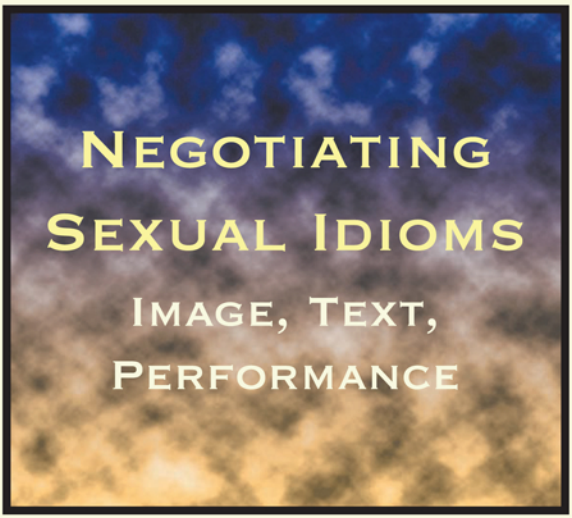
At the Interface



EDITED BY
MARIE-LUISE KOHLKE
LUISA ORZA

Probing the Boundaries

Negotiating Sexual Idioms

Image, Text, Performance

At the Interface

Volume 53
A volume in the *Critical Issues* series
'Sex and Sexuality'

Probing the Boundaries

Negotiating Sexual Idioms

Image, Text, Performance

Edited by

Marie-Luise Kohlke
Luisa Orza

Rodopi

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction: The Intricacies of Sexual Idioms ix
Marie-Luise Kohlke and *Luisa Orza*

PART I Desiring Subjects and Sexual Others

Spiritual Carnality: Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* 3
and Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"
Ilana Shiloh

Is My Yearning for You Sexual or Spiritual? 19
Cultivating the Divine between Us
Tahseen Béa

Country-Queer: Reading & Rewriting Sexuality 37
in Representations of the Hillbilly
Jan Peterson Roddy

Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: 53
Orientalising the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Fiction
Marie-Luise Kohlke

PART II Beings and Bodies in Sexual Discourse

Soma-Rasa 81
Shalmalee Palekar

Normalise Me! Sexual and Gender Identity in Sexological, 91
Criminological, and Feminist Discourses on Pornography
Kateřina Lišková

Les-being and Identity Politics: 103
The Intersectionality of Sexual Identity and Desire
Erzsébet Barát

Brokeback Mountain and the Nature of Desire: 129
Love beyond Transcendence
Marek M. Wojtaszek

PART III Sexibition, Power, and the Gaze

Perverting the Museum: 145
The Politics and Performance of Sexual Artefacts
Jennifer Tyburczy

Whore, Court, Church, and Europe's First Modern Obscene Text 171
Benjamin Jacob

Imagining Manhoods: Voyeurism and Masculine Anxieties 191
in East African Asian Fiction
Godwin Siundu

One 207
Luisa Orza

Notes on Contributors 221

Introduction: The Intricacies of Sexual Idioms

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luisa Orza

Abstract
The introduction outlines significant trends in the exploration of sex and sexuality today, highlighting four inter-related themes and developments which provide a contextual framework for the essays and creative pieces that follow: sexual/human rights discourse; the cultural diffusion of queer theory; sexual identity politics; and the privileging of bodily pleasure. The volume's contributions are situated in terms of their intersection with and problematisation of these trends, their celebration of diversity, and their resistance to any definitive theorisation of sexuality, sexual difference, and sexual subjectivity.

Key Words: bodies, Michel Foucault, homosexuality, pleasure, queer theory, sex, sexual difference, sexual identity politics, sexual rights, sexuality.

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1. Significant Trends in the Study of Sexuality

The Third Global Conference on Sex and Sexuality, held in Krakow, Poland, at the end of November 2006, out of which the following selected papers developed,[1] bears testament to the lively intellectual debates surrounding sex and sexuality in modern culture and everyday life. Sex and sexuality have assumed a central importance in modes of conceptualising ourselves and the world we inhabit, playing a conspicuous part in wider cultural processes, identity structures, and social formations and transformations. The 2006 conference formed part of the long-term Inter-Disciplinary.Net project "Sex and Sexuality: Exploring Critical Issues," since re-named "Persons and Sexuality: Probing the Boundaries."[2] Like the larger project, this publication brings together scholars and artists from diverse countries, continents, and communities in a constructive dialogue, ranging across varied disciplines, discourses, and historical contexts to address the complexity of sexual issues, past and present, and explore how these are represented through the mediums of image, text, and performance.

The authors of the following papers are particularly concerned with what we call "sexual idioms" or practices of speaking, writing, theorising, representing, negotiating, and performing sex and sexuality in the lives of individuals and the communities to which they belong and/or from which they are excluded. For discursive practices, both formal and informal, construct sexual discriminations and prohibitions as well as sexual rights and emancipations for sexual beings. Exploring the locations from where

different kinds of sexual idioms are voiced - geographical, historical, philosophical, ideological, political - and their often unacknowledged agendas and implications, this volume hopes to contribute to new ways of thinking through and re-imagining the constitution of sexual subjectivity in all its diversity. In doing so, *Negotiating Sexual Idioms: Image, Text, Performance* not only develops the dynamic exchange of ideas begun in Krakow, but also continues discussions initiated by previous project publications in this series, *Genealogies of Identity: Inter-Disciplinary Readings in Sex and Sexuality* (2005) and *Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging* (2007). At the same time, this collection signals further important new directions for critical engagement with the subjects of sex and sexuality and their bearing on notions of modern selfhood.

The critical and creative pieces in this volume engage in different but often interconnecting ways with some of the most significant trends in the study of sexuality today: firstly, the growth of sexual rights discourse, as part of a wider context of human rights and national/international legal reforms; secondly, the inter-disciplinary development of queer theory and its diffusion into the public realm and consciousness; and thirdly, the sexual identity politics employed by individuals and communities to promote group visibility and assert political agency. A fourth development can be added: the increasing concern with an affirmative and heterogeneous *materially* experienced sexuality - that is, with "a different economy of bodies and pleasures" anticipated by Michel Foucault as early as 1976, which might eventually free us from "that austere monarchy of sex."[3] This trend away from generalisations of sexuality in normalising theory or institutionalised regimes of sex, towards an individuated, experiential, and diverse sexual praxis, which distributes rather than concentrates power, enacts what Foucault termed "the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance"[4] - perhaps first and foremost the resistance to enforced conformity in our sexual self-fashioning and being-in-the-world. Yet while implicitly asserting the right to sexual individuality as a human right, those same bodies and pleasures, in their particularity and multiplicity, also contest the notion of any shared humanity founded on some "natural" sexual substratum common to all human beings.

2. Sexual Rights

Sex and sexuality in all their forms - the normative as well as the peripheral - have moved centre stage and become integrally politicised within personal, national, and globalised lives and economies. Sexual rights discourse linked to issues of health and reproduction, most obviously with regards to HIV and the AIDS pandemic, dominates states' internal policies on public health, disease control, family planning, and sex education, as well as governments' international policies vis-à-vis humanitarian and

development aid. An obvious case in point is the US Bush administration's 2001 "gag rule" and 2003 curtailing of funding to countries and NGOs that advocate active birth control and support abortion instead of abstinence-only programmes. Such policies have had serious adverse impacts on HIV/AIDS and family planning campaigns in Africa and elsewhere.[5] Other examples of measures with disturbing implications for the sexual rights of literally millions include moves to criminalise HIV transmission through unprotected intercourse, as in Kenya's recently passed HIV and AIDS Prevention Act (2007). Not surprisingly, sexual rights have become closely connected with political activism, the increasing international documentation of violations, and the rendering visible of abuses by both government and non-governmental agents, part of what Cynthia Rothschild describes as "the expanding canon of human rights reporting that addresses the ways rights and sexuality are actively linked, especially within the context of non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and practices."[6] In the process, Rothschild points out, attention is drawn particularly to those groups "who have the least access to human rights and civil liberties,"[7] from which they are barred not only by a combination of race/ethnicity, class, and gender, but as much, or sometimes even more so, by their particular sexual preferences, habitudes, and/or related existential conditions, such as sexual health.

Implicitly, then, sex and sexuality prove crucial not only to thinking through rights, right*less*ness, and political participation, but also through underlying, often unacknowledged, exclusionary conceptions of *what it means to be human*, and hence worthy of being accorded human - and sexual - rights in the first place, as well as concomitant protection from violation of such rights. The Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, exposed in 2004, functions as an illustrative limit case, highlighting the ambiguity surrounding sexual rights as supposed bearers of enabling liberationist possibilities, but simultaneously complicitous in *dis*abling mechanisms and coercive power dynamics. The deliberate sexualisation of the Abu Ghraib captives and their images, with the men's bodies forced into "unnatural" and imbruted positions, demonstrates their US captors' assumed power to redraw the limits of the prisoners' humanity through their sexual violation.

The aftermath of the abuses and their subsequent investigation further complicates the issues. In the context of the US government's presumed right to pursue damage limitation (so as to safeguard its strategic interests and military personnel), the right of perpetrators to a fair trial, and the right of the victims to have their sexual/human rights respected, the US administration determined which images of abuse were exposed to the public gaze and which - the vast majority - withheld from view. Implicitly, not only the torture but particularly the sexual degradation of the male prisoners, led naked on dog-leashes, made to simulate/engage in masturbation and oral sex and form naked human pyramids, was deemed too inflammatory to be made

accessible to public knowledge. Hence, the "protection" of the prisoner's mysteriously fluctuating rights leads to obscuration and invisibility; their sexual rights are made to compete with other kinds of (more powerful) rights and concerns. Clearly, sexual rights are implicated in much more wide-ranging power relations determining who should know what, or, more accurately, *who should know who can do what - and does what - sexually to whom*. Alice M. Miller and Carole S. Vance offer a useful summary of sexuality's complex dilemma vis-à-vis knowledge and power:

> Sexuality carries with it powerful assumptions and self-evident "knowledge" that may be misleading, biased, or inaccurate. In addition, sexuality has hidden and sometimes unexamined connections to hierarchies or structures of power that are inimical to equality, diversity, and freedom. Most importantly, sexuality varies in complex ways across time and place in a manner we are just beginning to apprehend, despite its deceptively imagined "common sense" relationship to the body and allegedly unchanging and static nature.[8]

Paradoxically, sexuality is identified with an essential knowable "given" and immutable humanity, on the one hand, and with cultural construction and, therefore, historical contingency, variability, even *dismissibility*, on the other.

This second possibility of sexuality being some kind of ever-changing performance without origin, adapted to particular self-locations within different times, places, and circumstances, brings with it the concomitant risk of sexual rights relativism - with human beings deemed to possess more or less sexual rights in some contexts than others. The case of Mehdi Kazemi, a gay teenage asylum seeker from Iran, proves a case in point. At the end of 2007, the British government initially decided to return Kazemi to Iran, even under threat of a possible death penalty, on account of having been named as a sexual partner during the Iranian authorities' interrogations of his former lover, subsequently executed for sodomy. Kazemi's sexual rights were effectively dismissed as irrelevant within the context of meeting government targets to reduce asylum seeker numbers in Britain. Once again, unequal power dynamics and deeply biased, not to say irreconcilable assumptions about sexuality came into play. As Robert Verkaik, law editor for *The Independent*, argues: "The Home Office's own guidance issued to immigration officers concedes that Iran executes homosexual men but, unaccountably, rejects the claim that there is a systematic repression of gay men and lesbians."[9] Accordingly, Iranian homosexuals' sexual rights need not be taken fully into consideration as regards the UK's (otherwise) binding commitments under international

human rights law and/or anti-discrimination legislation vis-à-vis its own homosexual citizens.

Clearly, sexual rights do not automatically or "naturally" convey sexual and/or legal, political, humanitarian, or other entitlements and legitimations. As Miller and Vance remark, "[t]he standards of sexual legitimacy, the organizing principle that members of a culture use for ranking, vary greatly and might include procreation, intimacy, consent, heteronormativity, personal fulfilment, or religious duty."[10] To return briefly to Kazemi's case, one cannot help but wonder whether a heteronormative female asylum seeker and mother, under threat of the death penalty for adultery if returned to Iran, would have encountered the same obstacles to having her sexual/human rights acknowledged and protected.

3. The Strange Implications of Queer Studies

As the above examples of the role of sexual rights and violations in health policies and development aid, the Abu Ghraib scandal, and UK asylum politics make clear, the issues go far beyond rights work for any specific minority group. Nevertheless, minorities whose sexual rights are not yet fully recognised or protected obviously have an especial investment in the development of sexual rights discourse at both national and international levels. Not surprisingly, therefore, some of the most prominent, vocal, and indeed successful advocacy for sexual rights has come from the homosexual community, granting gay and lesbian rights relative prominence in the popular consciousness, in line with an on-going diffusion of queer theory through a variety of academic disciplines and wider culture. One obvious example is the recent change in sex law, introducing legally recognised unions of same-sex partners, accompanied by pension and inheritance rights, in many European countries and elsewhere. When the UK's Civil Partnership Act (2004) came into effect, the first same-sex couples to exercise their newly bestowed rights were featured widely on national television and in the daily press, which suddenly reported celebrations of non-normative sexuality rather than, as more commonly the case, instances of gay and lesbian bashing or accusations of outraging public decency.

Homosexual rights remain at the forefront of identity politics and movements for sexual liberation and social transformation. One might think, for instance, of their impact on artificial insemination/assisted reproduction technology, adoption policy, and still on-going revisions of our conceptions of the traditional nuclear family. Indeed, it could be argued that the *homosexual* rather than the heteronormative subject actually provides the model for contemporary notions of sexual subjectivity, since, as pointed out by Marjorie Garber, the 1897 coinage of "homosexuality" predates by several years the formulation of "heterosexuality" predicated upon it.[11] Similarly, David M. Halperin regards the homosexual as the prerequisite catalyst for the

nineteenth century "conception of the sexual instinct as an autonomous human function without an organ;" a notion without which

> our heavily psychologized model of sexual subjectivity - which knits up desire, its objects, sexual behavior, gender identity, reproductive function, mental health, erotic sensibility, personal style, and degrees of normality or deviance into an individuating, normativizing feature of the personality called "sexuality" or "sexual orientation" - is inconceivable.[12]

In this sense, Foucault's oft-cited reflection on the nineteenth century transformation of the sodomite from a sexual actor/type into the homosexual as "a type of life, a life form" arguably has a much wider application - namely to all human beings regardless of sexual orientation: "Nothing that went into his[/her] total composition was unaffected by his[/her] sexuality."[13] The *whole of being* becomes saturated with/comprised of sexuality. This sexualisation of personal identity underlies the wider cultural diffusion of queer theory. Exposing the binaries of normative/deviant and natural/unnatural as *equally* socially constructed, queer theory in effect renders *all* sexual being unclassifiable as either/or. It defamiliarises or "queers" even the most prescriptive normalised sexual behaviours and practices, as being no different *in kind* from those traditionally represented as perverse, "other" or abnormal. *All* sexuality becomes potentially perverse, in what Annamarie Jagose calls "[q]ueer's totalizing gesture."[14]

Yet if *everyone* in the modern age is suddenly "queer" in this sense - their identity/identities inextricable from sex, sexuality, and sexual practices - new risks of cultural policing, (self-)regulation, and normalisation emerge. The one-time "anomaly" of visible and absolute sexualisation becomes the new oppressive norm, no longer a signifier of any particular individual or group identity. Even homosexuality's one-time political charge, as an oppositional position vis-à-vis the respectable status quo, is neutralised - although as Jonathan Dollimore persuasively argues, notions of a supposedly inherent radicalism attributed to sexual dissidence are likely no more than a self-deluding fantasy or "wishful theory" in any case.[15] Halperin similarly lampoons the grandiose claims made for "queer" and "its magical power to usher in a new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities," dismissing them as "so many portentous - weighty yet vaporous - significations."[16] Unsurprisingly, Teresa de Lauretis apparently abandoned her 1990 coinage of the term "queer theory" for much the same reason, considering its potential for resistance exhausted once co-opted by theorists for mainstream use.[17]

For the academic institutionalisation, even canonisation, of queer theory as the ultimate fashionable means of analysing fluid postmodern selves and cultures has had a detrimental de-politicising effect. As Halperin explains, queer theory's one-time "anti-assimilationist posture" has been defused, turning "queer" into little more than "a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of 'liberal'" appropriated by would-be progressives, irrespective of their engagement with the concrete sexual lives and material conditions of any particular social group.[18] Queer's spirit of sexual malcontent is translated into a spurious "politics" of complacent individualism that need not be linked to genuine activism or worry about the socio-economic world's impact on other individuals. Queer supposedly renders everyone "equal" irrespective of persisting social, legal, and material inequalities, as if a culture of unlimited tolerance was already achieved, rather than still a utopian ideal. Tim Edwards links this "politics of *lifestyle*" to a significant shift away from the roots of lesbian and gay studies in "the fields of social history, sociology or politics" towards "literary criticism, cultural studies and psychoanalysis" as the locus of non- or anti-identitarian queer studies.[19] The privileging of "diversity" and difference over group identity, Edwards argues, disables "any form of communitarian politics;" yet until a genuine equal footing is achieved between homo- and heterosexuality, "identity remains fundamentally necessary to the struggle for equality."[20]

4. Sexual Identity Politics and Differential Rights Claims

Queer theory's attempts to supersede identity politics proves potentially counter-productive, not just for the strategic deployment of homosexual rights, but the rights of other groups also - groups with differentially inflected sexual idioms and sometimes competing rights claims and agendas. For instance, notions of "freedom" and "protection" (from discrimination and harm) in homosexual rights discourse may acquire very different connotations for women subjected to sexual violence. As Alice M. Miller argues, these terms are implicated in potentially "restrictive and regressive responses to sexual harm - 'protecting women, rather than protecting their rights,' as Sunila Abeyesekera says."[21] Instead of promoting women's liberation, protection may conversely restrict it, by pandering to existing gender and sexual stereotypes. In Miller's terms:

> The recognition that sexual harm has begun to operate in isolation from other injustices as the worst abuse that can happen to a woman should alert us to the uncomfortable similarities, and differences, between this position and a position we fight against - that the most important thing to know about a woman is her chastity.[22]

In this case, identity politics' primary focus on actual and/or potential rights violation regulates the bodies of the distinctive group identified as "female victims of sexual violence," while excising any potential for autonomous pleasure from those same bodies.

"Rape" is another such differentially inflected term, for although homosexual rape is also a legitimate concern within gay and lesbian communities, it is clearly different in kind from the systematic mass raping used as a means of collective punishment and ethnic cleansing in situations of armed conflict. Hence homosexual rape remains primarily a crime against the individual, though in some instances it may also be construed as a hate crime. In contrast, the activism of women's and human rights organisations has led to the re-classification of strategically deployed rape in armed conflicts as a form of war crime, crime against humanity and/or genocide - though still subject to equivocal interpretation - most recently by the U.N. Security Council's unanimous adoption on 19 June 2008 of Resolution 1820 on women, peace, and security.[23]

Once again, however, identity politics prove problematic, with "violent offences against women" at risk of being "perceived as something exceptional, peculiar to [a] particular conflict" or an unfortunate by-product of war more generally, rather than being recognised as endemic to societies irrespective of their involvement in armed conflicts.[24] Women also face being instrumentally defined in terms of passive unequal victimhood, instead of the citizenship and political agency that identity politics seek to secure.

Conversely, notions of harm and sexual violence take on wholly different meanings within the consensual context of BDSM (Bondage Discipline, Domination Submission, Sadism Masochism), where they aim to *promote* rather than deny sexual agency. Actions that may appear to embody misogyny, intimidation, and/or aggression assume new significations when carried out with a different intention and emotional compass driving the activity. BDSM is not about *being* in or out of control, but about *using* tools such as control, power, pain, dominance and submission in a responsible way in the consensual pursuit of mutual sexual pleasure. These practices may not be perceived as "loving" or "caring" by individuals of other sexual persuasions, yet participants themselves may view BDSM as exactly that - a form of intimate devotion that maximises the slave or sub's (as well as the dominator's) right to pleasure.

Conflict between the problematic terms "rights" and "consent" nevertheless arises. Within the intimate realm, power relations turn on individuals' vulnerabilities, not only as regards love and trust, but also emotional and other forms of dependency. "Consent" may be given for any number of reasons other than pleasure. According to Guy Baldwin, in the context of Dominant and submissive (D/s) relationships, where power relations are most explicitly explored and (re-)negotiated, "power" may

actually be more about an experience of authority.[25] "Power" is never wholly assumed or resigned by either party, as the parameters of authority (to do) and consent (to be done to) are much more explicitly drawn prior to the sex-act than in most forms of couple intimacy. Although an individual identifying as a slave/sub cannot be said to be giving her/his consent to what follows in D/s "play," the individual knowingly and willingly (i.e. consensually) gives up the "right" to consent prior to the encounter. Paradoxically, temporary right*less*ness, based on an identity politics of submission, here secures the overarching right to sexual agency and pleasure.[26]

In some sense, then, sexual identity politics remains implicated in the same dilemma as sexual rights claims. On the one hand, identity politics posit a particular sexual difference or sexual identity as an essential(ist) state of existence, one not necessarily chosen and changeable; hence something of an authoritative, instinctual, "true" nature, an irreducible ground of being. One might think of the Intersex and Transgender movements in this respect, of an individual's conviction that s/he inhabits the wrong body, whether on account of erroneous surgical assignment or through birth. Self-transformation in these terms involves not so much modification to an *alternative* state as reversion/correction to one's *authentic* being. Yet on the other hand, identity politics are also tactical socio-political devices and instrumental effects responding and adapting to specific cultural and historical contexts (available medical procedures for sex re-assignment; debates on circumcision as a human rights violation; the accessibility of public and media platforms for victims of sexual violence; the existence of suitable venues or societies dedicated to BDSM practices). Indeed, sexual identity politics *need* to be strategically fluid and rhetorically versatile to maximise visibility/publicity for their particular groups and achieve the most effective political interventions on their behalf.

In other words, sexual identity politics rely on a circuitous paradox: *de*naturalising and *de*substantialising the constitution of sexual subjects by showing them to be discursively and culturally produced, yet *re*affirming the very "truth" of their supposedly inalienable sexual nature/substance, which culture acts upon. As Jagose notes, the same assumption structures both "the rationale for identity politics" and "the criticism of any suspension of identity" as encouraging "apolitical quietism" – "namely, [that] a coherent and unified identity is a prerequisite for effective political action."[27] Similarly, in order to establish the group's specific claims to sexual/human rights hitherto unacknowledged or incorrectly theorised (for example as unnatural or pathological), identity politics must undermine claims to any definitive knowledge of sexuality or all-encompassing theorisation of sexual difference - including that which the group bases its identity upon. Yet at the same time identity politics are dependent on (re-) theorising the shared sexual particularity (in orientation, in habitude, in discriminatory experiences) that

constitutes the group as a real and/or imagined distinct community with distinguishing rights claims that deserve to be taken seriously, so as to provide a conceptual framework for activism and political intervention. In turn, such "improved" theorisation again risks supplanting and/or silencing the group's authentically "different" and unique voices. Potentially, it replaces sexual subjects with victims requiring rescue and advocacy by more powerful individuals/communities/states located *outside* or beyond the group, such as academics, theorists, medical experts, aid workers, armies, and/or protection forces, who are prepared *to speak and act for* the members of the group.

5. Bodies and Pleasures

Might a subtle shift from rights to accountabilities point the way out of the identity stakes dilemma? Accountabilities, that is, in the sense of *being answerable* to oneself and others in terms of the bodies and pleasures that mediate between sex-acts and sexual subjects experiencing/claiming/owning those acts. Rights discourse and identity politics perhaps rely too heavily on negativity to be, in themselves, constructive and transformative, focusing as they necessarily do on rights withheld, threatened, or violated. They fixate on rights *of being* (the right to be sexually expressive, to be protected from sexual harm), rights that always already imply their possible restriction and curtailment, rather than stressing rights *of doing and feeling* (the right to feel pleasure, the right to perform particular sex-acts). What is needed may be a (non-) theory of "good" sexuality, one that conceptualises sexual pleasure not in opposition to coercion, violence, and harm, bodily or psychological, but conceives it in and of itself, if such a thing is possible. What might such self-and-other pleasuring and pleasure-(em)powered bodies prove capable of? Bodies that self-identify not through resistance, struggle, protest, and dissent against sexual suffering and violation, but rather through affirmation, indulgence, commitment - even *submission* - to pleasure?

Discussing Foucault's proposed different economy, Halperin convincingly argues that

> "bodies" and "pleasures" refer to two entities that modern sexual discourse and practice include but largely ignore, underplay, or pass quickly over, and that accordingly are relatively undercoded, relatively uninvested by the normalizing apparatus of sexuality, especially in comparison to more thoroughly policed and more easily pathologized items such as "sexual desire."[28]

As such, owning our still (under-theorised) bodies and pleasures might bring us that little bit closer to sexual agency than rights discourse, queer theory, or

identity politics alone - to the point where we will no longer be helpless patients in the monarchical madhouse of sex, but become sexuality's keepers (as *guardians* rather than wardens) and citizens of the sexual republic. Put differently, perhaps rights discourse, queer theory, and identity politics need to be *thought through bodies differently*, or, through *embodied* rights, practices, politics, *and* pleasure(s), with theory and practice grounded in what individuals actually *do* sexually, in bed and out of it, instead of our ideas about how and why they do what they do or get done to. To (re-)conceive sexual subjectivity positively in terms of the *capacity for pleasure* does not automatically imply surrendering subjectivity and agency *to* pleasure and/or mindless materiality.

Of course, we do not propose to circumvent the cultural history of the body, nor gloss over potential weaknesses in Foucault's anticipated different economy. Social constructionists and feminist theorists in particular have repeatedly taken issue with Foucault's masculine bias and have problematised the body as a site of extensive cultural inscription, as much a product/construct of language as a source of materiality, with all the attendant dangers of reification and conflation with a-historical (feminised) "nature."[29] In Deborah Lynn Steinberg's words the body is constituted dialogically as "both matrix and matter of culture."[30] Or, as the writer Angela Carter put it:

> [O]ur flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived…. no bed, however unexpected, no matter how apparently gratuitous, is free from the de-universalising facts of real life.[31]

Nevertheless an exclusive reading of the body as always simultaneously corporeal *and* other-than-material also risks misreading the body, reconstituting the dubious Cartesian mind-body duality by the backdoor. This way of thinking objectifies the body as that *from which* pleasure results/is derived as a second-hand product, instead of according the body itself (pleasurable) subjectivity. For as well as a "sex-text" to be read by another for her/his pleasure, the body itself can be "read" as the reader/writer/producer and subject of pleasure.

Admittedly, bodies and pleasure do not always go together. Hence, while the view "[t]hat bodies matter is axiomatic in current feminist debate,"[32] the view that *pleasure* matters is somewhat less so - perhaps because, to phrase it somewhat banally, pleasure is suspected of lulling the subject into a sense of false security that "everything's fine because I'm feeling fine." Hence the lure of pleasure is resisted as an assumed disempowering and depoliticising (self-)forgetting. Not coincidentally,

although BDSM is no longer pathologised as a "mental disorder," its practices continue to be perceived as the result of some kind of catalysing "wrong," such as childhood sexual abuse, on account of which forms of gender based violence have been internalised. Similarly a submissive or masochistic sexual identity may be interpreted as a form of self harm. Though in some cases such assumptions may, indeed, prove justified, this way of thinking also demonstrates the insistence on a negative rights discourse founded on infringement, rather than a positive one based on pleasure. As Rothschild points out, even the most ethically engaged rights discourse has yet to fully embrace "more affirmative rights claims" as readily as exploring rights violations, with "too few organizations" making genuine efforts to grapple with "how they can engage with more positive human rights claims related to sexuality, including the right to safe and satisfying sexuality, or the somewhat ambiguous 'right to pleasure'."[33] Hence new and different, less negative and less selective sexual idioms for bodies and pleasures must be sought, but without in turn aggrandizing the *pursuit of pleasure* as a substitute (self-)regulatory regime.

6. Essays and Creative Pieces

Part I: Desiring Subjects and Sexual Others endorses and affirms the sexual body as a primary means of coming to know and construct the self and its others, whether through attitudes of spiritual-sexual engagement, regional identity politics, or literary aesthetics. The contributions explore representations of intimate relations that privilege readings of pleasure, even within contexts of sexual suffering, but also highlight the problematic ethical implications of such body politics.

Ilana Shiloh focuses on Lars von Trier's controversial film *Breaking the Waves* and a Flannery O'Connor short story to explore "the conflation of sacredness and sensuality" implicit in Christian philosophy and its translation into sexual practice. Human sexuality becomes the means of approaching the eternal form of infinite divine love. The film's protagonist Bess discovers God's "tantalising mystery of alterity" through her marriage with the oilrig worker Jan. Following an accident that leaves him paralysed, Bess becomes a Christ-like martyr to Jan's voyeuristic desires, sacrificing herself in the demanded pursuance of sexual encounters with other men. Yet even when self-destructive, sexuality proves affirmative and redemptive, integrating the miraculous - divine love - into everyday physical relations through the voluntary relinquishing of Bess' sexual rights for the pleasure of another. Similarly, in O'Connor's story, the grotesque is elevated to the norm in the child protagonist's mistaking of a freak show hermaphrodite for the embodiment of the Holy Ghost. Queering carnality and incarnation, both filmmaker and writer celebrate an inalienable sacredness of the body.

Tahseen Béa similarly investigates connections between sensual embodiment and the search for the divine. She emphasises the sexual aspects of spiritual yearning, as an affirmative desire for union with human/divine otherness, which transcends identity politics of sameness and difference. Juxtaposing ancient Buddhist and Sufi literature with the work of modern American and French feminist writers and poets, Béa, like Shiloh, proposes that "the body and its sensuous potential are integral to reaching the spiritual dimension." Corporeal pleasure facilitates encounters with the sacred, rather than acting as an obstacle thereto. Hence, "allow[ing] ourselves to open up to the other" - without wanting to abrogate yearning via absolute knowledge or total possession - becomes crucial to spiritual development and self-fulfilment. By celebrating irreducible otherness, simultaneously the inexhaustible source of yearning and the unattainable destination towards which we yearn, sexuality reveals the divinity within each other and ourselves.

Jan Roddy too engages with questions of sexual otherness and yearning in the context of the Ozark hills community. After deconstructing prevailing sexual assumptions undergirding the hillbilly trope, Roddy creatively re-appropriates the figure for a subtle play with regional identity politics in a series of video and photographic pieces with voice-overs. Constructed as deviant outsider, the hillbilly becomes a protean sign of normative, urban, American society's projected desires for a return to an unbounded sexuality beyond the constraints of civilised modernity, inspiring longing as well as scorn. Roddy problematises this fantasy formation by exploring how the Ozark landscape creates spaces for unforeseen queer resistance for those occupying "that dangerous twilight" of dissenting desire. Drawing on oral tradition, personal experience, and family lore, Roddy locates complex "connections between the politics of queerness and US rural culture," and, like the earlier essays by Shiloh and Béa, identifies crucial convergences "between religious experience and queer sensual expression."

Marie-Luise Kohlke explores the contemporary "sexsational" phenomenon of neo-Victorian fiction and the constitution of present-day sexual subjectivity in opposition to its supposedly un-liberated nineteenth century Other. The "Victorian" functions analogous to Roddy's "hillbilly," representing an archaic sexuality against which modernity defines itself. In the process, the earlier period is "orientalised" as a free zone of libidinous excess via tropes of the harem and odalisque. Kohlke interrogates the complicated investments of modern-day readers in what she calls a voyeuristic strategy of "reading for defilement," which undercuts the liberatory aims of the neo-Victorian novel to give voice to silenced and repressed histories of sexuality. The literary "new Orientalism" of the genre becomes implicated in a potential "un-seeing" of sexual inequities and exploitations persisting in our own time.

Part II: Beings and Bodies in Sexual Discourse traces the liberating interventions and reactionary contradictions operative in the convergence of personal and political activism and theory. The contributions problematise the implication of sexual identity politics in complex and shifting power relations between non-conformist individuals and the societies in which they seek to gain fuller sexual participation, while resisting relegation to the position of the Other.

Shalmalee Palekar's performance piece, here reproduced without its accompanying video installations, complicates naïve notions of being able to arrive at sexual clarity through theoretical discourse separated from the living body. Palekar employs deliberately self-conscious writing, shifting registers between postcolonial and feminist discourse, humour, confession, poetry, dreamscapes, eroticism, and (out)rage, to better mirror the slippery sexual identities she performs in her life, as she is "excruciatingly produced through multiple traces." Focusing as much on the affirmative right to sensual pleasure as on the varying discriminations interconnected with notions of difference, the autobiographical "*LesbianIndianAcademic*" narrator deconstructs her own gendered, raced, professionalised, politicised, and sexually orientated body: "*Living in the hyphenated Land of 'Non': non-Anglo, non-citizen, non-heterosexual*." Negotiating the whiteness/colour binary, hetero-erotic expectations and fantasies, cultural baggage and academic ambitions, Palekar explores the impossibility of "*authentic hybridity*" and full sexual belonging among competing cultural constructions of self and desire, instead claiming the right to a "chiaroscuro" of sexual ambiguity and manifold identities.

Kateřina Lišková analyses the startling convergence of feminist discourses with often anti-feminist rhetoric by Czech criminological and sexological theorists. Through close textual readings, Lišková explores analogies between Jan Chmelík's conservative response to pornography as a socially and morally disruptive force and feminists' critique of pornography's dehumanising effect on women and its promotion of male violence, even though Chmelík also recycles discredited "classical rape myths" of victim culpability. Paradoxically, Radim Uzel's more liberal view of pornography, "as a means of social cohesion, sexual liberation, or at least an educational tool," remains implicated in discriminating stereotypes of homosexuals as aberrant and feminists as men-hating. All three discourses resort to a conservative strain of biological determinism and essentialist notions of "insurmountable" differences in gendered sexuality, suggesting "that the goodness of sex resides in its reproductive capacity" and constraining the pursuit of legitimate pleasure to heteronormative avenues of coupledom and family. Lišková concludes that the dubious "framing of the debate excludes the possibility of a viable non-anti-porn, pro-sex feminist position" within the mainstream Czech scientific community.

Erzsébet Barát explores similar unforeseen contradictions within the identity politics of the Hungarian Lesbian NGO *Labrisz* and its activists' work in the classroom, aimed at facilitating tolerance for sexual difference. Locating her case study within the theoretical framework of language and sexuality research, Barát analyses how, in seeking to combat the stigma of sexual otherness, the gay and lesbian community downplays the sexual practices, desires, and pleasures through which it defines itself, so as to position its members as wholesome, "normal," and undeserving victims of discrimination. Through a lack of self-conscious consideration of its language's own ideological investments and its "*a priori* embeddedness within the existing orders of discourse," *Labrisz* inadvertently adopts "a strategic *conformity to propriety*" that operates in complicity with the heteronormative expectations and norms it contests. Hence Barát stresses the need for attention to identity politics' dialectic provisionality as "the effect of a textually mediated *intersubjective* negotiation of power," so as to begin to work towards "a non-exclusionary epistemology of categorisation."

Marek M. Wojtaszek likewise traces the limits of dissident desire's subversiveness through an analysis of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, interrogating the film's much discussed paradoxical "burial of the libidinal" and (homo)sexual pleasure. Critiquing philosophical and psychoanalytical constructs of ideal(ised) desire, Wojtaszek argues that sexuality can only be experienced affirmatively "once released from the constraints of the negativistic logic of desire" as essentialised lack and "stripped of metaphysical underpinnings" and a teleological "orgasmic obsession." Wojtaszek reads desire in Deleuzean and Guattarian terms as a process of multiplying material interconnectivity. Jack and Ennis experience the greatest wholeness when becoming one with each other as well as their natural surroundings, a condition far removed from the men's "practiced" sexuality under their society's "merciless cultural surveillance." As in Shiloh and Béa's earlier essays, desire is no longer transcendental but *incarnated* as the driving force both of the characters' lives and of the film itself, "a primal energy that makes the currents of the real flow."

PART III: Sexibition, Power, and the Gaze explores the staging of sexuality in public and private arenas, the inevitable slippages between the two, and the attendant complex shifts in power dynamics, articulated through the gaze that mediates between seeing sexual subjects and represented sexual objects. The contributors disturb simplistic binaries of subject/object, showing how both constitute and invest each other with power. Performative contexts simultaneously constrain the production of sexual meanings and enable new ways of negotiating, living, and experiencing sexual being-in-the-world with all its equivocal pleasures.

Jennifer Tyburczy employs a creative combination of research techniques to explore the performative nature of collections of sexual

artefacts in the World Erotic Art Museum in Miami, New York's Museum of Sex, and the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago. The act of investigation - including awareness of her own gendered sexualised body - becomes as integral to the performance as do the collectors themselves and the visitors to the museums. Tyburczy uses dramatic re-enactment, personal interviews, visits, and voluntary work to elicit unexpected facets, functions, and meanings behind artefacts, which are "queered" as much by their gendered histories of collection as by the physical and conceptual spaces in which they are displayed and engage with their viewers, both disturbing and reinforcing sexual identifications. Tyburczy queers everything from moments in time, conversations, encounters, and mundane objects, to herself and her research, exploding the notion that "[t]he sex object's brazen function might seem to hide no mysteries." With tongue-in-cheek lucidity, she demonstrates that it's not what you have, it's what you do with it that counts - and who does the looking.

Ben Jacob traces the construction of obscenity via the rendering visible of sexual "truths" in Europe's arguably first obscene text, *I Modi*, a set of Renaissance illustrations with accompanying sonnets. Jacob examines *I Modi*'s significance as both a product of the fashions, values, and technologies of its day, and as a subversive, politically motivated exposé of the medieval church's hypocritical construction and regulation of sexuality. In contrast to earlier visual depictions of sexuality that emphasised lust's punishments and damnations after death, *I Modi*'s illustrations portray "naturalistic, arousing scenes of casual sex," often including postures that invert the presumed "natural" order, such as women-on-top and anal sex, as well as depicting recognisable public figures in the throes of pleasure. Hence *I Modi* represented "a particularly objectionable and conscious affront to Renaissance Rome's secular and religious moral code as well as its social structure," not least because the prominent use of visual representations made its revelations accessible to a much wider, partly illiterate audience. The text's authors highlight the trope of the gaze and the power of seeing, which becomes integral to the sexual act(s), enhancing and multiplying pleasure, and asserting the right to pleasure for its own sake.

Godwin Siundu's paper explores the role of sexual voyeurism in mediating masculine anxieties within East African Asian communities. Rather than a subversive and/or political purpose, here the gaze exercises a normalising function, especially through the patriarch as the embodiment of cultural surveillance and discipline. Though also indicative of homoerotic desire, which potentially destabilises deeply traditionalist, one-time immigrant communities, looking at/being looked at primarily (re)constructs hegemonic inter- and intra-group male sexuality, with conformity to heteronormative expectations conferring identity, power, material success, and sexual rights to pleasure. The gaze, Siundu argues, "signal[s] the political

dialectics of post-colonial discourses of autochthony and immigrancy, impure and pure, African and Asian respectively" that continue to dominate the East African polity. Through close readings of the fictions of Yusuf Dawood and Moyez Vassanji, Siundu focuses on the often-neglected area of men in postcolonial discourse, exploring the regulation of men's sexual desires, expressions, and liaisons, and revealing constructions of sexuality to be inseparable from racial and socio-economic - as well as gender - identities.

The collection ends on a suitably disruptive note to normative expectations of sexuality. The female protagonist of Luisa Orza's short story enacts her right to pleasure through the voluntary pursuit of received pain, what many would regard as a violation of her sexual and human rights. In doing so, the unnamed narrator initiates a Foucaultian economy of bodies and pleasures, which, though seeming to demand elaborate alternative regimes of (self-)discipline and punishment, actually foregrounds individual sexual fulfilment over and above shame and violence. Orza subtly traces the complexities of the master-slave dynamic to contest reader assumptions and stereotypical views of BDSM. The slave does not relinquish power and agency through submission; rather, she exponentially expands her own capacity for and "access to boundless pleasure." In thus "queering" desire, she achieves another kind of sexual liberation and sexual subjectivity of her own choosing, however misunderstood or despised by those of different sexual orientations. By the end of the story, rules and regulations are rendered obsolete, not through internalisation and incorporation, but through the shameless pursuit of bodily pleasure.

7. Conclusion: Thinking Creatively about Sex

It is worth remembering that the work of theorists of any denomination depends not only on facts, statistics, and other historical evidence, but also on the artistic products that form part of material culture. Much theory relies on the prior creative work of artists and writers exploring sex and sexuality through image, text, and performance - work to which theorists regularly resort for purposes of illustration and support. Hence the critical papers in this volume are interspersed with creative pieces so as to widen the debate and multiply the avenues for productive dialogue.

Together, the contributions to this collection interrogate prevalent sexual idioms and their often unacknowledged enmeshment in conflicting rights claims and identity politics of individuals, communities, and nations. What they do *not* aim at, singly or collectively, is to satisfy what Halperin calls "our hankering after a correct account or theory of sexuality [which] seems scarcely diminished since Foucault's day."[34] They do not seek to formulate, vindicate or privilege any particular sexual theory as definitive, as granting access to "the" truth about sex and sexuality. Such a project would inevitably end in futility, by pursuing what Foucault called "the endless task

… of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow."[35] Hence, this volume emphasises multiple critical and experimental approaches to the subject - or, more accurately, subject*s* in the plural, since it is, finally, more appropriate to speak of sexual idioms of sex*es* and sexualit*ies*, so as to promote appropriate tolerance for the fullest possible range of sexual differences and diversities.

