with its own history and representational stakes. Rooney fuses the nineteenth-century marriage plot with the radical concision of Raymond Carver and the tropes of the adolescent romance, while Jong takes up the excesses of the eighteenth-century picaresque and marries it to the confessional tone of the popular women's novel. Feinberg, by comparison, occupies the sentimental forms of the social problem novel and Marxist social realism. These explicit re-imaginings of realist form are hybrid in nature and shift between high and low, literary respectability and genre fiction. While not experimental in the ways that queer and feminist criticism have idealized, the form of these texts is no less complex.

This, this is not another argument for surface reading, but an assertion of the complexity of the ostensibly obvious. While my project resonates conceptually with some of the critiques levelled at contemporary criticism during the so-called "method wars," I am not rejecting wholesale "symptomatic", "suspicious," or "paranoid" reading practices. Given that queer criticism takes secrecy to be indicatively queer and queerness to be indicatively secret, it understandably emerges as the

archetypal example of this kind of reading. Certainly, Best and Marcus's description of symptomatic reading characterizes the foundational queer literary critical interventions that this project seeks to recontextualize, as "a specific type that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (1). Sedgwick herself, of course, re-evaluated her own critical method in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading". "Given that paranoia seems to have a peculiarly intimate relation to the phobic dynamics around homosexuality," she argues, "it may have been structurally inevitable that the reading practices that became most available and fruitful in antihomophobic work would often in turn have been paranoid ones." (126) Yet she concedes that "the mutual inscription of queer thought with the topic of paranoia may be less necessary, less definitional, less completely constitutive than earlier writing on it, very much including my own, has assumed." (146) Paranoid reading, contagious and "infinitely doable and teachable," is rewarding precisely because it satisfies that itch that Miller defines as that "desire for proof" (143).

Surface reading, by comparison, prioritizes "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth" (9). For Best and Marcus, it "assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves; what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is already present in them. Description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful. The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself" (11). Sedgwick's solution, reparative reading, is more of an affective shift than a change in depth. Defined as a practice grounded in a surrender to and a pleasure in the text, the question of what reparative reading might look like in practice remains hazy in comparison to her sharply defined account of the paranoid mode. This dissertation, by comparison, is a more thoroughgoing investigation of the very idea of obviousness itself. What the text says about itself, even and *especially* when striving toward perfect clarity and self-evidence, is itself a rich and complex site of inquiry. Further, the matter of who exactly a text is obvious to is a live question. While Rosenberg, for example, explicitly addresses himself to a subcultural audience of queer readers (and less explicitly, to readers who are themselves versed in theory), Crisp's project was grounded in a desire to attain the kind of self-evidence that breached subcultural boundaries and was universally legible.

My argument exists slantwise, or perhaps in inverse relation, to the argument for surface or reparative reading. We do not need to abandon the practices of so-called symptomatic or paranoid reading – we can and should read explicit texts as closely as we do implicit ones. Rather, it is the explicit *texts themselves* that are concerned with obviousness, surface, and self-evidence. Rather than taking these strategies at face value, I read them precisely as aesthetic techniques and deceptively complex ones. Our reading practices need to be responsive to the nature of our texts. We do not need to "draft every signifier" into the "hopeless task" of locating gay sex in, say, an Alan Hollinghurst novel. It is much more productive and interesting to read closely for potentialities and limitations in how, exactly, the text represents gay sex itself. My argument here is similar in intent, though to the opposite effect, as Benjamin Kahan's claim in *Celibacies* that "queer studies reads silence in only one way: reading the "absence" of sex as itself a sign of homosexuality. Queer readings tend to interpret

"absence" (preterition, silence, the closet, the love that dare not speak its name, the "impossibility" of lesbian sex) as "evidence" of same-sex eroticism, covering over our ability to read actual absences of sex" (3). Just as silence does not always mean we must read for absent sex, the presence of sex does not mean we should read for gaps and silences.

This dissertation, then, proceeds as a series of rather traditional close readings rather than as a disruption of critical methodology itself. This emphasis on close reading draws out that central aporia of the non-obviousness of the obvious. Close reading the seemingly obvious resists submitting too willingly to what the text tells us about itself, or, in the case of the texts that insist on the intentions of their authors, to map the places where they slip outside of authorial control. Explicit representation proves a much deeper, more existential problem than a simple negotiation of social propriety and legal freedom. They ask how close representation can get to the thing itself and what, if anything, this closeness can actually tell us. Again, my collection of case studies is far from a schematic or definitive accounting for the explicit as a single coherent aesthetic. It is instead a series of answers to the same fundamental question. There are clear conceptual and formal overlaps between the aesthetic strategies I focus on in each part, for example. Self-evidence, telling not showing, and intentionality are all slightly different ways of attempting to close the gap between text, audience, and critic. Similarly, while I emphasize how each strategy resonates with and resolves representational questions particular to one identity group, I do not insist on these resonances between intrinsic and exclusive. As I argue above, my lack of neat conceptual groupings is part of the point. The explicit is a problem that bleeds across literature and art, film and television, and across the organizational categories of queer, feminist, and trans studies.

What the explicit does offer is a potent new way of defining the contemporary. It is as much a literary historical concept as it is an existential question about representation. Emphasizing a shared question, rather than shared solutions, allows me to draw together disparate strands, genres, and identities, and makes the explicit a productive new rubric for making sense of what comes *after* modernism. This is not to insist that the twentieth century can be divided into a pre- and post-explicit period or suggest that this is the *only* means of accounting for the "post-modern." Rather, as an organizational framework, it facilitates surprising and productive new juxtapositions. The explicit accommodates and accounts for multiple characteristics of post-sixties literature, from the "theory turn", the return to realism, and the radical broadening of the canon. The significance of many of the attributes of contemporary fiction snaps more clearly into place when they are considered as responses to a new freedom, or indeed a new sense of obligation, to depict sexuality directly.

While each part begins with a short introduction, I will briefly summarize the structure and trajectory of each below. The first part pairs Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968) and the images from Mapplethorpe's sexually graphic *X Portfolio.* A somewhat anomalous pairing, I nevertheless argue that their work shares a compulsion towards "self-evidence." Taken from Crisp's description of himself as not only a self-declared but self-evident homosexual, I define self-evidence as radical legibility. Rather than occupying the shadow kingdom of connotation, to use Miller's terms, "self-evidence" seeks to foreclose all plausible deniability and present gay identity and desire so directly as to be unmistakable. In juxtaposing the indexical medium of photography and the discursive medium of life-writing, I

emphasize the different degrees of access these forms and modes have to this ideal of radical legibility. Mapplethorpe's work more obviously raises existential questions about the limits of what it is possible to "see," while Crisp interrogates the more narrative problem of what it means to represent an uncloseted life. Both embrace an aesthetics of surface, stasis, and constraint as a possible resolution, though it takes markedly different forms. For Crisp, this looks like a resistance to narrative altogether. If he is always already queer, there is nothing further for him to disclose and nowhere to go. His memoir eschews narrative momentum and cause and effect in favor of a perpetual present. Instead of development, he promulgates an idiosyncratic theory of "style" that emphasizes winnowing down and burnishing his existing qualities into a one-dimensional persona. Mapplethorpe's career is similarly marked by this process of burnishing a singular, heightened, and perfected aesthetic. His meticulously composed images combine classical restraint and the startlingly graphic representation of sex itself. His images play with the visual grammar of pornography, while seemingly attempting to transcend their indexing of the sexual real and achieve something like pure abstraction. For both Crisp and Mapplethorpe, the gesture of making the previously invisible visible loses its power the more it is repeated. Their embrace of constraint and perfectibility is a way of negotiating an aesthetic dead end – if there is nothing more to disclose, the only option is obsessive refinement.

The second part pairs Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). Rather more similar figures than Crisp and Mapplethorpe, both authors became bestselling avatars of their generation's sexual mores and feminist politics. Their fiction about the sexual and romantic lives of young women wrestles with the problem of how to reconcile feminist sexual politics with the reality of heterosexual desire. They negotiate this reconciliation by inverting the familiar maxim of the creative writing classroom and telling, not showing. I define this telling as a distinctly literal narrative mode, in which characters seem to directly and incessantly describe their feelings and circumstances. Rather than leave the political implications of their experiences tacit, for example, both novels have their characters directly analyze their lives through the lens of feminist sexual politics. Their version of explicitness is thus not only invested in representing sex itself, but in making sense of it. Both Jong and Rooney embrace a version of middlebrow realism that self-consciously positions itself somewhere between literary fiction and romance. What this looks like in practice, however, is discursive excess in Jong and radical concision in Rooney. Jong's protagonist, Isadora, is a relentless presence who cannot help but cite, list, and scrutinize. She self-consciously searches for an ideal of liberated heterosexuality, the novel's famed "zipless fuck," but finds herself perpetually mired in the "soupy longings" of romantic cliché. The novel nevertheless attempts, haltingly, to access a language for women's desire for men that accounts for its illogic. Rooney, by comparison, uses the cool and precise narrative voice of her protagonist, Frances, to access a similarly direct accounting for desire. The accretion of beautiful, precisely observed details at the novel's surface and Frances' insistence that she lacks an undisclosed inner life is belied by the novel's persistent, gentle irony. Like Isadora, Frances has ready access to the language of sexual politics but remains maddeningly inscrutable to herself. For both novelists, facility with theory is an ambivalent phenomenon. For Jong, the ability to name the problem brings her no closer to resolving it, whereas for Rooney, theory often proves a circular academic exercise. "Telling" proves both necessary and insufficient – a seemingly unavoidable

consequence of the permeation of feminist politics into everyday life, yet a fundamentally limited aesthetic strategy.

The final part pairs Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), two trans novels with equal claim to the title of being "first." While *Stone Butch Blues* was the first trans novel of any note, Rosenberg's was the first to be published by a major press. Stylistically and conceptually, however, the novels could not be more radically distinct, and unlike the other parts, this pairing emphasizes anomaly and difference. Both novels do share an abiding interest in intentionality, which I characterize as a distinctly trans representational strategy. In response to potential "misreading" of the trans body and the potentially voyeuristic gaze of a cisgender readership, these novels use the self-conscious assertion of authorial intention to manage the vulnerability of trans visibility. Feinberg embraces the didacticism of the sentimental social problem novel and intersperses the narrative of hir protagonist Jess' life with explicitly pedagogical set pieces. Written in an almost naïve, accessible tone, the novel solicits an earnest, affective response from its readers and models radical political empathy. Rosenberg, by contrast, embraces modernist experiment, using the metafictional structure of the novel to stage a deliberate process of withholding and disclosing information about its characters. This emphasis on intention makes the novels acutely self-aware of their address to an audience, yet Feinberg's democratizing approach contrasts with Rosenberg's deliberately narrow address to a (highly educated) audience of roguish, dissident queer readers. The novels represent vastly different perspectives on the relationship between queer and trans identity and formal complexity, and on the liberatory potential of theory itself. Whereas Feinberg resists the notion that queer content and experimental form are far from intrinsically linked, Rosenberg's novel reiterates prevailing ideas about the ambiguities, ruptures, and complexities of "queer form". This apparent incompatibility between the two novels is reflected in *Stone Butch Blues'* ghostly presence in *Confessions of the Fox,* in which it is mirrored and never cited. I use this incompatibility as a provocation. Is the explicit, exemplified in Feinberg's didactic realism, an increasingly naïve, redundant mode? Or is Rosenberg's appeal to the values of queer criticism a circular exercise that alienates the text from lived experience?

Part One: Self-Evidence

It is difficult to imagine two more outwardly dissimilar figures in contemporary gay culture than Quentin Crisp and Robert Mapplethorpe. Long a local curiosity in London, the eccentric Crisp became, arguably, the first unabashedly out public figure in British popular culture with the publication of his memoir *The Naked Civil Servant* in 1968. Deriving its title from his work as an artist's model on the government payroll, the memoir recounted his life as "not merely a self-confessed homosexual but a self-evident one" (5). His public persona combined nihilism and a willing embrace of poverty and squalor with a carefully cultivated aesthetic of painted nails, silk cravats, and an elaborate purple-rinse hairstyle. He was an anachronism in both Swinging London and the era of gay liberation, having retained an early twentieth-century understanding of his sexuality as a form of gender inversion. Mapplethorpe, by contrast, is the most notoriously sexually explicit artist of the twentieth century. In contrast to Crisp's studied effeminacy, the black leather-clad Mapplethorpe is synonymous with the wildly experimental, hyper-masculine gay sexual subculture of New York City in the decade between Stonewall and the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. While it is a relatively small fraction of his body of work, his career was defined by his starkly beautiful, sexually explicit photographs of BDSM and participants in the leather scene. This work became the object of a legal and political firestorm in the early 1990s, in which Mapplethorpe became an unlikely posthumous symbol of freedom of artistic expression.

My pairing of Crisp and Mapplethorpe in this first part is, I hope, provocative rather than willfully obtuse. The work of both artists attempts to resolve the same fundamental representational problem, despite their obvious differences in medium and aesthetics. Both worked in the immediate aftermath of substantive legal and social shifts that created new conditions of possibilities for gay representation, whether it be the legalization of private homosexual activity in Great Britain in 1967 or the rise of a gay liberation movement and the emergence of a newly public gay culture. For both Crisp and Mapplethorpe, this opening up of representational possibilities is also an aesthetic quandary – how do you actually represent something that has been constituted in the public imagination by its very unrepresentability? What new forms might an explicit gay narrative or image take, whether it be writing a life narrative that foregrounds rather than obscures its subject's homosexuality, or depicting gay sex itself on camera? Rather than develop a straightforward liberatory embrace of uncloseted representation, however, their pursuit of making their sexuality "obvious" often results in a dense, often frustrated, engagement with representation itself. I characterize Crisp's and Mapplethorpe's experiments in the explicit representation of gay identity and desire as both strikingly powerful acts of revelation and as a surprisingly conservative aesthetic dead-end.

This conceptual knottiness is inherent in the key term I take from Crisp himself to describe his and Mapplethorpe's aesthetics in this part: "self-evidence". By "self-evidence," I mean a deliberately obvious representation of gay identity and desire that is self-conscious about its own transparency. Rather than intimating sexuality through the negative space of connotation, their work seeks to make it radically legible and unmistakable. The problem, however, is that "self-evidence" is not so much a tangible property of a text as it is a critical judgment that necessarily implicates and is dependent upon the perception of its audience. To describe something as "self-evident" is to accuse

it of lacking any meaningful interpretative gap between what the text denotes and what it connotes. The problem, of course, is that this gap between denotation and connotation in which we tend to locate a text's aesthetic and conceptual sophistication is also precisely the gap into which gay representation has so often slipped. Self-evidence, as much as it promises a radically new kind of queer representation, is inescapably bound up with the threat of aesthetic impoverishment and oversimplification. In response to this problem, Crisp and Mapplethorpe, I argue, strategically embrace flatness, surface, and stasis as unexpectedly productive representational strategies.

In Crisp's case, the concept of self-evidence is inextricable from his retention of an increasingly obsolete understanding of sexuality as governed not only by the gender of one's sexual object choice but also by one's gender presentation. Crisp understands his sexuality as primarily constituted by his "style", a manner and look that he characterizes as both a carefully curated project and as having emerged fully formed. Accordingly, his memoir is not a *Bildung* or a coming-out story so much as it is an experiment in narrative stasis. It operates by oddly contradictory logics, wherein the poles of cause and effect, essentialism and constructivism are scrambled and reversed. There was, he argued, nothing but the persona "Quentin Crisp" all the way down. If homosexuality had been understood as the great secret and quintessentially private, particularly in the Wolfenden era, Crisp instead suggested that he had no private self at all. Mapplethorpe's version of a "self-evident" aesthetic, by contrast, is entirely dependent on depicting sex itself. The photographic image – particularly traditional film photography – bears a far more literal, indexical relationship to its subject matter than the written word. Mapplethorpe relies upon and exploits this indexical quality and seems to promise a startlingly unambiguous account of gay desire in its rawest form. Yet his images of sex rely, simultaneously, on their being real and not real. Mapplethorpe was unrepentantly formalist, and his images are consistent in the cool precision of their composition, lighting, and textures. The power of his sexually explicit images resides in their simultaneous striving toward pure surface and abstraction and their insistence upon their sexual content.

Crisp's and Mapplethorpe's embrace of constraint and stasis seems at odds with the idea of radically explicit gay representation. Yet their work underlines the limitations of ascribing radical political value to any one particular aesthetic mode. In this part, and particularly in the case of Crisp, I emphasize the surprising conservatism of an aesthetic of "self-evidence". While their careers were in many ways unimaginable without it, neither Crisp nor Mapplethorpe was particularly invested in the politics of gay liberation. The conservatism of their aesthetics is not, however, merely a matter of personal political investment but an extension of the problem of explicit representation. For both Crisp and Mapplethorpe, the cultivation of an explicit aesthetic brings with it the risk of aesthetic calcification. If the act of making explicit, or drawing the previously unrepresented to the surface of the text, has an extraordinary initial impact, it is a trick that cannot be repeated indefinitely. In a strange way, their work loops around into a remodeled iteration of a much older gay aestheticist emphasis on glossy, burnished surfaces, not by way of deflecting gay content but by having made it so obvious.

Despite their surprisingly equivalent conceptual underpinnings, Crisp's and Mapplethorpe's aesthetics are starkly different in practice. This difference is, in part, one of context. There is a chasm between the tentative period between the legalization of homosexuality and the growth of the gay

rights movement in the United Kingdom, and the bold, far more publicly sexually oriented gay culture of the urban United States in the late seventies. Crisp's work is so bound up in the distinctly British tradition of gay conservatism that his work would be bafflingly anachronistic in Mapplethorpe's context, just as Mapplethorpe's would be near unthinkable in Crisp's. More significant still to the differences between the two artists is their relationship to their own sexuality. Crisp views his own self-evident homosexuality as an affliction, and *The Naked Civil Servant* feels more like a solipsistic effort to create a narrative shape for Crisp's own eccentricities than a portable model for gay representation. It is an experiment that stands alone, shaped in no small part by its author's conscious anachronism. Mapplethorpe's photography is far more grounded in a desire to capture his evident pleasure in his own sexual life and erotic community. While not really documentary in its intent and often abstract in its form, his work nevertheless captures the erotic preoccupations of a particular subculture. Even as I identify a conservatism in Mapplethorpe's work, it is far more readily identifiable as a "liberated" kind of gay expression. It is useful, perhaps, to think of their differing relationship to the "naked." The "naked" in the title of Crisp's memoir conjures an abject, vulnerable kind of nudity. It is exposure as a tedious, desexualized form of waged labor, akin to Crisp's sense of his self-evidence as a kind of inescapable public humiliation. Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit work, however, embraces the naked as a rawer, more obviously sexual alternative to the art historical tradition of the nude. Mapplethorpe defies the tasteful, aestheticized protocols for depicting the naked body by foregrounding the genitals and sexual activity itself.

This part similarly emphasizes how the explicit shifts in form and poses distinctly different representational problems as it moves between media. In life writing and photography, Crisp and Mapplethorpe both work in mediums defined by their relationship to truth and, seemingly, rather well-suited to the project of making sexuality explicit. The "autobiographical pact" of the memoir relies on the authorial promise that what it recounts is "true" – if not always entirely literally. The photograph, on the other hand, physically indexes reality itself. Yet, as I have argued is the case with explicit representation more broadly, the apparent simplicity of this straightforwardly representational relationship with reality proves complex. Crisp's desire to radically flatten himself into one-dimensionality resists the confessional imperative of the memoir. Crisp's confession is essentially that there is nothing to confess. Mapplethorpe, on the other hand, seems capable of achieving a far more literal representation of queerness itself precisely because of the indexical properties of the photograph. Yet the increased clarity and explicitness seemingly promised by photography present Mapplethorpe with far more fundamental questions about the nature of representation. "Self-evidence", I suggest, is a complex proposition and negotiation between text and reader, both aesthetic mode and abstract aspiration. The naked, whether metaphorical or strikingly literal, is not simply the absence of obfuscation but something rather more dense and confounding.

"My life solidified around me like a plaster cast": Self-Evidence and Stasis in *The Naked Civil Servant*

In 1970, Quentin Crisp appeared in a strikingly intimate television documentary. Filmed in his tiny bedsit, Crisp monologues as the camera explores the details of his domestic life.[3] The camera lingers over dirty plates, a filthy, grease-splattered stove, and stacks of old phone books. A disembodied finger sweeps through the extraordinarily thick layer of dust on the base of a lampshade. Yet amidst the clutter and filth, Crisp is immaculate, his mauve hair elaborately coiffed. He declaims while posing with the studied elegance of an artist's model, while mixing up a mug of the meal replacement he has come to prefer over shopping for real food. This first introduction of Quentin Crisp to the television-watching public is a remarkably sympathetic portrait of his eccentricity and unabashed queerness. Comparatively little-known outside of the United Kingdom, Crisp's selection for the documentary was predicated on his local celebrity and the recent publication of his memoir, *The Naked Civil Servant,* in 1968. Born Denis Pratt into a "downwardly mobile" middle-class family in 1908, he had previously cobbled together a meager living as a sex worker, an artist's model (the source of the memoir's title), and a technical writer. Yet even before the publication of *The Naked Civil Servant,* his distinctive style of wide-brimmed hats, heavy makeup, and silk cravats made him an unmistakable figure of visible queerness in the period before homosexual law reform. While he was generally considered benignly eccentric by fellow Londoners, his visibility also made him the frequent target of violence. A made-for-television film adaptation of the memoir in 1975 made him a household name as a heroically defiant eccentric. While he wrote further memoirs and books of ostensible life advice, his fame was largely predicated on television appearances and live shows in which he would proffer advice and answer questions from audience members. He would visit and fall in love with New York City in the late seventies before making it his permanent home in 1981.

As famous for his squalid living conditions as his personal style, the documentary emphasizes his willing embrace of confinement and stasis. Glancing down from his window as the camera crew unloads their equipment in the street below, we hear Crisp in voiceover observe that:

> This is the window from which on a clear day you can see normality. This room is not only a room in a boarding house but a ward, a private ward, in a home for incorrigibles. And then again, it's a cell and here I've remained for thirty years and whatever has gone by in the outer world has passed me by. But I think if anyone said to me 'if you go on like this life will pass you by', I would reply thank God for that, I nearly got mixed up in the beastly thing.

Crisp's delivery of this morbid vision of a self-contained existence that stubbornly resists the passage of time itself is serene and measured. This odd admixture of nihilism, style, and squalor would define Crisp's utterly singular life and work. The intimacy of the camerawork of the 1970 documentary could

[3] There has been a slight turn toward using she/her pronouns for Crisp, given statements towards the end of his life that he was may not have been a gay man, but a transgender woman. I choose to use he/him pronouns for Crisp, not to foreclose the possibilities of his being something other than a cisgender man, but because he did not express any preference for feminine pronouns in his life. Rather than risking anachronism, I instead use the older category of "queen" as the most useful and historically appropriate term for understanding Crisp's relationship to gender and sexuality. Predating the solidification of the idea that sexuality was a matter of the gender of one's sexual object choice, rather than gender presentation, the category of queen was used to encompass a spectrum of individuals from effeminate gay men to transgender women.

seem like voyeurism, yet Crisp is so self-aware and unconcerned by the intimate glimpse of his living space that he dares the viewer to pity him. Instead, he remarks that, "I haven't cleaned this place since I got here and that's nearly thirty long dark years ago, and as you see it merely doesn't look clean, that's all." As the camera lingers on the sheer scale of the dust, we are invited to disagree, but Crisp is so commanding that it seems irrelevant. Crisp may describe his room as a private cell, but it is also an open book and a public stage. In making the most intimate of spaces an object for public consumption, he suggests that there is no effective distinction between his private and public selves. The result is a curious flattening of himself into something like a caricature. However, Crisp's deliberate one-dimensionality, studied manner, and self-conscious resistance to the passage of time are a deliberate, if idiosyncratic, response to the problem of explicit representation.

While Crisp can and has been characterized as a figure of radical queer defiance, Crisp's "self-evident" version of explicit representation is fundamentally conservative. However, this conservatism is a more nebulous, diffuse aesthetic than a simple party-political allegiance and is undergirded by a fatalistic understanding of historical change and human nature. What Crisp calls "style" (essentially an aesthetics of the self) is grounded not in liberatory freedom but in an embrace of formal containment and stasis. Further, this formal conservatism adapts and reimagines a much older, distinctly British tradition of gay conservatism. Since the late nineteenth century, homosexuality has been an explicitly classed phenomenon in the British cultural imaginary. While an association between aristocracy and effeminacy has existed since the seventeenth century, in Sedgwick's reading, a coherent linkage between the aristocrat, the homosexual, and the aesthete did not solidify until the late nineteenth century. Alan Sinfield argues that the Wilde trials were the moment when "the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus" of effeminacy, leisure, aestheticism and queerness are "transformed into a brilliantly precise image" – that of the modern homosexual (3). This yoking of the perceived effeminacy of the aesthete with that of the leisure class stands "in opposition to middle-class, philistine, masculine practicality" (98). During the seventies, a more militant gay Left would explicitly challenge the association between homosexuality and the ruling class (151). However, the archetype proved remarkably persistent. Sinfield notes that, well into the twentieth century, "unless there were really explicit signs, queers were generally assumed to be leisure-class. And conversely leisure-class men might fall under suspicion, regardless of their actual preference" (137). Crisp's own adoption of upper-class mannerisms, despite living in a state of near-destitution for much of his life, is symptomatic of his broader attachment to increasingly anachronistic frameworks for understanding his sexuality.

Crisp's ability to become a beloved public figure and television personality in spite of, and even because of, widespread homophobia is also coextensive with this distinctly British understanding of the role of gay men in society. What I categorize as gay conservatism has often been preoccupied with the accrual of cultural capital. Eve Sedgwick argues that one of the consequences of the availability of an aristocratic role to middle to upper-class British gay men has been the "considerable, tacit, and in many respects conservative male homosexual influence over English High Culture" (*Between Men* 93). Joseph Litvak similarly argues that the nebulous quality of sophistication has been coded as queer: "we have learned from gay, lesbian, and queer theorists that gay people – especially

gay men – have traditionally functioned as objects of such distinguished epistemological and rhetorical aggressions as urbanity and knowingness. But, in the Western *imaginaire,* gay people also function as subjects of sophistication." (4) Neil Bartlett's account of gay connoisseurship similarly conceives of it as a vestigial result of the association between aristocracy and homosexuality. He argues that for the men of Wilde's ilk, "it was precisely their entry into 'homosexuality' that allowed them to enter rich houses, the Savoy hotel, luxurious interiors" (180). This proximity to the ruling class further inflects his argument that contemporary gay culture is a form of elitism: "to be a connoisseur is to be a member of an elite – not necessarily the elite of the wealthy, though always close to it in inspiration at least. We may no longer pose as aristocrats, but the crucial point is that we still see ourselves as somehow above or apart from the world of production, licensed to play" (181). Joseph Bristow argues that while the status of the queer man as aesthete tastemaker enables a skewering of middle-class mores from within, it is a nevertheless a "perilous proximity" (34). This idea of being at once dissident and inexorably compromised is crucial – gay conservatism is neither wholly continuous with establishment power nor is it particularly equipped to challenge it. The presence of gay men within the establishment, or their cultural affiliation with it, does not mitigate its homophobia, and, as Bristow emphasises, one's position in the centre is always in some way provisional.

Perhaps the most obviously conservative aspect of Crisp's public persona is the undercurrent of homophobia that underpins even his most strident declarations of his right to exist. Throughout *The Naked Civil Servant,* heterosexuals are invariably referred to simply as "normal people", even "one's betters", yet they are rarely presented as anything more than marginally more fulfilled than Crisp himself. His simultaneous deployment of a medicalized language of stigmatization, and even while insisting on the necessity of his own visibility, is a product of the historical moment from which it emerged. *The Naked Civil Servant* was published in the relatively brief sliver of time between the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 and the foundation of the British iteration of the Gay Liberation Front in 1970. The nature of the text reflects this interstitial moment – frank enough that it is difficult to imagine it being published much earlier, but not yet able to marshal the vocabulary and concepts of gay liberation. If Crisp was not a gay liberationist, nor was he invested in what would now be termed the respectability politics of the gay political movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Pre-liberation groups such as the Homosexual Law Reform Society, founded in 1958 in the wake of the *Wolfenden Report's* suggestion that private homosexual acts be decriminalized, tended to be discreet and ostensibly non-partisan. Jeffrey Weeks describes the organization as "essentially a classical middle-class single-issue pressure group of a type which flourished in the 1960s" (171) and stresses their investment in appealing to the general public and politicians rather than providing a community for homosexuals themselves. Regardless of Crisp's lack of interest in this kind of organized politics, his highly visible queerness left him outside of the purview of a political movement predicated on discretion and rational reform.

Crisp's governing framework was not so much political as an idiosyncratic understanding of "style" as an all-encompassing model for living. *How to Have a Lifestyle,* written shortly after *The Naked Civil Servant,* codifies this philosophy, albeit obliquely, through a series of aphoristic definitions and case studies. Style, he argues, is "not the man; it is something better. It is a dizzy, dazzling structure

that he erects about himself, using as building material selected elements from his own character" (*HTHAL* 7). This definition is predicated as much on carving out the negative space around style as it is on describing it. It is not fashion, wealth, learning, beauty – it is instead perfected and heightened individuality: "an idiom arising spontaneously from the personality but deliberately maintained" (*HTHAL* 8). Crisp is quick to differentiate his approach to style from Wilde's, insisting that contrary to his declaration that "in matters of importance, it was not sincerity that mattered but style", arguing instead that "to the true stylist they are the same thing" (*HTHAL* 8). Rather than aphoristically reverse the weighting of surface and depth, trivia and significance, Crisp instead suggests that there is nothing *but* style. It is the deliberate cultivation of innate qualities, simultaneously constructivist and essentialist. Crisp emphasizes character (and sexual orientation) as largely an accident of birth, but an accident around which a beautiful container can be constructed.

Crisp acknowledges that there is something inherently conservative about this understanding of selfhood. In *How To Have a Lifestyle,* he asserts that,

> Political stylists are usually conservatives. This is not because Tories so often come from the upper classes and have learned to speak ever so nice but because conservatism is in its nature on the side of style; its object is to erect barriers – to preserve forms and rituals. The Liberal and Labour parties are without style; their very names condemn them, but even called by other names they would smell as sour. Their aim is to draw us all toward uniformity (*HTHAL* 110).

His version of style emphasizes preservation and formal constraint in and of themselves. It is not what is being preserved that is important so much as the fact that it *is* being preserved. Within the terms that Crisp sets, conservatism is on the side of the sharply differentiated individual, not because it offers more freedom but *less*. Self-expression is facilitated instead by an embrace of consistency and restraint. This theory of style gives shape not only to Crisp's understanding of his own sexuality but in the narrative shape of *The Naked Civil Servant* itself. Crisp recounts his life as the elaborate erection of barriers, within which he can replicate and refine the forms and rituals of a highly particular, increasingly anachronistic kind of homosexual identity.

This singular understanding of both selfhood and narrative is evident from the memoir's aphoristic opening line, whose initial semblance of logic quickly gives way to an off-kilter warping of cause and effect: "From the dawn of my history I was so disfigured by the characteristics of a certain kind of homosexual person that, when I grew up, I realized that I could not ignore my predicament." (*NCS* 5). Crisp suggests that the plot of his own life will be constituted by inscrutable and largely arbitrary temporal markers that bear little resemblance to the conventional milestones of a life. Rather than change, he suggests that development is merely a process of reconciling himself with what always has been and always will be. This obtuse sense of teleology governs and complicates his understanding of his own sexuality. For Crisp, one's sexuality is less a matter of desire than it is to possess traits that are recognizably associated with gay men. These traits are not only innate but unmistakable and radically legible to both himself and others. Yet as Eveline Kilian points out, these early passages are temporally impossible: "how can a baby already display the marks of the future (drag) queen, for example" (172)? To explain "the whole set of stylizations that are known as 'camp'", Crisp argues that

effeminate mannerisms were, in 1926, self-explanatory. Women moved and gesticulated in this way. Homosexuals wished for obvious reasons to copy them. The strange thing about 'camp' is that it has become fossilized. The mannerisms have never changed." (*NCS* 26) The ostensibly innate traits that mark him from birth are, in fact, the product of a *later* moment in time. While he gives a superficial sense that he is locating himself within a historically specific queer culture, he instead collapses the conventional logic of cause and effect into the ahistorical calcification of a particular kind of homosexual expression as innate and inevitable.

Characteristically, his emphasis on style and his preservation of a distinctively aphoristic narrative voice tend to subsume content. In accordance with his preoccupation with surface effect, Crisp will always defer to the most rhetorically effective, witty, or deliberately obtuse construction over logical consistency. Crisp particularly relies on the language of the "obvious" for rhetorical effect. Acutely aware of his own idiosyncrasy, his declarative statements mask logical skips and cultural assumptions with the language of conventional wisdom. Why camp might have fossilized in 1926, specifically, is admittedly strange but is not explained. That gay men would wish to copy women requires no further scrutiny within his model of sexuality as gender-inversion. Indeed, it quickly becomes apparent that he perceives actual sexual practice or objects of desire as secondary to mannerism and surface effect. He does not recognize in himself an innate desire for men, but rather recognizes that he is *read* as homosexual by others. He becomes, he quips, "not merely a self-confessed homosexual but a self-evident one" (*NCS* 5), his sexuality so radically legible that it is more akin to a disfigurement than an internal orientation. The rhetoric and gestures through which Crisp expresses his sexuality are not, in this construction, the outward signs of an inner identity but actually *constitute* it.

Crisp's model of identity as an innate form of disfigurement generates its own narrative logic or, more specifically, an *anti*-narrative logic. If he emerges fully formed, he does not change so much as allow the negative space of the world to settle in place around him. "As soon as I put my uniform on," he argues, "the rest of my life solidified around me like a plaster cast." (*NCS* 5) To describe his radically effeminate style of dress as a uniform seems incongruous, but reflects his sense of style as the willing embrace of constraint for its own sake. The strikingly claustrophobic image of his life hardening around him like a plaster cast is thus presented with resignation rather than horror. He often characterizes his life as one of studied idleness and resistance to gainful employment. Yet in these opening passages, his inertness seems less willed than an inevitable consequence of his sexuality, as "in major issues I never had any choice and therefore the word regret had in my life no application." (*NCS* 6) Crisp describes his life as a stilted, physically arduous grappling with the passage of time that is only occasionally under his own control: "so black was the way ahead that my progress consisted of long periods of inert despondency punctuated by spasmodic lurches forward towards any small chink of light that I thought I saw." (*NCS* 6) He declares that his "existentialist" solution to the "problem" of his homosexuality was to "exercise[e] the last vestiges of my free will by swimming with the tide – but faster" (*NCS* 5). If the course of his life is negatively predetermined by his sexuality, his only means of exerting influence is to intensify and hasten the inevitable. Crisp characteristically mixes his metaphors here – sometimes his life is utterly static, at others it is a tide that sweeps him inexorably

forward, yet one that he sometimes works desperately against. Immediately, however, the memoir forecloses any sense that it might abide by the conventional markers of a life and that his sexuality places him in an oblique relationship to teleology. The narrative shape of his life is a fractious and strange alternative to heteronormative convention, but with none of the self-conscious subversion that would characterize subsequent critical accounts of queer time.

Crisp's wariness of coherent developmental narratives is particularly apparent in his glib account of the Freudian highpoints of his childhood. As Paul Robinson notes, Crisp explicitly parodies a Freudian account of homosexual childhood development, going so far as to suggest that "my parents and I constructed between us the classic triangle for all the world as if we had read the right books on psychology" (*NCS* 10-11). Conscious of the expectation that his memoir would provide grist for a psychoanalytic account of his deviancy, Crisp responds by providing details so *obvious* that they resist interpretation. He muses on strategically soiling himself as a "love gift" for his mother and quips that his father's fastidiousness extended to eating bananas with a knife and fork, "to modern minds a dead give-away if ever there was one" (10). Crisp walks us through a more sustained process of analytic recall when he extrapolates on the vague memory of the unpleasant sensation of "drawing something long – a thin tube, a piece of cord – between my finger and thumb". In a moment of auto-analysis, "lying on in bed having another go at my half-buried past", Crisp surmises that this object was part of the coverlet on the cot in which he slept next to his parents' bed (*NCS* 8). This revelation leads to his recollection of a textbook primal scene – his mother checking whether he is asleep, his father letting out a "long, despairing groan" (*NCS* 9). The unearthing of this memory is, however, deliberately deflated: "I cannot say that, when I recalled all this, the scales fell from my eyes and the meaning of my life was suddenly clear. I merely experienced a pleasant relief as though I had solved a clue in a long-abandoned crossword puzzle" (*NCS* 9). The punchline to this story is a rejoinder to over-eager Freudians: "the only practical use I ever found for this revelation was that it enabled me to answer with certainty one of the questions that doctors and psychologists always asked me. Did my parents ever make love after I was born (*NCS* 9)?"

This winking determination to stay one step ahead of his potential analysts is applied, more precariously, to the question of childhood sexual abuse. While he makes a show of narrating the process of recalling his primal scene, he obfuscates about being "kidnapped" by a rag and bone man as a young man. The incident itself is downplayed in favor of the attention it cultivated – "only about two hours has passed, but the whole neighborhood had been stirred up, and my mother had telephoned the police. This was nice (*NCS* 8)." This tone of gentle amusement extends to the more unsettling revelation that "unfortunately the doctor who examined me on my return advised my mother never to question me about the incident. That was a pity, for now I can remember nothing of my journey (*NCS* 8)." This intimation of repressed memories of abuse, even when framed as nothing more than a mildly annoying gap in his memory, is a weightier and potentially more dangerous revelation than his father's discomfort with phallic symbols. As if to offset this, he swiftly counters with a story about having *not* been abused by "a down-and-out actor" directing a school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* who was later arrested for "seducing one of the boys (*NCS* 10)." Crisp laments that he was unable to convert "the greatest scandal in Sutton" to his advantage, not having

been abused himself despite giving us the unsettling image of himself "perched on the knee of its central character" while "he powdered my face and declared openly that I was his favorite (*NCS* 9)". The audacity of suggesting that he would rather have been the subject of this scandal is a barb aimed at readers who might attribute his homosexuality to childhood seduction. Crisp dares to suggest that his homosexuality has nothing to do with his development – it simply *is* and always was.

The scenes in the memoir that most resemble a conventional coming-out narrative are those in which Crisp finally locates himself in a queer community. Yet even here, Crisp emphasizes his being always already queer, always already legible. He does not so much seek out London's queer subculture as find himself interpolated into it. He recounts passing queer sex workers in Piccadilly who, reading him as one of them, would remark with a world-weary comradeliness, "isn't it terrible tonight, dear? No men about. The Dilly's not what it used to be (*NCS* 25)." Crisp admits to never having seen or conceived of male sex workers before, yet they immediately recognize him as one of their own rather than a potential client. This sense that Crisp is somehow already, seamlessly a part of the community he has yet to join is far more distinct in the memoir than in the film adaptation. In the film's expanded version of this scene, he is recognized and invited to join some other sex workers for coffee, yet when asked if he is "so" and "on the game", he is dumbstruck and nervous. He nervously accepts the offer of a bullet of lipstick as a form of initiation into this new community, staring at it in awe for some time before slowly bringing it to his lips. The scene, however brief, presents a clear narrative movement from recognition, through hesitancy, and toward acceptance. Yet in the memoir, Crisp immediately jumps from this scene of recognition to an aside on camp. When he returns to the narrative property, he has already enfolded himself into this new community, describing their (and by extension his own) lifestyle with the plural pronoun "we". The process of moving from having never even seen a male prostitute to being recognized as one of them, to becoming a part of their community, remains essentially unnarrated. If the film feels the need to offer a scene of initiation, Crisp handles his entry into queer community as inevitable. As with his winking dismissal of the psychological dimensions of his childhood, Crisp reiterates that this is not a memoir invested in psychological development and revelation. Whereas the conventional coming out narrative would center the gradual movement from recognizing one's own sexuality toward finding recognition and community, Crisp dispenses with it in three short chapters.

However, that Crisp had a social milieu at all often goes unmentioned in accounts of his life. While I, too, have emphasized his singularity, he was not the isolated figure of queer defiance he is so often portrayed as. In his meticulous historical account of queer London in the first half of the twentieth century, Matt Houlbrook identifies three contemporaneous and convergent queer subcultures – "the effeminate quean, the 'normal' working man who had sex with men *and* women, and the respectable middle-class homosexuality" (11). While all falling somewhere within the contemporary definition of same-gender attraction, all three of these categories were predicated on different understandings of sexuality and orientation. In the broadest terms, whereas working-class queens and "normal" men understood their sexuality as a product of and inextricable from their gender presentation, middle-class queers drew upon contemporary sexology and began to understand their sexuality in terms of the gender of their sexual *partners* (Houlbrook 142). The *Wolfenden Report*

itself reiterates this segmentation of homosexuality by describing a series of "clinical varieties" of homosexuality which roughly correspond to Houlbrook's categories, including the confused and transitional adolescent and homosexuals with "relatively intact personalities" who are "valuable and efficient members of the community, quite unlike the common conception of the homosexual as being necessarily, or probably, vicious, criminal, effete or depraved" (73). The queen, however, falls within the rubric of "severely damaged personalities… obviously effeminate and flauntingly exhibitionistic individuals (these, contrary to popular belief, are quite rare); grossly inadequate, passive, weak-willed person; or deeply resentful anti-social types" (73). Even within the context of an argument for homosexual law reform, the queen was deemed a pathological sub-group, less deserving of public sympathy than the middle-class, private, and undetectable queer.

"West End queens", "painted boys" or "Dilly boys" were the most visible of London's queer subcultures in the interwar years. Predominantly working class and frequently engaged in sex work, they understood their homosexuality as a form of inversion – their desire for men inextricable from their femininity. Queens wore makeup, grew out and dyed their hair, and adopted feminine names, pronouns, and mannerisms. They did not, however, wear women's clothing. Rather, the restrictive codes of male dress at the time rendered small adjustments in the cut and color of their clothing, feminizing enough to be evidence of homosexuality (Houlbrook 145). Crisp's own wardrobe is a testament to this – he did not wear women's clothing, but rather paired (to contemporary eyes) innocuous men's suiting with scarves, jewelry, a cocked hat, and sandals. As Houlbrook notes, cosmetics and hair styling were impermanent bodily manipulation which could facilitate a double life, as many queens worked in service jobs during the day (151). Nevertheless, a crucial part of the mid-century queen's identity was their startling visibility. They were a recognizable part of Piccadilly street life, as much a gathering place for queer men as it was a center for commerce and tourism. This hypervisibility was, in part, a product of necessity, given that private space could be particularly difficult to come by for young working-class men (155). Their prominence left them particularly susceptible to aggressive policing but also made them the most visible model of homosexuality in public life. Anxieties about "painted boys" surfaced in news coverage, yet Houlbrook suggests that Crisp's unrelentingly negative account may gloss over an admittedly strained degree of tolerance, as "queans acquired a precarious social acceptability as a theatrical source of color, entertainment and fun" (159).

Yet that Crisp belonged to a distinct subculture – that there were, in a sense, many other Quentin Crisps – has been underplayed. Part of this elision is certainly the product of Crisp's unrelenting emphasis on himself. Crisp provides a rich picture of the habits and haunts of the West End queen, yet the figures around him remain underdeveloped, and he evinces comparatively little interest in understanding himself as part of a cultural or historical milieu. There is little sense that Crisp's mannerisms are designed to amuse *other* gay men – there is a conviviality to this kind of camp that does not square with Crisp's resistance to collective identity or queer sociality. Rather than privileging the knowledge of the insider who is able to draw out the queer valences of an object or individual, Crisp instead cultivates a self-evident aesthetic that leaves no doubts about his queerness. When Crisp discusses his first glimpse of West End queens (a milieu that he would swiftly join), he

emphasizes the *lack* of interpretative work necessary to discern their queerness: "here they were for all the world to recognize – or almost all the world. A passer-by would have to be very innocent indeed not to catch the meaning of the mannequin walk and the stance in which the hip was only prevented from total dislocation by the hand placed upon it (*NCS* 25-26)". Crisp similarly imagines himself as not simply legible but on display. Whether knowingly echoing the *Wolfenden Report's* "severely damaged" effeminate exhibitionists, or not, he describes his public presentation as a form of exhibitionism. Likening it to a drug, he declares that "hooked in adolescence I was now taking doses so massive that they would have killed a novice" (*NCS* 49). This emphasis on self-evidence is linguistic as well as visual. Unlike the indisputably camp and partially encoded language of the contemporaneous Julian and Sandy (played by Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams), Crisp never used Polari (Baker 95). Indeed, when discussing his identity, his language is almost clinical in its neutral specificity, almost exclusively referring to himself as a "homosexual person."

Crisp's self-presentation and sense of his own identity remained largely unchanged throughout his life, even when the West End queen faded from public life as newer models of homosexuality emphasized object choice over gender presentation. Increasingly stripped of a subcultural context as the twentieth century wore on, Crisp must have appeared ever more singular, as he promulgated a "dead" and highly historically and geographically specific model of homosexuality as universal. However, while Crisp is largely uninterested in development, *The Naked Civil Servant* is nonetheless acutely conscious of the passage of time. His resigned acceptance of his immobility grants him a limited measure of possibility: "As the years went by it did not get any lighter but I became accustomed to the dark. Consequently, I was able to move with a little more of that freedom which T.S. Eliot says is a different kind of pain from prison." (*NCS* 6) His constancy – his swimming with the tide but faster – grants him some reprieve without his having to do anything. Moreover, while he remains a fixed point, society shifts around him and, however improbably, catches up with him. As attitudes about gender and sexuality shift, "those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis." (*NCS* 6) But having the world catch up with him seems to have often been more anxiety-provoking than reassuring. Faced with the style of Swinging London, he laments that "by an unlucky chance, the symbols that I had adopted forty years earlier to express my sexual type had become the uniform of all young people. By wearing bright colors and my hair long I had by mistake become the oldest teenager in the business… I gave the impression of trying to gate-crash a King's Road party for people two generations younger than I. I was not merely a stopped clock; I was a grandfather clock" (*NCS* 215). Crisp's lens for interpreting this shift in social mores betrays his aversion to a progressivist historical narrative, and he manages to reframe being ahead of his time as somehow being woefully behind it. He is not a hero but an embarrassing old man. The fact that Crisp pioneered the style embraced by this younger generation is framed as an unfortunate accident rather than a marker of progress.