Simultaneously, this collection counteracts "the trivialization of and cultural negativity toward sex" identified by Nancy J. Davis, who notes that, even in academic settings, talking about sexuality is still too often regarded with suspicion.[36] Sexuality's links to personal experience and its perceived proximity to "pornographic or proselytizing" discourse, fraught with pejorative connotations, at times gives sexuality "an air of lightness, fluff, and triviality" at odds with the serious and weighty topics for which it acts as a clarifying "prism"[37] - namely the kind of concerns explored in this volume, ranging from sexual and symbolic violence, racial/ethnic politics, and oppression by discriminatory power structures, to the marshalling of individual and collective energies of resistance, affirmation, and pleasure. *Negotiating Sexual Idioms* implicitly argues that sexuality not only *should* but *must* be taken seriously as part of an ethical subjectivity. Sex and sexuality act as a nexus of crucial concerns regarding the limits and possibilities of what it means to be human. Our sexual anxieties and pleasures are never only individual. Like "a course on sexuality," an anthology on sexuality "can be about much more than sex," mirroring as it does important "larger societal realities."[38]

Yet those same realities are always experienced, mediated, resisted, affirmed, and transformed through *embodied* subjects with the capacity for sexual agency and pleasure. Even if, as is often claimed, sex takes place as much in the mind as the body, sexuality cannot be wholly dis-incarnated. This holds true even with regards to virtual locations such as cyberspace - one might think of the erotic avatars of *Second Life*, where sex-acts and sex-talk nevertheless remain predicated on actual desiring bodies at the end of keyboards, typing commands. Hence this collection begins and ends with papers focusing on bodies engaged in sexual relations with each other.

The contributors to this volume confront the problematics of sex and sexuality in terms of the different idioms through which these are articulated: through legal and theoretical discourse, through literature, film, and the visual arts, through physical spaces and cultural fantasies, through everyday praxis and personal relationships. They explore what explicit, implicit, and at times deliberately unconfessed claims are made for sexuality, sexual rights, and sexual citizenship. And they analyse how different kinds of assertions to entitlements - for freedom of expression, for the right to pain as well as pleasure, for rights to seeing, knowing, and being - deploy sexuality strategically (and sometimes dubiously) in contemporary politics and culture.

The following essays, then, delineate some of the sexual stories we tell ourselves and each other, how and why we tell them, and how these stories position us as desiring subjects within and between competing ideologies of human nature, identity, and society.

The editors would like to thank the contributors to this volume, the conference organisers, and the members of the Sex and Sexuality steering group, especially Rob Fisher and Margaret Breen, for establishing the Inter-Disciplinary.Net project that made this collection possible.

Notes

1. Shorter versions of these and other conference papers, more closely approaching the original twenty-minute format of presentation, are available in the Inter-Disciplinary.Net eBook of conference proceedings: M Kohlke and L Orza (eds.), *Sex and Sexuality 3: Probing the Problematics*, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford, 2008, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/idp/ebooks.htm>.
2. The first conference under the new project title took place 19-22 November 2007 in Salzburg, Austria.
3. M Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, R Hurley (trans.), Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex & New York, 1981, p. 159.
4. Ibid., p. 157
5. See, e.g., the editorial comment, 'US HIV/AIDS policy under fire', peopleandplanet.net, 21 November 2005, viewed 20 March 2007, <http://peopleandplanet.net/doc.php?id=2598>.
6. C Rothschild, 'Not Your Average Sex Story: Critical Issues in Recent Human Rights Reporting Related to Sexuality', *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 7, no. 2, Sexuality, Human Rights, and Health, 2004, pp. 165-177, p. 165.
7. Ibid., p. 168.
8. AM Miller and CS Vance, 'Sexuality, Human Rights, and Health', *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 7, no. 2, Sexuality, Human Rights, and Health, 2004, pp. 5-15, p. 6.
9. R Verkaik, 'A life or death decision', *The Independent UK*, 6 March 2008, viewed 20 March 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/a-life-or-death-decision-792058.html>.
10. Miller and Vance, op. cit., p. 7.
11. M Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp. 39-42. Cited in C Heyes, 'Identity Politics', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 16 July 2002 (revised

2 November 2007), viewed 2 April 2008, <http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/identity-politics/>.

12. DM Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality', *Representations*, vol. 63, Summer 1998, pp. 93-120, pp. 96-97.
13. Foucault, op. cit., p. 43.
14. A Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York University Press, New York, 1996, p. 112.
15. Dollimore defines "wishful theory" as "a pseudo-philosophical refashioning of the world according to a preconceived agenda; a kind of intellectualizing which is self-empowering in a politically spurious way, and … tends to erase the complexity and diversity of the cultural life it addresses." J Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. ix; see also 'Chapter 3: Wishful Theory', pp. 37-45.
16. DM Halperin, 'The Normalization of Queer Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 45, nos. 2-4, 2003, pp. 339-343, p. 339.
17. See Jagose, op. cit., p. 127; and Halperin, ibid., pp. 339-341.
18. Halperin, ibid., p. 341.
19. T Edwards, 'Queer Fears: Against the Cultural Turn', *Sexualities*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1998, pp. 471-484, pp. 479 and 474, original emphasis.
20. Ibid., pp. 479 and 476.
21. AM Miller, 'Sexuality, Violence against Women, and Human Rights: Women Make Demands and Ladies Get Protection', *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 7, no. 2, Sexuality, Human Rights and Health, 2004, pp. 16-47, p. 18; citing a phrase employed by S Abeyesekera at the Institute for Rights Activism and Development, Bangalore, CREA/TARSHI, 2004.
22. Miller, ibid., p. 19.
23. A degree of interpretative ambiguity remains in the formulation "*can* constitute" of point 4 of the resolution; see United Nations, Security Council, 'Resolution 1820 (2008)', 19 June 2008, viewed 20 June 2008, <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/Open_Debates/Sexual_Violence08/SV_res_final_draft08.pdf>, emphasis added.
24. C Chinkin, 'Rape and Sexual Abuse of Women in International Law', *European Journal of International Law*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1994, pp. 326-341, p. 327.
25. G Baldwin, *SlaveCraft: Roadmaps for Erotic Servitude*, Daedalus, Los Angeles, 2004, p. 29
26. Problems, of course, remain as regards the ethical limits of consensual non-consent, which the constraints of this introduction do not allow us to fully explore. Suffice to say that permissible actions may become

impermissible, for example as regards practices such as scarring, permanent injury, mutilation, or indeed killing, where additional societal refusal of consent comes into play.

27. Jagose, op. cit., p. 103.
28. Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault', op. cit., p. 94.
29. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, questions "whose bodies and which pleasures" Foucault has in mind, since "he rarely discusses female bodies and pleasures, let alone women's sex and desires," inviting the conclusion that "the neutral body can only be unambiguously filled in by the male body and men's pleasures" - to which one might add further qualifiers of race, nationality, class, education, health, and so forth. E Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1994, p. 156. See also J Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993; and A Horner and A Keane (eds.), *body matters: feminism, textuality, corporeality*, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2000.
30. DL Steinberg, 'Cultural Regimes of the Body: An Introduction', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1996, pp. 225-228, p. 226. Cited in A Horner and A Keane (eds.), 'Introduction', in *body matters: feminism, textuality, corporeality*, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2000, pp. 1-14, p. 5.
31. A Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Virago Press, London, 1993, p. 9.
32. Horner and Keane, op. cit., p. 1.
33. Rothschild, op. cit., pp. 173-174. Curiously, Rothschild nevertheless ends her article on *negative* sexual rights discourse, only advocating further "inter-disciplinary efforts to better describe, research and educate others about the connections between *harm*, *stigma*, health, *violence* and *discrimination*." Ibid., p. 175, emphases added.
34. Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault', op. cit., p. 111.
35. Foucault, op. cit., p. 159.
36. NJ Davis, 'Taking Sex Seriously: Challenges in Teaching Sexuality', *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 1, January 2005, pp. 16-31, pp. 18.
37. Ibid., p. 17.
38. Ibid., pp. 25 and 28.

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PART I

Desiring Subjects and Sexual Others

Spiritual Carnality: Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* and Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"

Ilana Shiloh

Abstract
In contrast to Ingmar Bergman's films about the *Angst* of the unbeliever and the yearning to believe, von Trier's films are about the *Angst* of the believer and wanting *not* to believe. This apt observation by film critic Thomas Beltzer conveys some of von Trier's ambivalence towards Christian dogma, to which he conspicuously refers in *Breaking the Waves* (1996). The Danish director's powerful and extremely intense film has been criticised from two diametrically opposed perspectives - for undertaking manipulative Christian propaganda and for cynically subverting the narrative of the Passion. The principal reason for this critique is von Trier's conflation of carnality and Incarnation, his projected vision of the sacredness of the flesh. This vision equally informs Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," in which a child's imagination transforms a hermaphrodite into a Christ figure, discerning an invisible parallel between the freak's flawed sexuality and the Saviour's flawed divinity. Both Catholic artists, the Danish film director and the American writer imaginatively explore the unsettling paradoxes of the body, its simultaneous sacredness and imperfection, which are the subject of the present paper.

Key Words: carnality, desire, Incarnation, Flannery O'Connor, sacredness of the flesh, Lars von Trier.

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1. Introduction: Divine and Earthly Love

In the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich wrote:

> The human mother will suckle her child with her own milk, but our beloved Mother, Jesus, feeds us with himself, and with the most tender courtesy, does it by means of the Blessed Sacrament, the precious food of all true life… The human mother may put her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus simply leads us into his blessed breast through his open side, and there gives us a glimpse of the Godhead and heavenly joy - the inner certainty of eternal bliss.[1]

This poignant description of divine love, written by one of Christianity's most celebrated female mystics, is startling for a number of reasons. For one, it projects Jesus in feminine terms, as a mother suckling her baby. The image is substantiated by vivid physical details, meant to dispel the anatomic impossibility of the act. Second, Julian's analogy conflates love and nourishment, evoking both the mother-child relationship and the symbolic significance of the Eucharist. Finally, the entire account is sensuous and carnal, conveying the overflow of divine love in distinctly human terms.

The vision of Christ as a mother, suckling his believers from his gaping wounds, conveys the plenitude of charitable love - but the recipients of this love can ecstatically convert *caritas* to *eros*. There is an inner logic to the conflation of sacredness and sensuality in Christian thought. If the Son of God is incarnated in human flesh, divinity and carnality become inseparable. Christ is a living, loving, suffering body, and this body can become the object of infinite erotic desire. This desire is already implicit in the words of the gospel: "ye should be married to another, *even* to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God," Paul preaches to the Romans, depicting man's encounter with Christ in terms of a sexual union.[2] "Love is making me bold to summon my Beloved that he might comfort me, come unto me and *kiss me with the kiss of his mouth*," passionately pleads the fourteenth century hermit-theologian Richard Rolle.[3] Rolle's transport sounds homoerotic: for the medieval mystic, either male or female, Christ's image and infinite appeal transgress gender boundaries. But this appeal is definitely carnal. The carnality is implicit not only in the words of the gospel, but also in the exegesis of the Old Testament. The final sentence of Rolle's erotic transport evokes the first verse of the *Song of Songs*, which was traditionally interpreted in the Middle Ages as an allegory of the passionate sensual bond between the Saviour and his believers.

The carnality of religious devotion was not confined to verbal expression. It was also conveyed in everyday practices. Thus medieval women literally saw themselves as the brides of Christ: the nuns at Rupertsberg, for instance, wore bridal gowns when receiving communion. When they took the Eucharist into their mouths, they were eating not only the flesh of Christ, but also the flesh of their bridegroom, their eternal lover. In the words of Julian's predecessor, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Eucharistic practices become passionate sexual consummation:

> Thus [Christ] gave himself to me in the shape of the sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; … After that, he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. And then … I saw him completely come to

> naught and all at once dissolve, that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if it were one without difference.[4]

Freud has taught us that food is the metaphorical equivalent of sex and that this interchangeability is already established in infancy. In psychoanalytic terms, it is not surprising that the writings of Julian of Norwich and Hadewijch of Antwerp associate nourishment with sensuality, or that the ingestion of the Eucharist, the Saviour's symbolic flesh, is transformed into a vision of oral copulation. Neither is it surprising that men and women sworn to celibacy find a legitimate sexual outlet in religious devotion. But the conflation of the carnal with the spiritual transcends its individual components and results in a life-force that enraptures the soul and moves it toward the good and the beautiful. This alignment of the erotic with the aesthetic and the ethical is most eloquently formulated by Gregory of Nyssa, an ascetic-theologian of the fourth century, who envisions love as the mark of human perfection, as the ability to change toward the good, "from glory to glory."[5]

The Christian mystic does not distinguish between human and divine love, between *eros* and *agape*. Desire of God, believes Gregory of Nyssa, is not opposed to the craving of earthly pleasures. Sensual desire is also of the good and thus conducive to the desire of the ultimate good, which is the boundless charity and the infinite beauty of Christ. The blurring of boundaries between the carnal and the sacramental seems always to have existed in Christian thought, alongside the opposite trend, a dichotomous distinction between human and divine desire. This blurring of boundaries has currently been re-affirmed in the Pope's first Encyclical letter, "Deus Caritas Est." God's *eros* is *agape*, declares Benedict XVI; "there is an intrinsic link between the love which God mysteriously and gratuitously offers to man and the reality of human love."[6]

The spiritual dimension of erotic desire did not originate in Christianity. In *The Symposium*, one of the most famous studies of love in Western thought, Diotima explains that Love is the child of Penia and Poros, of resource and poverty. As the progeny of poverty, Eros originates in lack, and results in a yearning for that which we do not possess. But that yearning is not indiscriminate; neither is it particularised. We do not pine for the beauty of a particular body or for the goodness of a particular spirit; we crave the ideal, eternal forms of beauty and goodness.[7]

Lack can result from deficiency or from loss. We may crave what we never had, or what used to be ours, but no longer is. In the accounts of love voiced by Socrates and Diotima, lack, and the ensuing desire, result from our innate human flaw. Humans are imperfect beings who can only

partially partake in the eternal forms of Beauty or Good; but the ultimate objects of human desire are precisely these perfect ideas. Aristophanes grounds lack in the yearning for that which we have irretrievably lost. According to the poetic tale attributed to him in *The Symposium*, humans once used to be perfect and entirely self-sufficient, each being endowed with a double set of arms, legs, and genitalia, both male and female. Terrible in their strength and vigour, they mounted an attack against Zeus. In retribution, the gods then cleaved each human being in half; and ever since, each one of us longs to heal the wound in his flesh by finding his/her missing part.[8]

2. The Pursuit of Desire

This myth of the birth of desire has become a trope in the secular and religious discourse of love. It posits sexual union as a fusion of complements - but this view, suggests Emmanuel Lévinas, is grounded in solipsism. By seeking the other as my missing half, I pursue an extension of myself. Lévinas refuses this perspective and argues that *eros* is motivated by the riddle of the Other, by the tantalising mystery of alterity.[9] And the ultimate mystery, the most irreducible alterity, is that of God. This brings us back to the conflation of the pious and the erotic, which is also addressed by Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*. If the Christian mystics eroticised divine love, the contemporary philosopher deifies erotic love. "To expend oneself," writes Barthes,

> to bestir oneself for an impenetrable object is pure religion. To make the other into an insoluble riddle on which my life depends is to consecrate the other as a god; I shall never manage to solve the question the other asks me, the lover is not Oedipus. Then all that is left for me to do is to reverse my ignorance into truth…. I am … seized with that exaltation of loving someone unknown, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse. I know what I do not know.[10]

The conflation of the human body with the divine body as the ultimate object of desire is the thematic core of Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996). The film is set in the seventies, in a remote Scottish community of devout Calvinists. The film's protagonist, Bess, is a seemingly fragile, child-like woman, who is recuperating from a nervous breakdown following her brother's death. As the film begins, Bess weds a stranger - Jan, a Norwegian oil rigger - with whom she knows a brief period of total love, of passionate erotic ecstasy. But Jan must return to his work on a North Sea oil platform, and Bess cannot bear living without him. In her obsession and despair, she begs God to bring Jan back, so he will stay with her forever. Her

prayer is ironically answered - an accident paralyses Jan, who is rushed ashore in a critical condition. For reasons that remain unclear (genuine concern for Bess, the effect of drugs, or the voyeuristic perversity of the impotent), Jan urges Bess to pursue sexual encounters with other men and tell him about her experiences. Bess is initially shocked, but eventually acquiesces, convinced that vicarious passion will keep her lover alive. She starts soliciting total strangers, evoking increasing derision, condemnation, and violence, until she finally re-visits a ship manned with sadistic sailors, fully aware of the brutality awaiting her. Raped and mutilated, Bess dies of her wounds at the same hospital in which Jan seems similarly doomed. Jan miraculously recovers. He claims the body of Bess, taking it offshore to escape the local minister's curse and to bury at sea. The morning after her burial, Jan and his workmates have a revelation - they hear bells ringing in the sky, bells that Bess loved and that the local minister refused to install in the church.

The alignment of human and divine love and the complex relationship between love, goodness, and evil, are already announced in the film's opening sequence. "His name is Jan," Bess solemnly declares before the elders of the church, to which an invisible voice responds, "I do not know him." When Bess explains that Jan comes from the rig, a tall man reproves her, emphasising that the community does not favour matrimony with outsiders. Another voice then asks the apparently feeble-minded girl if she understands the meaning of matrimony. "It is when two people join in God," she answers. The first speaker sceptically wonders whether she can assume responsibility for such a union, not only for herself but also for another. Bess is utterly confident: "I know I can." "Name one thing of real value the outsiders have brought," a voice insists. After a moment's reflection, Bess smilingly replies: "Their music."

The opening sequence foreshadows the film's principal concerns and narrative developments; the end is contained in the beginning. Two worldviews and two visions of God are symbolically juxtaposed, both verbally and visually. The scene is dominated by dark, stern elders, weary of strangers and convinced of the frailty of human nature. They are surrounding a brightly clad, smiling girl, radiantly uttering her lover's name. She is serious about God, confident about her moral power, and joyfully grateful for the pleasures of life. In her manner and words, Plato conflates with Benedict XVI, the ethical joins the aesthetic, and love of God becomes another word for love of man and the rapture of the senses. But like Suzanna, Bess will be betrayed by the elders. Like Suzanna, she will be hemmed in on every side, placed in a situation from which it is impossible to escape. Unlike Suzanna, however, Bess will not be miraculously saved.

"His name is Jan." In these four words, Bess introduces her betrothed to the elders of her community, in preparation for her marriage.

Marriage vows, as John Searle has taught us, belong with a special class of utterances - they are performative acts, assurances which not only refer to a speaking relationship, but constitute a moral bond between speakers. Bess takes her moral bond very seriously. By naming Jan, she is naming the man who will join her in God, through whose worship she will worship God. Naming is an act of knowledge, a manifestation of cognitive mastery. The Old Testament forbids the naming of Yahweh, for God cannot be humanly apprehended. Appropriately, the elders cannot name Jan. But Bess can, because her God is different from the Old Testament God as interpreted by a radical Calvinist community.

3. Suffering and Rapture

Throughout the film, Jan is repeatedly established as an ambiguous and deeply unsettling God-figure. For one, he is an alien presence, arriving from afar; he literally descends from the sky, as he comes to Bess in a helicopter. But if his first coming is apparently from heaven, his second coming - descended in a gurney, paralysed from the neck down - is certainly from hell. The scenes depicting his work on the oil rig are shot in the yellow reddish hues of burning flames, accompanied by the deafening din of machinery. The whole set evokes infernal fire and brimstone, especially since Jan's accident on the oil rig eventually condemns him to an existence of living hell.

Bess vowed to assume responsibility for Jan when she united with him in holy matrimony. In the first days of their marriage, she joyously worships her lover's body; at the sight of his nakedness, she giggles in wonder. Her erotic attachment is rapturous and generous, and it is reciprocal. She and Jan seem suspended in a state of prelapsarian perfection. They have no sense of the sinfulness of the flesh, of the duality of body and soul. For them, the body *is* the soul. Alone in the church, after her wedding, Bess intimately talks to her God: "I thank you for the greatest gift of all, the gift of love. I thank you for Jan. I am so lucky to have been given these gifts." In bed with Jan, making love to him, she breathlessly gasps, "thank you, thank you," thanking God again for the bliss of the body. As aptly observed by Gerard Loughlin, Bess's relationship with Jan is always part of her relationship with God, the form that her loving God takes in her life.[11]

So when Jan, paralysed and impotent, tells Bess that only love can save his life and urges her to take lovers and relate her experiences to him, Bess does not really have a choice. Until that moment, her love combined a generous self-offering with an ecstatic enjoyment of the senses. In platonic terms, it conflated the ethical with the aesthetic. Jan's request strips *eros* of its aesthetic dimension, but in Bess's mind it still leaves the moral imperative implicit in erotic commitment. She pledged to take responsibility for the man with whom she joined in God; and so she must.

But the man with whom Bess joined in God undergoes a profound change. Jan's ethical metamorphosis from goodness to depravity is conveyed through his transformation of *eros* to pornography. The dividing line between the two concepts and attitudes is the gaze. The erotic mystery, like the mystery of divinity, is rooted in communion and reciprocal participation; the pornographic impulse is vicarious, voyeuristic. In the film's final section, the brutal shipmaster does not engage in sex with Bess: he watches her sexual encounter with another sailor and stabs her in the back. In doing so, he metaphorically mirrors the behaviour of Jan, whose voyeuristic impulse condemns Bess to death. Von Trier seems to suggest that the erotic mystery, like the mystery of divinity, is an unfathomable, ongoing flux of giving and receiving. Once joyous participation is reduced to voyeuristic observation, the gaze distances and commodifies the object of desire, transforming the beauty and goodness of the erotic embrace into a travesty.

Breaking the Waves is a powerful, extremely intense film, which draws on the theories of love outlined in the first part of this paper. The film projects erotic passion as a generous gift of the soul and aligns sensuality with beauty and goodness, in a visual and dramatic celebration of spiritual carnality. But this is only one aspect of this unsettlingly ambivalent work, which seems to allow for two mutually incompatible interpretations. While Lars von Trier's movie conspicuously evokes the story of the Passion, with Bess as the female counterpart of Jesus, this allegoric dimension is subverted by two principal factors: the effect of Bess' goodness and the nature of the lover/God whom she so ardently serves.

Bess is simple, innocent, possibly feeble-minded, in the vein of the dictum that the meek shall inherit the earth. Her devotion to her faith exceeds the normal limits of the place and time. She cleans the church during the week, a sign of her extraordinary capacity for selfless service; more obviously, she talks directly to God. In fact, she holds regular conversations, answering herself in the pitched down voice of a judgmental God-the-Father. But this compatibility between the figure of Bess and the figure of Jesus, and between the story of the film and the Passion narrative, is also potentially ironic, problematising the Christian ethos of self-sacrifice. Bess' goodness, innocence, and devotion trigger the sadism and brutality of the people around her, the victim's helplessness seeming to fuel the victimisers' cruelty.

At one point, Dodo, Bess' best friend and sister-in-law, tells the paralysed Jan that he has the power to do with Bess anything he likes. And so he does. He becomes God for Bess, an analogy underscored in a scene in which Bess conducts her two-voiced conversation reclined against the chest of the sleeping Jan, this time imitating the voice of Jan rather than that of God-the-Father. If Bess' devotion, worship, and self-sacrifice cast Jan in the role of God, this God is impotent, perverse, and malevolent. And Bess' ways

of serving her God are reminiscent of the actions of Mary Magdalena rather than of Jesus.

Still, in spite of its moral ambivalence, *Breaking the Waves* cannot be dismissed as a pastiche or a postmodernist exercise in deconstruction. The film re-affirms the ethos of self-sacrifice, and it does so in three principal ways. Firstly, we are made to accept Bess' point of view and to viscerally participate in her ordeal. Modelled on Renée Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and on Julietta Masina in Frederico Fellini's *La Strada*, Emily Watson's hypnotic and heart-wrenching performance and the camera's relentless and loving scrutiny of her face and body make us align our perception with that of the heroine.

Secondly, the film's visual style paradoxically projects the miraculous as ordinary. *Breaking the Waves* is divided into eight chapters, each chapter beginning with a static, panoramic shot of a landscape, accompanied by a pop song of the early seventies and by a chapter number and title ("Chapter One," for instance, is "Bess Gets Married"). These romantically picturesque shots, which have been digitally "painted" to achieve high resolution and vivid colours, present what von Trier has described as "God's eye view of the landscape in which the story is unfolding."[12] The rest of the film, however, is shot in adherence to the manifesto of *Dogme 95*, a mock-serious group of Danish filmmakers devoted to correcting the decadence of contemporary film by giving up such indulgences as artificial lighting, tripods, or props imported onto locations. The jerkiness of the hand held camera and the colour of the super-35-milimeter footage, partially bleached out from having been transferred to video and then back to film, create an effect of *cinema verité*. The result is a visual style closely associated with raw documentary, so that the miraculous is made to look naturalistic.

Finally, the film's celebration of the redemptive power of love is suggested in the closing scene, in which the bells ringing in the sky evoke Bess' desire to combine religious devotion and self-sacrifice with joy and pleasure. In one of the film's central scenes, Bess says that each person has been blessed with a unique talent. She has always known that she is not particularly clever, but she does have a special gift. Her unique talent is the gift of belief. Bess' fervent faith, her ethical seriousness, her goodness, and, above all, her self-sacrificial love are the forces that trigger the film's sequence of events, perform miracles and effect salvation.

4. The Body as Temple

The sacredness of the flesh, so powerfully and unsettlingly conveyed in von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, is also symbolically suggested in Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." Von Trier and O'Connor have often been compared, because of their apparently

scandalous treatment of key Christian tenets, but their iconoclasm assumes different forms. While von Trier unsettles his audience by aligning the pious with the erotic, O'Connor shocks her readers by conflating the divine and the grotesque. In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians about the sacredness of the body is paradoxically rendered through the figure of a hermaphrodite exposing his/her sex at a country fair, a figure gradually transformed into a vision of Jesus on the cross.

The alignment of the sacred and the grotesque is not new in Christian tradition. In *American Gargoyles*, Anthony Di Renzo offers a detailed and persuasive account of the grotesque elements in medieval religious art. These elements range from gargoyles that supported cathedral roofs, bawdy carvings that ornamented cloister walls, processions of freaks that constituted the illuminated marginalia of sacred texts, to pornographic practices in mystery plays and fabliaux. "No other period in Western history," concludes Di Renzo, "was more obsessed with God, and no other period in Western history was more obsessed with the human body and its functions."[13]

The grotesque can be defined as the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response.[14] Under its aegis the sublime and the ridiculous stand side by side, evoking a mixed reaction of horror and laughter. Its chief technique is degradation: in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, it is "a lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; … a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body in their indissoluble unity."[15] Grotesque art is transgressive: it crosses boundaries, flaunts taboos and broadens our vision of the world to include everything that we would rather leave out.

Flannery O'Connor was temperamentally, physically, and spiritually inclined towards the grotesque, as an art form and as a view of life. A religious author writing for a secular audience, a devout Catholic living in the protestant American South, an ailing and physically deformed human being surrounded by the healthy, she was a perennial misfit. And so are her fictional characters. By her own admission, the gallery of her protagonists conjures up "an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque."[16] But her sense of the grotesque does not coincide with that of her audience. The norm, for her, is man's redemption by Christ's tortured body on the cross. From this absolute perspective the normal and the aberrant exchange places, so that the grotesque is domesticated and the mundane is revealed as monstrous.

One of the works that symbolically foreground this altered perspective is "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," a short story first published in 1954. The story's protagonist and centre of consciousness is an unattractive, smart, and irreverent twelve-year-old girl, who is visited by two fourteen-year-old cousins. The cousins, convent girls sent to a religious school to

shelter them from males, address each other with hilarity as "Temple One" and "Temple Two," quoting a nun who used the term while cautioning them against encounters with boys. The nun's warning unsurprisingly achieves the opposite effect, and the two girls are preoccupied with the subject of boys, their changing bodies, and their self-proclaimed sophistication.

The child helps her mother entertain by suggesting local dates for the visiting cousins. Her first suggestion, a fat and elderly farmer by the name of Mr. Cheatham, is rejected by the mother. The child is more successful with her second attempt at matchmaking, and Wendell and Cory, the two country yokels she suggests, take her cousins out to a country fair. The child stays behind, daydreaming and fantasising about possible futures for herself. When the cousins come back from the show, they tell the child of a "freak" they have seen: a hermaphrodite who exposes his/her secrets to the audience. The child is profoundly impressed by the description, and in her imagination the freak-show assumes the pattern and rhythm of Mass. The mother and daughter attend Mass the next morning, when they return the girls to the convent. It is then that the child looks out of a window and perceives the huge red ball of the sun as an elevated Host drenched in blood.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is an initiation story, tracing a young girl's passage from childhood to puberty. But the story departs from the traditional narrative formula by dramatising a double initiation - the protagonist's discovery of sexuality and her realisation of Christ's mystery. The two rites of passage converge in the figure of the hermaphrodite. Their convergence subverts customary distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the debased, and redefines the concepts of normalcy and of monstrosity.

The conflation of contrasts is suggested in the opening sentence, which establishes the tone and the thematic purport of the story. "All weekend the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly, particularly Joanne, who had spots on her face anyway."[17] The sentence coalesces sanctity and ridicule, ugliness and the implied beauty of budding sexuality. This reconciliation of traditional opposites informs all levels of the narrative. Thus the two visitors, Joanne and Susan, are at once homely and attractive. Joanne talks through her nose and turns purple in patches when she laughs, but her yellow hair is naturally curly; Susan is very skinny but has a pretty pointed face and red hair. Similarly, the child's reaction to the two older girls is a mixture of contempt and envy. On the one hand, she decides that they are "practically morons" and is glad that they are only second cousins, so "she couldn't have inherited any of their stupidity."[18] On the other hand, she is intrigued by their practices of self-embellishment and seduction and feels "out of it," excluded from the mysterious rites of puberty.[19]

The convergence of apparent opposites also functions on other, more thematically meaningful levels. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist is consistently referred to as "the child," an epithet suggesting her basic innocence and purity. In spite of her irreverence, sassiness, and unattractive physique and demeanour, the child is innocent in matters of the body and pure in matters of the spirit. When she wants to impress the older girls, she shares with them the secret of procreation: a rabbit has rabbits by spitting them out of its mouth. When the cousins make fun of the nun's cautioning that the human body is a Temple of the Holy Ghost, the child sees nothing funny in the claim. She regards the phrase as an unexpected gift.

But the term "child" is also gender-neutral and thus conveys one of the story's central concerns - the conflation of the feminine and the masculine. This theme is symbolically suggested in one of the protagonist's daydreams, in which she fantasises about being a soldier in World War II. In her dream, she is the hero who has five times rescued her subordinates, Wendell and Cory, from "Japanese suicide divers."[20] The fantasy of empowerment humorously subverts the Southern ideology of female passivity and reverses customary gender stereotypes. Thus, when she visualises the overwhelmed Wendell and Cory proposing to her, and thereby attempting to re-instate her in the traditional role of a marriageable woman, the child turns both of them down, indignantly threatening to have them court-martialled.

The most radical embodiment of the convergence of opposites is the hermaphrodite. It is the freak in the story, scandalising the fictional characters and the reading audience alike. But its freakishness is a matter of perception; and the protagonist's perception, like that of her creator, Flannery O'Connor, casts the hermaphrodite in a role that ironically questions our aesthetic and moral norms. The theme of perception is already introduced in the first paragraph, through the motif of the mirror, in which the two cousins admire themselves. A mirror, as Jacques Lacan teaches us in his account of the subject's entry into the imaginary order, may offer an inaccurate version of reality.[21] What we see in the mirror depends on what we look for. Here, the cousins' perspective is undermined by the perspective of the protagonist and of the omniscient narrator. The girls see the hermaphrodite as a freak, but the story's consistent imagery suggests that freakishness is situated in the world outside the country fair. Thus, when the child inquires whether the cousins have seen the monkeys and the fat man in the show, her question echoes the description of the characters outside the show. Wendell and Cory, the girls' suitors, court the cousins sitting "like monkeys, their knees on a level with their shoulders and their arms hanging down between."[22] And Mr. Cheatham, the first prospective suitor, is the fat man, whose "protruding stomach he press[es] tenderly from time to time with his big flat thumb."[23]

The thematic significance of this symbolic correspondence is clarified in the story's climactic scene, in which the child falls asleep and dreams about the freak-show. Profoundly impressed by the cousins' description of the creature who "was a man and a woman both,"[24] and who pulled up its blue dress, the colour of divinity, to expose its double sex, the child imagines the circus performance as a religious ceremony and the hermaphrodite as another Temple of the Holy Ghost. In her mind's eye, the freak becomes Jesus and Jesus turns into a freak.

The logic behind O'Connor's apparently preposterous analogy, the common ground between the figure of the Saviour and the figure of the hermaphrodite, is their reconciliation of seemingly irreconcilable contrasts. In the same way that the androgynous body conflates the masculine and the feminine, Christ's body on the cross conflates the human and the divine. The hermaphrodite's carnality evokes the Saviour's incarnation. In contradistinction to the traditional Christian dualism valorising the soul over the body, the Southern writer accepts Christ's example literally. The body *is* the soul. The soul partakes of the body's imperfection. And the body partakes of the soul's sacredness.

"The main concern of the fiction writer is with mystery as it is incarnated in human life," writes O'Connor in her collection of occasional prose, *Mystery and Manners*.[25] Both the freak and the Saviour embody a mystery, what I term an inverted paradox. While classical paradoxes prove as true what we know to be false, the example of Christ proves as false what we believe to be true. Zeno demonstrated that Achilles would never overtake the tortoise and this proof, although perfectly logical, is a fallacy. Christ demonstrated that the Son of God could take a human form and be crucified like a thief, and this demonstration, although perfectly illogical, is the truth.

For O'Connor, mystery is the norm, and the reduction of reality to reasonable phenomena is an aberration. Monstrosity is a matter of perception. A hermaphrodite may be seen as an outrageous anomaly, but it can also be regarded as a manifestation of wholeness and perfection. That was indeed the hermaphrodite's symbolic meaning in antiquity, as we can learn from the figure of the bisexual prophet Teiresias or from Aristophanes' account of the origin of desire. Jesus suckling his babies from his gaping wounds can seem grotesque, but he embodies a profound truth. The Son of God who was crucified, a hermaphrodite exposing himself in a country fair, a child who is also a combat pilot - these are embodiments of the norm. All the others are monstrous exceptions.

5. Conclusion: Paradoxical Sacredness

Both O'Connor and von Trier celebrate the paradoxical sacredness of the flesh. In O'Connor's story, the androgynous body evokes Christ's figure on the cross, the conflation of the masculine and the feminine

suggesting the coalescence of the human and the divine. In von Trier's film, erotic desire is projected as the paradigm of all desire, of the human craving for goodness and beauty. Both Christian artists explore the affinity of carnality and the Incarnation and project the vision of the body as a temple of the Holy Ghost.

Notes

1. See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, C Walters (trans.), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 170. Cited in G Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004, p. 10.
2. See *Romans* 7.4, emphasis in the original.
3. R Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, C Walters (trans.), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 117. Cited in Loughlin, op. cit., p. 17.
4. Hadewijch of Antwerp, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, C Hart (trans.), Paulist Press, New York, 1980, pp. 280-281. Cited in Loughlin, op. cit., p. 11.
5. Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, H Musurillo (trans. & ed.), St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1979, p. 84. Cited in Loughlin, op. cit., p. 13.
6. Pope Benedict XVI, '*Deus Caritas Est*' viewed 11 February 2007 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents>.
7. Plato, *The Symposium*, C Gill (trans.), Penguin, London, 1999, 201a-212c.
8. Ibid., 189d-193d.
9. E Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. RA Cohen, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987, pp. 86-94.
10. R Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, R Howard (trans.), Jonathan Cape, London, 1979, p. 135.
11. Loughlin, op. cit., p. 174.
12. P Kirkeby, "The Pictures between the Chapters in *Breaking the Waves*," in L von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p. 14. Cited in I Makarushka, 'Transgressing Goodness in *Breaking the Waves*', *Journal of Religion and Film*, vol. 2, no.2, April 1998, <http://avalon.unomaha.ed/jrf/breaking.htm>.
13. A Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1993, p. 62.
14. P Thomson, *The Grotesque*, Methuen, London, 1972, p. 27.

15. M Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, H Iswolsky (trans.), MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968, pp. 19-20.
16. F O'Connor, 'The Fiction Writer and His Country', in *Mystery and Manners*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, pp. 25-35, p. 28.
17. F O'Connor, 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost', in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1971, pp. 236-248, p. 236.
18. Ibid., p. 236.
19. Ibid., p. 236.
20. Ibid, p. 240.
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Is My Yearning for You Sexual or Spiritual? Cultivating the Divine between Us

Tahseen Béa

Abstract
This paper researches the treatment of female sexuality in the secular and spiritual literatures of different cultures. This includes contemporary feminist literature on body and desire, mostly written by American and French women writers, as well as women writers in the Sufi and Buddhist traditions. I am interested in looking at secular and spiritual practices that engage both body and soul, with a special emphasis on women's bodies, because of the threat they pose to spiritual traditions. Some of the questions I will investigate include: Is gender crucial to spirituality? What does the experience of yearning involve? Is the attraction created by sexual difference pivotal to creating spirituality? How does homosexual love access the divine? Is the body a limit or a vehicle to reach our spiritual potential? Is spirituality possible only by worshipping a god or a deity outside ourselves, or is spirituality a process of creating integrity of self and the other? Is the yearning for god different from the yearning for a human being, and, if so, then how?

Key Words: body, Buddhism, divine, feminism, homosexuality, sexuality, spirituality, women's writing, yearning.

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1. Introduction: Speaking of Body

Speaking of body and sexuality, the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray says, "body is … no longer just a more or less fallen vehicle, but the very site where the spiritual to be cultivated resides. The spiritual corresponds to an evolved, transmuted, transfigured corporeal."[1] In my work I intend to explore the extent to which body and spirit correspond on an "evolved, transmuted, transfigured" level. Traditionally, women's sexuality and spirituality have been defined and interpreted according to the dictates of religion. To be linked to a specific cultural or religious tradition should not limit or inhibit women to go beyond their cultural and spiritual inheritance and welcome other modes of accessing the spirit. I have therefore incorporated inter-disciplinary feminist literature, as I attempt to liberate desire from previous definitions inherited from rigid theologies. My work will constantly seek equivalence of body and soul, the sexual and the spiritual, the mundane and the sacred**.**

2. Yearning for the Other

In philosophical, spiritual, and literary thought, the movement of self towards the other is captured in different ways. The disturbing presence of otherness creates desire within thought and feeling. Self relentlessly pursues these yearnings and tries to fulfil desire, and yet the distance between self and other, or self and otherness remains inexhaustible. The unattainable yearning for the other may be constituted as love for the other human being, who is my friend, my lover, my parent, or my child, or the nature of this yearning may bear a metaphysical quality, making it a mystical yearning for the divine other. Yearning to encounter the other, face the other, listen to the other, speak to the other, forgive the other, die for the other, give gifts to the other, love the other, and also kill the other are motives inspired by a passionate desire to locate a self-otherness within. In our urgency and need to address this yearning we make the mistake of reducing the other to our specific cultural, social, racial, gender, and sexual orientation. We are tempted to address the mystery of otherness by reducing the mystery to a political problem that can be resolved by political means. Yet, properly apprehended, yearning for the other is a spiritual yearning, immersed in vulnerability, humility, loneliness - it opens up our subjectivity to the other of humanity appealing to us to offer love.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas speaks of the relation between self and other in spiritual and ethical terms. For Lévinas a relationship between self and other cannot be reduced to consciousness, nor can it be contained and defined by positing it outside consciousness. "For this relationship," says Lévinas, "is not an act, not a thematising, not a position.… Not everything that is in consciousness would be posited by consciousness."[2] In Lévinas's thought the other, whose identity is fluid and dynamic rather than structured and predictable, exists both in physical proximity and in psychic proximity. The phenomenality of the other is both present and absent, and this ambivalent status of the other is what contributes to the other's irreducibility and otherness, as well as to the interruption of consciousness. In Lévinas' words, "[t]his incommensurability with consciousness … is an assignation of me by another, … an extremely urgent assignation - an obligation anachronously prior to any commitment."[3] In Lévinas's philosophy the other works not only as an interruption or disturbance but also as an inspiration to do good to the other. Above all, this kind of "exposure" to the other makes self vulnerable to wounding and humiliation.[4] Self's response to the other has a double focus: subjectivity is open to wounding but is also responsible for the other's vulnerability. As suggested by Lévinas this relationship with the other goes beyond time, since it is eternal and lasting. It is this infinite dimension of our "obsessive" obligation towards the other that, in Levinas's terms, makes this bond a spiritual and an ethical one.[5]

In spiritual literature also the yearning for the other carries a double movement. In the words of Saint Augustine:

> Empty yourself,
> So that you may be filled.
> Learn not to love
> So that you may learn how to love.
> Draw back,
> So that you may be approached.[6]

The embedded provocation makes one feel more alone and given to yearning, unless one achieves the fragile balance of proximity and distance, passion and passivity, presence and absence, as suggested by Saint Augustine. In monotheistic religions the journey toward the other is ultimately the journey toward the Divine, for human beings were cast out of a heavenly home to which they long to return. As Patrick Laude observes, "contemplatives are therefore never quite at home in this world. Their desire is as if magnetised by the golden origin that they carry in their heart. For them, something was lost and must be recovered."[7] In Laude's view, this yearning for a lost home brings the contemplative closer to the Divine living in the present moment.

> His Presence makes him Absent for us, and yet it is also true that it is because He is Absent that He makes himself Present. … As taught by Kabbalah, there would not be any room for us, nor for anything else, without this withdrawal. He literally had to make room to allow other than Him to be…. So Presence is Absence and Absence is Presence: his blinding evidence makes him invisible, and his recess makes him manifest to others.[8]

Rabbi Marc Gafni interprets this yearning as a feeling of lack within, not as "an expression of one's own deficiency but of one's own glimmerings of enlightenment."[9] According to Rabbi Gafni, to yearn for the other creates an opening, a space within, which allows for God to enter. "When my heart pines for a god who seems absent, the paradox of presence in absence collapses the distance into the most palpable and immediate presence."[10] In this interpretive context the absence of the divine other is felt within as a "tug at my heart," which is a sign of god's presence.[11]

In literary thought the French feminist writer Hélène Cixous speaks of the movement towards the other as both negative and positive. It is "negative incomprehension," when we meet the stranger in our daily life and fail to respond to the other's mystery. In Cixous's view the violence of this encounter can be reduced if we allow ourselves to open up to the other. And

there is also "positive incomprehension" experienced in recognising our inability to comprehend the other, who is not a stranger but a friend - someone we know. In Cixous's words,

> What is beautiful in the relation to the other … is when we glimpse a part of what is secret to him or her, what is hidden, that the other does not see; as if there were a window by which we see a certain heart beating. And this secret that we take by surprise, we do not speak of it. That is to say, we keep it; we do not touch it. We know, for example where the other's vulnerable heart is situated; and we do not touch it; we leave it intact. That is love.

Cixous goes on to say,

> [b]ut there is also a not seeing because we do not have the means to know any further.… At the end of the path of attention, of reception, which is not interrupted but which continues into what little by little becomes the opposite of comprehension. Loving not knowing. Loving: not knowing.[12]

What is most compelling in Cixous's thought is the emphasis on loving the other in spite of knowing the other, and loving the other in spite of not knowing the other. In both cases the relation with the other is based on an ongoing process of a loving ethics that does not require complete and adequate knowledge of why we love. It is this passionate yearning and loving the other that defines our subjectivities.

3. Yearning for the Heterosexual Other

To passionately yearn for the other gender suggests a desire for sexual otherness. In patriarchal cultures and in most religions traditions desire between men and women gains respect in marriage and procreation. Sexuality is productively used in the creation of nuclear families. This is the model that every contemporary society has inherited from their religious traditions. In Irigaray's words:

> The sexed identity necessary for the constitution of the family is not cultivated for itself but rather for what it can contribute to the unity of the family. Therein lies the origin of our conception of man and of woman as two halves of humanity rather than as two different identities, and the

> reason why they are valued more as father and mother than as individuals who have a relationship to each other.[13]

A relationship between men and women defined by religious and social law inhibits and represses the possibility of awakening a desire emerging out of a curiosity to understand sexual otherness. Intimacy between men and women needs to be experienced on the basis of personal love and personal desire without the fear of punishment for transgressing tradition. At best, it should not be interpreted as transgression at all, for the uniqueness of gender is a gift meant to be explored, appreciated, and loved. As suggested by Irigaray in her essay "Spiritual Tasks for Our Age," intimacy between the genders should be free of the burden of Original Sin because of which Adam and Eve were punished and banished from the Garden of Eden. If the Garden of Eden represents uninhibited recognition of each other in body and soul, thought and feeling, if it represents an honesty of expression, a tenderness of heart, a singularity in purpose, then men and women need to allow themselves to recreate that lost purity. In Irigaray's words, "[i]n order to move beyond the redemption of 'original sin', we would have to find love's innocence again, including the innocence of carnal love, between a woman and a man."[14] It may not be possible to reclaim this lost innocence or lost purity simply by yearning, but it is within the realm of possibility to look deeper into the spiritual meanings of intimacy, love, and desire. For instance it is possible to learn to see women's bodies beyond property valued for its potential for sexual gratification, procreation, and its able-bodied, healthy appearance. It is possible for men and women not to view gender as a commodity and not to exchange sexuality as a means to an end.

As suggested by Irigaray, what is most lacking in patriarchal gender relations is the transcendent dimension, which allows women and men to love each other from within the integrity of their otherness - sexual otherness, as well as personal otherness. Patriarchal religions have inculcated an acceptance and compliance of some codes of behaviour, which allow the satisfaction of being spiritual without the rigour needed to evolve as spiritual beings.

In the Sufi tradition, love for the other human being is always a reflection of love for a higher spiritual being. For Sufis, God created human beings, animals, and the natural world to give and to receive love. Human beings as God's creation therefore inherit the divine gift of love. For Sufis divine love is impassioned, full of ecstasy and joy, having the ability to reach a high intensity of desire experienced on the sexual and spiritual level. The thirteenth century Sufi poet Rumi testifies to this when he says, "the body is fundamental and necessary for the realization of the divine intention."[15] In Sufi literature and in meditative practices, the body and its sensuous potential are integral to reaching the spiritual dimension. Even when the rituals of

fasting and praying are practiced by Sufis, body and desire are not divorced from the experience of divine love.

The nineteenth century Persian female Sufi poet Bibi Hayati, who fell in love with and married her Sufi teacher, expresses her love for him in a collection of poems. In one of her poems, called "The Night of Power," religious images and metaphors are used as an expression of her passionate love for her husband. Alluding to his physical beauty, she questions, "Is this the dawnbreak, or your own face?" and "Is it the tuba-tree, date-bearing in paradise/Or your own stature - elegant, empathic?" And again, "Is it your hyacinth curl/Or your braided tress?" She ends her poem saying:

> Everyone faces to pray
> A *qibla* of adobe and mud,
> The *qibla* of Hayati's soul
> Is turned towards your face.[16]

Qibla being the direction in which Muslims offer their traditional prayers, for Hayati to choose to face her husband instead is a radical gesture that expresses her creative and sexual identity. The invocation of religious images is a reminder of her sources of love, which are steeped in sexual and spiritual yearnings.

The overwhelming nature of desire is a concern for many Sufis, since they are on a journey of self-transformation and work energetically on a higher and more intense level. In her book, *The Taste of Hidden Things: Images on the Sufi Path,* Sara Sviri addresses this side of Sufism:

> This conjunction may create confusion and bewilderment in the heart and psyche of the seeker who has been touched by human beauty and affection and yet feels that these are not the real objects of his[/her] search. This confusion is, in fact, one of the main problems on a mystical path which emphasizes "*ishq*" [*passion*]. Passion is energy necessary for the journey, but it can also become a test.[17]

The beauty in sexual difference creates the yearning that even Sufis cannot resist. They honour this passion, for it is on the basis of this passionate attraction and exposure to the beauty of the other's difference in body and soul, thought and speech, touch and yearning that space is made for an awakening on a higher plane. Sexual difference, when loved and understood with full integrity, provides a source of profound spiritual learning. The love between genders may or may not reach the level of Sufi-love, but Sufi-love does acknowledge the beauty of sexual difference.

Passion in sexual difference is also addressed in Tantric Buddhism. Tantrics are *yogis* and *yoginis* trained in the meditation practices so as to engage in physical intimacy on a level where they are able to gather and channel their energies to transform their experience. In Miranda Shaw's words, "Tantric Buddhism is unique among Buddhist subtraditions in its acceptance of the body and sense experience as sources of knowledge and power."[18] Prior to engaging in sexual intimacy the *yogis* and *yoginis* are trained in meditation practices, knowledge of Tantra, and the art of channelling their sensuous, psychic, and intellectual resources. Men and women are careful in choosing their partners for a Tantric union. According to Shaw's research, which is based on Indian Tantric texts from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, men and women make well-informed choices in order to achieve a perfect compatibility. Though passion forms an integral part of this yogic union, qualities such as honesty, fidelity, and awareness of Buddhist principles are also important.

The Tantric practitioners experience sexual intimacy at an equal level. For this union to work on a spiritual level, neither of the partners is allowed to be dominant over the other. In the case of an imbalance of masculine and feminine energies the relationship is perceived as a failure from a Tantric Buddhist standpoint. Shaw says:

> Tantric Buddhism represents a different cultural realm and a novel variation on gender relations. The power that reigns in this realm of cultural meaning is not a power of domination, but a power to transformation and liberation. This nonhierarchical power is seen as a fluidic, dynamic property variously and momentarily inhering in persons, objects, places, symbols, and especially ritual activities meant to generate and channel power.[19]

This sexual union takes place in a much guarded privacy. The Tantric couple "create[s] a separate, hermetically sealed world that is invisible to humans and gods."[20] The intention behind this privacy is to block distractions and to focus on the visionary and spiritual aspects of the Tantric embrace. In Shaw's words:

> The partners become saturated with one another's energy at the deepest levels of being. They consciously absorb one another's energy and then deliberately direct that energy through their yogic anatomy, into the subtle nerve-centers (*cakras*) along the central pathway (*avadhuti*). This energy carries the quality of the partner's emotions, consciousness, and karmic traces. Therefore, at this level the partners

> permeate one another's being and literally merge their karma and blend their spiritual destinies.[21]

At another place Shaw equates this heterosexual erotic embrace to the creation of a *mandala*. In Buddhism *mandala* is a figure personifying centeredness and alignment. In Shaw's words, a *mandala* is

> generated from and infused by their [tantrikas'] bliss and wisdom, which radiates from the most intimate point of their physical union. They use the energies and fluids circulating through one another's bodies to become enlightened beings in the center of that *mandala*.[22]

Although Tantric yoga is described in erotic and sensuous terms, the meeting of *yogi* and *yogini* goes beyond sexual gratification. In the words of the Tibetian Buddhist scholar Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, "in Tantra," Buddha "encourages us to transform our attachment into the spiritual path."[23] In spite of physical intimacy the Tantrics experience a transcendence of sensuality. The man and woman make a gift of their bodies, fully cognisant of body's sensuality. The man sees his sexual partner as a goddess, and the woman sees him as a god. It is only from the centre of such a powerful and intense focus that the divinity in each can be released as genuine bliss, and authentic spiritual togetherness can be experienced. In the book *Twilight Goddess: Spiritual Feminism and Feminine Spirituality*, Thomas Cleary and Sartaz Aziz state that the "Tantrics were attempting to experience the most intensely captivating of earthly pleasures while maintaining a mood of serene devotional contemplation of divine realities."[24] Cleary and Aziz observe that "the theory underlying this view is that if the practitioners could transcend passion at its peak, then ordinary temptations and seductions of the world would lose hold of their minds."[25] Participating in Tantra therefore becomes a way of disciplining passions and reaching a level of serenity and fulfilment. In Miranda Shaw's words:

> The offering of pleasure is not an end in itself but a point of departure for an advanced Tantric yoga that uses the bliss of union as a basis for meditation.… As delectable as these unearthly pleasures may be, they are but the basis for more rarefied states of mind to follow. Their attainment signals the time to meditate upon emptiness.[26]

Shaw explains how it is necessary for both partners to recognise the fleeting and impermanent nature of desire, bliss and reality. "In the midst of intense desire," Shaw says, "it is necessary to renounce desire by seeing it as

dualistic grasping for something that ultimately does not exist."[27] The ability to recognise the intangibility inherent in human experiences allows the Tantric practitioners to let go of the need to grasp and possess. From the Buddhist perspective this recognition allows for wisdom to enter.

When desire and love for the sexual other is allowed to flourish outside the bounds of rigid theologies, men and women respond to this desire in nurturing and elevated ways. In Sufism as well as Tantric Buddhism, god is not forgotten when men and women express their love for each other. Engaging in sexual intimacy is not a denial of the divine; instead the transcendent dimension, which Irigaray finds missing between heterosexual lovers, is invoked and sustained in Sufi love and Tantric yoga between men and women.

4. Yearning for the Homosexual Other

Unlike what patriarchy would have us believe, some of us don't yearn for sexual difference. There are those who yearn for sexual sameness - their desire is for the one who shares their gender, their anatomy. Based on my research, every religion condemns same sex relationships. In the Muslim tradition the Persian Sufi poets from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries had relations and affiliations with boys. Their poetry is a testament to their sexual and spiritual yearnings, but the Muslim culture would probably reject such interpretations of Sufi work. In the Buddhist tradition too homosexuality was repressed, although Kukai, a ninth century Japanese Buddhist, is known to have written on male love, while the seventeenth century Japanese mystic poet Basho is also known to have been bisexual.[28] Since my paper focuses more on female desire and its connection with the sacred, I will focus on some of the works of twentieth century women writers who were either bisexual or lesbian, such as the African American poet Audre Lorde (1934-1992) and the English poet Elsa Gidlow (1898-1986).

In her well-known essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist, affirms and embraces the erotic aspect of the human body as an enabling and empowering energy. For Lorde the erotic ability is not only the ability to connect with the other on a libidinal level but the ability to connect with the self. For Lorde human bodies are creative enough to function on multiple levels, opening up possibilities of reaching and touching not only the body of the other person but also the body of earth, wind, water, and fire. Most importantly for Lorde, the sensuous side of our bodies allows us to go inside ourselves and gather a greater beauty within. For Lorde the sensuous body offers a raw and potent energy, which must be tapped into in all our activities. As far as Lorde is concerned, "there is … no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love."[29]

Lorde defines the word erotic as "the personification of love in all its aspects … and personifying creative power and harmony."[30] Lorde is critical of Western patriarchy for manipulating, exploiting, and appropriating female sexuality and female desire. In Lorde's view, women were made to feel guilty about their sexual identities in patriarchal societies, which inculcated self-censorship and denial of desire in them. In her essay Lorde is addressing women of all races, nationalities, and sexual orientations. She exhorts women to respect and own the erotic resource given to them at birth and to operate from within the centre of this resource to feel fulfilled and accomplished in their lives. In her words,

> that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife.[31]

The deliberate distancing of the body's joy to marriage, god, and/or afterlife suggests Lorde's way of de-essentialising the expectations we have of these concepts, which have been institutionalised in patriarchy for a long time so as to lose creativity. Lorde urges women to redefine their relationship to marriage, god, and afterlife in a way that is most specific and authentic to them and in accordance with their individual needs.

In another piece called "Woman Forever," Lorde writes:

> I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest part of my mother and father within/into me - to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks.
>
> I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered - to leave and to be left - to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving.[32]

Lorde is not the first woman writer to express her yearning for more than one gender, one sexuality, one body. Cixous, for instance, addresses the same desire:

> I would like to know masculine *jouissance*; I will never know it; I would like to know the *jouir* of the other sex. What I know is the point of contact between two impossibilities: I will never know, you will never know. Both at the same time we know that we will never know. In

> that instant I touch at what remains your secret. I touch your secret, with my body. I touch your secret with my secret and that is not exchanged.[33]

The desire to live two different sexual experiences from within two different bodies, to be able to inhabit masculinity and femininity, to love the other as same and as the other - such a desire entails immense humanity, empathy, and love. For a woman to own her desire is enough of a challenge given patriarchal censorship; here she wishes to own not only her desire but his too, which makes both body and desire doubly desirable, doubly pleasurable.

Cixous locates this yearning to know the other's secret in the desiring nature of human beings. "[W]e were created to desire," she says, especially when we are in proximity with sexual difference.[34] Cixous finds this secret of femininity and masculinity "totally fascinating and … mysterious."[35] One's sexuality is one's "history with [one's] body," "an interior destiny" that is lived by a specific gender by a specific person, the originality and uniqueness of which makes one yearn to get more close to it, to know more of it. In *The Newly Born Woman*, a book Cixous wrote nineteen years prior to *Rootprints*, she had defined bisexuality as a "location within oneself of the presence of both sexes."[36] The bisexual centre that Cixous refers to is also invoked by Lorde in her work. Both women writers seem to be unveiling a source of intuition and feeling from which one passionately responds to the world, to bodies, to work, and to oneself. Cixous and Lorde are not limiting bi-sexuality to a sexual practice, in which men and/or women do not exclude any gender as a sexual partner. Instead, they are referring to a libidinal energy that works both in masculine and feminine ways, not as interruption but enrichment, not as limitation but empowerment.

Elsa Gidlow is an English poet whom Andrew Harvey refers to as the "modern gay mystic," who has written "some of the most explosive 'tantric' poems in any language."[37] Much like Audre Lorde, Gidlow is keenly aware of her body's erotic potential and how that energy can be used in defining the world we inhabit especially when the experience is gay, female, and mystic. In her poetry Gidlow beautifully brings the sexual to the spiritual, the sacred to the erotic, without sacrificing her femaleness. In one of her poems, "Love in Age," she addresses her female lover:

> All bliss known on earth I have found
> In you, Woman, Lover-Beloved;
> Beyond reason loved; beyond care
> Of self or safety in the passionate years
> When youth must find - cost no matter -
> Haven or Heaven.
>
> And now

in age
Your Being mirrors the Divinity.[38]

In the rest of the poem Gidlow's female partner takes on the persona of a goddess, a mystery that lives in another dimension in nature and yet nourishes her spirit and body. In her intimacy she feels the "human veil is rent," leaving both women open to each other psychically and spiritually, providing them access to the ethereal and sublime existing between them and beyond them. Gidlow ends her poem saying:

Lover-beloved, Woman
Small and strong in my arms
I know in you
The Goddess
Mystery
fecund Emptiness
From which all fullness comes
And universes flower.[39]

Clearly Gidlow's female relationship extends beyond the erotic, the sexual, and the immanent. Through her libidinal experiences she is reaching out to the invisible, nurturing presence of the female energy in the universe, which she elsewhere refers to as the Mother.

In and through her poems Gidlow offers both love and love's holiness, the erotic experience and the experience of transcendence. Gidlow's poetic imagination exudes sensuous, erotic images, and yet her female lover escapes sexual objectification. Gidlow defines love in images of radiant transformation, as though both lover and beloved become new after being touched by love.

Enter, O, enter
The inmost Holy Place;
At the altar, self-anointing
And anointed, dance
Your dance.

Till flesh, transfused
With burning breath becomes
Veil of the Goddess; and
Earth heaves.

The fiery lava floods;
We whirl with the stars,

No cell of self un-
Exploded.[40]

The movement of the female body, in the above stanzas of a poem, is captured in mystical terms. The two people in love are mutually engaged in creating a third place - co-created and co-shared. This place of love is sacred and healing, transformative and cosmic.

The poem "What If?" is especially poignant in the defiant voice with which the poem's female persona questions heteronormative patriarchy and religious authority again and again, and then responds to her own questions with radical solutions. "What if we smashed the mirrors/And saw our true face?" she asks; "What if we washed clean of Authority's ordure/And smelled the fresh smell of our own bodies?" Gidlow identifies with Eve as a woman who possessed knowledge of gender and sexual difference, and who brought "cleansing rain" in Eden. Gidlow ends her poem by responding to her questions in absolute terms: "Knowledge was standing stark under the sky/Feet naked to earth/Eyes there for whatever light falls./What if--?"[41] Gidlow's provocative questions are meant to subvert the conventional interpretations of female sexuality. Being true to her love for women, Gidlow finds it difficult to reconcile her sexuality as genuine and authentic with religious authorities' rejection of it. The haunting refrain of the words "what if?" reflects the restless anxiety of someone wishing to erase the blame history casts on her and re-write the history of sexuality from her female source.

Lorde and Gidlow speak of love in spiritual terms. Both poets experience love on a spiritual plane and do not wish to deny themselves of love on both levels: erotic and spiritual. They embody the best of the sacred and holy in love and desire. Body in both their work and in their lived experiences is a healing, joyful, hallowed place for love.

5. Conclusion: Unveiling the Divine in the Other

After discussing yearning for the other in friendship and love, in intimacy and separation, in proximity and loss, I find it difficult to locate yearning for the divine other as something separate and apart from the embodied forms of yearning I have already invoked. If the divine is defined in terms of a god outside human subjectivity and human experience, then self's encounter with the other is experienced as a means to access a higher spiritual reality. Sacrificing the sensuous body therefore becomes central to the movement that goes beyond body. In this framework the divine other is found in negating desire, keeping desire in check, in subordinating body to spirit.

In Lévinas's thought the other is the centre of inspiration for the self to do good, not simply for this person with whom the self is in a relationship

in present time, but for the self also to carry this inspiration as an integral part of one's thought for all times. This inspirational relation to the other, in Lévinas, has an infinite dimension, in which the other always approaches from a higher spiritual plane, making it obligatory for the self to offer the best gifts. The movement towards the other surpasses any social context and becomes a longing, a yearning that defies a foreseeable limit. Lévinas says, "[t]o be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace…. He shows himself only by his trace…. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace … it is to go towards the others who stand in the trace."[42] For Lévinas the recognition of being in God's trace is enough to approach the other with a spirit of humility, vulnerability, and sincerity. Lévinas offers a definition of spirituality that embodies humanity and divinity.

For Irigaray the mystery of otherness should remain virginal, untouched, irreducible to self and all that self yearns to project on the other. In her work Irigaray strongly argues for a respectful distance between self and the other, especially between those others who are intimate with each other. Owing her insight to Lévinas, Irigaray says:

> *Renouncing possession of the other becomes not just a simple ascetic privation, but the means of achieving a kind of relation we do not yet know, one that is more religious and at the same time more likely to attain beatitude in the here and now.*[43]

Irigaray is using the word "renouncing" in a radically different way to how it has been used in traditional religious contexts. Irigaray is not suggesting renouncing the human other in our search for the divine other, instead, she is suggesting renouncing our yearning to reduce the other to our needs, and thereby allowing the other to flourish in their unique humanity. Irigaray is presenting a philosophy of otherness that recognises the open subjectivity of the other, making it our ethical obligation not to stand in the way of the other's freedom to grow, evolve, and become divine.

The irreducibility of the other suggests the infinite dimension that Lévinas speaks of, and which Irigaray refers to as the transcendent dimension between self and other, but especially between partners who share sensuous and erotic possibilities. As a feminist philosopher, Irigaray is cognisant of the risks of objectifying women's bodies, and therefore offers a philosophy of sexual difference that addresses femininity as not only separate and different from masculinity, but also as deserving a space to grow and blossom in relation to itself, that is in relation to femininity as opposed to masculinity. In her words, "[h]ow could I succeed in sanctifying myself if I am not myself, in myself? I should first be who I am. Renunciation of spiritual becoming

stemming from me is already an error, a sin."[44] For women to recognise the divine potential within themselves, within femininity, they must make psychic, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual choices that strengthen and validate them. Until women learn to grow and develop within the integrity of the femaleness of their genders, their female spirits, their female bodies, women will fail to honour their divine truths. Irigaray puts it very simply when she says, "[n]obody can accomplish this process in my place, for me."[45]

For Irigaray, it is only when women fall in love with their sexual partners as spiritual adults that they will be able to create a spiritual partnership, which will honour the divinity in him and in her. In Irigaray's words:

> Love of God has nothing moral in and of itself. It merely shows the way. It is the incentive for a more perfect becoming…. God forces us to do nothing except *become*. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, … to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment.[46]

In other words, it would work against our spiritual selves to truncate, repress, or deny desire, for it is from within our solitary yearnings for the love of the other that we unveil the divine in each other.

Notes

1. L Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, S Pluháček (trans.), Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 63.
2. E Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, A Lingis (trans.), Klumer Academic Press, Dordrecht, 1994, p. 101.
3. Ibid., p.101.
4. Ibid., p. 15.
5. Ibid., p. 101.
6. Saint Augustine, Narration on Psalm 30:30, cited as epigraph on the inside cover of *Parabola*, vol. 31, no. 2, Summer 2006.
7. P Laude, 'A Blinding Proximity', *Parabola*, vol. 31, no. 2, Summer 2006, pp. 6-11, p. 8.
8. Ibid., p. 10.
9. M Gafni, 'The Path of Yearning', *Parabola*, vol. 31, no. 2, Summer 2006, p. 28-33, p. 31.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

12. H Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, E Prenowitz (trans.), Routledge, London, 1997, p. 17.
13. L Irigaray, 'Spiritual Tasks for Our Age', in *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*, Continuum, London, 2004, pp. 171-184, p. 179.
14. Ibid., p. 179.
15. J Rumi; cited in S Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things*, The Golden Sufi Center, Inverness, 1997, p. 114. Cited in RWJ Austin, 'The Sophianic Feminine in the Work of Ibn Arabi and Rumi', in L Lewisohn (ed.), *The Heritage of Sufism*: *Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism* (*1150-1500*), vol. 2, Oneworld Publications, London, 1992, pp. 233-245, p. 243.
16. B Hayati, 'The Night of Power', in CA Helminski (ed.), *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure*, Shambhala, Boston, 2003, pp. 133-136, emphasis in the original.
17. Sivri, op. cit., pp. 114-15, emphasis in the original.
18. M Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 140.
19. Ibid., pp. 175-176.
20. Ibid., p. 167.
21. Ibid., p. 171.
22. Ibid., p. 168.
23. G Gyatso, *Mahmudra Tantra*: *The Supreme Jewel Nectar*, Tharpa Publications, Ulverston, 2005, p. 19.
24. T Cleary and S Aziz, *Twilight Goddess: Spiritual Feminism and Feminine Spirituality*, Shambhala. Boston, 2000, p. 27.
25. Ibid., p. 27.
26. Shaw, op. cit., p. 159 and p. 161.
27. Ibid., p.161.
28. See 'Love is the Diamond: The Persian Sufi Traditions' and 'Open Wide the Door of Heaven: Traditions of the Far East', in A Harvey, (ed.), *The Essential Gay Mystics*, Castle Books, Edison, 1997, pp. 85-103 and pp. 68-84 respectively.
29. A Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', in *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Crossing Press, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 53-59, p. 58.
30. Ibid., p. 55.
31. Ibid., p. 57.
32. A Lorde, 'Woman Forever', 'Audre Lorde', in A Harvey, (ed.), *The Essential Gay Mystics*, Castle Books, Edison, 1997, pp. 276-282, pp. 277.
33. H Cixous, op. cit, p. 53, emphasis in the original.

34. Ibid., p. 53.
35. Ibid., p. 55.
36. H Cixous and C Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, B Wing (trans.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 85.
37. A Harvey (ed.), *The Essential Gay Mystics*, Castle Books, Edison, 1997, pp. 269-270.
38. E Gidlow, *Sapphic Songs Seventeen to Seventy*, Diana Press, Baltimore, 1976, p. 78
39. Ibid., p. 79
40. Ibid., pp. 272-273.
41. Ibid., pp. 274-275.
42. E Lévinas, 'The Trace of the Other', in MC Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context*: *Literature and Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 345-359, p. 359.
43. L Irigaray, 'Spiritual Tasks for Our Age,' op. cit., p. 182, emphasis in the original.
44. L Irigaray, 'The Redemption of Women', in *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*, Continuum, London, 2004, pp. 150-164, p. 153.
45. L Irigaray, 'The Age of the Breath', in *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*, Continuum, London, 2004, pp. 165-170, p. 165.
46. L Irigaray, 'Divine Women', in *Sexes and Genealogies*, GC Gill (trans.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, pp. 56-72, pp. 68-69.

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Country-Queer: Reading & Rewriting Sexuality in Representations of the Hillbilly

Jan Peterson Roddy

Abstract
The continuing recirculation and regeneration of the hillbilly stereotype helps to maintain certain existing social hierarchies. Related popular culture images reinforce heteronormative dominant class relations but also contain inherently queered aspects. Examining the hillbilly trope through a queer lens allows for expanded understandings of existing power relations relative to class, gender, sexuality, and geographic location. Two groups of images are juxtaposed to explore the oppressive as well as potentially subversive nature of this set of characters and the land they inhabit. Class and regional signifiers are inextricably linked with gender and sexual expression, and related power relations are identified. Popular culture examples from film, TV, and postcards set the context for photographic and video pieces that the author creates in an attempt to offer a more complex and subtle image of sexuality and gender within rural, Southern US hill culture.

Key Words: hillbilly, lesbian, Ozark, photograph, postcard, queer, rural, sexuality, visual representation.

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1. Introduction: Reading Hillbilly "Queerness"

The words "country" and "queer" used in conjunction identify a territory of otherness where individual and collective identity, based on class, gender, sexuality, race, geographic region and relationship to modernity, is contested or at least complicated.[1] My investigation is focused mostly on the hillbilly, defined here as the white, poor, Southern highland woods dweller of the US, whose cultural roots can be traced back to the European peasant. I use the term queer in multiple and overlapping ways. In the analysis of cultural imagery it is meant to highlight the popular definition of gender and sexual deviance within the hegemony of heteronormativity. Here the focus is on sexual acts and gender expression as opposed to identity. I expand this usage with the addition of class and regional signifiers imbedded in the hillbilly stereotype that increase the dangerous outsider status of the group. When discussing the narratives in my own image and text pieces, I adopt the reclamation of the word "queer" as a socio-political term, indicating resistance and self-proclaimed identity. The term centres on sexuality and gender, but is expanded again to include socioeconomic class and rural

isolation from centres of power. What follows then is an analysis of the more queered elements within popular culture's hillbilly tropes as a context for text and image pieces, which I have created in an attempt to reconstruct a more complex and subtle image of sexuality and gender within rural, Southern US hill culture.

Hillbilly, hick, yokel, bumpkin, rube, plebe, redneck, cracker; these terms have various connotations nationally and regionally but share a position as outside by virtue of class and rural isolation or resistance to dominant urban values. By the time these phrases were coined, they indicated both a nostalgia for and ridicule of human throwbacks to a time without an industrial division of labour, which exists outside of, or in resistance to, modernity and its market economy. Through tropes in literature, film and television texts the terms also often embody the fantasies of the middle and upper classes of an "other" people closer to nature and base physicality, as well as outside of middle class social and sexual constraints.[2] Throughout US regions such as the Appalachians and Ozarks, where hillbilly lore still fuels tourism industries in otherwise economically depressed rural areas, postcard and cartoon images regenerate a consistent set of tableaux and characters.

Card captions frame the supposedly candid snapshot, signified by white or torn borders and photo album corners. A weathered wood print background is common on more recent cards, reinforcing ties to nature and reflecting nostalgia for hand built shacks in an age of less picturesque trailer homes in poorer rural areas. The staging and costuming is theatrical, predictable, even vaudevillian, with occasional satire and burlesque undertones. One-liner texts are juxtaposed with an image that completes the punch line. Common themes include outside toilets, a farmwife worn down by unending manual labour, a lazy male partner, numerous offspring, pregnancies out of wedlock, and farm animals. A prodigious amount of homemade alcohol in crude containers is a common prop for male characters, as are shotguns and rifles. Female figures may also be staged with guns, depending on their gendered role in the situation. The backdrop is always a hardscrabble land, often with a roughshod shack obviously too small or ill repaired to realistically contain its inhabitants. All of the characters, including the farm animals, are sometimes pictured spilling out of one bed within. In cartoons, as well as on postcards, illiteracy and ignorance of modern ways are often at the crux of staged situations, where a double-edged humour may strike at both the stubbornly ignorant country dweller and arrogant city slicker.

Contemporary pop-culture celebrities who are associated by geographic region, class and race with Southern hill culture, such as Britney Spears, are often fodder for mass media that frame them within this same hillbilly stereotype. Photos and captions characterise Spears as a hastily wed, irresponsible mother in sexually evocative clothing, evidencing failed

attempts to get city style and high fashion quite right. Spears, in turn, parodies the paparazzi and media representation of her with a snapshot tableau, apparently of her own making. A family portrait with tattooed, bare armed, then-husband Kevin Federline and baby, staged with cheap, strewn about beer cans, guns, coonskin caps, and a confederate flag is distributed through fan blogs.

In all of these representations the "shiftless hillbilly" and related rural males exist outside of the constraints of the civilising forces of middle-class values and capitalism. By their association with the mythic frontiersman and cowboy they possess virility, but one that without constraints can turn dangerous at any moment, often exposing homosexual, incestuous, or even bestial desire.[3] The Hollywood film *Deliverance* provides one of the more enduring and infamous examples of this type.[4]

The plot in the film turns around encounters between two groups of men in the back hills of the state of Georgia in the Southern US. The first is a small band of suburban, professional, male friends out on a wilderness adventure. The other is comprised of local adolescent and adult men, two of whom figure prominently in several violent encounters. The most referred to scene in the film centres on the sexual assault and rape of the suburban men by two local hillbillies. Scene dialogue implies that the main perpetrator is in the habit of using animals or any body he can control through violence for his sexual satisfaction. References to wife beating or familial rape and incest as a male right, and bestiality as a point of humour, is relatively common in representations of white lower classes in general, and in particular in the hillbilly or redneck subset. The strumming of a few lines of the *Dueling Banjo*s ditty from the film is all that is necessary for professional comedians, or ordinary pranksters, to conjure hillbilly bogeymen for their audience.[5]

Barely beneath the surface of the macabre joke lies a complex set of sexualised power relations. In the scene where the song is introduced, one of the men from the city on a backwoods adventure wordlessly engages in an impromptu musical "duel" with one of the first local inhabitants he meets. The latter, an adolescent boy, though obviously not normal in body or mind, adeptly meets his suburban adversary's every musical attempt and ultimately outdoes him. Though seemingly harmless, this is the first competition between the two juxtaposed groups of men. The rape, other stalking, and murder scenes are matches in a related set of contests of masculine physical prowess between the two groups of men enacted against the wilds of the mountains. Fundamentally the contest is between civilised, regulated masculinity and primal, uncontrolled maleness. When the suburbanites find themselves capable of murder and deceit during their encounters with this ultimate wildness of nature and masculinity, the moral necessity of middle class constraints on men's time and behaviour is reinforced.

Another side of rural masculinity portrayed through cartoons, TV series, and postcards is the affable fool. A middle class disdain of those who are unwilling or unable to raise their standard of living due to laziness is evident in these moralistic mythologies. Conversely, an undercurrent of a class envy of the hillbillies' time and freedom to indulge in unproductive leisure and unregulated behaviour seems to exist, which sometimes also infers sexual fantasies in bucolic country settings. This hillbilly fool and his counterpart female characters are evident in the long running comic strip *Li'l Abner* and related spin-offs.[6] Li'l Abner is extremely muscular, handsome, harmless, and stupid. His main interest lies in evading responsibility of any kind. His only occasional employment is as a mattress tester. Abner's ever pursuing, over-sexed girlfriend, Daisy Mae, provides the ultimate in the farmer's daughter sexual fantasy. Li'l Abner is cut in his father's image in most ways except for his physique. Small in stature, Pappy happily plunders along, too lazy and foolish to do much but get in the way and provide comic relief. The father figure Jed Clampett in the US television series *The Beverly Hillbillies* plays a less extreme form of a similar character.[7] An updated, somewhat suburbanised version can be seen in the character Van on the *Reba* television series, starring Country Western singer Reba McEntire.[8] To ensure the gender dualism inherent in heteronormative models, these intellectually emasculated characters require female counterparts with some traditionally masculine characteristics.

Representations of the female hillbilly or rural inhabitant are primarily divided into two categories. The first is the often-naive country girl or farmer's daughter. She, like her male counterpart, is seen as closer to nature, the farmyard, and animals than her sub/urban cousins, but is always willing to entertain them with her sexual charms. Examples of the mainstream media versions of this type can be seen in any variety of Hollywood sitcoms, including *Petticoat Junction*, *Green Acres*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, as well as Ellie Mae of the already mentioned *Beverly Hillbillies* and Daisy Mae of *Li'l Abner*.[9] The type figures throughout other hetero-male fantasy narratives as the standard in pornographic scenarios and pop song lyrics.[10] This character embodies a base physicality and unrestrained sexuality (within heteronormative standards, at least). As punishment for her trespasses beyond the containment of middleclass feminine sexual mores, she often ends up as the pregnant, unmarried, or beleaguered married woman, grown old before her time.[11] The latter occurs in the rare instances when these characters are allowed to evolve past the frozen youth of many Hollywood roles.

The second category of the gender ambiguous or decidedly masculine female hillbilly proves just as plentiful. She is often depicted as pipe- or cigarette-smoking, and by necessity, toughened by the heavy physical labour that her male counterpart eschews. She may be the

beleaguered, homely farmwife who, like historic representations of gender ambiguous lesbians in the West, is portrayed as hideously pathetic within a patriarchal paradigm. Alternately she is the capable, gun-toting, go-getter Mammy Yokum of *Li'l Abner*, granny of the *Beverly Hillbillies*, or Ma Kettle in the 1940-1950s US series of Ma and Pa Kettle movies.

The female hillbilly outlaw is another, though more complicated, amalgam. In films like *Thelma and Louise* and *Million Dollar Baby*, female characters take on brazenly masculine and queer attributes, resisting regional, class and gender confines.[12] In many ways *Thelma and Louise* recasts the classic male buddy film, adapting the storyline of homoerotic overtones and search for personal freedom, usually reserved for men in Western narratives. In this case freedom also infers liberation from sexist abuses of power. In *Million Dollar Baby*, Hillary Swank is freed from the child-bearing, dead-end fate of the women in the rest of her heavily stereotyped poor, trailer-dwelling, hillbilly family by assuming a decidedly androgynous role and pursuing the typically urban lower-class male profession of boxing.[13] In both of these films the characters become estranged from their original kinship or sexual relationships, because they are impossible to reconcile with their community's traditionally prescribed gender models. They must also die by the end of the story, as there is no future for such queer women within the context of patriarchal gender roles and power relations.

US Army Private Lynndie England came into the mass media news limelight for having participated in the torture and humiliation of Arab prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. England and her family come from the Appalachian region of the US, from where the hillbilly stereotype is originally drawn. Her widely distributed image and attendant captions of "mannish" and "hillbilly torturer," along with other similar media characterisations, create the perfect blend of hillbilly types.[14] A now infamous snapshot depicts her with a cigarette roguishly hanging from her lips and fingers pointed like a make-believe gun at naked male prisoners' genitals. Here she is depicted as the androgynous, tobacco smoking, gun-toting, female hillbilly. The sexual component of her use of power over male prisoners made her figure all the more disruptive within the hetero-patriarchal framework of the military prison. In later representations during her trial she is symbolically castrated and brought into heteronormativity as the naive pawn of boyfriend and Military Police Officer, Charles Graner. Her portrayal becomes even more conventional through a highly publicised pregnancy out of wedlock and poor future prospects. Graner was portrayed as the particularly violent ringleader in these torture cases and so takes on the bestial male role. As an ex-prison guard from a small town and coal mining area, he too fits the hillbilly type.

The spectacle that the media made of both of them has been useful in deflecting accountability away from powerful upper and middle class male

leaders in US government and armed forces, who have institutionalised torture as a military practice and weapon. England and Graner are not innocent victims, but their hillbilly portrayal in the media has aided America in its desire to see these acts and soldiers as isolated and anomalous.

In all cases, the rural characters' whiteness is essential to both their relationship to people of colour and to other Caucasians. Visual representations of the social categories of "white trash" or "trailer trash" are common within the hillbilly trope and connote white people who have not lived up to the privilege their race entitles them to, or alternatively, who resist the attendant civilising constraints of ascendant classes in white supremacist society. They have counterparts in sexualised or perversely gendered stereotypes of people of colour, but are ironically represented as the most bigoted of white people. While the stereotype of the racist redneck has some basis in fact, this group does not have the power to institutionalise the white supremacist mythologies and ideologies that have the most significant impact on the lives of people of colour. These two groups could constitute a critical mass of resistance to their collective marginalisation. Instead they continue to be pitted as arch-rivals in a battle of brutal racism that is often fuelled by representations constructed by upper class interests. The actual and represented relationship of these two groups is an important topic, but not the focus of this investigation.

The land itself as stage is essential for these characters. In the case of the hillbilly, the mountain region s/he inhabits carries with it a long recorded fear and fascination with wilder places, untamed by agrarian or market economy society. With this and other similar groups, the sheer isolation from the services and controlling structures of civilisation creates both allure and trepidation.[15] Sexuality within these country settings is based on heteronormative characters including variations of the child-like but coy farmer's daughter, the harmlessly strapping young male with a juvenile intellect, and the bedraggled farmwife. It is also queered in the flipping of gender roles within this paradigm and in the gun-wielding granny or female outlaw. In the hillbilly subset of horror films this cast of characters is revived in ever more vulgar and monstrous versions. The backdrop of the countryside becomes, seductively and terrifyingly, an absolute wilderness. Rural isolation outside the terrain of middle-class Christian mores sets the stage for un-condoned sexual encounters of various types. The plot of *Deliverance* is recycled in various forms, as unsuspecting suburbanites or upper crust college students take a wrong turn or are lured too far into the backcountry by the desire for adventure that rural places generate in urban dwellers and by their fascination with the dark woods of gothic America.

2. Rewriting/Revisioning

It is in this larger context of the hillbilly trope that I have been creating text and image media-art pieces, which attempt to at least complicate these mythologies. I reclaim some of these attributes while reconstructing a more complex version of white, rural, working class, sexual identity. These pieces are culled from a larger, on-going project consisting of vignettes of place, people and events in the Southern hill Ozark region of the US, where my family has been rooted for generations. The subjects are defined as much by a common subsistence farming or their white rural poor and working class status, as by their queerness.

Conservative religion, whether Christianity, Islam or Judaism, tends to be a more dominant social force in rural than urban areas and in debates about, and repression of, unapologetic queer culture. My work attempts to subvert this force by drawing connections between religious experience and queer sensual expression in relationship to the land.

Myths of regional homogeneity and rugged individualism are explored through the interpretation of events that span time from the nineteenth century to the present-day, both exposing and resisting social patterns of homophobia, classism, and religious bigotry. The work as a whole explores intergenerational influence rather than attempting to arrest any particular moment in time as more authentic than another. I draw on regional oral tradition and personal and family lore, as I wrestle with these complexities and explore connections between the politics of queerness and US rural culture.

In the video piece *What Price?* the audience is taken down an endless, dark country road while piecing together a story, the undercurrent of which revolves around class and social control within capitalism and the prison industrial complex that has become a mainstay in many economically depressed rural areas in the US The reality of the supreme surveillance of the body and the practice of rape as a form of class control also evidence the blending of violent hyper-masculinity and homoerotic desire expressed in male prison culture.

The photo/text piece *The Edge* juxtaposes young adult characters living a generation apart but linked by family ties, their experience of Bible-Belt homophobia, and rural isolation, which together lead to potential suicide. Tragedy is not meant to be final in this piece, however, as redemption is found in intergenerational connection forged through queer identification and resistance.

Called Down reclaims some of the attributes of hillbilly types, while reconstructing a more realistic version of white, rural, working class, female sexual identity in formation. In this piece, as well as in *The Point*, Ozark place and land and fundamentalist religious experience are inextricably linked with queer sexuality. Typically, a number of changing photos are

screened over the spoken text so that the narrative is interwoven between the two. The photographs and text pieces are not meant to have a singular, one-to-one or illustrative relationship. Following are four short pieces, juxtaposing video still or photos with text, reproduced as selected examples.

A. *What Price?* - Video and Audio Text Transcribed

Still (Video) 1

Between the thick cement walls he calls me Ma'am with such tenderness that I'm taken aback; I empty my purse onto the conveyor belt and hold up my arms. His hands halting and apologising move dutifully up and down the length of my body, and I wonder if he's a miner's or farmer's boy.