In one of the memoir's more novelistic moments, Crisp imagines himself at last being discovered by politicians and lobbyists in the wake of the decriminalization of homosexuality. He is tottering, barely alive, and hauled from the ruins with some reluctance:

> What happened? What went wrong? This is the question that, from a throat parched by brick dust, I ask the rescue party as they lean for a moment's rest on their Reform Bills and their Acts of Parliament. When they see me tottering towards them, they find it difficult not to recoil. I am the survivor they hoped they would not find – something too broken to be restored to active life but not quite ready for a decent burial. My lip still move (*NCS* 220).

Here, the issue is not that Crisp risks inadvertently looking like mutton dressed as a lamb, but that his very existence is a political liability. Rather than being heralded as a harbinger of change or the fortunate beneficiary of legal reform, he is not just shameful but repulsive. If the world has caught up to Crisp, it will, it seems, just as easily sweep past him and render him an unsettling reminder of a darker political moment. In this slim window between decriminalization and the emergence of gay liberation proper, Crisp has already – albeit in his own morbid fashion – predicted some of the unease that he would generate for a younger generation of activists.

Crisp's model of historical change as incremental and almost entirely out of his or anyone's hands is distinctly conservative rather than liberatory. Crisp frames societal development as being as much a product of accident and ambivalence as anything else: "politics are not an instrument for effecting social change; they are the art of making the inevitable appear to be a matter of wise human choice" (*RA* 41). While he would speak at and express a degree of support for organized gay politics, his own project – if it can be called that – was more a gentle prodding and goading of the general public than a call for wholesale change. In making himself visible to the world outside of the queer West End, he sought to convince the public that "effeminacy existed in people who were in all other respects just like home. I went through the routine of daily living looking undeniably like a homosexual person." (*NCS* 33) Crisp's politics operated on the level of the personal and the everyday, striving not for legal recognition but for a relatively unobstructed movement through public space. Surprisingly, given his eccentricity, Crisp advocates a politics of ordinariness, less seeking radical social reform than a more comfortable level of begrudging tolerance.

One of the most indelible images of Crisp is the final scene of the film adaptation of *The Naked Civil Servant*, in which a group of children taunt him only to be met by a steely confidence and the declaration that, "you cannot touch me now, I am one of the stately homos of England". Yet while John Hurt's Crisp walks ahead straight-backed and defiant, the final chapter of *The Naked Civil Servant* is disarmingly pessimistic. He characterizes an autobiography as "an obituary in serial form with the last instalment missing" and, indeed, he tends to slide from the present perfect voice of memoir into the tone of a eulogist (*NCS* 222). The effect is rather morbid in the first person, with Crisp writing as if his life is already over. After reflecting on the value, or lack thereof, of his life so far, he acknowledges that whatever knowledge he may have gained is belated and unactionable. In a flight of fancy about a Ministry of Death tasked with "the chore of exterminating old people", he suggests his own age (sixty) as a reasonable time limit on human life (*NCS* 216). While he later quipped that he would live to one hundred with a decade off for good behavior, here Crisp is quite ready to accept that his life has no further value and might happily end tomorrow.

While the final scene of the film adaptation suggests that there is something mutually ennobling in Crisp's encounter with his tormenters, the memoir is less optimistic about the value of his visibility. He says that,

> By constituting myself the one among the many I had provoked the worst behavior in others. With this I felt compelled to deal politely. This wrought no change whatever in the character of my enemies but caused the total disintegration of my own. In the end the habit of taking no notice diminished my perception to the point where I became impervious to influence of any kind and therefore to all change except decay. I grew boring to my friends and, which was worse, to myself. I wanted nothing except to get into my coffin without getting into debt (*NCS* 221).

This version of Crisp is much more disconcerting than that of a courageous pioneer. Written before he attained more than minor local celebrity, we encounter a version of Crisp who believes his life to be an abject failure. The filmic Crisp, in confronting his bullies, hews to the liberal tenet that the route to social change is through visibility and the display of common humanity. Yet in the memoir itself, Crisp considers these very qualities – paying no attention to what people thought of him and never responding to violence in kind – to have fundamentally broken him. While at times he appears to endorse a more liberal understanding of acceptance, such as in his claim that "it is not the simple statement of facts that ushers in freedom; it is the constant repetition of them that has this liberating effect." (*NCS* 214) Yet he quickly undercuts the idea that this repetition exerts any meaningful *ideological* change: "tolerance is the result not of enlightenment, but of boredom" (*NCS* 214). Crisp's understanding of the possibilities of social change is grounded in a profound skepticism about the human capacity for goodness and a sense of historical entropy.

Despite his resistance to developmental narratives and progressivism, Crisp belies recent critical interventions that have characterized "queer time" as a radically disruptive alternative to the life narrative. In their account of queer temporality, E L McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen emphasize the act of "becoming" as distinctively queer – an iterative model of selfhood that is perpetually renewed and unfinished. Indeed, in its tendency to collapse as much as it builds, they suggest that queerness might better be understood as an "*un*becoming (10)." Compared to the liberal coming-out story, McCallum and Tuhkanen's idealized queer life narrative is an anti-*Bildung* that resists the neat endpoint of uncloseted, well-adjusted adult homosexuality. *The Naked Civil Servant*, however, is neither a conventional coming-out narrative nor a queer "unbecoming." Crisp does resist the conventions of the *Bildung*, yet rather than depict his life in perpetual mutation and flux, he emphasizes endless *being*.

In his review of Crisp's diary collection, *Resident Alien,* Neil Bartlett remarks that "Mr Crisp's stasis, achieved by dint of relentless application over nearly 80 years (one feels sure that all his major airs, graces and opinions were firmly in place well before secondary school), has now become so monumental that should he ever return to these shores he would undoubtedly be listed (71)". Bartlett riffs on Crisp's own self-designation as the "last stately homo of England" by imagining him here as a perfectly conserved human national trust landmark. In *The Naked Civil Servant* itself, though, Crisp's "conservation" looks a lot more like slow-motion decay. He characterizes himself as "grimly at home"

in a "Havisham twilight" where "about me there was something of the dusty elaboration of her mouse-nibbled wedding cake… propped up on some rickety Victorian chair, I sat silent and, I hope, apparently resigned – an ashy clinker from the long dead fires of Bohemia…" (*NCS* 219) His life is permanently paused, its preservation a kind of morbid accident.

In Jed Esty's account of the fate of the *Bildung* in the twentieth century, he asks: "What does a novel look like when its protagonist engages in permanent self-development with no obvious end, no external aim, no vocational or libidinal closure, no horizon of bourgeois self-discipline or social compromise? How does such a novel, a tale of endless becoming, function as a narrative (101)?" We might equally ask ourselves how a memoir not of endless becoming but *being* might function as narrative. For Esty, if the *Bildung* is invested in the impermanence of youth then "a *Bildung* is truly such only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as *concluded*: only if youth passes into maturity, and it comes to a stop there (26)." Crisp does not, like the protagonists in Esty's novels of interminable youth, fail to grow up. Rather, he settles into a calcified version of adulthood, but does not conclude the narrative. He focuses on – even fetishizes – the endpoint of the conventional life story and experiments in what it might mean to simply continue to draw it out. He (wrongly, as it turns out) foresees no substantive future development, observing that "whatever I could hope to do or say or be, I had done and said and been (*NCS* 181)." There is nothing left to tell, yet the narrative continues.

Much of what Crisp narrates, both in *The Naked Civil Servant* and his subsequent life writing, is what comes *after* the traditional *Bildung*. The formal problem of where one might end such a narrative is posed by Crisp himself: "It was as though I had been climbing a hill in expectation of finding on the other side a landscape utterly different from one through which I had passed. Now I was at the summit. I could see what stretched ahead was exactly the same as what lay behind (*NCS* 180)." He suggests that the prospect of a narrative climax, or even that of narrative change *at all,* is delusional. Instead, he is stuck in the indefinite and undifferentiated home stretch of his life. The fantasy of a Ministry of Death neatly executing him on his sixtieth birthday is posited as much as a solution to his narrative problem as it is a social parody. With no prospect of narrative development, an artificial and arbitrary ending point is as good an endpoint as any.

This resistance to development is, I argue, a queer version of the life narrative, but in rather a different sense than that of McCallum and Tuhkanen. Rather, Crisp's static, anti-*Bildung* is a narrative experiment in writing a self-evident, *uncloseted* life. Franco Moretti's model of the *Bildung* as the reconciliation of the self with society seems to preclude access to its forms for somebody so wholly excluded from and uninterested in bourgeois markers of social integration, such as marriage, career, and property. Yet Moretti suggests that marriage and family are not necessarily the *only* endpoints of the *Bildung* but serve merely as the most archetypal and recognizable of social contracts with which a protagonist must reconcile themselves (22). And Crisp *does* reconcile himself to society, in his own way. He deliberately shrinks his horizons of possibility and operates within a tight set of self-imposed parameters as a means of managing the experience of being "self-evident" in a hostile society. If Crisp circumvents some of the narrative structures of the *Bildung,* he is not wholly rejecting its movement towards some kind of reconciliation. Instead, he reimagines this reconciliation as a small-scale, pessimistic process of adjusting himself to his own inescapable visibility.

However, this reconciliation with society is a flattening of and eventual disavowal of his private self rather than its enrichment. Crisp sought to put as little daylight as possible between his public persona and private self. His definition of style emphasizes perfect internal coherence and consistency, in which each part of one's self is a perfect fractal-like distillation of the whole. One way of conceptualizing this collapsing of his selfhood is "camp". Indeed, it seems to be utterly in accord with Susan Sontag's definition of camp as "a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing." (286) In this reading, camp is essentially the erasing of personal complexity and character development, instead exaggerating a single trait. Within this rubric, the fact that Quentin Crisp was born Denis Pratt is an irrelevance. As Bartlett writes, Crisp had "completed the process begun when John Hurt adopted his voice, face and biography in the TV adaptation of *The Naked Civil Servant:* the person has become impersonal; Quentin Crisp has become 'Quentin Crisp' (71) I want to suggest, however, that this kind of radical distillation might represent something *other* than camp. In its resistance to disjuncture between form and content, intent and effect, Crisp essentially sought to foreclose the very ironic relationships that facilitate camp. In other words, to cultivate a perfect, unmistakable self-evidence.

This desire to create the illusion of a wholly integrated selfhood is evident in his willingness to embrace the curiosity about his living arrangements and to allow both his London and New York bedsits to be made into semi-public, almost theatrical spaces. Crisp's emphasis on self-evidence and transparency extended to something like the denial of an inner life altogether. The 1971 Granada documentary ends with a lingering shot of Crisp – purportedly after his interviewers have left and he is once again alone – sitting so motionless that the film might be mistaken for a still. This pretense of presenting Crisp when truly alone (we see him reflected in a mirror, as if we are voyeurs able to glimpse him unobserved) works to substantiate his claim that there was no secret Crisp. Instead, he insists, and purports to demonstrate, that his time alone was spent quite literally doing nothing. Tim Fountain's play *Resident Alien,* a monologue set during Crisp's final years, fittingly generates Crisp's dialogue by stringing together segments of material from his published work. When repurposed as a soliloquy, Crisp's thought process itself – his internal life – is simply a continual reiteration of the familiar. We are supposedly presented with the "private" Crisp, monologuing alone in his bedsit, yet he refuses to present us with a hidden self, the Denis beneath the mask of Quentin. Instead, he would insist that no such hidden self existed at all.

One of the difficulties in writing about Crisp at all is his collapsing of idiosyncrasy into dogma. Crisp's signature rhetorical maneuver is to collapse his personal idiosyncrasies into universal dicta. Crisp embraces a solipsism so intense that to differentiate between the two would be meaningless. Robinson connects this to his fundamentally anti-social nature, "the nonstop talker lived in a universe of which, psychologically speaking, he was the sole inhabitant. Other persons had no meaningful existence for him." Yet, as Robinson notes, Crisp is simultaneously aware of his own condition – "create[ing] the apparently impossible paradox of the self-aware solipsist (152)." It is difficult not to feel a creeping anxiety that one is simply too tangled in Crisp's own rhetoric to differentiate between the ideological and the personal. Crisp certainly wants us (dares us) to perform a "surface reading", to

purloin a contemporary term, of himself. He wants us to believe that there is no great secret, there is no hidden motivation.

Compare Crisp to a figure like Kenneth Williams, whose diaries betray that cliché of camp celebrity – the radical divergence between profoundly troubled, serious private self and exuberantly camp public persona. For Crisp, there was to be no secret diary, no smoking gun. This is not to say that he genuinely *achieved* the seamless integration of public and private that he aspired to. According to Paul Bailey, his final editor, Philip Ward, maintains that Denis Pratt re-emerged in those final months. The Quentin mask would suddenly remove itself, and the frustrated man who had created him would clench his fist and bang on the table. The anger he never exhibited in public, the rage he felt at the way he had been treated in his youth, then came spluttering out. He even tore at his hair. He no longer wore that expression of 'fatuous affability' he put on in restaurants and art galleries when he was being feted" (27-28). The great project of being nothing other than "Quentin Crisp" all the way down is, effectively, an aesthetic aspiration as much as it is something genuinely achievable.

It is tempting to characterize Crisp's project of radical flattening as just another iteration of Wildean aestheticism. Bartlett certainly argues that "authors who achieve [Crisp's] level of identification between their utterances and their writings are accorded a peculiar form of canonization, announced by the coining of a word which is an admission of the irrelevance of all criticism: Wildean, Firbankian, Ortonesque. At a stroke, their failings are rendered as characteristic (and therefore saleable) as their achievements... (71)." However, this comparison between Crisp and Wilde is surprisingly fraught. While Crisp's public persona seems on a surface level to be indebted to Wilde, he was vociferously critical of him. Indeed, he reportedly claimed that he would much rather chat to Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot in the afterlife than Wilde (Bailey, *Stately Homo* 30). It would be easy enough to consider Crisp's disdain for Wilde as an extension of his own self-loathing. Crisp is certainly aware of his resemblance to Wilde. The scenes in *The Naked Civil Servant*, for example, of Crisp's witty and bold performance in the dock after being arrested for solicitation, are self-consciously Wildean. I agree with Christopher Grobe's assessment that this aversion is rooted in the fundamental difference between a Wildean dandyism predicated on embellishing the self, and a Crispian model of "style" which emphasizes the radical paring back of oneself to its most essential elements (106).

Yet Crisp's extended case against Wilde proves to be a remarkably revealing lens through which to understand the particularities of his public persona and ethos. His critique of Wilde in *How to Have a Lifestyle* is a pointed negotiation of the stakes of negotiating one's complicity with power and "polite society" as a gay man. Prefiguring Bristow's argument about "perilous proximity", Crisp argues that Wilde "really seems to have thought that he could rise above common morality while almost certainly knowing that he was already in danger" (*HTHAL* 87-88). Crisp is bemused that, when threatened, Wilde would appeal to "the laws of a society that he had so volubly professed to despise" (*HTHAL* 89). Wilde, he argues, was hopelessly "bound hand and foot" by the ethos of those he ridiculed: "he believed as firmly as Queen Victoria in good and evil" (*HTHAL* 90). Crisp attributes this to Wilde's self-loathing and offers his own corrective rendering of his familiar aphorism: "I have used my talent to satirise a society by which I secretly felt enslaved; my genius I reserved for disguising a personality of which I felt ashamed" (*HTHAL* 91). Wilde's style, he argues, was a "a sequined Band-

Aid covering a suppurating sore of self-hatred" (*HTHAL* 100). Wilde's primary sin, in Crisp's eyes, was naivety: he believed that the society that embraced him would not just as soon expel him. Crisp, as we see at the end of *The Naked Civil Servant,* considers the project of trying to change society from within as a hopeless failure. Even skewering social values is a tenuous, dangerous proposition: "when you make fun of people, they laugh not because they feel free of your mockery, but because they feel helpless. When they are no longer at your mercy, the laughter dies on their foaming lips" (*HTHAL* 99). Crisp's version of the Wildean archetype is far scrappier and more cynical, always braced for the moment when the audience turns. Crisp insists on radically narrowing his horizons and, rather than striving to integrate into the establishment, expects that his moments whatever tolerance he attains may be revoked at any time.

His wariness of Wildean decadence is also directly correlated to his sexuality. Crisp returns to Wilde in *Resident Alien,* but this time accounts for his distaste in bodily terms: "the thing that I deplore about Wilde was that he never came to grips with how sordid his life had become. When the names of five or six boys whom Mr Wilde knew only in Braille (they were procured by Lord Alfred Douglas and met Mr Wilde in darkened rooms in Oxford) were read out at his trial, he was still bleating about love and invoking the fair name of Mr Plato" (*RA* 222). While Crisp criticizes Wilde for his "sordid" sexual life, it is the elevation of the tawdry sexual encounter to the level of philosophy that seems to most irritate him. Crisp instead insists on dragging him back down to the gross bodily level, describing him as "a gross human being" (*RA* 222). Indeed, Bailey argues that Crisp presented homosexual sex itself as "a bit of an endurance test, a chore that has to be undertaken when requested, but is better avoided (*Stately Homo* 15)." Crisp famously insisted on the superiority of masturbation, arguing that for the "incorrigible fantasist", "it is sexual intercourse that becomes a substitute – and a poor one – for masturbation" (*NCS* 121). Masturbation is continuous with Crisp's anti-sociality and his understanding of his homosexuality in primarily gendered terms. If effeminacy is the key constitutive element of homosexuality, then other homosexual people become surprisingly incidental. What Crisp seems to dislike about Wilde, then, is the unmistakable evidence of his indulgence in, and his "sordid" enjoyment of, sex itself.

Crisp's resemblance to Wilde is most obvious in his aphoristic style and role as a public font of witticisms. Yet here too, we can see something of his emphasis on self-containment and formal constraint. He makes no pretensions to spontaneity or sincerity, and his utterances give the distinct impression of having been obsessively burnished and refined. Crisp suggests that wit is merely the skillful application of the correct linguistic rules. He argues that we must "formulate infallible rules about [word] order so that, if we wish, we can make our simplest utterances funny" (*HTHAL* 73). Like Wilde, he was an inveterate self-plagiarist and would incessantly recycle comic bits and turns of phrase – most notably, his insistence that if one gives up cleaning one's home "after four years, the dirt doesn't get any worse". Crisp's one-man show was developed by memorizing his own improvised speech: "we recorded one of the shows and the script was typed up from that show. I memorized the script from that recorded show, and that is the show that I now perform, word for word (qtd in Grobe 137)." In keeping with his flattening of private and public selves, Crisp became the perfect mimic of himself. He acknowledged this repetitiousness and deemed his own aphoristic style (or in his words,

"the detestable curlicues with which my discourse was decorated") "Crisperanto" (*NCS* 129). He himself admits that "I had gone beyond the original sin of purging my speech of the dross of sincerity. I had robbed it of all meaning altogether, I became like a stopped clock. I was right about once ever twelve years… To people who knew me well, listening to me became almost unbearable" (*NCS* 166). While Crisp would immortalize his quips in an edited collection, *The Wit and Wisdom of Quentin Crisp*, reading apparently spontaneous interviews with him often feels as if one is not so much listening to a conversation as paging through these "greatest hits".

This emphasis on a tightly controlled, restrictive style was reflected in Crisp's material circumstances. While his bearing may have been aristocratic, his lifestyle was decidedly more ascetic. Crisp grew up in an upper-middle-class home with servants (although his family was heavily indebted) and attended public school. Nevertheless, his own financial position was precarious for much of his earlier life, partly by design. The community of rent boys that he found himself amongst was primarily working-class, who "forgave [him] for [his] unfair advantages because I was in the same sexual boat as they" (*NCS* 27). Homosexuality, in this case, was a form of downward mobility, not least because of the sheer difficulty of obtaining regular employment as a visibly effeminate gay man. He is quite explicit about his diminished expectations for his life: "I could not avoid seeing that I was always going to have a very circumscribed life. If travelling to Ealing was like embarking on a crusade, I could be fairly sure that I was never going to Rome or Paris or New York; … I must not expect that I would ever have money or influence" (*NCS* 54). While Crisp epitomizes the stately bearing of the aristocratic gay archetype, the leisure to which he aspires is not so much that of the aristocracy as that which can be made possible by the welfare state. On beginning a job, he relates holding his breath until he "had been in work long enough to become eligible for the dole" (*NCS* 48). He writes of visits to the Pentonville Labour Exchange during the Depression and of wading through crowds of groping onlookers subdued by police to claim his "fifteen shilling three pence" (*NCS* 58). Rather than supporting himself through his proximity to power, as Wilde and others did, he was the beneficiary of the welfare system that effectively subsidized many British artists, however meagerly, for decades.

Crisp prided himself on his ability to eke out the small sum of the dole or his meagre wages as an artist model and to construct a life that fit within its tight confines. One could argue that *this* is the reconciliation with society in Crisp's *Bildung*. Crisp rejected the Wildean house beautiful in favor of self-conscious squalor. He lived in bedsits for most of his adult life, and his filthy room in Chelsea was, in Mark Armstrong's words, "one of the most infamous single rooms in modern mythology" (155). Even in his more financially lucrative New York years, he chose to maintain a tiny room in a boarding house in the East Village with a shared bathroom. In his devotion to the bedsit, Crisp turns a dwelling that often served as a provisional stopgap between the home of one's parents and of one's own family into a permanent state. Armstrong argues that, rather than being a radical discrepancy, the conflict between his self-presentation and domestic life are indicative of Crisp's "precarious class position" (161) and his resistance to domesticity. That kind of femininity, as Crisp emphasizes in his aversion to camp, holds no appeal for him. Crisp preferred a life shrunk to maximum portability and efficiency, the better to navigate a world in which his security was never guaranteed. In contrast to the mistaken security he criticizes in Wilde, Crisp's living arrangements betray a wariness of settling and

becoming too comfortable. In this sense, his description of himself as a stately homo displaces the material trappings of the ruling class onto the self. While he inhabits and refashions the rhetoric and style of the aristocratic gay archetype but entirely its upwardly mobile aspirations.

Crisp's eccentricity, too, can be considered a way of staking a claim on the freedoms afforded to the aristocracy, but stripped of the material security that enabled the classic Sitwellian English eccentric. He describes himself as acquiring early in life "that haughty bearing which is characteristic of so many eccentrics" but attributes this aloofness to self-defense rather than a genuinely felt sense of superiority (*NCS* 35). More tellingly, he concludes *The Naked Civil Servant* by equating himself with the seamier example of the Collyer Brothers, the notorious New York hoarders who died trapped in their own home amidst tons of possessions in 1947. Eccentricity, in this sense, is pathological and crippling rather than a lovable hallmark of nobility and Englishness. It is also no accident that he invokes an example of radically disrupted domesticity. In comparing himself to the Collyers, he states that "in a sense, this is the way I lived, this was the fate that overtook me. The place where no harm can come is the place where nothing at all can come. Here I stood" (*NCS* 221). Again, eccentricity is a defensive posture, even as it exacerbates the radical shrinking of possibilities that Crisp laments in the final part of *The Naked Civil Servant*.

Crisp's life and work are bound by the paradox that governs explicit representation: the gesture of bringing that which was previously unrepresentable to the surface is incredibly potent but cannot be repeated. In life, Crisp thrived on the striking visual impact of first encounters and, by his own admission, extended encounters with him betrayed the extent to which his life was a tedious, almost clockwork series of repetitions. The problem for Crisp was never, therefore, making himself "self-evident" but in figuring out what to do next. His aesthetic solution was to radically flatten himself into caricature and to embrace an eternal twilight. He evinces a scrappy, pragmatic reimagining of Wildean aestheticism that combines an aristocratic manner with a willing reconciliation to social exile. While Crisp's aesthetic experiment is striking in its idiosyncrasy, it is also something of a dead end. Crisp is so particular, so singularly himself, that it is difficult to extrapolate any portable or generalizable principles about the narration of queer lives from his work. Again, the trick is compelling but impossible to repeat. Crisp's conservative aesthetics of constraint and stasis are nearly impossible to square with a liberatory politics and underline the lack of any straightforward correlation between explicit representation and radical politics. Crisp understands his self-evidence as an affliction to be borne and, while his bravery and tenacity are certainly admirable, he cannot be readily co-opted as an icon of proto-queer politics. Rather than attempt to rehabilitate Crisp, then, it is more productive to use his strange, imperfect experiment as a case study in the limits and possibilities of explicit representation. Crisp recognizes the inadequacy of existing forms for containing his self-evident life and the necessity of forging a new, explicit kind of queer life story. The imperfect experiment that results underlines just how complex and non-obvious – yet utterly necessary – the apparently simple task of making queerness explicit would prove to be.

"A flower, then a picture of a cock, then a portrait": Indexicality and Abstraction in Robert Mapplethorpe's Photography

When an outraged Jesse Helms took to the Senate floor to argue against the use of National Endowment for the Arts funding for "immoral" art, he requested that women and clerks leave the room before exhorting senators to view sexually explicit photographs by Mapplethorpe. He demanded that they "look at the pictures! Look at the pictures! Don't believe *The Washington Post*! Don't believe *The New York Times*!" (Williams 285) Linda Williams characterizes the moment as a quintessential instance of "on/scenity" – the distinctly late twentieth century bringing onto the public scene detailed sexual representations that had previously been deemed obscene. In a paradoxical gesture, Helms is "bringing on what the exhibitor defines as obscenity in order to keep it off" (286). Mapplethorpe's work has been subject to more intense hand-wringing and scrutiny for its sexual content than any other visual artist of the twentieth century, due to Helms' use of Mapplethorpe's work as a test case for withholding NEA funding and the obscenity trial targeting the Cincinnati exhibition of his retrospective, *The Perfect Moment*, After his death, his name alone became shorthand for sexually explicit art, whether as an avatar of freedom of expression or a punchline.

There is, however, an unexpectedly knotty aesthetic point to Helms' suggestion that Mapplethorpe's images are able to "speak for themselves." Interpretation and art criticism – here signified by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* – are figured as disingenuous distractions from the self-evidence of the pictures themselves. Mapplethorpe's work, Helms suggests, is so obvious that it requires no interpretation. Mapplethorpe abandons obfuscation in favor of the direct representation of gay, sadomasochistic sex and radically breaks with existing patterns for representing gay sexuality that relied on connotation or flimsy pretenses for displaying the erotic male body. As Edmund White argues, Mapplethorpe is "genuinely original, especially in his simplicity, his directness, his unapologetic curiosity, the unwavering force of his regard. As any look at gay art, whether literary or plastic, reveals nothing is so difficult, so recent, so *evolved* as the simplicity of unmediated vision" (132). Whereas earlier gay art relied on classical or quasi-scientific pretexts, "what is extraordinary about Mapplethorpe is his abandonment of all these contexts, this window dressing for, if you will, the naked fact of sexual curiosity and erotic intensity" (133). While Helms and White could not be further apart ideologically, their readings of Mapplethorpe rest on similar grounds. Mapplethorpe is somehow providing, perhaps for the first time in artistic history, unmediated, self-evident access to gay male desire itself.

This chapter is not a detailed account of the posthumous scandals surrounding Mapplethorpe's work or the Cincinnati obscenity trial. Instead, I focus on analyzing Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit SM work itself, often referred to as his *X Portfolio,* which was made during a relatively brief period in the mid-to-late seventies. Much of the best critical work on Mapplethorpe has traced the retroactive influence of the AIDS epidemic on interpretations of his earlier explicit work and the complex racial politics of his later preoccupation with black male nudes. Rather than retreading this territory, this chapter is a more specific engagement with explicit representation as a formal problem. His work, as Arthur Danto notes, "cannot have been a serious possibility for a major artist at any previous moment in history" (23). In bringing previously unthinkable sexual content "on/scene," Mapplethorpe engages in a complex negotiation with the idea of obviousness as an aesthetic problem.

He must, as Danto puts it, "play with the edge" of how much is possible, or indeed bearable, to reveal to the camera.

Mapplethorpe's photography has often been read as inherently contradictory. As Danto argues, "there is a tension at the heart of Robert Mapplethorpe's art, verging on paradox, between its most distinctive content and its mode of presentation. The content of the work is often sufficiently erotic to be considered pornographic, even by the artist, while the aesthetic of its presentation is chastely classic—it is Dionysiac and Apollonian at once" (25). Yet Mapplethorpe appeared to be surprisingly resistant to the idea that there was an inherent contradiction here. Indeed, when interviewed, he frequently rejected the idea that sexually explicit content was aesthetically or ontologically distinct from other subject matter. In conversation with curator Janet Kardon for the catalog of *The Perfect Moment,* Mapplethorpe gives a version of the artistic philosophy he had repeated throughout his career: "when I've exhibited pictures, particularly at Robert Miller Gallery, I've tried to juxtapose a flower, then a picture of a cock, then a portrait, just so that you could see they were the same. I would just like people to be able to get the real meaning" (25). The "real meaning" of his photographs appears to be that there is none.

However, Mapplethorpe's insistence on the sameness of his subject matter is enigmatic, and his statements shift slightly in emphasis when he repeats them. When he claims that "my intent was to open people's eyes to realize anything can be acceptable... it's not what it is, it's the way that it's photographed", he suggests that the equivalence between his subjects is a moral one (Mapplethorpe qtd in Weiley 109). The images are "the same" insofar as they are equally tenable and valid subjects for fine art photography if handled well. Elsewhere, he suggests that the similarity lies in his technique: "my approach to photographing a flower is not much different than photographing a cock. Basically, it's the same thing" (Morrisroe 182). In other statements, it seems more like pure provocation, such as when he declared that "I don't think there's that much difference between a photograph of a fist up someone's ass and a photograph of carnations in a bowl" (Meyer 187). In his interview with Kardon, Mapplethorpe clarifies what he means by sameness. "The same," he insists, "is that I'm seeing them; it's my eyes that are photographing them. Whether I look at a piece of bread or I look at a flower or I look at you, I'm not seeing any differently" (28). Here, the camera and the eye are conflated, drawing on both the apparent neutrality of the camera as a recording device and the subjectivity of the individual eye as a means of achieving equivalence between subjects.

Mapplethorpe's conception of "sameness" is slippery, whether ontological, moral, or technical. In response to Mapplethorpe's remarks to Kardon, Thomas Yingling argues that "what [Mapplethorpe] does not register in this, of course, is that difference is already inscribed in these objects, and that any sameness he can produce among them as a photographer is predicated on his erasure of their social, material difference and its meanings" (16). Yingling's interpretation does not quite account for the wry awareness Mapplethorpe demonstrates immediately afterward when discussing one of his most explicit pieces: "I did a picture of a guy with a finger up his cock. I think that for what it is, it's a perfect picture, because the hand gestures are beautiful. I know most people couldn't see the hand gestures, but compositionally I think it works. I think the hand gesture is beautiful. What it happens to be doing, it happens to be doing, but that's an aside" (25) It is hard to

believe that Mapplethorpe is genuinely convinced of a true equivalence between his subjects. He is very conscious of the near impossibility of the viewer being able to ignore "what [the hand] happens to be doing" and would, as his biographer Patricia Morrisroe argues, probably be disappointed if they did (192). I thus interpret Mapplethorpe's comments about the sameness of his images as neither a genuine descriptor of the effect his work achieves nor as a straightforward falsehood. Instead, this vision of sameness functions more as an aesthetic aspiration and thought experiment. It poses the question of whether sexually explicit subject matter is inherently or qualitatively different from other subjects. The achievement of absolute equivalence between his subjects through the exertion of aesthetic control is a horizon of pure formalism toward which Mapplethorpe moves but can never quite reach. It is the process of trying to attain this equivalence – and the ontological and aesthetic challenges of doing so – that makes his explicit work so compelling.

Perhaps the most significant barrier toward achieving this "sameness" is the supposedly categorical distinction between art and pornography. While Mapplethorpe relies on some of the same visual grammar as pornography, his work is not particularly interested in exciting desire, per se. Ingrid Sischy argues that "part of the upset and brilliance of these [sexually explicit] pictures is their matter-of-factness, their forensic quality, creating the kind of sharply focused ground for belief that only the least sentimental evidence can offer" (84). This evocation of the language of criminal evidence is striking and conveys something of the unflinchingly anatomical, static qualities of Mapplethorpe's sexual images. Their gaze at the sexual body is so intent, so close that it pushes through erotic interest into something almost clinical. This, I think, is what Mapplethorpe means when he states, "I've always found it irritating to hear people say erotic when they mean sexual material" (Weiley 109). Mapplethorpe instead locates the desired reaction to his images in his memory of first encounters with cellophane-wrapped pornographic magazines in Times Square sex shops as a teenager: "the feeling I got was a strong stomach reaction, and I thought it would be extraordinary to get that gut feeling from a work of art. I'm not talking about arousal. The feeling was stronger and much more interesting than that" (Mapplethorpe qtd in Weiley 109). He would repeatedly cite the importance of this intense "feeling in the stomach" without elaborating on its precise character. In arguing that Mapplethorpe's work is sexual but not erotic is not, then, to dismiss its intensity. The matter-of-factness of Mapplethorpe's work does not preclude its capacity to elicit "gut feelings," but those feelings are not straightforwardly sexual.

It is because of this slipperiness that I do not draw any hard lines between obscenity, pornography, and fine art. Mapplethorpe's work exposes these categories as too limited, too contextually bound, and too porous to be particularly conceptually useful. This is not, however, to say that the generic conventions and social ramifications of the pornographic have no bearing on Mapplethorpe's work. As Paul Morrison argues, Mapplethorpe's work appeared *both* in fine art galleries and gay porn magazines, and I agree with his assertion that "the specious (and therefore much insisted upon) distinction between the pornographic and the erotic is a matter of context, not content, and Mapplethorpe plays knowingly on the relation between the two" (83). Mapplethorpe makes use of the visual grammar and representational logic of commercial pornography, a gesture which

undermines, or at least complicates, his insistence on the fundamental sameness of erotic and non-erotic subject matter.

Specifically, Mapplethorpe's aesthetic of "self-evidence" depends upon the indexical qualities of the photographic image in much the same way as pornography. He relies on the photograph's purported ability to directly represent reality or, in Mapplethorpe's case, unsimulated "real" sex. This fascination with the indexical is also a product of the particular art-historical moment of the seventies, which, Rosalind Krauss argues, was marked by "the pervasiveness of the photograph as a means of representation" and a corresponding preoccupation with the indexical (78). Krauss defines the index by its distinctly physical relationship it bears to its referent: "they are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces (like footprints), medical symptoms, or the actual referents of the shifters" (70). The film photograph bears an indexical relation to its object because of the physical nature of its production: "it is the order of the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently on the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives to the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity" (59). Mary Ann Doane notes that, in his original taxonomy of signs, Charles Sanders Peirce identifies the indexical as not only physical traces of the real ("the footprint, the death mask, the photograph") but also linguistic shifters ("this", "now", "I", "here") (2). While they may initially appear conceptually distinct, these two versions of the indexical are evident in Krauss' account of photography. The photograph is not only a physical trace of the scene it records, but a deictic pointing at its subject. Roland Barthes, too, identifies the deictic qualities of the photograph, arguing that it is "never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis,* and cannot escape this pure deictic language" (5).

While Williams does not specifically cite theories of indexicality, her understanding of pornographic form depends on the idea of photography's apparent access to the "real". Photography promises unmediated access to the truth of sexuality, in a way that is qualitatively different from other media: "In [pornographic films] we seem to see not the representation of sex acts as such but, as the Meese Commission and others have put it, 'sex itself'" (94). Pornography thus depends on its effect on something like Barthes' argument that the photograph "is never distinguished from its referent" and "always carries its referent with itself" (Barthes 5). The representation is inextricable from the represented. Williams argues that pornography operates by a "principle of maximum visibility," which emphasizes the documentary quality of the image over alternative, more aesthetically pleasing or even arousing alternatives. Technically, this results in a style that seeks "to privilege close-ups of body parts over other shots; to overlight easily obscured genitals; to select sexual positions that show the most of bodies and organs" (49). "In contrast to both mainstream fictional narrative and soft-core indirection," she argues, "hard core tries not to play peekaboo with either its male or its female bodies. It obsessively seeks knowledge, through a voyeuristic record of confessional, involuntary paroxysm, of the 'thing' itself" (49). The problem that pornography encounters, however, is that this pursuit of "maximum visibility" is stymied by the limitations of the very medium that seems to promise it. Speaking specifically about heterosexual pornography, Williams argues that ironically, "while it is possible, in a certain limited and reductive way, to 'represent' the physical pleasure of the male by showing erection

and ejaculation, this maximum visibility proves elusive in the parallel confession of female sexual pleasure" (49). Pornography thus relies on the idea of the camera as an eye that cannot help but register the scene in front of it, "to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core 'frenzy of the visible'" (50).

For Krauss, the photograph's indexical quality will always prevent it from being entirely under the formal control of the artist: "the indexical presence of either the photograph or the body-cast demands that the work be viewed as a deliberate short-circuiting of issues of style. Countermanding the artist's possible formal intervention in creating the work is the overwhelming physical presence of the original object, fixed in this trace of the cast" (80). Krauss is not dismissing the role of artistry and artistic agency in photography so much as suggesting that the physical "trace" in the image will always exceed or remain outside of the artist's control. Danto, too, argues that if the camera is like an eye it "cannot help but register what is seen" and performs the function of "witness, a recorder, a monitor, a registrar" (46) While the metaphor of the camera as an eye suggests its involuntary registration of the real, when Mapplethorpe himself conflates the camera and the eye, he is insisting on the totalizing quality of his aesthetic. His work is aesthetically unified because it is the product of *his* eye. His sexually explicit photography never quite resolves the tension between the image as a record of the real and the artist's exertion of absolute aesthetic control. The frisson provoked by Mapplethorpe's explicit work depends on its being an indexical representation of sex itself, whereas its aspiration towards a classical, formalist perfection resists the idea that photography is outside of the artist's control.

This tension is evident in Mapplethorpe's notorious *Self-Portrait* (1978), in which he penetrates himself with the handle of a bullwhip. The image functions as a kind of proof, a declaration that Mapplethorpe was neither a voyeuristic tourist in the leather scene nor taking advantage of his model's sexuality while guarding his own. Mapplethorpe was encouraged by one of his models to reveal his own sexual "secret" and uses the work to make an unambiguous statement about his membership in the leather community he photographed (Morrisroe 193). However, if the image is a confession, it is not an involuntary one. At first glance, the photograph does seem to be organized around the principle

Figure 2: Robert Mapplethorpe, Self-Portrait, 1978, Getty Center, Los Angeles

of maximum visibility. The multiple shadows on the wall behind Mapplethorpe betray the bright "overlit" quality of the scene. His pose is decidedly unnatural, designed to place both his buttocks and face as close to the dead center of the frame as possible to underscore the fact that the body being penetrated is his own. The exertion of simultaneously achieving this pose and penetrating himself is evident in the taut, flexed fingers of the hand holding the whip and the veins visible in his forearm. Mapplethorpe gazes intently at the camera with an inscrutable frown that could be defiance or evidence of the concentration required to get the shot right.

The image centers what pornographic directors call the "meat shot", the "closeup of penetration that shows that hard-core sexual activity is taking place" that Williams identifies as foundational to the pornographic genre (72). As a visual trope, it relies on the idea of the image's indexicality for its effect and functions as proof that the sex depicted is "real" and unsimulated. If heterosexual pornography seeks access to the invisible truth of women's sexuality, Mapplethorpe promises to reveal an equivalent (arguably even more inscrutable) truth about male sexuality. Yet Mapplethorpe's expression in the image may be ambiguous, but it does not appear to be an involuntary

expression of pleasure. If the work successfully imbricates Mapplethorpe in the leather community, it never purports to show us his "real" sexual life even as it demands that we acknowledge the reality of the sexual act that it depicts. The image might best be understood as a demonstration or declaration, rather than the revelation of a secret. As Weiley argues, "Mapplethorpe is uninterested in discovering the unwary subject in a moment of self-revelation or self-expression, nor is he eager to document to random, the accidental, the fortuitous" (110). This lack of interest in spontaneous confession is even more pointed when the subject is himself.

While the image relies on its indexical properties for its effect, there is nothing about it that suggests a loss of artistic control or an abdication to the camera as a neutral, recording eye. The photograph foregrounds the paraphernalia and setting of the photographic studio and is unmistakably "staged". Whereas almost all of Mapplethorpe's images were shot in a studio, he did not often depict the edges of the backdrop or the room itself, and preferred to crop his portraits so that his subjects are isolated in front of a neutral background. In this image, however, we see the rough and imperfect floorboards of the studio, the end of the roll of backdrop as it meets the floor, and the makeshift prop of a chair or boxes covered with a drop cloth. Richard Meyer notes that "the bullwhip also resembles an extension cord or shutter-release cable tying Mapplethorpe's body to the clicking camera off-frame. Notice the photographer's careful fingering of the whip and the way his cupped left hand mimics the action of triggering a shutter-release" (197). Just as Mapplethorpe's placement of his face as close to the "meat shot" at the center of the image to emphasize that it is *him* in the picture, this emphasis on the paraphernalia required to take a photo of oneself underscores his aesthetic mastery. He is not being interrupted or captured in a private moment of pleasure, but the architect of a carefully composed visual declaration.

This assertion of control runs counter to Barthes' reading of Mapplethorpe's 1975 self-portrait with outstretched arm in *Camera Lucida*:

> The photograph leads me to distinguish the "heavy" desire of pornography from the "light" (good) desire of eroticism; after all, perhaps this is a question of "luck": the photographer has caught the boy's hand (the boy is Mapplethorpe himself, I believe) at just the right degree of openness, the right density of abandonment: a few millimeters more or less and the divined body would no longer have been offered with benevolence (the pornographic body shows itself, it does not give itself, there is no generosity in it): the photographer has found the *right moment,* the *kairos* of desire (59).

Barthes' differentiation between the pornographic and the erotic is practically unworkable as a practical critical framework, as he seems to acknowledge when he attributes the distinction to luck. If the precise degree of openness and generosity intuited in the position of a hand is the dividing line between the two categories, there might just as well not be one at all. Like Williams, Barthes evokes the camera's capturing of something involuntary but argues that the fortuitous capturing of the "right moment" is what *prevents* the image from being pornographic.[4] Mapplethorpe's work *is* concerned with

[4] The title of Mapplethorpe's retrospective exhibition, *The Perfect Moment,* is presumably derived from Barthes' turn of phrase here.

capturing "perfect moments", but this perfection is less a matter of fortuitousness than it is careful staging. Mapplethorpe's orchestration of "perfect moments" emphasizes the deictic quality of the photograph at the expense of "chance." It is a deliberate act of pointing and of saying, "look at *this*." This emphasis on staging the sexual scene is integral to Mapplethorpe's exploration of the conceptual and practical limits of depicting "real" sex.

If Mapplethorpe's perfect moments are always staged rather than captured "in flagrante", the reason was also, in part, a technical one. In his interview with Kardon, Mapplethorpe acknowledges the practical challenge of marrying rigorously controlled technique and the unpredictability of the human body: "a cock is more problematic when you're photographing, especially if you want it erect. You can't juggle the lights as much, and it's hard to refine the photograph quite as much as you'd like, but I attempt to make just as refined a photograph as of one of the flowers" (26). Even disregarding his own sexual preferences, SM, with its reliance on props and quasi-theatrical staging, seems to lend itself to Mapplethorpe's technique more than more "vanilla" sex that would rely much more on the body's ability to perform under scrutiny in the studio. As Danto recounts, "Mapplethorpe told Dimitri Levas that sex was really not meant to be photographed. Bodies could not be controlled. He could not say to someone in ecstasy, "Hold that! That's it!' Without the formalism, the work goes over the edge" (79). The work of photographing sex is, moreover, a difficult and not particularly enjoyable process: "It was a lot of work—not easy at all. It's not sexy taking pictures of sex. I wasn't doing it for that. I wasn't getting off on it" (Weiley 108). Unlike hardcore pornography (and perhaps more importantly, film rather than still pornography), none of Mapplethorpe's images depict orgasm. Mapplethorpe's "perfect moments" are sexual in content but primarily aesthetic in nature – the erect cock is the centerpiece of a still life rather than a confession.

Danto's account of discovering a collection of working images that Mapplethorpe *did* take during sexual encounters rather than during a studio session is, I think, integral to understanding Mapplethorpe's approach to depicting the sexual "real":

> The difference between art and image when the two have the same content was dramatically clarified for me some time later, when I was doing research for the essay that follows…. Dimitri [Mapplethorpe's assistant] brought in a carton on which SEX was written in ballpoint pen. "I think you ought to see these," he said, leaving me alone. The box had shots of men engaged in sadomasochistic practices, doing to one another things evidently deeply wanted, perhaps deeply wanted by many of us who keep the cravings sufficiently repressed as to be unaware of possessing them to begin with. They were working shots. Mapplethorpe was there, recording the session, which happened to be a sex session but which could have been men engaged in any group activity, so far as the urgency and artlessness of the photographs went. It was very raw, and altogether unmediated by art. Dimitri told me that the phone would ring, inviting the artist, known to be interested, to come and take pictures of a session of sex… It was, in any case, an extremely painful experience to go through the photographs, and I was unable, finally, to look at everything the box contained. I gave up halfway through, and when I got home that evening my wife wanted to know what had happened to me. I looked pale and shaken, and it took a while before the images faded (12-13).

Danto contrasts his response to these images with his experience of seeing "The Perfect Moment" at the Whitney, where he was "not pale and shaken" but instead "*exalted*." The images in the "SEX" box were "not yet art" and "belonged to photodocumentation, while "the photographs of the show had become art by transcending their documentary origins" (14).

Danto cannot or chooses not to reproduce the working snapshots, and, to my knowledge, they have never been published or referenced elsewhere. As such, their aesthetic properties and the purpose they served for Mapplethorpe or his subjects remain unclear. Danto does not describe the contents of the images, although the implication is that the acts depicted are effectively the same or of the same nature as those in Mapplethorpe's exhibited photographs. What then makes these images so viscerally different in impact from Mapplethorpe's canonical work? What makes them uniquely unbearable and almost unspeakable? The primary difference seems to be whether photographic representation is primary or secondary to the sexual experience. The scenes photographed in the studio happened *only* so that they could be captured on camera – while they are real bodies in real contact, they serve as exemplars or placeholders for sex itself. By contrast, the presence of Mapplethorpe's camera at the scenes depicted in the "working shots" is secondary to the sex itself, which would have taken place regardless of whether Mapplethorpe was there or not. The camera was certainly not an important part of Mapplethorpe's private erotic life – as he put it, "sex without the camera is sexier" (Meyer 198). Curiously, Danto describes these images as "not yet" art rather than categorically distinct from art. This differentiation suggests that it is the process of transforming "raw" sexual activity into a form that is directed primarily toward the camera that differentiates the sexually explicit piece of art from the indexical representation of "sex itself". While Mapplethorpe's explicit images appear to hide nothing, Danto describes these working shots as moving beyond even what the canonical images show. However much Mapplethorpe shows us, Danto suggests that there is always *more* to be seen. That we only encounter the images through Danto's response to them only enhances this sense that this "outside" is unbearable, almost impossible.

One of the more notorious images in Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio, Helmut and Brooks* (1978), is an exercise in testing the limits of just how much the fine art photograph can lay bare. The image is one of Mapplethorpe's most concentrated efforts to produce an entirely "self-evident image." It is composed to remove as little ambiguity and extraneous content as possible: the frame is almost entirely composed of a tight close-up of a fisting scene. The camera is so close, its sense of scale so exaggerated, that the image nearly fades into abstraction. Viewers who have never encountered or even conceived of the practice of fisting may need time to identify precisely which body parts and in which configuration they are looking at. Lucy Sante describes the image as "a sculptural enigma that entirely excludes the viewer, any viewer. After you have figured out what is going on, you are immediately expelled by the monstrous arm and buttocks that devour all space." In Sante's reading, the image is the opposite of a confession: "It is not a privileged display, not a window onto anything; it is an aggressive, even hostile declaration of limits. They are breaching theirs; you are confined to your bubble." I read the central image's "devouring" of space as an attempt to access as concentrated a representation of sex as possible, rather than a hostile gesture.

Figure 3: Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut and Brooks, 1978, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

In her role as expert witness in the Cincinnati trial of *The Perfect Moment,* Kardon made the much-criticized comment that the image's value resided in its compositional precision, namely the "centrality of the forearm." This assessment does seem formalist to the point of absurdity, however, as Douglas Crimp argues, one cannot begin to describe the photograph adequately without mentioning its compositional symmetries, its tonal subtleties, its sheer formal beauty and at the same time, the photograph's impact surely resides in the contrast between those qualities and the challenge of its subject matter" (274). However, I read the work as an interrogation of the very idea that there *should* be a contrast between its execution and its subject matter. To evoke Mapplethorpe's assertion that his subjects are "the same", the image insists that extreme sexual content does not preclude formal beauty. The photograph is defined by the remarkably precise central line formed by the forearm of the fister, the cleft in the fistee's buttocks above it, the trail of hair down his spine, and the wrinkle in the leather of the armchair that he rests on. The forearm in the foreground mirrors the glimpse we

see of the fistee's own upper arm, where his body contorts slightly to the left. The precision and geometrical regularity of the image are nevertheless broken up by small, humanizing details that emphasize the subjectivity of the models. The symmetry of the image is broken by the small mark on the fistee's right buttock – whether a bruise, a mole, or a pimple. The light captures the shine of the lubricant at the center of the image, giving a small visual clue as to the physically demanding process that had to be performed to achieve the picture.

The photograph is painfully intimate, despite its apparent anonymity. While the image is titled after its subjects, we see nothing of their faces and little of their bodies beyond those involved in the sexual act. Danto emphasizes the foundation of mutual trust required to achieve the images he wanted, not only between Mapplethorpe and his models but in this case between the models themselves. Crimp observes that "we cannot but be impressed by the photographic staging of this extreme sexual moment in a spare, well-lighted studio, a set-up where we have come to accept a bell pepper or a nude body, perhaps, but not a sexual act whose intensity cannot be faked for the camera" (Crimp 275). Fisting requires a tremendous amount of relaxation and mutual trust and to achieve this within the context of a studio gives the image a kind of hushed power. This inability to "fake" the subject is integral to its effect. Again, this image relies on Williams' model of the "meat shot" as evidence of the veracity of a pornographic image. The work is almost entirely subsumed by this central, unmistakable visual proof – the hand and wrist disappearing from view and leaving no ambiguity about whether "this is really happening."

Helmut and Brooks appears to depict nothing *but* sex, eliminating the contextual, social dimension in favor of a focus so intense it threatens to become pure abstraction. However, the image also encounters the same "limits of visibility" that Williams attributes to the pornographic representation of penetration. Frustratingly, "for the male performer to penetrate the wonders is to make it nearly impossible for the viewer to see what is penetrated" (94). It effectively pushes up against the very limits of what the camera can capture and demands of its viewers what more they need to see (or perhaps what more they are willing to see.) Danto observes of Mapplethorpe's studio work that "none of the photographs is exactly a document of what people did when they were not being photographed" (73-74). The criticism that Mapplethorpe's work is "stagey" and thus inauthentic, as Paul Morrison argues, "hardly proves devastating", given that "the criticism presupposes both a myth of photographic transparence (the camera, in hands less theatrical or theatricalizing than Mapplethorpe's, records rather than constructs its world) and a myth of natural or spontaneous sexuality (sex, at least for individuals less kinky than Mapplethorpe's subjects, is all animal vitality, utterly innocent of cultural determination)" (103). Mapplethorpe thus records something that is simultaneously sex itself and its aestheticized simulation. It at once purports to show everything and runs up against the physical limitations of what the camera can capture.

Mapplethorpe's work must contend not only with the limits of rendering sex itself visible, but specifically *gay* sex. Just as *Helmut and Brooks* demands how much more we can or need to see, Mapplethorpe's images also ask just how direct a visual representation of gay sex is possible. Doug Ischar argues that trying to "see" queerness is a fundamental problem for visual art:

If we agree that gay people don't look different from others – and for decades photography was used in vain to prove otherwise – then we reach something of a sticking point in terms of gay photographic representation. How does one use an indexical medium to represent the particularities of people whose difference is not physiognomically evident? Typifying them is one answer, but a dangerous and reductive one. Developing style is another, but fashion's well-proven ability to raid and deplete the cultural margins makes this approach tricky business (10).

The solution, Ischar suggests, is to depict queerness socially. Mapplethorpe, he argues, "suggests disregard rather than concern for the problematics of gay representation. Although many of his models were gay, we can't tell this from looking at his pictures; it is once again the photographer/viewer who determines the homoerotics of the image" (10). This comment might apply to Mapplethorpe's less explicit nudes, but it is difficult to look at *Helmut and Brooks* and argue that the queerness of its subjects is in the eye of the beholder. Mapplethorpe is profoundly concerned with the problem of how (or even if) an indexical medium might capture gay desire itself. Unlike contemporaries Nan Goldin and Peter Hujar, his images of gay men do not generally position them within a social world. Rarely captured on location and never the kind of organic snapshots with which Goldin captured downtown nightlife, his work was not particularly well-suited to capturing sociality. While Mapplethorpe depicts models recruited from The Mineshaft and lovingly captures leather paraphernalia, his approach to the problem of what it means to make queerness visible is not photodocumentary. Instead, he interrogates the codes of connotation and denotation that have traditionally structured representations of gay sexuality.

D A Miller defines homosexuality by the impossibility of its being directly represented: "until recently, homosexuality offered not just the most prominent, it offered the only subject matter whose representation in American mass culture appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation" (119). Within this representational system, homosexuality might be insinuated everywhere but cannot be directly located anywhere. Connotation "excites the desire for proof" and fosters "the dream (impossible to realize, but impossible not to entertain) that connotation would quit its dusky existence for fluorescent literality, *would become denotation*" (123). The impossible promise of this revelation becomes a source of fascination for the viewer: "continually put in the position of being *just about to see* what we are waiting for; and the desire for the spectacle of gay male sex is intensified accordingly into that pleasurably (because all but unpleasantly) prolonged state of expectation we call suspense" (124), Miller's focus is on pre-Code cinema, but he argues that this representational system is the product not only of Hollywood's self-regulation, but of the broader "cultural surround of legal, social, psychic, and aesthetic practices (the last including those of spectatorship) that tolerate homosexuality only on condition that it be kept out of sight" (118). While he gestures towards a shift toward explicit representation in the concession that this system operated "until recently", a footnote argues that "even 'after Stonewall' this principle does not cease determining mass culture's representational practice, in which homosexuality, though obviously a less infrequently cited phenomenon, has hardly therefore become a more visible sexuality." (n.4 131) For Miller, the representation of homosexuality remains haunted by its apparent impossibility even in an ostensibly liberated cultural moment.

Figure 4: Robert Mapplethorpe, John, N.Y.C, 1978, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

Mapplethorpe's photography, then, is a strident rejection of the representational logic that relegated homosexuality to insinuation. His images wrench viewers from the perpetual suspense of being "just about to see" and finally present them with the impossible spectacle of gay male sexuality. Mapplethorpe's images, characteristically flooded with light, seem to embody the "fluorescent literality" that Miller ascribes to the imagined movement of homosexuality from connotation to denotation. In giving us nothing *but* the spectacle, Mapplethorpe's work strives for the kind of utterly self-evident, irrefutable representation of gay sex that Miller characterizes as impossible.

Miller argues that the specter of gay sex raised by the system of connotations is specifically that of anal sex. Mapplethorpe's work centers the anus (which Danto points out is rarely, if ever, seen in fine art) and the sexually receptive male body. *John, N.Y.C.* (1978), like *Self-Portrait* and *Helmut and Brooks,* enacts this literalization of the absent, phobic specter of anal sexuality. Mapplethorpe uses his composition's bold, geometrical precision to center the unmistakable "proof" of penetration. As the subject leans forward and penetrates himself with a dildo, his spine, arm and the dildo itself form a diagonal line that bisects the image and further concentrates our visual attention in an already tightly framed image. *John* characteristically crops out the face of its subject and leaves only the buttocks, arm,

back, and upper thigh in view. The background is the familiar neutral gray of Mapplethorpe's studio backdrop, without any of the already minimal furniture or props in the other images. We do not see evidence of the subject's pleasure or lack thereof, or any information that might position him in a social or even physical space. Instead, the photograph relies on its being precisely and only a representation of *the* image that haunts representations of homosexuality. Mapplethorpe's static "stagey" aesthetic here distills the forbidden and ostensibly unrepresentable into pared-back, almost archetypal scenes. Mapplethorpe attempts to wrest images of gay male sexuality from their highly particular "shadow kingdom of connotation" and present them *as if* they could be denoted as benignly and straightforwardly as a flower.

This pursuit of an all-consuming, literal self-evidence comes into greater focus when contrasted with Hal Fischer's contemporaneous *Gay Semiotics,* a "photographic study of visual coding among homosexual men." Published in 1977, the same year as Mapplethorpe's first exhibition of his sex pictures, *Gay Semiotics* is a witty visual field guide to "the male fantasy: archetypal gay images as they appear in both the gay media and gay urban enclaves" and "the invention of a semiotic mode within the gay community" (15). Drawing on his observations of the "gay enclaves of San Francisco", Fischer annotates a series of images of gay "types" (the cowboy, the jock, the leather man) and paraphernalia (handkerchiefs, poppers, earrings). He pays particularly close attention to the placement of accessories to signal sexual preferences, a practice codified in the leather community to make cruising prospective partners easier.

Fischer's primary audience seems to be the gay community he depicts rather than curious outsiders, which lends his captions a wry tongue-in-cheek quality. His description of the significance of the placement and color of handkerchiefs in the back pocket concludes, with pseudo-anthropological seriousness, "red handkerchiefs are also employed in the treatment of nasal discharge and in some cases may have no significance in regard to sexual contact" (9). Fischer pokes fun at the obsessive scrutiny of visual cues, even as he engages in it himself, and reminds his readers that not everything signifies, and sometimes a handkerchief is just a handkerchief. However, Fischer's joke makes an important point about the overdetermination of any apparent visual signifiers of homosexuality. Miller argues that the suppression of images of homosexuality results in us seeing homosexuality in *anything*, "yet if connotation, as the dominant signifying practice of homophobia, has the advantage of constructing an essentially insubstantial homosexuality, it has the corresponding inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place" (119). Fischer's apparently straightforward labels and captions seem to promise, at last, to decode the visual signs of homosexuality, though he also acknowledges that ghostly insinuations will continue to attach themselves to innocuous signs. But the possibility that innocuous details may be interpreted as signals of gay desire does not invalidate the semiotic system that Fischer outlines. The site of Fischer's semiotic analysis is the gay bar, the streets of the Castro, and the leather club, rather than the nominally heterosexual confines of Hollywood cinema produced under the Hays Code. Rather than signaling furtively or ambiguously, signifiers like the handkerchief code are supposed to be readily legible. They signal, as he puts it, sexual availability, and if they did not successfully denote something, they would not be used. Fischer's book affirms that we *do* obsessively look for the visual cues of homosexuality,

but, more importantly, that we *find* them and that they can signify relatively unambiguously, most of the time. Fischer's images play with the aesthetic and humorous possibilities of literality and denotation.

Fischer's images of leather and SM paraphernalia ostensibly contain many of the surface-level visual signifiers we might associate with Mapplethorpe. In one photograph, a man in a leather mask with a bare chest and studded belts drapes a cat-o'-nine-tails over the shoulder of a naked slave with his back to the camera and hands cuffed behind him. The image could easily be a Mapplethorpe in content alone, but its execution betrays a different affective relationship to the subject matter and "the real". Fischer's masked model cocks his head to the side, and what might be a glimmer of a smile is just visible beneath the mask. Rather than conveying menace, he appears camply aware of his own posturing. Fischer's echoes this in his caption, wryly noting that SM "takes place in an atmosphere of good, clean fun" (36). In a series of photos of bondage props (a "meat hoist", "open end table rack," and crucifix), Fischer chooses not to stage even a self-consciously posed scene. Instead, the position of the "user" of each device is illustrated with a dashed white outline, which keeps the more visceral elements of SM at bay.

Mapplethorpe's images are often witty and self-aware, but they lack the knowing explication that Fischer provides. While both are invested in making gay male sexuality visible and legible, Fischer locates his subjects within a social and discursive world, whereas Mapplethorpe seems to try to access a distilled version of "sex itself." The closest Mapplethorpe's work comes to Fischer's sociological approach to gay visual culture is *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter* (1979)*,* a work which is both one of Mapplethorpe's most famous and one of his most anomalous. Rather than being taken in the contained, clean space of the studio, Mapplethorpe posts Ridley and Heeter in full leather regalia in their suburban living room. The image is rich in visual information, and the juxtaposition of its subjects' chains and manacles with their fussy objets d'art comes as close as Mapplethorpe dares to a commentary on gay aesthetics itself. In contrast, most of Mapplethorpe's more explicit images strive for a self-evident immediacy. Whereas the network of evasions, hints, and gestures that make up the implicit representation of gay sexuality invites a certain degree of interpretative complexity, showing "the thing itself" seems, in theory, to short-circuit familiar patterns of interpretation. Mapplethorpe seems to want to achieve clarity and obviousness that requires no semiotic decoding. Rather than explain the relationship between signifier and signified, as Fischer does, Mapplethorpe's images strive to close the gap between the two altogether.

This produces a strange critical paradox. For his formalist critics, Mapplethorpe's images of sex are so concentrated and "obvious" that they are no longer about sex at all. In her essay for *The Perfect Moment's* catalog, Kardon asks of Mapplethorpe's explicit work, "how can the subject, stultified by symmetrical, frontal, canonical poses, and removed from real life by dramatic light of high contrast, really be homosexuality? The scenes appear to be distilled from real life; when elevated to an unnatural innocence, they create a frisson between the licentious subject of the photograph and its formal qualities that purifies, even cancels, the prurient elements" (10). Kardon's argument extends Danto's claim that "without the formalism the work goes over the edge" – that is, the work's style can contain and control the more unruly and disturbing aspects of sexuality (79). The critical desire to look through

or past the sexuality in Mapplethorpe's images should also be understood as the result of their disruption of existing interpretative models. If we are used to dwelling in the suspenseful state of being "just about to see" gay sexuality, we are critically ill-equipped to make sense of its revelation. If it is not the central, unrepresentable secret, how *can* the subject of a work of art be homosexuality? In the absence of a dense, near-infinite series of clues, the thing itself appears so obvious that there is nothing else to talk about but its form.

This lack of a critical language for explicit sexual representation can present itself as, ironically, a posture of sexual sophistication. Morrison argues that the critical impulse to collapse the distinction between explicit and non-explicit subject matter in Mapplethorpe's work is a display of liberal worldliness: "everyone knows that only the good bourgeois is ever shocked, and to register disgust or fascination before (yet another) photograph of (say) a man ramming a whip up his ass—see Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait, 1978*—is to abandon all claims to sophistication" (Morrison 84). Allen Ellenzweig makes a similar case, arguing that while "*not* distinguishing between [Mapplethorpe's] flower images and his pornographic imagery… may be a persuasive defense for those world-weary mondains weaned on art world formalism and critical theories, it hardly addresses an essential truth, apprehended if not analyzed by less 'sophisticated' eyes, that in photography content counts" (129). Citing *Jim and Tom, Sausalito,* in which a leather hooded man urinates into the mouth of another man kneeling in front of him, he argues that "it *is* rather elegantly staged to capture a quality of afternoon sunlight that imposes admirable formal play of light and shadow. But it is the transgressive nature of the image that immediately, and finally, impresses itself" (129). The critical posture of having "seen it all before" and remaining studiously unshocked by it erases the sheer novelty of Mapplethorpe's project. It effectively moves through and beyond explicit representation rather than engaging it on its own terms.

As I have argued, if Mapplethorpe's work imagines the possibility that graphic depictions of gay sexuality might be as self-evident and natural a subject for fine art photography, it is also acutely aware of the near impossibility of achieving this. The central effect of the images is in their being caught between the desire to escape into pure form and the knowledge of their capacity to unsettle and disturb. For queer and feminist art critics, defending Mapplethorpe's work on the grounds of formalism and abstract freedom of expression is an obfuscation of the material reality of gay sex itself. The images became a matter of public outrage precisely *because* of their documentary properties – the point is that they index "real" instances of gay sex and literalize what Crimp calls "straight men's phobic fantasy of anal penetration" (279). As Morrison argues, "if we are to continue to exercise our right to consume in representation the perversions of others, logic, if nothing more, dictates that someone, somewhere, must first have the right to engage in perverse sexual acts. The point is obvious, yet it bears emphasizing, if only because the defense of Mapplethorpe has, to my knowledge, remained exclusively on the level of our right of access to representation." "So much depends", he argues, "upon the actual existence of something called 'gay sex' (90). The fantasy that Mapplethorpe's work can transcend its own sexual content – a fantasy that Mapplethorpe himself at least partly encourages – assumes that a distilled, precise enough aesthetic can, in fact, successfully shake off the traces of social context.

The tension between indexicality and aesthetic control that I identify in his work is also a tension between the specificity of his historical moment and an archetypal, universalizing representation of gay "sex itself." The "actual existence of something called gay sex" is so politically overdetermined that Mapplethorpe cannot bypass the material circumstances in which that sex happens by sheer aestheticist willpower. Mapplethorpe's images are inescapably the product of the sexual subculture that flourished in the decade between the Stonewall riots and the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. Mapplethorpe's relationship to his own gay identity was decidedly apolitical, yet the emergent gay cultural economy in New York, especially, enabled an engagement with gay life that was structured almost entirely by sexual freedom and possibility. Patrick Moore argues that the urban gay sexual world of the 1970s was so extreme and so creative that it constituted a form of art, in which "the men who were visiting the Everard or stalking the piers or coming out of the Mineshaft into the morning light were artists. These men were artists using sex as their medium. The gay male community in the late 1970s might be seen as a collective engaged in an unprecedented exploration of their own minds and bodies" (14). Clubs like The Mineshaft became theatrical stage settings, "a fragile environment of unreality that allowed for acts that were literally dangerous" (Moore 22). In its laser-focused display of sexual variety and expression, Mapplethorpe's explicit work is as much a record of its context as Goldin's snapshots of downtown nightlife. As White argues, in this respect, he "provided the age with the very image it required" (129).

Even within a community focused on radical sexual experimentation, Mapplethorpe was attracted to extremity. He was, according to Morrisroe,

> most interested in the really freakish aspects of a person's sexual behavior and he would often canvass his friends to find out if they knew anybody who had something "interesting" to offer him, a "sexual schtick" he hadn't seen before. It was almost as if he were revisiting Coney Island, except now the "freaks" wore leather suits and bondage masks. If he found someone who enjoyed "fisting" — the act of inserting a fist into a partner's rectum - he'd then want to find a man who enjoyed two fists, or three. It wasn't enough that someone experience orgasm – he wanted the orgasm to be produced by some "creative" act, such as having a catheter, or a needle, inserted into the penis (145).

In pushing against the limits of what can be recorded by and revealed to the camera, Mapplethorpe's images echo his personal fascination with sexual extremes. Mapplethorpe's work does not just make the sexual visible, but demands that its viewers expand the definitions of sexuality itself. Gayle Rubin argues that fisting may be the only sexual act invented in the twentieth century, and Mapplethorpe's work seems to capture the feeling that the leather scene was radically revising and expanding existing frameworks of what constitutes sex. Images like *John, N.Y.C.,* literalize the specter of male sexual receptivity that haunts representations of gay sexuality. Others, however, represent sexual practices that lie so far outside of the norm that a general audience is unlikely even to conceive of them, let alone anxiously anticipate their revelation.

Mapplethorpe cites *Lou N.Y.C* (1978) in his interview with Kardon as an exemplary case of an image whose formal elegance supersedes its sexual content, though "most people" would be unable

Figure 5: Robert Mapplethorpe, Lou, N.Y.C, 1978, Getty Museum, Los Angeles

to move beyond its graphic content. Yet "most people" might find the image of what Sante calls "the hair-raising feat of inserting his little finger past the first knuckle into his urethra" hard to recognize as sexual at all, let alone allow themselves to let it dissolve into formal abstraction. The image contains recognizable ingredients of conventional sexuality, such as the erect penis and the act of penetration, but in a startlingly unfamiliar configuration. Mapplethorpe's glib claim that what the hand happens to be doing is "an aside" is a provocation that is hard to take seriously. This is not to say that Mapplethorpe is wrong about the image's form, which is characteristically precise in its framing and its emphasis on geometrical lines. The left arm, with its sharp, right-angled bend at the wrist, hugs and defines the edge of the frame. The splayed fingers of Lou's left hand – that beautiful hand gesture that Mapplethorpe cites – form a series of smaller triangles in the triangular negative space created by the subject's thighs. This, in turn, mirrors the inverted triangle of light on the Lou's stomach formed by his right hand and the shadow cast by his left. As with *Helmut and Brooks,* the geometrical precision is softened and broken by individualizing details like the pattern of veins in the hands and the varying densities and textures of body hair. The image works because it dares to suggest that there is no

inherent contradiction between explicit sexual content and formal beauty. It demands that the viewer not look past the shock induced by its indexing of "real" and often radically unfamiliar sexual content in favor of its compositional virtuosity, but to see both things somehow simultaneously.

However, if there is a limit case in Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, it is probably *Dick, N.Y.C.* (1978), a work that Sante describes as "calculated to shred all the niceties of critical palaver". The image of a penis and testicles restrained in a wooden device, covered in blood after being slashed with a razor, is cropped so tightly and so unprecedented a subject for art photography that it is not at all immediately evident what it depicts. In Danto's description of first encountering the image, recognition is mixed with disbelief,

> There was, for example, a picture of male genitals trussed up in some way so at odds with anything I had ever seen or even imagined done to male genitals that I was unable to acknowledge it as a picture of something an actual person had allowed to happen to his cock and balls, some painful wished-for masochistic infliction that had never entered my own repertoire of fantasies: I thought it had to be a photograph of some sort of sculpture (7).

The apparent unreality of the image threatens Mapplethorpe's keenly cultivated balance between indexing the unruliness of sex itself and retaining aesthetic control. The viewer, Sante argues, is "simultaneously pushed into outer darkness and forced to experience vicarious pain, a palliative middle distance being only marginally achievable by dryly considering the relative textures of wood, metal, cord, pubic hair, and stretched, blood-engorged, capillary-striated skin." In place of an appreciation for line, form, and shadow, Sante suggests that the best we might manage is a "marginally achievable" reprieve from thinking about the reality that the image indexes.

Most of Mapplethorpe's SM images, as I have argued, have a contained, demonstrative quality due to their being staged for the camera. In *Jim and Tom, Sausalito* (1977), which depicts a hooded man urinating into the mouth of another kneeling in front of him, the image is framed around the exchange of bodily fluids, but the urine itself is recorded as a thin, almost invisible, white line. In *Dick,* blood splatters and drips of its own accord, splashing onto the legs of the subject, and the image's ability to be borne at all probably relies on Mapplethorpe's customary use of black and white, which mitigates the impact of the blood. The image is also uncharacteristically imprecise in its focus and lighting. The penis and testicles at the center of the frame are blurred, while the metal plates on the restraining device are overexposed. Mapplethorpe's famous technical control seems to have slipped, allowing an unusually raw, documentary quality to overwhelm it. The swollen testicles and trussed penis are lumpy,

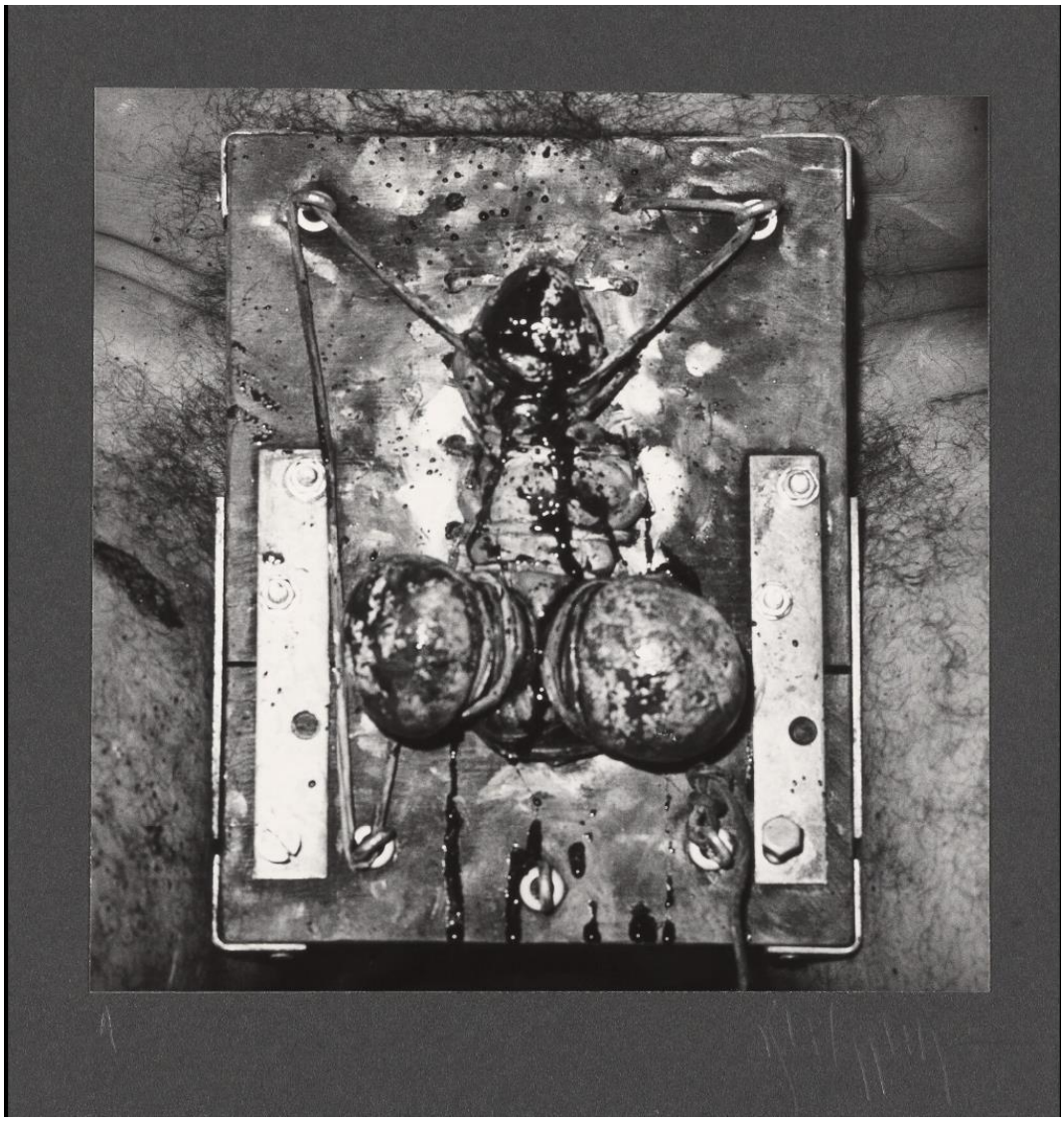

Figure 6: Robert Mapplethorpe, Dick, N.Y.C, 1978, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

asymmetrical, and look like so much meat. While this accords with the fantasy of butchery it depicts, it also evokes the more pornographic "meat shot" in its crudest, most utilitarian sense. In the unruliness of its form and content, the image seems more like Williams's involuntary confession than the controlled demonstrations of his more well-known SM work.

The point at which a particular sexual practice becomes unbearable to witness is far from universal. If *Dick, N.Y.C.,* is a breaking point for some, *Helmut and Brooks,* or even the *Self Portrait* with bullwhip, may be for others. The image does, nevertheless, document a level of sexual extremity that proved unsettling even for Mapplethorpe himself. He was introduced to Richard through an art critic aware of Mapplethorpe's fascination with sexual novelty and was invited to visit his apartment with his camera to witness the scene. As he later recounted, "I was told I could be a participant or an observer. I managed to do both. It was hard to focus the camera, but I found I could really get off on this thing. Holding a scalpel in my hand and grazing a cock was a real turn-on. You could feel the

energy in your fingers" (Morrisroe 202). Despite this initial spark of interest, Mapplethorpe's return visits to produce a finished piece quickly disillusioned him. Morrisroe writes that "Mapplethorpe saw Richard several more times and later created a multipanel piece that detailed the progressive mangling of Richard's penis. But ultimately, the mingling of blood and semen revolted him. "I had kind of exhausted the S&M thing," he concluded. "I had gone through it all both photographically and physically, and I was meeting too many guys like Richard. It was getting a little too crazy" (202). Mapplethorpe identifies *Dick, N.Y.C.,* not as a tipping point in terms of horror, but creative exhaustion. It is as if he had reached the outer edge of the content he could reconcile with his aesthetic vision – it is too "crazy", too unruly to achieve the delicate tension of his most successful work.

Mapplethorpe's urgent desire to push further and capture more was inevitably finite. Like Crisp, however different their work might be, he is confronted by the limits of explicit representation. While AIDS may explain why Mapplethorpe did not return to the material of the *X Portfolio* after the late 1970s, his turn away from this material predated the epidemic. Mapplethorpe's obsession with black men quickly consumed his creative output, and while these images were preoccupied with representing the penis, they did not depict sexual activity per se. His claim of having become artistically exhausted with very sexually explicit subject matter seems to be worth taking at face value. Having already laid bare the "secret" of homosexuality, both Crisp and Mapplethorpe find themselves instead drawn to the endless refinement of a signature style rather than conceptual development or further disclosure. If, as Miller argues, the possibility that homosexuality might be revealed is the primary focus of interpretative energy and the engine of narrative suspense, then the actual, unambiguous revelation of homosexuality would have a strangely deflationary effect on artistic representation. Crisp's emphasis on the refinement and intensification of pre-existing qualities rather than development makes sense as a logical counterpoint to the representational model that Miller outlines. When queer content does shift into the "fluorescent literality" of actual representation, Crisp suggests that there is little else that can be done but to distill and perfect its visible signs.

In his interview with Kardon, Mapplethorpe agrees that his aesthetic remained largely unchanged throughout his career. The primary development in his work was the result of gaining access to the technique and technology required to actualize his vision:

> Kardon: Are you aware of any stylistic or conceptual changes in your work since the early seventies? I look at your work and feel it's seamless; it has a consistent vision. Are there stylistic or conceptual changes I'm not aware of?
>
> Mapplethorpe: Not really. I think the work moves toward a kind of perfection. Over the years, the lighting has probably been controlled more, the precision is greater, but basically the vision is the same. It's just a matter of refining (28).

Mapplethorpe's description of his progression, or lack thereof, as an artist is remarkably similar to Crisp's own statements of intent. Sante's characterization of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre nicely captures this Crispian consistency of vision, describing it as "so continuous from one end of his career to the other that he might appear to have sprung into being one day around 1970, his aesthetics and preoccupations fully formed." "His life's work", she adds, "might look like a single action rather than

a forking path of possibilities." (Sante) While the content or the subject of an image may betray the year when it was taken to more informed viewers, it is difficult to differentiate by style alone between a Mapplethorpe of the mid-seventies and one of the late-eighties.

That singular vision was characterized by geometrically precise framing, a richness of texture, and a command of the interplay between light and shade that was only intensified by his near-exclusive use of black and white. Despite this, Mapplethorpe was not necessarily a technical genius. Mapplethorpe confessed to his brother, photographer Ed Maxey, that he "[didn't] know why [his] pictures come out looking so good" (Morrisroe 268). According to Maxey, "He didn't bother with light readings, nor did he test the setup beforehand by taking Polaroid pictures of his models. He simply turned his monolight on at full power and kept the aperture of his camera at f16." (Morrisroe 268) He never did his own developing but fostered a productive relationship with his printer Tom Baril, who would meticulously "dodge" and "burn in" Mapplethorpe's lights and darks to erase any imperfections in the sitter's skin (Morrisroe 240). In his interview with Kardon, Mapplethorpe identifies his vision of perfection as more a matter of composition than purely technical command of the photographic medium:

> Perfection means you don't question anything about the photograph. There are certain pictures I've taken in which you really can't move that leaf or that hand. It's where it should be, and you can't say it could have been there. There's nothing to question as in a great painting… In the best of my pictures, there's nothing to question – it's just there" (28).

Mapplethorpe's vision of perfection is one of absolute control, in which every detail is accounted for by the artist's "eye". In this sense, Mapplethorpe's turn away from explicit work in favor of the nude is a rejection of the kinds of compromises and practical challenges he encountered in shooting sex itself.

Mapplethorpe, like Crisp, embraced formal constraint as an end in itself – a kind of aesthetic and conceptual conservatism. Both Sante and Danto posit that this formal conservatism was an obstacle to his acceptance by the art world. "He upset the art world less by his graphically sexual subject matter", Sante argues, "than by his closure, his symmetry, his deliberateness, his polish—his frank pursuit of beauty." Danto suggests that Mapplethorpe's work's challenge to the art world was its being simultaneously ahead of and behind the times: "However liberated the sexual mores of the age, they were hardly loose enough to accommodate as acceptable the sadomasochistic practices he celebrated. But neither did the formal beauty to which his art aspired recommend him to the artistic establishment. However modern its content, its severe classicism seemed to consign it to another age" (Danto 24). In purely stylistic terms, Mapplethorpe's work does seem out of step with its time. Again, Goldin's work offers a useful counterpoint. Contemporaneous with Mapplethorpe, her work is far more identifiably "of its moment." Goldin's portraits of friends and fellow artists of the Downtown Scene place them in a decidedly unglamorous domestic world of unmade beds and grimy apartments. Her nudes are loving but do not attempt to flatter their subjects, who guilelessly display their sweat, scars, tan lines, and imperfect figures. By contrast, Mapplethorpe's already physically attractive models look more like platonic ideals of themselves. This preoccupation with beauty, both in terms of the

models he used and his polished renderings of them, led to his dismissal as merely a very good fashion photographer.

That Mapplethorpe's aesthetic is not being particularly contemporary or radical is not an inherent flaw. However, it does lead back to the statement of intent with which I began this chapter: that when photographed by Mapplethorpe, a picture of a cock and a flower could be "the same". Does the cultivation of aesthetic beauty and compositional perfection have differing effects depending on the content of the image? Ellenzweig is unequivocal in his dismissal of the idea, arguing that in making this assertion, "Mapplethorpe reached the most hermetic end of the 'art-for-art's sake' tradition" (140). This accusation of self-indulgent aestheticism does not, however, stick to his most explicit work. It is the simultaneous attempt and failure to present sexual material "as if" it were as benign as a flower that animates the images and makes them compelling. Yet, when not being propelled by the contradictory impulses of indexing sexual reality and transcending it, Mapplethorpe's work can retreat into a glossy, chilly blandness, in the case of the flowers, and an uneasy idealization, in the case of his black nudes. The gesture of laying bare the otherwise hidden electrifies the geometrical lushness of the images in a way that "straight" content cannot.

Mapplethorpe's increasing retreat into pure style is most apparent in the images of statues taken during the last years of his life. Rather than photograph classical statues themselves, which were "missing noses and things," Mapplethorpe preferred nineteenth and twentieth-century reproductions. Mapplethorpe began sending these statues to be professionally cleaned until his assistant Dimitri Levas stopped him, arguing that he was "making them look like brand-new statues" and that "it doesn't make any sense" (Morrisroe 334). By Mapplethorpe's aesthetic logic, of course, this *does* make some sense. Yet in tilting so far toward a totalizing pursuit of beauty, the images can become academic exercises and his signature coolness and sterility. Indeed, at the very end of his life, Morrisroe writes that "the Mapplethorpe style had become so formulaic that Mapplethorpe needed only to approve a Polaroid of the setup before delegating the actual picture-taking responsibilities to someone else" (335). Maxey, however, argues that the precision and intensity of his vision were such that these images *were* undoubtedly Mapplethorpe's: "After a while it got to be so standardized that it was almost like a factory… And you would think, oh well, it really doesn't have that much to do with Robert. But from the beginning, he had set up a certain process with Tom and me and his assistants, so that no matter what, it was really about his statement" (336) "In fact", Morrisroe notes, "even when Mapplethorpe wasn't involved in the pictures, his vision was so controlled and precise that both Maxey and English felt as if they were forced to see the world through his eyes" (336). As with Crisp, the force and consistency of Mapplethorpe's vision has a totalizing effect. The line between distilling and refining a signature style and retreating into a one-dimensional parody of oneself is delicate, and both Crisp and Mapplethorpe arguably find themselves tipping over it.

In a strange sense, Crisp and Mapplethorpe find themselves arriving at an older gay male aestheticist tradition not by evading the direct representation of gay content but by embracing it. Their work moves through and beyond connotation and, in the process, arrives back at aestheticism. In laying homosexuality bare, they contend with the lack of a coherent aesthetic tradition for direct representation. If gay desire is structured as *the* great secret, then what is to be done when it is finally

revealed? The alternative is a turn to style itself and the distillation and cultivation of the aesthetic as an alternative to development and further disclosure. In his explicit work, Mapplethorpe simultaneously works towards more, greater, and more graphic revelation and wants to retreat into pure style. He attempts the impossible task of rendering the sexually graphic and extreme abstract, almost benign, while retaining its capacity to shock. His best work is propelled by the dynamic relation between these two impulses – to index the reality of gay sex itself and to impose a totalizing aesthetic control over the image. The act of revealing what had long been inaccessible or impossible for fine art is remarkably powerful, but has an inherent limitation. As much as the work tries to, it cannot simply continue to reveal and reveal. The physical limitations of the photograph as a medium and the threat of tipping over the edge into something outside of his aesthetic control, as he seems to with *Dick, N.Y.C.,* effectively curtail how often he can repeat the trick. His cool, sterile later work lacks the power of the earlier explicit material but reflects the impossibilities built into his aesthetic project. This is not to say that explicit representation is inherently limited, so much as to acknowledge the conceptual challenges both Mapplethorpe and Crisp face in crafting a "self-evident" aesthetic mode that somehow bridges the gap between the real and its representation without devolving into pure surface.

Part Two: Telling not Showing

Erica Jong and Sally Rooney have occupied a strikingly similar position in the cultural imaginary. Poet-turned-novelist Jong published *Fear of Flying* in 1973, an account of its loosely autobiographical protagonist Isadora Wing's thwarted efforts to cultivate a liberated, feminist version of heterosexual desire. The novel would turn its author into both an overnight literary celebrity and a somewhat unwilling spokeswoman for feminist sexual politics. Rooney, too, has attained a level of literary stardom rarely seen in the twenty-first century. Her bestselling, sparsely narrated novels trace the romantic lives of intelligent yet self-deprecating young women. Both praised and mocked for her avowed socialism and her focus on a distinctly middle-class, millennial milieu, Rooney's fiction has been repeated grist for the mill of online cultural commentary. The work of both novelists exists in uneasy relation to the category of literary fiction, not only because of their staggering popularity but in the proximity the work itself bears to the feminized and aesthetically suspect genre of the romance. Indeed, both novelists' work has been defined in the popular imaginary by its explicit sexuality. By virtue of their emphasis on representing sex itself and their sheer popularity, the two authors have acquired a somewhat unwitting role as uniquely perceptive chroniclers of an entire generation's sexual mores and anxieties.

Jong's and Rooney's literary projects are fundamentally informed by the paradigm-shifting intervention of second-wave feminism that the personal is political. That is, sex itself is as available for political scrutiny as any other aspect of social life and as conditioned by gendered power structures. Jong's explicit representation of sex from a woman's perspective was similarly novel and revelatory in 1973; however, the problem of what an explicitly feminist version of literary sex might look like remains as thorny a problem for Rooney forty years later. Indeed, this part emphasizes the maddening quality of what Jong's protagonist calls the "big problem": "how to make your feminism jibe with your unappeasable hunger for male bodies." (88) I characterize Jong's *Fear of Flying* and Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* as experiments in the novel's role in the impossible yet necessary work of reconciling feminist sexual politics with everyday experiences of sex and love. Crucially, they are explicit not only in their representation of sex but in their self-consciousness and citation of the language of politics and theory. Whereas Quentin Crisp and Robert Mapplethorpe contend with the more fundamental aesthetic question of how to depict an identity that has been constituted by its very unrepresentability in the cultural imaginary, Jong's and Rooney's projects are predominantly concerned with making *sense* of sexuality.

In an inversion of the familiar truism of the creative writing classroom, I characterize Jong's and Rooney's style as a distinctly middlebrow mode of "telling not showing." The dictum to "show, don't tell" advises writers to use image, gesture, and intimation rather than direct statement to convey inner states and concepts. Rooney and Jong's narrative voices, by comparison, are painfully self-aware, and their characters make continual, explanatory observations about their thoughts and circumstances. If the novel, as a high art form, shows rather than tells, then its inverse has been associated with the amateurism and literality of middlebrow realism and genre fiction. If the middlebrow mediates and domesticates high culture and political discourse for a broader audience, then this kind of "telling" is one of its key tools. As with "self-evidence", "telling" seems to refuse the reader the pleasures of

inference and ambiguity and effectively does their work for them. Indeed, both aesthetics share an apparent tendency to close the interpretive gap between reader and text, rendering it impervious to criticism. However, while Crisp's and Mapplethorpe's "self-evidence" was a highly visual aesthetic of surface and stasis, Jong's and Rooney's "telling" instead emphasizes *explanation* and the incorporation of direct commentary and analysis into the body of the text itself. In keeping with middlebrow fiction's reputation as tendentious or as a form of literary therapy, telling draws the novel's political stakes to the surface but keeps them in a determinedly feminized social context.

For *Fear of Flying* and *Conversations with Friends*, the aesthetically suspect, feminized generic strategies of the middlebrow novel are not an aesthetic liability, but a solution for writing about sexuality in the wake of the women's movement's politicization of the very mechanics of sex and desire. Heterosexual desire, far from being conditioned by secrecy, is hopelessly overdetermined by cultural baggage and literary convention. Rather than attempt the impossible work of extricating themselves from these cultural tropes, Jong and Rooney instead position themselves in a tenuous position somewhere between literary fiction and romance. In contrast to the somewhat dry "consciousness-raising novels" more often associated with middlebrow feminist fiction, both Jong's and Rooney's characters are *already* conversant in feminist theory. Their novels depict a distinctly middle-class milieu in which these politics have already become part of the language of everyday life. Both novels use a confessional, intimate first-person narrative voice that emphasizes the embeddedness of these analytical frameworks in their protagonists' inner lives. In a manner that is distinctly middlebrow, their brand of "telling" renders the once radical decidedly ordinary. The novels' engagement with theory comes not in the form of meta-textual allusion and formal experiment, but a version of self-reflexivity that is compatible and coextensive with their precisely observed realism. This mode of "telling not showing" is not as tediously literal as this categorization as middlebrow might suggest. Rather, the novels are extended, and stylistically quite different, experiments in the explanatory powers of the novel and the limits of "telling."