An all night Quick Mart went up in town for the late night shift to grab coffee, Little Debbie cakes and gas beneath fluorescent lights, as they drive miles of two lane roads to get here. Unrelenting searchlights drag the passing minutes in their sway, glinting sparks off razor wire. It's the unnatural glow of a place that never sleeps; an island of light stabbing night woods and fields dimming stars in the country sky. The store cashier asks what brings me to town at this hour, knowing perfectly well. A foul thickness saturates the air, every breath and conversation, covering the ground like dew. He wants to know what part I am playing in the perverse theatre that occasions this town every month or so nowadays, ever since the politicians realised what wins elections.

I float alone in a sea of plastic chairs in the visitors' area where he and I had talked last week through plate glass. Two local preachers in cheap black suits circle around like buzzards. Their offers of prayerful comfort echo thinly off slick, hard walls and scrubbed linoleum. A night matron arrives to lead me through miles of windowless halls, automatic gates and doors slamming with stomach seizing force. Crossing through a steep walled courtyard with a tiny patch of open sky, I swallow air desperately, believing I might suffocate before the night is over. All the regulars are well rehearsed for this midnight performance, directing the rest of us to our appointed places.

You can hide all sorts of things in the backwoods. The soul of small towns sold for the price of a few jobs with benefits, as family farms become impossible and factories move over the border to pay poorer folks even less. Distant cousins, aunts and uncles are on both sides of the bars, some needing the only job for 90 miles that pays a decent wage; the others, who but God knows for sure, except that they didn't have (big) enough money for a lawyer who had the time or inclination to give a damn. They're none the same after spending time here, because everyone knows and never says what goes on. What men do, or have other men do, to keep everyone in their place.

Packed three across in a pickup, his brother, mother and I drive down the dark roads looking for an open Dairy Queen to pass this terrible time. I shake my head trying to throw off visions of his shaved forearms and a waiting gurney in the curtained, glass bubble stage, flanked by miniature banks of stadium seats, and order a chocolate shake I know I can't drink. It rains, then stops, while I think that I understand both nothing and all too much. (*End*)

B. *The Edge* – Text Read Over Changing Still Photos

Still (Photo) 2

Still (Photo) 3

I was pulled to the edge of Baird Mountain that they sliced part away to build the dam. Rocks slipping under foot dared my half-belief that I could fly or wouldn't mind falling.

How fast can you drive that old car down crooked two lane blacktops before temptation takes you? I heard that you skated these same rocky ledges, before you got tired and fell asleep to the rumbling of that 57 Chevy truck engine, so far back the Narrows that it took days for another car to find you. Did you dream of pretty soldier boys you had held like I yearned after graceful girls in that dangerous twilight?

The quiet that rolls over any conversation, where your name surfaces, tells me that I am right. I knew you even when I was in my mama's belly, the weeks she locked herself away and cried after you. Past her blowing skirts that summer afternoon the funeral wreath on bare dirt, "brother" stamped on white ribbon flapping in the hot wind. Buddie Lee, lanky, handsome, with the easy slouch of country boys.

I hate the shame you had to bear, but am grateful you made the sacrifice so I did not have to. The burnt offering that ignorant, fearful folk demanded. There weren't nearly enough ways to grow to be a man, or a woman for that matter, in this hill country. There still aren't. Dyed in the wool stubborn persistence is the blessing and curse of this place. (*End*)

C. *Called Down* – Text Read Over Changing Still Photos

Still (Photo) 4

Still (Photo) 5

I have gone down to the altar during the call. I have spoken in tongues. I have felt the sweet surrender, falling willingly backward into murmuring streams. Baptised in what they call Tablerock Lake, for now, while men's dams stand and where the White River waits for a while on its way to Arkansas.

I skinny-dipped in those same waters with boy and girlfriends on clandestine escapes, out after hours from the Bible college, where we were counted in our beds each night. Homemade moonshine burning hot in my throat, drunk straight from plastic milk gallon jugs. A not quite ancient rite that joined us to ancestor hillbillies and steaming back-wood stills.

Long faced, willowy girls led me to hidden rope bridges and underground rivers whose whispering siren's moan lured us into a skin-felt faith in our own yearnings. We were called down into splits in Ozark bedrock, fissures that open and close into caves, which wind endlessly, secretly under Missouri. We groped after each other in that musky, pressing deep dark that is more surrounding than anything I think I will ever know before death's warm blanket falls. (End)

D. *The Point* - Text Read Over Changing Still Photos

Still (Photo) 6

Still (Photo) 7

Even though Mama was not church going herself, she saw to it that I got water poured over my head by the Presbyterians when I was a baby. Her way over the years was to drop me at the church steps Sunday mornings, picking me up later. It seemed I was her only offering. She had planted seeds in me that she had little place for in herself, and now in these days of my first revival, immersion and adult intention seemed necessary for the yield.

Climbing halfway down Point Lookout that rises three hundred feet or more above the river, I spent the night, prepared to meet the devil. I slept naked and barely at all on a rocky ledge, dreaming fitfully of biblical and cold-blooded serpents. I was going to be baptised once again, down below on the next day.

The rock underneath my body still held afternoon warmth, while the night air pressed down cool and clear. In the velvet sky overflowing with stars and planets, glittery Venus teased at the crescent moon just inches away - like Jesus had been tempting, leading me on with the prophet's promise of baptism by fire. I longed for dramatic union.

There were three of us to bring into the fold that day. I was the last to wade in, wondering how that earnest young preacher's leather brogues stood this river water time and again. I learned then what I still hold truer than most any other thing. There is no salvation without surrender. So I put myself in her arms and gave in. (*End*)

3. Conclusion

I seek to engage the audience of my creative works in an experience that is grounded in the description of real lives and place but utilises personal experience and interpretation rather than transcription to convey a particular understanding of the subject matter. My interpretation is influenced by historic veins of regional lore and tradition, while incorporating contemporary methods of cultural analysis. At times it no doubt also reflects my own mythologising of place that is influenced in one way or another by the films, postcards, and comics that I grew up with and am still drawn to. No matter how problematic many of these popular culture images are in reinforcing certain heteronormative dominant class relations, they also contain inherently queered aspects. As a young person in search of alternatives to middle class gender roles that made no sense in the light of much of my experience or desires, these aspects fuelled my imagination. Examining the hillbilly trope through a queer lens allows for expanded understandings of existing power relations relative to class, gender, sexuality, and geographic location and so facilitates the possibility for resistance. Though my creative work is not a direct reaction to, nor a reconstruction of the hillbilly tropes outlined, it contains elements of queer refusal as well as re-appropriation and should be understood within this larger context of related images.

Notes

1. The term “country” is used throughout to refer to the countryside or rural area, as opposed to the nation.
2. A Harkins, *Hillbilly*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p. 53.
3. JW Williamson, *Hillbillyland*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1995, pp. 2-6.
4. J Boorman (dir.), *Deliverance*, Warner Brothers, USA, 1972. For other cinematic examples, see F Harris, ‘Hillbilly Horror Pits Red States Against Blue’, *Pulp Culture*, 2003, viewed 25 November 2006, <http://home.hiwaay.net/~tfharris/pulpculture/columns/030925a.shtml>.
5. ‘Dueling Banjos’, song arranged and performed for the movie *Deliverance* by E Weissberg and S Mandel, originally composed by A Smith and D Reno as ‘Feuding Banjos’, USA, 1955.
6. A Capp (writer and artist), *Li’l Abner*, syndicated US newspaper comic strip 1934-1960. There were a number of spin-offs, including a radio serial, film, stage play and theme park.
7. P Henning (creator), *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Filmways Productions, USA, 1962-1971.
8. A Gibson (creator), *Reba*, 20th Century Fox Television/ACME Productions, USA, 2001-2007.
9. P Henning (creator), *Petticoat Junction*, Filmways Inc., USA, 1963-1970 (continuing re-runs). J Sommers (creator), *Green Acres*, Filmways Inc., 1965-1971 (continuing re-runs), USA. Both series are situated in the fictional town of Hooterville (“hooters” is a US slang term for breasts); the introduction sequence features three buxom young women swimming nude in the water tower. G Waldron (creator), *Dukes of Hazzard*, CBS, USA, 1979-1985.
10. See, for example, B Wilson and M Love, ‘Farmer’s Daughter’, on *Surfin’ USA*, Capitol Records, 1963; and B Wilson and M Love, *California Girls* on *Summer Days*, Capitol, 1965.
11. A Harkins, op. cit., p. 54.
12. R Scott (dir.), *Thelma & Louise*, MGM, USA, 1991.
13. C Eastwood (dir.), *Million Dollar Baby*, Warner Brothers, USA, 2004. Hilary Swank’s fame begins five years earlier, playing the lead role in a film based on the true story of a transgendered man living in a small town in K Peirce (dir.), *Boys Don’t Cry*, Fox Searchlight Pictures, USA, 1999.
14. C Mason, ‘The Hillbilly Defense: Culturally Mediating US Terror at Home and Abroad’, *NWSA Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, Fall 2005, 39-63, pp. 48-50.
15. Williamson, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

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Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Fiction

Marie-Luise Kohlke

Abstract
This paper explores contemporary writers' fascination with the nineteenth century erotic, the multivalent forms of literary re-imaginings of Victorian sexualities, and the infusion of present-day socio-political concerns into the literary striptease. Covering a range of neo-Victorian novels, this essay traces writers' negotiations with the Victorian sexscape and their texts' implications for contemporary culture and postmodern identities. I argue that a displacement has occurred from the spatial to the temporal axis, with the nineteenth century replacing the Orient as an imaginary free-zone of libidinal fantasy and "sexsation."

Key Words: Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Michel Faber, J. G. Farrell, John Fowles, Shari Holman, Brian Moore, neo-Victorian novel, Orientalism, sexuality, Sarah Waters.

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1. Introduction: Invitations to Seduction or Defilement?

In Brian Moore's novel *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975), the staid and respectable academic Anthony Maloney dreams into life an exhibition of Victorian artefacts in historical room settings that include "the parlor of a famous Victorian brothel" alongside *objets d'art* and displays from the Great Exhibition of 1851.[1] Maloney's collection is emblematic of neo-Victorian novelists' obsession with "exhibiting" the hidden underside of nineteenth century propriety and morality, to reveal a sensationalised realm of desire and novelty, where any and every sexual fantasy may be gratified. When *The New York Times* representative announces the completion of the collection's documentation on film, Maloney cautions him:

> "There are a number of concealed drawers, cupboards, and compartments which have things hidden in them. The Victorians had many secrets. For one thing, there is the Carrington Collection of Flagellatory Instruments and Literature, which is concealed behind a false wall in the Zollverein Indian Room. There is the Dodson-Hutter Collection of Pedophilic Photographs, concealed behind

> false panels in a sideboard carved in oak in the Renaissance style by Graham and Sidgwood of London…. There is an artificial phallus concealed in a false compartment in the statue *The Turkish Slave* by Henry Powers. There are a number of wonderful things like this, which you've missed."[2]

Maloney proceeds to reveal what is hidden, to expose what was deliberately obscured from view, allowing the reader to access the sexual "wonders" of the past. His collection constitutes a veritable orgiastic phantasmagoria of erotic excess - or "sexsation" - demanding correction of still prevalent modern-day notions of our forerunners' sexual repression. For too long, Cora Kaplan notes, the term "Victorian sexuality" has been regarded as an "oxymoron," while "Victorian" has been employed rather simplistically as "the unhealthy antonym to … sexual freedom."[3] Yet today's literary Victorianists and cultural historians argue that such a view constitutes a stereotypical latter-day invention; as Matthew Sweet claims: "The Victorians invented us, and we in our turn invented the Victorians" with sexuality becoming the "principal territory upon which this body of myth and misinformation was constructed."[4] This retrospectively projected fantasy-as-truism could also be viewed as a Bluebeard's chamber - our own age's heart of darkness - representing the omnipotent fantasy of penetrating and mastering the great sexual unknown of the Victorian age.

In Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (1999), this dubious fantasy is symbolised by the *ectopia cordis* or exposed heart of the illegitimate baby son of the occasional prostitute Gustine, with both of whom the doctor Henry Chiver becomes obsessed. His craving to penetrate the hidden workings of human nature through the child's abnormality stands in for the reader's desired mastery over the Victorians' secret lives, vices, and perversities. In both cases, sexual appetite is sublimated into empirical investigation and intellectual knowledge. This becomes clear upon the reader's introduction to Gustine, who supplements her meagre pay as a factory potter's assistant by the titular dress lodging, selling herself in rented finery. The first view of Gustine positions the reader as a potential client, tempted to engage in erotic consumption. Gustine is described as "[a] walking confection. A tasty morsel. And yet, still you hesitate. Certainly no one other than the finest lady might afford such a singular dress."[5] A similar discrepancy pervades the neo-Victorian novel's frequent presentation of sex as something else. The "fine" and noble aim of historical inquiry and exposé is the pretence – "the singular dress" - that potentially masks a self-indulgent prurient voyeurism.

The opening of Michel Faber's bestselling *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) renders the same desire explicit, enticing the reader to lose

her/himself in the night time underworld of Victorian London, in another metaphorical encounter of time-travelling punter and streetwalker:

> you are an alien from another time and place altogether.… you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let's not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name, or at least show you a good time.[6]

The reader's motivation to keep reading derives as much from the anticipated pleasurable entertainment as from any interest in historical documentation, instruction in past socio-economic iniquities, or edifying criticism of Victorian moral hypocrisy. As does Holman, Faber opts for a prostitute protagonist, who echoes Gustine's depiction as "confectionary" in her very name: Sugar quite literally deals in the fulfilment of every imaginable sexual craving, since being forced into the sex-trade as a child by her own mother-madam. Sex becomes the "sweetener" to market a frequently loathsome past.

Indeed, our fascination with Victorian sexuality seems to derive largely from depictions of such anomalous practices as child prostitution and sexual slavery, in an age of juxtaposed wilfully imposed/maintained sexual ignorance and unchecked libertinism. To borrow Sweet's words, "the Victorians are required to play the villains in most histories of sexuality,"[7] not only in terms of the repressive hypothesis. Their dichotomic configuration as sexual blackguards or else "sexual ignoramus[es]," as in the case of John Ruskin, "satisfies a desire to see evidence of broader erotic dysfunction in Victorian culture" supposedly transcended since.[8] Yet we also extract politically incorrect pleasure from what has become inadmissible or ethically *unimaginable* as a focus of desire in our own time. We enjoy neo-Victorian fiction at least in part to feel outraged, to revel in degradation and revulsion, *reading for defilement*.

Neo-Victorian fiction panders to a seemingly insatiable desire for imagined perversity. The consummation scene in *The Dress Lodger* between Henry and the reluctant Gustine, fresh from the cholera-stricken pottery works, proves paradigmatic. Performed in Henry's anatomical study cum dissecting chamber, the sex-act smacks of necrophilia and rape, as well as constituting child prostitution, since Gustine is barely fifteen. It leaves little room for mainstream erotic titillation, only disgust. Moreover, narrated from the viewpoint of the aggressor, it renders the reader complicit in the assault:

> Gustine struggles. "Please, Dr. Chiver, my child…"
>
> [….] Why does she pretend? His soft white hands pry those lying legs apart, cracking the seal of mud

> between. He fumbles with the buttons on his trousers, never in his life so excited and terrified at once.
>
> Yes. With a moan, he drives into her sump, letting himself wallow, rut like the depraved animal he is. He is where he belongs, at last, splashing himself with swill. He breathes in her hair, smelling the perfume of worms and cold earth, of rotted wood and human decay. Her tiny cunt is loamy with dirt, this little whore. Henry pounds and pounds, driving six feet deep inside her. Not yet. Not yet. He moans, and from the corner of his eye sees the baby staring at him, his heart beating like a slow blue dirge. […] He cries, and with a shudder spends as into his own grave.[9]

Perhaps a cynical mirror of our own time's sexual glut and disillusionment with so-called sexual revolutions, reading for defilement also seems intended to whet jaded appetites with something "different," even if nauseatingly so, when sexual novelty has been largely exhausted. For in some cases, such as child sex, our permissive age paradoxically affords a *lesser* instead of greater gamut of sexual "freedoms" to be readily enjoyed than does the re-imagined Victorian banquet of illicit pleasures. Our distance from the period, Kaplan remarks, "has gradually lent it over time the charm of antiquity and the exotic, so that increasingly … even its worst abuses seem to fascinate rather than appal."[10] While neo-Victorian representations of sex as defilement participate in a long tradition of anti-Victorianism that reaches back to Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, the oppositional stance is undermined by readers' complicated investments in the sexual/textual politics of degradation. By projecting prohibited and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexual liberation and social progress, indulging in the self-satisfactions of our assumed superiority. Or as Christian Gutleben puts it, "[i]f the contemporary [neo-Victorian] novels insist so much on the sexual discriminations of the past, it is of course to convince the reader that such a state of affairs would be totally out of place today."[11]

Hence, the sexual emphasis in neo-Victorian fiction falls as much on the repulsively ugly or monstrous as on the appealingly erotic, as much on the denial and violation of sexual rights as on their achievement. Sexuality contributes crucially to what Gutleben calls "[a]n aesthetics of the unsavoury" at work in the neo-Victorian novel.[12] Gutleben reads such aesthetics as a carnivalesque "anti-Victorian stance" that "conveys a manifest willingness to adopt a strateg[y] opposed to Victorian euphemisms and sexual understatements," deliberately violating "the decorum of traditional literature" via flagrant indecency and a scandalous foregrounding of bodies and sex-acts.[13] As a writerly technique of resistance/contestation/correction,

the aesthetics of unsavouriness - even at their most perverse - still enact a socio-political critique of the nineteenth century's self-serving public fictions, elisions, and repressions that maintained the veneer of middle-class respectability. Yet arguably, reading for defilement is finally focused more on reader response than on authorial strategy (though the latter, of course, guides the former). It possesses a less than liberatory dimension, hardly more truthful, ethically responsible, or morally edifying than the Victorian attitudes of un-saying and un-seeing that are purportedly being castigated.

If the Victorians function as all too convenient bogeymen and nemeses to our modern-day sexual selves, they also act as our darkest doubles. The twenty/twenty-first century proliferation of sex clubs and prostitution; the globalisation of sex tourism, sex trafficking, and sexual slavery; the AIDS epidemic and exponential rise in sexually transmitted diseases; violent internet porn and paedophilia - all of these can be read as an uncanny doubling and intensification of Victorian social issues, indicating a return of the repressed instead of societal "progress." Sweet, for instance, cites statistics on the number of prostitutes working in 1860s London, ranging from 5,500 to 22,000, which compare surprisingly favourably with estimated twentieth century figures: "In 1994, an eight-week campaign to remove prostitutes' cards from pay phones in Westminster [alone] garnered more than one million cards."[14] Even allowing for extensive duplication amongst sex workers' advertisements, this indicates an extraordinary increase. Neo-Victorian fiction's retrospective "sexual liberation" of the Victorians becomes disturbingly infused with preferred ignorance - or deliberate denial - of our own culture's complicity in free market systems that enable continuing exploitation and abuse, sexual and otherwise.

It is no coincidence that in *The Great Victorian Collection*, the sexual aspects of the exhibition are effectively censored by the state of California, with "the Correction Chamber, the bordello parlor, the erotic library and collection of pedophilic photographs … remain[ing] closed to the general public."[15] Yet in the nearby Great Victorian Village franchise, capitalising on the notoriety of Maloney's collection, innocuous family restaurants and shops like "the Florence Nightingale Tea Room" and "Oscar Wilde Way Out (a men's-wear boutique)"[16] vie with more bawdy venues:

> The prurient were wooed in Mrs Beauchamp's Parlour, a nightclub decorated in a bowdlerized version of the Collection's bordello, which had been closed to the public because of its bestial wall decorations. In Mrs Beauchamp's Parlour, young California girls wearing black lisle stockings and white cotton knickers with panels which opened to expose their behinds moved among the patrons,

> serving drinks and flaunting their breasts in provocative dishabille. There was also the Penny Gaff, an imitation Victorian music hall, with low comedians, topless can-can dancers, and three nude girls in red silk stockings who sailed over the heads of the audience in red velvet swings, their bare bottoms elegantly cushioned on white swans-down seats.[17]

Nudity, sex, and the female body are no less exploited in this permitted free market scenario than in Maloney's Victorian exhibition.

Comparable present-day transgressions underlie *The Dress Lodger*'s depiction of Henry Chiver's appropriation and outright theft of the bodies of Sunderland's poor for anatomical dissection and medical research. His activities echo such current concerns as the illicit and/or stolen organs trade especially rife in economically disadvantaged Third World countries, or Gunther von Hagen's *Body Worlds* (*Körperwelten*) exhibitions, sometimes alleged to utilise bodies obtained without consent. For Holman's British readers, Chiver's offences also resonate with the Alder Hey organs scandal, during which medical practitioners illicitly "harvested" over 2000 hearts, as well as other organs and tissues, from more than 800 infants who died at the Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool between 1988 and 1996, with similar practices apparently rife in other British hospitals at the time.[18] Henry's fitting punishment for his violation of the poor - including Gustine's grave-robbed son whose heart he intended to preserve – takes the form of another quasi-sexual consummation, this time with his virginal fiancée Audrey, who succumbs to cholera and whose body the rioting vengeful mob forces him to dissect. The doctor's "knife plunging in" replicates the phallic breaking of the hymen on the wedding night, here perversely duplicated as a scene of necrophilia, already foreshadowed in the grave imagery of his earlier violation of Gustine, as underlined by the communal narrative voice of his ghostly watching victims: "Though she is stretched before you on the table, your dearest stands with us now, married to you in a far more final way."[19]

Finally, Faber's description of Victorian gentlemen's nights on the town in *The Crimson Petal and the White* differ little in kind from today's organised stag night trips to Prague or World Cup football match celebrations, which encourage an orchestrated influx of prostitutes to meet demand, many of whom will not be voluntary professionals but trafficked sex-slaves labouring under duress. Hence, when William Rackham strolls through Soho with his friends Bodley and Ashwell, picking up a threesome of prostitutes for a quick blowjob and fuck down an alleyway,[20] he brings to mind the modern-day sex tourist at home and abroad, as much as standing in for the contemporary reader as sex tourist in the Victorian sexscape.

Coming to "know" the secret sex-lives of the Victorians in order to censure and pillory, to boo and hiss, thus becomes an all too convenient means of "un-knowing" our own world of sex, even of re-asserting our own sexual rights and freedoms by neglecting those of others. Gutleben argues along similar lines that "the recriminative purpose" of neo-Victorian novels potentially pre-empts socio-political engagement:

> It seems that, since it denounces a number of social and historical [and sexual] wrongs, neo-Victorian fiction feels exempt from any other political responsibility - as if the operation of denunciation were a self-sufficient and ground-breaking eye-opener.… [I]s it not remarkable that a majority of these contemporary novels are totally bereft of any narratorial or diegetic consideration about the present situation?[21]

If neo-Victorian sexuality is primarily represented as a crisis of anxiety and guilt, it signals such a crisis not merely in the past but, more significantly, in our own time also.

2. Into the Great Unknown (or, Being Had)

More is at stake, however, than political correctness in neo-Victorian solicitations to read for and about sex. In figuring the great unknown predominantly through the sexscape of the female body, the neo-Victorian novel replicates the methods of Victorians themselves. In 1845, for instance, the American gynaecologist J. Marion Sims described himself as "a colonizing and conquering hero" for advancing boldly into unexplored territory: "I saw everything as no man had seen it before."[22] In *The Dress Lodger*, Henry Chiver's feverish reaction to Gustine reminds him of how he used to feel when in love and "[t]hen, when he stood before the uncharted universe of his first opened body."[23] Not all Victorians, however, shared Sims' and Chiver's excitement of discovery. An apocryphal account of the life of the Victorian author and art critic John Ruskin recounts the disaster of his wedding night with Effie Gray. Ruskin found his wife's materiality so unlike his idealised notions of angelic femininity, exemplified by the smooth female forms familiar to him from Greek statuary and paintings, that he apparently "suffered a traumatic shock … when he discovered that Effie had pubic hair."[24] Purportedly, his disgust rendered him incapable of consummating their union; nor does he appear to have managed do so in the remaining six years of their marriage prior to its annulment.

In *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), J. G. Farrell stages what I take to be a comical re-enactment of this scene. In a fictional British outpost during the Indian Mutiny, the fallen Lucy Hughes holds a tea-party for two of her

admirers, George Fleury and Harry Dunstaple, when the participants are engulfed by a swarm of resonantly named cockchafers. Feeling the flying black beetles "pullulating beneath her chemise," Lucy hysterically tears off her clothes: "Her muslin dress, her petticoats, chemise and underlinen were all discarded in a trice and there she stood, stark naked but as black and glistening as an African slave-girl."[25] The insects fasten onto Lucy's white flesh but repeatedly fall off due to their own weight, leaving the female form simultaneously veiled and exposed in an erotic black-and-white "flickering image" that inspires George with the idea of "a series of daguerreotypes which would give the impression of movement."[26]

As Lucy swoons, the men debate the permissibility of assisting the naked woman, but finally remove the insects, using the torn-off boards of a conveniently handy Bible to "shave" Lucy. This is the point at which Farrell invokes the Ruskin episode:

> Her body, both young men were interested to discover, was remarkably like the statues of young women they had seen…like, for instance, the Collector's plaster cast of *Andromeda Exposed to the Monster*, though, of course, without any chains. Indeed, Fleury felt quite like a sculptor as he worked away and he thought that it must feel something like this to carve an object of beauty out of the primeval rock. He became quite carried away as with dexterous strokes he carved a particularly exquisite right breast and set to work on the delicate fluting of the ribs. The only significant difference between Lucy and a statue was that Lucy had pubic hair; this caused them a bit of a surprise at first. It was not something that had ever occurred to them as possible, likely, or even, desirable.
>
> "D'you think this is *supposed* to be here?" asked Harry, who had spent a moment or two scraping at it ineffectually with his board. Because the hair, too, was black it was hard to be sure that it was not simply matted and dried insects.
>
> "That's odd," said Fleury, peering at it with interest; he had never seen anything like it on a statue. "Better leave it, anyway, for the time being. We can always come back to it later when we've done the rest."[27]

The scene of Lucy as slave girl in moving daguerreotype is clearly voyeuristic, alluding to the erotic film industry emerging in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As do many such films, the "shaving" evokes tropes of the harem, with concubines being depilated for their master's pleasure.

The incident plays to modern readers' titillation, mediated by Lucy's mesmerised male observers. The passage invites desire but delays erotic gratification - quite literally sublimating Fleury's sexual energy into art - and then short-circuits desire altogether by the shift to comic parody in the Ruskinesque episode. Having enticed his present-day audience into the sexual tableau of the helpless, naked female body at the mercy of male desire, Farrell checks our delectation, by inscribing an insurmountable difference in sexual knowledge and competence between the Victorians - "them" - and us. Lucy's pubic hair ejects us from the fictional illusion of the nineteenth century into our own, more sexually sophisticated, historical context.

The movement from seduction to erotic disappointment and/or farce constitutes a recurrent motif in the neo-Victorian novel. It satirises our cultural obsession with sexuality and readers' over-investment in sex as the hallowed gateway to knowledge of self and others. As Miriam E. Brustein argues, too many authors reductively "associate representations of sex - speaking and performance thereof - with the 'truth' about the Victorians" per se, producing a supposedly "heightened realism" by "uncover[ing] the bodies hidden under corsets and frock coats" that reveals rather less about our forebears than about twentieth/twenty-first century fantasies.[28] This raises questions as to whom the laughter often produced by neo-Victorian sexual fumblings should be properly directed at, as in another Ruskinesque scene re-imagined in Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Henry Rackham, the priesthood contemplating brother of Sugar's lover, reflects on the mysteries of the female body via "the Magdalens and the classical heroines and the martyred saints" with "their flesh … on show" at the Royal Academy exhibitions,[29] all the while tortured by the shadowy areas the painters withhold from view and by his secret lust for his reformist friend, Emmeline Fox. To test his faith and commitment to social reform, Henry engages prostitutes in paid conversation with the aim of converting them from their fallen ways. Not surprisingly, his first encounter ends in disaster:

> "Are you…are you hairy?"
>
> She squints in puzzlement. "Hairy, sir?"
>
> "On your body." He waves his hand vaguely at her bodice and skirts. "Do you have hair?"
>
> "Hair, sir?" she grins mischievously. "Why, of *course*, sir: same as you!" And at once she grabs hold of her skirts and gathers them up under her bosom, holding the rucked material with one hand while, with the other, she pulls down the front of her pantalettes, exposing the dark pubic triangle.
>
> Loud laughter sounds from elsewhere in the street as Henry stares for a long instant, shuts his eyes, and turns

> his back on her. […] Head aflame, he stumbles stiffly down the street, as if her sex is buried deep in his flesh like a sword.
>
> "I only wanted an answer!" he yells hoarsely over his shoulder, as more and more of Church Lane's elusive and subterranean voices join in the laughter without even understanding its cause.
>
> "Jesus, sir!" she calls after him. "You ought to get *summat* for your extra shillin'!"[30]

Though siding with those laughing, the amused reader is equally implicated in Henry's position of being laughed *at*, for Henry assumes the reader's place as the explorer of the alien Victorian sexscape. His prurient fascination mirrors our own, for all that we come from what Sugar imagines as "the more sophisticated and permissive future that's just around the corner."[31]

Indeed, for products of a "permissive" society, neo-Victorian fantasies repeatedly assume curiously antiquated overtones of imperialist adventures by would-be conquerors of exotic female Others. In this sense, Henry's encounter with the heathen of the streets echoes the reader's first glimpse of Sugar in terms of its Oriental sensual promise: "Her eyes alone, even if she were wrapped up like an Arabian odalisque with nothing else showing, would be enough to declare her sex."[32] Similarly, Moore refers to *The Turkish Slave* statue; Farrell transforms Lucy into an African slave-girl; and in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) the protagonist Charles Smithson views the enigmatic Sarah Woodruff as "proud and submissive, bound and unbound, his slave and his equal" shortly before he finally takes physical possession of her.[33] Put differently, the neo-Victorian novel exoticises and seeks to penetrate the tantalising hidden recesses of the nineteenth century by staging a retrospective imperialism.

The neo-Victorian sexsation elicits reader desire only to mock the possibility of its satisfaction. In Fowles' novel, the gentleman Charles' growing obsession with the fallen woman Sarah propels the plot of bourgeois respectability tempted by erotic transgression to its natural climax, namely the sexual union of the protagonists. Yet the consummation proves perversely anti-climactic. The still shirt-clad Charles climbs on top of the "half-swooned," "passive yet acquiescent" Sarah and, with a single thrust, "beg[ins] to ejaculate at once" - in "[p]recisely ninety seconds" the non-event is over.[34] Fowles' use of erotic tension becomes a means of game playing with the reader. Similarly in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), the unions of the two sets of nineteenth and twentieth century lovers, whose romances develop in parallel, take up a minuscule amount of text compared to the long drawn out build-up of attraction and seduction. When the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte finally

consummate their secret love affair, their orgasms disappear into a line break in the text; the reader's curiosity remains unsatisfied. As Jennifer M. Jeffers argues, the reader desires to possess and "come to 'know' the text" - and hence the Victorian age in its truest naked aspect - "much as a lover comes to 'know' her beloved."[35] Yet teasingly, the narrative affords only a glimpse from Randolph's summary perspective: "That was the first of those long strange nights," to which the reader never becomes fully privy.[36]

At this point, roughly half-way through the novel, most readers will displace their sexual anticipations onto the twentieth century academics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, who seek to uncover the truth about the Victorian poets' relationship. Not surprisingly, their quest for knowledge ends in sex. Yet the libidinal energy that literally drives Byatt's plot fizzles out in a single sentence bedroom scene:

> And very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries, and he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph.[37]

As in the case of the poets' union, the discretely couched, self-consciously "outdated" language, highly romanticised and oblique, withholds more than it discloses. The reader is not allowed to participate even vicariously, but is held "a long way off," permitted no visceral involvement with sweat-moistened flesh and groping hands. Not a breast, buttock, clitoris, vagina, or penis in sight. Indeed, Byatt's narrator forewarns the reader of her intentions in this respect. Ruminating on the pleasures of reading as a kind of "*mise-en-abîme*," the narrator remarks on novels' interminable self-referentiality (or, if you will, auto-eroticism); words constantly reproduce their own image so as to make "the imagination experience something papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture" - supplying an equivocal substitute that affords "the pleasure of the brain as opposed to the viscera - though each is implicated in the other."[38]

Much as Fowles' novel does, *Possession* makes clear that our arrogant attempt to *repossess* the Victorian age through sex is analogous to Ash's reflections on Christabel: "For months he had been possessed by the imagination of her. She had been distant and closed away, a princess in a tower…. Her presence had been unimaginable, or more strictly, *only* to be imagined."[39] Victorian sexuality continues to appear to the modern-day reader/critic as a princess in a tower awaiting rescue by our more liberated

age. Yet it too is "*only* to be imagined," never *known* as anything other than a simulacrum reflecting our own desires. In *The Great Victorian Collection*, Maloney appropriately wakes to gaze upon his collection glittering in the sun "mysterious as the minarets of Samarkand," a shimmering mirage of desire:

> And, looking at it now, he saw it for the first time as it really was: a faëry [sic] place, ringed around by spells and enchantments, a web of artifice as different from the reality it sought to commemorate as is a poem about spring from spring itself.[40]

The neo-Victorian novel reader, then, has been had, in part by what s/he *wants* to believe, much like Charles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Discovering virgin blood on his shirttails, which reveals the fallen woman's innocence, he accuses her, "I was no more than the dupe of your imaginings," but clearly these "imaginings" were as much his own.[41] Analogously, in Faber's novel, William Rackham revels in the affirmation of his sexual omnipotence by Sugar's praise of his male organ: "The taste of it alone is enough, she assures him, to bring her to the brink of ecstasy."[42]

3. Politicising Victorian Sex

Neo-Victorian sexual fantasies of possessing/penetrating the erotic Other simultaneously deconstruct that desire, balancing reactionary and liberationist impulses. In Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), the implication of lesbian desire in fraud and criminality inevitably reinforces outdated stereotypes of lesbianism as linked to deviance. Yet Waters also employs the neo-Victorian sex trope for a subversive textual/sexual politics of turning the tables on heteronormativity. In *Fingersmith*, she ironically appropriates the male-dominated realm of pornography, represented by the protagonist Maud Lilly's tyrannical collector "uncle." After his death, Maud achieves economic independence by writing pornography, a lesbian profiteering from male desires by simulating fantastic sex on paper, and possibly mainly heterosexual copulation at that. In *Affinity*, Waters stakes a political claim to spiritualism, not only as a proto-feminist means of Victorian women's empowerment and advance into the public sphere, but as a manifest space of lesbian desire and intervention.

Waters' first neo-Victorian novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), demonstrates this historicisation of lesbianism still more explicitly, tracing the Whitstable fishmonger Nancy Astley's picaresque journey of sexual awakening via a series of lovers ranging from the repressed music hall male impersonator Kittie Butler, through the rich exploitative Sapphist Diana Lethaby and her working class maid, to the socialist philanthropist Florence Banner. Nancy's progression to an open and equal lesbian relationship

figures personal actualisation and social progress through sexual liberation. Perhaps not surprisingly in view of this strategy's similarity to Chic Lit themes, Kaplan notes that Waters' trio of neo-Victorian novels has "nicknamed a new subgenre: the slyly metrosexual 'Vic Lit'."[43]

While questions surround the extent of Nancy's budding political consciousness, Waters' sexsationalist politics are unambiguous. While Nancy's androgynous facility to shift between female and male roles in her stage career and her stint as a rent boy enacts theories of gender as historically contingent performativity, Waters also recuperates the ghost of lesbian history left out of the Victorian public record, apart from negative mentions in medical discourses on sexual perversion and degeneracy. Representing lesbianism as pervasive from the lower to upper classes, Waters creates a quasi-genealogy of lesbian desire and puts the weight of historical precedent behind lesbian existence. Waters breathes life into Terry Castle's notion of the culturally ghosted presence of the "apparitional lesbian,"[44] giving her back flesh, blood, sex, and cunt, as in Nan's first union with Diana and her massive leather dildo:

> The more I fingered her the harder she kissed me, and the hotter I grew between my legs, behind my sheath of leather.… she gently lowered herself upon me; then proceeded to rise and sink, rise and sink, with an ever speedier motion. At first I held her hips, to guide them; then I returned a hand to her drawers, and let the fingers of the other creep round her thigh to her buttocks. My mouth I fastened now on one nipple, now on the other, sometimes finding the salt of her flesh, sometimes the dampening cotton of her chemise.[45]

There is nothing remotely spectral or unreal about lesbians and lesbian sex here. Wholly of the flesh, lesbianism is quite literally *materialised*, arguably accounting for Waters' graphic and extended sexual representations, compared to Fowles' and Byatt's oblique depictions. Yet the reader's belief in Waters' lesbian history is finally achieved not by facts but by the sheer force of desire that carries its own conviction within it.

Even overtly political uses of the sex trope in neo-Victorian fiction thus remain flawed as avenues to genuine knowledge of the past, as Margaret Atwood's exposure of the Victorian sexual double standard in *Alias Grace* (1996) also makes clear. Dr. Simon Jordan, a burgeoning American psychologist, is employed to assess the mental state of the infamous real-life Grace Marks, convicted for involvement in the murders of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper-cum-mistress Nancy Montgomery, but spared execution on account of her youth. Nearly thirty years later, Simon

plans "to open her up like an oyster" and break through the now middle-aged Grace's supposed amnesia, establishing the true extent of her culpability and possible grounds for a pardon.[46] Employing an aphrodisiac for his simile proves apt; for like the Victorian newspaper readers who avidly followed Grace's case, the prison and asylum visitors who come to gaze upon her with prurient curiosity, and arguably the neo-Victorian novel readers also, the doctor is chiefly concerned with whether or not Grace really was the murder-inciting "paramour" of her fellow servant James McDermott, executed for the crimes.[47] Simon stands in for the modern-day reader, seeking to penetrate and possess Grace as an object of erotic knowledge.

All the male characters engage in metaphorical versions of *reading for defilement*, from the reverend who urges Grace to confess her sins, to the man she marries upon her release, who employs her stories of degradation as sexual foreplay. "[H]is favourite part of the story," Grace notes, is "when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house … looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes."[48] Similarly, Grace recalls her murdered master's evident pleasure at "watching my bare ankles and legs, dirty as they were, and … my backside moving back and forth with the [floor] scrubbing, like a dog waggling its rump."[49] The figure of the maid, her morals inevitably suspect on account of her lowly origins, is constructed as sexually available to the men of the house, comparable to chattels or prostitutes. So too in Simon's mind, where Grace's servant status in the prison governor's household evokes childhood memories of creeping into maids' attic bedrooms to finger their still warm, discarded petticoats and stockings. In an erotic Bluebeard-like dream of a passageway of locked doors, Simon imagines the hidden maids "[s]itting on the edges of their narrow beds, in their white cotton shifts, their hair unbound and rippling down over their shoulders, their lips parted, their eyes gleaming. Waiting for him."[50]

Atwood resonantly critiques unstable gender and class hierarchies, which become "eroticized topograph[ies] for transgressive desire,"[51] acting upon which proves punishable, even fatal, for women, while men do so with impunity. Thus Grace's friend Mary Whitney, seduced by her employer's son, is forced to safeguard her domestic position by resorting to abortion and dies from resulting complications. In contrast, Simon admits freely availing himself of the sexual opportunities afforded by his European travels, and he slips readily into an affair with his married landlady Rachel Humphreys, in no way feeling thereby disqualified to pursue the prison governor's virginal daughter Lydia as a possible marriage partner. Simon conveniently justifies the "hypocrisy" of dichotomising women into virgins/whores on the basis that "one must present what ought to be true as if it really is" so as to "safeguard the purity of those still pure."[52] Atwood presents female sexuality as conveniently "read" or constructed by men so as to be most readily exploitable. In an act of resistance to such reading for actual or fantasised

defilement, Atwood has her protagonist's "real" sexual nature and role in the murders evade both Simon and Grace's present-day would-be readers.

4. Conclusion: The New Orientalism

What does the neo-Victorian novel's sexsation finally amount to in its contradictory celebration of libidinous fantasy and defilement, its parody of erotic fulfilment, and its ambivalent political impulse to "liberate" the past? The answer, I believe, is gestured at in the seemingly innocuous query of one of Thomas Kinnear's friends, as to whether Thomas had locked his mistress "up in a cupboard somewhere with the rest of his Turkish harem."[53] The query is linked directly to Grace's shock at two pictures in her master's bedroom. One depicts the bathing scene from the apocryphal story of Susannah and the Elders who would violate her, set of course in the Middle East. The other shows "a woman without any clothes on, on a sofa, seen from the back and looking over her shoulder, with a sort of turban on her head and holding a peacock-feather fan," in all likelihood a print of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's 1814 painting *Grande Odalisque*.[54] In the course of the novel Simon too turns into a metaphorical pasha contemplating the sensual delights of an imaginary harem, already implied in his dream of the maids. He reflects on his mistress Rachel's sexual fantasies, in one of which she is

> trapped, at the mercy of his will, as in the obscene novels obtainable at the seedier bookstalls of Paris, with their moustache-twirling Sultans and cowering slave-girls. Silvery draperies, chained ankles. Breasts like melons. Eyes of gazelles. That such configurations are banal does not rob them of their power.[55]

Colette Colligan notes that the harem, as depicted in the obscene literature Simon alludes to, "evoked endless sexual fantasies in the West that revolved around violent incarceration and limitless sensuality."[56] Rachel clearly acts as a stand-in for the incarcerated Grace, Simon's true object of fantasy. When quizzed about Grace's veracity by Simon, her defence lawyer Kenneth MacKenzie invokes the *Thousand and One Nights*, comparing Grace to Scheherazade, who "has merely been telling [Simon] what she needs to tell" so as to "keep the Sultan amused."[57] The discrete dispersal of such Oriental allusions throughout the novel means they function as a textual unconscious, easily missed upon first reading, though striking in their cumulative effect.