Fear of Flying is an experiment in verbal excess. Isadora is a relentless talker and analyst of her own life, who is equally conversant in the nascent politics of "women's lib", mid-century psychoanalytic dogma, literary history, and feminine pop-cultural detritus. Isadora is more than capable of identifying her "big problem" – reconciling her feminism and her desire for men – yet the act of ever more precisely naming proves frustratingly inadequate. While the novel is remembered for its vision of the "zipless fuck" – an effortlessly pleasurable consequence-free sexual encounter – the actual sex in the novel is hopelessly disappointing. Indeed, differentiating between "good" and "bad" sex and even the explicit recounting of the mechanics of sex itself appears to reveal precious little about the "truth" of desire. *Conversations with Friends* is, by comparison, an experiment in extreme concision. Rooney's famously cool, sparse prose style has earned her a reputation for accessibility and, for her detractors, intellectual vacuity. Yet Rooney's experiment with "telling" is more sharply ironic than her protagonist Frances' self-aware, deadpan assertions might suggest. The novel seems to promise that the accretion of enough precisely observed details might unlock something like the truth. Despite its pretense to tell all, the novel subtly ironizes Frances' inability to make sense of her romantic and sexual life.

In both novels. the ability to name the "big problems" of feminist politics is simultaneously necessary and insufficient. The circularity and persistence of feminist anxiety about heterosexual desire and, indeed, its real resurgence in recent years in the form of "heteropessimist" discourse, undermine the idea that the ever-more precise dissection and naming of the problem might serve to resolve it. Their "telling" is a seemingly inescapable byproduct of the normalization of feminist politics, in that the narrative voices of their characters in their educated, anxious milieus cannot help but draw on these frameworks as a means of understanding their lives. Both Jong's and Rooney's protagonists are intensely anxious about their own cleverness and its inability to insulate them from the indignities of heterosexual desire. However, *Fear of Flying* belongs squarely within a distinctly seventies, distinctly American mania for self-actualization and remains rather optimistic about Isadora's capacity for intellectual and personal fulfilment. By contrast, there is a weariness and cynicism to *Conversations with Friends*, not least because it retreads the same, seemingly irresolvable questions about sexual politics. Her millennial women are, above all, overdetermined by their economic precarity in post-recession Ireland. These conditions underpin the novel's skepticism about what, if anything, its characters can do with their knowledge. Despite this, Rooney never genuinely suggests we abandon the work of reconciling one's life and one's politics, but proposes a far more modest, more pessimistic vision of the form it might take than Jong.

Jong's and Rooney's novels also result in a more thoroughgoing examination of the very stakes of explicit representation itself. Rooney, it turns out, does rely on and have full command over the writerly craft of "showing" through intimation, irony, and absence. The supposed literality of "telling" proves to be as much an aesthetic effect as it is a genuine means of accessing something like truth. Further, while the explicitness of both novels' accounts of sex itself is inextricable from the explicitness of their politics, it is not necessarily the case that the novel's engagement with sexual politics can be equated with their representation of "good" or "bad" sex. Indeed, representing the mechanics of sex itself proves an imperfect means of accessing any kind of truth about desire. Isadora, for example, is compelled by the mediocre sex she has with the repulsive Adrien rather than her far more physically satisfying and attractive husband, and the novel struggles to account for this seeming illogic. As with all the modes of explicit representation I analyze in this dissertation, a core of inscrutability underpins these novels' promise to "tell". Rather than undermine this kind of explicit representation altogether, though, my readings of Jong's and Rooney's fiction reveal "telling" to be a far more mobile, contradictory, and dense aesthetic mode than the familiar dicta of the creative writing classroom would suggest.

"An unappeasable hunger for male bodies": The Middlebrow Aesthetics of Heterosexuality in *Fear of Flying*

Despite selling a remarkable twenty million copies, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), if it is remembered at all, persists in popular culture more as an idea than a novel. It was the defining literary artefact of second-wave feminism, that is, unless it was not really that feminist after all? If nothing else, it was a novel about sex, "so sexually frank", in fact, "that you may have found it hidden in your mother's underwear drawer" (Kamensky 10). Its notorious two-word coinage for casual sex, "the zipless fuck," percolated into the cultural imaginary as a talismanic catchphrase for the heady naivety of the sexual revolution. Timothy Aubry suggests that turning to the novel itself might also yield little insight:

> Anyone encountering the current paperback edition of *Fear of Flying*, with its glossy cover, pocket-sized dimensions, picture of a woman's naked curvy torso adorning the front, and advertisement, "For every woman who ever dreamed of living her sexual fantasies," on the back, may be puzzled by the enthusiastic blurb from John Updike's *New Yorker* review: "A winner… fearless and fresh, tender and exact." What kind of novel is this?" (420)

The reader may be rightfully uncertain as to whether they are about to encounter something more like *Deep Throat* than *Rabbit, Redux*. Indeed, for critics, the novel has been figured as the literary equivalent of a full-frontal gynecological display – as nothing *but* unmediated sex. Writing on the fiftieth anniversary of the novel, Jane Kamensky describes the novel as "sexual self-portrait, kin to the self-examinations women's groups undertook on living room floors." (11) Reviewing the novel for *The New Statesman,* Paul Theroux matches Jong's perceived grotesquerie with some of his own, he declares that "with such continual and insistent reference to her cherished valve, Erica Jong's witless heroine looms like a mammoth pudenda, as roomy as the Carlsbad Caverns, luring amorous spelunkers to confusion in her plunging grottoes" (554).

In these descriptions, the novel appears to do with language what Linda Williams argues the pornographic film tries desperately to achieve but cannot – to make the secret of female sexuality visible. If, as Williams argues, "for the male performer to penetrate the wonders is to make it nearly impossible for the viewer to see what is penetrated", in Theroux's account, Jong appears to have achieved this fantasy of absolute transparency and visibility (94). Counter to the expectation that the novel represents an unmediated vision of absolute sexual freedom, the truth of the novel's oft-forgotten plot is far more prosaic. Poet Isadora Wing accompanies her psychoanalyst husband Bennett to an international psychoanalytic convention in Vienna, ostensibly to write an article about it. Faced with a gnawing dissatisfaction at monogamous marriage, she meets and becomes rapidly infatuated with Adrian, a crass, British psychoanalyst. They begin a somewhat unsuccessful sexual affair, which escalates into a spontaneous trip across Europe. When abandoned, somewhat inevitably, by Adrian, Isadora finds her way to her husband's hotel in Paris and leaves the possibility of their reconciliation suspended and unanswered. In an essay on the process of writing the novel, Jong confesses that "*Fear of Flying* is not really a very sexy book. It is all about unfulfillment. All that's new about it – if anything – is the explicitness of the *language*. The sexual *acts* in the book are nearly all abortive and unfulfilling, and that was what I intended" ("Writing" 267).

Part of the ambiguity surrounding the novel can be located in the sheer novelty of what it was attempting to do. In her 1980 overview of the past decade of women's writing about sex, Ann Snitow argues that, "in the history of fiction in English, it was only the day before yesterday that male novelists had the license or the desire to write about sex explicitly, seriously, as an experience in itself. It was only yesterday that women novelists who are my subject could begin to think that they, too, had such license and such desire" (702). While Snitow identifies Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) as the first "public, detailed, and influential exploration of how sex fits into a modern woman's life" (703), she notes that "the effect was not as if a lid had been taken off a pot so that rich, active sexual experiences could bubble out. Instead, alongside hope and occasional ecstasy, their books are about the pain of women, their social oppression, and sexual repression. Women, for so long equated with sex, did not immediately leap at the chance to tell their side of the sex story" (704) The "fulsome and hectic" *Fear of Flying* was arguably the first novel to try to "take the lid off the pot" and mine the formal possibilities of explicit sexual representation afforded by shifting obscenity laws and social mores (711). Further, it was the first novel of note to combine sexual explicitness with explicit reference to the nascent sexual politics of second-wave feminism.

Indeed, I argue that *Fear of Flying* is not just a novel about sex, but a novel preoccupied with the question of just *how* to negotiate its newfound capacity to represent it. If Williams argues there is no straightforwardly unmediated way to represent sex photographically, then the non-indexical nature of prose only compounds the problem. Claire Jarvis's account of literary sex before the so-called "end of obscenity" serves as a negative image of this problem. Jarvis begins her project with "a simple question, "How do respectable novelists describe sex and still maintain a decent distance from pornography?" (i) The answer, she argues, is a complex of "metaphor and euphemism":

> waves, oceans, blooms, and illuminations mark the sexual act within the respectable novel and allow a writer to refer to sexual action without realistically describing the act itself. Descriptive haze lets a reader experience sex's capacity to dislocate personal experience. It alerts us to the fact of sex's occurrence, and it absolves the writer of a particular kind of obscenity, one that comes of naming things as they are (i).

If representing sex without showing it is figured as an aesthetic challenge here, I argue that its direct representation is no less of a formal puzzle. Jong, I argue, undertakes an experiment in aesthetic reversal as a means of solving the problem. That is, if the literary sex scene before the mid-twentieth century was veiled in metaphor and connotation, Jong develops a profoundly literal counter-aesthetic. The novel is preoccupied with what happens when we can tell, name, and show. Further, this desire to tell is not just reserved for the sexual act itself. Rather, Jong integrates the language of second-wave sexual politics at the level of the text itself. Isadora has access to the same critiques of the gendered power dynamics of love and sex as the novel's readers and explicitly analyzes her experience on these terms.

For *Fear of Flying,* heterosexual sex is not just a political problem, but an aesthetic one. It is a novel not only about the problem of representing sex itself, but of squaring the lived experience of sexuality with a newly available framework that radically reimagined the private arena of love and sex

as a political site. I argue that, counter to emerging French feminist theories of literary form, the novel does not seek to radically reinvent the form of the novel itself, but reimagines the feminized genre of middlebrow realism as the most appropriate generic vehicle for resolving the problem of literary sex. My reading of Jong as middlebrow follows Aubry's own framing of the novel in these terms, as part of "a new genre of middlebrow fiction, confessional in nature, designed for female readers, which has achieved its apotheosis with Oprah Winfrey's Book Club." (419) As a profoundly middle-class genre, the middlebrow novel has been criticized for repackaging high culture for readers eager to accrue cultural capital. Yet, in her definitive account of the genre, Janice Radway argued that middlebrow fiction is not merely a watered-down imitation of high culture, but "a kind of counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic English." (9-10) This counterpractice, I argue, also encompasses an engagement with obviousness and literality itself as an aesthetic mode – of "telling". Isadora's confessional narrative voice is excessive, emotive, and preoccupied with romantic love and sex. It directly, obsessively invokes social issues and sexual politics and, while it does not offer pat solutions, actively wrestles with how its protagonist might metabolize and reconcile her politics with the messier details of an individual life.

Yet the novel is not as frothy or as purely smutty as its reputation and my characterization of it as distinctly middlebrow suggests. Rather, it sits in the ambiguous middle ground between literary fiction and the middlebrow romance. Updike's characterization of the novel's narrative voice as a "flow of breathy vernacular" (albeit prone to cliché) is astute. Jong herself admitted that "in the novel what I wanted was excess, digression, rollicking language, energy, and poetry. *Tristam Shandy* rather than a well-wrought urn. Henry Miller or Colette rather than Forster or Bowen" ("Writing" 264). It is not merely referential but near obsessive in its citations. Each chapter is granted at least one epigraph, and the novel is littered with dense, paragraph-long lists of authors and historical figures, and, often, entire poems (many of them Jong's own published work, attributed to Isadora). Witticisms and flights of fancy become extended riffs, while the narrative loops back on itself to tell and re-tell the same episodes from Isadora's past. As a narrator, Isadora is frenetic, logorrheic, and, as even her more sympathetic reviewers concede, somewhat exhausting. Jong argued that a "perfectly wrought" novel would not fit as "the frame for my experience of life" ("Writing" 263-264). The novel is an unabashed conglomeration of registers and references. The "perfectly wrought" form of the modernist, high-cultural novel was, for Jong, an inadequate and inappropriate vessel for an account of contemporary sexual mores.

Fear of Flying was not alone in its skepticism of the modernist novel as an appropriate genre for self-consciously feminist fiction. In an overview of this emergent subgenre, Rosalind Coward notes that, "over recent years we have been witness to a strange phenomenon, the emergence of what we may loosely call the 'feminist novel.' This phenomenon has involved the immense commercial success and popular appeal of some novels which claim explicit allegiance to the women's liberation movement" (225). *Fear of Flying* was often grouped with these other "consciousness-raising novels" of the 1970s, though it is formally rather distinct from them. Novels like Marilyn French's doorstopper *The Women's Room* (1977) and Alix Kate Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1972) were somewhat

dour accounts of their protagonists' political awakening. Snitow argues that, regarding women's writing about sexuality, "the realist novel has always been the novel of such first phases. Since the inception of the form, novels have been 'how-to' manuals for groups gathering their identity through self-description" (Snitow 705). This gravitation toward middlebrow realism was a source of anxiety for feminist critics. Coward observed that "in the informal networks in which phenomena like the 'feminist novel' are discussed, responses are rarely unambiguous. No one is quite sure about the political validity of the admixture of conventional entertainment with a serious political message. Many are suspicious of the commercial success of "the novel that changes lives" and are eager to demonstrate how these novels are ultimately "not feminist." This has been the fate of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*" (225-226). The problem was not only a matter of literary convention, but commerce – these novels were being read in exponentially more quantities than feminist theory and were becoming a primary, rather than supplementary, source of information about feminist thought for millions of women.

This chapter is not a re-litigation of whether or not *Fear of Flying* is a feminist novel. To use Toril Moi's framework, if feminist literary criticism was beginning to split into an Anglo-American faction interested in the feminist content of a work, and a continental faction concerned with radically disruptive feminist form, then *Fear of Flying* is insufficiently feminist by both metrics. Rather than reiterate the exhaustive work of Charlotte Templin's study of Erica Jong's reception by feminist and non-feminist critics alike, I want to focus specifically on Jong's place in Rita Felski's recuperation of the realist aesthetics of feminist fiction. Writing at the height of continental feminist theory's popularity, Felski cautions that "the chimera of a "feminist aesthetic" has tended to hinder any adequate assessment of both the value and limitations of contemporary feminist writing by measuring it against an abstract conception of a "feminine" writing practice, which in recent years has been most frequently derived from an antirealist aesthetics of textuality" (2). Felski argues that contemporary women's fiction has gravitated toward realism because of what the genres affords them, "while it is no longer possible to accept the epistemological claims of a naive realism and to believe that a text can transmit an unmediated representation of the real, this does not negate the strategic importance of feminist writing as a medium of self-exploration and social criticism" (79). While not arguing that "literature should be reduced to a narrowly utilitarian function in advancing specific and identifiable political goals", Felski nevertheless questions whether a so-called feminist aesthetic of experimental, defamiliarized language could ever serve as a meaningful political intervention.

Given this critical position, it is surprising that Felski emphatically excludes *Fear of Flying* from the category of "feminist literature", which she defines as "all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed" (14). Instead, she argues that,

> The novels of Erica Jong, for example, which have been marketed as examples of feminist writing, do not seem to me to reveal any serious questioning of the existing basis of male-female relations or any sustained refusal of the values of a male-dominated society. It can be noted in this context that some feminist ideas which might once have been considered radical (such as the critique of the sexual double standard) have filtered down to the extent that they

> are now relatively familiar. Consequently, these ideas have gradually become incorporated into a great deal of material which cannot be construed as consciously feminist or oppositional in any meaningful sense. (14-15).

Given that the novel explicitly and repeatedly discusses women's liberation, Felski's assessment is a strange one. Merve Emre responds to this critique by suggesting that her criteria for dismissal are neither aesthetic nor theoretical. Instead, the problem with *Fear of Flying* is "overconsumption, overcitation, overcirculation, and overcommunication – in short, a problem of excessive reading" (125). I agree that Felski's dismissal betrays an aversion to the novel's commercial popularity. Further, Felski's critique does not account for the particularity of the novel's relationship to feminism. This is not so much a novel trying to be feminist as it is a novel that is *about* feminism. That is, the entire premise of Isadora's sexual crisis is that she has already metabolized the familiar "filtered down" insights of feminist sexual politics. The work of the novel is in figuring out what on earth to do about them.

While Felski considers *Fear of Flying's* insights unremarkable, it is worth noting that *Sexual Politics* was less than three years old at the time of the novel's publication. In Jong's middle-class milieu, the foundational critiques of the women's movement have already been integrated enough to have become truisms. Considering how comparatively nascent the women's movement was, it is striking how often the novel makes explicit reference to it. When Isadora recounts a "final blow-up" with her previous analyst over his "warmed-over cliches about women's place" (24), she complains that "Dr Kolner could only see anything which vaguely smacked of Women's Lib as a neurotic problem" (23). In protesting him, she berates herself for "sounding so damned like some sort of tract and for being forced into simple-mindedly polarized positions. I knew I was neglecting the subtleties" (24). In her parodic citation of the diminutive "Women's Lib", Isadora alludes to a movement that had already been packaged, flattened, and absorbed into the vernacular. This free circulation of feminism as a more or less sophisticated concept, unmoored from activist politics, threatens it with both banality and willful distortion. Isadora recalls asking "a guy [she] know who is very hot for the movement" why he was a feminist, only for him to reply that it's "because it's the best damned way to get laid nowadays" (269). Feminism has been so swiftly metabolized by the culture that it has already been disingenuously repurposed as a tool for seduction.

The novel emerged from a political climate in which sex itself was newly understood as an appropriate object of political scrutiny. Writing in *Sexual Politics,* the first substantive theoretical work of the women's movement, Kate Millett proposes that "coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum; although of itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes…. But of course, the transition from such scenes of intimacy to a wider context of political reference is a great step indeed" (23). The concept that "the personal is political" has been chewed over and flattened in subsequent decades, but its fundamental claim that the private sphere is subject to the operations of power was an electrifying new concept when *Fear of Flying* was published. Further, in its close readings of the sex scenes in Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, D.H Lawrence, Jean Genet, *Sexual Politics* suggested that we might be able to close-read the act of sex

itself. Rather than something animalistic and divorced from the social, Millett emphasized that even the most intimate aspects of our lives are mediated by ideology and culture.

Many other early interventions concerned themselves quite literally with the anatomical dynamics of sexual dissatisfaction. Essays such as Anne Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm", Alix Kate Shulman's "Organs and Organisms," and Betty Dodson's "Liberating Masturbation" drew on the mid-century revolution in sexology to argue that prevailing sexual norms were rooted in ideology rather than anatomical reality. In one of the most widely circulated essays of the early movement, Koedt argues that "women have… been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men" and reframes received psychoanalytic notions that indexed orgasm to women's psychological maturity (101). If it is true that the clitoris is not immature but the only location of female orgasm and "if certain sexual positions now defined as "standard" are not mutually conducive to orgasm", then they no longer be defined as standard" (101). Further, she suggests that male anxiety about clitoral orgasm is predicated on a fear of their own sexual expendability. If intercourse is not necessary for women's sexual pleasure, "women might equally seek other women as lovers" (109). Reclaiming clitoral orgasm then, is not merely a pragmatic solution to the problem of bad sex, it poses a threat to the "heterosexual institution" itself (109).

In these earliest missives of the women's liberation movement, sex is almost always tacitly heterosexual – the problem of sex is the problem of sex with men. Yet the understanding that heterosexual norms were precarious, rather than inevitable, began to inform proposals for radically new ways of organizing sexual desire. The most radical wing of the movement, including Ti-Grace Atkinson and Dana Densmore, advocated that feminists withdraw from sex entirely. An emergent lesbian feminism, however, suggested that lesbianism could be as much a conscious political decision as it was an innate sexual preference. Just as Densmore argued that a withdrawal from sex effectively freed up energy wasted on "mak[ing] love to a man who despises you" (265), Radicalesbians argued in that rather than "trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man… our energies must flow towards our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors." (4) In theory, the Radicalesbians were working toward a future "in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings [and] the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear" (1). Yet the hypothetical redeemability of men remains an abstract possibility, overshadowed by the more pressing need to withdraw emotional investment from their oppressors. This "personal solutionism" was viewed by others in the movement as an essentially unsustainable position on which to build a mass movement (Echols 111). When interviewed recently by Nona Willis Aronowitz Densmore claims that "there wasn't anyone in Cell 16 [the often stridently anti-sexual organization she was part of] that was celibate… all of us were, at times, between relationships, and we could see that relationships are positive." She was, at the time she made a call for principled celibacy, involved with "a lovely man who I think is wonderful." (204) Squaring feminist theory and sexual praxis could feel like an impossible project. Sex was both inevitably inflected by social and political conditions, yet it proved stubbornly resistant to individual reform efforts.

It is clear from *Fear of Flying's* first pages that Isadora's consciousness has already been raised and that she has absorbed these critiques. In what Aubry describes as "an impressive barrage of cliches", Isadora launches quickly into an interrogation of the novel's central problem:

> Growing up female in America. What a liability! You grew up with your ears full of cosmetic ads, love songs, advice columns, whoreoscopes, Hollywood gossip, and moral dilemmas on the level of TV soap operas. What litanies the advertisers of the good life chanted at you! What curious catechisms! ... What all the ads and all the whoreoscopes seemed to imply was that if only you were narcissistic enough, if only you took proper care of your smells, your hair, your boobs, your eyelashes, your armpits, your crotch, your stars, your scars, and your choice of Scotch in bars—you would meet a beautiful, powerful, potent, and rich man who would satisfy every longing, fill every hole, make your heart skip a beat (or stand still), make you misty, and fly you to the moon (preferably on gossamer wings), where you would live totally satisfied forever… (17)

This list – a characteristic formal device of Isadora's – is as good an introduction as any to Isadora's frantic internal monologue. Splicing forced puns ("whoreoscopes"), snatches of song lyrics, and deliberately blunt references to armpits, crotches, and holes, it darts associatively from one piece of pop-cultural detritus to another. Further, the novel's reputation for facetiousness is at least in part the result of this associative, citational style. The humiliating and facile elements of heteronormative culture are contagious and impossible to dislodge. Heterosexual love and sex is so hopelessly mediated by the language and forms of pop cultural ephemera and the romance plot, the novel suggests, that there is no way of conceptualizing desire that does not in some way cite and regurgitate them.

Isadora's breathless spinning out of examples here also proves that she has done her homework and internalized the fundamental critiques of second-wave feminism. Therein, however, lies the problem. Her obsessive lists are efforts to bolster her own critiques, yet their repetitiousness and circularity more often end up indicating an intellectual dead end. In the absence of more analysis, she merely piles up examples, as if telling more and more will clarify the problem. She knows very well that her desires and problems are banal, yet their emotional hold on her remains remarkably stubborn. The novel does not present its central problem as obscure or in need of careful teasing out. Instead, Isadora essentially summarizes the novel's central conceit when she says,

> I had been a feminist all my life (I date my 'radicalization' to the night in 1955 on the IRT subway when the moronic Horace Mann boy who was my date asked me if I planned to be a secretary), but the big problem was how to make your feminism jibe with your unappeasable hunger for male bodies. It wasn't easy (88).

It is here that Felski's critique of the novel's "filtered down" and "familiar" version of feminist politics misconstrues the nature of *Fear of Flying's* relationship to feminism. None of Isadora's insights is original, but Jong's point is precisely that they are *not*. If the insight that our ideas about sex and romantic love are mediated has been told before, it does not become any less true in the retelling. The novel is not interested in breaking theoretical ground, but in what we do with the politics we already

have. The novel tries to negotiate this problem by stating and re-stating the same problematic and pushing up against the limits of what "telling" can achieve.

For Isadora, knowledge itself is insufficient and makes the persistence of the "wrong" kind of desires all the more galling:

> The fact that greater minds than mine had pondered these issues and come up with no very clear answers didn't comfort me much either. It only made me feel that my concerns were banal and commonplace. If I were really an exceptional person, I thought, I wouldn't spend hours worrying my head about marriage and adultery…. My guilt only shows how thoroughly bourgeois and contemptible I was. All my worrying this sad old bone only showed my ordinariness (72-73).

Characteristically, Isadora is self-aware enough to have absorbed a version of Felski's critique – this *has* all been said before. Yet being able to articulate the problem and resolving it are radically different propositions. The political method of consciousness-raising groups was predicated on gathering the collective experiences of their members to demonstrate the ubiquity of what were once considered purely personal issues. For Isadora, her susceptibility to the same ubiquitous problems as other women is humiliating.

In his review of the novel, Updike argues that it "not only stands as a notably luxuriant and glowing bloom in the sometimes thistly garden of "raised" feminine consciousness but belongs to, and hilariously extends, the tradition of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Portnoy's Complaint* —that of the New York voice on the couch, the smart kid's lament." This "smart kid's lament" takes the form of the humiliating realization that her intelligence and self-awareness alone do not allow her to transcend her implication in the category of heterosexual woman:

> And the crazy part of it was that even if you were clever, even if you spent your adolescence reading John Donne and Shaw, even if you studied history or zoology or physics and hoped to spend your life pursuing some difficult and challenging career—you still had a mind full of all the soupy longings that every high-school girl was awash in. It didn't matter if you had an IQ of 170 or an IQ of 70, you were brainwashed all the same. Only the surface trappings were different. Only the *talk* was a little more sophisticated (17).

To be subject to ordinary desires is all the more embarrassing for the clever girls. Implicit here, however, is a sense that increased sophistication is not a solution. Clever, middle-class girls may have "more sophisticated" language for their problems, but their spinning out of ever-more complex theories does not supersede or render irrelevant the more basic premises of feminist sexual politics.

Heterosexual desire is also frightening in its potential to evacuate women's intellectual sensibilities. Reflecting on her time in graduate school and her first, sexually disappointing marriage, she recounts with horror that, "I would sit in my 'Proseminar in Eighteenth Century Lit', listening to some creepy graduate student drone on and on about Nahum Tate's revisions of Shakespeare's plays, and meanwhile I would imagine sucking off every male member (hah) of the class. Sometimes I would imagine myself actually fucking Professor Harrington Stanton" (178). Isadora describes these fantasies

as "pathetic" – not least, it seems, because they threaten to either adulterate or nullify her intellectual life. Jong argued *Fear of Flying* "was *meant* to challenge the notion that intellectual women must be heads without bodies" ("Writing" 267). The novel's repeated references to high culture betray Isadora's anxiety about this reconciliation between the intellectual and the physical. She tries, at times, to envisage a harmonious relationship between aesthetic sophistication and heterosexual desire. As a teenager, she describes dreaming of

> a perfect man whose body and mind were equally fuckable. He had a face like Paul Newman and a voice like Dylan Thomas. He had a body like Michelangelo's... He had a mind like George Bernard Shaw (or, at least, what my sixteen-year-old mind *conceived* of as George Bernard Shaw's mind). He loved Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto and Frank Sinatra's "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" above all other mortal music. He shared my passion for unicorn tapestries, *Beat the Devil*, the Cloisters, Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, witchcraft, and chocolate mousse (91).

Isadora's teenage understanding of her identity as the sum of her eclectic tastes is being gently mocked, but this tendency to bolster her sense of self with lists of cultural referents persists into adulthood. Indeed, Isadora's resistance to intellectual ordinariness betrays the fact that her adult romantic ideal is still premised on a fantasy of mutual aesthetic sophistication. Even as she cheerfully tolerates and even embraces Adrian's selfishness, crassness, and impotence, she is genuinely disappointed when she has to incredulously ask him, "you don't know who Molly Bloom is" (84) ???

Isadora is horrified to discover that her desire for Adrian presents itself as an evacuation of taste, leaving her "acting out the vocabulary of popular love songs, the cliches of the worst Hollywood movies. My heart skipped a beat. I got misty whenever he was near. He was my sunshine. Our hearts were holding hands. If he was in a room with me, I was in such a state of agitation that I could hardly sit still" (114). In another one of the novel's signature lists, the corporeal and the metaphorical slide and blur. At the end of this list of metaphorical hearts and hands comes, abruptly, a description of Isadora's actual embodied distress. She suggests that the abstract and the corporeal are alarmingly difficult to disentangle. Isadora is not simply citing cliches; in some sense, they *are* her experience of desire. If, as the novel suggests, heterosexual romantic love is constituted by this tackiness, one of the novel's central anxieties is that no version of heterosexuality is not an aesthetic (as much as a sexual or psychological) disappointment.

This anxiety about heterosexual aesthetics is a problem for "high culture" too. Without explicitly citing Millett, Isadora's account of learning about heterosexuality from male authors nevertheless suggests that *Sexual Politics* lingers over the novel as a frame of reference for how to write sexuality. Like Millett, Isadora takes literature as a privileged site for the dissemination of sexual knowledge and norms. Beyond simply encoding and replicating gendered power structures, Isadora presents literary sex scenes as formative pedagogical experiences: "until I was twenty-one, I measured my orgasms against Lady Chatterley's and wondered what was wrong with me. Did it ever occur to me that Lady Chatterley was really a man? That she was really D. H. Lawrence" (30)? Isadora levels a similar feminist literary critique as Millett, albeit in more visceral language, when she asserts that

"throughout all of history, books were written with sperm, not menstrual blood" (30). Yet Isadora has little tangible sense of what a re-visioned feminine aesthetic of sex might look like. For both Isadora and Millett, the ability to critique the inadequacy of existing literary accounts of sex does not make it any easier to develop a meaningful counter-aesthetic.

Further, the novel *is* consciously indebted to this masculine tradition of sexually explicit fiction. Jong herself writes that when composing the novel, "I had in mind novels like *Tom Jones, Henderson the Rain King, Augie March,* and Henry Miller's *Tropics,* and I saw no reason why the same liberties with language should not belong to women since women take them in life" ("Writing" 267). Miller and Jong's mutual enthusiasm for one another's work resulted in *The New York Times* publishing twinned articles in praise of one another, in which Miller regards Jong as "more forthright, more honest, more daring than most male authors" (27). While Miller pays lip service to women's liberation, his account of Jong is scarcely attuned to feminist literary politics, evident in his surprise that the "interesting thing" about Jong and Germaine Greer is that they are 'two women endowed with strong intellects, they are cultured, they have read well, and they have excellent taste" (27). Writing in response, Jong asserts that "feminist critiques of Miller withstanding", she "loved the sheer energy of his writing, the rollicking headlong power of his sentences." She sees herself and Miller as part of a shared tradition of sexually explicit literature – of "Sappho, Catullus, Petronius, Rabelais, Chaucer (or even Shakespeare or Donne, for that matter)" (27). Rather than disavow Miller's (and Updike's) enfolding of *Fear of Flying* into a masculine tradition of writing about sex, Jong herself positions her work as partly continuous with, rather than radically divergent from, this canon.

Similarly, unlike other second-wave theorists of sexual politics, Isadora does not entirely eschew the ubiquitous mid-century framework of psychoanalysis as a way of understanding sex. Just as Echols argues that consciousness-raising was most appealing to those middle-class women who had experience on the analytic couch, so too does Isadora's account of sexual politics betray a middle-class facility with the language of psychoanalysis. (91) Like *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Fear of Flying* takes place almost entirely within the bounds of a psychoanalytic framework. The novel begins with speculation about Isadora's "glorious unanalyzability" and she suggests that she knows the game too well for it to work on her anymore (11). She bemoans analysis for its "flat-footed literal-mindedness" (14) and relentlessly skewers the psychoanalytic conference attendees. Despite this, she betrays an indebtedness to the talking cure that proves more difficult to shake. In the novel's repetitious verbosity, Isadora finds herself unable to stop telling, as if endlessly verbalizing the problem of sexual politics might resolve it. The novel's monologues, its continual worrying over the same memories, and its associative skips all betray the influence of therapeutic speech. Even when articulating her "big problem", her parenthetical aside about her teenage radicalization reads like the free association of a therapy session in its precise, almost irrelevant detail. The preeminence of psychoanalysis as *the* way of conceptualizing sexuality for middle-class Americans at mid-century is not readily superseded by feminism, even if Isadora chooses to consciously disavow it. Again, the aesthetics and vocabulary of normative heterosexuality prove contagious and impossible to purify from her speech.

Thus, while the novel incorporates a feminist critique at the level of content, it is not neatly extricable from its phallocentric predecessors. Yet, the novel's value is not in its proposing an entirely

new feminist counter-aesthetic, but in its working out of a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, aesthetics of heterosexuality. If there is no subject position unmediated by heteronormativity, then it must be negotiated from within. Counter to the contemporaneous speculative fiction of Joanna Russ or Marge Pierce, for example, *Fear of Flying* is about what it means to live with feminism *now*. It is about having access to a critique and still finding that desire lags behind and resists it. The novel's sexually explicit passages are less a straightforward key to the novel's sexual politics, but a negotiation of this push and pull between the capacity to articulate a feminist sexual politics and the unpredictable vicissitudes of desire.

The novel's famed zipless fuck operates as something of a foil to the actual sexual encounters that Isadora experiences. The concept's "catchiness" has given it a popular legacy that exceeds its relatively minimal place within the novel itself. Yet the term's untethering from its narrative context in the popular imagination is appropriately continuous with its fantastical dimensions. Isadora's description of the zipless fuck slides between describing it as an ostensibly real phenomenon and acknowledging its fictionality. For Isadora, the zipless fuck has "the swift compression of a dream," and the narrative vignette she uses to illustrate her fantasy does seem to operate by dream logic (22). The term itself is somewhat nonsensical, despite having an intuitive sense to it. It is, Isadora claims, "zipless" because "when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff" (19). Taken in isolation, the term seems to refer to a liberated sexual encounter without any of the entanglement of a committed, monogamous relationship. Yet its definition in the novel relates to its dream logic and its hovering outside the realm of practicality. In its fantasy of sex without the awkwardness of undressing, Isadora's zipless fuck betrays a pornographic desire to skip ahead, disrupt, and circumvent the messiness of real sex. It is, ostensibly, "pure" – the closest the novel comes to that elusive version of heterosexuality unmediated by the fluff and banality of culture. Yet, appropriately enough, it seems constituted by its very impossibility.

Strangely, the fantasy scene she presents as an illustrative example does not involve *her* as an actant at all. It is a third-person vignette, whose separation from Isadora's first-person narrative is heightened by its being bracketed off and indented from the main text of the novel. In this imagined scenario, a beautiful young widow finds herself alone in a train carriage with a soldier, who wordlessly slides his hands up her thigh and seduces her. Isadora suggests that the scene is "perhaps inspired by an Italian movie I saw years ago," and her description of the sex itself is presented as if it too was subject to studio censorship. The soldier's initial advance is drawn out and rich in sensory detail, as he slides his hand up the widow's leg, "upward into the fleshy gap between her heavy black stockings and her garters" (21). At this moment, however, the scene quite literally fades to black as "the train enters a *galleria,* or tunnel, and in the semidarkness, the symbolism is consummated" (21). In a novel this verbose and frank about sex, this cut to black is conspicuous. Despite presenting the scene as a vision of a Platonic sexual ideal, the reader is actively prevented from witnessing the actual sexual encounter. The visual pun of a train entering a tunnel as the affair is consummated seems to reference the comedic fireworks and exploding bombs that mark Linda Lovelace's discovery of orgasmic pleasure in the contemporaneous *Deep Throat,* but Isadora omits the accompanying graphic representation of sex.

While promising a new paradigm for a sexual encounter, Isadora's scenario instead appears to simply reinforce the impossibility of transcending existing sexual scripts.

This cinematic vision of a zipless fuck gestures toward, but cannot fully realize, a version of sex that exists outside of the social. The scenario she imagines is entirely wordless, and its protagonists share an almost telepathic understanding of one another's desire. The encounter is presented as a foregone conclusion that exists outside of the frame of negotiation and consent. In this sense, it does draw on the generic norms of pornography and its fantasy of perpetually willing bodies. The zipless fuck, she argues, is "free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not 'taking,' and the woman is not 'giving.' No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone" (22). Because of this, it is "rarer than a unicorn," and those encounters that come close prove to be "a horse with a papier-mâché horn, or two clowns in a unicorn suit" (22). The novel will later stage a parodically unpleasant version of Isadora's train scenario when a train conductor sexually assaults her, yet it does not necessarily need this later scene to reinforce what the fantasy scene itself makes clear: a pre- or post-social sexual encounter is impossible. Isadora argues that in her own experience "all my infatuations dissolved as soon as I really became friends with a man, became sympathetic to his problems, listened to him *kvetch* about his wife, or ex-wives, his mother, his children" (19). Writing about a man has a similarly stultifying effect on her desire. Once anatomized and captured in print "he no longer had the power to make me wake up trembling in the middle of the night… He had a face." (19) In its attempt to effectively obscure or evacuate the specific personhood of a male lover, the zipless fuck articulates a desire not so much for actual men, but for the *idea* of men. Isadora thinks she might be able to describe what women's desire for men and male bodies might look like outside the bounds of heteropatriarchy, yet finds herself unable to narrate it with any specificity.

Even considering this definitional ambiguity, the term's descriptive potential is undermined as soon as it is used in reference to "real" experience. When Isadora declares that she has finally encountered the possibility of an *actual* zipless fuck in Adrian, her experience bears little resemblance to either a soft-focus cinematic love scene or a post-heteronormative egalitarianism. While Isadora struggles to gain press admission to the psychoanalytic congress, she is intercepted by Adrian, who offers to help. In a tonal inversion of the slow, wordless seduction in the hypothetical zipless fuck, his initial sexual advance is to call her a "cheeky cunt", grab a "fistful" of her ass, give it a "long playful squeeze" and tell her "you've a lovely ass" (32). Adrian's advance strips away the cinematic haze of the imagined zipless fuck and reduces heterosexual seduction (if it can be called that) to its basest elements. Yet in place of its customary over-analysis, Isadora is uncharacteristically silent in the immediate aftermath of Adrian's grabbing her. Isadora defers her assessment of the advance and continues to worry about how she will gain admission to the conference. She suddenly declares that "all I wanted was for him to press my ass again. I would have followed him anywhere. Auschwitz, Dachau, anywhere" (32). Isadora's rhetoric wildly exceeds both the context and emotional stakes of the interaction and displaces the analytical scrutiny she previously applied to desire with a sudden, violent infatuation. The crassness of Adrian's behavior seems to induce a performative rejection of "good taste."

Further, if the zipless fuck exists in a space outside of the social, Isadora's subsequent conversation with Adrian serves only to reinforce the structural imbalances between them. Indeed, Isadora's attraction to Adrian seems to intensify at precisely the moments when his remarks emphasize the imbrication of their interaction within larger social power dynamics. Whereas Isadora's use of the word cunt might be framed as a playful reclamation of patriarchal language, Adrian's calling *her* a cunt resituates it within a power structure that cannot be willed away with linguistic play. While Isadora seems unperturbed by his barbs, the co-existence of these two iterations of the word cunt only serves to reinforce the limitations of a feminism predicated on linguistic disruption alone. Isadora and Adrian's conversation devolves into a series of sexualized ethnic and racial stereotypes. He needles her about where her "ancestors" are from, and Isadora accuses him of being an anti-Semite, to which he replies, "it's just that Jewish girls are so bloody good in bed" (33). It is in response to *this* that Isadora responds: "sweet Jesus, I thought, here he was. The real ziff. The zipless fuck par excellence" (33). Isadora's inability to recognize a phenomenon that she herself invented is painfully apparent. After deliberately spilling his pint over Isadora and loudly farting to "punctuate" a critique of British anal retentiveness, Isadora "sneer[s]" that he is a "real primitive… a natural man". Yet still, she asserts that "both of us knew I had finally met the real zipless fuck" (35). As far as the novel is concerned, the zipless fuck is a solipsistic invention of Isadora's, hardly a matter of public knowledge and certainly not one that she has shared with Adrian thus far. Her assertion that *he* somehow knows, despite all evidence to the contrary, serves only to reinforce the willful disconnect between Isadora's ideal and her actual sexual encounters.

Isadora's response to Adrian in all his grotesquerie is to discover that "[her] underpants were wet enough to mop the streets of Vienna" (33). Whether her arousal is despite or because of Adrian's boorishness, the body is nevertheless positioned as a recalcitrant agent that cannot be relied upon to align with one's political beliefs. It is not that Isadora is willfully ignorant or hypocritical, so much as navigating a lack of concordance between her analytical frameworks and the unpredictability of her erotic response. Yet the novel refuses to sustain the temporary dampening down of Isadora's internal monologue for long. Almost immediately, her familiar narrative voice returns to dissect the problem of her "questionable" taste in men and of the sheer unpredictability of her attraction. "After the infatuation is over", she argues, "you rationalize" (36). As ever, the novel constantly pre-empts and closes any apparent interpretative gaps or uncertainties with its relentless self-analysis.

While the novel is graphic in its representation of arousal, it rarely, if ever, seems to want to elicit an erotic response in its reader. It is about sex, but as Jong puts it, "not really very sexy". (267) Its sex is usually abject, comedic, and miserable, and even when it is good, it is examined with such fastidiousness that it can hardly be characterized as pornographic. Isadora recalls that in graduate school, she began "a ridiculous thesis on dirty words in English poetry" and quips that "even then I was a pedantic pornographer" (178). Despite her dismissal of its worthiness, Isadora is already experienced in treating sex as a discursive object available for analytical scrutiny. This sense that sex is a constitutive part of literary language and not radically, qualitatively different is reflected in the novel's aesthetic treatment of sex. Neither littered with pornographic cliché nor cloaked in

euphemism, the novel's sex scenes are strikingly continuous in tone with the rest of the novel and just as rich in comedic possibility.

The novel's explicit accounts of the body fluctuate between and often deliberately blur scatological grotesquery and a genuine attempt to find a language for heterosexual desire. When Isadora finally sleeps with Adrian, she examines his nakedness "with tenderness and amusement" (86). The unflinching scrutiny she subjects him to is laced with both desire and an exquisite embarrassment:

> Adrian was like a new country. My tongue made an unguided tour of it. I started at his mouth and went downward. His broad neck, which was sunburned. His chest, covered with curly reddish hair. His belly, a bit paunchy— unlike Bennett's brown leanness. His curled pink penis which tasted faintly of urine and refused to stand up in my mouth. His very pink and hairy balls which I took in my mouth one at a time. His muscular thighs. His sunburned knees. His feet. (Which I did not kiss.) His dirty toenails. (Ditto.) Then I started all over again. At his lovely wet mouth (86-87).

In contrast to the priapic literary visions of masculine potency that Millett scrutinizes in *Sexual Politics*, her image of the male body is pink, vulnerable, and soft. Adrian is paunchy, sunburned, dirty, and unable to get an erection. Yet while this strange reimagining of a blazon does not present Adrian as particularly sexy, it is also not intended to humiliate him. Isadora's description of Adrian's body is, I argue, one of the novel's most concerted efforts to develop a vocabulary for heterosexual desire unmediated by the "soupy longings" of patriarchal culture. It does not attempt to rationalize her desire – indeed, its grotesque qualities emphasize how profoundly *irrational* her desire is. Rather, it applies a novelistic precision to the "new country" of Adrian's body and, with the eye of a "pedantic pornographer," maps it in all its specificity.

The admixture of "tenderness and amusement" in Isadora's description of Adrian's body extends to the rather unsuccessful sex they have. Any effort Adrian might make at performing a Miller-esque hypermasculinity is rapidly undercut by his inability to penetrate Isadora and her reassuring him in "a social worker voice" that his erectile dysfunction is a temporary issue. (87) If hardcore pornography has been defined and legislated by the presence of an erect penis, the novel's fixation on Adrian's impotence is a witty means of establishing its own explicitness as doing a different kind of generic work entirely. During their first encounter, Isadora describes herself "sucking away but as soon as he got hard, he'd get soft again" (87). Their subsequent encounter is equally troubled: "it was no good. Or not much. He was only at halfmast and he thrashed around wildly inside me hoping I wouldn't notice. I wound up with a tiny ripple of an orgasm and a very sore cunt" (115). In attempting to come to terms with Adrian's impotence, Isadora takes the idea that sex might be a site of political analysis rather literally: "the older you got, the clearer it became that men were basically terrified of women. Some secretly, some openly. What could be more poignant than a liberated woman an eye to eye with a limp prick" (88)? In imagining her feminism itself as being an obstacle to sexual satisfaction, Isadora stumbles against the necessity of at least some degree of male cooperation in reforming heterosexual sex. The erect penis is, she argues, a bargaining chip that might be withheld: "the ultimate sexist put-down: the prick which lies down on the job. The ultimate weapon in the war between the

sexes: the limp prick" (88). The volubility of Adrian's arousal *is,* in effect, both a symbolic and actual obstacle to a mutually satisfying reimagination of sex between men and women.

When Isadora suggests that Adrian's inability to get an erection may be due to his being afraid of her, he angrily replies that "when you finally do sit down to write about me, you won't know whether I'm a hero or an anti-hero, a bastard or a saint. You won't be able to categorize me" (89). This claim that he will prove impossible to categorize sparks a rapid about-face in Isadora, who declares that "at that moment, I fell madly in love with him. His limp prick had penetrated where a stiff one would never have reached" (89). Here, the novel makes it clear that a feminist analysis of sexual politics cannot be reducible to differentiating between "good" and "bad" sex at a physical, anatomical level. While being explicit about the sexual act itself, the novel is largely reluctant to locate straightforward political significance in the mechanics of sex and arousal itself. After all, Isadora makes it clear that the sex she has with Bennett is, at least on a physical level, very good. Unlike her slightly grotesque assessment of Adrian's physical appeal, Bennett is only ever described as extremely attractive and sexually proficient:

> Tall, good-looking, inscrutably Oriental. Long thin fingers, hairless balls, a lovely swivel to his hips when he screwed—at which he seemed to be absolutely indefatigable… He soared and glided when he screwed. He made marvelous dipping and corkscrewing motions. He stayed hard forever, and he was the only man I'd ever met who was never impotent—not even when he was depressed or angry. But why didn't he ever kiss? And why didn't he speak? I would come and come and come and each orgasm seemed to be made of ice (38-39).

Simply laying bare the mechanics of sex does not reveal its truth. Jong's anatomical precision and sexual frankness are continually held in tension with a kernel of irrationality that is constitutive of heterosexual desire under patriarchy.

Despite the novel's popular reputation as a quest for more and greater sexual pleasure, the nature of its explicit sexual content often serves to *undercut,* rather than reinforce, the significance of physical pleasure. In this respect, *Fear of Flying* somewhat sidesteps the feminist politics of orgasm that preceded it. While Jong characterizes the novel as being one of "unfulfillment", on a physical level, Isadora is more or less always orgasmic (even if it is just a "tiny ripple"). Isadora has so well metabolized the feminist critique of the distinction between clitoral and vaginal orgasm that she can ably rattle off, in abbreviated form, the "sexual myths of the fifties" that she was raised on in an itemized list: "B. There are two kinds of orgasm: vaginal and clitoral. One is 'mature' (ie. good). The other is immature (ie. evil). One is 'normal' (ie. good). The other is 'neurotic' (ie. evil)" (179). This schematic account ironically condenses and dispatches with midcentury Freudian orthodoxy, doing the work of "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" in a few glib lines. It is not that the novel is dismissive of this kind of analysis. If anything, Isadora's easy facility with it makes the case for its being one of those "once radical" ideas that has been filtered down into a truism. Yet the novel refuses to locate the truth of sex in the body alone, as Isadora argues:

> Masters and Johnson's charts and numbers and flashing lights and plastic pricks tell us everything about sex and nothing about it. Because sex is all in the head. Pulse rates and

> secretions have nothing to do with it. That's why all the best-selling sex manuals are such gyps. They teach people how to fuck with their pelvises, not with their heads (40).

Beyond technique, then, lies something far harder to pinpoint. In a rough analogy to the work the novel itself is doing, itemizing of the mechanics of sex tells us everything and nothing. The question of what must supplement it, however, is more difficult to answer.

The novel's plot, and particularly its ending, has been criticized for its failure to reconcile these divergent threads. Isadora's journey around Europe with Adrian serves largely to emphasize the practical hindrances to actually pulling off an impromptu, no-strings-attached affair. Isadora is left dirty and exasperated by her adventure, and by the end of the novel, any frank descriptions of the body simply emphasize her physical discomfort. "Peeing by the side of the road", she complains, "is all very charmingly Rousseauian in theory, but in practice, it leaves your crotch sticky" (239). Adrian may have become the unlikely object of Isadora's affection, but he is a source of neither physical nor emotional satisfaction. He reveals that their fling had a built-in expiration date and that he is due to meet his wife and children for a family holiday, effectively nullifying whatever fantasy Isadora may have entertained about their affair being a spontaneous escape from marital life.

Left stranded in Paris, Isadora locates Bennett's hotel, talks her way into being let into his room, and bathes at last. The novel closes as Bennett enters the room, leaving the question of their reconciliation unresolved.[5] Isadora makes metafictional light of the novel's lack of a satisfactory resolution:

> Perhaps I had only come to take a bath. Perhaps I would leave before Bennett returned. Or perhaps we'd go home together and work things out. Or perhaps we'd go home together and separate. It was not clear how it would end. In nineteenth-century novels, they get married. In twentieth-century novels, they get divorced. Can you have an ending in which they do neither? I laughed at myself for being so literary. "Life has no plot" is one of my favorite lines (277).

This citation of alternative literary models emphasizes the lack of a pre-existing framework for the kind of feminist novel *Fear of Flying* is trying to be. With its protagonist's politics largely unchanged and its journey of sexual self-discovery profoundly unsexy, how is a novel like this supposed to end?

The closest the novel comes to a coherent reconciliation of the political knot at its heart is a passage that Jong often selected for public readings, in which Isadora stages a pseudo-theatrical dialogue between her competing selves:

> ME: And you know that men and women can never wholly possess each other.
>
> ME: I know.
>
> ME: And you know that you'd hate to have a man who possessed you totally and used up your breathing space. …

[5] In the novel's drastically inferior sequel, *How to Save Your Own Life,* Isadora and Bennett do temporarily reconcile before getting divorced.

ME: I know—but I yearn for it desperately.

ME: But if you had it, you'd feel trapped.

ME: I know.

ME: You want contradictory things.

ME: I know.

ME:You want freedom and you also want closeness.

ME: I know.

ME: Very few people ever find that.

ME: I know.

…

ME: But what about liberation?

ME: What about it?

ME: You believe in independence?

ME: I do.

ME: Well then?

ME: I suspect I'd give it all up, sell my soul, my principles, my beliefs, just for a man who'd really love me. …

ME: Hypocrite!

ME: You're right.

ME: You're no better than Adrian!

ME: You're right.

ME: Doesn't it bother you to find such hypocrisy in yourself?

ME: It does.

ME : Then why don't you fight it?

ME: I do. I'm fighting it now. But I don't know which side will win (251-252).

What, if anything, has changed from the novel's first pages? If nothing else, Isadora's explanation of the same old problem of reconciling politics and desire has been streamlined from a verbose, obsessive listing into a neat, catechism-like dialogue. While there is no resolution and she is still left restating the same old problem, there is at least a new sense of clarity and precision to her account. Isadora cannot

abandon politics, but refuses to cede to it entirely. The work of feminism – and of the novel – is to live within this aporia.

Despite this perpetual circling of the irreconcilability of its central problem, there is something substantive to its efforts to find an embodied language for women's desire for men. This is, as Isadora puts it, "the restlessness, the hunger, the thump in the gut, the thump in the cunt, the longing to be filled up, to be fucked through every hole" (16-17). Updike praised Jong for having "more kind words for the male body than any author since the penning of *Fanny Hill*." This assessment seems ill-matched to the novel's often grotesque scatological detail. Perhaps most memorably, Isadora describes a former lover "who never bathed, had stringy hair, and was a complete failure at wiping his ass. He always left shit stripes on my sheets. Normally I don't go for that sort of thing—but in him it was OK—I'm still not sure why" (36). However, this same unflinching attention to the body also manifests in the tenderness with which Isadora describes Adrian's body and her appreciation of its strange, surprising details. If heterosexuality has been framed as an aesthetic problem, then its resolution seems to lie in teasing out – even partially – the threads of embodied desire from our culturally overdetermined frameworks. One of the primary reasons why the zipless fuck cannot leap from fantasy to reality is precisely in its obfuscation of the corporeal indignities that the rest of the novel makes clear are an inescapable component of the sexual experience. If the zipless fuck is a false horizon of erotic possibility, then however improbably, the sunburned knees and dirty toenails of a deeply unpleasant man might be.

"Some kind of undisclosed emotional life": The Fantasy of Radical Transparency in *Conversations with Friends*

As with *Fear of Flying,* the cover of *Conversations with Friends* might well provoke the question, what kind of novel is this? Two young white women painted in a flat minimalist style, gazing impassively forward, sit at either edge of a bright yellow cover. The artwork resembles the bold, primary-colored covers of the contemporary romance novel, which have replaced the rippling six-packs of previous generations with simple, playful illustrations. In the case of *Conversations with Friends,* however, the cover painting is not the work of an anonymous illustrator but of the figurative pop artist Alex Katz. This sense of the novel's slipping between high and low is heightened by its blurbs. The cover reproduces glowing praise from *The New Yorker* and Zadie Smith, yet it also declares that the novel was on both *Vogue* and *Elle's* lists of best books of the year. It seems to simultaneously occupy multiple disparate literary registers. And while Erica Jong is rarely cited as a literary predecessor of Rooney's, the two novelists nevertheless have much in common as cultural figures. Both wrote literary fiction that, to their surprise, sold millions of copies and made them that increasingly rare thing, a celebrity author. In the popular imagination, their work became a synecdoche for a particular kind of white, middle-class woman and a particular kind of feminism. Their novels promised to reveal something essential about the truth of women's sexuality, with an unusual frankness. Yet this frankness positions both in suspicious proximity to the genre of romance and its supposed normalizing, reactionary politics. Their reception has been defined as much by a fervent popular readership and a profoundly ambivalent, often hostile, reception from the critical establishment.

Conversations with Friends (2017), Rooney's first novel, establishes her now familiar combination of a cool, pared-back prose style with a precise dissection of the sexual and emotional lives of millennial women. As with *Fear of Flying,* the novel's narrative trajectory is relatively simple. Its protagonist, undergraduate English major Frances, writes and performs slam poetry with her ex-partner turned best friend Bobbi. A successful writer, Melissa, takes an interest in the two women and welcomes them into her wealthy social circle. Frances begins an affair with Nick, Melissa's husband, which is inevitably uncovered. While this secret and Frances' publication of a short story that draws heavily on Bobbi's life causes a rift between the pair, they reconcile and re-establish a sexual relationship. The novel ends with a tentative non-monogamy, with Frances continuing her relationships with both Nick and Bobbi, with Melissa's reluctant approval.

Conversations with Friends shares *Fear of Flying's* wariness about the explanatory power of sexual politics and feminist theory. Compared to Jong, the version of feminism that Rooney's protagonists deploy reflects several decades of its academic institutionalization and its inflection by poststructuralist critical theory. However, the problem of how to reconcile one's desire for men with one's sexual politics remains as frustratingly, inescapably live as it did in the early 1970s. In pairing the two novels, I emphasize both the shifting material conditions that underpin this problem, such as increased economic precarity and the increased viability of a queer alternative, and the stubbornness of the fundamental problem of how to live with men. Rooney's aesthetic solution to the problem of representing explicit sexuality is a more thoroughgoing examination of what it means for the literary text to "tell rather than show." Her minimalism, rather than simply being a marker of its ready

digestibility, is an attempt to reckon with what happens to the realist novel when the secrecy and veiled sexuality that defined it in its inception are stripped away. Like Jong, Rooney's sex scenes are formally continuous with the rest of the novel and open the possibilities of their being *both* explicit and literary fiction. Rooney's sex is, moreover, radically *good*. Unlike Isadora's grotesque and unsatisfying encounters, part of Rooney's project of reckoning with politics and desire is to suggest, as Claire Jarvis puts it, that "straight sex is not a disaster." ("Sweet Stuff")

While the "consciousness-raising novel" may have effectively died out decades ago, it has been supplanted by the mainstreaming of broadly feminist concerns in literary fiction. Rooney is the most prominent exponent of a micro-genre of writing by women about contemporary sexual politics published in the last five to ten years that Namwali Serpell has called "remaster novels" and Noor Qasim the "Millennial Sex Novel".[6] In Serpell's schematic, the protagonists of these novels are invariably clever young women, working in the culture industry and fluent in leftist politics and theory, who find themselves in relationships with older, wealthy men. Financial disparity and emotional unavailability exacerbate the gender dynamics of the relationship, until a climactic instance in which the protagonist asks to be hit during sex. This gesture, Serpell argues, initiates a reversal – the drama of submission and dominance in the bedroom "remasters" the man and equalizes the power dynamics of the relationship. For Qasim, this genre has become a "seemingly endless, exasperating supply" governed as much by market forces as by compulsion, "in the way that scratching at a scab creates a neverending, ever fascinating wound." The same basic question that Jong posits in *Fear of Flying* – how to square one's desire for men with one's politics – is still a matter of obsessive narrative interest fifty years later. The precise shape of the contemporary women's novel about sexuality has shifted, as have the vocabulary and critical frameworks available to its protagonists, yet it cannot stop scratching at the same scab.

Moreover, this fiction *sells*. Seemingly to her own bafflement, Rooney has become an industry and has sold over six million novels. Both *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* were adapted into television miniseries, the former attaining an unusually large audience in part because of its resonance with romance-starved audiences at the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns. To promote the launch of her third novel, *Beautiful World Where Are You,* influencers and celebrities were sent PR packages containing the novel itself along with themed tote bags and bucket hats. Her most recent novel, *Intermezzo,* arrived in bookstores accompanied by shirts depicting the sleek form of a protagonist's pet whippet. Rooney's career has coincided with the rise of a dizzyingly large ecosystem of online cultural commentary and has provided it with ample fuel. Indeed, *Literary Hub* declared *Beautiful World Where Are You* the most-reviewed novel "of all time" (or, as they rather significantly caveated, since they began tracking and quantifying reviews). The equally well-scrutinized HBO television series *Succession* depicted a character reading *Conversations with Friends,* only for *The Cut* to run an article speculating about whether or not she would have enjoyed it. Following *Intermezzo's* publication, an essay in *Vogue* questioning why Rooney's protagonists are always so thin sparked its own flurry of response pieces.

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[6] These novels include Imogen Crimp's *A Very Nice Girl,* Naoise Dolan's *Exciting Times,* Lilian Fishman's *Acts of Service,* Raven Leilani's *Luster,* Megan Nolan's *Acts of Desperation* and Alyssa Songsiridej's *Little Rabbit.*

Rooney's extraordinary prominence has inevitably ensured an equally robust industry dedicated to enumerating her faults. Amid wider anxieties about the feminization of literary fiction, Rooney's work is accused of being romantic genre fiction dressed up as literary fiction. The avowed Marxism of both Rooney and her protagonists has been read as either vacuous, empty rhetoric or self-righteous posturing. Her representation of sexuality has been dismissed as heteronormative, and her handling of the politics of BDSM as phobic and reductive.[7] The intensity of feeling that Rooney provokes is, I think, symptomatic of its precise attention to the social conditions of contemporary intellectual life. There is an anxious proximity between the milieu of Rooney's fiction and its readers. It is both the product of and the ideal object for the particular kind of literary discourse that prevails online and mediates between the academy and popular culture. To put it more glibly, Rooney's protagonists are precisely the kind of people who would publish an essay in an online literary magazine about how much they dislike Rooney's fiction. Resisting a tendency to collapse the positions of Rooney herself, her protagonists, and the novels themselves, I instead read her novels' explicit citation of these discourses as sharply ironized. Like Jong, Rooney's fiction asks how realist forms might shift and expand as new kinds of political discourse – and most importantly, new ways of thinking about sexual politics – enter the texture of everyday speech and social relations.

However, the sexual politics of Rooney's contemporary moment look an awful lot like the re-litigation of Isadora's central "big problem" of "how to make your feminism jibe with your unappeasable hunger for male bodies" (88). Even in the aftermath of the sex wars of the 1980s and the sex positive feminism of the 1990s and early 2000s, perhaps even because of these successive political swings, we still cannot stop "scratching at the same scab". Popular feminist texts like Katherine Angel's *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again,* Nona Willis Aronowitz's *Bad Sex,* and Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex* make the case that sex positivity has failed to make heterosexual sex any better for women. Instead, they argue that an overwhelming focus on consent, while necessary, has negated other questions of pleasure and desire. As Angel argues, "much sex that is consented to, even affirmatively consented to, is bad: miserable, unpleasant, humiliating, one-sided, painful" (27). In an argument much like those made by Anne Koedt, Alix Kate Shulman and Betty Dodson fifty years earlier, Angel argues that "instead of resigning ourselves to the inevitability of bad sex, and even romanticizing it as merely youthful mis-adventure, we should subject it to sustained scrutiny" (27). Srinivasan explicitly frames her account of contemporary sexual ethics as a return to feminist first principles. "reach[ing] back to an older feminist tradition that was unafraid to think of sex as a political phenomenon, as something squarely within the bounds of social critique" (xiii).

Srinivasan's proposition that "our sexual preferences can and do alter, sometimes under the operation of our own wills – not automatically, but not impossibly either" reflects the rise of a new

[7] For a selection of more negative responses to Rooney, see: Natalie Adler's "Bisexual World, Where Are You?", Sarah Brouillette's "The Consolations of Heterosexual Monogamy in Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You*" and "Sally Rooney's Couple Form", Emmeline Clein's "A Trapdoor of Her Own", Jessa Crispin "*Normal People* is little more than a gutless soap opera for millennials", GD Dess' "Sally Rooney: The Dark Side", Cody Delisatry's "Sally Rooney's Politics of Millennial Resignation", Gloria Fisk's "What Are Feelings For?", Christian Lorentzen's "I couldn't live normally", Rothita Naraharisetty's "Why Are Sally Rooney's Women Like That?", Becca Rothfeld's "Normal Novels" and "Sanctimony Literature", Madeline Schwartz's "How Should a Millennial Be?", Emma Specter's "Why Are All the Characters in Sally Rooney's Novels So Thin", Katy Waldman's "Has Self-Awareness Gone Too Far in Fiction?"

iteration of something like political lesbianism (91). Long after consciously-chosen, lesbian separatism had been dismissed as a failed experiment and supplanted by a pop-psychological "born this way" theory of orientation, these newer iterations argue that queerness might be a volitional, preferable alternative to heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality (often shortened to the more internet-friendly "comphet") has been revived and recirculated (albeit without citing her) in the viral shared Google doc titled "Am I a Lesbian?" Subreddits like "Are the Straights OK?" collect the online detritus of patriarchal sexuality and ask, why would any woman choose this? In 2019, Asa Seresin coined the term "heteropessimism" to account for this phenomenon of women self-consciously (though usually rhetorically) disavowing heterosexuality:

> Heteropessimism consists of performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience. Heteropessimism generally has a heavy focus on men as the root of the problem. That these disaffiliations are "performative" does not mean that they are insincere but rather that they are rarely accompanied by the actual abandonment of heterosexuality. Sure, some heteropessimists act on their beliefs, choosing celibacy or the now largely outmoded option of political lesbianism, yet most stick with heterosexuality even as they judge it to be irredeemable. (Seresin)

For Seresin, heteropessimism is a nihilistic abdication of political responsibility. Its characterization of heterosexuality as irredeemable but inevitable precludes efforts to improve the material conditions of everyday relationships. While I disagree with Andrea Long Chu's assessment that the persistence of the problem of heterosexual desire is proof of feminism's impossibility, there is nevertheless something that seems intractable about the problem, despite fifty years of feminist efforts to resolve it.

The most deliberately provocative intervention into this conversation is Jane Ward's *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality*. Ward questions the assumption that heterosexuality is "easier" for women and makes the counterintuitive claim that most queer people are actually relieved not to be straight. Straight men and women, she argues, seem bafflingly unattracted to one another, whereas a reformed version of heterosexuality might look like men really *liking* women the way "lesbian feminists lust for women" (32). Yet, as Phoebe Maltz Bovy argues in her review of the book, much of Ward's critique is not of heterosexuality as practice but as an aesthetic problem. For Ward, heterosexuality is a problem because it is boring and tacky – sometimes, "quite literally repulsive" (114). For Ward, straight culture is her older academic colleagues who "lived in McMansions in gated communities, wore Dockers, and liked to host poolside department parties at their homes during which they would stand around in heterosexual married couplets, drinking white wine and talking about sports cars, the successes of their grown children, or whether to buy a boat." (144) Though looking outward at heterosexuality from a queer perspective, Ward's account of straight culture is remarkably similar to Jong's own aesthetic critique of the "soupy longings" and facile pop culture that she cannot let go of despite herself.

The particular kind of aesthetic embarrassment that Rooney's fiction seems to provoke is inextricable from their representation of heterosexual desire. Becca Rothfeld argues that Rooney is simply another reiteration of tediously normal heterosexual pop culture: "If Rooney's books have true precursors, they are not Austen's tense novels of manners but commercial romances that specialize in a certain sort of fantasy fulfillment. Like *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* offer up heroines who are, paradoxically, both extraordinary and extraordinarily normal." ("Normal Novels") For many of her critics, Rooney's preoccupation with "normality" and the heterosexual couple is a form of political quietism. For Brouillette, the novels celebrate retreating from social life into "the consolations of heterosexual coupledom." ("Consolations") More cuttingly, Natalie Adler insists that "Rooney writes sex-negative novels about redemptive heterosexuality for straight people who have sex but don't like it." Emmeline Clein, however, suggests that it is not just Rooney's protagonist's retreat into heterosexual coupledom that is the problem, but that (like Isadora before them) they know better and do it anyway: "Of course, these women understand heterosexual monogamy as "coercive," masculinity as "oppressive," and traditional marriage "obviously not fit for purpose." How could they not? They're Rooney girls. For all of their oft-criticized flaws, one can't deny them a high degree of intelligence. Yet entering normative heterosexual relationships appears the sole salve for the "huge emptiness" with which they contend." I resist the reflexive argument that Rooney's preoccupation with normality and heterosexual desire is reactionary at worst and boring at best. The novel's deceptively simple treatment of the fraught interplay between desire and sexual politics is more sharply ironic than it is hypocritical. Indeed, I argue that Rooney's formal experimentation with a remarkably concise, precise mode of "telling not showing" is an effort to – like Angel, Aronowitz, and Srinivasan – take the novelistic representation of heterosexual back to first principles, defamiliarize it, and reimagine it from within.

Specifically, Rooney does this by reversing that cliché of the creative writing classroom to "show don't tell". Mark McGurl argues this dictum is a product of a Jamesian seriousness about the novel as high art. "Taken up by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and subsequently by a great many of the writers who would be associated with writing programs after the Second World War, the poetics of "show don't tell", McGurl argues, "would gradually evolve into a more general understanding of good fiction as founded on discipline, restraint, and the impersonal exercise of hard-won technique" (99). Telling betrays a lack of skill or relegates the text to the vulgar excesses of genre fiction. Rooney's spare style certainly appears indebted to the lean, honed prose of Hemingway or Raymond Carver, the contemporary writing workshop's quintessential exemplar of writerly technique. Despite this, Lauren Collins argues that Rooney has "upended the conventional wisdom that a writer should show and not tell, that characters shouldn't say what they think." (26) While Collins reads Rooney's propensity to tell as formal innovation, her apparent literality and "flat" style have also led to her characterization by other critics as vacuously accessible. Rather than simply betraying the presence (or absence) of technical skill, Rooney's style is a self-conscious experiment in the formal possibilities and limitations of "telling."

Rooney's preoccupation with what can be named, confessed, or explained is inextricable from the representation of sex. Rooney's own literary criticism establishes explicit sexuality as a formal

problem for the novel. Her lecture "Misreading *Ulysses*" traces an idiosyncratic line between *Ulysses* and Joyce's female literary progenitors and suggests that, perhaps despite itself, the stakes of the novel are love and marriage. Her discussion of Jane Austen in this lecture offers a quietly audacious account of novelistic form:

> Marriage serves another important purpose in Austen's work and in the novels that followed: it represents the only permissible expression of romantic love and sexual desire. Austen's characters can never speak openly about sex, of course: but the tension that animates her novels, the momentum of Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy or Emma's with Knightley, is romantic and sexual in nature. The fact that erotic attraction in Austen's work is forced out of language – sublimated into ambiguous gestures and looks and seemingly innocuous speech acts – constitutes in very large part the drama of her narratives. In a sense, then, it is from the unavailability of language that the tensions of the novel arise. We might propose the novel as a kind of book in which the most important subject cannot be spoken about. The genius of Jane Austen's technical achievement is apparent not only in her wide readership but in her formal legacy.

Rooney seems to echo the mid-century writing classroom's valorization of restraint as the hallmark of technical genius. According to Rooney, the very formal architecture of the novel, its linguistic subtleties and narrative momentum, are governed not by what it says but by what it does not and cannot say.[8] Crucially, Rooney suggests that the formal imperative to "show don't tell" is not necessarily about restraint as a technical virtue in and of itself but is a necessary adaptation to the problem of representing sex.

Ulysses, of course, is not characterized by its restraint. "Perhaps the most famous thing about *Ulysses*", Rooney suggests, "is that it is a sexually explicit book: a novel in which the characters permit themselves to think openly about erotic desire." This explicitness constitutes not just a shift in content but a radical disruption of novelistic form: "In a way, *Ulysses* represents the moment at which sexuality entered into the language of the novel. On its pages, the novel as a form is forced to collide with social realities it was never designed to accommodate, and the chaotic, difficult, radical, exciting prose of *Ulysses* is the result." To write about sex, Rooney suggests, requires that we remake the novel anew. Explicit sexuality could not simply be introduced into an existing novelistic form as just another subject because that very form was built around the impossibility of its inclusion. Rooney does not make a hierarchical distinction between constraint and riotous vulgarity – showing and telling – so much as suggests that they are formal solutions to particular representational problems. Rooney describes her analysis of *Ulysses* as a productive misreading: "Every reading of *Ulysses* is a misreading, a faulty but revealing translation, a way of drawing the novel into new and perhaps unintended relationships. All that matters to me is finding a way to read the book that is interesting: that opens out instead of closing down." Her own account of the history of the novel is itself a productive

[8] Rooney's argument here is quite similar to Claire Jarvis' *Exquisite Masochism.* Jarvis argues that scenes of masochistic refusal in Victorian novels "allow writers to reference sexual desire without representing sexual acts. The respectable nineteenth-century novel may not (often) graphically depict sex acts, but the sexual charge of the masochistic scene enables a novelist to detail sexual connection without an explicit account of it." (11)

misreading. In suggesting that the history of the novel is that it is a sustained negotiation with whether and how we can write directly about sex, Rooney thematizes precisely the questions that underpin her own fiction.

Yet what this means for the fiction that followed *Ulysses,* and more specifically Rooney's own writing, is left unspoken in the lecture itself. Rooney seems to reiterate the same narrative about the literary representation of sex that this project seeks to displace, namely that it finds its most appropriate form in modernist experimentation. Yet if, as she argues of Joyce, the most famous thing about her own fiction is that it is sexually explicit*,* the presence of this explicit material does not result in the collapse of realist form. In fact, she has described her work as nineteenth-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing. If, according to Rooney's argument, the form of the nineteenth-century novel was predicated on an inability to directly articulate erotic desire, then a contemporary realist novel about sexuality *cannot* simply dress old forms in new clothes. Taking up this claim, Claire Jarvis argues that her reimagining of the realist novel *is* more "invasive" than a superficial shift in clothing. It is not the detail of the material world that shifts, but her relocation of readerly attention to the soft fleshiness of the body as it interacts with others: "If Henry James and the Brontës used the charged edges of the body to portray desire and need, Rooney presses through those edges into the soft meat inside. It's not that the 19th-century novel doesn't have flesh; it's just that it can be hard to see under all that heavy drapery, under all the social exactitude." In Jarvis' model, Rooney's contemporary version of realism bridges the space between Austen and Joyce by bringing the precision of traditional realism's observations to bear on gross, mundane fleshiness. Drawing in those social realities that the novel was "never designed to accommodate" requires stripping back the layers of verbiage and deflection to access the body underneath.

While I broadly agree with Jarvis' reading, I also argue that Rooney tackles the problem of explicitness by self-consciously playing with transparency and directness at a formal level. Collins' brief assertion that Rooney's work resists the conventional wisdom to show rather than tell is central to my understanding of Rooney's solution to the formal problem she poses in "Misreading *Ulysses.*" In Rooney's novels, characters self-consciously explain their feelings and motivations, and scrutinize their interactions in unusually precise, direct terms. The sharpness of her narratorial eye seems (at first) to promise that with a precise enough observation of a gesture or a feeling, meaning will snap into focus. However, in practice (and counter to the characterizations of her critics), her narrative voice sits in an ironic relationship with her protagonists. Rooney opens and closes by degrees the gap between what her characters tell us and what the narration suggests is happening instead. The resulting prose isolates noticing, feeling, and understanding into a series of discrete phenomena that do not always bear a necessary and logical relationship to one another. Her characters' self-conscious citation of theory more often betrays the limits of their understanding than it affords a useful lens through which to understand their own lives. Her sex scenes, in particular, are frank, precise, and emotionally rich. Yet representing sex this explicitly does not make it any easier to understand than when it was "forced out of language." I argue that Rooney's version of "telling" can be better understood as an aesthetic effect. The directness of her prose purports to tell – and does at times seem to strive towards perfect linguistic clarity – while constantly troubling the usefulness and accuracy of this telling.

Critics of Rooney's version of "telling" tend to collapse the perspectives of Rooney herself, her narrative voice, and her characters. Rooney's citation of political discourse and the *apparent* self-awareness of her characters, these readings suggest, render familiar critical modes of novel reading irrelevant. Katy Waldman characterizes Rooney as symptomatic of a broader trend in contemporary fiction towards excessive self-awareness. She defines this "reflexivity trap" as "the implicit, and sometimes explicit, idea that professing awareness of a fault absolves you of that fault—that lip service equals resistance. The problem with such signalling is that it rarely resolves the anxieties that seem to prompt it." Contemporary novels, she argues, treat self-awareness as an end in itself and, as a result, their protagonists are "congratulated for spending enough time contemplating themselves that they can correctly diagnose their own flaws" but are unable to do anything about them. Waldman suggests that this condition of painful self-awareness is not limited to the protagonists themselves but is a problem with the novel, or more specifically, the novelist. "It's hard", she suggests, "to tell exactly how far [Rooney's] self-awareness goes." Madeline Schwartz characterizes Rooney's self-aware style as true to life but aesthetically unsatisfying. She warns that the characters' direct statements about their feelings and anxieties are not satire and that Rooney's writing has "little irony or distance." Instead, they speak in "the international anxious English of the overeducated and underemployed" because "that's the way people talk now, and there's no reason to imbue a narrator with style in an age that sees style as affect." For Waldman and Schwartz, the novel is aesthetically diminished when its characters are too capable of articulating themselves. In these accounts, Rooney's directness is stubbornly literal or, to use McGurl's terms, bad writing.

However, Frances' self-awareness is more obtuse than Waldman and Schwartz's readings would suggest. She imagines herself as decidedly blank, lacking a "real" personality and much of an inner life. In a text conversation with Bobbi that she unearths after they fall out, Frances resists the suggestion that she is withholding access to her emotions:

> Bobbi: well you don't really talk about your feelings
>
> me: you're committed to this view of me
>
> me: as having some kind of undisclosed emotional life
>
> me: I'm just not very emotional
>
> me: I don't talk about it because there's nothing to talk about
>
> Bobbi: i don't think 'unemotional' is a quality someone can have
>
> Bobbi: that's like claiming not to have thoughts
>
> me: you live an emotionally intense life so you think everyone else does
>
> me: and if they're not talking about it then they're hiding something
>
> Bobbi: well, ok
>
> Bobbi: we differ on that (186).

Frances understands herself as radically transparent or perhaps more accurately, radically flat. She does not refuse to disclose her emotional life so much as assert that there really is nothing further to disclose. As the protagonist and narrator of a realist novel, this refusal to concede that she has an "undisclosed emotional life" is a striking gesture. Frances' self-concept, I argue, mimics the proposition of Rooney's fiction itself. What happens if we reject the traditionally novelistic idea that meaning can be located by excavating sublimated depths and desires? This is, after all, what Rooney identifies as quintessentially novelistic in the work of Austen. Does the capacity to represent sexuality, specifically, frankly and without sublimation, enable or require a qualitatively different approach to narrating inner life? Of course, it is not necessarily true that Frances is as entirely transparent about her inner life, or lack thereof, as she suggests. I do not think that Rooney believes that the novel does – or even can – achieve the kind of minimalistic emotional clarity that Frances imagines for herself. Instead, the novel sits somewhere between Frances and Bobbi – drawn to the idea of an empirical narrative voice that hides nothing but suspicious of its plausibility.

Rooney's prose seems to aspire toward the idea that the accumulation of enough observable details, largely unadorned by figurative language, can somehow pin down and make sense of experience. Frances diligently notices and reports her thoughts and bodily experiences, yet she derives meaning from them through an often-imperfect process of inductive reasoning. For example, she struggles to make sense of her emotional response while listening to Bobbi speculate about whether Nick is attracted to her, unaware that they are already sleeping together:

> I felt a growing sense of dread, a thin and physical dread that began in my shoulders, as I listened. At first I couldn't figure out what it was. It felt like dizziness, or the strange blurry sensation that precedes being violently ill. I tried to think of what might be causing it, things I had eaten, or the car journey earlier. It was only when I remembered the night before that I knew what it was. I felt guilty (140).

Rooney's prose has a reputation for its ease and frictionlessness, and her reviewers often report reading her novels in a single sitting. Here, however, Rooney's short declarative sentences *add* friction and dramatically slow the process of apprehending and articulating emotional experience. In making self-awareness itself a deliberate logical exercise, Rooney denaturalizes the process by which we can name our experience at all. In giving as a protagonist who understands herself as "just not very emotional", the novel makes the narration of inner life a cerebral, almost alien process that calls attention to itself as a deliberate act of "telling".

Similarly, Frances understands her personality as a pattern of behaviors that she must retroactively reconstruct into a coherent sense of self: "Bobbi told me she thought I didn't have a 'real personality', but she said she meant it as a compliment. Mostly I agreed with her assessment. At any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that's the kind of person I am" (18). Rather than treating her recurrent thoughts and behaviors as neuroses to be mined and traced back to their source, as Isadora might, Frances' self-awareness often takes the shape of a quasi-empirical noting. She shares in characteristic deadpan, for example, that "I turned all the lights on before I went to bed. Sometimes that was something I did," (16) and that "things matter to me more

than they do to normal people, I thought. I need to relax and let things go. I should experiment with drugs. These thoughts were not unusual for me." (29) Frances' sense of her personality (or lack thereof) as a collection of observable thoughts and behaviors that she is somewhat arbitrarily associated with is not dissimilar to Roland Barthes' definition of literary character in *S/Z*. This understanding of herself as being something like a literary character resonates with her self-professed lack of an "undisclosed emotional life". When looking over the photos Melissa took of her and Bobbi, Frances appraises herself as if she were a character: "I zoomed back out and tried to look at my own face as if I were a stranger on the internet seeing it for the first time. It looked round and white, the eyebrows like overturned parentheses, my eyes averted from the lens, almost shut. Even I could see I had character." Character is not attached to an internal, felt sense of selfhood and is instead simply a constellation of observable, external traits. Frances' deadpan statements are not, then, straightforward acts of self-reflexive navel-gazing. Her narrative voice turns the recognition and articulation of her inner life into a series of negotiations with the idea of narrative surface and depth. In Frances, the novel gives us a protagonist who positions meticulous observation as a substitute for mining inscrutable depths.

What happens, then, when this narrative voice is brought to bear on sexual content? While Rooney's fiction has been characterized in the popular imagination by its explicit representations of sex, the question of *how* and in what way they are explicit remains surprisingly unresolved. Critic Amil Niazi refers to the "flushed faces" of readers poring over the "frank and unwavering" sex in Rooney's fiction, yet on Reddit, a user frantically asks whether the copy of *Normal People* she is reading has been censored because there are "no sex descriptions" in it. Despite this curious lack of consensus about how explicit the novel's sex scenes really are, the one aspect of the novel's representation of sex that recurs across critical accounts is how surprisingly unembarrassing it is. Lauren Oyler, infamously remorseless in her dismissals of contemporary fiction, notes that "descriptions of the act in both novels are mainly notable for how not-embarrassing the writing is." For Dawn Foster, Rooney "manages to avoid the excruciatingly embarrassing traps many older male novelists find themselves mired in". At the same time, Jane Hu describes her as a "remarkably unembarrassing writer of sex scenes." I argue that both kinds of response – whether confusion over how explicit the sex scenes really are and not being embarrassed by them – are the result of the formal continuity between its sexual content and the rest of the novel. When I argue that Rooney's sex scenes are explicit, I particularly emphasize the fine, formal distinctions between explicitness as a mere marker of sexual content and as an aesthetic category. That is, they are not genitally, even scatalogically, explicit in the same way as a Mapplethorpe photograph or *Fear of Flying*. Indeed, sometimes its description of sexual mechanics seems parodically deflationary, as when Frances notes simply "we had sex, it was nice" (76).

Instead, Rooney quips in an interview that "when I hear the phrase 'sex scene,' I think about a dialogue scene", adding that she will only include sex scenes when they serve a particular dramatic purpose. (Hart) Sex, then, might simply be just another variety of human interaction and no more or less assimilable into the novel than anything else. Yet in "Misreading *Ulysses*," Rooney argues that the direct representation of sex has a radical, definitive impact on novelistic form. Rooney has thus posited

two apparently reconcilable models of sexual representation – either it is as prosaic as a dialogue scene, or it is a rogue element that warps the very shape of the novel. This uncertainty about the relationship between explicit content and novelistic form is not reconciled in the novels so much as it is worked through. The fiction itself enacts a double movement, in which sex is presented *as if* qualitatively equivalent to any other subject of the realist novel, while being acutely conscious of its social overdetermination.

Nick and Frances' first kiss in the laundry room at a party is narrated as a characteristic series of precise observations that foreground gesture and sensory detail over direct descriptions of sexual anatomy and response: "I rested my back against the fridge and fanned my face a little with my hand. He held up his beer bottle and touched it to my cheek. The glass felt fantastically cold and wet, so much that I exhaled quickly without meaning to" (55). The scene unfolds as a series of discreet physical gestures and statements that lead inexorably to their kissing – "I kissed him. He let me." (56) Frances retains that strange combination of being both incredibly observant ("His ears were red, I noticed that") and characteristically "flat". Her observations – her involuntary exhale and the "bead of cold condensation that roll[s] down [her] skin", making her shiver – serve as a narrative proxy for her arousal, as if this accumulation of detail were capable of extracting something like an objective account of intimacy. The explicitness of the scene is more continuous with Rooney's aesthetics of "telling" than it is with the visceral grotesquerie of Jong's sex scenes. The precise, denotative quality to Rooney's language is explicit in its literality and its pretense of radical transparency.

Frances' only prior sexual experiences were with Bobbi, and the combination of her distinctive "flat" narrative voice and the novelty of the experience renders the novel's representations of sex with men strangely defamiliarizing. Rooney's sex scenes can make sex itself seem brand new. The first time Frances and Nick have sex, she continues to observe herself as if from the outside: "I felt very flushed and I could hear myself making a lot of noise, but only syllables, no real words. I closed my eyes. The inside of my body was hot like oil. I was possessed by an overwhelming and intense energy which seemed to threaten me. Please, I was saying. Please, please" (68-69). While it is tempting to read this distance from herself as disassociation, I am resistant to this interpretation, given the formal continuity with Frances' narrative voice elsewhere. Her description of "an overwhelming and intense energy which seemed to threaten me" is rather like the physical sensation of dread that Frances slowly identifies as guilt. The relationship between her sensations and emotions and her own understanding of them continues to exist on a lag, opening odd gaps that "make strange" the experience of sex without deferring to metaphor or euphemism. Instead, Rooney's "telling" becomes a subtle, surprisingly destabilizing aesthetic mode. It is in this defamiliarizing mode that we might locate the Rooney who argued that sex must necessarily alter novelistic form.

Yet as the novel progresses, it makes increasingly use of the formal model of the sex scene as a dialogue scene. Frances' description of a later sexual encounter with Nick is strikingly discursive, rather than focused on bodily sensation:

> "The sex was so good that I often cried while it was happening. Nick liked me to go on top, so he could sit back against the headboard, and we could talk quietly. I could tell that he liked

> it when I talked to him about how good it felt. It was very easy to make him come if I talked about that too much. Sometimes I liked to do that just to feel powerful over him, and afterwards he would say: God, I'm sorry, that's so embarrassing. I liked him saying that even more than I liked the sex itself" (73).

Rooney's removing the sex scene from the purely anatomical here does not read as an evasion of sex itself, or even less explicit, but rather a shifting of emphasis that opens the sex scene up to the possibility of signifying more than just sex. Whereas sex scenes in contemporary fiction can often feel as if they occupy a different tonal register to the rest of the novel – those "excruciatingly embarrassing traps many older male novelists find themselves mired in" – Rooney's formal continuities clear space for the sex scene to serve not as a rupture in the narrative but as a seamless extension of it. The scene is a self-conscious character study and exercise in power dynamics, emphasizing Nick's benign passivity and Frances' burgeoning sense that she can exert particular kinds of sexual power over men.

What is most striking and most remarked upon, however, is that the sex in Rooney's novel is almost always good. Jarvis argues that Rooney's "sexual plots draw attention to a difficult — maybe intractable? — problem with the relationship between contemporary literature and sexuality studies." Jarvis argues that a new, theory-inflected teleology has replaced the old marriage plot, that "sex is a structure that must be mastered, and that mastery looks like a progression from vanilla straight sex into something queer. Queerness is capacious and always an improvement on the straightness that came before. Gay, lesbian, bondaged, be-butt-plugged, poly-, it's all better for you politically and aesthetically than the leaden hetero-sex that you grew up thinking was synonymous with plot." ("Sweet Stuff") Rooney, she argues, "is troublesome for a sexuality studies framing: in her novels, even the most heterosexual sex — vanilla sex! — can be wholly, mind-shiftingly pleasurable, if it lacks coercion, social pressure, angst, and envy." Of course, Frances is bisexual rather than heterosexual, but the novel nevertheless makes no hierarchical distinction in pleasure or political virtue between Frances' sex with Bobbi and with Nick.

Rooney's treatment of BDSM has been particularly scrutinized for the moralizing role she assigns to it, and while I agree with Jarvis' broader argument, I am slightly less inclined to read it as simply a practice that the characters try and do not like. A strikingly similar scene recurs across her novels, in which the protagonist asks her partner to hit her, but he declines. Following Jarvis, there is a suggestion that her protagonists have identified BDSM as a more complex, more politically disruptive kind of practice than "vanilla" sex and must learn to disabuse themselves of this idea. Yet, more often than not, the scenes can serve as an uncharacteristically clunky allegory for her protagonist's self-loathing. Certainly, the reduction of BDSM to the simple practice of asking to be hit, without prior negotiation, is a radical flattening of a complex series of sexual practices. I argue, however, that these scenes are also an effort to excavate a version of heterosexuality predicated on tenderness rather than violence. When Frances asks to be hit, she declares (in a line repeated practically verbatim in *Normal People*), "you can do whatever you want with me" (207). These scenes effectively serve as a test for male characters – they are given permission, even explicitly requested, to hurt their partners, and they instinctively decline. However compromised the scenes are, Rooney nevertheless

uses them in tandem with the scenes of good, pleasurable sex to trouble a heteropessimistic narrative in which men are innately violent and straight sex inevitably disappointing.

Jarvis' reference to the ubiquity of a sexuality studies framing for novelistic sex resonates with *Conversations with Friends'* own self-consciousness of sexual politics and theory. This prevalence of capital-T Theory in the novel is a distinctly contemporary phenomenon and a reflection of the anxious social milieu that her characters inhabit. McGurl argues that postwar American fiction – and increasingly, global Anglophone fiction – must be understood as the product of the transformation of higher education after the Second World War. The contemporary university has both granted vast swathes of the lower middle-class access to cultural capital and instituted itself as patron and facilitator of serious literary production through the creative writing program. For McGurl, the self-reflexive properties of so much contemporary fiction – not to mention its frequent setting in the campus itself – are a logical product of its own embeddedness in the institution of the university (47-48). Rooney's work (Irish, but certainly part of the contemporary Anglophone literary culture that McGurl sketches) is also enmeshed in the institutions of literary production. Her fiction is littered with readings, lectures, classroom discussions, book launches, and internships at literary agencies, and *Normal People* ends with the triumph of Connell's acceptance into the MFA program at New York University. Yet while McGurl's late-noughties university is a site of relative security and stability for the production of literary fiction, Rooney's work is intimately bound up in the precarity of the post-recession university and the digital critical ecosystem.

Rooney's characters exist on the margins of academia and the cultural industry. They are usually clever undergraduates who are conversant in literature and theory but are unconvinced that this fluency can be parlayed into a meaningful professional life. They graduate into entry-level positions proofreading at literary magazines that are incommensurate with their qualifications but oddly comforting in their banality. Her characters inhabit a world in which the stakes are higher and the rewards underwhelming, where a €800 check for a short story from a literary magazine makes them feel "invincibly wealthy." Frances is paid a stipend for her internship at a literary agency, which "meant we basically weren't paid at all," and which she and her colleague acknowledge as structurally flawed:

> "This is how privilege gets perpetuated, Philip told me in the office one day. Rich assholes like us taking unpaid internships and getting jobs off the back of them.
>
> Speak for yourself, I said. I'm never going to get a job" (17).

To take on a scarcely livable internship is, for Frances and Philip, not a failure but a sign that they are winning. Whatever their qualms, they have beaten out the other "rich assholes" and have secured a toehold in the creative economy, however small. If, in *Fear of Flying,* Isadora's decision to drop out of her graduate program at Columbia is framed as her embrace of a more authentic relationship with literature, this kind of principled refusal seems impossible for Rooney's protagonists.

The preoccupation with ordinariness and normality in Rooney's work is as much about reconciling oneself to a world in which cleverness cannot guarantee meaningful success as it is a

negotiation of normative sexual desires. In *Fear of Flying,* Isadora's sense of her own exceptionality is a source of frustration, in that she believes her cleverness should serve as a bulwark against the banality of heterosexuality. For Frances, intelligence is a more abstract virtue and source of psychological comfort.

> I would open fifteen tabs on my web browser while producing phrases like 'epistemic rearticulation' and 'operant discursive practices'. I mostly forgot to eat on days like this and emerged in the evening with a fine, shrill headache… Afterwards I'd print the essay out without even looking over it. When I went to get my feedback, the notes in the margins always said things like 'well argued' and sometimes 'brilliant'. Whenever I got a 'brilliant' I took a little photograph of it on my phone and sent it to Bobbi. She would send back: congrats, your ego is staggering (33).

Intellectual labor is not a tool for understanding the world here but a circular reaffirmation of Frances' own cleverness. The content of Frances' essays is elided and, it seems, secondary to their style. The phrases she produces as representative examples of her writing ("phrases *like*") are meaningless in isolation and instead demonstrate her mastery of a particular kind of critical discourse. For Rooney's protagonists, intelligence is bound up with – or simply equivalent to – being a good student. Again, this is grounded in conditions of precarity. As critics have already noted, Rooney's characters are navigating an economy where "grown-ups" (that is, Gen X and Baby Boomers) have a historically disproportionate degree of power over the outcomes of young generations. If actually being able to do something meaningful with their knowledge and credentials is uncertain or foreclosed for these characters, then the particular cleverness of being a "good student" becomes an end in itself.