As a literary genre and aesthetic technique, neo-Victorianism, I want to propose, has become the new Orientalism, a significant mode of imagining sexuality in our hedonistic, consumerist, sex-surfeited age. As the spread of more interdependent globalised economies, mass tourism, and new technologies continuously diminishes the availability of unexplored

geographical "dark areas" for reconfiguration into mirrors of our own desires, a displacement occurs from the spatial to the temporal axis. As Sugar's mother remarks in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, "we are hawkers in the marketplace of passion, and we must find whatever niche is not already filled."[58] In an ironic inversion, the Victorian age that once imagined the Orient as seductive free zone of libidinous excess in its literature, architecture, and arts, itself becomes Western culture's mysterious, eroticised, and exotic Other. As much is evident in *The Dress Lodger* from the narrator's question to the "matchstick painter," employed as an entry point into the Victorian scene, doubling for both the author/reader and her/his re-imagining of the seedy past:

> If you might have at your command the entire globe, any moment of historic confluence, if you might in the writing of a humble book bring back to life a Queen of Sheba or an Empress Josephine, would you strew her path with frogs here in dirty Sunderland when you might pluck from your imagination green emeralds to scatter before her in Zanzibar? No, we thought not.[59]

Yet of course Holman and her reader *do* opt for "dirty Sunderland" over exotic Zanzibar, for the Victorian whore over the enticing Creole Josephine or the outlandish Queen of Sheba - exactly because the nineteenth century industrial city and prostitute have been transfigured into fetishised erotic spectacles, evoking an analogous sexual fixation as the mysterious Orient.

If, as Gutleben argues persuasively, "[t]he object of [neo-]Victorian fiction is not a historically accurate referent but the commonly fantasized image of Victorian *fiction*,"[60] that is, an already *imagined* reality, then arguably the sex-object of neo-Victorian fiction likewise is not an authentic referent but a fetishistic fantasy, projected backwards in time. This is sex not as actually lived or experienced, but as imagined - sex in the brain, not in nineteenth century bedrooms or streets. Neo-Victorian fiction becomes both opium and Viagra for the modern armchair traveller through a magic lantern show. The Orient, described by Malek Alloula as "the sweet dream in which the West has been wallowing for more than four centuries,"[61] is replaced in the modern-day imagination by the equally wet dream of the Victorian age.

Orientalism, as first defined by Edward Said, as a means of appropriation, of asserting discursive, symbolic, and political power over the Other, has of course become politically incorrect and hence untenable, so that alternatives must be sought to fill its place. Even more so since "Oriental" religion and communities are now firmly embedded, if not wholly indigenised, into heterogeneous, "multi-cultural" Western societies. As Bryan S. Turner argues, nowadays,

> the sense of the strangeness of the outside world is difficult to sustain since the other has been, as it were, imported into all societies as a consequence of human mobility, migration and tourism. Otherness has been domesticated…. Islam is increasingly … part of the "inside" of the Western world.[62]

The Orient is no longer somewhere else out there. Accordingly, writers turn to their own culture to discover or, more accurately, *(re)construct* a substitute Other. Through a process of self-estrangement via nostalgic displacement and simulation, our imagined Victorian Others supplant the Orient to become what Said called "a sort of surrogate and even underground self."[63]

This substitute Orientalism is signalled by a striking repression or relegation of Orientalist tropes to the textual unconscious, encoded in "the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem," which associates "a political notion (despotism) with a sensual vision (the possession of women)."[64] The neo-Victorian novel may finally owe as much to Victorian pornography as to any of its literary predecessors. It is no coincidence that the busy nineteenth century traffic in pornography also proliferated the harem trope through its trade in erotic photographs and films, such as *Slave Trading in a Harem* (Méliès 1897) and *Marché D'Esclaves en Orient* (Pathé c.1900), and obscene publications, including such exotic novel titles as *The Lustful Turk* (1828) and *A Night in a Moorish Harem* (c.1896).[65] Indeed, according to Colligan, "the harem eventually became one of the most bankable and reproducible *topoi* in nineteenth-century obscenity," functioning "as a microcosm of empire where sexual conquest was commensurate with imperial conquest."[66] In a postcolonial age, the trope thus assumes a potential compensatory function vis-à-vis lingering Western dreams of maintaining one-time power over Others. Like the obscene Victorian texts on which they draw, sexsational neo-Victorian novels become "portable fantasies of personal empire."[67]

Although such a significant aspect of the nineteenth century cultural imaginary might be expected to feature conspicuously in re-visions of the period, literal Oriental settings or individuals are rarely given prominence, except in neo-Victorian novels dealing with events such as the Anglo-Afghan Wars or the Indian Mutiny.[68] More commonly, neo-Victorian fiction replaces the seraglio with nineteenth century backstreets, brothels, and bedrooms, as in William Rackham's first visit to a London house of pleasure in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Entertained by two girls at once, in a room where "[f]lattened velvet cushions are strewn on the threadbare Persian carpet," William's "lust … become[s] almost somnambulistic; he demands ever greater liberties … and the girls obey like figments of his own sluggish dream."[69] During the later Soho excursion with his friends, the harem trope of limitless sensuality and sexual mastery recurs in William's fantasy of

"[f]uck[ing] all the females in the world while the fucking is good! He feels as though he could spend like a geyser, filling first one woman, then the next, in their mouths, their cunts, their arses, leaving a great mound of them lolling and rumpled…Ah!"[70] Similarly, his brother Henry imagines Emmeline Fox as an odalisque, "splayed supine in a pillowy bower, naked and abandoned, inviting him to fall upon her."[71] Meanwhile Sugar's daily routine as kept mistress emulates Victorian fantasies of harem life as an indolent existence of pure voluptuous indulgence; Sugar reflects that "[h]alf her life … seems spent in the bath, preparing herself in case William should visit."[72] In *Tipping the Velvet*, Diana Lethaby's friends attribute elongated clitorises to Oriental women in a debate that again invokes the harem, with overtones of envy at the licentious possibilities it might afford:

> "We are reading the story," cried the woman … "of a lady with a clitoris as big as a little boy's prick! She claims she caught the malady from an Indian maid. I said, if only Bo Holliday were here, she might confirm it for us, for she was thick with the Hindoos in her years in Hindoostan."
>
> "It is not true of Indian girls," said another lady then. "But it is of the Turks. They are bred like it, that they might pleasure themselves in the seraglio."[73]

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Charles complains of Mr. Freeman's harshness following the break-off of the protagonist's engagement with his daughter, only for his solicitor to remind him that "if you play the Muslim in a world of Puritans, you can expect no other treatment."[74] And in *The Dress Lodger*, referring to the 1827-1828 Burke and Hare murders scandal, Henry recalls "the naked body of a prostitute [he'd] been with only the night before" arriving on Dr Knox's dissecting table at the Edinburgh Medical College; deeming her "almost too beautiful to cut," Knox first had her painted "as a cadaver odalisque."[75] The Oriental harem functions as the paradigm of sexual fantasy *par excellence*, paradoxically both in the Victorian age and in our own. As Alloula points out, constituting "[a] universe of *generalized perversion* and of the *absolute limitlessness of pleasure*, the seraglio does appear as the ideal locus of the phantasm in all its contagious splendor."[76]

Even as it promises a retrospective critique of gender, class, and/or race relations and their ideological legacies, the neo-Victorian novel's sexsation brings with it very real dangers of inadvertent recidivism and obfuscation, not least through romanticisation. The depiction of prostitution, for example, proves highly problematic. Though granting prostitutes an individuality beyond their often emblematic embodiment of sin and social evil in Victorian fiction, *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Crimson Petal and the*

White represent prostitution - no matter how degrading and exploitative - as a means of self-actualisation through ironic performativity, a calculated circumvention of "hard work" and appropriated female labour, and a sensible means of achieving economic independence and the "good life." During her time passing as a rent boy, for instance, Waters' Nancy experiences no greater discomfort than the cold street under her knees as she fellates her clients, and with a sovereign per trick, renting keeps her easily in comfort. Prostitution is little more than a merry masquerade allowing Nancy the freedom of the city; the threat of sexual violence does not even appear on the horizon, while risks of illness and venereal disease are elided. They may only be guessed at in the tuberculoid cough of the "mary-anne" or girlish rent-boy Alice and the never-told story of his dead sister, for whom he named himself.[77] Such figuration articulates a questionable *twenty-first* century trope of self-liberation through sexual liberation, which threatens to re-encode femininity first and foremost in terms of sexuality, and thus in terms of the body and its sexual availability. Such terms are all too easily co-opted by conservative factions defining and codifying "social problems" (such as teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, sexually transmitted diseases, and date rape) in ways that can be readily manipulated for sexual panic or political profit. This includes the notion, encoded in the picture of Susannah and the Elders in *Alias Grace*, that "women are always held responsible for male desire" and its consequences.[78] Quasi-Victorian sexual ignorance and extreme decorum, rather than sexual knowledge and liberation, once more become the only guarantors for the female body/subject's safety, her moral and/or legal "innocence," and her right to protection.

Similarly, the discourse of liberty from despotism, sometimes articulated through Orientalism, at least promises the possibility of political engagement when transposed to neo-Victorian fiction. Yet it seems increasingly unsustainable for the West to position itself as democratically superior primarily on the basis of its more enlightened attitudes to sexuality as *the* basic human right per se. Perhaps liberationist engagement can only be sustained by *not* hypocritically conflating liberty with sexual liberation, or knowledge with sexual knowledge, but keeping the two distinct. In *Possession*, Roland complains about disparate elements being "all reduced like boiling jam to - human sexuality" and queries, "really, what is it, what is this arcane power we have, when we see that everything is human sexuality? It's really *powerlessness*."[79] Though perhaps most relevant to contemporary gender relations, such reductionism also inflects international relations. One need think only of the way the figure of the Afghan woman, shrouded in her *burqa*, was appropriated to help justify the US led NATO intervention in Afghanistan against the Taleban, a move disturbingly reminiscent of British imperialists' treatment of the Indian practice of *suttee* or widow self-immolation, ironically described by Gayatri Spivak as "brown women saved

by white men from brown men."[80] This configuration almost literally replicates the Orientalist position, for as Emily Haddad points out, "[m]uch European condemnation of oriental tyranny arose (and still does) from moral indignation at the presumed oriental subordination of women."[81] We need to begin to ask not only what we know about sexuality, but *how* we know it. Or, put differently, what knowledge derives from eroticised fantasies of the Other (and ourselves as *Other-than*) and what from actual embodied practice.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles' narrator issues a resonant warning about the dangers of facilely projecting our fantasies of Otherness upon the sexually repressed Victorians, when "our [own] world spends a vast amount of its time inviting us to copulate, while our reality is as busy in frustrating us."[82] Using the Victorians as an excuse to produce and disseminate sexual discourse, purportedly about "them" but really about ourselves and our own desires, may finally result in power*lessness* rather than sexual empowerment and liberation. In an ironic twist, neo-Victorian Orientalism rebounds upon ourselves, as we become what we imagine:

> In a way, by transferring to the public imagination what they left to the private, we are the more Victorian - in the derogatory sense of the word - century, since we have, in destroying so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure.[83]

Notes

1. B Moore, *The Great Victorian Collection*, Paladin Grafton, London, 1988, p. 13.
2. Ibid., pp. 37-38. The reference to the statue appears to be a play by Moore on the American sculptor Hiram Powers' actual statue *The Greek Slave*, exhibited at the centre of the Crystal Palace, which attracted widespread acclaim, inspired a sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and was utilised to support abolitionist and Unionist causes .
3. Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana - Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 85. Other critics and social historians have tried to correct misapprehensions of the nineteenth century as a sexless age. See, e.g., S Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966; Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969; E Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*,

Heinemann, London, 1976; M Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1994; and W Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1996.

4. M Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002 , p. xii.
5. S Holman, *The Dress Lodger*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 2000, p. 9.
6. M Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2003, p. 3.
7. Sweet, op. cit., p. 211.
8. Ibid., p. 218.
9. Holman, op. cit., p. 298, un-bracketed ellipses in the original.
10. Kaplan, op. cit., p. 6.
11. C Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*, Rodopi, Amsterdam & New York, 2001, p. 123.
12. Ibid., p. 128.
13. Ibid., p. 131.
14. Sweet, op. cit., pp. 213-214.
15. Moore, op. cit., p. 189.
16. Ibid., p. 190.
17. Ibid., pp. 189-190.
18. See, e.g., 'Organ scandal background', *BBC News*, 29 January 2001, viewed 31 October 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1136723.stm>.
19. Holman, op. cit., pp. 394 and 393.
20. See Faber, op. cit. pp. 755-763.
21. Gutleben, op. cit., p. 169.
22. M Sims, cited in E Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Bloomsbury, London, 1991, p. 129; cited in J King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2005, p. 67.
23. Holman op. cit., p. 33.
24. M Lutyens, *Millais and the Ruskins*, John Murray, London, 1967, asterisked note, p. 156, referring to M Lutyens (ed.), *Effie in Venice: Unpublished Letters of Mrs. John Ruskin Written from Venice between 1849-1852*, John Murray, London, 1956, p. 21. Later Ruskin biographers proposed body odour and/or menstrual blood as alternative reasons for Ruskin's disgust. See also the discussion of the Ruskin story in Sweet, op. cit., pp. 217-219.

25. J G Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Orion, London, 1999, p. 230.
26. Ibid., p. 231.
27. Ibid, pp. 231-232, original ellipses and emphasis.
28. ME Brustein, "*Alias Grace*", 4 November 2004, viewed 20 October 2006, <http://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2004/11/ialias_gracei.html>.
29. Faber, op. cit., p. 315.
30. Ibid., p. 326, un-bracketed ellipses and emphasis in the original. Later in the novel William Rackham's friends discuss self-publishing a book on working class responses to Ruskin's *Academy Notes*. The reaction of a working man to a statue of the goddess "Afferdighty" is imagined as: "Greek? Blimey. Where's 'er black moustache, then?" Ibid., p. 756.
31. Ibid., p. 229.
32. Ibid., p. 26.
33. J Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Triad/Granada, Bungay, Suffolk, 1977, p. 301.
34. Ibid., p. 304.
35. JM Jeffers, 'The White Bed of Desire in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*', *Critique*, vol. 43, no. 2, Winter 2002, pp. 135-147, p. 135.
36. AS Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 283.
37. Ibid., p. 507.
38. Ibid., pp. 470 and 471.
39. Ibid., pp. 276-277, original emphasis.
40. Moore, op. cit., p. 168.
41. Fowles, op. cit., p. 309.
42. Faber, op. cit., p. 268.
43. Kaplan, op. cit., p. 8.
44. See T Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.
45. S Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, Virago, London, 2002, p. 243.
46. M Atwood, *Alias Grace*, QPD [Quality Paperbacks Direct], London, 1996, p. 133.
47. Ibid., p. 27.
48. Ibid., p. 457.
49. Ibid., p. 275.
50. Ibid., p. 139.
51. SK Stanley, 'The Eroticism of Class and the Enigma of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 22, no. 2, October 2003, pp. 371-386, p. 371.
52. Atwood, op. cit., p. 87.
53. Ibid., p. 252.

54. Ibid., p. 213. (For an image of the painting, see the Louvre's Ingres webpage, viewed 30 April 2008, <http://mini-site.louvre.fr/ingres/1.4.2.1_en.html>.)
55. Atwood, ibid., p. 365.
56. C Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke & New York, 2006, p. 32.
57. Atwood, op. cit., p. 377.
58. Faber, op. cit., p. 284.
59. Holman, op. cit., p. 6.
60. Gutleben, op. cit., p. 167, emphasis added.
61. M Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, M Godzich and W Godzich (trans.), Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, p. 3.
62. BS Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 183.
63. E Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 1995, p. 3.
64. Alloula, op. cit., pp. 3 and 95.
65. Although originally published in 1828, *The Lustful Turk* continued to be regularly re-printed during the later parts of the nineteenth century; see Colligan, op. cit., pp. 48-55. For a brief discussion of late nineteenth century erotic films, see ibid., p. 19.
66. Ibid., p. 23, original emphasis.
67. Ibid., p. 48.
68. See, e.g., George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman* (1969) about the First Afghan War, as well as *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975) about the Indian Mutiny. Linda Holeman's *The Linnet Bird* (2004) includes an inter-racial affair of a one-time child prostitute with a Ghilzai tribal chief in India, and Holeman's *The Moonlit Cage* (2006) deal with an abused Afghan girl's escape to England, where she paradoxically ends up in haremesque incarceration. Her gaoler and abuser Mr Bull keeps her drugged, taking sexually explicit photographs of her and commenting that "when newly attired, you might resemble your grandmother, as a concubine in the *zenana*." L Holeman, *The Moonlit Cage*, Headline Review, London, 2006, p. 445.
69. Faber, op. cit., pp. 71 and 72.
70. Ibid., p. 762, original ellipses.
71. Ibid., p. 263.
72. Ibid., p. 336.
73. Waters, op. cit., p. 312.
74. Fowles, op. cit., p. 356.
75. Holman, op. cit., p. 45.

76. Alloula, op. cit., p. 95, original emphasis.
77. Waters, op. cit., pp. 218 and 203.
78. King, op. cit., p. 78.
79. Byatt, op. cit., p. 253, original emphasis.
80. G Spivak, unpublished work at the time of quotation; cited in B Harlow, 'Introduction', in M Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, pp. ix-xxii, p. xviii.
81. EA Haddad, *Orientalist Poetics: The Islamic Middle East in Nineteenth-century English and French Poetry*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, p. 25.
82. Fowles, op. cit., p. 233.
83. Ibid., p. 234.

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PART II

Beings and Bodies in Sexual Discourse

Soma-Rasa

Shalmalee Palekar

Abstract
In this theory/fiction/performance, Soma-Rasa,[1] I will examine my "raced," lesbian, academic, creative body as a site of both "otherness" and empowerment. By inhabiting the subject position(s) of a diasporic, Indian, lesbian academic in Australia, do I necessarily operate from multiple liminalities? In what ways do I negotiate with whiteness? Attempting a fluid movement between "authenticity" and dreams, between split selves and fragmented subjectivities, between playfulness and polemic, my writing/performance will interrogate boundaries of the gendered body, sexuality, "race," and professionalism. I will explore what representations make it possible for the voices of "Indian women" to not be completely anchored to a space that is dictated only by white Western and Indian dominant discourses. Ultimately, I aim to develop a longer multimedia performance piece that examines the embodied production of knowledge and writes sexuality as a participation in multicultural community networks.

Key Words: academic, creativity, Indian, lesbian, postcolonial, sexuality.

*****

As a member of the Indian diaspora, Dr Shalmalee Palekar has left her home country, like many of us who come to Australia, perhaps with the hope of joining the ranks of the international cultural elite (smile). She thus falls into the interstices of the Third and First World, and she is part of the class of postcolonial intellectuals and artists of the Third World practising in the First World. What then is the specific construction of this postcolonial intellectual, and is her intervention in our country necessarily a departure from the now-much-theorised issue of Orientalism? How does the situatedness of such a postcolonial intellectual leave her signature on the cultural representation produced?

IndianAcademicLesbian. She is writing to create herself. She is writing for her life. She is writing so she exists. She writes longhand/hours/lines. She cannot write the questions. She can write only because the questions exist.

The hybrid subject is a split and a mobile subject, located in "third space:" an "in-between space" that disrupts binary oppositions between "self" and "other." …

LesbianIndianAcademic. There are days when she reels from the snowy keyboard, the glaring monitor. This is ridiculous, she thinks, why would she cry because she can do what she wants to do? This is the unanswerable question of her life.

… travelling into "third space" may open the way to conceptualising an inter-national culture, based not on exoticising multiculturalism, but on the inscription and articulation of hybridity.

AcademicIndianLesbian. The boat always sailed on rocky waters. In her waking dreams the boat always sailed on rocky waters. She sailed on rocky waters everyday. The turbulence of the waters rocked her to sleep.

To that end we should, you say, Uncle Bhabha - remember that it is the "inter - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture."[2]

But my dear Uncle Bhabha - splitting sunlight into a million shards no longer earns a living, and the cutting edge is trying to slice through my jugular!

Academic. She would wake every morning and feel deep dis-ease. She would open her eyes, there would be dis-ease lying on top of her. Its eyeballs pressing into hers.

Bloody NRI![3] *But what about the "hype of hybridity?"*[4] *Am I authentically hybrid enough?* Bloody NRI! *Who decides?*

In India. There are so many layers. This is why hats have a never-ending significance in her life. Like those whitehot, still days when you sit with gin and tonic and a book. With each turn of the page, another hat is placed on your head. A recognition is barely made and it

slips away immediately.

In Oz. My friend Paul says: "God, you two are disgustingly in love! I bet you read Derrida to each other in bed!" And I say "Paul, Paul! Like all lesbians, we gently comb each others tresses in shimmering soft focus, with kd lang swelling on the soundtrack!"

In Oz. She cultivates a taste for the details in a dark work of art, a love of chiaroscuro - because its sharp highlights hurt.

In India. The wearing of bindis has been an urban fashion statement for Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Parsi, and Jewish women for decades. Must we, my dears, always be "tradition" to your "fashion"?

In India. There have always been words for women who love women - Samyoni, Sakhiyani. Affectionate, erotic words. Must we, my dears, be "western corruption" to your "Indian values?"

Shalmalee says: "take your 'authenticity' and shove it! The author still engages in a political act by inhabiting the subject position(s) of a diasporic, Indian, lesbian."

Where do you like it best? Butterflies frolicked in the air around her. She was surrounded by a snowfall of butterflies. Butterflies frolicked around her creating a blizzard. She didn't have the heart to pin them down.

Where do you like it best? Come to me, Lakshmi, you whose body is moist with the sprinkling of water from the tips of elephant's trunks, you, who are an embodiment of potency and energy and who, wearing a garland of lotus flowers, are delightful like the moon and shine with the splendour of gold.[5]

Where do you like it best? I… I… ( )

Where do you like it best? The repetition is circular. (She wonders at your irritation.) The meanings refuse to appear except as ellipsis. This being all she has to write with, she begins.

Says Shalmalee: "I am looking at you and I have something to say. Will you listen?"

Do not cast your eye on this exquisite branch.
It springs from a poison tree.
It will suck the venom out of the ground
And spread it in your veins
And you will blossom
With glittering poison flowers,
But bear no fruit.[6]

Says Shalmalee: “I am such a coward, I whimper and cover my arse-hole, wanting to hold the shit in.”

Dreamscape 1

In the silence between us the lines come back. Running through my head like little voices that whisper me to sleep:

I will not say that you betrayed me.
What for?
I have nursed my wounds fastidiously.
Why bother?
This blood leaks continuously
A congealed moment is illusory ...
It has forgotten how to stop, this blood.
Its duty is to flow and flood.

Dreamscape 2

In the silence between us the lines come back. Running through my head like little voices that whisper me to sleep.

You smell it, don’t you? The stench of burning flesh?
I can tell by the way your nostrils flare.
You’ve guessed correctly, it is the smell of a burning corpse.
Quite surprising, I suppose -
This stench pervading an affluent suburb -
Or is it?
I light quite a few funeral pyres when I can, you know.
For my friend, killed in a plane crash
In some foreign country,
Or my great-grandfather, thrown by a horse
On some unknown street.
For myself, killed in some forgotten past.
This pyre is for a dead woman. See, it’s like this,
Her body lay unattended in the street
For three days and finally the smell ...
What’s that? You’re in a hurry?
Oh well, hold on just a minute, will you,
I’ll join you as soon as her skull shatters.[7]

Dreamscape 3

I was at Woolworths yesterday and saw a woman checking the price on a loaf of bread. She turned to me and we smiled. She read my thoughts. She knew that I felt I couldn’t write conference papers anymore, hated

picking up the phone to call someone who would want to talk to me, feared the sound of my heart beating away so steadily in my chest. She nods at me and offers me the bread. I am confused and hesitate. She chooses another loaf of bread with her delicate, pale fingers, and leaves. I wonder what this bread will do. Will it cure me? Am ( ) I ( ) sick?

Says Shalmalee: "The more words I use, the more absurd this becomes. Longing for a pure space of marginalism beyond the cultural-political, hmm?"

So she decided, instead, to discourage her wildest passions, suck out all her desire, and … write an Australian Research Council Grant Application!

APPLAUSE! AUDIENCE WHISTLES, APPLAUDS.

Thank you, thank you! What am I doing at the moment? Oh just trying to finish my application, and to this end, will make a Blanket Statement:

Boredom smothers her, a blanket
Smelling of musty sex and
Long-dried laughter
Struggling to breathe through the heavy wool
She becomes inert as the air itself
Her purpose, now only a stain -
On one plaid corner
Of her faded mind -
Too vague for concrete shapes
Even monsters won't live there
Anymore

SO SHE SUBMITS THE GRANT APPLICATION, SECURE IN THE BELIEF THAT HER EXAMINATION OF HETERONORMATIVITY, FUNCTIONING AS NEO-COLONIALISM IN THE SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXT, WILL *DEFINITELY* SAFEGUARD AUSTRALIA.

Cut! Cut! The camera loves you, baby, but you're acting -
react instead, it'll be much more authentic!

TAKE 2: SHE SLEEPS THE SLEEP OF INNOCENTS, BECAUSE THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, FREE SPEECH SKIPS TRIPPINGLY THROUGH LUSH MEADOWS,

RACISM IS SO NINETIES, BABY! AND SOME APPLICATIONS ARE ALWAYS MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS.

APPLAUSE! AUDIENCE APPLAUDS WILDLY, STAND UP AND TAKE A BOW.

Now gather round, girls and boys, LETS HAVE FUN! Today we're going to listen to Wollongong Stories!

> hot breath on cheek close too close i look up to see raw face in my face slab of redmeat where you from mumbai blank stare india stuffing irritation back into my belly india oh theres lots of you people around these days wow but you dont look indian you know i mean forced smile starts to freeze on my mouth god not now dont say it i mean really you could pass for ( ) what with your accent and all i mean you dont sound indian you know i turn away biting my irritation hard not letting it go stay calm stay calm hot breath hovers on cheek
>
> close too close where you from mumbai blank stare india oh india deep sigh the poverty in these third world countries is appalling all those poor beggars but so spiritual you people i watched clive james you know heat and dust and illiteracy not like that overhere you must feel lucky to be overhere not really no i say blandness oils my words they slide out smoothly you know that indian woman i hear overhere not very friendly is she
>
> face in my face where you from india oh india really love curries myself the hotter the better sodoyouhaveaboyfriend the words run to gether dont connect at all not really no i say blank stare no bland better butter to oil youre not one of those god not now dont say it feminazi dykes are youhaha redtip tongue flickers obscenely across lips thick hand on my breast raw slab of meat stinging septic from restraining bites my anger roars dont touch dont DONT TOUCH ME BASTARD fuck fuckyou manhatinglezzoCUNT … GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM
>
> i wait for the car blood rushing my veins my watch weighs down wrist wrench to pick up that clenched fist is not mine i wait for the car a bottle of coke beckons sinister glinting i

walk towards it those trembling legs are not mine the bottle gleams glare in the sun too red too red i cut my throat and choke on coke i wait for the car a woman smiles at me i contort my face into grin bitter vomit rises filling my mouth those twisted lips are not mine i wait for the car the world blares colour it scorches my skin hot ash trickles down those seared eyes are not mine red on red on red on red i pluck my eyes and stab them dead i wait for the car my knees give way i sink into tar my black black heart flops out of my throat my rotted innards slime out after it is not they are not mine not mine
i wait for the car
i wait for
i wait

PAUSE

Says Shalmalee: "Every day is a conflict between 'nivrutti' (an absolute withdrawal into the void) and 'pravrutti' (the desire to be omnipresent).[8] How dramatic, no?! But you know I am NOT one to argue fiercely, to FORCIBLY draw your attention."

And while we're here, let's talk about the role of the public intellectual today, especially with regard to challenging white, heteronormative, institutionalised hegemony. In moments of doubt and despair, I feel it is auspicious to talk about such things before we sleep. For then no harm could befall us.

in perfect dreams
the blackened body spirals,
breaking crimson over
the bleached bone
of sand

in perfect dreams
crimson stairs we cannot
climb
spiral only to non-
existent rooms
lights on. action! be still. stay calm.
begin the descent into tears
but do not dare drown

Living in the hyphenated Land of "Non": non-Anglo, non-citizen, non-heterosexual - always demanding an authentic hybridity of me - doesn't mean I'm faithful as a fucking crutch, snuggling happily into your stale armpit! Heart pounds furiously - one thing I do know - the silence cannot take over -

Says Shalmalee: "More doom and gloom, doom and gloom? Get a grip, arse-hole - your shit will inevitably ooze out, and who'll wipe it up tomorrow?"

In Oz: You walk towards me
on soft, silent feet
under a prematurely dark
sky. You say nothing,
just hesitate, shifting your weight
from foot to foot.
Your silence is eloquent.
It tells me of your loneliness,
vast and ancient as
the sky itself.

In India: I recognise that loneliness well.
I encounter it everyday
in myself,
a stagnant, dirty pool,
sloshing around my innards,
rising in my throat,
oozing through every pore in my body.
The only thing to do
is to make it a part of you,
and laugh
and laugh without fear
and go on living.

> "For me, the question 'Who will speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' 'I will speak for myself as a Third World person' is an important position for political mobilisation today. But the real demand is that when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously, not with that kind of benevolent imperialism...."[9]

Right, Aunty Spivak? Aunty? Auuunty! Hmm, Aunty Spivak doesn't seem to be responding.

But … is that…? Yes it is! Aunty hooks has something else to say about fearlessness, about how we arrive at a space of radical openness and possibility. About how we're excruciatingly produced through multiple traces.

> "We know struggle to be that which gives pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed individually, collectively as we make radical creative space which sustains our subjectivity, which gives us new locations[s] from which to articulate our sense of the world…"[10]

Well, says Shalmalee: "What more can I say? I'm listening. Are you?"

Notes

1. The title is bilingual. While it can be read as a pun on "tabula rasa," I am also using "rasa" quite differently in this work. Rasa is the Sanskrit for juice, flavour or essence. In ancient Sanskrit aesthetic theory, it describes the energetic transmission which is "tasted" both by actor and spectator in performance.
2. H Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 38
3. A colloquial Indian acronym for "Non-Resident Indian," often used pejoratively by non-diasporic Indians.
4. K Mitchell, 'Different Diasporas and the Hype of Hybridity', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 15, no. 5, 1997, pp. 533-553, p. 533.
5. Loosely based on a Vedic Hymn from the Srisuktam.
6. My translation of P Ganorkar's poem 'Poison Tree', from her collection *Vyatheeth*, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 1975, p. 23.
7. My translation of P Ganorkar's poem 'Funeral Pyre', from her collection *Vyatheeth*, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 1975, p. 26.
8. As defined by the twelfth century poet-philosopher Jnandev in Anubhavamrut. See D Chitre, *Shri Jnandev's Anubhavamrut: The Immortal Experience of Being*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1996.
9. G Spivak, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', in S During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993, pp. 193-202, p. 197.
10. b hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness', in *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston, 1990, pp. 145-153, p. 149.

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Normalise Me!
Sexual and Gender Identity in Sexological, Criminological, and Feminist Discourses on Pornography

Kateřina Lišková

Abstract
To a large extent, the regulatory discourses of sexology and criminology control our understandings of sexual as well as gender identity. By pathologising some identities, they highlight the normal and acceptable, thus reproducing the heteronormative status quo. In this text I analyse Czech sexological and criminological writing on the topic of pornography, as well as feminist anti-pornography arguments, as articulated both in the United States and contemporary Europe. I argue that not only do sexology and criminology produce normalising accounts of gender and sexuality, but that surprising congruences arise between these disciplines and feminist anti-pornography discourse. These discourses share a perception of gender as a binary and stable category and sexuality as essentially heterosexual. Although this is perhaps to be expected from confining discourses such as sexology and criminology, it remains objectionable and proves especially unwelcome in progressive social powers such as feminism.

Key Words: criminology, Czech Republic, feminism, gender, normativity, pornography, sexology.

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1. Introduction

Sexual identity has been a focus of sexology ever since the latter emerged as a discipline in the late nineteenth century. Sexology classifies people as sexual beings very much according to the model of biological nomenclature and codes. Recently, criminology has addressed the issue of sexuality in order to identify socially "dangerous" immorality. In this view, people demonstrating specific sexual interests or behaviours become objects of criminal scrutiny. The disciplines of sexology and criminology thus constitute biopower,[1] regulating subjects through their bodies, creating and fostering discourses that enable the control of entire populations.

Scientific discourses are crucial for shaping and strengthening the notion of normality. Sexology has historically made claims about nature and naturalness. Nature has been deployed to justify our innate violence as well as peacefulness. Nature and the supposed truth about "Man" meet in sex. A founding father of sexology put it clearly, stating that "a man is what his sex

is."[2] Claims about what is "natural" are powerful - and we should not miss one important feature: they are always both about nature and about society. Sexologists thus perform a double-step consisting firstly, of biologising sexuality (and the social), and secondly, of socialising nature. Criminology is more straightforward in this respect, dividing people and their (sexual) practices into two separate categories, legal and illegal, where the former parallels and reinforces the normal and the latter the non-normal or abnormal.

Feminism, on the other hand, perceives itself purely as a liberatory movement, freeing us from the patriarchal grip of a society organised unequally along the axes of gender and sexuality. Recently, feminist voices against pornography have been heard in Europe,[3] which echo those from two decades earlier in the United States.[4] I will argue that this stream in feminist thought and organisation resonates to a surprising extent with the normalising and regulatory discourses of sexology and criminology.

2. Sexuality, Morality, and Social Cohesion

Criminological - as opposed to sexological - discourse relies heavily on presumed shared cultural norms regarding what constitutes non-offensive and morally acceptable sexuality. Together with the scientific notions of natural, healthy, and mature sexuality offered by sexology, these discourses constitute a disciplinary power that attributes normalcy and legality to the conduct of some, and pathology or criminality to others. My aim is to analyse two recent books dealing with pornography written by well-known Czech sexologists and criminologists. The two exemplary texts are *Morality, Pornography, and Criminal Vice* by a collective of authors, including the criminologist Jan Chmelík and the sexologist Petr Weiss,[5] and *Pornography or Provoking Nakedness* by the sexologist Radim Uzel.[6]

Not surprisingly, sexuality is the main topic of both studies. The criminologist Chmelík and his collective build implicitly on a stereotypical notion of sexuality characteristic of Western culture. In this view, sexuality is twofold: the tamed variety, which constitutes the basis of marriage and the reproduction of the human species, and the wild variety, which disrupts everything the former stands for and represents. Thus Chmelík's text posits a good and healthy sexuality, which is a key society-building element: "human sexuality is at the beginning of the deepest connection between people and is basic for the well-being of individuals, couples, families, and society."[7] On the other hand, there is bad and dangerous sexuality which, according to this text, constitutes an enormous threat to society: sexual debauchery should be criminalised, especially if youth (the supposedly sexually innocent) are involved. According to the authors, "society is interested in the proper moral education of youth" and "youth must be protected against all negative influences including undoubtedly lack of sexual restraint."[8] In their search for the culprit responsible for subverting the proper moral functioning of society,

these authors focus in on pornography. Pornography is framed by Chmelík as the polar opposite of morality: "Everything immoral is mostly connected to pornography."[9] More specifically, porn is defined as:

> sexual acts depicted in an obtrusive, distorted and unreal manner, sexual contact with exaggerated violence and perversity such as showing anal and oral intercourse, etc. … Through pornography, human beings are reduced to the very physiological core - overemphasising reactions to basic sexual stimuli.[10]

In this influential criminological account (praised by the chairman of the Supreme Court Senate of the Czech Republic), pornography stands in for the "skewing of moral values," is "degrading to human dignity," and "elicit[s] feelings of shame and repulsiveness" - all of which are contrary to "natural sexuality free of commercial efforts, aggression and perversity."[11] In conclusion, Chmelík views pornography as a potentially criminal, socio-pathological element, which is especially dangerous to youth.

Given all this, the question remains as to how to reconcile the presupposed criminal essence of porn with another claim, namely that "[p]ornography is induced by a natural need to cover one of the basic life needs of humans".[12] These clashing views of pornography as something damaging and yet necessary reflect the twofold notion of sexuality, which is deeply embedded in our society. Sexuality/pornography is something "we" despise but need for the sake of life. It both literally and metaphorically keeps "us" going. But generally, Chmelík et al. are very close to other acclaimed Czech sexologists and psychologists, such as Slavomil Hubálek and Ivo Pondělíček, who claim: "Recently, the liberalisation process has reached an extent which is unparalleled within the last two millenniums. Time is up, thus, for a change of direction."[13] In this conservative perception, the shrew of sexuality must be tamed, not increasingly unleashed, in order to restore the fragile balance of society.

The views of the sexologist Radim Uzel seem to be totally opposite - at least at first glance. Uzel perceives the attacks against porn as negative stances towards nakedness and sex as such.[14] For Uzel, pornography stands in for sexual openness, which in his account is very much needed. Not only does it aid in the prevention of sexual exploitation,[15] it also constitutes the everyday sublimation of instinctual urges which invigorate the individual. Here the liberal sexologist resonates with the conservative criminologist, perceiving pornography as a basic human need which must be fulfilled. In short, according to Uzel, pornography is "socially and individually beneficial."[16] According to this author, it is "not true that pornography subverts social ties."[17] On the contrary, it is the "confused fight for a legal

ban on porn which is siphoning off the means to fight the real crime," but most of all it is "a governmental attempt at legally enacting morality."[18] In this view, there is nothing wrong with pornography *per se*; it is rather those fighting against it who endanger the societal functioning smoothed out by pornography. Uzel calls for the liberalisation of sexuality and for sexual education: "We should try to revise the deeply rooted view that sexual feelings and sexual knowledge are inappropriate and unhealthy for youth."[19] Contrary to Chmelík, who would protect "the innocent" from becoming polluted by sex, Uzel presents an enlightened view of sexuality and young people. However, Uzel's progressiveness comes at a price.

This sexologist's positive and affirming stances towards sexuality and pornography would be welcome if they were unambiguous. However, that is not the case. The first discrepancy worth noting lies in his claim that "consuming pornography does not constitute a dark side of the human being but a necessary part, the expression of which it is inappropriate to be ashamed of."[20] So why does he claim "under oath" in the very introduction of his book that he is not "a reader or a consumer" of porn himself?[21] The more important inconsistency has to do with the character of pornography. Uzel attributes several fundamentally different qualities to porn, apparently not realising their mutually exclusive character. Firstly, he argues that porn is a fantasy, which is "being bought mainly because it is different from real life, it is an idealised reality."[22] Secondly, only ten pages later he claims, "pornography is a mirror hall of human sexuality … it defines humans as sexual animals … it is a concise metaphor for sex."[23] Thirdly, porn ceases to be either fantasy or metaphor, because "porn deals with sex in its true essence, that's why pornography is being neglected."[24] These contradictory views concerning an imaginary ideal, animalistic drives, and the quintessence of sex might appear simply vague, but in fact they are employed to serve specific purposes that will be examined later in my paper.

Further problems are revealed when we focus on Uzel's broader notions of sexuality. Although he claims that "porn is not all that horrible,"[25] sex for him conflates with breeding, because he adds "couples having sex are not ruining the earth, they are rather populating it."[26] Here again the liberal resonates with the conservative, construing sex as a good and harmless entity. Moreover, his explanation carries a latent message about sex being exclusively coupled, heterosexual, and reproductive. Uzel's heteronormativity is obvious despite his manifest support of the rights for sexual minorities. In a passage critical of social conservatism, he explicitly criticises "our numerous countrymen who would want to have this country free of homosexuals, prostitution, drug addicts, abortion and alcohol."[27] Yet inexplicably, this statement is followed by a comment that essentially endorses the conservative argument: "Well, I think many problems would disappear then."[28] Here he comes very close to endorsing prejudicial notions

of homosexuality as something "bizarre" or "sickly distorted." The consequence of such a claim is to effectively situate homophobia as a commonly held position - disconcerting in that it seems to be shared by other well-known Czech scholars, such as the psychologist Slavomil Hubálek and the sexologist Ivo Pondělíček.[29]

Thus two ideal types define the Czech scientific continuum regarding porn. At one end stands the seemingly liberal sexologist Uzel, who cheers for porn as a means of social cohesion, sexual liberation, or at least an educational tool, and at the other end stands the criminologist Chmelík, who cautions against the perils of sexual chaos caused by pornography usage. However, the seemingly opposite ends of this continuum overlap along heterosexist lines, stressing that the goodness of sex resides in its reproductive capacity.

3. Unexpected Resonances with Anti-porn Feminism

The criminologist's understanding of porn resonates with the way in which porn is understood by anti-porn feminists. According to the criminologist Chmelík, sexual arousal involves a risk of aggressive behaviour, which is prone to increasing as a result of watching porn. Porn "stimulates the idea that women are docile victims."[30] The criminologist and anti-porn feminists are in agreement, however unreflected upon, regarding the supposed dehumanisation and objectification of women through porn: "woman in pornographic materials is dealt with mostly in an inhuman way, she is perceived as a useless thing serving a man for the satisfaction of his sexual filthiness."[31] The same has been argued by American anti-porn feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Susan Brownmiller, Laura Lederer, and Diana Russell,[32] arguments currently being revived by some feminists in Europe, including Heather MacRae, Susan Baer, and Catherine Itzin.[33] However, whereas the central criminological category in defining pornography is morality, anti-porn feminists focus on discrimination.[34]

In the view of both the Czech criminologist and anti-porn feminists, pornography is closely linked to violence against women. Chmelík presents porn as synonymous with the abuse of and traffic in women - much as does the feminist Kathleen Barry, who calls pornography female sexual slavery.[35] In the criminologist's perception, pornography triggers violence against women, but when he describes rape, his consonance with feminists comes to an end. Chmelík focuses on the rape victim, stressing four distinctive features

> 1) "the victim's masochism" ("some masochistic women find it sexually stimulating to be abused, so that they compel men to do it");

> 2) "the victim's role in guilt" ("provoking conduct on the part of the victim, women who provoke a man [sic] by flirtatiousness, loudness, slinkiness, baring parts of their bodies and thus work up sexual desire in him… this category contains cases where the victim consented to intercourse only to change her mind immediately before the act");
> 3) "the aggressor's small role in guilt" (when a man is under the influence of drugs or alcohol);
> 4) "the hyperbolizing of repercussions" ("the damage on the victim is minimal, the woman does not have any visible marks on her body, has previously had intercourse with the man in question etc.")[36]

This list reproduces all the classical rape myths as they were identified and unravelled by feminists in the late 1970s. However, this contemporary Czech criminologist repeats them all as scientific truths, seemingly unaware of their patriarchal bias. Since this same approach also informs the attitudes of judges, it is not surprising that Czech courts rarely sentence drunken rapists, whose victims are "flirtatious" prostitutes.[37]

It is paradoxical that this criminologist, who reproduces rape myths exposed by feminists, should share with those same feminists a condemnation of pornography. Yet this shared focus on pornography of a mainstream criminologist and an influential stream of feminism is hardly random. It reveals a socially conservative tone, which is to be expected from criminology as a status quo preserving discipline by definition, but which is undesirable within feminism, which arguably is and should be a dynamic power for social change.