Frances confesses that "I knew that intellectual attainment was morally neutral at best, but when bad things happened to me I made myself feel better by thinking about how smart I was" and that being a lonely but intelligent child made her feel like "a genius hidden among normal people" (33). This confession about her intellectual "ego" quickly gives way to an anecdote that frames her preciousness as a liability. She describes using online chatrooms as a lonely teenager and befriending a "twenty-six-year-old American grad student" who tells her she has "the mind of a physicist." Predictably enough, "one night he sent me a picture of his genitals. It was a flash photograph, zoomed right in on the erect penis, as if for medical examination. For days afterwards I felt guilty and terrified, like I had committed a sick internet crime which other people could discover at any moment. I deleted my account and abandoned the associated email address. I told no one, I had no one to tell" (34). Cleverness could not protect Isadora from internalizing the "soupy longings" of patriarchal culture and feeling all the more ashamed because of it. Frances tacitly frames her intelligence as having *invited* the violent intrusion of adult male sexuality into her teenage world (her guilt, it should go without saying, is unwarranted). Moreover, the paragraph ends here, and the main narrative resumes after a section break. A section that began as a meditation on self-abnegating intellectual labor is cut short by the insistent presence of the male sexual body. Cleverness appears to be as equally limited a resource for navigating the politics of sexuality for Frances as it is for Isadora. Instead, it is vulnerable to being short-circuited and undermined by the grimy, unsettling reality of sexual experience.

Later in the novel, Frances receives an email from Melissa after Nick tells her about their affair. In a moment that does seem to befit a nineteenth-century novel dressed in contemporary clothing, the long, dense email is reproduced in its entirety. Rather than prompting a climactic shift in perspective, as Austen's letters so often do, Frances uses it as an exercise in textual analysis. She frames the email as the work of a fellow writer, rather than her lover's wife:

> "I read the email several times. It seemed like an affectation on Melissa's part not to include paragraph breaks, as if she was saying: look at the tide of emotion that has swept over me. I also believed she had edited the email carefully for effect, the effect being: always remember who is the writer, Frances. It is me, and not you. These were the thoughts I sprang to, unkind thoughts" (228).

Textual analysis comes easily to Frances – it "springs to" her, almost like a reflex – but her series of cool, declarative statements determinedly avoids the social and emotional ramifications of the email. Her repeated sentence structure presents her close reading of the email in an almost schematic fashion, identifying a formal feature of the email, attributing it to Melissa, then explaining its intended effect after the colon. In giving us the email verbatim as well as Frances' response to it, the novel invites the evaluation of Frances' ability as a close reader, and her reading is an astute evaluation of Melissa's prose. It is also a fundamental misapplication of the wrong kind of cleverness. Frances is unsettled by Melissa discussing the difference in their ages and confesses that "on the second reading I let my eyes skip over that section" (228). Her reflexive analysis of the email's style is matched by an equally reflexive ability to selectively ignore information that cannot be quite so easily contained and managed by her formal analysis.

Instead of the ramifications of the affair itself, Frances fixates on Melissa's disclosures about Nick's mental health:

> "The only part of the email I really wanted to know about was the information relating to Nick. He had been in psychiatric hospital, which was news to me. I wasn't repelled as such; I had read books, I was familiar with the idea that capitalism was the really crazy thing. But I had thought people who were hospitalised for psychiatric problems were different from the people I knew. I could see I had entered a new social setting now, where severe mental illness no longer had unfashionable connotations" (229).

Once again, her response is that of the good student, albeit one self-aware enough to glibly note that she "had read books". She identifies what she believes to be the relevant theoretical conceptual framework for understanding the situation – mental health under capitalism – and then deploys it as a source of comfort and a marker of her ethical sensitivity. She imagines herself entering a turning point in her social maturation, but misapprehends that the most pressingly relevant "new social setting" she is entering is one in which she is culpable in the potential breakdown of an "adult" marriage. This willfully oblique engagement with the email is reflected in her response to it: "After an hour, the email I wrote in response was as follows: Lots to think about. Dinner sounds good" (229). Again, the colon serves as a grammatical marker for a deceptive sense of authority. It presents the statements that follow it as definitive, as if they are self-evident and requiring no further elaboration.

Frances uses the colon to impassively quote her reply without needing to give an account of it, leaving its dismissive brevity and insufficiency to hang. Rooney frames intellectual capability not as a weakness but as fundamentally insufficient. In a precarious climate in which cleverness so often becomes an end in itself, reconciling her analytical astuteness with emotional life becomes increasingly difficult.

Despite this, in an excoriating review essay, Becca Rothfeld categorizes Rooney as a proponent of "sanctimony literature", which she describes as "an extension of social media: it is full of self-promotion and the airing of performatively righteous opinions. It exists largely to make poster-cum-authors look good and scrollers-cum-readers feel good for appreciating the poster-cum-authors' goodness." Rothfeld performs the same gesture of collapsing Rooney, her narrative voice and her characters into a single perspective. She characterizes Bobbi as *Conversations with Friends'* moral conscience, a performatively righteous and unforgiving eye governing the "character, author, and regulative ideal alike." "Though it purports to treat themes of great gravity and complexity, such as sexism and economic inequality," she argues that "sanctimony literature is suspiciously easy to read." These novels are juvenile and aesthetically wanting, examples of "millennial agit-prop, millennial middlebrow". Alternatively, to read Rooney's treatment of the character's politics as straightforwardly satirical, as other critics have, feels similarly limited. Theory instead operates as a complex social phenomenon in these novels rather than as a coherent explanatory framework, signifying membership in a particular milieu and structuring interpersonal reactions. This does not necessarily mean that the actual substance of a particular political or theoretical position is irrelevant. *Conversations with Friends* is not "anti-theory" but neither is it as bewitched by it as its young protagonists. The ironic effect is more a tender consciousness of the limitations of her characters and of theory's explanatory powers than a caustic critique.

There are moments when Frances and Bobbi's relationship to cultural politics does seem straightforwardly facetious and juvenile, as when Frances shares that "Bobbi and I had always shared a contempt for the cultish pursuit of male physical dominance. Even very recently we had been asked to leave Tesco for reading aloud inane passages from men's magazines on the shop floor" (81). It is quite evident that the girls were kicked out more for being a nuisance than for the potency of their political critique, yet Frances still identifies with the incident as representative of her politics (emphasizing that it happened "even very recently"). However, the irony of the narrative voice modulates across the course of the novel and is often difficult to ascertain. When Frances, for example, tells Nick that "Bobbi thinks depression is a humane response to the conditions of late capitalism" she notes that it "made him smile," (119) but there is little sense of whether that smile indicates agreement, a shared laugh at Bobbi's expense, or an indulgent response to Frances' earnestness.

When Frances attends Nick's performance of *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof,* she notices "a care label bunched inside the seam of the slip [the actress] was wearing, which destroyed the effect of reality for me, although the slip and its care label were undoubtedly themselves real." (28) She concludes that "some kinds of reality have an unrealistic effect, which made me think of the theorist Jean Baudrillard, though I had never read his books and these were probably not the issues his writing addressed" (27-28). Frances again proves herself to be an intuitively good close reader – the detail of the care label in the slip is a characteristically astute observation. She knows enough to more or less correctly associate

Baudrillard with theories about reality, but with no degree of precision. I do not think that Frances is really being made fun of here, after all, she acknowledges that her conclusion is based on association rather than anything substantive. Neither are we supposed to consider whether Baudrillard really would be a useful way of interpreting this detail. Rather than a clever moment of intertextuality, this moment is typical of Rooney's *realism*. It is a precise study in how a particular kind of clever undergraduate of a particular social class parses the world.

Rooney's citation of theory and popular culture is almost invariably in service to characterization or as a proxy for other kinds of interpersonal communication. As in *Fear of Flying*, the novel is dense with references. Yet while Jong's excessive listing seems to serve as a manic consolidation of her own intelligence or prove a point, Rooney uses reference as a minimalist shorthand to effectively sketch a milieu. Bobbi, Frances and Melissa discuss "twitter famous" poet Patricia Lockwood, Frances watches *Arrested Development* ("it was the one where they burn down the banana stand", Bobbi fishes an Animal Collective CD out of Nick's glovebox, and Frances half-watches a Greta Gerwig film. Rooney sketches a remarkably precise picture of the tastes and preoccupations of a liberal middle-class millennial. Elsewhere, the novel slyly implicates readers of the same demographic, referencing an "Iranian film about a vampire" and "that [reissued] Chris Kraus novel" with the knowledge that her readers will recognize *A Girl Walks Home at Night* and *I Love Dick*. As if to indicate its primarily social function, the novel has a primarily citational relationship to theory. It is interested not so much in replicating critical discourse within the novel as acknowledging its existence and social function. Frances, for example, describes reading Gayatri Spivak in sensory rather than intellectual terms: "I lay on my side with *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* propped half-open on the pillow beside me. Occasionally I lifted a finger to turn the page and allowed the heavy and confusing syntax to drift down through my eyes and into my brain like fluid. I'm bettering myself, I thought. I'm going to become so smart that no one will understand me" (90-91). Again, the relevance of Spivak to the novel's text is effectively nil – the scene serves merely to illustrate an adolescent infatuation with theory as a mechanism for bolstering one's own cleverness rather than as a source of insight.

This is emphasized in an exquisitely uncomfortable scene where Frances and Bobbi discuss the politics of monogamy with friends. Bobbi advances a series of feminist critiques of the concept, arguing that "no sexual orientation was 'natural' as such" and that "monogamy was based on a commitment model, which served the needs of men in patrilineal societies by allowing them to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife" (242). If Bobbi is the moral consciousness of the novel, then the scene should function as a reflexive commentary on the novel's own infidelity plot or perhaps precipitate a revelation for Frances. Frances, however, is not affected by the content of Bobbi's argument, nor does she reflect on its relevance to her own situation. Instead, she is captivated by Bobbi's performance: "Listening to Bobbi theorise in this way was exciting. She spoke in clear, brilliant sentences, like she was making shapes in the air out of glass or water. She never hesitated or repeated herself. Every so often she would catch my eye and I would nod: yes, exactly" (242). The point of the scene is not that Bobbi is right or wrong about monogamy. Her argument is a relatively uncontroversial feminist position, seemingly cribbed from Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women." As Frances does when she writes, Bobbi performs the fluency

and confidence of a very good student experiencing the youthful intellectual thrill of encountering familiar ideas as if they were brand new. The moment largely illustrates that Frances is still in thrall to what she perceives as Bobbi's intellectual charisma.

Yet this awe at Bobbi's performance gradually shifts into discomfort:

> [Bobbi] didn't seem to be paying attention to the other people at the table while she spoke, but I noticed that Philip and Camille were exchanging glances. At one point Philip looked at Andrew, the only other man seated with us, and Andrew raised both his eyebrows as if Bobbi had started talking gibberish or promoting anti-Semitism. I thought it was cowardly of Philip to look at Andrew, whom I knew he didn't even like, and it made me uncomfortable. Gradually I realised that no one else had spoken in some time and that Marianne had started staring at her lap awkwardly. Even though I loved to listen to Bobbi when she was like this, I started to wish she would stop (242).

The ironic distance between Frances' perspective and the novel's own opens and closes by degrees, as Frances inches towards the partial, painful recognition that Bobbi is embarrassing herself. Frances' precise observations of gesture and expression register the outward signs of social discomfort, yet she defers the obvious conclusion and pins her rising discomfort on her friends' qualms with the substance of Bobbi's argument. Her admission that she "started to wish she would stop" without ever articulating why is characteristic of Rooney's mode of "telling" - what appears to be a confession is a determined resistance to self-awareness. The scene is not about Bobbi's brilliance but the unsteady, shifting gap between Frances' reverence for her performance of political and theoretical astuteness and the novel's own de-idealization of Bobbi's character.

This de-idealization is central to the novel's broader suggestion that being "right" about theory can be painfully ineffective as a social strategy. As the scene progresses, Bobbi's "theorizing" shifts from being not just a source of embarrassment but of cruelty:

> Lots of anthropologists agree that humans are a naturally monogamous species, said Philip.
>
> Is that really where you're at theoretically? Bobbi said.
>
> Not everything goes back to cultural theory, said Philip.
>
> Bobbi laughed, an aesthetically gorgeous laugh, a performance of total self-assurance which made Marianne wince.
>
> Oh my God, and they're going to let you graduate? Bobbi said. (243)
>
> In response to an essay of Philip's,
>
> "Bobbi began to search her bag for a packet of cigarettes, lifting her head once to say: you should have read Gilles Deleuze. Philip glanced at Camille again.
>
> I did read him, said Philip.
>
> You missed his point then, Bobbi said" (244).

It feels impossible to sustain the idea that Bobbi is meant to be the novel's moral conscience here. Rather, despite Rothfeld's accusation that the novel venerates the "airing of self-righteous opinions", the point is quite the opposite. Bobbi's understanding of theory, even when correct, is secondary to the cruelty with which she wields it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the novel has a limited sense of the tangible, actionable usefulness of feminist sexual politics. This is not to say that the novel is anti-theory or anti-feminist, but rather that theory is almost always superseded by a far more novelistic emphasis on the subtleties of interpersonal exchange. In this, it reinforces the intractable knot at the heart of sexual politics – that understanding sex as political in the aggregate is very different from experiencing it at the level of the personal. A text exchange between Frances and Bobbi demonstrates their facility with the language of anti-capitalist critique of romantic love:

> Bobbi: if you look at love as something other than an interpersonal phenomenon
>
> Bobbi: and try to understand it as a social value system
>
> Bobbi: it's both antithetical to capitalism, in that it challenges the axiom of selfishness
>
> Bobbi: which dictates the whole logic of inequality
>
> Bobbi: and yet also it's subservient and facilitatory
>
> Bobbi: i.e. mothers selflessly raising children without any profit motive
>
> Bobbi: which seems to contradict the demands of the market at one level
>
> Bobbi: and yet actually just functions to provide workers for free
>
> me: yes
>
> me: capitalism harnesses 'love' for profit
>
> me: love is the discursive practice and unpaid labour is the effect
>
> me: but I mean, I get that, I'm anti love as such
>
> Bobbi: that's vapid frances
>
> Bobbi: you have to do more than say you're anti things (173-174).

While certainly played up for satire, Bobbi is partially right here – being able to abstract the politics from the personal is insufficient. While Bobbi does not posit a solution here, the novel suggests that critiquing heteronormative love is an empty gesture unless it is accompanied by a sense of what might replace it. While not offering anything like a utopian alternative to love under capitalism, Rooney does sketch glimpses of new ways of relating to one another in a compromised present that have little to do with her characters' theoretical ideals.

Specifically, those solutions do not involve the wholesale disengagement from men. Rooney often has Bobbi reiterate a version of Ward's critique of heterosexuality from a queer perspective. In

response to Frances discussing her relationships with Nick, Bobbi simply retorts, "sex with men, how weird" (100).

> "What I like about your male characters, Bobbi said, is they're all horrible.
>
> They're not all horrible.
>
> At best they're very morally ambiguous.
>
> Aren't we all? I said.
>
> You should write about Philip, he's not problematic. He's 'nice'.
>
> She did air quotes around the word nice, even though she did really think that about Philip. Bobbi would never describe anyone as nice without quotation marks" (24).

Yet, overwhelmingly, the men in Rooney's novels *are* nice, or at the very least not horrible. While not deploying a facetious "not all men" argument, Rooney's male characters are unusually sensitive and kind. Nick is "morally ambiguous", but he is not cruel. Instead, he is presented with the opportunity to be violent and demurs, finding the prospect of hitting their partners profoundly unsettling. While the relationship between Frances and Nick begins as infidelity, the sex that they have is good, and they genuinely like each other, clearing at least the lowest of Ward's bars.

Further, while Frances is bisexual and ends up romantically involved with Bobbi *and* Nick, the novel does not present bisexuality as a solution to the "problem" of heterosexuality. Perhaps in defiance of heteropessimism, Frances' decision to choose both is a refusal to assign a hierarchical relationship between the two. Unlike in *Fear of Flying,* where a queer alternative seems inconceivable, queerness is not a foreclosed option for Rooney. Neither, however, is orientation presented as a volitional choice. Frances' bisexuality is not undermined in the novel, but neither is it presented as more politically virtuous or conducive to happiness than heterosexuality. Instead, Rooney reinforces Seresin's argument that while "quite often framed as an anti-capitalist position, heteropessimism could be read as a refusal of the 'good life' of marital consumption and property ownership that capitalism once mandated. Yet this good life, which was always withheld from marginalized populations, is now untenable for almost everyone." Just as Frances' intelligence does little to guarantee her financial stability, the novel disabuses us of the notion that a relationship with a man would be any more successful. Nick gives Frances small amounts for money for groceries, but, like the checks from literary magazines, a few hundred euros here or there does not amount to anything she can stake her life on.

It is perhaps in this respect that Jong's and Rooney's novels diverge most sharply. As Merve Emre argues, Isadora's sexual adventures are facilitated by her ready access to an American Express card backed by the income of her psychoanalyst husband (123). She is needled by the possibility that she might not be exceptional, and her sexual adventure is presented as a journey of self-improvement typical of the "Me Decade". Frances, on the other hand, is terrified that she might *not* be ordinary, and her version of a great adventure across Europe is as the guest of an older, wealthier couple. The prospect of doing something with one's intelligence and insight is radically foreclosed for Rooney's characters, whereas Isadora is fueled by boundless optimism. Rooney's characters are far more

conscious than Jong's that theory and cleverness cannot save them, even as the novel refuses to denounce theory entirely. Yet it is Rooney's characters rather than Jong's who seem more capable of carving out a space for pleasure and mutual respect in the patriarchal present. In its careful and ostensibly cool, emotionless way, Rooney suggests that contemporary novels can absorb explicit sexual content and use it as a means of asserting that most traditional of novelistic values, sensitivity.

Conversations with Friends proves a far more thoroughgoing investigation of the possibilities and limitations of what the novel can and cannot say than its reputation for accessibility would suggest. While it exists in a similarly middlebrow position between literary fiction and the romance novel, like Jong, the novel reflects Rooney's uncertainty about its place in the longer tradition of literary realism and its negotiation of sex. Rooney's "telling" is simultaneously an experiment in achieving a crystalline narrative clarity and an aesthetic effect that is constantly undercut by a sustained, delicate irony. It teases the possibility of an entirely flat, transparent kind of narrative in which everything is disclosed because there is nothing to hide, yet Frances' pretense of total self-knowledge is undermined at every turn. The novel tells and shows, both breaking down and displaying mastery over the conventions of realist fiction. Like Jong, the novel treats its explicitness about sex and sexual politics as both a necessity and a frustrating dead end. We cannot simply set aside the insights of feminist critique, yet it proves maddeningly hard to live with. Theory, the novel suggests, functions more often as a tool to be wielded in social interactions or as proof of membership in a particular intellectual milieu. For all the characters' self-consciousness about sexual politics, its best negotiations of heterosexual desire exist outside of this framework. Like Jong, its closely observed descriptions of sex as a complex, infuriatingly illogical extension of social life offer a tentative vision of a better kind of heterosexuality, despite its broader pessimism about Frances' capacity for intellectual and romantic fulfilment in a post-recession world.

Part Three: Intentionality

The explicitly trans *novel* is a remarkably recent development. Whereas a significant body of openly gay and lesbian literature was already coalescing by the end of the seventies, the vast majority of fiction by and about trans people has been published in the last ten years. The publishing industry's relative lack of interest in anything other than trans life writing is a recognizable aftereffect of the mid-century clinical imperative that trans people construct normative life stories to obtain treatment. For most of the twentieth century, the stories that trans people have been able to (publicly) tell about themselves have been tightly constrained. Within this comparatively slim literary archive, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) is an idiosyncratic phenomenon. Set in the lovingly described mid-century working-class lesbian bar scene of upstate New York, the novel was canonized as an instant queer classic. Yet it would be 2018 before Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* became the first novel by and about a trans person to be released by a major publishing house. A metafictional re-imagining of the life of eighteenth-century thief Jack Sheppard, the novel uses the pretense of a found manuscript to interrogate what it means to locate trans voices in the archives. However, the pairing of Feinberg and Rosenberg in this part is not complementary but a study in difference.[9] *Confessions of the Fox* is a counterexample and an anomaly compared to my other texts – avant-garde, modernist, and steeped in queer theory. This project is not a polemical case for the aesthetic and political superiority of the explicit, and my inclusion of a counterexample is not to establish a hierarchical relationship between texts. Rather, Feinberg's and Rosenberg's strikingly different aesthetic resolutions to the problem of transgender representation sit in productive tension with one another, drawing into sharper relief the precise stakes and possibilities of the explicit.

It is not surprising that the most anomalous of my texts is a transgender one. As Morgan M. Page and Emma Heaney have argued, trans people are always in the process of being discovered. Throughout the twentieth century, they have been figured as a perpetually new and quintessentially modern phenomenon. The gaps and dissonances between Feinberg and Rosenberg are not just stylistic, but symptomatic of an identity figured in the public imagination not by continuity but by a series of disjointed moments of revelation and discovery. Further, explicitness and obviousness have rather different, more complex stakes in the case of trans representation. A clinical and cultural imperative to pass, for example, conditioned the trans experience for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet the recent blossoming of trans representation over the last ten to twenty years is not necessarily a liberatory phenomenon. "Positive representation" of trans lives is an insufficient gesture and, at worst, makes trans people *dangerously* visible. A figure like Crisp, whose understanding of his sexual orientation was grounded in his gender nonconformity, illustrates just how frighteningly vulnerable the refusal or inability to pass can be. Further, the explicitly sexual, graphic representation of trans bodies risks merely satisfying the pornographic, voyeuristic gaze of the cisgender audience.

[9] I also want to acknowledge that disparate transgender identities necessitate different kinds of representational strategies. My focus in this part is on transmasculinity, almost entirely because the first significant transgender novel has a transmasculine protagonist, and I sought a companion text that would resonate with it. My arguments about the texts are not, therefore, straightforwardly portable to fiction with transfeminine or non-binary subjects.

Trans representation is caught in a continuous push and pull between disclosure and strategic withholding that shifts according to context and audience.

Feinberg's and Rosenberg's texts are both experiments in negotiating this tension, albeit deploying rather different aesthetic techniques. I characterize this negotiation as a rejection of the intentional fallacy and an embrace of didacticism as a distinctly trans mode of reading and writing. To "read" the trans body sensitively and accurately, one must defer to intention. The trans novels I analyze here are also characterized by this imperative to teach, explain, and assert. As with "self-evidence" and "telling not showing", this emphasis on intentionality seems to collapse and short-circuit conventional modes of critical reading. Both *Stone Butch Blues* and *Confessions of the Fox* are resistant to critical intervention, albeit in different ways. Feinberg states in the paratexts of a later, self-published edition that, while she embraces unauthorized translations, she rejects introductions to the novel and insists on its ability to explain itself. Rosenberg, by contrast, embeds a critical commentary on the novel itself within its footnotes that preempts the reader and critic at every turn. This resistance to critical attention reflects trans studies' resistance to prevailing queer critical frameworks. Given the critical tendency to attribute metaphorical significance to the trans body, the self-conscious assertion of intent within the novel itself resists the re-inscription of the body by external forces. The relationship between author and reader is, however, fundamentally uncontrollable. The differences between the two texts often arise from their management of this problem. While Feinberg uses the didactic mode of the social issue novel and explicit instructions on how to read the text to assert hir[10] moral authority, Rosenberg's play with intention and instruction relies on the novel's metatextual form to dramatize "good" and "bad" kinds of reading.

In *Stone Butch Blues,* Feinberg self-consciously rejects the language of theory in favor of an accessible, sincere realism. While evidently grounded in the autobiographical details of Feinberg's own life, the novel should not be read as a straightforward transliteration of the author's experience but as a deliberate occupation and manipulation of the unfashionable, distinctly un-queer genres of the working-class social issue novel and sentimental fiction. More than aware of the vulnerability inherent in documenting violence, trauma, and sexually explicit content, Feinberg chooses not to excise this material but to set the terms with which we engage with it. The novel's sentimentality provokes its readers to eschew irony and engage with an earnestness and sincerity that is almost uncomfortable. Further, it contains a series of didactic set pieces of political pedagogy that model empathetic practices of listening and learning. *Confessions of the Fox,* by contrast, revels in ambiguities, absences and linguistic play. Its dense layers of fantasy, scholarship, and alternate history are willfully complex, in contrast to Feinberg's accessible realism. Like Feinberg, however, the novel does thematize and worry over the conditions in which it will be read. While it contains explicitly sexual content, the novel engages in a deliberate process of strategically withholding and disclosing information about its characters' bodies. The novel insists upon the authority of the author to modulate and contain the access they grant their readers. It uses the novel as a means of constructing anachronistic fantasies of queer pasts that legitimate scholarship itself cannot responsibly pursue. This faith in the liberatory possibilities inherent

[10] I address Feinberg's use of the neopronouns ze/hir in more detail in the chapter itself.

in theory itself gives the text a circular quality – it is a perfectly queer text because it was designed to be.

The two novels represent starkly different understandings of the relationship between identity and form. This project is a concerted effort to resist the critical tendency to conflate queer identity and "queerly" modernist forms. While they often *do* converge, this convergence is not necessary or inevitable. While Feinberg's text is a powerful counter to the presumption that queer form is necessarily avant-garde, Rosenberg's embraces it wholeheartedly. The seemingly incompatibility of the two novels reflects their grounding in two starkly different conceptual frameworks for understanding queer and trans representation. The counterexample of Rosenberg poses the question of how contemporary queer and trans studies accommodate the co-existence of fundamentally incompatible modes of thinking about representation. Part of this question lies in *who,* exactly, we understand these texts to be for. Rosenberg addresses the novel to an imagined community of roguish outsiders, not dissimilar to the characters who populate the manuscript, yet it is also inescapably bound up in the world of the elite academic institution. *Stone Butch Blues,* in contrast, is a concerted attempt to move outside of the potentially alienating territory of theory and to insist on the precedence of lived experience. The risk of addressing a more tightly circumscribed audience is the perpetuation of an inward-looking, circular aesthetic in which literature and criticism merely reflect off of one another in a self-sustaining loop. Yet there is also something powerful in writing within an imagined "t4t" community of trans writers and readers that privileges intimacy over efforts to proselytize to cis readers. The democratizing text, by comparison, may flatten the nuances of subcultural language and expression in the service of a broader appeal. Rather than resolve this tension in any polemical way, I hope that the two case studies jostle and co-exist with one another productively and raise very real, live questions about what trans and queer representation can and should look like now.

Butch Words for Butch Feelings: Sincerity and Sentiment in *Stone Butch Blues*

Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) is, to repurpose the title of that other path-breaking trans text, a conundrum. It is omnipresent on lists of the most important queer and trans fiction and on the syllabi of gender studies courses. Unsurprisingly so, as its queer politics are exemplary. It is vocal in its anti-capitalist, anti-racist investments, and its condemnation of the violence of the carceral state towards queer people is visceral and unsettling. It critiques an essentialist version of feminism that excludes butches and trans men. Most queerly of all, Jess's unconventional transition eschews the medicalized narratives and procedures of transsexuality in favor of a more flexible version of gender non-conformity. Yet the novel also diverges strikingly from the *aesthetic* qualities most associated with queerness. *Stone Butch Blues* is a popular realist novel in the tradition of politically committed working-class fiction. It is sincere, often sentimental, sometimes even saccharine, and makes its political investments clear through explicitly didactic dialogue and distinctly un-subtle pedagogical set-pieces. *Stone Butch Blues'* readers have been profoundly invested in its trueness-to-life and earnestly attest to its life-changing impact. In the comments below a YouTube video of Feinberg delivering a lecture, fans describe looking up the video after reading the novel to hear hir voice and finding themselves weeping. In a blog post, the New York Public Library explained that it was buying large quantities of Feinberg's self-published edition of the novel to meet the demands of readers, given the limited number of original editions.[11] The novel is both a perfect queer object and its strange, earnest opposite.

The apparent discordance between the queerness of its content and the conventionality of its form has been surprisingly unremarked on. Yet the apparent conundrum of *Stone Butch Blues* is a vital corrective to the assumption that queer content can only be meaningfully represented in oblique, modernist forms. As Ramzi Fawaz argues, "aesthetic form's shaping quality, its ability to concretize various iterations of gender and sexuality in cultural or artistic expression, came to be seen as analogous to, even a direct extension of, the delimiting or regulatory aspects of fixed identities and prescribed norms" (40). This association between formal coherence and normativity, which Teagan Bradway calls queer studies' anti-narrative impulse, results in the privileging of experimental, non-linear forms as distinctly queer. Timothy Aubry similarly argues that the collapsing of aesthetic and political values has made it difficult to determine what literary texts actually *do* politically. Scholars, he argues, "have a habit of overstating the capacity of both literary texts and criticism to subvert or reinforce hegemonic power structures. The aesthetic strategies that contemporary scholars tacitly favor, including defamiliarizing, unsettling, making strange, and the like, are especially susceptible to being treated as sources of political change… An unacknowledged commitment to certain privileged aesthetic criteria can, for instance, entail an overvaluation of the political efficacy of certain sophisticated rhetorical strategies and a disregard for other, less complex but more effective modes of political action." As a result, "parody, irony, and strategic ambiguity" tend to be valorized as more politically efficacious than more concrete statements or calls to action (22-23).

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[11] As a case in point, no other text I have worked with has proven quite so difficult to keep a hold of as *Stone Butch Blues*. Whenever I secured older editions, whether interloaned or at the UC Berkeley library, it was more often than not recalled shortly afterwards.

Like the foundational critical interventions of trans studies that emerged roughly contemporaneously to its publication, *Stone Butch Blues* resists the image of the trans subject as a cipher for limitless fluidity. Rather than celebrating the free play of language and identity, the novel is a prolonged search for a more precise language for transgender experience. Its version of realism is rather distinct from that of Jong and Rooney, whose work is a kind of hybrid of literary fiction and genre writing. Ze works instead in the tradition of the didactic working-class political novel and the sentimental novel of social issues. These models are far more earnest and far less conditioned by the subtle ironies evident in Jong's and Rooney's pictures of middle-class sexual anxiety. As Tom Perrin argues, the social problem novels has often been "disqualified from the sphere of high art because of its refusal to be disinterestedly modernist, its insistence on preaching a message that sat at odds with what was felt to be art's true purpose." (38) While Jong and Rooney may cite and worry over political discourse, neither could be described as didactic. Yet for Feinberg, the sincere, didactic qualities of the social problem novel offer a solution to the specific problems posed by *trans* representation. The strong assertion of authorial intention is a means of negotiating the potentially voyeuristic gaze of its cisgender readers. Rather than excise potentially vulnerable material, the novel relies on the moral force of its assertions and its valorization of earnest, emotional reading practices in an effort to manage its relationship with its readers.

I want to quickly address the terminology I use in this chapter. Feinberg readily acknowledged that the language used by and about trans people evolves quickly – something ze refers to in hir pamphlet *Transgender Liberation* as a "wonderful problem" (6). Hir preferred pronouns also shifted with time and according to context. Ze opens hir history of transgender life with the assertion that "there are no pronouns in the English language as complex as I am, and I do not want to simplify myself in order to neatly fit one or the other" (ix). Feinberg did not have an objectively "correct" preferred pronoun and thus any decision I make is somewhat subjective. I have chosen to consistently use ze/hir pronouns, rather than alternating between pronouns, for the sake of clarity. While these particular neo-pronouns have largely fallen out of fashion, I use them in a deliberate effort to use language that both reflects Feinberg's transgender identity and was meaningful to hir at the time when *Stone Butch Blues* was written. Nevertheless, the use of these pronouns is not just a neutral matter of accuracy and clarity. Rather, Feinberg's embrace of neopronouns is a deliberately disruptive linguistic gesture, and I recognize that my use of them does have a somewhat defamiliarizing effect. While they do not appear in the novel itself, Feinberg's use of these pronouns does indicate that hir approach to language could be more experimental than my argument about *Stone Butch Blues'* conventionality suggests. I hope their presence also serves as a productive source of tension, rather than a contradiction. While the novel is in many ways a case study in inarticulacy, these pronouns gesture toward the kinds of linguistic transformation that the novel can only gesture toward at its very end. The question of what pronouns to use to refer to the novel's protagonist Jess is similarly complex. Jess shifts through a number of different identities, from butch lesbian to passing as a man to transgender (though she never refers to herself as such). Given that the use of she/her pronouns is standard in criticism of the novel, I have chosen to use them, however imperfect, for the sake of consistency with existing scholarship.

Feinberg was instrumental in championing the term "transgender" as an alternative to the limited existing language of transsexuals and transvestites. Feinberg described hirself as transgender to specify a dissonance between hir sex and hir gender. While ze had had top surgery and had previously taken hormones, ze was no longer passing as a man nor presenting as a woman. Whereas the term transgender has now come to serve as a broader categorical umbrella for a variety of gender expressions, in the early 1990s it was used to refer to a) those who were living as the "opposite" gender full time, as opposed to cross-dressing, and were not "transvestites" and b) those who were not wholly committed to surgical transition and were not, at least in medical terms, strictly "transsexuals." Feinberg's understanding of the term transgender must be understood as distinct from an older definition of transsexuality that was more insistent upon a normative surgical and hormonal transition. Feinberg's use of transgender accords with Sandy Stone's argument that the term demarcates a particularly visible kind of transition, as opposed to "disappearing" into straight life. In describing Feinberg and Jess as "transgender", I use the term in the way that Feinberg understood it at the time of writing. It is important to note, however, that the term is never used in the novel itself. Jess refers to herself most often as a "butch" or a "he-she", however, the novel thematizes the lack of a coherent language for her gender identity. At the risk of collapsing Feinberg and hir protagonist, I consider "transgender" the most appropriate, encompassing term for Jess' gender identity.

While I read *Stone Butch Blues* primarily as a transgender novel, it is worth acknowledging that it has also been included in the canon of lesbian fiction. This categorization has shifted over time, with the novel now more likely to be identified as primarily about trans, rather than lesbian, experience. This too is the result of incremental shifts in how gender and sexuality, and the relationship between the two, are categorized. In the new edition, Feinberg writes that "like my own life, this novel defies easy classification. If you found *Stone Butch Blues* in a bookstore or library, what category was it in? Lesbian fiction? Gender studies? Like the germinal novel *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe/John Hall, this book is a lesbian novel and a transgender novel- making 'trans' genre a verb, as well as an adjective" (336). I agree with Feinberg that the novel can quite easily be understood as both. Certainly, Jess understands herself and her sexuality within the framework of lesbian desire and culture rather than conceiving of herself as a heterosexual man. Indeed, the very crux of the novel is in its negotiation of the complex and evolving relationship between transmasculinity and lesbian culture. Gayle Rubin and Jack Halberstam, among others, have argued persuasively against the need to police the border between butch lesbian and FTM identity.[12] It is not that distinct identity categories do not matter, but that these distinctions need not be understood as qualitative or absolute.

That the text is transgender *fiction* was a novelty in itself, given that life-writing has historically been the only commercially viable genre available to trans writers. The emergence of a distinct body of explicitly trans novels has been strikingly belated compared to, for example, gay and lesbian fiction. The earliest transition memoirs were an extension of the mid-century fascination with newly available technologies of medical transition and the emergence of the trans celebrity in the figure of Christine Jorgensen. The gender clinics that began to proliferate in the United States at this time granted access to gender-affirming care on the condition that prospective patients be able to provide a coherent,

[12] See Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* and Rubin's "Catamites and Kings"

acceptable narrative of their lives. Doctors elicited standardized "born in the wrong body" narratives from their patients that emphasized normative gender presentation and "heterosexual" object choice. In her field-inaugurating critique of these memoirs, Stone argued that the narrative exemplified by bestselling memoirs such as Jan Morris' *Conundrum* (1974) effectively replicated the tropes of these standardized clinical narratives. *Stone Butch Blues* is something of an outlier in trans literary history. Published by the small lesbian press Firebrand Books, some decades before the emergence of any kind of coherent trans literary scene, it was for a long time the only novel of any note by and about a trans person.

This is not to say that the novel bears no relation to the trans memoir. Like Feinberg, the protagonist Jess Goldberg comes of age in Buffalo's working-class lesbian bar scene and supports herself with a series of factory jobs. Her experiences of police violence and harassment correspond to Feinberg's recollections in hir explicitly autobiographical writing. Jess also begins the process of medically transitioning and passes as a man for several years before deciding to cease hormone therapy and partially detransition, just as Feinberg did. Jess's name deliberately evokes Feinberg's own, with its gender-neutral first name and recognizably Jewish last name. As Juliet Jacques and Jean Noble both argue, the original publisher's decision to put Feinberg's image on the front cover seems to deliberately invite autobiographical readings (Jacques 363, Noble 98). This autobiographical slippage is evident in a 2023 digital exhibition by Jeff Iovannone, which meticulously traces the Buffalo of *Stone Butch Blues* by pairing real bars with their counterparts in the novel, identifying the factories where Jess "works" and naming real figures in the lesbian bar scene who may have served as inspiration for characters in the novel. The exhibition provides quotes and page references from the novel for each location, explaining what "happened" there. This mapping of the novel onto the real landscapes of the city reflects, albeit with more self-awareness, the phenomenon of readers writing to Feinberg with messages for the characters in the novel (Noble 97).

Feinberg hirself repeatedly emphasized that *Stone Butch Blues is* a novel, despite its being grounded in hir own experience. In correspondence with Jay Prosser, Feinberg expressed hir concern that overly autobiographical readings of the novel were condescending, noting that "an elitist bias has been revealed to me by some who have conveyed their assumption that a blue-collar person, who lacks extended formal education, could not possibly write about anything except their own life" (Prosser 199) This classed assumption that Feinberg *could* not write fiction intersects with a transgendered imperative that ze *should* not. Speaking to Prosser again, Feinberg emphasizes that hir decision to write a novel rather than an autobiography was a deliberate refusal of the imperative to reveal hirself:

> I felt, by telling it autobiographically, that I would pull back in a lot of places … as transgendered people, that we're always being told who we are, either physically or emotionally – strip or be stripped, you know? … I feel we've each found our own boundaries of dignity which we will not go beyond; that we deserve. I really felt that by fictionalizing the story, that I would be able to tell more of the truth; be more brutally honest than I would if I were telling my own story (192).

For Feinberg, the novel is an opportunity to carve out a kind of explicit speech that is both "true" and resistant to the prurient cisgender gaze. "Fiction", Prosser argues, "interposes a distance between the potentially policing reader and the trans gendered author" (194). In making Jess like but not identical to Feinberg, the novel diffuses the specificity of Feinberg's trauma and grants hir a measure of "dignity". Whatever happens to Jess may be similar to what happened to Feinberg in kind or type, but it is not hir own trauma in all its specificity.

Feinberg's words to Prosser on the problem of visibility – "strip or be stripped" – are particularly pertinent to the cultural context in which the novel was published. *Stone Butch Blues* was published between two particularly galvanizing incidents for the contemporary transgender rights movement – the posthumous revelation that jazz pianist Billy Tipton was a transgender man in 1989 and the murder of transgender teenager Brandon Teena in 1993. Whether accidental or forceful, both cases hinged on an act of exposure that seemed to prove the impossibility of "getting away with it." The coverage of both Tipton and Teena's cases framed passing as fundamentally deceptive and an extended con of their (tacitly naïve) female partners. The trope of stripping transgender characters, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to expose their deception was prevalent in contemporaneous pop culture. The publicity campaign that accompanied *The Crying Game* (1992) urged audiences not to reveal its great "secret", that the character Dil was a transgender woman. *Boys Don't Cry* (1998), a fictionalization of Teena's story, hinged on a violent, upsetting scene of forceful exposure. Regardless of hir sympathies and political investments, in writing an explicitly trans novel, Feinberg risked reproducing this act of stripping.

Indeed, the relative benefits and risks of visibility are a central and potentially irresolvable problem for transgender studies. Stone argues that successful transition has historically been defined by the ability to pass so completely as to "fade into the normal population" (230). Clinicians urged trans people to live "stealth" and construct an alternate "plausible history" that effectively erased any trace of their previous lives and, most importantly, any involvement with queer community. Stone argues that this disappearance into plausible histories sacrifices political potential for the sake of individual security and that "to deconstruct the necessity for passing implies that transsexuals must take responsibility for all of their history, to begin to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures in the service of a species of feminism conceived from within a traditional frame, but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body" (232). Feinberg hirself identified passing as a distinctly modern source of oppression in *Transgender Liberation*: "Transgendered women and men have always been here. They are oppressed. But they are not merely products of oppression. It is passing that's historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence. But that is not the case today." (7) Stone's incitement to resist the normalizing force of passing in favor of a legible transgender identity argues that there is political power in the production of more explicit, less obfuscating life narratives.

However, more recent critical interventions have emphasized the material dangers of trans visibility. In the introduction to their edited collection, *Trap Door,* Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton argue that the "politics of visibility" extend beyond simply demanding more trans

representation. Rather, they argue, "we are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence" (xv). The possibilities afforded by trans are backed by an awareness that "when produced within the cosmology of racial capitalism, the promise of "positive representation" ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color – the very people whose lives and labor constitute the ground for the figuration of this moment of visibility" (xv). Increased visibility can be concomitant with increased vulnerability and surveillance, regardless of whether that visibility is affirmative or not. In an interview in the same collection, Juliana Huxtable asks if "they – meaning the audience obsessed with and consuming media about transness – (are) tapping into a derivative pornographic obsession with transgender bodies" (42)? Visibility and legibility uneasily coexist with the history of the trans body as spectacle and object of prurient interest. The pornographic gaze that Huxtable cites is the product of a historical preoccupation with the forced display of the trans body, whether through colonial pseudo-science, sexological case studies, or tabloid sensationalism. Visibility as a virtue in itself is insufficient, particularly when that visibility is forcibly extracted.

What, then, can the trans literary text do? Eastwood suggests that the solution may lie in re-examining our reading practices. Eastwood makes a case for a renewed attention to authorial intention as a distinctly trans mode of reading. Eastwood suggests that the critic's "focus on the impossibility of textual integrity, coherence, and legibility is at odds with the transsexual's deep-seated desire to determine how he or she is read. Physical transition aside, the narrative insistence upon a preferred name and pronoun, the guidance of a lover's eyes and hands, the sometimes-fictional denarrativization of one's past, all depend upon the audience's respectful adherence to the author's intentions. Sometimes being read as transsexual, for instance, when one wants to be read simply as a man or a woman, can register as the most profound misrecognition of all" (593). For example, both passing *and* not passing raise different, but equally important, questions about the stakes of reading. Not passing can be a powerful kind of recognition and a refusal to concede to the imperative to disappear. Conversely, as C Riley Snorton argues, "discussions of transsexuality often presume a corporeal materiality that does not aptly characterize the lived experiences of transsexuals who are not able to pass in a traditional sense" (80). That is, the ability to pass is not universal. Relying on visual cues and gendered norms to "read" somebody's gender may, by necessity, be superseded by a deference to intention and self-determination. If we extend this imperative from reading the trans body to reading the trans text, being a "good reader" could mean deferring to perceived authorial intention. It is a potentially unsettling prospect for the reader, critic, and author. The act of readerly deferral to their authority feels both necessary and impossible for the trans author to negotiate, given its reliance on readerly goodwill that cannot be meaningfully secured.

Indeed, trans theory and criticism have long insisted on the determining role that the audience has played in structuring the shape of trans narratives, as well as the difficulty of exerting control over who has access to particular texts. The paradigmatic trans narrative of the twentieth century has been the clinical autobiography, a text whose form is determined almost entirely by its intended audience. For Prosser, telling the right kind of story has often been a practical necessity for trans people: "The story of a strong, early, and persistent transgendered identification is required by the clinical

authorities, the psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists who traditionally function as the gatekeepers to the means of transsexual 'conversion'" (101). The fabrication of a clinically acceptable life narrative is predicated on strategic disclosure and withholding for utilitarian ends. Dean Spade, for example, notes that any suggestion of continued affiliation with butch lesbian aesthetics in a trans masculine patient might be regarded as muddying the waters of a straightforward cross-gendered identification (323). While savvy (and necessary), these fabricated life stories are also symptomatic of the limitations of this kind of exertion of authorial control over both the meaning of and access to a particular narrative. As Stone points out, from the sixties onward, clinicians relied upon the case studies in Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* to identify the right kinds of life narratives and were initially gratified with how neatly patients seemed to conform to Benjamin's models. Eventually, however, it became apparent that this was because trans patients had been reading Benjamin too and using it to construct their own clinical histories (228). The circulation of Benjamin's texts and the life narratives derived from it thus shuttle between "right" and "wrong" readers, taking on markedly different authorial intentions and producing divergent readings. To assert one's intention as a trans author, then, is to resist the role of authority (whether medical, literary, or otherwise) that would either legitimate or override the validity of one's narrative.

The paratextual apparatus in Feinberg's 2014 self-published edition of *Stone Butch Blues* is an extended negotiation of these questions about the role of authorial intention in the trans text and its relationship to legitimizing authorities. In self-publishing the text, Feinberg removes it from legitimate networks of institutional credibility and allows hirself to make a series of unorthodox demands of the reader. *Stone Butch Blues* was out of print for many years following the bankruptcy of its second publisher, Alyson Books. Feinberg embarked on a prolonged legal battle to obtain the rights to the novel, which ze secured in 2012. Rather than negotiate a new commercial contract, Feinberg chose to "[take] *Stone Butch Blues* off the capitalist market" and to "give this novel back, as a tiny handmade gift, flaws and all, to the workers and oppressed of the world" (352-353). A free PDF of the novel is available for download on Feinberg's website, and a physical copy can be ordered "at cost" from an on-demand printer, but it is not distributed through conventional means. A physical copy of this edition lacks the familiar signifiers of legitimacy that render a text quantifiable and archivable, such as an ISBN and a barcode. Despite its recent explosion in popularity, self-publishing cannot quite escape its association with a vast fringe of kooks and amateurs. Unlike a radical small press, for example, self-publishing more often than not actively diminishes the artistic credibility of a text. *Stone Butch Blues* is insulated from this credibility problem to the extent that it is already well-known as a classic of queer literature and has previously been commercially published. Yet the shadow of illegitimacy associated with self-publishing resonates strikingly with Feinberg's cautious relationship to institutional credibility.

Within the novel itself, knowledge institutions are a source of pain and loss for working-class queer people. The novel characterizes the university as a proscribed space for butches like Jess, even as it serves as a locus for radical politics. Jess's femme partner Theresa's ability to pass for straight enables her to work as a secretary at a local university, which in turn grants her access to radical student politics and the nascent women's movement. If organizing on the factory floor introduces Jess to

politics at a micro-level, the "pamphlets, and underground newspapers" that Theresa brings home from campus "opened a window" onto a broader "hurricane force of change" (133). Jess, however, can only access this world through the intermediary of Theresa. Others in the bar scene had "heard about weekly gay liberation and radical women's meetings at the university, but Theresa was the only one in our crowd who knew her way around campus. It was still another world to the rest of us" (144). Women's and gay liberation meetings may not be officially sanctioned by the university itself, but from the perspective of Jess and other working-class butches, this distinction is practically meaningless. For them, the middle-class New Left remains functionally indistinguishable from the institution that they rail against. They both occupy the same physical space of the campus, which is rendered as alien as if it were another planet and as difficult to navigate.

Despite its skepticism of the university as an institution, the novel is not anti-intellectual so much as a critique of which stories are told by whom and who is granted access to knowledge. Jess, after all, becomes a voracious learner and autodidact who, like Feinberg, independently researches and typesets a history of trans lives. She describes reading feminist theory as a covert operation that allowed her access to a world she had been excluded from, in that "by leafing through the books I could eavesdrop on the discussions going on between women without being seen." Yet institutional barriers to entry remain. Jess fears reading this work at all lest she not be able to understand it and "it turned out to be true that [she] couldn't understand a lot of the theory." Her reading thus becomes an urgent scavenging of whatever information she finds useful and actionable despite a sense that it is not for her, "as though I was rushing into a burning building to rescue the ideas I needed in my own life" (260). In the letter to Theresa that opens the novel, Jess argues that the institutionalization of radical politics will always systematically exclude working-class queers: "We thought we'd won the war of liberation when we embraced the word gay. Then suddenly there were professors and doctors and lawyers coming out of the woodwork telling us that meetings should be run with Robert's Rules of Order. (Who died and left Robert god?) They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke" (6). Robert's Rules of Order stand in for the bourgeois standardization of radical energy, which rewards particular kinds of institutional knowledge and behavior. It is not surprising, then, that Feinberg would later be wary of ceding control of hir novel for the sake of this kind of institutional credibility.

Self-publishing allows Feinberg to bypass the institutions that would standardize the novel's formatting and include a wealth of idiosyncratic paratextual material that would be unlikely to make it into a commercial edition. Feinberg's statements in these paratexts serve as a series of protective, albeit largely symbolic, gestures against the novel's being taken up and reabsorbed into discourses and contexts beyond Feinberg's control. The embarrassment and illegitimacy attached to self-publishing can also be extended to the measure of paranoia that undergirds many of Feinberg's statements. Hir protectiveness of the text is evidently grounded in a deeply felt sense of pain and distrust. This is particularly evident in hir refusal to grant film rights to the book, which ze justifies by explaining that "I worked briefly on a movie version of *Stone Butch Blues* until I discovered that the producer's prospectus was trying to raise capital from investors by offering a sexual fantasy: an invitation to watch butches being raped by police. I requested that no movie be made; I don't believe any movie can be

made true to the intention of the book." (354) Feinberg concedes that the representation of violence towards trans people, or indeed, the representation of the trans body at all, is always at risk of spectacularization and fetishization for the cisgender gaze. In trying to contain the migration of the novel's content across forms and into the hands of other creators, however paranoid or unorthodox the attempt appears, Feinberg seeks to mitigate this reappropriation as far as ze materially can.

This exertion of control is necessarily limited, however, and the paratextual material in the new edition ultimately relies on assertion alone to reiterate Feinberg's singular authority as author. The novel begins with a note to the reader that seems, on first glance, to be a brief content warning but proves to be a more pointed statement about Feinberg's understanding of authorial authority:

> "Dear Reader,
>
> I want to let you know that *Stone Butch Blues* is an anti-oppression/s novel.
>
> As a result, it contains scenes of rape and other violence.
>
> None of this violence is gratuitous or salacious.
>
> Leslie" (Frontmatter).

Feinberg rejects the idea that violence should be excised from trans stories or take place "off-screen," but baulks at the idea that it is the reader or the critic who determines what is "gratuitous or salacious." The claim that the novel is not excessively violent does not rely, as contemporary critics often do, on its being written *by* a trans author. While this is not irrelevant, Feinberg instead cites hir own intent as the primary grounds for containing a level of violence that might otherwise be considered a capitulation to the cisgender gaze.

This assertion of intent as superseding the perspective of critical intermediaries is similarly evident in Feinberg's request that any translations of the novel not contain an introduction by the translator. Feinberg cites hir aversion to the restrictions imposed by clinical narratives of trans lives:

> For many decades, as I grew up, the only publications about people who were oppressed based on their sexes, gender expressions, and sexualities were books that had psychological/psychiatric "experts" writing about those lives. The words of the oppressed individual then became the "patient narrative" that was stretched or chopped, as if into a Procrustean bed of torture, to fit the theory of the "experts." *Stone Butch Blues* speaks in its own voice and needs no expert between reader and protagonist. (359)

Feinberg's rejection of intermediaries is grounded in hir wariness about the structural implications of expert commentary rather than the precise nature of the commentary itself. Given the relative novelty of trans stories written outside of the medical paradigm of the case history, Feinberg is not yet willing to cede hir story to experts, however sympathetic. As with hir discussion of political organizing in the novel, the intervention of experts represents too great a potential for loss.

Feinberg argues that *Stone Butch Blues* will not yield to critical scrutiny, or at least does not require mediation. "This novel can introduce itself to readers," ze argues, "and so can Jess Goldberg.

Stone Butch Blues is the voice of someone who is living the oppressions, resistance and pride. Let the reader hear Jess Goldberg's own words" (359). Its meaning is "self-evident" (to again evoke Crisp) and accessible without the intervention of experts. Feinberg asserts the capacity of literary language to accurately and meaningfully transmit hir intended meaning. If ze believes that intention matters, ze also believes that that intention is legible and readily accessible. This is as much a question of form as it is of epistemology. Feinberg writes in the preface of the tenth anniversary edition that ze "wrote the novel, not as an expression of individual 'high' art, but as a workingclass [sic] organizer mimeographs a leaflet -- a call to action" (338). Feinberg privileges legibility over formal invention or style qua style. Feinberg suggests that the accessibility of the (popular, realist) novel makes it the most appropriate and effective formal vessel for hir story. Ze positions the novel as a counterpoint to expert discourse, stating that, "I had read a great deal of gender theory that I felt was so abstracted from human experience that it did not speak to or about my life and the lives of other trans people. I wanted to contribute my voice to the discussion of gender theory in a way that was accessible, particularly to working class readers" (qtd in Prosser 199). For Feinberg, accessible prose is not only able to convey the nuances of a transgender subject position but is actually better suited to it than the dense, oblique language of theory.

Jay Prosser's reading of *Stone Butch Blues* exhibits some of the limitations of approaching the novel, anticipating the kind of formal experimentation that Feinberg deliberately eschews. Prosser is most well-known for his critique of queer studies' use of the trans subject as a synecdoche for the instability and mutability of gender categories, and argued that an emphasis on the constructedness of gender categories privileged the linguistic and the semiotic over the material facts of the trans body. He reframes the movement across categories inherent in the prefix "trans" not as a perennial oscillation between them but as a journey homeward. Yet despite this critique, Prosser's reading of *Stone Butch Blues* still hinges on there being a tacit relationship between queer subject matter and formal indeterminacy. It is, he argues, "a text as between genres as its subject is between genders… what is remarkably, indeed satisfyingly identical in Feinberg's response to gender and genre is this calling attention to hybridity on both counts: the author's resistance to going home to either side of either boundary, hir positioning of hir protagonist's gendered subjectivity and her text's generic form symmetrically in between" (191-192). Just as Jess chooses to exist outside of conventional gender categories, so too does the novel eschew conventional genre categories. It is particularly worth noting Prosser's emphasis on "the critical pleasure to be reaped from this mirroring between transgender and transgenre" (192). However, taking pleasure in this apparent correlation risks sacrificing an accurate account of the novel in favor of conceptual neatness.

Stone Butch Blues' political effect does not depend on producing a defamiliarizing aesthetic experience. It is almost entirely lacking in "parody, irony and strategic ambiguity" and instead solicits intense emotional investment. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, "a major source of the novel's appeal is its emotional power, especially its use of sentimental and melodramatic narrative modes" (73). *Stone Butch Blues* is a clear contemporary descendant of the sentimental novel, a genre often characterized as "weak, escapist, puerile, and apolitical" (Aubry, *Guilty*, 13). Yet politically, the novel's trans and queer affirmative, anti-capitalist, anti-racist project is entirely antithetical to the supposedly reactionary,

disciplinary inclinations of its generic form. In describing the text as "trans-genre" or formally indeterminate, we risk radically misrepresenting what it actually does in favor of reconciling an assumed correlation between its political investments and the formal strategies we *presume* must accompany them. Its most notable (and arguably more interesting) formal qualities are its sincerity and literality. In an early review for *The Women's Review of Books*, EJ Graff seems struck by the disconnect between the novel's "earnest and simple" prose and its affective power. It solicits an unwaveringly sincere reading practice from its readers that is, as Graff discovers, rather disarming.

While the text's sheer sincerity seems to repel ironic or parodic readings, it relies heavily on readers heeding its appeal to their goodwill and moral consciousness. In an early scene that serves as a model for the kind of reading the novel solicits, the relentlessly bullied Jess is asked to recite a favorite poem to the class. She reads "Alone" by Edgar Allen Poe, despite fears that choosing a poem that genuinely moved her would leave her even more "vulnerable and exposed". The scene is calibrated to elicit an emotional response from its reader, even wavering on the edges of cliché:

> I tried to read the words in a flat sing-song tone without feeling, so none of the kids would understand what his poem meant to me, but their eyes were already glazed with boredom. I dropped my gaze and walked back to my seat. Mrs. Noble squeezed my arm as I passed, and when I looked up I saw she had tears in her eyes. The way she looked at me made me want to cry, too. It was as though she could really see me, and there was no criticism of me in her eyes (21).

This scene is not just laden with sentiment itself but also models and valorizes sentimental reading practices. Jess's feigned ironic detachment fails as a defensive mechanism, whereas her emotional investment in the poem is rewarded by a rare moment of tenderness. Literature becomes a conduit for empathy and makes Jess's transgender affect of alienation and loneliness legible to Mrs Noble. The novel invites us to read it in a way that we are not *supposed* to read, at least as literary critics. Instead, the contagious tears that the poem elicits in Jess and her teacher are both symptomatic of the kind of reading the novel wants us to do and its reward. Moreover, scenes like this make it difficult to sustain an association between sentimental form and reactionary politics. Feinberg's manipulation of sentiment to elicit sympathy for a transgender child may not constitute "good" writing, but neither can it be said to shore up existing social structures.

The novel relies most on its solicitation of readerly sympathy when representing homophobic and transphobic violence. In what arguably constitutes the novel's central trauma, Jess is arrested in a bar raid and subjected to abuse by police officers at the station:

> They snapped my mug shot. One of the cops loosened my tie. As he ripped open my new dress shirt, the sky blue buttons bounced and rolled across the floor. He pulled up my T-shirt, exposing my breasts. My hands were cuffed behind my back. I was flat up against a wall…
>
> There wasn't a sound in the room. I didn't move. No one said anything. I almost got the feeling it could stay that way, all action frozen, but it didn't. Mulroney was fingering his crotch. "Suck my cock, bulldagger." Someone hit the side of my knee with a nightstick.

> My knees buckled more from fear than pain. Mulroney grabbed me by the collar and dragged me several feet away to a steel toilet. There was a piece of unflushed shit floating in the water. "Either eat me or eat my shit, bulldagger. It's up to you." I was too frightened to think or move.
>
> I held my breath the first time he shoved my head in the toilet. The second time he held me under so long I sucked in water and felt the hard shape of the shit against my tongue. When Mulroney pulled my head back out of the toilet I spewed vomit all over him. I gagged and retched over and over again (65).

The passage relies on its unrelenting specificity for its effect, which Graff says, "will turn your hair white" (25). In a tone ironically reminiscent of legal testimony, Jess recounts this violence as a series of actions and observations stripped of all but the most basic of figurative language. Its grotesque details – "the hard shape of the shit against my tongue" – are communicated flatly, in no particular emotional register. Indeed, its language is deliberately ugly, whether in the officer's command to "suck my cock, bulldagger" or the blunt admission that "I spewed vomit all over him". The passage is not cultivating a particular kind of heightened aesthetic response. The scene does not allow for any retreat into irony but demands that we keep looking. Feinberg's solution to the "visibility paradox" of trans fiction is not to excise violence altogether, but to demand that its readers bring an earnest, affective intensity to witnessing its violence. This invitation to read sympathetically is tenuous, as Feinberg acknowledges in the paratext when decrying the use of violent scenes to titillate potential film producers. *Stone Butch Blues* is certainly vulnerable to the same charges levelled against *Boys Don't Cry* of making a spectacle of violence against trans bodies and calcifying the notion that violence is an inherent part of trans experience. Yet representing police brutality against trans people is intrinsic to Feinberg's political project, and particularly the novel's efforts to solicit empathy.

The novel does not rely solely on evoking sympathy as a political tactic. Just as the novel models appropriate modes of sympathetic reading, so too does it contain transparently didactic scenes of political education. It is in these scenes that Feinberg's assertion of authorial intent is most palpable. This didacticism sometimes takes the form of explicitly pedagogical vignettes, in which Jess is explicitly taught about a political or social issue by a friend or lover. Elsewhere, the novel presents what are effectively miniature case studies in labor organizing or social activism. This literal treatment of politics is inextricable from Feinberg's Marxism and in hir understanding that the political novel must necessarily be accessible and readily legible. Cat Moses observes that, "her focus on class is generally dismissed as old-fashioned, simplistic, and naive. These claims are not entirely without merit; Feinberg is more Marxist than neoMarxist" (76). This characterization of Feinberg's Marxism as "old-fashioned" or somehow unreconstructed reflects Aubry's argument that literary critical judgments of political value are tacit statements about aesthetic value. The novel's overt didacticism, like its sentimentality, makes its characterization as formally transgressive somewhat difficult to sustain.

In contrast to the ironized depictions of political discourse in Erica Jong and Sally Rooney, politics are deadly serious in *Stone Butch Blues*. Jess is not, however, rendered as a straightforward polemical mouthpiece and is often incorrect or partially informed. Yet, unlike Jong and Rooney, her

misperceptions are never left to hang unresolved and are folded into the depiction of her developing political consciousness. For example, Jess expresses discomfort at the notion that her colleague Frankie is in a relationship with another butch: "The more I thought about the two of them being lovers, the more it upset me. I couldn't stop thinking about them kissing each other. It was like two guys. Well, two gay guys would be alright. But two butches? How could they be attracted to each other? Who was the femme in bed" (219)? Jess's reaction mirrors the homophobic and transphobic rhetoric that has been directed toward her, and it is fairly evident that we are to recognize her as mistaken. Yet the novel refuses to let these beliefs go unexamined, to the extent that Jess makes a concerted effort to reconnect with Frankie after years apart to apologize and explain herself: "You know, Frankie, when we were younger, I thought I had it figured out: I'm a butch because I love femmes. That was something beautiful. Nobody ever honored our love. You scared me. I felt like you were taking that away from me" (299). Again, it is important to emphasize that formal and conceptual complexity are not concomitant or necessarily the same kind of thing. Even when presented as part of a straightforward developmental arc, the matter in question is a nuanced re-evaluation of how butch identity might be defined when it is extricated from the butch/femme erotic dynamic.

This translation of conceptual complexity into a readily graspable narrative arc is a rejoinder to what Feinberg perceived as the abstraction of gender theory. Ze argued that ze instead "wanted to write about trans characters, and how their lives were intersected by race, class, and desire. I wanted to write the kind of gender theory that we all live." (qtd in Rand 40) Feinberg's use of fiction as a means of narrativizing and concretizing the politics of gender thus feels continuous with trans studies' foundational gesture of critiquing queer theory's use of the trans body as a symbol or cipher for gender fluidity. The novel, in line with the materialist bent of early trans critics like Prosser, is concerned with charting the politics inherent in everyday trans life. Many of the novel's scenes simply function as exemplars of the everyday indignities of trans existence. While passing as a man, Jess contemplates riding her new motorcycle over the border to Canada before realizing that she exists in a legal limbo:

> I opened my wallet and looked at my ID. Birth certificate, driver's license. They were all clearly marked female. How could I get ID as a male? Getting identification required identification. I couldn't even open a checking account without some sort of ID. A credit card was out of the question. I felt like a nonperson. Even outlaws probably had more ID than me. (188)

Jess's desire to ride across the border functions primarily as the slightly arbitrary or forced narrative pretext for explaining an important practical obstacle to transitioning, as she does, outside of the official scope of the gender clinic. These exemplary scenes read like excerpts from trans activist Lou Sullivan's contemporaneous self-help pamphlet for transgender men or as a loosely narrativized adaptation of a polemical essay.

Granular accounts of contracts, shop-floor tensions, and organizing drives are hardly the conventional stuff of fiction, yet take up a considerable, perhaps surprising, amount of space in the novel. When, for example. Jess is injured by a machine that a colleague tampered with, her union steward Duffy angrily recounts that "just before he put you on that machine one of the guys saw Kevin removing the safety device. Jack could claim he took it off because the hose was on the blink,

but ordering someone to put their hand in it was an out-and-out contract violation" (99). While this is certainly illustrative of the workplace harassment that butches experienced, compared to the novel's more affectively charged moments, these passages are fairly dry. Critical accounts of political efficacy that privilege ambivalent, unsettling aesthetic experiences over more overt kinds of political speech cannot account for this material as anything other than an aesthetic failure. Yet, in a 2018 piece for the New York Times recommending the novel to contemporary readers, novelist Kaitlyn Greenidge recalls looking up from the novel to tell her boyfriend that "she's writing about strike breaking!" or "this scene is a perfect attempt to explain the racial politics of organizing" (SR8)! Greenidge's enthusiastic, receptive response to the novel's more didactic scenes suggests that this kind of content is not inherently antithetical to readerly pleasure.

The novel's pedagogical scenes are not always quite so tendentious, however. Pedagogy often serves as a distinctly queer expression of intergenerational care and intimacy, or as an emotional education. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, their oral history of Buffalo's working-class bar scene, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis find that by the 1950s, experienced butches "help[ing] the younger butches catch on to gay life" had become codified as part of the lesbian bar scene. (80) Jess relies on the older Butch Al's mentorship as a queer alternative to the kind of socialization she receives in the heterosexual family unit or the school. In a typically literal fashion, Jess remarks that "she took me under her wing and taught me all the things she thought were most important for a baby butch like me to know before embarking on such a dangerous and painful journey" (26). This mentorship extended to sexual pedagogy, with butches offering "quite full and detailed" instructions to newcomers. (Kennedy and Davis, 219) Al, too, instructs Jess in matters of sexuality, gifting her a dildo and giving her what Jess called "our butch 'father to son' talk." The novel demurs on the specifics of the conversation, stating only that "Al talked, I listened," as if to ensure that the intimate details remain contained to the private sphere of interpersonal mentorship (28). If the novel's more didactic scenes of political education can be dry, these scenes are a more tender treatment of pedagogy as a historically and geographically specific form of butch sociality.

Yet while Butch Al plays a pivotal role in Jess's queer social education, it is femmes who most often serve as the novel's "teachers" and to whom the novel attributes an almost uncanny level of perceptiveness. While Al gifts Jess the dildo and talks her through the mechanics of using it, it is Jackie, Al's partner, who instructs her in its more intangible psychological implications: "You know, you could make a woman feel real good with this thing. Maybe better than she ever felt in her life... Or you could really hurt her, and remind her of all the ways she's ever been hurt in her life. You got to think about that every time you strap this on. Then you'll be a good lover" (28). Feinberg's femme characters share a common tone – warm, wise, intuitive, and endlessly patient. Seemingly without exception, they all refer to their friends and loved ones as "honey."[13] Cvetkovich also notes the novel's reliance on the emotional intelligence of its femme characters, arguing that "butch-femme is as much an emotional as a sexual interplay, in which the untouchable butch can be seduced by the femme's receptive sympathy. The emotional intimacy provided by a (femme) lover, which is also one of the forms of affective labor provided by heterosexual domesticity, offers solace for a range of forms of public

[13] The word "honey" appears an extraordinary 71 times in the novel.

experience, including not just work life but homophobic violence" (74). This same dynamic structures many of the novel's depictions of pedagogy and Jess's political and emotional education. Jess's emotional inarticulacy and inexperience precipitate the unspooling of femme wisdom.

These three strands of explicitly political discourse, butch mentorship, and femme emotional intelligence converge in the novel's treatment of Jess's developing consciousness of racial politics. If *Stone Butch Blues* has sustained any significant criticism, it has largely been for its tendency to romanticize its characters of color (Moses 77). The novel's Native American characters, for example, are invested with an innate wisdom like that attributed to femmes and, as Siobhan Somerville argues, Native American culture provides Jess with "an enabling fantasy of an alternative gender system" (172). By comparison, the "particular relationship between African American and transgender identity, however, is more conflicted and ambiguous than is the position of Native American identity in the text" (172). While working-class lesbian bars were largely integrated, Feinberg depicts this integration as uneasy and sometimes volatile. The tension boils over in a fight about the Vietnam War between older, more conservative butches and Ed, a close friend of Jess's and one of a minority of Black butches in the bar scene. The conversation with Theresa that follows becomes an inciting incident in Jess's burgeoning understanding of the intersection of race and sexuality. The novel uses Jess's status as an almost total political naif as a narrative foil, allowing it to stage scenes of explicit political pedagogy. While she is eager to call Ed afterwards, Theresa cautions her against it. When Jess says that she wanted to tell Ed that "we need to stick together" despite political differences, Theresa "nod[s] as though I'd confirmed something she already knew" (135). From Jess's perspective, Theresa's perceptiveness about her lack of political consciousness comes across as almost uncannily prescient.

The novel relies on this interplay between Theresa's greater self-awareness and Jess's exaggerated naivety to stage its pedagogical scenes. Their conversation proceeds like a cross between a Socratic dialogue and a mother cautioning her child:

> Theresa sighed. "Some of the butches are for the war, honey. And are you sure you're really against all wars? Are there any wars you feel different about?"
>
> I did a double take. "Like what?"
>
> Theresa took a long drag on her cigarette. "Ed feels like she's in a war here at home. You haven't seen the news yet. Cities are burning. There's troops in the streets."
>
> I shrugged. "That's different."
>
> Theresa nodded. "Yeah, it is. You have to figure out where you stand."
>
> I exhaled smoke and watched the wind lift it up and away.
>
> Theresa watched my face with obvious concern. "I'm just saying be careful, honey. Think first before you talk to Ed or anybody else about what happened last night" (137).

Again, there is nothing subtle about the novel's incorporation of political discourse, nor the point that it is making. To evoke Greenidge, this is the moment when the reader would look up and exclaim that

Feinberg was perfectly illustrating the imbrication of queerness and geopolitics, or that membership of a sexual minority is not necessarily accompanied by radical politics. This latter point is particularly important in understanding why the novel is so emphatic in its representation of political pedagogy. Jess needs instruction in the sexual and social aspects of living as a butch. While her understanding of herself as something other than cisgender and heterosexual is represented as innate, her expression of that identity is the product of explicit guidance and socialization. Similarly, while Jess is almost always intuitively sensitive and has an innate sense of fairness, her political consciousness does not organically evolve from her own marginalized position. Particularly on matters outside of her own immediate experience, the novel represents politics as something that must be taught. While there can be a level of dramatic irony at play between Jess's naivety and the reader's own political consciousness, the novel does not necessarily assume its readers are any more politically informed than Jess herself. The text thus functions at a double level, with Jess serving as a proxy for the reader in their education and as a representation of politics as a pedagogical process.

After her conversation with Ed, Jess remarks to Theresa, "you know, I always fall back on assuming that what Ed and I deal with every day as butches is pretty much the same, you know? Ed reminded me about what she faces every day that I don't" (139). Ed also gifts Jess Malcolm X's *The Ballot and the Bullet* and W.E.B Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. That Jess's political education can function as a mirror of the reader's own seems no more apparent than when Ed uses books themselves as a tool for political education. Ed marks a paragraph in the Du Bois, telling Jess that "I carry it in my wallet. Read it. That's how I feel. I couldn't say it any better" (157). Jess loses touch with Ed when both hormonally transition and learns of her death by suicide some years later. It is only then that she looks at the passage Ed had marked: Du Bois's famous description of double-consciousness. Even as the novel's staging of Jess's developing politics is self-evidently didactic, her failure to read the books that Ed gifts her leaves the question of the political efficacy of text alone unresolved. On the one hand, the scene is a tragedy of belatedness, in that arguably Jess *could* have better understood Ed while she was alive if she had read the book. Alternatively, despite Ed's insistence that the text itself is sufficient to explain how she feels, it seems to fail.

Ed's faith in the passage's self-explanatory nature puts pressure on Feinberg's own insistence on the transparency and legibility of hir own language. For all of the novel's emphasis on didacticism and soliciting particular kinds of reading, this scene reveals an uncertainty about the ability of the text to exact change or straightforwardly transmit political meaning. While I have been categorizing the novel in terms of its directness and its assertions of authority, it is nevertheless also defined by the central problem of inarticulacy. Within the generic container of the accessible, sentimental novel, *Stone Butch Blues* nevertheless sustains an ongoing investigation into the limits of language's ability to properly articulate transgender experience. Writing the year before the publication of *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg describes hir pamphlet *Transgender Liberation* as an effort to "trace the historic rise of an oppression that, as yet, has no commonly agreed name" (5). Similarly, a young Jess observes that despite it being evident that her gender non-conformity was a problem, "no one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That's what made me afraid it was really bad" (7). For Feinberg, the absence of adequate language is not a side effect of oppression, but constitutive of it. This lack of a

coherent vocabulary for trans experience exists in tension with the assertion of intent I have identified as a distinctly trans mode.

In *Stone Butch Blues*, finding the right language is not simply a matter of coining more precise terms for identity categories, but in finding the words to capture distinctly trans ways of feeling and relating. The breakdown of Jess and Theresa's relationship is accelerated by their inability to find a shared language for Jess's gender identity and emotional life. Feinberg characterizes this lack of words as a distinctly "stone" problem. It is not, as Cvetkovich argues, that Jess's stone is constituted by a lack of feelings but by an inability to show them. Stone is usually defined by an absence -- that is, of what somebody will *not* do sexually. Feinberg suggests that this definition of stone through negative space alone is insufficient. While not pathologizing the identity itself, Feinberg suggests that stone is an emotional pattern constituted by the physical and sexual violence experienced by butch and transmasculine people. Jess's inability to speak revolves most acutely around not only naming her gender, but in verbalizing the trauma she experiences at the hands of the police.

When Jess reconciles with Frankie, they discuss Jess's lack of words for her experience, which she connects directly to this trauma, "there's things that happened to me because I'm a he-she that I've never talked about to a femme. I've never had the words." When Frankie reassures her that she does not need the words, Jess pushes back: "I do need words, Frankie. Sometimes I feel like I'm choking to death on what I'm feeling. I need to talk and I don't even know how" (301). This image of choking on words recurs throughout the text, echoing Jess's retching in the police station. Jess argues that finding appropriate language or, indeed, being able to make her experience explicit is a matter of almost physical urgency. She describes her feelings as "toxic goo" welling up inside her, seemingly borrowing the vocabulary of her industrial workplaces as a crude proxy for the kind of language she is scrabbling for. Further, she tells Frankie that the emotional vocabulary of femmes is insufficient: "Femmes always tried to teach me to talk about my feelings, but it was their words they used for their feelings. I needed my own words -- butch words to talk about butch feelings" (301). The novel, as I have argued, revels in the intuition and emotional intelligence of femmes. Here, however, Jess sharply delineates between appreciating this femme facility with emotions and the language she herself needs. Certainly, within Jess's working-class butch/femme framework is no coherent, shared "lesbian" language. The best Frankie can suggest is that butch words might sound "like thunder" or "yearning" -- a figurative approximation of a language that is still emergent.

While Jess does not fit neatly into existing categories, whether woman, man, butch, or transsexual, she does not want to simply "transcend categories". Her sharp resistance to Frankie's platitudes about not needing words mirrors her equal determination that simply "being neither" is an inadequate means of understanding herself. Instead, she seeks a more precise, sharply delineated language for her gender identity. Her arguments with Theresa about her identity wrangle with the multiple ways that Jess is interpolated by others, all of which prove insufficient:

"You're a woman!" Theresa shouted at breakfast...

"No, I'm not," I yelled back to her. "I'm a he-she. That's different."

> Theresa slapped the table in anger. "That's a terrible word. They call you that to hurt you."
>
> I leaned forward. "But I've listened. They don't call the Saturday-night butches he-shes. It means something. It's a way we're different. It doesn't just mean we're ... lesbians" (159).

Jess hesitates before the word "lesbian", a term more closely associated with the middle-class women's movement that Theresa is being incrementally drawn into than the working-class bar scene. Despite its pejorative origins, she is far more comfortable with "he-she" than lesbian because it more accurately delineates something legible about her gender expression to others, rather than referring only to sexual object choice. Just as an assertion of authorial intent is limited in scope by the investments of the reader, the novel acknowledges that finding the "right" language cannot be a purely solipsistic enterprise. Feinberg suggests that being hailed by others, whether accurately or not, is an inevitable component of identity formation. Indeed, it can even *precede* a more internal sense of gender variance. As a child lacking the language for what "is wrong" with her, Jess "only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: "Is that a boy or a girl" (7)?

The delicacy of this balance between language as a social phenomenon and as an assertion of individual intent is made even more apparent when Jess lives as a man. For Jess and the other butches who choose to hormonally transition, passing means a radical severing of community and of a certain kind of legibility in favor of another. While Jess transitions outside of the supervision of a gender clinic, her passing is still determined by the same imperative to construct a plausible history and disappear into her new life. Passing, as Eastwood and Snorton suggest, is a linguistic phenomenon, a reinscription. Jess's first experience of successfully passing happens at the barbers, when she is first called "sir". When she looks for work, she is now "a clean-cut young man" when "only a short time before I had been a monster" (187). Nevertheless, Jess experiences passing as a crushing loss of self: "As far as the world's concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me. No one really sees me or speaks to me or touches me" (231). Partially detransitioning grants Jess a history, but it also plunges her even further outside of language, to the extent that she is no longer interpolated by strangers at all:. "Before, strangers had raged at me for being a woman who crossed a forbidden boundary. Now they really didn't know what my sex was, and that was unimaginable, terrifying to them. Woman or man— the bedrock crumbled beneath their feet as I passed by" (244). Jess does not experience this state of being unnamable as liberating or dissident but as a different kind of alienation. While she is now more content with the alignment between her identity and her physical body, the problem of language remains unresolved.

The novel does not, however, end with Jess definitively finding the right language. While Feinberg settled on "transgender" as the most accurate way of describing her identity, the word does not appear once in the novel as a resolution to Jess's definitional struggles. What it does present, however, is the beginnings of a new kind of sociality in which her search for the right language and legibility can continue. Levine posits *Stone Butch Blues* as a counterexample to critical skepticism about narrative closure, arguing that "formally speaking, Stone Butch Blues is structured as both an anti-teleological narrative—a gender transition that is partially reversed—and one of the most classic teleological arcs—the struggle to find home" (399). Linguistically, too, the novel is a teleological

movement towards greater clarity, even if it does not fully arrive there. When living in Manhattan, Jess notices other visibly trans and gender non-conforming people, but quickly realizes how atomized they are, noting that they "only acknowledged each other with a furtive glance, fearful of calling attention to ourselves." Once again, Jess frames this alienation in terms of language and observes that "we didn't seem to have any of our own places to gather in community, to immerse ourselves in our own ways and our own languages" (270). It is here that the novel suggests the resolution to the problem of naming – that it is not Jess's problem to resolve alone, nor could it ever be. "*Our* own languages" cannot be generated by an individual assertion of intent, nor only by the violent interpolation of others.

Appropriately, the novel ends with a scene that is both explicitly political and sentimental. Jess stumbles across a rally for gay rights and makes a spontaneous decision to take to the stage and speak. She begins with the problem of naming, declaring that "I'm not a gay man… I'm a butch, a he-she. I don't know if the people who hate our guts call us that anymore. But that single epithet shaped my teenage years" (324). After years spent passing and living in isolation, Jess characterizes herself as having fallen out of a shared definitional language. In a speech that recalls a politer version of Sylvia Rivera's iconic 1973 address to the Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally, Jess characterizes trans experience as both isolated from and profoundly necessary to a queer political coalition: "I watch protests and rallies from across the street. And part of me feels so connected to you all, but I don't know if I'm welcome to join. There's lots of us who are on the outside and we don't want to be. We're getting busted and beaten up. We're dying out here. We need you—but you need us, too" (324). Just as with her childhood poetry recital, Jess's public expression of sincerity facilitates a rare moment of sympathy. She notices with awe that "everyone got very quiet as I spoke, and I knew they were listening; I knew they had heard me." Amongst the crowd, Jess picks out "a femme woman, about my age" who nods in recognition, her eye "warm with memories," and "an older drag queen slowly wav[ing] her hand back and forth over her head in silent testimony" (324). While Jess does not yet have the words, she is granted a startlingly large, receptive audience with whom she might find them. Though, as she notes, it does not "change night into day", Jess is nevertheless welcomed back into a newer iteration of the liberatory politics that had previously systematically excluded her.

The novel that is synonymous with bringing the concept of "transgender" to broader consciousness, thus, strangely enough, ends before its protagonist has even located the term to describe herself. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that the text that would inaugurate a contemporary trans literary canon concludes on the cusp of something new. As with all of the texts in this dissertation, *Stone Butch Blues* might best be considered an experiment in the possibilities of language's capacity for explicit representation. Yet while other texts have found themselves locked into aesthetic dead ends or frustrated by the explanatory limits of explicit representation, Feinberg ends with a joyous sense of hope and possibility. While Jess has not quite acquired "butch words for butch feelings", it is not implied that she cannot or will not, but that she simply has not *yet*. Rather than break down under the weight of linguistic ambiguity, the novel's unpretentious realism proves capacious enough to contain Jess's search for a more precise language alongside its more straightforwardly didactic moments.

Stone Butch Blues is a powerful corrective to the critical assumption that queer and trans literary form must necessarily be oblique, anti-narrative, and radically defamiliarizing. Its determined rejection of irony echoes trans studies' foundational critique of the use of the trans subject as a synecdoche for the fluidity and formlessness of the queer. However, the trans novel does put distinctly different kinds of pressure on explicit representation than other identities or orientations. The radical visibility of Mapplethorpe's sexual bodies, for example, is a source of potential voyeuristic violence when applied to the trans body. Feinberg negotiates the vulnerability and exposure inherent in the explicit trans text not by excising traumatic content but by playing with the relationship between author and text. Like Eastwood's suggestion that transgender identity is in some ways an assertion of authorial intention, Feinberg makes both explicit and implicit requests of her readers. The novel's unfashionable sentimentality and sincerity are a provocation to read earnestly, while the novel's didactic scenes of political education are an incitement to listen and learn. The paratextual apparatus of hir self-published edition wrests back control of the text from institutional authority, but makes unusually direct, even paranoid demands of its readers. The problem, of course, is the impossibility of ever truly managing this relationship, which the idiosyncrasies of the self-published edition make readily apparent. The novel relies on its (again, rather unfashionable) moral clarity and conviction, yet the fervent response of its readers suggests that it largely succeeds.

"Language Redacted in Original": Strategic Withholding and The Romance of Theory in *Confessions of the Fox*

Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* is an anomaly within this project, but a critically useful one. Whereas the fiction I have analyzed so far has exemplified different versions of middlebrow, *Confessions of the Fox* is a wryly self-aware experiment in contemporary modernism. While it contains the kernel of a contemporary trans narrative in its metafictional conceit of a manuscript edited by a disaffected trans academic, the bulk of the text takes place in a fantastical re-imagining of the eighteenth century. The novel nevertheless eschews many of the formal strategies that I have characterized as solutions to the problem of explicitly represented marginalized identities and liberated sexualities. If most of this dissertation has been concerned with texts that do something quite distinct from the aesthetic ideals implicit within contemporary queer critical frameworks, *Confessions of the Fox* serves here as an example of a text that is exemplarily queer. It approaches the matter of trans representation through the wielding of theory in a far more optimistic fashion than in, say, Jong and Rooney. Whereas for them, theory is something to be misunderstood, worried over, and deployed as social weaponry, the very metafictional structure of the novel is conditioned by the values of contemporary queer theory and politics. Like *Stone Butch Blues, Confessions of the Fox* takes up the assertion of authorial intention as a distinctly trans mode and a means of negotiating the potentially voyeuristic cisgender gaze. Yet, rather than solicit particular forms of reading, Rosenberg asserts the right to strategically withhold the trans and femme body from the reader's gaze. While unabashedly sexual, the novel nevertheless takes a distinctly measured approach to what it chooses to reveal.

The novel does, however, resonate with *Stone Butch Blues* in striking ways. They share the same anti-capitalist, anti-racist critique of the carceral state, though express it in rather different ways. Further, their representations of transmasculine experience both romanticize the pedagogical dimensions of the butch/femme romance. However, while it mirrors it in ways that seem too specific to be accidental, *Stone Butch Blues* does not appear in *Confessions of the Fox's* many direct citations of trans theory and literature. This ghostly legacy of *Stone Butch Blues* draws into sharp relief the disjuncture between Feinberg's sincerity and Rosenberg's postmodern reflexivity. While *Confessions of the Fox* self-consciously hails an audience of outsiders and rogues, in practice, its version of dissidence is almost impossible to extricate from the academic institutions it satirizes. Its ideal reader is steeped in theory and capable of taking critical pleasure in having that theoretical nous reflected back to them. In *Stone Butch Blues,* even the dissident elements of university life are exclusionary. The campus itself is a proscribed space for Jess and other working-class butches, and the radical political movements gaining traction are no exception. Despite his emphatic distaste for the contemporary neoliberal university, both Rosenberg and his academic protagonist Voth nevertheless voice their dissent from within the academy itself. This is, of course, partly the difference that 25 years makes. Being both a trans man and a tenured academic, let alone being welcomed on campus, was an unthinkable possibility for Feinberg or Jess. Nevertheless, for all its satire of the university's managerial excesses, *Confessions of the Fox* believes in the liberatory possibilities of theory, and its ultimate utopian vision is of an archive where queer scholarship can flourish outside of the demands of capital. The resulting novel is strangely fractured, in which its more recognizably explicit representation of its scholarly

protagonists' everyday experience is relegated to the footnotes, while a theoretically self-aware experiment in alternative history takes precedence in the main body of the text.

The novel is labyrinthine in structure and plot. The main body of the text is a seemingly hitherto undiscovered manuscript about Jack Sheppard, the eighteenth-century thief, escape artist, and folk hero immortalized in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. The manuscript suggests that the famously slight, effeminate Sheppard was, in fact, assigned female at birth and positions him within a racially diverse community of sex workers and mollies. Sheppard's romantic companion, Edgeworth Bess, is revealed to be one Bess Khan, the daughter of a Southeast Asian sailor. These deviations from the canonical Sheppard story are, by turns, reflective of the very real and oft-elided racial diversity of eighteenth-century London and sharply historically divergent. In a speculative effort to wrest the technology of transition from its violent origins, Jack undergoes amateur top-surgery by Bess' hand, and much of the plot concerns an effort to secure and protect a prototypical testosterone elixir created by mutineers. This body text is supplemented by the footnotes of Dr Voth, a beleaguered trans associate professor of English who discovers the manuscript in a library book sale. In an increasingly absurdist skewering of the contemporary corporate university, Voth at first concedes to editing and annotating the manuscript for pharmaceutical company-cum-publishing house P-Quad, which is interested in the manuscript's recipe for an organically derived testosterone. While initially scholarly (albeit with an emphasis on noting the manuscript's many and various synonyms for pussy), Voth's footnotes expand into a digressive meditation on his recent breakup and arguments with his publishers. As the reader may have already suspected, Voth quickly realizes that the manuscript is not, in fact, authentic. Littered with historical anachronisms and references to theory from the twentieth century, it is the work of a group of vigilante scholars who retroactively edit and "liberate" archival material. Realizing the implications of this discovery, Voth flees with the manuscript, seeks out the group, and finds himself in a dreamlike alternate time/space that offers a utopian vision of scholarship and camaraderie outside of the neoliberal university (and indeed reality itself).

As the novel's representation of a fugitive, dissident archive makes clear, the development of a coherent canon of trans fiction has been halting and belated, particularly when compared to explicitly gay and lesbian literature. Writing in 2014, Alexander Eastwood argues that there was still no meaningful trans literary archive and that what trans literature did exist was passed over by critics and rarely assigned in the literature departments. In her survey of contemporary trans fiction, Kay Gabriel reinforces this absence of a coherent trans literary scene, noting that while "a small, oppositional trans cultural scene developed in the last few decades of the twentieth century…it remained largely subterranean until the early 2010s." Rosenberg, for example, notes how challenging it was to sell *Confessions of the Fox* to editors, even in the 2010s. He states in an interview with *Kirkus* that "there is a huge thirst around transgender memoir and that is fine and great. I love that there are so many people out there representing their stories. But I would say 75 percent of the [editors my agent and I] talked to said, 'Well, if this person would just write a memoir, that's what we want" (Labrise). A small community of trans writers, including Imogen Binnie, Torrey Peters, Casey Plett, and Bryn Kelly, did begin to coalesce in the 2000s and 2010s, largely affiliated with the now-defunct Topside Press. Gabriel

describes this new wave of writing as "trans realism", both in its embrace of realism as a literary form and its commitment to depicting a quotidian version of trans life that eschews simplified narratives of individual catharsis. Gabriel argues that the genres of life-writing and cis-authored "gender novels" were "basically conservative" in that "they manipulate sentiment to shore up life as it's currently lived, where transition is rare and gender works out its social force in powerful but highly limited ways on some strange people over there." Rather than these "sympathetic renditions of challenging lives", new novels by trans authors traced the "complicated, ambivalent, sometimes shitty, and constantly shifting patterns of thought and behavior that people take on when they live how we do."

Confessions of the Fox is an atypical kind of contemporary trans novel to be the first published by a major house, or at least decidedly different in its emphases from the work associated with Topside Press. I am cautious of placing too much emphasis on trans "firsts," bearing in mind Morgan M. Page's argument that this preoccupation puts trans people in a constant state of being discovered. Citing various sources calling either *Confessions of the Fox,* Torrey Peters' *Detransition Baby,* or any number of other new fiction the "first trans novel", Page suggests that we resist this obsession with trans novelty in favor of emphasizing history and lineage. Nevertheless, *Confessions of the Fox* directly thematizes the conditions of possibility in which the contemporary trans novel exists at all. In a strange, knotty piece of logic, Jack's story frequently depicts a richer, more historically "accurate" London than we are used to seeing in the archive or historical fiction, yet this accuracy is the product of the document's very inauthenticity. Locating explicitly trans literature in history can only be the product of fabrication and fantasy. The very impossibility of Jack's story foregrounds the historical novelty of writing by, about, and for trans people.

The novel is also acutely aware of the "paradox of visibility" that accompanies the growth of a contemporary canon of trans representation. Like Feinberg, Rosenberg uses the assertion of authorial intent to manage the vulnerability of disclosure. *Confessions of the Fox* attempts, however impossibly, to simulate a textual space for the vulnerable act of intimate disclosure while simultaneously fending off its reader's potential voyeuristic fascination with the trans body. The novel asks its readers – and most specifically its cisgender readers – to abdicate their authority over the text and to allow the novel to withhold details of its characters' bodies. Like Feinberg, the novel asks that we rehabilitate a seemingly old-fashioned or critically naïve understanding of the relationship between author and text and re-privilege a version of authorial intention predicated on the right to disclose or withhold information. The novel suggests that an insistence on *privacy* might be as radical a literary maneuver as the far more graphic accounts of sexuality that characterize the texts I have discussed in previous chapters. The novel is far from sexless – indeed, it is unabashedly sexual – but its negotiation of the erotics of the trans body makes a sharp distinction between a confession given and taken. It pointedly obscures the body of its eighteenth-century protagonist, a fictionalized version of the famous rogue Jack Sheppard who is certainly trans and possibly intersex, while allowing the trans narrator of its contemporary frame narrative to far more graphically insist on the desirability of his body.

Even more overtly than *Stone Butch Blues, Confessions of the Fox* is preoccupied with *how* it is being read. It thematizes both the impossibility and necessity of soliciting "good" reading. The novel

reasserts an authorial imperative to determine the degree to which it withholds and discloses that is (however impossibly) predicated on who its audience is. This play with degrees of disclosure centers most notably on the novel's sexually explicit content and, more specifically, the representation of trans and intersex genitalia. In an interview with *The Lifted Brow*, Rosenberg shares that,

> I didn't ever want to show Jack's genitalia—and even more importantly to me, perhaps, I didn't want to ever show any of the femme characters' genitalia or bodies more broadly. That was something I wasn't willing to negotiate on. But then, on the topic of trans bodies, I also felt that to some extent, the prohibition on certain kinds of descriptiveness around genitalia was coming (for me at least) from a fear about mainstream readers' spectacularizing gaze. And while I didn't want to pander to that gaze, I also wanted to write for our people, and to shed some of my fears a bit in order to communicate intimately with readers who I wanted to be able to write for. So with Voth, the footnote character, I tried to break or push back at my own self-censorship. This is a character that wants to talk about his genitalia, and I wanted to let him do that (Fitzpatrick and Maynard).

Pragmatically, though, the novel cannot simultaneously protect the bodies of trans characters from the "spectacularizing" gaze of a mainstream reading public *and* speak frankly and privately with a smaller, sympathetic audience. The novel uses its metafictional frame narrative to simulate these shifts in audience and intimacy, yet this gesture proves impossible to sustain even within the world of the novel.