On the other hand, the sexologist Uzel does not hold anti-porn attitudes, instead claiming that men, women, and society in general benefit from its existence. However, some of his arguments also resonate with those of anti-porn feminists, becoming especially apparent when Uzel writes about the insurmountable differences between men and women. These opinions are also held by many anti-porn feminists: Susan Griffin argues that men and women cannot speak to each other because women speak the language of nature;[38] Mary Daly insists on the necessity of creating a new gynomorphic vocabulary for women which, according to her, is very much needed in a polarised society;[39] and Carol Gilligan claims women have an essentially different way of thinking and moral reasoning than men do.[40]

Despite these similarities, Uzel himself is explicitly anti-feminist. What he despises about feminism is its focus on equality and political goals. Uzel states that "the fuel to all feminist movements is basically hatred towards men, often skilfully masked." According to him, "all feminists are

unified in this hatred."[41] Thus, while positioning himself as the liberal alternative to standard scientific anti-porn discourse, he at the same time maintains deeply conservative views. Uzel's knowledge of feminism, however, is fairly limited. According to him, anti-porn feminists "disapprove of oral sex" and allegedly perceive porn as "a conspiratorial perversion jeopardizing family and nation."[42] Uzel is particularly horrified by the prominent anti-porn feminists Susan Brownmiller and Laura Lederer. However, there is a congruity between their opinions and his, a congruity he remains unaware of. Brownmiller argues that sexuality is biologically given and men are predators by nature.[43] Similarly, Uzel stresses the naturalness of hard, promiscuous, predator-like, body oriented sexuality for men, and softer, relationship and love oriented sexuality for women.[44] This view of characteristic feminine sexuality is shared by most anti-porn feminists, including Robin Morgan, Kathleen Barry, Adrienne Rich, and Andrea Dworkin.[45]

Anti-porn feminists regard pornography as discrimination against women, but the sexologist Uzel claims that as long as the majority of porn-consumers are men, feminist campaigns against porn are oppressive to men. Anti-porn feminists hold that porn causes violence against women, while Uzel characterises violence as inherent to sex, using the example of praying mantises - given his anti-feminism, it is hardly pure chance he chose a species in which females commit violence against males.[46] Given the much more widespread sexualised violence *against women* in society, Uzel might have instead chosen a "violent-male species" example - but that would not have resonated with his political beliefs. However, given these discrepant views on pornography and feminism between the liberal sexologist and the anti-porn feminists, there is nevertheless significant reverberation in their accounts of gender and sexuality. Both Uzel and the anti-porn feminist lobby endorse a binary notion of gender division and an essentialist understanding of the operation of sexuality.

4. Conclusion

In Czech scientific discourses of sexology and criminology, the continuum of approaches to pornography is defined by uncompromising deprecation on one side and unconditional approval on the other. Thus on one hand we can find condemnation of pornography usage as immoral and resulting in increased aggressiveness and general sociopathy.[47] On the other hand of the Czech scientific continuum on questions of porn, one finds sexologists who are less hasty in condemning porn users, but instead stress the essential "biological" difference between female and male sexuality,[48] thus reproducing and reinforcing the gender binary. The irony here is that the conservative anti-porn writer utilises language actually used by at least one section of the feminist movement, while the liberal wing of scholars espouses

an explicitly anti-feminist agenda. This framing of the debate excludes the possibility of a viable non-anti-porn, pro-sex feminist position from the realm of Czech science.

Moreover, feminist discourse should remain critical of the subjectifying effects of scientific discourses, which shape us in a heteronormative fashion. Feminism should not ally itself blindly with regulatory biopower, nor should it unreflectively parallel its normalising moves. Feminism at its best has always explored the totalising claims of hegemonic discourses and countered their demands for "normal" docile women and men with coherent desires for reproductive (hetero)sexuality. Feminism should continue to pose a challenge to normalisation of any kind.

Notes

1. M Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990 (first publ. 1976), p. 140-144.
2. H Ellis, *The Psychology of Sex*, William Heinemann, London, 1946 (first publ. 1933); cited in J Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London & New York, 1985, p. 62.
3. See H MacRae, 'Morality, Censorship, and Discrimination: Reframing the Pornography Debate in Germany and Europe', *Social Politics*, vol. 10, 2003, pp. 314-345; S Baer, 'Pornography and Sexual Harassment in the EU', in RA Elman (ed.), *Sexual Politics and the European Union: The New Feminist Challenge*, Berghahn Books, Providence, 1996, pp. 51-66; and C Itzin, 'Pornography, Harm, and Human Rights: The UK in the European Context', in RA Elman (ed.), *Sexual Politics and the European Union: The New Feminist Challenge*, Berghahn Books, Providence, 1996, pp. 67-82.
4. See A Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Women's Press, London, 1982; A Dworkin, *Letters From a War Zone*, Lawrence Hill Books, New York, 1988; CA MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987; CA MacKinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993; S Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Bantam Book, New York, 1975; L Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, William Morrow, New York, 1980; D Russell, 'Pornography and Violence: What Does the New Research Say', in L. Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, William Morrow, New York, 1980, pp. 218-238; K Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*, New York University Press, New York, 1979; S Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Harper &

Row, New York, 1978; and M Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1978.

5. J Chmelík et al., *Mravnost, pornografie a mravnostní kriminalita*, Portál, Praha, 2003.
6. R Uzel, *Pornografie aneb provokující nahota*, Ikar, Praha, 2004.
7. Chmelík op. cit., p. 12. All translations from this source are my own.
8. Ibid., p. 12.
9. Ibid., p. 41.
10. Ibid., p. 43.
11. Ibid., p. 43.
12. Uzel, op. cit., p. 47.
13. Slavomil Hubálek and Ivo Pondělíček, quoted in A Brzek et al. *Průvodce sexualitou člověka,* Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, Praha, 1993, pp. 35-36.
14. Uzel, op. cit., p. 26. All translations from this source are my own.
15. Ibid., p. 80.
16. Ibid., p. 103.
17. Ibid., p. 104.
18. Ibid., p. 104.
19. Ibid., p. 166.
20. Ibid., p. 189.
21. Ibid., p. 11.
22. Ibid., p. 141.
23. Ibid., p. 151.
24. Ibid., p. 151.
25. Ibid., p. 21.
26. Ibid., p. 21.
27. Ibid., p. 21.
28. Ibid., p. 21.
29. Brzek, op. cit., p. 6.
30. Chmelík, op. cit., p. 45.
31. Ibid., p. 48.
32. See Dworkin, op. cit; MacKinnon, op. cit.; Brownmiller, op. cit.; Lederer (ed.), op. cit.; and Russell, op.cit.
33. MacRae, op. cit.; Baer, op. cit.; and Itzin, op. cit.
34. See MacKinnon's underlying argument throughout *Feminism Unmodified*, op. cit.
35. See Barry, op. cit.
36. Chmelík, op. cit., pp. 49-50.
37. City Court of Brno, Czech Republic, July 2006, quoted in the Czech national weekly *Respekt*, issue 29, 2006, p. 5.

38. See Griffin, op. cit.
39. See Daly, op. cit.
40. See C Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women´s Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982.
41. Uzel, op. cit., p. 133-134.
42. Ibid., p. 146.
43. This forms the underlying argument of Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, op. cit.
44. Uzel, op. cit., p. 139.
45. See R Morgan, *Going Too Far*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p. 181; Barry, op. cit., pp. 167 and 267; A Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in A Snitow, C Stansell and S Thompson (eds.), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983, pp. 177-205, p. 193.
46. Uzel, op. cit., p. 66.
47. Chmelík, op. cit., pp. 43-50.
48. Uzel, op. cit., p. 139.

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Les-being and Identity Politics: The Intersectionality of Sexual Identity and Desire

Erzsébet Barát

Abstract
Language and sexuality research has recently seen a heated debate over whether the linguistic constitution of sexuality should still be focused on matters of identity or rather on matters of desire. I want to contribute to that debate and argue that this is a non-productive dichotomy. We need to stop the counter-effective spectator sport of academic in-fighting and see desire as one aspect of the articulation of sexual identity. To demonstrate the advantages of the proposed intersectional approach, I will analyse the case of the initiative of the Hungarian Lesbian NGO called *Labrisz* that approached secondary schools in the country, offering help in the sexual education of the pupils and organising discussions of dissident sexual orientation. I will carry out an ideology critique of the NGO leaflet sent to the directors to argue that, for a pedagogical initiative to successfully inhabit the weaknesses of the heterosexual norm, it should not exclude the discussion of desire but highlight desire as an important dimension of sexual identity, especially as part of a project launched in the name of authenticity.

Key Words: desire, homosexuality, language, les-being, politics of knowledge, sexual education, sexual identity, sexuality.

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1. Critical Reflexivity in Language and Sexuality Research

In this paper I would like to advance the dialogue about the implications of rethinking the conceptualisation of the category of identity vis-à-vis desire for exploring dissident sexuality, in the light of the ongoing debate in the field of language and sexuality research. The participants in these exchanges seem to be divided along geographic lines. British linguists, led by Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, propose that we should go beyond the dominant, mostly US based approach best represented by William Leap, Anna Livia and Kira Hall.[1] The US research frames particular projects in terms of the concept of identity, while the British approach suggests that the study of language use and sexual practice encompasses other dimensions of sexuality, above all, that of the erotic, discussed under the general heading of the category of desire.

Both approaches emphasise that they see the relationship between language and sexuality as primarily political in nature. In the first place, this

means that it will not suffice for either faction to produce a descriptive account of the distribution of various linguistic forms used by or about lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, queens, transsexuals, or any other sexually non-normative (group of) speakers. They both move beyond that and engage, instead, in critical projects, exploring the many ways in which the identified patterns of language use intersect with social relations of power. As potential targets of similar (academic) discrimination of sexual categorisation, they assume the position of the dispossessed and contest hegemonic practices of power that stigmatise, exclude, or, at best, tolerate non-heterosexual collectives and individuals. What matters to me here are not so much the actual issues, the specific linguistic behaviours identified by the representatives of the two approaches for their case studies, but rather the *ideological investments* of their conceptual frameworks. In other words, my concern is how best to understand the situatedness of the research projects themselves, especially when, as researchers, we regard ourselves as members of the targeted collective. Having fought all sorts of (academic) battles in order to have our conceptual frameworks acknowledged, it is all too tempting to believe that our reflections do not reiterate the homophobic logic of the dominant discourses we are struggling against. However, in my view, transgressive positions are inevitably forged in the course of discursively mediated contestations, never simply granted.

I argue therefore that we will not necessarily produce transgressive knowledge claims even if we observe the two major requirements of critical social research: first, to situate our research within the lives of the marginalised researched collectives and individuals (in this case, meaning the social position and discourses of the various "outlaw" sexualities); second, to proceed to interrogate and expose the logic of power relations in the chosen field or institution of homophobic practices.[2] I think the obstacle to the ideal of progressive objectives has to do with taking our transgressive position for granted in a two-fold manner - regarding the conceptualisation of intertextuality and of progressive knowledge claims.

Regarding intertextuality, we may believe that what we need to do is identify the particular (textual) sources of discrimination "out there," as if determinable outside of the exclusionary signifying practices of cultural mediation. One strategy to counter this assumption may require opening up our approach to contingency and seeing the text of our own analysis as an inter-textual product. This involves a need to understand that practices of enhanced reflexivity (such as the specificity of academic knowledge production) are also embedded within the same order of discourse as that of the "data" of our analysis.

The analytical practice is inherently a form of sense-making practice and, as such, a form of *interpretation.* The corollary of this ontological condition of research practices is that the posited relationship between the

text and the discourses of research practices is always inevitably mediated through the analyst's *investment* in a given theoretical discourse. Therefore it may not make sense to operationalise the text of the data versus the context of the data-analysis divide. Accordingly, we cannot automatically dismiss an analysis of the dynamics of complicity with - versus transgression of - homophobia in and through the academic discourse.

Once we see the text of the analysis *emerging* at the intersection of the text/context boundary embedded within a particular order of discourse, we need to carry out an *intertextual* analysis to expose the discontinuous, often contradictory logics informing our own discourses of sexuality. It is an often troubled yet necessary intersection, the ontological condition for any change towards a more inclusionary model of language and sexuality research. My observation hinges on the actual understanding of intertextuality. It needs to acknowledge above all the materiality of discourse and define it as an ideological social practice where categories or concepts "never assert their meaningfulness in and of themselves" but function "as a particular way of making sense of [the signified]" and thereby bring about or "define a particular set of social arrangements."[3] In other words, signifiers come to be meaningful "within the available frames of intelligibility,"[4] which are effects of particular relations of hegemonic power.

The actual intertextual analysis, then, should explore the ideological investments of the sense-making practices in a given cultural and historic moment. I agree with John Frow's observation that doing such an intertextual analysis of a text - academic or otherwise - "is not, in itself, the identification of a particular intertextual source" (so that we could prove that the text is made up of several *Other* texts) but that of "the more general discursive structure (genre, discursive formation, ideology) to which it belongs."[5] That is, the mere identification of the textually mediated sources and/or the "origins" of homophobia as ultimate research objectives would count as enacting the ideology of "the real" - paradoxically that of the "real homosexual" or the "really good framework" of sexuality.

In terms of ideological investments then, any analytical approach that is merely obsessed with the origin of constituent texts, as if literally *in* the data, delivers the promise of the authoritative position of the "expert" who is never complicit with the targeted relations of power. However, seen from the very point of view of our arguable claim to belonging in the marginalised collective that we wish to "prove," by choosing to analyse the diverse ideological investments of *Others* in the differential cultural logic of sexual categorisation of people to their disadvantage, this non-complicity will not deliver the ideal of a progressive, less exclusionary practice of categorisation, because we have failed to carry out an adequate intertextual analysis and consider our own discourses' *a priori* embeddedness within the existing orders of discourse. We will merely be speaking on behalf of the

Other, legitimising the dominant academic practice of giving voice to the excluded whom we are positioned by this logic (falsely) to know prior to - and without any need of - any actual encounter. I contend therefore that we should rather see critique as an always *contingent* political activity whose only strategy is to make its own embeddedness in the discursive order visible via self-reflexivity and an explicit accountability to the collectives to which we wish to belong (for example, by way of researching the damages of homophobia). This accountability consists in deconstructing the multiple intersections of the often contradictory discourses of "outlaw" sexuality in our own texts. We should open up its self-contained boundaries, *examining the ways in which the practice of analysis itself shapes the meaning of "outlaw" sexuality*.

There is another, more general political aspect of taking our (academic or activist) transgressive position for granted. It has to do with the most recent developments of social movements, including LGBT organisations, which are critical of the status quo. Reconsidering the characteristic features of critical social research, Sandra Harding pointed out that identifying with the marginalised does not necessarily mean that the politics of the scientific research agenda are going to be progressive, since there are social movements whose critique of the status quo is informed by a conservative agenda. In other words, it is very important for pro-democratic research projects such as language and sexuality studies to understand that "[s]tandpoint logic shows how to identify and critically analyze a distinctive aspect of power, namely its conceptual practices. *Yet*, more than pro-democratic groups are marginalized by contemporary political economies."[6] Therefore it is not "obvious" that (scientific) engagement with the dispossessed for obtaining knowledge of the discursive practices, more specifically of the conceptual framework of power relations, will deliver any knowledge transgressive to the dominant modes of oppression.

I agree with Harding's point that not all new social movements in the past four decades that have claimed a political agenda to transform the social order have been pro-democratic. In other words, the struggle against exclusion from existing cultural goods and services does not inevitably result in pro-democratic agendas. Movements, such as the American Patriot movement or religious and territorial fundamentalists groups that are marginalised socially and/or culturally, may not only be complicitous with hegemonic forms of power, but may even articulate a politics that is an obstacle to the advance of a progressive, less exclusionary (epistemological) agenda. Yet, their agenda is also informed by the logic of a critical methodology.

Harding, however, does not address the question of the politics of knowing the difference between progressive and regressive conceptual practices. She only observes that "studying up" cannot be politically neutral:

> [since] both regressive groups longing for a less democratic past and progressive groups longing for a more democratic future can identify obstacles to achieving their goals in the conceptual practices of modern sciences and their philosophies.[7]

At this point her own argumentation becomes caught up in the ideological work of naturalising the past versus future orientation divide as the "obvious" ground for differentiation, articulating a complicity with the dominant practice of ahistoricising the meaning of "democratic change." The exposure of this blindness supports my earlier point about the importance of self-reflexivity. From this second, more immediately political perspective, the strategic struggle against co-optations by dominant conceptual practices requires not only a social movement but also that movement's self-critical/self-reflexive problematisation, in order to see that the so-called standpoint of any critical approach is itself an *emerging* position, one that is the effect of a textually mediated *intersubjective* negotiation of power. Therefore it is never ascribed, nor is it granted on the presumption that we already know what democracy "is" but always remains subject to contingent intertextual deconstructions.

2. Re-Articulation of Identity Versus Desire Based Positions

I propose that the twofold orientation to a contingent intertextuality is what the rival approaches to language and sexuality research could benefit from when revisiting the informing logic of their own discourses of sexuality. As for the twofold orientation of such a critical analysis, we can say that the research field has successfully transgressed the old assumption of linguistic studies rooted in the naturalising proposition that the experience of systematic silencing and humiliation of the researched will simply produce unquestionable transgressive knowledges of the various forms of their oppressions. In other words, language and sexuality research has long gone beyond the obsession with giving accounts of and/or identifying linguistic characteristics of language users based on the naturalising assumption that if gay people use a particular linguistic form that makes the linguistic form itself "gay" and therefore always "authentic." What matters in this regard for research purposes within the new paradigm is to explore the reasons for choosing particular discourses, to understand the ideological investments of users in one linguistic form rather than another. For capturing the essence of this shift in language and sexuality research we can adapt Deborah Cameron's criticism of the traditional descriptive projects as a critique of a politics of complicity, against which she argues in favour of a progressive research agenda from a critical feminist perspective. She stresses the need to view the relationship between language and gender - and by extension

between language and sexuality - as primarily a matter of *political* rather than purely linguistic concern:

> Feminism is *not* about giving housewives [or LGBT collectives] their due, it is about changing the conditions of domestic labour [or homophobia] altogether. Similarly, feminism cannot stop at validating the linguistic strategies typical of women [or LGBT people]; it must also ask *why* women find some communicative practices more relevant than others to their circumstances: a question of their social positioning, of the social practices [linguistic or otherwise] in which they are allowed to participate.[8]

However, as far as such an orientation to reflexivity is concerned, language and sexuality research have yet to counter the other equally non-productive assumption according to which a critical (feminist) reflection on dominant oppressive relations of power should always lead to progressive politics (of research). Extending Harding's earlier cited warning, my point is that in so far as epistemological frameworks (scientific or otherwise) constitute a distinctive aspect of power relations, we cannot assume that a critical theoretical framework is inevitably resistant to them, just as social movements critical of the status quo do not necessarily lead to less exclusionary claims. We still need to address the particular conditions of escape in terms of the politics of knowledge production.

Re-reading the arguments in the language and sexuality debate, we can say that they evolve around the consequences of sexual categorisation in the Other's academic discourse but never in one's own. In terms of contingent intertextuality, my reflections on the debate aim to advance a dialogue through giving primacy to questions of self-reflexivity. We need to explore and deconstruct the ideological investments of the discourses of sexuality that the two approaches (believe themselves to) draw on, when critically analysing the damaging linguistic effects produced by exclusionary categories of sexuality. In short, when revisiting the two academic, allegedly "transgressive" discourses of sexuality, I am concerned with the politics of their knowledge production rather than with the relevance of the particular linguistic methodologies chosen for analysis. The ultimate question in the discourse analysis of the two positions will therefore adopt Penelope Eckert's suggestion to link the place of sexuality in social life to the particular place of language and sexuality research in the order of (academic) discourse.

Eckert suggests that in order to expose a particular speaker's membership of a given social collective through her/his language use, we need to remember that the linguistic effects or specificities of the speech are not merely shaped by the speaker's membership of a particular sexual

category but equally by the speaker's *investment* "in the *idea* of membership."[9] In this regard, I want to underscore, academics are simply yet another community of speakers. Consequently, the oppositional positions in the debate on what to prioritise when addressing sexuality through language use can be viewed as conflictual investments of the participants in the idea of subscribing to identity versus desire as the dominant meaning of "outlaw" sexuality. This, in turn, entails producing a categorisation of the LGBT collectives and individuals in terms of identity versus desire, making sense of their belonging in the collectives in terms of either one or the other. I want to argue that what is at stake in the debate, then, is to be able to make a *claim* to membership in a *transgressive* sexual collective that will now be produced in terms of their own logic of sexual categorisation. Furthermore, this also means that *neither* of these positions implicates the proponents in the explanatory value of categorisation itself, even if the desire based approach believes that it is only the identity based approach that is "guilty" of valorising the cultural practice of differentiating people in terms of sexuality based categories. I argue therefore that the obstacle to a transgressive politics of knowledge production is not the fact that categorisation is inherently oppressive but the one-way critical gaze directed at the Other's conceptual practices "out there," which obstructs the attempt to forge some framework of non-exclusionary differentiation.

In a self-reflexive gesture, Cameron and Kulick ask explicitly: "What does a focus on desire have to offer that a focus on identity does not?"[10] They see four advantages to the shift. Firstly, they observe that this change would acknowledge that "sexuality is *centrally* about the erotic."[11] In their opinion such realignment is all the more needed since research based on the identity paradigm, when analysing language use for finding linguistic indexes of speakers' membership in a given LGBT collective, implicitly also draws on the category of desire "insofar as the relevant groups are defined by the nature of their desire."[12] Secondly, the shift would also acknowledge that "*our erotic lives are shaped by forces which are not wholly rational and of which we are not fully conscious.*"[13] Thirdly, shaped in part by these unconscious forces, desire, unlike deliberate linguistic acts of identification, need to be explored through analysing genres in which we perform and represent desire, such as sex talk or flirting. Finally, the identity paradigm has its main emphasis on "the verbal presentation of the self, [while] the study of language and desire acknowledges that sexuality is relational or transitive: desire is always for someone or something." Consequently, the identity paradigm "does not exhaust what there is to say about language and sexuality."[14]

I agree with Cameron and Kulick's evaluation of the identity based paradigm in that it is predominantly focused on conscious claims to identity and/or the homophobic responses these claims are faced with, and that it runs

the risk of reductionism. However, I want to take issue with them on account of their ideological investments in the traditional exclusionary practices of categorisation in this evaluation. First of all, what is at stake in the change they propose is *not* a question of quantity and completion as the verb "exhaust" would imply. Nor is such an intention as neutral and disinterested as the chosen methodology of listing the missing apparently self-contained tasks would entail: "we suggested that the study of language and sexuality should encompass *not only* sexuality *but also* other dimensions of sexual experience, among which we mentioned 'fantasy, repression, pleasure, fear, and the unconscious.'"[15] It is much more about the competing logic as to which paradigm is better *because* self-sufficient *due to* its willingness to *explicitly* root itself in the "true" organisation of sexuality around the core of desire. Arguably, this is why they turn to Freudian psychoanalysis for their framework of conceptual practices.

I do not want to reiterate the various feminist criticisms of psychoanalysis by lesbian feminists or queer theorists here, but I would like to point out the telling blindness of the authors to those very critical voices, although they do make use of them when, for example, they draw on Judith Butler's concept of performativity in *Gender Trouble*.[16] Cameron and Kulick argue that we should move away from what Butler calls "epistemological [self-same] account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification*."[17] According to Cameron and Kulick,

> Butler's call is to move away from the temptation to ground linguistic practices in particular identity categories and to open up our analysis to exploring (rather than denying or lamenting) the ways that linguistic practices are inherently available to anyone to use for a wide variety of purposes, and to a wide variety of social effect.[18]

The irony here is that to replace an epistemologically understood identity for an equally epistemologically presumed foundational desire, which corresponds "best" with the researcher's sense of "outlaw" sexuality, does not result in a different politics of sexuality. The issue, in my opinion, is not desire over identity but, much more in line with Butler's performative contingency, the possibility of a non-exclusionary epistemology of categorisation.

In that case desire and identity will operate as different dimensions of sexuality, intersecting with one another, *mediated but not exhausted* by discursive signification that is always an effect of power relations. What matters, then, is whether spaces could emerge, in which power relations would no longer be oppressive and exclusionary but instead allow for their dialectic relation, with desire and identity internalising each other without

reducing one to the other. Such a move will also implicate both aspects as matters of relationality.

When Cameron and Kulick argue in favour of a desire based paradigm because desire, unlike identity, is relational, they do not in fact move in the direction of a socially located intertextuality but abstract it from any other dimensions of sexuality, such as identity or practice, and from any other organisation of social activities, such as division of labour or cultural consumption. This move produces the effect that one is always a sexual being, regardless of the particular social and cultural context, and that this is so because of an essentially self-same primordial desire for the Other of the "same sex." Ironically then, their logic of abstract valorisation of relationality delivers the ideological gain of an "inherently pro-democratic" research model, provided sexuality is argued to be inflected with desire only. This position reminds me of the tradition in feminist conceptualisations of autobiography that equally opts for reversing the logic of devaluing women's ways of telling stories and argues that those ways are valuable precisely because of their orientation towards the Other.[19]

There are two relevant aspects of feminist autobiography research on relationality. Firstly, relationality as a constitutive feature is discussed in the context of the textually mediated sense of the self, that is, *identity*. Contrary to Cameron and Kulick's proposition, orientation to the Other is not inherently and exclusively the property of desire. Secondly, as far as the politics of critical research are concerned, a mere celebratory reversal of dominant conceptual practices concerning women's life does not result in a transgressive position. The celebratory framework inevitably bypasses the possibility of a *critical* reading of relationality as a strategic *conformity to propriety*, which is hardly indicative of any transgressive difference to the dominant logic of sacrificing the self for the interests of the Other. Therefore, I argue that to be able to see whether (the theorisation of) orientation to the Other, either in terms of the linguistically mediated act of the self or that of desire, maintains the hetero-patriarchal status quo, or whether it is part of a transgressive project, we need a dialectical model of connectedness. Such a model may analyse the intertextual contingencies of the particular modes of relating and look out for the conditions of building a *non-exclusionary* frame of relationality.

A critical engagement with the desire based model, then, entails an intertextual deconstruction, aimed at destabilising the desire versus identity divide through two steps. First, I expose a contradiction between the claims that - to the extent it is *discursively mediated* - desire is a social construct and that desire is *essentially* oriented towards the Other of the "same" sex. Second, I expose that the vested interest in conceptualising desire as an isolated, therefore never contingent, ontological category lies in further privileging the lesbian or other "outlaw" collectives of privilege, for instance

amongst academic researchers, through the idea that lesbians are women who desire other women. That is, the exclusively sexually defined imaginary "outlaw" sexual being is made possible by attributing to her/him the autonomy from exploitative social relations such as class or race. What is more, such a reductionist ontology may also come to serve the very interest of the dominant logic of straight sexuality, ascribing sex-based desire as the cause of sexuality. However, once we see sexuality as a matrix inflected by other dimensions of hierarchical arrangements of social practices, we can forge a discourse of sexuality oriented to a transformative politics. As Rosemary Hennessy puts it in her self-reflexive criticism of the major feminist models of desire by Theresa de Lauretis, Elizabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler:

> A politics built on abstracted desires may be the privilege of those for whom survival is not a pressing daily concern, but it also lures those whose struggle to survive is laced with sexual oppression into a collectivity that splits their sexuality from their survival needs. For some of us, unlearning the privilege of rallying around our sexual desires may indeed be a loss, but a loss of this privilege does not require that we forfeit critical attention to sexuality.[20]

3. Redefining Identity: Identity-in-Progress

The corollary of an intertextual approach to identity is that the individual subject is neither transparent, in an unproblematic referential relation to her/his non-discursive material sexual practices, nor is she/he "dead" in the sense of a purely textual construction, excluded from any agency. Rather, the individual becomes a subject/agent in Judith Butler's sense of the word.[21] Consequently, it becomes a meaningful political project to explore the dialectics of complicity and transgression in any given configuration of identity based practices without reifying identity as an inherently exclusionary concept. It is no longer assumed to be a unified and unifying construct, nor an utterly contingent pattern of signification, but is inserted into the constraining conditions of its formation. This process involves relatively stable, textually mediated organisations of practices that achieve a contingent permanence. What matters, then, is the exploration of the moment when this process of identity formation comes to be informed by a non-exclusionary logic of power relations. I argue that the need for knowledge of "outlaw" sexuality collectives is best served if we see that the two discourses of identity versus desire do not necessarily entail that we should take sides. The debate around whether language and sexuality studies should be evolving in terms of identity or desire is a non-productive

dichotomy. One cannot delineate sexuality along either dimension but should perceive it *at the intersection of both*. Moreover, I consider this the strategy that best satisfies the reformulation of our scientific framework in the current context of the LGBT agendas' shifts towards identity-based social movements.

We can reformulate the debate in language and sexuality research as a struggle not about what categories to use, if any, but *how* to categorise. In the quest for a non-exclusionary model of categorisation, Allison Weir's theorisation of the self proves promising for replacing the dominant individualised concept of the self with a progressively relational one.[22] In my PhD research I summed up the two distinctive conceptual changes proposed by her model as follows:

> One is the recognition of the connectedness of the self to the other/s, that is, the intersubjective nature of the self. The other is the recognition of heterogeneity, non-identity within the self. This way identity is not necessarily a product of the repression of difference achieved via the negation of non-identity. It is not reduced to the repression, exclusion of the other (meaning either the other self or otherness as such). The model fosters difference both by accommodating the non-identity of the other/s in relation to the self as well as *by accepting non-identity within the self*.[23]

Weir's self is not a self-contained subject present-to-itself any longer but a *subject-in-process of negotiating with Others*, while the dominant concept of the autonomous self is seen as a disengaged and seemingly self-contained individual. However, Weir conceptualises relationality in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of the affective relationship of the child to her/his primary caretaker, typically the mother. Drawing on Kristeva,[24] Weir defines relationality as the "promise of the *gift* of meaning,"[25] which positions the Other as the *enabling* source for recognising *nonidentity* in the self. The ontological condition for difference to be partially included within the self is said to be the child's recognition of the mother's internal differentiation, which takes place through the mother's failure to satisfy all her/his demands because she has another meaning in her life beyond the child. The child needs to learn that there is another realm of meaning that can satisfy desires. Through its affectionate relationship with the mother, the child is able to identify with the mother's desire for that meaning. In short, the child learns to identify with the mother's linguistic means of participation in a shared meaning. Note that the child's participation in shared meanings is achieved via a de-historicised glorification of an "affective relationship," an affective

investment in discourse with others, based in an abstract concept of *desire*, which is not a matter of power struggle but of intellectual "discovery." Desire here stands for an idealised "common bond," an inherently pleasurable process of relating to a loved one. Consequently, Weir does not need to attend to the differentiation of actual practices of relating to the Other, but is able to abstract theory away from the politics and practices of categorisation to glorify what might be termed "affectionate mothering." That is why she is not troubled by the need to qualify relationality further as "inclusionary."

According to a social theorisation of inclusionary relationality, the task of the analyst is precisely to explore whether the social and political conditions of relating to others and self may allow for an "identity" *not* conflated with domination of the Self over the Other. This can be achieved by a critical intertextual analysis of the gaps or discontinuities between ideals of sexual identities promoted in a given polity and the (discursively mediated) practices of sexuality *not* legitimised by the identity categories involved, hence determining to what extent it is possible to *di*sidentify with them.

4. Feminism and Sexual Identity: Queering the Lesbian

In this section I translate the general concerns about identity to the meaning of "lesbian" through mapping queer onto lesbianism. The main thrust of my argumentation is concerned with the re-articulation of Judith Butler and Tamsin Wilton's positions, challenging the prevailing normative discourses of sexual(ity based) identity.

While discussing what it means to be critically queer, that is, conceptualising the conditions of escaping reiterative discourses of normalcy and of producing non-normalising knowledges of sexuality, Judith Butler makes two important observations. One is concerned with the politics of categorisation. In this context Butler rethinks the separability of sexuality and gender for analytical purposes and argues that debate between researchers of feminist and queer theory over the relationship of sexuality and gender is in part negotiated between discourses based in identification and desire. In her opinion, the difficulty of imagining the relationship of the two domains of practices consists in a "keeping *open* an investigation of their complex interimplication."[26] In my reading of Butler, a queer critical practice entails a practice of conceptualisation that is informed by the logic of relative differentiation, one that does not force the analyst to be complicit with the dominant discourses of essentialising either identity or desire. In short, gender and sexuality as analytical categories of identity are to be conceptualised as intertextually linked dimensions of the category of the (lesbian) woman. In Butler's view, this open approach will also entail the possibility of theorising sexual difference *within* homosexuality. In other words, Butler acknowledges the relevance of different sexual experiences for the construction of a queer theoretical model of sexual identity.

The other relevant observation Butler makes is concerned with the locus of the language of such a queering project. She contends that, in the absence of new non-normalising discourses of sexuality, researchers need to turn to non-academic practices of conceptualisation in LGBT movements. She emphasises that her example of gender-as-drag, should not be viewed as "*exemplary* of [all forms of] performativity" but only as one particular example of performing gender parody,[27] and one that is apparently an example of a transgressive practice of sexuality. Consequently, the absence of transgressive conceptual categories functions as a sort of enabling ontological condition of communication, "This not owning one's words is there from the start, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself."[28] I hold that this stranger speaking through oneself can be reformulated as the model of a *relational identity*, where the "stranger" gets articulated in the self as non-identity.

However, Butler's queering ends up in a contradictory position. It is a contradictory position in that Butler argues in favour of the non-academic field of "outlaw" sexuality, not only as another field of multiple discourses of sexuality but as a *better* place for forging a transgressive vocabulary for describing the difficult interplay of destabilising gender identifications within homosexuality. It comes to be assumed to be "the" locus, because it is outside of the dominant institutional locations of social control. Ironically, the ideological subtext of the model, informed by the Foucauldian idea of the "positive" because dispersed and therefore apparently non-locatable power, comes to be exposed on its own terms. The non-reflexive valorisation of the marginal cannot achieve more than a desperate gesture of hope, since the ontology of Butler's redefined queer is purely discursive in nature. With all dimensions of social existence reduced to discursivity, Butler cannot develop any analytical concepts to link "queer" systematically with its ideological investments. Consequently, the margin is either ascribed to be a space saturated with inherently non-exclusionary relations of power, or else Butler needs to address the problem of the directionality of power. Butler's anxiety about securing openness seems to push her instead into conflating directionality with determinism and maintaining her investment in power as constitutive but non-locatable. That logic will simply produce the declaration that non-academic LGBT identifications is an ideal field to turn to, since it is a dense site of multiple signification outside of the heteronormative matrix. This misses the question of what enabling conditions might first render this engagement possible at all and what might open up a future mode of community that is not informed by the sacrificial logic of *identification* with the Same. Implicitly, Butler simply evokes her previous position on the "referential function of the name [of a category] as *performative*."[29] On this basis, all we may argue is that the transgressive politics of the term "queer" as a performative signifier consist in its *constitutive instability*, which is the

discursive effect of a dense intersection of differential social relations of power. In other words, queer turns out to be losing its political potential in so far as in Butler's ontology *any* term is assumed to gain or lose its stability "to the extent that it remains *differentiated* and that differentiation serves *political goals*."[30] The naïve trust in non-academic LGBT discourses of sexuality as "much more instructive" for theory, because "historically embedded in gay communities,"[31] results in conflating the difference between progressive and conservative critical research in Harding's sense of the term. If the non-academic field of LGBT movements is potentially more instructive for a progressive model of sexuality, I suggest that this has got to do with lesser degrees of institutional(ised) social control over terminologies and less standardisation of language use from within the marginalised locus of "outlaw" sexuality. Though also a site of struggle, it is one where ways of linguistically signalling sexuality have not been temporarily institutionalised through the ideal of a "standard," as has been the case in heterosexuality.

My choice of the *Labrisz* project for analysis seems to follow Butler's expectations. As a non-academic text, it may be more of a source for queering the meaning of "lesbian" than academic discourses. However, as my analysis aims to demonstrate, the dominant discursive practice informing the NGO text is that of a self-inflected silencing of desire, a strategy of pre-empting excessive homophobic responses. As such, the NGO text is the effect of hegemonic relations of power, except for one moment of transgression achieved by the non-exclusionary intersection of identity and desire in the meaning production of "outlaw" sexuality (see Item 9 below).

The position I found helpful for conceptualising sexual identity as potentially open to change, without abstracting it from power as a directional concept, is that of Tamsin Wilton.[32] She discusses various models of sexual identity that reinforce different claims to "truth" about the sexual self. In order to avoid complicity in the project of oppressive social control, Wilton chooses the particular location of the "lesbian." Although I am not going to address the particular forms of "outlaw" sexualities in the analysis of the NGO text, it is important to underscore that LGBT sexualities should not be ascribed a false homogeneity, not even vis-à-vis the discourses of normalcy. In an extended analysis of the project itself, not possible here, I should question the leaflet's adherence to the narrative of a "homosexuality" *per se*.

Wilton's model of sexual identity argues for a dynamic *les-being*, i.e. it emphasises *lesbian doing* while still making a "politically strategic claim" to the identity category of lesbian.[33] This is a position that can cut across the dividing boundary between queer versus lesbian feminist concepts of identity. Like Butler, Wilton also understands the politics of naming, observing that "[w]hat is certain is that *the politics of naming* is at the heart of lesbian studies." But she continues in a very different direction and supports the previous claim by *inserting* the apparently linguistic question of

how to categorise the "lesbian" back into its social context. "It is not so much 'the lesbian' [the signifier] which we study, as the multiple, shifting processes which the lesbian body *inhabits and enacts at the permeable meniscus between the social and the self.*"[34] This logic pushes us beyond the assumption that "outlaw" sexuality, seen from within, is a neutral process. It makes us *denaturalise* the celebratory engagement with LGBT spaces, by reflecting on the actual relations of power promoting or hindering intellectual benefit from the various frameworks of sexuality operating within marginal spaces. This radical integration of the self, the body, and the social will open up the boundary of the "lesbian" to the dynamic discontinuities effected by the reflection on the differences of the passage of time and the crossings of space. Without considering the "lesbian" as a dense site of power struggle, I could not embark on a critical project and argue against the assumption of a reassuring permanent visibility of "outlaw" identity abstracted from desire.

5. Discourse Analysis of the Leaflet: Strategies of Defence

To support my proposition for a model of sexuality that presupposes the intersection of identity and desire I undertake a case study of the sex-educational project *Melegség és megismerés* ("Gayness and Knowledge"), launched in 2002 by *Labrisz*, the Lesbian Civil Organization in Budapest. *Labrisz* was and is the only officially registered Hungarian lesbian activist group, since it was first registered in November 1999 with 11 members. In 2002 the Lesbian organisation sent a letter to the directors of all Hungarian secondary schools (approximately 1300 institutions), promoting a sex-education programme as part of the official curriculum. The letter included a leaflet which, in nine points, sums up the most common stereotypes the organisation perceives to be dominant in contemporary Hungary, with each derogatory prejudice followed by a counterargument. In the letter the NGO expresses its hope that, as an actual enactment of tolerance, the schools will take the opportunity and invite its members to foster a safe space for classroom inquiry about "outlaw" sexual identities through discussions with self-identified and therefore authentic members of such communities. The text I am going to analyse is the actual leaflet the NGO attached to their letter of introduction. The linguistic analysis of the conflicting points produced through the rhetoric of argumentation aims to explore the predominantly defensive strategy of the NGO's self-perception and the unexpected ruptures of its liberatory logic brought about by the *discursive articulation of homosexual desire*. More to the point, this explicit formulation functions as an integrated part of a more general framework of *identity* politics.

The following discourse analysis of the emerging meanings of lesbian/ness and gay/ness will explore firstly, the extent to which the NGO text successfully exploits the weaknesses of the heterosexual norm by deconstructing various stereotypes and, secondly, the extent to which it offers

any genuine alternative discourse of "outlaw" sexuality, which strategically "queers" the subject position of the lesbian, keeping it potentially open to change and preventing it from an identitarian fixation.

As I have said before, the nine stereotypes, cited in translation, are meant to serve as strategic sites for developing a competing perspective that should support the NGO's "visibility" project, when introducing themselves as LGBT members in the classroom. My analysis exposes the rhetoric of argumentation in the claims, counterclaims and the implied meanings of the emerging LGBT identities.

> **1. In a homosexual relationship one party plays the role of man and the other that of the woman.**
> That is not true. In a homosexual relationship the partners should share the characteristic features of *both genders* one way or another. That is, neither *is "playing" the other gender*.[35]

What is contested by the NGO's logic in Item 1 is the denial of a differential way of being non-normative, the degradation into pretence, the hetero/homo divide itself. However, there is no contestation of an equally bipolar mobilisation of gender. Instead of seeing gender as a dividing principle of categorisation, it is reduced into "two genders." As a result, the implied claim to a non-linearity between sexuality and gender in the statement "the partners should share the characteristic features" runs into a self-jeopardising contradiction. The claim to sexual multiplicity cannot be supported by the male/female polarity of gender roles retained in the phrasing "of both genders."

> **2. They have no permanent relationships.**
> Not true. Many lesbians and gays live in permanent relationships. *The fact that many do not dare to be open about it in public is a heavy burden* that makes co-habitation difficult - *nevertheless*, many are able to live in a stable relationship.

A perspective of ambiguous hybridity informs Item 2. A discourse of self-blame - "do not dare" (because cowardly) - merges with an implied criticism of the hostility enacted by the dominant social behaviours and values, summed up by the collocation "heavy burden" that indicates oppressive forces imposed from outside. Nonetheless, this is *a successful displacement* of the original logic of the stereotype that rests on the implied meaning of some unruly, volatile homosexuality, which supposedly pushes LGBT people on to yet another affair. The success consists not so much in

the stability of the gay relationships, which could easily run the risk of normalisation, as in the achievement of *any* relationship in spite of an extremely hostile and as such stressful environment.

> **3. Gay men are paedophiles and child molesters.**
> Not true. There are a lot less homosexual men molesting children than heterosexual ones.

Missing in Item 3 is the contestation of the criminalisation of "outlaw" sexualities in the first place. The alleged higher number of perpetrators on one side, so to speak, will not contest the legitimate/criminal divide itself. What's more, it could easily be countered by the same quantifying logic, arguing that the lower number is "due to" the lower ratio of gay men in the general population and as such paedophilia is "naturally confined" to a "minority" only.

> **4. Homosexuality is caused by childhood trauma.**
> Not true. Nobody knows what makes someone *"become"* homosexual. There are various theories, which contend various propositions about heredity or social influence. Most homosexuals experienced no hardships in their childhood.

Note here that there is *no* hypothetical question formulated to the same effect as at the end of Item 5 below, something like: Why should we need to know it at all? Do we (want to) know the "causes" of heterosexuality in our childhood? Without that critical voice, the argument risks slipping into an obsession with the original cause. And any quest for a shared origin will inevitably mobilise the same exclusionary logic of collective membership that motivates the heteronormative myth of belonging. Besides, because of the psychological pathologisation of "outlaw" sexualities evoked by the word "trauma," this slippage comes to be informed by the moralising logic of accountability or discipline. Nevertheless, the quotation marks around "will become" indicate *a potential site for departure* from the logic of anchoring sexual identity once and for all. It may echo the difference between "I am a lesbian" and "I advocate lesbianism" as formulated by Wilton,[36] where the dynamism of the transitive verb can successfully contest the effect of the copula of "be," which would imply the transparent assumption of a self-contained location for good.

> **5. The children of homosexual people will be homosexual too.**
> Not true. Many studies prove that children raised by same sex couples are not more likely to become homosexual than children in other sex couples. But there arises the question too: *Why should it be a problem if that were the case?*

As observed above, Item 5 is a *successful contestation* of the origin(al sin) model, even if the polarity and complementarity of the two genders is left in place by the distinction "same sex" versus "other sex couples." This success is the effect of the question at the end of the contesting paragraph, reversing the stereotype against its own logic.

> **6. Homosexuals feel attracted to everyone of the same sex.**
> Not true. Homosexuals do not feel attracted to everyone of the same sex indiscriminately. They have *as high expectations* of their partners *as heterosexuals*.

The homogenising problem with the NGO's general strategy of "we are people just like them" emerges most tellingly at this point: its direction is always only one-way. Seen from the problem of unidirectional comparison, the issue of the missing question after Item 4 (and in general from the end of all entries besides Item 5), can be reformulated in terms of this reinforcing normalisation of heterosexuality that always functions as the point of departure for any comparison with the various sexualities in question.

> **7. If we spread positive information about homosexuals, then there will be an increase in their number.**
> Not true. Knowing about gay people does not make you homosexual. On the other hand, there are more people daring to live as homosexuals since information about them reduces prejudice and repudiation.

Item 7 is the most visible moment of the missing displacement of the dominant logic. It could easily have been formulated as a question such as "Why should we be concerned about the growth of their number anyway?" Since the self-defined objective of the NGO is to create a space in the classroom where students can try to define for themselves the meaning of "outlaw" sexualities, the systematic use of these questions of displacement would have been a more effective strategy than staying within the dominant culture's logic of "we are as nice as you/them" - even if the questions might provoke some explicit homophobic responses in the classroom. Perhaps, the

NGO participants' reports after the encounters to the effect that the students did not articulate a strongly homophobic disposition, indeed, hardly any at all in comparison with the emerging voices in the media and the political field, could have to do partly with this strategic avoidance of a more confrontational formulation of the contestations. Interestingly, the NGO members were much more ready to explain the high level of tolerance of the students in terms of the disciplinary power of the classroom setting itself.

> **8. One becomes homosexual because his/her relationship with members of the other sex is not good.**
> Not true. Homosexuality has nothing to do with how much one attracts members of the other sex. It means that one *feels attracted to* others in his/her own sex.

With Item 8 we have arrived at the point where I must address the other most telling feature of the NGO's avoidance strategy, the embarrassing avoidance of any explicit implication of sexual practices - *except* in the context of the criminal conduct of male paedophile practices in Item 3! This self-inflicted silencing of "outlaw" sexual practice through wordings such as the desexualised choice of "relationship" and the barely charged term of "attraction" instead of "desire" or "pleasure", so as to avoid the unspoken but assumed accusations of "doing" homosexuality in the classroom when talking about it, only serves the interests of that kind of zero tolerance. Such evasion remains caught within the homophobic logic that conflates physical injury and discursive injury, in order to silence any form/degree of "outlaw" erotic explicitness in case of being charged with disseminating pornography.

The strategic avoidance of this aspect of LGBT identity is made explicit both in the covering letter addressed to the schools, saying that their representatives will refuse to talk about actual sexual practices, as well as in the course of the training for the participating NGO members, which emphasises the importance of refusing to discuss one's own practices for fear of unmanageable situations arising in the classroom. Such self-inflicted silencing can easily link the dispersed points of trauma in Item 4 and the argument of frequency in Item 5, turning the former into the cause of the latter: accusing non-heterosexual parents of a criminal act of exposing their children to some sort of pornographic sexual behaviour. This trajectory may easily construct a shared ground between Items 4 and 5 and the already criminalised act of "child molestation" in Item 3! Instead of affectionate caring and erotica, we have merely the medical discourse of heterosexuality, evoking some mechanistic, clockwork activity, if any at all, in fact justifying the unspoken outrage over the inherent pornography attributed to "outlaw" sexualities, which are always already assumed to be implicated in "perverse" and dehumanising brutal acts.

> **9. Gays and lesbians intend to provoke with their behaviour.**
> Anything that in the case of a heterosexual couple is not considered to be showing off, such as wearing a wedding ring, walking hand in hand, keeping the photo of the other on their desk, is considered by many to be provocative in the case of *same sex lovers. Yet these gestures are part of a relationship - everyone has the right to show their emotions.*

My point above about the missed chance of displacing homophobia through voicing "outlaw" erotic sexual practices, moments of affectionate desire, etc. is in fact *supported* by the success of the line of argumentation in Item 9. Note, straight away, the difference of the opening in this session. There is no need for the usual denial - "Not true." - for framing the counterargument. Why? Arguably, because the direction of the displacement here is *not* caught within the logic of the contested stereotype. Instead, we have an appeal to the logic of some legal discourse: sexuality is rearticulated in terms of the universal right to one's feelings and, by way of implication, to their open enactment. Even if the gestures of affection the homosexual *lovers* perform (such as wearing rings, walking hand in hand, let alone displaying a picture of the loved one at one's place of work) have nothing to do with erotica proper, their mitigated emergence in relation to the "lover" may work as textual sites for recognition. Once the NGO discourse seems *to trust* its own capacity to handle the emerging space for passion, no matter how mitigated, a shift in perspective can emerge. I'm afraid the NGO's investment in the importance of authenticity cannot come about without this different framing of the matter. Even more to the point, this moment of emancipation comes from within the position of the NGO trusting its own desire.

6. Conclusion

If the ultimate aim of the NGO project is to make students recognise and know that "they [LGBT people] are just like any other people," then the perspective of this counter-discourse is *untenable* because, as my analysis has shown, it will end up caught within the normative discourses of homophobia, re-inscribing the normality/deviance divide and rendering homosexual erotic desire and pleasure as perversion and, as such, "rightly" criminalised acts of unruly forms of sexuality. The latter is especially problematic in my view because of its exclusionary *identitarian* move. It consists in reducing and confining "outlaw" sexualities, in effect, to sex as an ontological category, moreover one that is inherently "sick." As a result, it legitimises the ideological investments of the various normative institutions in controlling the subversive power of non-normative sexualities by silencing gay erotica,

anchoring this technology of discipline in and through an appeal to the right to privacy, while hiding the flip side of any rights rhetoric, namely the duties and responsibilities expected to be delivered in return to the state.

To sum up my position then, it is precisely the expected unruliness of "outlaw" sexual desire and pleasure that emerges in Item 9 as a potential source of queering the (self-)policed boundaries of LGBT identities. Furthermore, it occurs vis-à-vis the self-identified strategy of avoiding anything that runs the risk of explicitly relating to sexual erotica, to matters of practice, pleasure, or desire. What could we learn from the emergence of this transgressive intertextuality in the NGO leaflet as far as language use and sexuality is concerned, especially when academic discourses of sexuality have become the focus for conflict in their own right? In an article critically exposing so-called conversation analysis, another established mode of linguistic analysis, Celia Kitzinger revisits the various conversation data bases to see how the world is constructed and maintained as "naturally" heterosexual in everyday talk-in-interaction.[37] Crucially, Kitzinger argues that "outlaw" sexualities, unlike straight collectives of speakers, occupy non-symmetrical relations to discursive resources of assumptions for constructing their sexuality as "ordinary." When using reference terms to kinship relations, such as identification of the other with reference to their spouse, or telling stories of notable events of their lives, implicating heterosexual institutions such as family, marriage, courtship, or health care, etc., straight collectives will position themselves as "ordinary," because these linguistic devices *automatically* evoke the corresponding hetero-normative institutional organisations of life. These organisations act as the interpretative frame, which is *taken for granted* by the listening members of their normative speech community for what gets *explicitly* said in the interaction.

In my view, the asymmetrical relation to power is especially informative for a progressive critical research agenda when the linguistic interaction is not thematised explicitly around anything "sexual," whether that be identity or desire. The marginalisation, the exclusionary differentiation between straight and "outlaw" sexualities is played out through this set of (non-discursive) institutions of legitimacy, not as readily available as the necessary interpretative framework for "outlaw" sexualities. Consequently, if they do make assumptions about familial, intimate, or any other relations, they are likely to be heard as "making an issue of" the speaker's sexuality - even if that is not what they believe they are doing.

Finally, let me underscore that it is this hegemonic distribution of access to "ordinary" assumptions, which serves as the foundation for the dominant set of conceptual frameworks. Paradoxically, *Labrisz*' general strategy of defence, the self-inflicted silence it decided to opt for, will not be able to redefine the general landscape of straight privilege and *implicit, seen-*

but-unnoticed membership in the heterosexual category, precisely because it tries to mobilise a non-available reciprocity of shared assumptions.

Notes

1. The works that I find most representative of the two positions, are, on the British side, D Cameron and D Kulick, *Language and Sexuality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 2003; and D Cameron, *On Language and Sexual Politics*, Routledge, London & New York, 2006; and, on the US side of the dividing line, W Leap (ed.), *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon: Authenticity, Imagination and Appropriation in Gay and Lesbian Languages*, Gordon and Beach, Buffalo, New York, 1995; W Leap, *Word's Out: Gay Men's English*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1996; and A Livia and K Hall (eds.), *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997.
2. On the meaning of critical self-reflexive research I have found important arguments in S Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity?"', in L Alkoff and E Potter (eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993, pp. 49-82; N Fraser, 'What's Critical about Critical Theory?', in J Meehan (ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, Routledge, New York & London, 1995, pp. 21-55; PH Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, New York, 1991; D Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575-599.
3. R Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, Routledge, New York & London, 1993, p. 46.
4. Ibid., p. 46.
5. J Frow, 'Intertextuality and Ontology', in M Worton and J Still (eds.), *Intertextuality*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, pp. 45-56, p. 46.
6. S Harding, 'Transformation vs. Resistance Identity Projects: Epistemological Resources for Social Justice Movements', in LM Alcoff, M Hames-Garcia, SP Mohanty and PML Moya (eds.), *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York & Houndmills, 2006, pp. 246-263, p 249, emphasis added.
7. Ibid., p. 260.
8. D Cameron, 'Rethinking Language and Gender Studies: Some Issues for the 1990s', in S Mills (ed.), *Language and Gender:*

Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Longman, London & New York, 1995, pp. 31-44, p. 41, emphasis added.

9. P Eckert, 'Demystifying Sexuality and Desire', in K Cambell-Kibler, R Podesva, SJ Roberts and A Wong (eds.), *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*, CSLI Press, Stanford, California, 2002, pp. 99-110, p. 101, emphasis in the original.
10. Cameron and Kulick, op. cit., p. 106.
11. Ibid., p. 106.
12. Ibid., p. 106.
13. Ibid., p. 107, emphasis in the original.
14. Ibid., p. 107.
15. Ibid., p. 106.
16. J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London & New York, 1990.
17. Ibid., p. 144, emphasis in the original; cited in Cameron and Kulick, op. cit., p. 104.
18. Ibid., p. 104.
19. The criticism of these assumptions is best summed up in DC Stanton, 'Autobiography: Is the Subject Different?', in DC Stanton (ed.), *The Female Autograph*, Chicago University Press, Chicago & London, 1984, pp. 3-21.
20. R Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, Routledge, New York & London, 2000, p. 202.
21. Butler develops her concept of agency best when giving an account of the social iterability of the utterance in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, London & New York, 1997, particularly pp. 150-159.
22. See A Weir, 'Toward a Model of Self-Identity: Habermas and Kristeva', in J Meehan (ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, Routledge, New York & London, 1995, pp. 263-282; and A Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.
23. E Barát, *The Relational Model of Identity: The Discoursal Negotiation of (Non)-Oppressive Relations of Power in (Researching) Hungarian Women's Life Narratives*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Lancaster University, UK, 2000, p. 5, emphasis added.
24. Weir mostly makes use of J Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982; and J Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984.
25. Weir, 'Toward a Model', op. cit., p. 279.

26. J Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993, p. 238, emphasis added.
27. Ibid., p. 230.
28. Ibid., p. 242.
29. Ibid., p. 216.
30. Ibid., p. 218.
31. Ibid., p. 239.
32. T Wilton, *Lesbian Identities: Setting an Agenda*, Routledge, London & New York, 1995.
33. Ibid., p. 42.
34. Ibid., p. 49, emphasis added.
35. The quotes are my translations taken from *Már nem tabu - tanári kézikönyv a melegekről, leszbikusokról, biszexuálisokról, transzneműekről*, Labrisz Egyesület, OKKER, Budapest, 2002. The emphases are my own, so as to highlight wording which is particularly relevant for the analysis.
36. Wilton, op. cit., p. 37.
37 C Kitzinger, 'Speaking as a Heterosexual: (How) Does Sexuality Matter for Talk-in-Interaction?', *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 221-265.

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Brokeback Mountain and the Nature of Desire: Love beyond Transcendence

Marek M. Wojtaszek

Abstract
This paper is a critical investigation of the sexual as it is created and developed in the narrative of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain.* Employing Deleuze's highly idiosyncratic approach to the study of the cinematic work - one no longer conceiving art as the copy of nature but as a creation of desire - I will propose a novel and radical glance at this broadly debated cinematic production. More specifically, I shall focus on the notion of the sexual and attempt to unearth its fundamentally material, if forgotten, status and force. The article, drawing on Deleuzean and Guattarian conceptions of affectivity and desire, engages in a rigorous critique of the Oedipal, transcendentally legitimised and socially practiced construal of men's and women's sexuality. Following Deleuze's appeal for even more abstract models of thinking sexuality (via connectivity, relationality), which by no means stands for the flight from the body, I contend that it is the self-understanding and figuration of our bodies that incarcerate the sexual and preclude its authentic realisation and appreciation. Sexuality realises itself through the body; therefore, the paper looks at (male) bodies in the film's portrayal and proposition of alternative manners of thinking the corporeal and the sexual.

Key Words: affect, becoming, body, *Brokeback Mountain,* Deleuze, desire, Guattari, homosexuality, multiplicity, sexuality.

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The truth is that sexuality is everywhere.
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*[1]

1. 1ntroduction: Missing Sex?

Infuriated as I have grown by the oft-recurring theme in the plethora of articles, both in the press and in scholarly journals, about the conspicuous absence of talk about sexuality in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), I wish to express my objection to such a claim, which in my view, testifies to an utterly negativistic and uncritical reading of the film. Conversely, sexuality becomes the (molecular) driving force of the entire narrative - imagistic, sonic, temporal, and most importantly, kinetic. Sexuality's absent presence not only animates the characters (Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist) and fuels their lives, but also underlies and enables the film itself to be produced.

By no means does this return of neo-materialism revert to phenomenological, or even psychoanalytical, accounts of the corporeal and sexual. On the contrary, it proclaims a radical critique of the subjectivism that they conceal, which Gilles Deleuze remarks, is the last vestige of Western transcendence that precludes an authentic recognition and appreciation of the libidinal, thus degrading life to a mere preservation-directed and death-bound phenomenon.[2]

Unsurprisingly, it is only once released from the constraints of the negativistic logic of desire and stripped of metaphysical underpinnings that life and sexuality can be experienced affirmatively and lived on a social-desiring plane of immanence. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critiques of the discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis, as set forth in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*,[3] I aim to escape the commonsensical, the conventional, the molar construal of sexuality, reading *Brokeback Mountain* as a painterly visualisation of life's intrinsic forces and flows, globally named desire, as the tagline of the movie seems to admonish that indeed "Love is a force of nature."[4] Proposing a radical change of paradigm, in lieu of enquiring what desire might be (ontology), this paper explores how it functions and what it produces (ethics), thus investigating its variegated material trajectories. Disengaging from the dominant conceptualisations of the flesh, from the entrenched trust in our putatively immaculate perception, I argue for thinking the body as an incorporeal multiplicity, which best accounts for Ennis' and Jack's becoming-erotic, as the film ingenuously paints.

By no means do I attempt to present a totalising critique of the film. Rather, being critical of what Deleuze and Guattari diagnose as our Western dis-ease, the always transcendentally supported and murderous quest (becoming) for some allegedly existing origin or sense (being), what they call "interpretosis," I propose to view the film as an assemblage of sensations (percepts and affects). I will look into the way in which it triggers, affirms and enhances the virtual powers of life through creational and transformational becoming-sexual, instead of tracing becoming back to some being.[5] Especially in its episode upon the eponymous mountain, the film offers an account of life that is intrinsically sexual and desiring; the remainder of the film might well function as a warning of the damaging consequences, either in the guise of life-long frustration (in the case of Jack) or irremediable melancholy (in the case of Ennis), that the denial of the sexual can bring. Lastly, as *Brokeback Mountain* aptly shows, it is stressed that life *as* sexuality can come to pass only if it becomes liberated from any transcendence whatsoever, be it symbolic (cultural), familial, deathly, or subjective. Only in a Nietzsche-inspired Dionysian self-forgetting does the *principium individuationis* crumble, whereby original solitude is affirmed through a merging with everything; a pure becoming no longer presupposes

any authenticity, a becoming-erotic that Ennis and Jack can enjoy blissfully while physically on Brokeback and thereafter incorporeally, owing to affects and intensities eternally returning as differences in their living bodies (or mnemo-techniques) through an unbridled interplay with multiplicities of another day.

2. The Immanence of Desire

"The traditional logic of desire is all wrong from the very outset,"[6] the authors of *Anti-Oedipus* boldly pronounce, alluding directly to the Platonic heritage enshrined and perpetuated in our structure of thinking. The logic of desire embedded in Western traditions of thought postulates desire as the split between the production of the desired object and its acquisition. Placing desire on the side of acquisition inevitably forces us to think of it primarily as a lack of the real object.[7] Thus construed desire ends up essentialised in lack, which triggers the production of the object. Indeed, desire is thought of as a process of production, but what it produces are merely fantasies. Functioning according to the idealistic principle, desire doubles the reality by constantly fantasising about it. If looked at closely, it becomes clear that the real object that desire lacks is found in the natural or social world, whilst desire is programmed to endlessly produce its imaginary mirror, "as though there were a dreamed-of object behind every real object, a mental production behind all real production."[8] This logic necessarily sentences desire to the eternal unattainability of the object and, being steered by the idealistic machine, to the impossible coupling of the real with its representation. It is not surprising that predicated on the idea of lack, Ennis' and Jack's experience of love becomes dematerialised, disembodied, delegated to some *meta*physical realm, a feeling ungraspable and unspeakable. As the film demonstrates, love as the unconditional affirmation of the sexual powers of life can only and sadly take place in "the hell in the middle of nowhere," away from the *panopticon* of the culture that erects itself upon the burial of the libidinal.[9]

This drastic castration exercised on desire results in turning two men's existences into an unwanted mix of lies and undeserved pain, rendering their lives miserable and pitiful, destitute of vigour and mirth, a vicious cycle of stultifying repetition: the repetition of submission, repression, and guilt brought about by their bodies as a punishment for not giving voice to their desire, for not letting it produce this connection, this reality, *their* reality of their love. Desire incarcerated within this dominant logic predicated on lack ends up dispossessed of its material and real powers.

Instead, Deleuze and Guattari joyfully proclaim:

> If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and

> can produce only reality…. Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object…. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it.[10]

It is only when Ennis and Jack do away with Oedipus, to which Deleuze and Guattari disdainfully refer as "ideational rubbish," that they can feel that desire is fundamentally productive rather than lacking.[11] Desire as a productive force generates products that are real and not phantasmatic. Their entire enterprise, by seeking to bind the material and libidinal, is set, as aforementioned, to dispense with any transcendence that might block the flow of life, crippling its virtual powers (of sexuality), curtailing its creative and transformative expansion. "The truth of the matter is that social production is purely and simply desiring production itself. There is only desire and the social and nothing else."[12] Emphatically, desire and the social are no longer thought of as two separate instances that affect one another; rather, the social becomes always already the libidinal, as the episode on Brokeback unfolds; together they form an authentic monism, a cosmic flow of experience, pure immanence. This absolute union of bodies, of machines, of the natural and social, enables desire to produce endlessly, which, once allowed, can no longer be halted. The eternal recurrence of Ennis' and Jack's becoming-erotic, the overwhelming power of desire's (re)production is dramatised in Jack's enunciation, produced twenty years after their trysting, "I wish I knew how to quit you."[13]

This horizontality comes into being only through an abolition of subjectivity as an heir to the emptied seat of assassinated God in the otherworldly realm. *Anti-Oedipus* announces: "It is the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject."[14] Here lies the core of Deleuze and Guattari's scathing critique of Freudianism, its anthropocentrism, and the commencement of analysis from bounded individual or ego. Life does not begin personally, all the less so in the bounds of the family. Desire, therefore, is neither to be reduced to sexual (genital) relations between persons nor sexuality limited to an act, something that two bodies do. As *Brokeback Mountain* stresses, these genital acts, though definitely important, by no means overshadow all the other material realisations of sexuality. Conversely, persons and bodies are effects of the sexual organisation of desire.[15] Freud's Oedipalising, transcendental logic accounts for his demand to have order in the face of libidinal disorder, alas a characteristic tendency discernible in most other theoreticians of desire also. His inability to explicate the germinal flux of life (sexuality) makes him resort to representation (i.e., the Oedipus myth), which eventuates in the ultimate *abandonment of sexuality* altogether.[16] The film provides an excellent, if

harrowing, account of how a cultural, metaphysically animated and legitimated, negativistic logic of desire can produce nothing but tragedy and sorrow, all-too-well known mourning and melancholia. All this idealistic desexualised machinery - programmed to hold boys in check - achieves is imposed control (heteronormativity, the dialectic of gender) and the infliction and execution of dreadful sanctions and punishments on the disobedient.

The constraining power of the dominant conception of love again turns victorious, as the film develops, succeeding in forcing desire to set Ennis and Jack in search of a dialectically opposed being, regardless of their own will. Their love gets crushed and subjugated entirely, harnessed to the re-creation of a highly oppressive representational system. No longer can we tell which sense of culpability is greater in Ennis, the tragic bearer of his own desire: the one of shutting up the omnivorous mouth of desire, or the one of failing to adequately play his cultural and familial roles (of masculinity, of father, of lover, of breadwinner). Jack becomes no less tragic a character, arguably, even the more tragic. Unable to subject his bodily desires to such a catastrophic castration as Ennis, he indulges himself in a chain of sexual encounters with strangers for sheer genital satisfaction, while remaining all the while in love with his mountainous companion. Jack's case acutely shows the exasperation and tragedy that are brought about by the prohibition of the material realisation of desire. Lack, try as Jack may, stays unrecoverable; regardless of the number of make-outs he has, of bodies he forms connections with, he cannot ease his restless longing for love. Desire, still held in the constraints of Oedipus, dispossessed of its material power, yoked to sexual (genital!) functions, causes him to strive endlessly for the unattainable ideal, thus contributing to the resiliency of the system and the recyclable lack at its centre. Being dramatically trapped between bodily desires on the one hand and the lack of possibility of living and experiencing authentic love beside his beloved one on the other, Jack becomes telling proof of self-extirpation and life-time agony that idealistic, indeed Platonic, love and *meta*physical rendering of desire produce. This orgiastic and diabolically carnal vision of desire must be kept repressed so that socio-cultural life may be established under the leadership of consciousness. Considered the sinful site of desire, the body has, by implication, to be forgotten, submerged unto the dispassionate logic of *meta*physical love. This erasure of *mat(t)er*-iality (of the body, of desire) is precisely the source of all suffering that Jack and Ennis unrightfully undergo. Culture holds them in check disallowing an experience of passionate mutual sharing, actually inducing them to lie to themselves, to their bodies, and respectively, to everyone they enter into relations with (women, wives, children). It is not their love that brings about others' suffering and misery, but the very idealistic character and hypocrisy of our culture, desperately seeking to

impose conformism and utilitarianism, grounding its legitimacy in the idea(l) of another world (love), pure and eternal.

3. The Materiality of Desire and Becoming-Multiplicity

To capture more materially the intrinsically productive power of desire, what is needed is a complete disentanglement of the libidinal from the shadows of the subject and instead, as Deleuze and Guattari propose, to think of desiring-machines, which successfully precludes a crude subsumption of desire under the traditional notion of the bounded anthropomorphic body. It is the function of desire to connect, to relate one erotic machine with another, endlessly producing and devising more complex and sophisticated configurations. Therefore, it is imperative that we renounce the phenomenological construal of the corporeal and begin envisioning it rather as an open multiplicity, an assemblage of connections and conjunctions, forever unrestrained, remaining exposed and vulnerable to the flows of life in all their unpredictability and virtual potentiality. "Sexuality is no longer regarded as a specific energy that unites persons derived from the larger aggregates, but as the molecular that places molecules, partial objects (libido), in connection."[17]

It becomes clear that desire is itself a multiplicity, never in pursuit of a specific object but engaged in making connections, enabling "interflux" of intensities and affects. The multiple structure of desire precludes assumed linearity or unity of the addressee of one's desire. One never desires something or someone, but rather always an aggregate, an assemblage.[18] What, then, is the nature of relations between all these elements forming an aggregate for an aggregate to become desired? Both limitlessness and intricacy are inscribed in the construal of an aggregate, an assemblage. It is therefore difficult to speak of the aggregate in other terms than those of a perpetual play of divergent forces that any reality is a totality of. Desire thus viewed might well be considered something mythical, *extraterrestrial*, a cosmic interplay of molecules and forces that cannot be condensed into any symbolic form, any theoretical definition, any corporeal phenomenon. Desire is a multiplicity of forces; desire for something is a will to pleasure generated towards a *paysage*, a landscape (Brokeback) that someone and something can become. "In desiring an object, the desire is not for the object, but for the whole context, the aggregate; I desire in an aggregate."[19] This implies that desire as an assemblage must be constructed out of elements and forces at one's disposal. This is far from saying that there is an agent who does the constructing; "Desire is not in the subject, but the machine in desire."[20] Jack's confession during one of their re-connections in the mountains, "Sometimes I miss you so much that I can hardly stand it,"[21] bespeaks a novel, more complex construal of desire. He languishes neither for Ennis as an embodied being, nor as an idealised fixed image. Rather, his words

express a multiplicity, a creative and affirmative blend of his bodily memories and sensations, accounting for a living interplay of affects and percepts, both actual (past, present, and future) and virtual ones (whether facts or fantasies). His confession to Ennis testifies to the ever growing producibility and creativity of their bodies, of desire itself. *Anti-Oedipus* states, "Desire does not take as its object persons or things, but the entire surroundings that it traverses, the vibrations and flows of every sort to which it is joined, an always nomadic and migrant desire, characterised first of all by its gigantism."[22]

Desire disengaged from an acquisition of the desired object, "instead of a yearning becomes an actualisation;"[23] a production itself, the production of productions, a production of conjunctions and connections, of life itself in its real, material dimension. Purged of its catastrophic undertones and freed from the confines of the psychic, desire becomes immanent to life, becomes life itself. The chasm between the psychic and the social is overcome by the two becoming one. Put differently, what both Ennis and Jack desire is what they get. Jack and Ennis' social desires are doubtless different as they are two distinct creations, differently embodied and embedded in their walks of life. However, growing up in the culture of somatophobia, they both feel estranged and alienated, ravenous and languishing for intimacy and proximity, bodily connectivity (desire), and, quite simply, touch, which, especially as men, they have been ideologically severed from. Their love is absolutely material, which the story visualises in a sequence upon Brokeback. Their intimate adventure in the idyllic land displays the very working of desire as this material force, as love, with its overpowering and all-encompassing might that drives characters' lives always further on. Their corporeal encounter accounts for their desperate, but beautiful, attempt to regain what their bodies have been sequestrated from. It paints with supremely earthly colours the picture of how beautiful and simple love can become, if only stripped of its cultural ideologies (via distance from civilisation), materially figured (embodied and embedded in the actual context of the sheep's togetherness), and freed from limiting and territorialising categories, as a truly schizophrenic process. Real, material flows within the bodies are represented by body fluids (blood, sperm, sweat, tears), but also flows in the body politic (flows of clouds, trajectories of sheep, rides of horses, drops of hail, streams of water, etc.) - precisely what Deleuze and Guattari suggest when speaking of "love's flows."[24] Put differently, rehabilitating desire as social desire, as a primal energy that makes the currents of the real flow, is the way the film re-materialises love, its embodiment and the resurrection of its non-teleological becoming.

Revolutionary desire as a material and natural process, as a multi-component machine initiating connections and making things possible is "in itself not a desire to love, but a force to love, a virtue that gives and produces,

that engineers."[25] The Brokeback episode constitutes a breakthrough of desire; Jake and Ennis do not *fall* in love, as into some kind of ineluctable trap that desire sets for them; rather, they are literally *making* love, producing it thanks to this illumination of the force of nature, desire. In *making* love, they materialise themselves, becoming one with nature, with each other, permitting their bodily affectivity a carefree and joyful play. This is the power of desire, the marine power of love, of dissolving and overwhelming, that has forever been petrified in the hardened rocks of Western thought. "Mountains are matched by deep ravines. Yet the sea remains: the fluid petrified in sublime rocks still subsists as mass, surrounded by firm ground,"[26] Luce Irigaray notes. The very title of *Brokeback Mountain* seems to recall desire's disruptive and unpredictable power (made) dormant in each body. It is a very special kind of metaphysics wherein the prefix "*meta-*" refers to the true beyond of representational thinking, otherising the "*physis*" as monstrous, and moving toward the far higher level of abstraction that successfully "reaches the abstract machine that connects the body to a whole of micropolitics of the social field."[27] Love does change the world; unfortunately, this story in its entirety barely awards love any room whatsoever. Desire is all about bodies, of whatever kind, about their virtualities and plateaus of intensities. It is only through experimentation that Ennis and Jack can verify whether connections with another body mobilise the body's flows or inhibit them. The story leaves no doubt whose bodies interact smoothly and whose do not. What would desire *be*, were it not for the bodies (human or inhuman, molar or molecular) and the synergies between them?

4. Plateaus of Desire and Becoming-Erotic

Thought of in terms of identity and unification terms, love only comes into being when the specificity of desire is questioned or rejected. Becoming-love is feasible only beyond any territoriality, especially beyond persons and identities. It is Brokeback Mountain that makes it possible for Ennis and Jack to undergo such a de-territorialisation and depersonalisation dedicating themselves entirely to one another in their becoming-sheep, becoming-sound, becoming-cloud, becoming-imperceptible. The unearthing of their mobility keeps potentiality as well as all action in disequilibrium, holds potentiality in action as virtuality. All these *becomings* are deeply rooted in matter; it is indeed matter that enables the men to experience their bodies as multiplicities, multiple becomings. In serene and virginal environs - whether herding sheep, sharing stories by the fire or making love - they can freely enjoy peaceful moments of self-forgetting; in un-making themselves, they make other, more complicated and complex connections, thus going through a truly transcendental experience, otherwise called love. "And I was changed into a cloud. Not in ecstasy nor dissipated into the air, but a body

animated throughout. Living and aroused in each part of my flesh."[28] Jack and Ennis are *making* love, are becoming-love, becoming-molecular, reconnecting to matter (nature), away from the vigilant eye of molar and mortifying culture.

This same culture which, as Irigaray astutely claims, is afraid of the body's limitlessness, sentences Jack and Ennis to live in perpetual fear: fear of the body's becoming, of its perpetual renascence, of the *jouissance* bodies can thereby generate.[29] This joyful process of incessant creation of bodies and bodily connections is by no means reduced to sexuality as genitality and a vehicle for reproduction. It is rather "an opening to openness,"[30] to use Irigaray's term, to unadulterated and uninhibited flows of forces, affects and intensities, and most importantly, to time. The body can no longer be figured as "either sketched on the horizon of orgasm. Or deposited as a memory of what orgasm forgets,"[31] simply as an object, a means toward any end. Nothing could be further removed from the becoming-love than such a positioning of the body. Surely, this involves a radicalisation of the phenomenological conceptualisation of the body. The living body, as the incorporeal, completely open (porous) and intrinsically sexual (relational), driven by desire, functions by making connections with other bodies, allowing an interflow of energies and intensities (affects, percepts). The body rediscovers its multiplicity in desire, its intrinsically sexual character prompting it to ever more expansion and experimentation. Deleuze and Guattari hold that love is this very creative novelty of connection, this joining of multiplicities of bodies, these body-multiplicities: "To join them to mine, to make them penetrate mine, and for me to penetrate the other person's."[32] The Brokeback episode of Jack and Ennis' lives can justifiably be read as an epitome of the sheer bliss love evokes. Disentangled from merciless cultural surveillance and liberated from *meta*physical obligations and duties, they can experience an authentic return to the materiality of their bodies, their forces and becomings, their playful multiplicities; a retrieval of love, life's most basic capacity to produce connections: a genuine return to the innocence of life. "Heavenly nuptials, multiplicities of multiplicities."[33]

This desiring multiplicity is no doubt a driving force in the intercourse scenes. "Making love is not just becoming as one, or even two, but becoming as a hundred thousand,"[34] *Anti-Oedipus* insists. Desire is not about dualisms, binaries, dialectical charades of any sort, not about subject/object, inside/outside, active/passive; rather it bespeaks its potential for continuous change and creation. *Making* love, Jack and Ennis render their multiplicities, and enter into new, obviously seductive and exciting relations, and always virtual conjunctions. To view these powerful moments of intimacy as prurient amounts therefore to a total misrecognition of the sexual powers of life. Rather, these as any other, literally *sexually* charged scenes remind us of the temporal frailty and spatial fragility of the relations bodies

form, of the virtual power of time, and consequently, of the affirmation and enjoyment of every tiny intensity that our bodies through desire give (affect) and steal (are affected by).[35] This implies openness to the flows of varied charges of intensities that bodies produce, simultaneously actively and passively, which orient us to pleasure enjoyed on plateaus rather than as a climax-fixated pursuit. The comparatively little attention drawn to the sex acts in the film seems in keeping with the erotology of plateaus, which frees Ennis and Jack from an orgasmic obsession and allows more experimentation and appreciation of the material and multiple erotogeneity of life, an affirmation of life as desire through an eternal journey between plateaus or intensive states of becoming.

The story of two painfully solitary young men earning their most precious gift quite unexpectedly herding sheep, *making* their own love, echoes throughout with the silent but vibrant shimmering flow of desire as a life force. Their bodies immediately turn into multiple and material flows of sheep, streams, clouds, horses, sounds, becoming always more. Put otherwise, the immanence of desire conditions the very enactment of love, its materialisation, its becoming, of their becoming-love. It does not need any transcendental assurances, best expressed in the clichéd and misleading "I love you," which, quite tellingly, is never uttered by Jack or Ennis. As a matter of fact, they never refer to their affection as "love." There are two crucial points to note here. Firstly, being brought up in the so-called Western context, they might revere this word, thinking it appropriate to a heterosexual relationship, whilst theirs remains an outburst of unbridled and traumatising desire (as in Ennis' articulation, "If *that* grabs hold of us…").[36] Or secondly, they might well sense that what their bodies produce is something of a radically different character and significance to them from their sustained relations with women, a feeling verbally inexpressible, a play of intensities and affects that is so overwhelming that it can only be lived and experienced in the here-and-now, a veritable immanence of time, of love. This is definitely not a question of them being cowboys, of not being sophisticated or refined enough to speak their desire. Desire does not need verbalisation; rather, it appreciates a body, open and malleable, welcoming experimentation as life's basic mode and capacity for living the sublime, as the men do on Brokeback Mountain. The enigmatic sublime that desire carries is not to be confused with anything other than this-worldly, rooted in matter, affirmative recognition and acknowledgement of vital, fluctuating differences, of multiple becomings beyond any territoriality.

5. Conclusion. Sexuality Regained

As the film aptly portrays, the virtual powers of desire in their unconditional affirmation by Ennis and Jack are far from spontaneous or gratuitous. Rather, desire needs to be constructed, which involves the men's

active participation and investment. This, however, is not steered by the theological transcendence of lack, nor does it introduce any interruption of the immanent and perpetual, if non-teleological, process of desire-constructing in the form of hedonistic discharge, which the film testifies to in its significantly minor focus on their romance. Instead, we are exposed to a flow of incessant life construction with no possible point of exhalation, where in an explicitly Heraklitean fashion, everything rests by changing. The sexual emerges as this genetic element of desire, with which it forms a pure immanence, a life.

> Desire includes no lack; it is also not a natural given. Desire is wholly a part of a functioning heterogeneous assemblage. It is a process, as opposed to a structure or a genesis. It is an affect, as opposed to feeling. It is a hecceity - the individual singularity of a day, a season, a life.[37]

Ennis and Jack's love can barely be construed as an outburst of some dreadful force buried deep inside their bodies (crude materialism), or alternately, as an unexpected gift from up high (naïve idealism). A joyous overcoming of this dualistic and no doubt limiting view is precisely what the oft-mentioned virtuality heralds. It points to the possibility of producing love, immanent labour, which leads to a restless emergence of singularities - all these tiny, molecular affects and *becomings* that populate the always in-between space, thus perfectly accounting for Ennis and Jack's *sexual* (i.e., connective, relational) adventure.

As the tagline of the film announces, the love Jack and Ennis make is indeed a force of nature, though it bears no sign of any primordial essence. Therefore, it can no longer be viewed, in a very poor manner, as a civilised/lived form of unbridled sexuality circumscribed and channelled historically, socially, legally or culturally. The vision of love in concert with idealistic principle necessarily expels it from this world, the world of matter, its creativity and change, positing it as a utopia. In all its simplicity of means of expression and delicateness of themes invoked, *Brokeback Mountain* excels in putting this utopia to an end in favour of revolutionary materialism, which renders possible the resurrection of the sexual and the affirmative use of its potential.

Under no circumstances would this be feasible were it not for their bodies, now lived incorporeally, as assemblages of forces and becomings. Deleuze notes:

> They are defined by relationships between an infinite number of parts that compose each body and that already characterise it as a "multitude." There are therefore

> processes of composition and decomposition of bodies, depending on whether their characteristic relationships suit them or not.[38]

This seemingly crude logic in fact aspires to the highest exercise of the imagination, a certain abstraction, capable of accounting for the molecular, joyfully volatile character, structure, and functioning of the sexual. Ennis and Jack's myriad encounters, instead of *gene*-rating pleasure as a manifestation of some alleged gene-based identity, produce or construct a love as becoming, always occurring in-between, which can only be grasped at the level of "I feel," every little moment of which records intensive relations amongst multiple bodies and affects. The final, ironic, cinematic juxtaposition of an old, worn-out and blood-stained shirt, along with a fatigued postcard and the claustrophobic space of the caravan on the one side and the window overlooking a farmed pastoral land on the other, admirably stresses the imperishability and importance of the affective affirmation of life-love in all its vibrant difference and becoming, which eternally run along, even if buried under the many layers of cultural symbolism. Ennis' closing phrase "Jack, I swear…"[39] best conveys this exuberance of the experience of desire and its irreducibility to the order and barrenness of the negativistic and idealistic discourse. The denouement appears to be forceful, if not coercive, an appeal for affirmation, otherwise it will forever be too late ….

Notes

1. G Deleuze and F Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, London & New York, 2004, p. 322.
2. Here, Deleuze follows Foucault's description of the Western tradition of thought as a "subjection to transcendence;" M Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Pantheon, New York, 1972, p. 203. As early as *Difference and Repetition*, published in French in 1968, Deleuze discusses the question of transcendence. In his work *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze describes his philosophy as an ethics of *amor fati*, a love of fate, of what becomes, rather than a quest for some ultimate truth transcendent to what is. The question of subjectivity as a closeted transcendence is discussed, most crucially, in his work on Foucault, wherein Deleuze emphasises his adherence to immanence and exposes Foucault's sustained dualism.
3. See Deleuze and Guattari, op. cit.; and G Deleuze and F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, London & New York, 2004.