The novel is bookended by Voth hailing a particular kind of "good reader" as his co-conspirator. In the foreword, Voth explains why he has absconded with the manuscript: "I took the manuscript because I could not help but take it once I realized it was trying to communicate something. Something just for us. If you are reading this, then you know who I mean. And you're like: *Don't say too much! What if this publication falls into the wrong hands?* Don't worry. Even if I were saying – *hypothetically speaking* – that this is a code, they will never be able to read it. There are some things you can see only through tears" (xiv). The novel ends as it begins with a similar suggestion that particular kinds of knowledge are accessible only to the right readers: "Dear Reader – if you are you – the one I edited this for, the one I stole this for – and if you cry a certain kind of tears – the ones I told you about – you will find your way to us" (316). In the absence of any kind of guarantee that the audience will be a sympathetic one, the novel nevertheless addresses its readers as if they are. While this "us" is not specified here, it is evident that it at least encompasses its trans readers and, more likely, something akin to the wider community of "rogues" at the novel's heart. In addressing them as if they already are, the novel extends an invitation to those who are ostensibly outside of this intimate community to nevertheless be a "good reader". However, they are confronted with the more disturbing possibility that the novel is not for them. That is, even if they have access to the text, they will not be able to properly understand it.

In this invocation of a readership who "cry a certain kind of tears", Rosenberg evokes a literary version of "t4t" intimacy. Cameron Awkward-Rich and Hil Malatino's defines "t4t" as "a concept and practice [which] organizes some of the most salient features of trans life and culture/knowledge

production." (1-2) Awkward-Rich and Malatino argue that the term names something far more expansive than romantic or sexual relationships between trans people, but encompasses "trans separatist social forms, trans x trans erotics, trans practices of mutual aid and emotional support". (2) It is also, they argue, a particular mode of literary production, consumption, and distribution characterized by the work of Topside Press, which sought to publish work by trans writers for trans readers. *Confessions of the Fox* exceeds the boundaries of these micro-literary landscapes, given its publication by a subsidiary of Random House. Nevertheless, the spaces of imagined privacy and the explicit hailing of collective "us" evoke a t4t sensibility. Amanda Armstrong-Price has characterized Torrey Peters' fiction as being written "as if the TERFS aren't watching", evoking a similar notion of imagined privacy between trans reader and writer. Even if they *are* watching, it is the "as if" that is more significant.

The novel's pretense of simulating readerly, "t4t" intimacy is heightened by the intermittent presence in the footnotes of the hectoring voice of the novel's primary villain, Sullivan, an editor from P-Quad. As Voth wavers between cooperation and resistance, his footnotes are modulated by whether he believes they are being read by Sullivan. Before P-Quad's involvement and while "on strike" over the terms of his agreement, Voth's footnotes enter a far more intimate register. In Sullivan's absence, he remarks on how good it is "to be just *you and me again.*" (166) Even if we suspend disbelief about the creation of a private exchange between Voth and his readers, the novel undercuts the very possibility. Sullivan and P-Quad have access to everything and take voyeuristic pleasure in accessing Voth's franker commentary on his personal life:

> "SULLIVAN: HI! ME AGAIN! JUST WANTED TO PEEK IN TO LET YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I'VE BEEN ENJOYING YOUR "CONFESSIONS"! CONFESSIONS ON TOP OF CONFESSIONS! GREAT TWIST![14]
>
> Me: How in the –
>
> SULLIVAN: OF COURSE YOU KNOW THAT P-QUAD'S SISTER COMPANY, MILITIA.EDU, HAS A PRIVATE CONTRACT WITH YOUR UNIVERSITY'S SERVER, AND THUS YOUR CLOUD STORAGE IS THE PROPERTY OF –
>
> Me: You read *everything*? And didn't say anything?" (256)

The gesture of imagining that the novel will only be read by "us" co-exists with an acknowledgment that there can be no such guaranteed intimacy in a society of surveillance and prurient fascination with trans bodies. The novel's treatment of trans bodies – both in the body and frame narratives – serves then as an imperfect attempt at managing levels of disclosure in a compromised environment.

One of the earliest clues that the manuscript was shaped by contemporary hands is its refusal to provide Jack's dead name. Lest the reader see it as Voth's own editorial intervention, a footnote clarifies that "the excision of what appears to be Jack's given name (P------) is original to the text"

[14] In a satire of corporate culture, Sullivan's describes his use of all-caps as a "leadership technique."

(16). This early hint sets the tone for the rest of the novel's resistance to the tropes of transition narratives. In refusing Jack's deadname, the novel indicates its unwillingness to reproduce a narrative model that dramatizes the "before and after". Similarly, the novel refuses, at least in Jack's case, to indulge in voyeuristic fascination with his genitalia. Jack's arousal is described figuratively as "wave after wave of tumult crash[ing] against [his] breeches", to which Voth notes "remarkable that Jack's genitalia are not described in detail. Unlike almost any other sexological or protosexological document from the period (and after), which exfoliate layer after layer of prurient fantasies about the sex organs (e.g., George Arnaud de Ronsil, *A Dissertation on Hermaphrodites* [1750], or, really, just about any colonial "first contact" narratives – as, for example, John Marten, *A Treatise on Venereal Disease* [1711], which is less about treating venereal disease and quite a lot of speculation about genitalia in Guinea…)" (92). The novel presents *not* telling as an act that is as agential and as significant as telling, using the footnotes as an explanatory bolster that ensures we "see" this absence as deliberate.

This thematization of absence is most striking in the novel's negotiation of Jack's encounter with a "protosexological" encyclopedia entry about "chimeras", defined by Voth as a term that encompassed "hermaphrodism, heteroclitism, clitoramegaly, an abundance of masculine passions in a cis-woman, etc." (132) Bess describes the entry as "one of the only scientific treatments of chimeras to date", which posits that chimeras are "not natural, but they're not Monsters either. They're just humans with certain Changes. Differences" (131). The presence of the encyclopedia is a somewhat overdetermined means of flagging the incorporation of sexuality into an emergent discourse of empiricism and scientific neutrality. Bess appears to have been convinced by the apparent neutrality of its being "just a survey" (131). For Jack, however, the text is a source of profound discomfort, namely its illustration of "a quite proximate view of *a certain area* of a human Chimera" (134). Jack is unsettled by the text's taxonomization of what he had previously conceptualized as "his something". Ironically, in "forcing a formulation on him", the illustration renders his own body "unaccountable and unfamiliar" (134). Rather than clarifying his sense of self, finding himself pinned down by medical discourse opens a dissociative gap between his self-concept and the book's "cruel diagnoses and classifications" (134). The novel, however, pointedly refuses to show us the illustration that Jack sees, only his response to it. In a refusal to reproduce this "spectacularizing gaze", the manuscript redacts the illustration and, in a direct citation of *Tristam Shandy*, replaces it with a marbled page. When Voth discovers that the novel is a contemporary fabrication, he conjectures that the editorial decision was a homage to Saidiya Hartman's refusal to reproduce violent scenes from the archive, "in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes reiterated" (261). This intervention, whether it replaces a "real" page in the manuscript or not, serves as a marker for the act of withholding.

Voth's exertion of editorial control is challenged by Sullivan, who, in his role as a cipher for neoliberal surveillance, refuses to believe that the illustration has not been reproduced in the manuscript. While Voth meets his demands for the missing page with a cool "looks like original author inserted abstract page instead" (134), this apparent absence becomes weaponized when Sullivan withholds Voth's salary until the page is produced. In one of the more broadly comic moments in the novel, Voth confesses to having pacified Sullivan with an image of a slug, "salted, fatted and then left to perish", photoshopped to appear "quite like" an "authentic eighteenth-century manuscript page"

(272). Sullivan is placated, indeed, "he motherfucking love[s] it" (272). Voth calls the deception "my necessary lies", a phrase which echoes Snorton's characterization of passing as a means of actively avoiding harm. While the manuscript's elisions and demurrals are a quiet but firm assertion of a right not to tell, Voth's response to Sullivan's hunger for the graphic representation of trans bodies suggests that outright fabrication is an equally valid response. Like the mid-century gender clinic patients who massaged their life stories to align with medical orthodoxy to gain access to the treatment they desired, the novel suggests that dissembling is a situationally valid narrative strategy. If visibility brings with it the threat of physical danger or of being made a spectacle, the decision of whether to disclose or withhold becomes an exercise in risk assessment.

As well as modelling the withholding of explicit information, the novel also expands on the conditions under which intimate disclosure *can* be possible. Like *Stone Butch Blues, Confessions of the Fox* suggests that intimate butch/femme relationships serve as a particularly privileged, safe container for emotional pedagogy and the sharing of difficult truths. As in *Stone Butch Blues,* the novel is preoccupied with the role that femme lovers play as teachers and agents of radicalization. Rosenberg concedes that the novel is partly an act of "femme worship" and, certainly, Jack's political education becomes a series of lessons in how to listen to femmes and when to cede his authority. (Wayne) For example, in response to his clumsy eagerness to single-handedly right the racial discrimination Bess experiences, she requests that he defer to her judgment and not "call Attention to what [he doesn't] understand" (54). While she does selectively elaborate on her personal history, her telling him is framed as conditional and predicated on the establishment of trust between them. The novel makes this even more explicit and, in one of its most didactic moments, has Jack recognize and meticulously lay out the terms on which Jess both discloses to and teaches him:

> Jack could see how many steps ahead of him she was. She anticipat'd his reactions to her – knew them before he did. She did this, he presumed, because his reactions occupied a spectrum she knew from other pale Anglos. She could anticipate what Nonsense was about to come out of his mouth and when. And for whatever reason she had now deign'd to clarify to him the extent of his false presumptions. This Conceding to explain things was a kind of mercy. An opening she was offering (165).

As if this were not direct enough, Voth also participates in this deference to femme perceptiveness. His loquacious editorial voice is uncharacteristically silent when Bess shares a backstory dense with obscure historical references to her past as a member of the Fen Tigers, a guerrilla group that resisted the draining of the Eastern English Fens in the 1600s. Instead of explicating, he closes the chapter with a solitary footnote: "Reader, please forgive the radio silence. I'm not in the habit of interrupting women when they are speaking" (198).

The novel's emphasis on the strategic withholding does not, however, mean that it is demure about sex. Reviewer Sophia Magnone describes the novel as an "ardent paean to pussy", while Izabella Scott simply declares it "hot as fuck". For all its metafictional, metacritical experimentation, *Confessions of the Fox* is equally preoccupied with the sensory, embodied pleasures of queer sex. More interestingly for this project, it suggests that the explicitness (or indeed, the eroticism) of literary sex is not strictly

indexed to anatomical naming and precision. Instead, we see Jack's body outlined through the negative space around it. When Bess first sees his genitals, she gasps "*Yes",* which the manuscript describes as "the *yes* (in that inimitable fashion particular to women of a certain predilection), referr'd, of course, to what *was* and *was not* there" (109). Jack's body is rendered not with anatomical detail, but by Bess's erotic response to it. She describes Jack's genitals as "a wonderful, fetching *Something*", before she "brought her hand down between them and drew her fingers across the front of it, tracing his outline with a Fingertip." (109) Here, again, "the thing between Jack's legs" is constituted by what Bess *does* to it rather than what it is. The text relies on a deictic "it" as a placeholder and instead foregrounds the verbs, "drawing, tracing". The scene thus asserts that descriptions of action, interaction, and response alone can constitute an explicit, erotic scene, without any genital specificity. As Rosenberg notes, it is not just the graphic detail of Jack's body that is withheld from us, but also Bess's. This refusal to share Bess's body is deliberately foregrounded through visible redactions in the text: "Jack knelt --- Her breasts were ---, her nipples ---." If this were not evidence enough of the novel's self-conscious withholding, Voth adds a footnote remarking that, "in what can only be described as gallantry, the speaker declines to showcase Bess's body for the reader. Incidentally a much better boyfriend than I ever was" (109). Indeed, before realizing that the text is a fabrication, Voth takes its emphasis on privacy as evidence of its authenticity: "It is almost certainly the case that if there were a hack job this section would include a voyeuristic depiction of Jack's genitalia. I consider this elegant declining-to-describe to be strong evidence of the document's authenticity" (109).

Voth does not, however, consider this "declining-to-describe" to be intrinsic or inevitable to *all* representations of trans bodies. He adds that, "of course, personally, I'm more than happy to go on at length about my prodigious genitalia. But there's a difference between a confession one wants to give, and one that is taken" (109). There is a distinction here not only between the historical and the contemporary, but also between the third-person narration of the body text and the first person of the footnotes. Voth's somewhat braggadocious account of his sexual prowess in the first person, if only rhetorically, models a version of explicit speech that is freely shared rather than forcefully extracted:

> A lot of women are relieved not to have to deal with a bio-cock, and to be honest, what I have going on – it – it intrigues them. It intrigues them *libidinally,* let's say. And I feel compelled to reflect here on the fact that what I have going on was outsized even before the T, so now it's just – well, I hope you don't think I'm an asshole for mentioning it. Or you know what, think I'm an asshole I don't care... It turns out there's an entire population of women who really hunger for some mythic genital sublime shit. I mean, you would be surprised how many women like getting fucked by an unclassifiable monster. [Relax: I'm reclaiming the term. I *like* it. I mean, when uttered in certain contexts out of certain mouths. Must I justify everything?] Anyway, who could deny me glorying in this turn of events just a little bit? *Didn't I pay the price for this* (76)?

Whereas Jack is haunted by the label of monstrosity in the pages of the cyclopedia, Voth speaks knowingly from a contemporary subject position influenced by Susan Stryker's (unnamed, but clearly evoked) reclamation of trans monstrosity as a source of power and rage. Again, this level of disclosure

is modulated by both intentionality and audience. Voth's confessions here precede the involvement of P-Quad in the manuscript and exist within the imagined intimacy of a conversation with the "right" readers. The novel's approach to explicit speech about the sexual trans body is ultimately more flexible and open to lust than its censoring of Jack and Bess's bodies alone would suggest. Rather, representing the sexual trans body is responsive to the contingencies and particularities of circumstance and audience.

Further, watching itself is not always and necessarily a violent act. The description of Jack watching Jess "ride" a rocking horse he brings her is as intense and frank an erotic exchange as any in the novel, despite Jack's not "physically" participating: "She cross'd the room, pulled up the red silk to spread her legs open above the horse, settled her quim against the oiled wood, and rocked back and forth – this latter so slowly – while holding his gaze. A firework exploded inside him as he watched the meeting point of her notch against the wood, the Resin growing soaked and tart. He wanted to fall to his knees and lick the Wet from the darkened grain" (107). For Jack, the scene is "tender and deprav'd at once", not least because the intimacy between them is heightened, rather than diminished, by its mediation through the figure of the rocking horse. Part of the novel's demurral in showing us Jack and Bess's body is bound up in its resistance to normative sexual scripts that only prioritize genital activity. Jack's observing Bess's pleasure – meeting her gaze, reveling in the sensory details of the scene – is rendered as its own kind of sexual agency. Voth is also inserted into the scene as an observer once removed, who is no less aroused by what he sees. He Voth interjects the scene with a footnote that makes his own erotic response unmistakable: "I – I – I hate to interrupt, especially when I'm about to (- ahem – never mind)" (107). It is not voyeurism in and of itself that is the problem – indeed, the novel establishes a particular kind of watching as profoundly erotic. Rather, it makes a distinction between an invitation to share in an erotic scene that is given and a forcibly extracted pornographic obsession that is taken.

Confessions of the Fox's re-privileging of a version of authorial intent is an attempt to manage a voyeuristic or presumptive readerly gaze, but also places it in an unusual relationship with its critics. If, as Eastwood suggests, a reader attuned to trans sensibilities must be willing to forfeit their expectation of authority over the text, then the role of the critic of trans fiction may no longer be that of a "producer of knowledge" (593). Yet while the novel suggests we become comfortable with forfeiting a certain amount of readerly authority, this abdication seems to extend beyond the novel's treatment of trans bodies and into its relationship with the act of interpretation itself. The narrative structure of the footnoted manuscript necessitates a certain dependency on a denotative, explanatory mode, and though the novel models the act of literary criticism itself, the resulting "auto-interpretation" renders it curiously resistant to traditional critical reading. If a critically minded reader suspects, for example, that the manuscript's refusal to reproduce the image of a "medical chimera" might be a nod to Sadiya Hartman's theory of the archive, she will eventually discover that the novel tells us that this is precisely what it is doing and has dutifully included the appropriate citation in a later footnote. The reader's observation still stands, but the explanation within the text itself effectively prevents the critic from being able to lay any kind of claim to it. The novel instead threatens to reduce its critics to mere transcribers of what the novel is already telling us it is doing. Whatever the novel's

debt to the narrative structure of *Pale Fire,* Voth is no Charles Kinbote. While he fails to recognize that the text is fabricated for far longer than might be plausible, his critical commentary on the manuscript is never substantively undermined. After all, Voth cites the same texts as the novel's bibliography, which is accompanied by an author's note that clearly marks it as Rosenberg's own work rather than a deliberate extension of the novel's metanarrative.

Moreover, the novel seems to function as a direct extension of Rosenberg's critical work. Specifically, the novel reads as a fictional elaboration on his 2015 essay on Sheppard's life and its relationship to the political history of testosterone, "Trans/War Boy/Gender: The Primitive Accumulation of T". Rosenberg locates in shifting attitudes towards the criminal body in the eighteenth century the beginning of the commodification of the endocrine system itself and testosterone's transformation into a "deracinated object of exchange". This confluence of factors results in the beginnings of what Rosenberg calls the "gendocrine system" – the naturalization of the innate connection between gender and endocrinology. "For 'testosterone' to emerge into history," Rosenberg argues, "the foundations for the conception of bodily anatomy as raw material had first to be laid" (Trans/War Boy/Gender). He locates this foundation in eighteenth-century legislation, which rendered the bodies of executed prisoners property of the state and subject to dissection. Rosenberg draws a straight line between these early experiments and those of Leo Stanley, a doctor at San Quentin prison whose early twentieth-century experiments attempted to extract the raw material of testosterone quite literally from incarcerated men. Sheppard emerges as a figure of resistance within this historical narrative, both for his dissident criminality and the folk tale of his body being rescued from dissection by a mob of supporters after his execution.

The essay's sometimes historical, sometimes associative logic pushes at the bounds of what a scholarly essay (even one as relatively informal as this one) can responsibly claim. Rosenberg emphasizes Sheppard's erotic appeal for the eighteenth-century public and characterizes him as a "sexy lithe being who can slither through the narrowest of cracks" (Trans/War Boy/Gender). Yet the emphasis on his slightness, which Rosenberg cites in later interviews as the inspiration for making Jack transgender in the novel, never edges into outright assertion that Jack is anything other than cisgender. Rosenberg does make figurative reference to the possibility of Jack's transness, claiming that, "we'd love to pursue further the question of seduction and recruitment to rebel positionalities – not to mention the transgendering of dainty Jack by the 'mannish' puppeteer, Bess in the process – but this is a thread too far for now" (Trans/War Boy/Gender). If Jack's gender is a "thread too far" for a scholarly essay, Rosenberg pointedly clears a space for the work that the novel will do. Whether conceived of and composed before or after the essay, the novel becomes a means of pursuing material too speculative and too impossible for non-fiction.

In the essay, Rosenberg is quite clear about the at times associative rather than strictly causal relationship between the historical phenomena he analyses:

> Please don't take from this some new historicist nonsense that contemporary forms of transgender resistance owe their particular configuration to the Enlightenment past. The point here is quite the opposite: only through the lens of the political present does the past take on

> the dimensions that it does, and begin to inform us about itself in ways previously uncomprehended (Trans/War Boy/Gender).

The novel provides the imaginative space to make far more literal connections between Jack's transness, revolutionary politics, and the commodification of the endocrine system itself, which the essay cannot and will not do. The somewhat parenthetical role of Sheppard in the essay is resolved in the novel, as Rosenberg can use a trans reimagining of Sheppard to make tangible the connection between the state's claims over the criminal body, the commodification of the endocrine system, and transmasculinity. In arguing that these connections can *only* be made with the benefit of hindsight, the essay also prefigures the novel's revelation that the manuscript could never be an authentic one and that it must necessarily be the product of contemporary hands. The novel, in effect, becomes a meditation on the conditions of possibility for a particular kind of explicit speech about trans lives and bodies.

Confessions of the Fox abandons the near-impossible project of a naturalistic, historically accurate account of gender variance in the eighteenth century and instead imagines a speculative alternate history. It relocates the historical origins of the technologies of transition as the product of queer, dissident knowledge, or at the very least, resistant to the emergent "gendocrine" system. Characteristically, Voth makes this connection explicit in the footnotes, arguing that "there is the medical history that purports to linearity (a kind of *endochronology* – a so-called progress narrative of the alignment of sex hormones and subjectivity if you will). And then there is *our* history – fragmented and fugitive" (301). In the foreword, Voth suggests that the manuscript's significance can be distilled into a single phrase: "*the body is transformed by love*" (xii). While this transformation is often one of figuratively reinscribing the body's meaning, in the case of Jack's top surgery and the production of testosterone, this maxim is made quite literal. Evans, a client of Bess' and a surgeon researching "chimeras", offers Jack a rudimentary mastectomy. However, when Evans faints at the sight of blood, Bess tentatively reveals that while he had "*study'd* it quite a bit", he had never actually performed this operation before. Jack protests that she too had studied the operation and "meant by this that Evans was about as qualified to slice him open as was any untrained person – which was to say, *not at all*. But Bess took this to mean something else" (143). In another of the novel's acts of preternatural femme brilliance, Bess consults the Evans' notes and successfully performs the surgery herself. Jack, plied with alcohol, eroticizes the bodily intimacy of surgery and "delirious and babbling, he told Bess to lick the Blood up, like a cat. He wanted his Proximity to her, wanted her spit inside him, sewed up inside him, like a watery organ" (144). The novel presents a wildly anachronistic fantasy whereby even the physical technologies of transition can be de-medicalized and relocated within the erotics of the butch/femme erotic dynamic.

The novel is self-aware enough about the profoundly fantastical nature of its associative, anachronistic relationship to history. In his footnote on the surgery scene, Voth refers back to an early message to Sullivan, which argued, via Derrida, that "the archive is less a record of what has been said, and more an ongoing problem of what cannot be. What is forgotten, repressed, disallowed" (84). Yet Voth is unable to resist the promise of a truly "accurate" historical document that gives voice to the marginalized. On discovering that the Bess of this telling is a "lascar", he notes that "not a single

Sheppard text describes Bess as South Asian. Not one. So, then, between this characterization and that of Jack's assigned sex, what we have here is either the most or the least authentic Sheppard document in existence" (27). As he reads on, Voth becomes more convinced of the manuscript's authenticity: "Given that London was not by any means a white city in the eighteenth century… we have to take the unquestioned nature of Bess's characterization as white as less a reflection of "actual" history than as the occlusion of it. The departure from this *occluding whiteness* – this whiteness that occludes even the possibility of history itself – in the text at hand thus inclines me to regard this document as potentially more accurate to the period and its personages than either Gay's or Brecht's renderings" (31). The knottiness of Voth's approach to "authenticity" is particularly apparent here. While claiming that the truth of the archive is constituted by its gaps and the kinds of speech it renders impossible, he also insists that the manuscript's inclusion of these very occluded voices is proof that it is real. The novel imagines a version of representation and explicit speech that is simultaneously more and less historically accurate than existing archival records – one in which the very impossibility of a particular kind of speech becomes a marker of its authenticity.

Voth *wants* the manuscript to be real, confessing that "[his] own attachment to the text clouded [his] ability to recognize the glaring obviousness of this collective authorship earlier" (259). This yearning for an impossible kind of representation allows him to both contradict his purported beliefs about how the archive operates and to overlook the manuscript's evident inauthenticity. Characteristically, he says as much in a footnote, arguing that "caught up in the manuscript, I forgot a central tenet of decolonial theories of the archive – its critique of our fetish for archival truths" (259). Stylistically, the manuscript is certainly not a convincing forgery. It borrows the vocabulary, as well as the erratic capitalizations and italicizations of eighteenth-century prose, but these gestures are inconsistently applied and function as more of a stylistic overlay on the structural bones of a contemporary novel. This, and the novel's foregrounding of the problem of authenticity, guide the reader to recognize that, even in the story world, this manuscript is simply too good to be true.

Yet this sensation of being caught up and *wanting* to believe is important. In his effort to map a distinctly trans mode of reading, Eastwood argues that he is "not suggesting that texts from the past are waiting around to be saved from an abyss of unintelligibility—to be "read," quite literally, as trans. Rather, I am dwelling on the affective reality that marginalized readers crave historical representations of themselves" (Eastwood 591). This desire to see oneself in the archive is most famously outlined in Heather Love's account of the irresistible lure of the backward glance towards a queer past. For Love, if we locate recognizably queer figures in the past, it is only through the benefit of hindsight: "Contemporary critics approach these figures from the past with a sense of inevitability of their progress toward us… Their relation to this future remains utterly tenuous, however. If their trajectory to a queer future seems inevitable, this appearance is perhaps best explained by the fact that *we are that future.* Our existence in the present depends on being able to imagine these figures reaching out to us" (40). The novel, however, takes the inevitable presentism that Love identifies in this process of recognition and endorses rather than cautions against it. It effectively backforms a historical queer text that *is* impossibly conscious of the future towards which it is tending.

The rogue archivists reconstitute raw material of history through the lens of their contemporary political and theoretical investments. As Voth describes it, "their central principle was to take their fidelity to certain theoretical texts out of the classroom and into the streets. Well, not the streets actually, but the archives" (261). Unable to locate the right kind of representation in the archives or revisiting the depressing or traumatic queer past (as Love argues we do), the archivists write something "better" instead. Rather than remove existing texts from the archive, they are "simply *improved on*" (261). Voth describes it as a work of "plitho-hypomnesis" or collective diary-keeping and argues that it is "the only explanation for the many generic irregularities and impossible references that populate the text. And it makes this manuscript not only the most valuable Sheppard document ever discovered, but something far in excess of that. Something evasive, gnomic and irreplaceable. The diary of a trace" (260). The manuscript mirrors the work that the novel itself is doing for Rosenberg, in allowing him to pursue the scholarly fantasy that Jack Sheppard might be trans in a way that is not beholden to the rigors of historical proof. If the archive is fundamentally compromised, Rosenberg suggests, the alternative of sheer fantasy and speculation is an equally valid means of accessing a version of queer truth.

However, this rewriting of history exemplifies the idealization of deviance that Kadji Amin identifies as a critical problem for contemporary queer scholarship. For Amin, queer studies locates value in "politically potent outsiderhood, whereby our sex, because outlawed, is hotter; our love, because uninstitutionalized, is truer; our families, because freely chosen, are uniquely supportive and antihierarchical; our political movements, because unbound by narrow social identities, are coalitional and capable of fighting oppression on all fronts. In short, because we are forced to invent relations outside of tired old blueprints, our socialities are not only better, more authentic, and more pleasurable; they also actualize real-life alternatives to existing relations of oppression" (6). The problem is that our objects consistently fail to behave in the ways that we want them to. If queer scholarship is predicated on the belief that theory lags behind culture, Amin argues, "what happens when culture fails the expectations with which theory approaches it" (6-7)? *Confessions of the Fox* resolves this problem by building culture outward from theory. Rather than attempting to locate a perfectly queer dissident object in the past, the novel simply becomes one and thus can never fail to live up to contemporary expectations. Its protagonists are thieves, sex workers, and anticolonial dissidents who, unlike Amin's own subject Jean Genet, retain their reputation as exemplary rogues when held up to scrutiny. Indeed, in the figure of Bess, the novel gives us an avid reader of theory who has impossible access to texts written hundreds of years after their deaths. The novel effectively sidesteps Amin's central problematic by rendering the archive a malleable, perpetually updating reflection of contemporary theoretical investments. Whereas Feinberg suggests that the novel is a tool to write "the kind of gender theory that we all live," Rosenberg flips the proposition and presents theory as actively determining the shape of its characters' lives.

In light of the novel's sincere investments in theory, I want to return to the question of how the novel characterizes its ideal reader. Halfway through the novel, Voth radically restricts the scope of the more nebulous "us" that he is stealing the manuscript for. Whereas this prior version of "us"

might plausibly encompass trans people and (perhaps) their allies, Voth's second definition is far narrower:

> I am not breaking this shit down for some manager of a private testing corporation. I'm honestly – quite honestly, if you want to know the truth – not even going to do it for those queers from "nice" families. You know, the ones with supportive, rolling-in-the-dough, loving parents chauffeuring them to the mall to fulfil whatever sartorial needs they have, etc.! I mean, good for these people, obviously. But then: Where are my people? Am I the only one who's been puked up by the bowels of history? On the very good chance that the answer is *no,* I'm editing this for *us* – those of us who've been dropped from some moonless sky to wander the world. Those of us who have to *guess* – wrongly, over and over (until we get it right? Please god) – what a *"home"* might feel like. So forget the held ones for a second, they're doing just fine (166).

The "us' that I previously characterized as a community of sympathetic readers, that definition is now radically tightened and explicitly classed. Voth seems to align his intended audience with Jack's gang of rogues, be they queer, people of color, sex workers, or criminals. However, in practice, the novel's heroes are perhaps less its queer eighteenth-century rogues than the scholars who have effectively invented them.

That is, the kind of subcultural knowledge necessary to "get" the novel is inescapably that of the elite academic institution, rather than queer rogues lacking "nice families". Its satire of neoliberal academia and indeed the very premise of the novel as an annotated manuscript is predicated on a fluency with not only theory itself but the material conditions of knowledge production in contemporary academia. As Matt Brim argues, queer studies has enabled its scholars to imagine themselves as disruptors of these conditions: "Though higher education may present us with the neoliberal problem of queer radical possibility being incorporated and administered, we have, by making institutional management systems visible objects of critique, allowed ourselves to continue to imagine that a defining feature of the field of Queer Studies is its impulse to fuck up the academy. Admittedly ensconced, we can all the more dramatically position ourselves as subversives, thieves, vandals, committed to egalitarianism" (9). This final definition might as well be a description of the way that *Confessions of the Fox* imagines its "archivists." The problem, Brim argues, is that Queer Studies reproduces elite hierarchies more than it subverts them from within: "The field of Queer Studies as an academic formation has been and is still defined and propelled by the immense resources of precisely those institutions of higher education that most steadfastly refuse to serve representative numbers of poor students and to hire faculty without high-status academic pedigrees" (9). The novel's collapsing of archival vandalism at elite institutions and the lives of a queer criminal underclass into a shared vision of roguish dissidence ultimately feels disingenuous.

Confessions of the Fox does satirize theoretical discourse and the institution of the university, as when Sullivan bowdlerizes Derrida in an attempt to persuade Voth to work with P-Quad. However, its utopian vision of a de-institutionalized community of queer scholars demonstrates a real faith in the capacity for theory to liberate and subvert. Voth characterizes this community as outside of time,

space, and language. He is now "living at a different timescale" and "barely [has] the language to describe" the work of the "archivists" (266-267). "Actually, like I said, they don't use the word 'archives' here," he notes. Instead, "the closest translation for archives is: 'stretches.' By which they mean stretches of time, but also stretches of space. And they don't just mean space as a place; they mean space as a practice: the way we make space in our own bodies" (267). His description of the Stretches fittingly suggests that it defies the laws of physics and architecture. It is a "colossal library of chitin, spiderweb and glass", so large that Voth has "never seen its inner edges" (267). Compared to the ending of *Stone Butch Blues,* in which Jess re-finds community in coalitional queer politics and labor organizing, *Confessions of the Fox's* vision of political possibility is in "slip[ing] off the map of the world" and into abstraction itself. Unsurprisingly, its vision of the Stretches is reminiscent of Heather Love's description of the "indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift" of "experimental, oblique" modernist textual production (745). The novel effectively reinforces the theoretical premise that there is an inherent, satisfying concordance between queer identity, capital T-Theory, and formal abstraction.

Yet given how dense the novel is with citations to trans (and specifically transmasculine) theory and history, it is surprising that it contains no direct reference to *Stone Butch Blues.*[15] Rosenberg has written about the novel in an afterword for an edited collection on transgender Marxism, but even here the novel itself seems to slide from view. Rosenberg will often quickly alight on the novel, before telescoping away from it into a discussion about the decline of manufacturing and the rise of service work in the last decades of the twentieth century. There are, I argue, a series of glancing, oblique references to *Stone Butch Blues* in *Confessions of the Fox*. Both novels venerate the wisdom of femmes and the pedagogical dynamic of butch/femme relationships and rely on the preternatural insightfulness of their femme characters to anticipate and gently correct their transmasculine lovers. During pivotal pedagogical scenes, for example, Bess can "anticipat[e Jack's] reactions to her – [know] them before he did" (165), just as Theresa nods at Jess "as though I'd confirmed something she already knew" (135). The scenes in which the novel's protagonists are initiated into sex also have a striking narrative resemblance. In both, Jess and Jack watch with naïve wonder as their femme lover searches her bedroom for a dildo and feel a sense of intense identification when they finally strap it on. In both scenes, Jess and Jack's partners gently guide them into a rhythm in spite of their nerves, and both protagonists are startled when they witness their partner's pleasure for the first time. Though there are no direct quotations or citations involved, the level of structural mirroring in scenes like these feels too deliberate to be coincidental, particularly for a writer as versed in transmasculine theory and literature as Rosenberg.

I do not want to make the somewhat conspiratorial argument that Rosenberg is deliberately evading reference to Feinberg, but rather that its function as a ghostly intertext to *Confessions of the Fox* draws into sharper focus this project's central questions about explicit form and content. Rosenberg's reluctance to transpose elements of *Stone Butch Blues* could be seen as consistent with the novel's citation of Hartman's theory of the archive. That is, transposing the more graphically violent and traumatic elements of *Stone Butch Blues may* only reinforce the ease with which these scenes can be

[15] There is one reference to Feinberg in the novel, but only as the interviewer of Sylvia Rivera.

decontextualized and reiterated. Feinberg certainly believed that the text would lose some of its integrity if translated into new media or if its scenes were detached from their context. Yet there is also something far more fundamentally incompatible about the two novels' aesthetics. The earnestness of *Stone Butch Blues* and its reliance on generating and sustaining a sincere affective response from its readers also makes it difficult to into the ironically metatextual world of *Confessions of the Fox*. Whereas *Stone Butch Blues* understands itself as part of a tradition of working-class realism, *Confessions of the Fox* is emphatically a work of contemporary modernism. By most critical metrics, *Confessions of the Fox* is a far more formally accomplished, complex text than *Stone Butch Blues.* Yet the pairing of the two indicates the real limitations of assuming a necessary connection between queer content, avant-garde form, and political radicalism. What this project has argued instead is the limitations of indexing any kind of aesthetic mode to political value.

There is also something potentially embarrassing about *Stone Butch Blues'* sincerity, which might easily constitute another example of Love's depressing, loss-haunted texts from the queer past. *Confessions of the Fox* does not so much look backward to reclaim these historical texts, but uses them to imaginatively reconstruct a better, queerer history. Perhaps *Stone Butch Blues* has acquired some of the same embarrassing historical baggage as that other embarrassingly melodramatic, transmasculine novel, *The Well of Loneliness.* This embarrassment could also be a matter of comparative institutional credibility. Compare, for example, the paratexts that surround the two novels. While using it in ironic and often comedic ways, *Confessions of the Fox* is nevertheless structured by the textual apparatus of academic criticism. The formal structure of extensive footnoting, while also recalling the postmodern experimentation of David Foster Wallace, also cements the novel's facility with the institutions and practices of literary criticism. It has, after all, an extensive *real* bibliography that foregrounds the author's institutional credibility. By comparison, the strange paratexts of the new edition of *Stone Butch Blues* are a hodgepodge of links to web articles, discussions of the CeCe McDonald case, assertions of authorial rights, and declarations about what Feinberg does and does not permit its readers to do with the text. The kooky, fringe qualities of these texts emphasize Feinberg's distance from the institutions of the academy as much as the novel emphasizes Jess's own alienation from this world. While both celebrate working-class, roguish dissidence in their content, as texts they bear a radically different relationship to institutional authority. This argument about the comparative strategies of *Stone Butch Blues* and *Confessions of the Fox* is not anti-intellectual, nor is it the reductive claim that *Stone Butch Blues* is more authentically queer because it is working-class. Following Amin, the problem is not whether one text or another is authentically "queerer", but the very idea that we can hierarchize texts based on their perceived authenticity.

There is something strangely uncanny in the way that theory precedes and overdetermines *Confessions of the Fox's* content. Its theory-first vision of what trans fiction looks like ends up quite literally shunting its representation of contemporary trans life into the margins. The novel seems to inadvertently suggest that the explicit representation of contemporary trans life and the experimental, theory-inflected form are fundamentally incompatible with one another. They are separated into two hierarchical registers, with the quintessentially "queer" text of the manuscript taking precedence as body text and the more grounded narrative of the trans everyday consigned to the footnotes. It is in

this story on the margins that the novel seems to most reflect Gabriel's definition of trans realism as the representation of the mundanity and imperfection of contemporary trans life. For example, Voth admits that he is as politically quietist as his peers: "Faculty like to imagine that being upset counts as political activism. Not like I was much better. I went to one meeting just to see if there was anyone cute there. As usual, there wasn't" (84). Ironically, before being swept up in the radical potential of scholarship in the Stretches, Voth seems to share Brim's suspicion that elite academic institutions are rarely an ideal site for genuinely radical action. Voth's retreat into a utopian realm of academic abstraction thus reads like the foreclosure of a more compellingly de-idealized kind of realism.

When not writing from his position as critic and editor, Voth's stream of consciousness narration is as casual and self-deprecating as that of Binnie's *Nevada* or Peters' *Detransition, Baby*. When, for example, Voth realizes that his pharmacist is flirting with him, he launches into a stream of consciousness panic:

> Yeah, I'm really babbling on. But then, the manuscript is the main—only?—thing in my life since my ex left. Or I left. Or whatever fucking thing happened. Ursula's being sweet. So sweet, in fact, that what I'm beginning to realize is: this woman has an appetite for trans, and thank fuck for that. But also now I'm panicking. Would I even know how to get it on at this point, given the opportunity? I used to be so—how to put this—confident. Very confident. But god it's been so long. I mean, so very long that now I'm trying to mentally track through the house, to remember where I even last saw my cock. Under the bed? In the cheapo cardboard set of drawers I've stuffed in my closet (52)?

These are precisely the kind of "unforgiving thoughts and off-putting habits" that Gabriel reads as central to trans realism's recounting of the imperfect, undignified qualities of the trans everyday. The text is chatty and alive to the particularities of contemporary trans life – Voth's realization that his crush "has an appetite for trans", the knowingly surreal phenomenon of "losing" your cock. In Jenny Fran Davis's 2023 queer novel of manners *Dykette,* the protagonist observes that a character "reminded her of Jordy Rosenberg's narrator in *Confessions of the Fox,* the guy who describes himself as having this "shameless, gross vibe" that makes women uninhibited to ask for anything they want to do or get done to them." (35) It strikes me as particularly salient that Davis draws not on Jack, the theoretically overdetermined hero of the manuscript, but on the protagonist of the miniature novel that takes place in its footnotes. There is something charismatic and portable about Voth to the extent that only five years after the novel's publication, he can serve as a recognizable archetype of a certain kind of trans desirability. It is here, rather than in the effort to construct the story that queer theory wants him to tell, where the novel most convincingly locates the kind of everyday trans experience that cannot yet be located in the archives and must be made anew in the present moment.

Confessions of the Fox is a strangely divided text. While it represents a stark counterexample to the other texts in this project, it nevertheless contains, embedded within it, a version of explicit representation that is not dissimilar. In his consciousness of the mismatch between his ideals and his actions and his sexual anxieties, Voth is not unlike Jong's and Rooney's highly educated, terminally self-aware protagonists. Yet whereas these novels emphasize the maddeningly irresolvable qualities of

this dilemma, Voth's narrative resolves through a deus ex machina that transports him to a fantastic, utopian realm of abstraction. While I am not suggesting that all texts engaging with sexual politics and queer identities should operate within a realist framework, this fantastic resolution to Voth's problems is telling. Whereas my other objects are, ironically, a lot more pessimistic about the explanatory and representational limits of the explicit text, Rosenberg locates real freedom in the discursive world of the text itself. The novel is the perfect queer object because it has literally (at the level of the story itself) been made that way. The result is a distinctly inward-looking novel that seems largely written for and about critics themselves. Its proposition of rewriting history with the hindsight afforded by contemporary scholarship is a way of reclaiming hidden histories, but this deliberate presentism also reinforces critical and aesthetic hierarchies. The novel is undoubtedly compelling and witty, but it betrays the real risk of a particular mode of queer idealism that only produces a tautological closed-circuit between text and scholarship.

Nevertheless, Rosenberg's embrace of modernist form poses questions about the continued viability of the explicit. I have argued that late twentieth and early twenty-first-century art and literature have been defined by their grappling with the problem of explicit representation, but this periodizing gesture also suggests that the explicit is a preoccupation that will eventually be superseded. Is, given the very real concerns raised about the vulnerability of trans visibility, Rosenberg's strategic withholding a more sensitive form of trans representation than Feinberg's far more intimate, direct disclosures of trans trauma? Yet other contemporary trans novelists, like Torrey Peters or Nicola Dinan, have embraced the kind of middlebrow realism that I have argued characterizes explicit fiction. Beyond the specific example of trans literature, has the pursuit of the explicit exhausted itself aesthetically? My reading of Sally Rooney suggests that the problem of making *sense* of sexuality and our capacity to represent it is an ongoing existential and political matter, frustratingly so. Her experiments in extreme concision and transparency still read as a starkly new, conceptually rich way of negotiating this problem, decades on from *Fear of Flying's* first efforts to tackle it. Yet my reading of Crisp and Mapplethorpe suggests that explicit representation can constitute as much of an aesthetic dead end as a source of possibility. Is the stasis and repetition that characterized their work the logical endpoint of efforts to make sexuality explicit?

Fan fiction and fan culture pose a rather unexpected lens through which we might consider the continued aesthetic knot that is explicit representation. Fan complaints about queerbaiting in contemporary media (that is, the deliberate introduction of queer sexual tension into a text without resolution or direct acknowledgment) are symptomatic of the normalization of explicit representation. Now that direct, unabashedly queer representation is possible, resigning it to the "shadow kingdom of connotation" can be read as an aesthetic and political failure. Fan fiction has historically filled the gap created by unresolved queer tension within canon texts and constitutes its own definitionally explicit literary genre. It draws out that which was implicit within the source text and renders it graphically, unmistakably explicit. Moreover, fan fiction suggests that there is something distinctly pleasurable about the specific gesture of making explicit, as indicated by the prevalence of "first time" and "slow burn" stories. The moment of revelation itself – the first confession of romantic feelings, the first kiss, the first sexual encounter – is the source of greatest narrative pleasure. Divorced from

the official status of canon, fan fiction is liberated to endlessly repeat and re-constitute this moment of explicit revelation. The increased mainstreaming of fan fiction and "official" media that take up its narrative logics, such as the television series *Our Flag Means Death* or *What We Do in the Shadows,* suggests that the aesthetic pleasures of the explicit has not yet been exhausted. In its deliberate reinscribing of the source texts, both fictional and non-fictional, about Jack Sheppard's life as explicitly queer and trans, *Confessions of the Fox* might well be argued to constitute a work of fan fiction itself. The presentism that I have cautioned against in Rosenberg's fiction is, nevertheless, akin to the fan fictional impulse to override the logic and historical exigencies of canon with an exuberant queerness.

There are, however, exigencies beyond the aesthetic that threaten to radically reshape the nature of explicit representation. The second Trump administration has exerted powerful restrictions on freedom of expression. Federal funding for art and research that even remotely intimates a concern with gender and sexuality has been cancelled. The dismantling of so-called "DEI" has, in practice, been a wholesale removal of explicit reference to the existence of queer and trans people. The National Parks website on the Stonewall National Monument, for example, was systematically stripped of any reference to trans people in a crude series of deletions. School libraries across the country have also been stripped of books that make any kind of reference to sexuality, and queer and trans existence. The question of explicit representation suddenly feels like less of an aesthetic problem and more of an urgently political one. While I have resisted making a straightforward polemical case for the explicit throughout this dissertation, these rapid shifts in the political landscape have nevertheless made apparent the necessity of protecting explicit representation. While this project has combined and juxtaposed American, British, and Irish texts because, despite obvious contextual differences, contemporary English language literature has been a distinctly transnational phenomenon. When discussing late twentieth and early twenty-first-century literature, the siloing of texts into national traditions is a limiting gesture rather than a useful organizational tool. Yet, as the political circumstances and possibilities for expression begin to rapidly diverge from one another, it may increasingly make sense to differentiate between national traditions again. American literature about sexuality may begin to take on wholly different, less explicit qualities than the rest of the English-speaking world. Yet literary representation cannot go back, or at least not naively. A return to the language of implication and connotation as a means of resisting censure would always be inflected by the explicit representations that preceded it.

Rosenberg's cultivation of an intimate "t4t" dialogue between reader and text is a potential solution to the urgency of the present moment. However, the queer idealism of Rosenberg's project, which speaks directly to those already proficient in the language of theory, feels too circular and indulgent a response to the pressures of the contemporary moment. Feinberg's gesture of outreach toward a wider audience may now seem naïve, yet the aspects of explicit representation that can seem particularly tendentious or unsophisticated may be precisely what we must continue to emphasize. What once seemed boring or obvious now feels urgent. Similarly urgent is the need for criticism to remain responsive to the shifts in culture itself, particularly in this historical moment. Throughout this project, I have insisted on the need for a critical vocabulary capable of making sense of what art and literature are actually doing, rather than what we wish they were doing instead. My case studies have

emphasized just how messy, incomplete, and politically diverse explicit representations of sexuality have been throughout the last five decades. The texts that respond to our present moment will inevitably be just as compellingly flawed in their efforts to make sense of what sexuality means now. Remaining attuned and alive to this complexity, rather than ignoring or censuring it, is our fundamental responsibility as critics.

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