4. A Lee (dir.), *Brokeback Mountain*, Alberta Film Entertainment, Canada, 2005.
5. It must be noted that in their rigorous critique of Western thought Deleuze and Guattari often resort to the metaphor of the tree; the vertical arborescent structure - that is, our Western image of thought - is exposed as the main oppressor and impediment for thinking. In *A Thousand Plateaus* they write, "We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics;" Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, op. cit., p. 17. They further argue, "Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centres of significance and subjectification;" ibid., p. 18.
6. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 26.
7. Ibid., p. 26.
8. Ibid., p. 27.
9. Lee, op. cit.
10. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 28.
11. Ibid., p. 328. Deleuze and Guattari repetitively ask about the reasons for reverting to myths (Oedipus) as a ground for cultural edifice. Their abhorrence of myths seems best expressed in their words, "In the myth there is no life for us. Only the myth lives in the myth;" ibid., p. 328.
12. Ibid., p. 31.
13. Lee, op. cit.
14. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 28.
15. This insistence on the inhuman character of sexuality harks back to Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. Deleuze actually begins by agreeing with Freud about his conception of desire. In *Anti-Oedipus* he writes: "His [Freud's] greatness lies in having determined the essence or nature of desire, no longer in relation to objects, aims, or even sources (territories), but as an abstract subjective essence - libido or sexuality;" Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 292. Freud's association of the libido with the family, and moreover, with the subject, occludes his discovery and contributes to its entrapment within yet another form of transcendence, failing to recognise and appreciate its revolutionary character.
16. The term is borrowed from Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm*, as it is quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, ibid., p. 127.
17. Ibid., p. 200.
18. G Deleuze and C Parnet, *Dialogues II*, Continuum, London & New York, 1987, p. 71.
19. Ibid., p. 77.

20. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 314.
21. Lee, op. cit.
22. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 322.
23. E Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays in the Politics of Bodies*, Routledge, New York & London, 1995, p. 195.
24. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 126.
25. Ibid., p. 366.
26. L Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 73.
27. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, op. cit., p. 8.
28. Irigaray, op. cit., p. 99.
29. Ibid., p. 53.
30. Ibid., p. 59.
31. Ibid., p. 77.
32. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, op. cit., p. 39.
33. Ibid., p. 40.
34. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 325.
35. Deleuze and Guattari underscore that "[d]esire knows nothing of exchange, it knows only theft and gift;" ibid., p. 203.
36. Lee, op. cit.
37. G Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, Semiotext(e), New York, 2006, p. 130.
38. Ibid., p. 192.
39. Lee, op. cit.

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PART III

Sexibition, Power, and the Gaze

Perverting the Museum:
The Politics and Performance of Sexual Artefacts

Jennifer Tyburczy

Abstract
This article explores performances of collecting and exhibiting sexual artefacts at three contemporary museums in the United States: the Museum of Sex (New York), the World Erotic Art Museum (Miami Beach), and the Leather Archives & Museum (Chicago). It mobilises a variety of analytical paradigms from performance studies, interweaving historical, theoretical, and ethnographic detail to focus on a variety of normative and transgressive sex exhibition processes. "Perverting" functions as a poetic and methodological concept, which aims at sensually and erotically engaging the deviating and/or conforming dynamics of the performances and spaces I encounter.[1]

Key Words: collecting, exhibiting, *L'Origine du Monde*, Leather Archives & Museum, Museum of Sex, museum, performance, perverting, sexual history, World Erotic Art Museum.

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1. Act I: Lacan's Vulva

Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du Monde*, 1866 (RF 1995-10)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

A Note on Reading: This section places a body, my body, in the mind's eye. A white queer female US academic, I invite you to envision this body in drag performance as Jacques Lacan, as you insert your own body into the audience of the painting he unveils.

The year is 1957. Imagine you are an elite white gentleman visiting the summer home of famed psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. This is La Prévôté, purchased by Lacan and his wife Sylvia Bataille, after WWII and situated in Guitrancourt, near Mantes-la-Jolie. You are led into Lacan's atelier, where books and art objects decorate the walls and shelves. In a corner of the room, sits a wooden contraption upon which a surrealist sketch has been painted. Lacan fingers a mechanism and, somewhat mysteriously, the panel slides away.

"Come closer gentlemen," *he may have begun to this small group of well-dressed colleagues and close acquaintances now staring silently at the painting before them.*

"I have acquired a most excellent example of what I'm discussing in my lectures these days. I trust you will keep your word and mention none of this to anyone - not even my wife - over dinner. You may already be familiar with the piece painted by Gustave Courbet in 1866 for Khalil Bey, the Turkish diplomat of course. Well, it's passed through many hands since, and though you may laugh at the mechanism I've had made to conceal it, believe me, she's seen more reclusive days … *L'Origine du Monde* … Take it in.

"You may notice the redness of the nipples and around the vulva suggesting that the woman has just been penetrated. You may notice the crumpled nightshirt exposing her breasts, her body becoming even more vulnerable to the seducer? the aggressor? the lover? the painter? the spectator? Does it excite you? Does it terrify you? Does it bore you? Of what does it remind you?"

Lacan's scene of unveiling *The Origin of the World*, as well as my partially fabricated rendition of it, represents only one pause in the painting's history,[2] what Arjun Appadurai would call the painting's "social life,"[3] of being collected and displayed before audiences. In scripting this moment, I want to suggest playfully how practices and histories of collecting and exhibiting performatively impact artefacts and the bodies represented in and around these artefacts. That is, an object and the bodies situated within the frame of that object collect meanings or assume a life beyond the frame only and ever through the processes and practices of human interactive performances. Display spaces like museums, then, create contexts of encounters that teem with material and affective potentials.

In drawing attention to the human action involved in how objects are inherited, acquired, exhibited, organised, catalogued, and seen, I approach

collecting and exhibiting as performances.[4] Collecting and exhibiting materials are everyday practices that propel objects and ideas through space and time; they are also highly constructed practices haunted by cultural, social, and political prerogatives that govern and organise vertical hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Sexual objects historically and currently circulate alongside rhetorics of fear, secrecy, shame, transgression, and/or elitism.[5] Particularly those objects representative of non-normative sexualities oftentimes require curators, collectors, and audiences to engage in psychic leaps of fantasy and imagination, or at least the decentring of the normative scopic lens in order to flesh out the erotically powerful possibilities of these artefacts' social lives.

The sex object's brazen function might seem to hide no mysteries, just organising singular histories. I argue here that to the contrary, the histories of object use and fantasies of use reveal sexual practices, ethics, and modes of value occluded by what is explicitly functional about the object. When organised into museum exhibitions, these nuances create affective environments that challenge, expose, and restage the circulation histories of sexual artefacts in the present toward an understanding of how certain bodies have been invited or coerced to perform in sexual environments of the past. It can also require a reckoning with barely perceptible or seemingly invisible traces of erotic life, hovering at the parameters of the frame or archive.

One potential space where this poetic and methodological reckoning can occur is the sex museum. Insofar as they de-privatise, re-caption and re-spatialise sex and sexual artefacts for collective audiences, sex museums offer sites for exploring what happens to bodies when sexual objects emerge from private collections to public exhibitions. The primary goal of these museums is to shift the ways in which publics view, consume, and evaluate sex and sexual knowledge by working within an institution normatively expected to provide a space of pedagogy, history, aesthetic value, and respectability.

Re-staging sexual representation in a public museum *perverts* the function of the museum. Turning stigmatised meanings of the word "pervert" into sources of transformative power is a discursive tactic employed by sex and sexuality scholars, genderqueer writers, anti-censorship activist groups, and kink communities.[6] Of these examples, I find the transformed application of "pervert" by queer geographer David Bell most conducive to this discussion: "The pervert, inhabiting the space between the public and the private, threatens the collapse of both domains."[7] Perverted spaces, then, are potential everyday sites of resistance where sexual knowledge is publicly and communally shared.

My use of "pervert" in its verb and gerund forms goes beyond the transgression of public/private expectations and mandates, however. The sex museum project also indicates an effort and a desire to re-stage sexual

artefacts by isolating them from the banal details of living, in which they may go unnoticed or unread. Constructing an exhibit dedicated to framing "natural" or "original" claims to (hetero)sexuality, for example, offers an opportunity to interrupt the performative discourses that create and sustain these claims. In the case of queer and other marginalised sexualities, the processes of collecting and exhibiting sexual artefacts revive the historical and aesthetic value of objects previously hidden from history due to the taboo, secretive, scientific, and/or elite circuits they previously travelled. The primary focus here is on how collectors and curators furnish the environments for re-staging artefacts in collective, public, albeit imperfectly democratic display spaces - particularly in terms of the class limitations imposed by ticket prices.

Moreover, perverting refers to the ways in which sex museums lodge the explicitly sexual in the oftentimes de-eroticised space of the museum. Perverting historical performances of collection and exhibition, then, refers neither to corruption nor pathology but to everyday sexual destabilisations, turns or curves in normative human performances of framing, sharing, and viewing sexual artefacts and sexual knowledge. A perverted space or thing is a transformed space or thing, signalling a reworking of its (typically considered non-sexual) form and orientation toward a more explicit association with the erotic or the sexual.

In the pages that follow, I revisit select ethnographic and observational moments with people and exhibits at three sex museums in the United States. Foremost, I explore how sex museums transform erotic or sexual traces into readable display spaces and ask whether these spaces reconfigure past performances of collecting and exhibiting sexualised bodies. Though I primarily focus on vision as a sense perception, vision and visuality are considered synesthetically, that is, in relation to other senses. Primarily working through the visual aspects of sex museums, however, prompts the primary thesis of my analysis here: sex museums house sensual performances of transgression that also contribute to the reproduction of domination, discipline, and normativity.

2. Act II: Miss Naomi Wilzig and the Public Sex Collection

She enters an antique shop in Paris with a sign hung around her neck that reads: *Je cherche de l'art erotique*. In the past she would have had to ask clerks for their erotic art holdings; few put sexual artefacts in plain view for fear of offending their customers. Instead they climbed wooden ladders, grasped behind tall cabinets, or disappeared into back rooms to reveal their covert collections.

"He told me I had to ask for it," says the 71-year-old Jewish American widow Miss Naomi Wilzig, relating some advice given to her by an English-speaking art dealer.[8] And Wilzig doesn't speak French. For

fourteen years she travelled the Americas and Europe asking for erotic art, and when linguistically necessary, emblazoning her body with her quest. Wilzig now personally owns a 4,000-piece collection and in 2005 financed the opening of the World Erotic Art Museum (WEAM) in Miami Beach, Florida.

Wilzig is the self-proclaimed second-largest collector of erotic objects in the world, second only to a male collector in Paris who, according to Wilzig, avoids public identification for fear of potential damage to his political and economic clout. From my conversations with Wilzig at WEAM, it seems that this man, whoever he may be, performs a traditionally told story of erotic object circulation and display. He collects and exhibits privately, sharing his collection only with a small coterie of friends and colleagues, most of whom share his wealth, status, and gender.[9]

Although Wilzig matches this man in terms of class status, the gendered interruption of her body in the space of the antique shop, read through the lens of performance theory, opens up possibilities of perverting prior histories of sexual object circulation. The focus on Wilzig's gendered intervention fosters a feminist critique of human performances and environments rather than a reading of the misogynistic and/or the subversive aspects embedded in a text or object.

From the Parisian antique shop, I step into the institutional frame of the museum and how Wilzig's collection and exhibition of sexual artefacts for public communal audiences perverts the recorded history of women's roles in circulating sexual and erotic knowledge. Sexuality and the collection of artefacts, erotic or otherwise, have oftentimes been regarded as sharing an intimate relationship. That connection, however, has been more readily attributed to the primacy of male scopophilia, sexually pathological perversity, or the desperate frenetic fear inspired by the death drive.[10] As art historian Michael Camille argues, pleasure "not as a passive and merely optical response but as an active, productive and shaping stimulation of the senses - is the fundamental experience at the foundations of the act of collecting."[11] In the case of Wilzig, the motivating sources of her collecting and exhibiting at least partially derive from her pleasure in performing an authoritative role in the circulation of sexual knowledge.

Wilzig's desire to collect and exhibit sexual artefacts at WEAM grows out of the pleasure she experiences in becoming a public sexual woman and an erotic pedagogue without always or necessarily being punished for her desire. Leaning on the civic and pedagogical ethos of the museum as a genre of spatial aesthetics and historical value, Wilzig creates a space in the public domain to perform this identity. According to Wilzig,

> one of the truths of life is that people are sexual beings and that people have different sexual habits and likes and

> dislikes and practices and activities. And that we as members of the human race should be understanding and tolerant of the other people's practices and views. Because it all comes down to the fact that we are basic in our creation, we are basic in our origin, we are basic in our "natural plumbing," we are basic in our arousal of life, in our method of creation and to procreate, and to shy away from erotic art as something that's a horror or forbidden or evil is a misnomer, is wrong, and I'm trying to help correct that.[12]

Here, Wilzig imagines herself as playing an important part in a project of educating her visiting publics on matters of sex and sexuality. Her unabashed hope that sharing her collection will enable her visitors to see sex differently contradicts a history of sexual object circulation that denied women the opportunity to assume this responsibility.

In his study of modern "pornography," *The Secret Museum*, Walter Kendrick traces the formation of the concept in the nineteenth century to the unearthing of sexual artefacts at Pompeii around 1745. The "secret museum" concept functions like a private club in which books, artefacts, and other sexual or immoral materials are covertly catalogued and sparingly circulated or displayed only to those individuals above corruption, namely white, elite males. "'Pornography,'" Kendrick asserts, "names an argument, not a thing,"[13] and the argument of pornography created a regulatory category of potentially corrosive materials, not coincidentally at the same historical juncture when Western nations-states adopted democratic ideals of greater public accessibility. The arbiters of the secret museum named the prostitute as the public sexual woman of the period and *the* corruptive force in need of cleansing and eradication; simultaneously, it grouped (white bourgeois) women, children, and the lower classes as particularly vulnerable bodies in need of state and social protection from these corrosive materials and people.

Conceptually, the "secret museum" supported definitively gendered, raced and classed answers to questions that US culture continues to grapple with when it comes to sex: What are the proper places, times, tones, and formats for sexual conversations and explorations? And who should decide? The answer to the latter question has of course shifted significantly since the first discovery of Roman erotica at Pompeii. Still, women rarely perform as arbiters of what and how erotic knowledge should be disseminated, even when these issues concern their bodies specifically. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Lauren Berlant describes US sexual politics of the present through what she terms "The Intimate Public Sphere" and the "Theory of Infantile Citizenship."[14] The former describes the contemporary climate of sexual politics, particularly

how the United States obsessively generates certain visual and rhetorical discourses of and about sex that performatively feed the tones and shades of traumatised national identity and a monolithic heteronormativity. Any discursive circulations of sex in public are reworked or demonised and then re-routed to serve the concept of private/sacred space and the bourgeois bodies that occupy such spaces. In Berlant's "Theory of Infantile Citizenship," women and children are lumped together as hyper-vulnerable bodies in need of state protection from pornographic materials, the supposed deleterious effects of which support and uphold the affective environment of the "intimate public sphere." While adult women are my primary concern here, Berlant points toward the broader effects of this sexual environment on everyday life, namely that in the contemporary world sexual discourse is no longer hidden and in fact organises the political public; and yet the discourses of innocence and shamed explicitness continue to prevail, operating in a paradox identified by her book.

WEAM becomes for Naomi Wilzig a performance space in which she publicly enacts a sexual and pedagogical identity that confronts and exposes this paradox. In this way Wilzig bravely stares down the history of the "secret museum" concept - and not only in terms of its gender script. The public display of her erotic art collection continues to evoke appreciation, arousal, shock, awe, repulsion, and ambivalence, especially when her critics and fans consider her Orthodox Jewish background, alongside her age, widowhood, and gender. For Wilzig, it was her Jewishness and what that meant for her as a woman which caused her the most trepidation as she contemplated opening the museum. Of particular concern was the way her rabbi would respond:

> He always said, "why are you - I would always say I was in Florida - why are you going to Florida so much? What are you doing in Florida that you can't do here?" He asked me so many times that one day I said to him, I said, "Rabbi, do you want to know the real truth why I'm in Florida?" He says, "Yes, of course." I said, "I do something that is unusual for a woman to do." He looks up at me. I said, "I do something that's more unusual for an Orthodox [Jewish] woman to do" - cause our temple even had segregated seating between the men and the women, it was such a religious organization - "I do something that even an Orthodox woman doesn't do." [He replies] "Yes, what?" I said, "I have become the country's leading authority on erotic art." - He looks up at me and he says, "You're a smart woman. I always knew you'd do something

> important." That lifted a stone from my chest and from my heart and from then on, there was no stopping me.[15]

Wilzig's pleasurable practices of exhibiting after this "lifted stone," however, are complex and at times, problematic. While Wilzig clearly cracks the mould in many areas of erotic object circulation, desire and pleasure always and everywhere exist alongside power and culturally and socially conditioned ways of seeing. Sex museums in general offer unique opportunities to investigate Michel Foucault's theory of "power-knowledge-pleasure,"[16] or the interweaving discursive regimes whereby sexual bodies are ranked and ordered based on psychological, scientific, and statistical obsessions with universally coded bodies and structuring and structured norms. While exhibiting sex troubles the legacy of the nineteenth-century function of a museum as a space for civilising and forming particular kinds of citizens from the un-ideal masses,[17] Wilzig's ordering of sexual artefacts under the traditional rubric of the art museum in some ways continues that history.

Wilzig and her staff have done very little to historicise the diverse materials in WEAM, suggesting that she prefers visitors to prioritise aesthetics over objects' potential historical contribution. In the "Black Art" room, for example, foregoing textual exegesis frames an encounter with the blackface minstrelsy puppet with the large phallus, while glossing over the performatively redundant and controlling histories in which white culture employed visual representation to create stereotypes of black male sexuality; some of these stereotypes solidified into meanings mapped onto the bodies of black men, which were in turn used as fear-inspiring confirmations or justifications for acts of violence committed against those bodies.[18] Should the blackface minstrelsy puppet, most likely a white cultural creation, be placed in the "Black Art" room, or should it be placed among other white-authored artefacts, leaving to the "Black Art" room only those representations created by, for, and about black people and their self-authored sexual images? What are the benefits and limitations of separating "American" sexual artefacts by race? Without historical contextualisation, these questions remain unanswered and, to my mind, raise uneasy questions about the relation of transgression to the reproduction of domination at WEAM.

The visitor to any museum is in many ways a sensual eye, invited or coerced to look in certain ways based on the contextualisation of the artefacts and the feelings and vocabularies associated with a particular display environment. In contrast to social history museums, art museums and galleries hinge more on the concept of taste and the "good eye" of the bourgeois or middle class subject, who possesses prior knowledge to properly evaluate and appreciate art. While Wilzig can certainly do what she wants

with her sex museum, her project's alignment with the art museum and the artefacts' minimal contextualisation limit the perverting potential of WEAM.

The ways in which WEAM interprets and applies museum traditions of ordering, narrativising, and juxtaposing artefacts demonstrates another potential/limitation of Wilzig's project and the challenge facing the sex museum project more broadly. WEAM's "technologies of layout," as Gillian Rose calls them,[19] order artefacts based on "subjects" or "styles" of art, avoiding a linear chronological or sexually progressing story. The material application of this ordering system, however, oftentimes separates art by nationality or by sexual identity with some suggestive results. For example, artefacts from Africa are textually labelled according to nation, but collectively called "ethnographic," a designation that plays upon histories of displaying these artefacts as primarily anthropological in value or second-tier to the high art aesthetic historically associated with Western artistic traditions.

If objects assume meaning when human bodies physically or verbally perform exegesis, then the textual label and the carefully designed tour of rarely seen sexual objects assume a particularly important role in realising Wilzig's goal of re-educating her museum publics. Of course, museum visitors can and do resist the presentation and organisation of the artefacts, and the most popular request in the visitor survey books calls for more historical information in the forms of well-researched labels, tours, and headsets.[20] As I share Wilzig's interest in the idea of relearning and shifting assumptions of sex and sexuality, I find this visitor input fascinating, as it too expresses a desire to engage in a project of cruising sexual knowledge and developing new sexual vocabularies, at least temporarily in the space of WEAM.

But the absence of these traditional museum knowledge technologies from WEAM does not mean that the museum engages in no explicit contextualisation. Wilzig certainly does pervert the idea of "art" by including what would be considered highbrow art objects - like the phallic-anal murder weapon from Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* - and works by well-known and critically acclaimed artists, such as Robert Mapplethorpe, with objects that could be considered lowbrow, kitsch, or pop art items. Furthermore, Wilzig's museum occasionally pokes fun at itself, even interrupting the size and antiquity of the Roman and Greek collection with a sense of humour; in one of the glass display cases filled with ancient plates and sculptures, for instance, she includes a nude, plastic Homer Simpson figurine and smilingly responds to visitor inquiries, "He's Greek."

During an informal interview session with Wilzig, she returned some of my questions and asked what I would change about the museum. In that moment, my mind went immediately to the "Gay (Male) Art" room. I described my mixed feelings on separating the gay art, and how the

intermixing of lesbian sexual artefacts with heterosexual images, neither of which were labelled as such, perplexed me. Moreover, I explained that while I found it important to devote a room to gay male art so that it could easily be located by interested parties, it was also the only room stylistically and structurally distinguished from the rest of the museum by a glass wall with dark, drawn blinds that enclosed the space and created, for me at least, too strong an association with taboo. With this sentence barely out of my mouth, Wilzig rose from her desk seat and gestured for me to follow her. We entered the nearby gay art room where she immediately started pulling at the blinds; humorously surprised by what struck me as a contra-Lacanian unveiling of naked male bodies at sexual play, I followed her lead.

I pulled tentatively; then yanked with forceful intensity, without effect. After a minute or two, Wilzig turned to me and shrugged her shoulders. "That's funny," I remember mumbling, half-laughing, half-crest fallen. As though they meant to defy the good-humoured and collaborative rebelliousness of this small but important moment, the blinds refused to budge, seemingly cemented to the tightly screwed track that held them in a cohesive and obstructing line.

3. Act III: Sexed Spaces Revisited

The Museum of Sex (MoSex) is a veritable haunted house. Located in what was once known as the Tenderloin District of New York, a place of teeming sexual commerce, the building was originally a brothel called The Reform Club.[21] From Anthony Comstock's "vice squad" raids in the 1890s to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's anti-porn zoning laws in the 1990s, the area has become a gentrified, commercialised hub just a smidge off the beaten track of tourists arriving from Penn Station or passing their New York vacation in the vicinity of Times Square. The existence and success of MoSex may be paradoxically attributed both to the demand for more publicly sexualised spaces in a "cleaned-up" New York and to the closure of adult cinemas, porn shops, brothels, strip joints, and bathhouses that had formerly inhabited the Midtown Manhattan area. A for-profit business that cannot solicit donations as tax-deductible or seek aid from charitable foundations and government cultural programs, MoSex encountered the strange conundrum of being haunted by and replacing these other sexual locales; for example, the New York State Board of Regents refused to accredit it as a museum, allegedly saying that the name (Museum of Sex) made a mockery of the museum as an institution.[22]

MoSex's exhibit "Stags, Smokers & Blue Movies: The Origins of the American Pornographic Film" consciously plays with the presence/absence of the sexual archive. Not unlike my performance of Lacan's private studio unveiling, the curatorial team re-staged atmospheric

elements of the smoke-filled, semi-public spaces where men once gathered to watch then illicit material.

[*Boisterous masculine laughter interrupts the scene, followed by whistling, clapping, and other unanimous ejaculations*.] You hear this exhibit before you see it. Recorded laughter and chants reminiscent of sporting events pipe through the walls. So prompted, I combed the hazy, blue room for the group of men who must have thought something was hysterically funny. I soon realised I was part of the exhibit; my feminine-gendered performance became necessary for shifting and retaining the affective atmosphere of this once clandestine scene. The films were projected down onto large, white blocks in two columns, separated by an eye-level partition where one could read printed information on the technology, the spaces, and the bodies included in these early pornographic films. The positioning of the partition was strategic: I could enjoy my pornographic consumption without looking into the eyes of another person; I could be aroused or discomfited and hide it at the same time. In one of the small booths lining the left side of the exhibit, interviews with performers, spectators, and producers conjured memories to describe the dynamic energy between the various embodied performances in the space of the stag showing. The hullabaloo, apparently, was a defence mechanism, a way of laughing off one's "boner." Anyone who showed too much arousal was a dangerous participant; the creation of a homoerotic scenario seemed the greatest fear.

On the one hand, MoSex's "Stag" exhibit reanimates a historically dated atmosphere of rebellious male consumption of pornography; on the other hand, it mimics that scene, interrupting this history by inviting diverse museum publics into a new collective history of stag spectatorship. The way the exhibit's structure disengages live bodies from eye contact ironically plays on the disciplining of desire in past stag showings and the predicament of all sex museums: you can look, but dare you noticeably get aroused? But while certain scenographic elements create a disjuncture or a perversion in the straight, male-orchestrated history of collecting, exhibiting, and consuming stag porn, some erotic potentials certainly get short shrift, and one of these is definitely queer.

MoSex, a social history museum, spends a considerable amount of time and money inviting scholars to curate and conduct research for exhibits. Alongside an advisory board consisting of various practitioners in the sex industry and tenured academics at prestigious universities, the rotating exhibits and MoSex's dedication to research and scholarship guarantee a multivocal environment, where diverse publics playfully and intellectually engage a rethinking of sex for the museum.

The filmmaker and writer Jennifer Lyon Bell co-curated "Stags, Smokers, and Blue Movies" with Joseph Slade, a historian of telecommunications and author of several books on American pornographic

representation. From labels to lighting to sound and image, their choices for this temporary exhibit create a historically rich and sensually engaging atmosphere for museum visitors. The inclusion of oral histories, collected from past stag spectators, Slade himself, and former stag projectionist and famous porn collector Ralph Whittington, indicates an awareness of recently implemented museum strategies like the inclusion of memory and multivocal argumentation alongside the display of material artefacts.[23]

"Stags, Smokers, and Blue Movies" demonstrates MoSex's awareness of current museum scholarship and practice and a willingness to employ more theatrical techniques toward the creation and remembrance of sexually affective environments. But in the museum re-staging, it too closely imitates the myth of sexual spaces motivated by normative desires. The stag exhibit's portrayal of masculinity not only denies the homoerotic possibilities of the stag atmosphere, but also maps our current notions of masculinity onto historical periods when socially accepted forms of male gendered performances did not exclude male-male erotic and homosocial relations in the same ways or with the same intensity that mainstream American culture does today.[24]

Clearly, stag porns are sexual artefacts principally made by, for, and about straight men and their often humorous and clumsy sexual encounters with (mostly) white women. But looking outside the frame of the stag film, there are other stories to be told, among them the homosocial/erotic opportunities created in the space of stag porn screenings.[25] Film scholar Thomas Waugh tracks "a consistent pattern of denial" both within the frame of the stag film and within the scholarship written by and about stag show screenings.[26] Distinguishing between the content and the *context* of erotic stimulation, Waugh describes his own experience watching a particular stag film:

> None allows for the traumatized silence I felt when I saw *Smart Alec* with my dormitory peers in 1968 and the queer difference I and others must have felt. Extrapolating back through the decades, it is impossible not to imagine that difference was not present in all of those classic all-male audiences. Not only difference but also dissemblance, the deceptive performance of belonging.[27]

While Waugh's memory of his stag porn viewings suggests an excruciatingly uncomfortable scenario, remembering sexual difference perverts the continuation of dissembling performances within the reconstructed atmosphere of the museum toward the creation of a sexual counter-memory.

The particular difficulty of representing queer sexual history oftentimes lies in understanding the ideological and political motivations for

creating and utilising archives and the ways in which queer erotic moments have been constructed so as to avoid policing. In order to cope with undocumented queer sexual pasts and traces of homoeroticism, we must embrace what psychoanalytic scholar Jacqueline Rose describes as an "idea of sexuality which goes beyond the issue of content to take in the parameters of visual form (not just what we see but how we see - visual space as more than a domain of simple recognition)."[28] For example, in the case of the stag porn exhibit utilising the historical record and asking only straight white male spectators to share their memories of the stag events, while multivocal, is not dialogic in the sense of incorporating competing views of the same scene and thereby creating the possibility for multivalent, free-floating desire, both in the space of the museum and in visitors' cultural imaginary of what and whom the stag show phenomenon served and concerns. Queers past and present navigate the available scopic landscapes of everyday life, dis-identifying with unilaterally heteronormative visual messages. Traces, openings, and apertures are found and clung to, or perverted and transformed into visual and affective possibilities for queer erotic subjectivity.

MoSex is no stranger to the necessary project of perverting the gaze in order to discover queer erotic histories purposefully hidden from those who would police or regulate; for example, MoSex's very first exhibit, "NYC SEX: How New York City Transformed Sex in America," displayed vintage Wonder Woman comics explicitly labelled as lesbian erotica.[29] The exhibit "Men Without Suits: Objectifying the American Male Body," countered histories that primarily frame the naked white, female body as male-authored sex object, and dedicated a section to the collection of beefcake photos, physique magazines, and other gay male erotica. Unfortunately, a partition divided the scene, a division that seemingly organised space by desire: straight women, get turned on here; gay men, just behind this wall.

Along with creating their own barriers of explicitness and inexplicitness and distinctions among kinds of sexuality, sex museums encounter the ordinary obstacles that all museums encounter. As sex museums unearth archives of sexual history, they inevitably encounter silences, gaps, and absences that are in themselves discursive messages of what and who was considered valuable by a small coterie of experts and collectors. In the case of queer sexual history, however, sometimes traces are all there is left to work with when rethinking the sexual past. More MoSex exhibits and readable moments in the museum that engage these traces are necessary to avoid the establishment of yet another institutional space predicated on the fantasy of one coherent national heterosexuality and a transhistorical understanding of gender performance.

Rendering queer erotic subjectivities publicly visible is not always politically or socially advantageous. In the opinion of some scholars, a permanent public display space for queer materials is neither possible nor

desirable.[30] This assertion includes the valid fear that visibility will lead to greater surveillance and regulation. Returning to Bell's definition of "pervert" and how perverted performances threaten to collapse a public/private dyadic understanding of space, Bell is careful to add that "the pleasures of perversion must be weighed against the dangers," and that violence is oftentimes inflicted on those who transgress constructions of public/private space.[31] While I certainly share these concerns, I am not willing to give up my desire to pursue queer moments of pleasure and exploration, especially insofar as I believe that complex representations of sexual practices and identities perform the work of rendering these practices and identities culturally intelligible.

Museums are not just spaces for re-staging expansive views of historical and aesthetic value. They are also spaces where people come together to form temporary publics, in the case of MoSex and WEAM, unique sex museum publics gathering out of personal desire and the opportunity to pedagogically and viscerally connect with representations outside or on the margins of that desire. The haunting/absence of the queer body and the easily missed mention of homoerotic fear as part of the affective energy of the stag exhibit signals an unacknowledged marginality that inevitably limits experiential potentials, particularly for queer-identified visitors.

When I asked visitors about what they thought MoSex wanted to say to them about sex, responses overwhelmingly pointed to the "educational" quality of the "rich sexual history," the entertainment value of particular exhibits, or the artistic value of the objects on display. Most visitors, even those that criticised the museum most harshly, agreed that the museum represented a great possibility for sexual pedagogy. Sometimes visitors and staff, however, commented on what they considered to be reluctance on the part of the museum to explicitly engage queer sexual issues. A white, heterosexual Australian photographer working on the intersection of sexuality and disability argued that transgendered people were only portrayed as stage performers, rather than discussed in light of their everyday performances. Speaking about what motivated her photographic projects, she wanted MoSex to put more energy into what she called the "demystification of taboos."[32] Another visitor I spoke to, a white, lesbian woman, called MoSex a "museum for straight people,"[33] while a white heterosexual man lamented the lack of attention given to alternative sexualities, like kink and leathersex.[34] One staff member admitted that the space dedicated to queer representation was "definitely coming up short." In the following quote this same staff member explains his theory on why some men verbally expressed discomfort when they discovered they would be visually consuming the naked male body during the run of the "Men Without Suits" exhibit:

> in sex, it just seems you always hear about - it's always about women. You always see women. In my opinion, you always see women exploited. Naked women everywhere, and I think to change that, or to make it all men, I think you get - we had men that would come in and [say] "Oh, I don't want to see that," with their wives or whatever, but when they went through and actually saw the exhibit and realized that it wasn't a male porn exhibit, I think some men actually enjoyed it.[35]

While he called for more queer representation at MoSex, his observations of male visitors' aversion to the "Men Without Suits" exhibit certainly suggest how male homoeroticism or even the nude male form arouses intense discomfort in certain audiences. This unease on the part of straight male spectators returns me to Waugh's description of suppressed queerness and the "traumatized silence" he felt in the moment of consuming stag porn in his dormitory. Imagining the tension produced by these two scenarios reveals that queer/straight discussions are neither mutually exclusive nor diametrically opposed. Furthermore, this admission of feeling uncomfortable, when certain bodies encounter particular sexual images in specific contexts, reveals how the stag porn offers a potential site for addressing questions that blur everyday and museum separations based on sexual identity or practice.

Definitely, MoSex represents a publicly accessible space that applies cutting-edge museum technology from a unique sexual-pedagogical platform. As a social history museum, MoSex in some ways possesses an even greater opportunity than WEAM to pervert historical configurations of power-knowledge-pleasure. At the same time, traditional ways of seeing in a social history museum, ways historically resistant to the incorporation of memory, absences, and erotic traces into an exhibitionary rhetoric predicated on the visible, pose a greater challenge to the MoSex project. Whereas the horizon of expectations when visiting an art gallery more often includes the anticipation of experimental, avant-garde, or abstract encounters, visitors to social history museums look for facts, straight-forward pedagogies, and perhaps even the sharing of knowledge couched in convincingly objective scenery. When approaching the display of sexual history and the re-staging of past sexual environments, both of which depend on leaps of fantasy and conjecture for curators and visitors, a dynamic combination of artefacts, oral histories, innovative technologies of display and interaction, and visitor resistances in spaces of free-floating meaning-making and desire describe my utopian hope for what the sex museum concept could invite and inspire in its participants/spectators.

Inhabiting the space of the museum for the display of sexual history, then, has its benefits and limitations. Social mores of respectability and

decorum, oftentimes tied to museum experiences, sometimes sway MoSex staff to push only those buttons considered "safe" for a general audience, frequently coded as heterosexual, alongside white, middle class, and conventionally coupled. Competitively vying against an overwhelming number of museums and other ways of passing leisure time in Manhattan, any tentativeness certainly and at least partially grows out of justified business concerns that stirring up the wrong kind of controversy with an exhibit, albeit temporary, could jeopardise the capability of continuing any project where sex and education intersect. How political and social performances outside the museum inform what MoSex's curators and staff confidently exhibit and highlight for their audiences (or even who they project those audiences to be) both perverts and conforms to what is currently and historically regarded as decorous public sexual consumption. Certainly MoSex need not be all things to all people, but in a cleaned up New York, the effects of which severely impact queer sexual spaces, and with a sizeable queer visitor demographic, I want my stag exhibit to consciously and intentionally embrace the queer ghost in the room.

4. Coda: Pervertibles or Eroticising the Banal

Five magnets featuring Tom of Finland drawings. Three of the magnets are sexual in nature depicting Finland's signature genitals, blow job, and man fucking world. White "Cum rag" used to remove lipstick from Judy Tallwig-MacCarthy's Lips, American Brotherhood Weekend-2003. Four Chicago Eagle Emory Boards. Four (identical) Coffee Mugs, Brown field with black print and image of man on knees licking boots, reads: "Boy's Training Camp 3, April 2001, Dallas, Texas." First Leathersex on the Beach Party Supersoaker. A signed plastic, green and orange supersoaker; some cracks in plastic; Text reads (one side): "The First Leathersex on the Beach Party; IML-May 1995; Hosted by Sarah Humble, American Leather Woman 1994, Cindy Bookout IMsL 94 and Glenda Ryder Ms. Baltimore Eagle 1992"; (other side): "Wet T-Shirt Contest; Wet Boxer Shorts/Jock Contest, inspired by Shan Carr, The Fake Orgasm Contest; Best Cocktail Party of IML '95 as reported in The Leather Journal*".*

Cataloguing what museum planners and scholars refer to as "realia" in the Leather Archives & Museum (LA&M) in Chicago is a performative practice simultaneously incorporating moments of humour, boredom, ambivalence, confusion, and arousal. Realia can be defined as

> objects from real life, in contrast to those objects typically included in an archival or museum collection. A piece of realia draws attention either because it is a common example of its kind - as an exemplum rather than an exemplar, or because of associations with its previous

> owner. Some such objects might also be described as artefacts, ephemera, bric-a-brac, gewgaws, found objects, or memorabilia, but they are seldom prized for any qualities of their design, for their fine materials, or for the craftsmanship with which they were made.[36]

New to the sexual symbols, lingo, practices, and props unique to kink, leather, and Bondage & Discipline, Domination & Submission, Sadomasochism (BDSM) cultures when I began volunteering there, the people at LA&M assigned me to the realia collection partially due to my naiveté. (How could I possibly know where and how to evaluate, archive, or display a single-tail whip, for example, if I had never bought one, wielded one, or felt its sharp sting against my body?) The intimacy of my experience with the more mundane side of kink - that is the time and energy spent touching, smelling, and wondering at the import of these materials and the sexual environments from which they travelled - inspired many of the questions that this article sought to explore.

What is the relationship between the erotic and everyday objects and images? How does the sex museum provide (or fail to provide) an opportunity to entertain this relationship? Why is it important to contemplate the banal dynamics of pleasure and power that go beyond personal experience or desire? How do sex museums perform as reflections or contestations to the ways in which sexual bodies and practices are ordered and labelled outside the museum? These questions are never answerable in general and only ever explorable in specific time and space locations. As I hope I have demonstrated through archiving my own temporally and spatially specific encounters and conversations in this article, sex museums offer glimpses into the practices, ethics, and modes of value embedded in sexual artefacts, momentary exposures into past dynamics and scenes of pleasure and power that can contribute to the *doing* and the *undoing* of the ways in which we talk, think, and feel when it comes to sex.

In the case of artefacts emerging from scenes of alternative sexuality practices, which conspicuously borrow and pervert everyday hierarchies of hegemonic power in their creation of erotically charged scenes of pleasure and pain, we encounter heightened material examples of dynamic pleasure/power negotiations. Many of the postures, bodies, and costumes imprinted on the objects at the LA&M recall other spaces not immediately associated with sex and definitely not with pleasure: war, enslavement, the prison, the doctor's office, the dungeon. In LA&M, then, the theatrical play with power/pleasure in alternative sexuality practice marks the surfaces of objects and illuminates the practices of collecting, exhibiting, and seeing as highly directed archival and museum performances.

Developing an apropos cataloguing script for the objects in the realia collection at LA&M challenged me to consider how future researchers and kinky community members would search for the materials that interested them. At times I used my cataloguing performance to resist the decorum of other museum spaces (e.g. by using the word "fuck" instead of "penetrating" or "having sex"); at others, I chose to go with a more clinical or formal term ("fellatio") than a colloquial one ("blow job"). Describing the connection between the erotic and the everyday depends on the attachment of public, private, or semi-public labels to a given space. These labels adhere to particular spaces based on official and unofficial laws of decorum, respectability, morality, and taste that govern what should and should not be performed - visually, physically, emotionally - within the boundaries of that space.

With its slogan, "Located in Chicago and Serving the World," LA&M positions itself as the national home for the memories and histories of leather/levi culture. Started by Chuck Renslow in 1991 in a small Clark Street storefront near the leatherbar, The Eagle, LA&M assumed its new abode on 6418 N. Greenview in 1999. While LA&M is a public institution open to any visitor interested in leather history for whatever reason, its daily traffic consists mostly of kinky and leather folk in the Chicago area (most of whom are working on oral history, cataloguing, administrative, research, and curatorial projects at the museum) or researchers from colleges and universities. LA&M's acceptance of any and all donations of kinky and leather artefacts is one of the defining distinctions between them and other museums that preserve and display sexual material culture. When compared to other sex museums currently operating in the US, LA&M pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable and valuable to study in a museum perhaps more so than any other.

This is not to say that LA&M does not embody a representational conundrum; while most of the artefacts depict queer sex, most of them portray gay white male bodies. As in MoSex and WEAM, perverted and continued histories of power-knowledge-pleasure simultaneously characterise LA&M's public sexual history project. While LA&M faces similar collection and exhibition challenges when remembering the sexual in a public space, it is distinct from these projects in its overt and consistent dedication to queerness, alternative sexuality, and those who live, love, and play kinky.

While in MoSex and WEAM, I longed for the extreme, the non-normative, and the queer. In LA&M, a site of intense, non-normative sexual memory and history, I ironically lingered longest over the most banal of objects. What is the potential of this perverted moment? Of any perverted moment in the sex museum? As a partial response and as a means of extending sex museums' projects of preserving histories of pleasure by

incorporating sensual memory, I close with a group of artefacts called "Pervertibles."

Pervertibles are common everyday items re-conceptualised, recycled, and reapplied as sex toys. Located in the "Dungeon Exhibit" at LA&M, a dark, stone-lined, and carefully lit reconstruction of a play dungeon in what was once the old boiler room, these dollar store, kitchen store, and home improvement objects juxtapose chastity belts, gynecological equipment, leather whips, riding crops, and cock-and-ball torture devices. If, according to performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, [and] the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls,"[37] pervertibles literally materialise the friction between the everyday and the erotic in the sex museum. If encountered outside the kinky play space or even inside LA&M without a label, their erotic function would go unnoticed, unread, or untapped.

But in the sex museum, as in all museums, encountering the elevated value of banal objects encapsulates a moment of intersecting mobile elements. While intellectually engaging objects on display can inform and shift the way we view objects in the everyday, how we view objects in the everyday can influence our encounter (or neglect) of certain objects in the museum, or in the context of this article, what is deemed worthy of collection, exhibition, and seeing in a museum. Perverting the everyday through a shift in the perceiving lens opens up erotic potentials in the banality of the accustomed routine and creates ways of seeing that embrace polyvalent and polyvocal expressions of desire, while also cultivating awareness of what and whom that desire serves.

Shortly after my first encounter with "pervertibles" in the museum, Mr. International Rubber, an annual leather/kink competition and community-building event, returned to its perennial location in Chicago. As part of the conference the organisers offered a workshop called "Kitchen Kink," which promised to teach its audience how to apply some of the banal artefacts I had seen in LA&M. "Kitchen Kink" was to be held at a gay male leather bar in a Chicago neighbourhood known as Boystown. Upon arrival at the leather bar, I noticed that I was the only female patron in attendance; not surprisingly, the other patrons seemed uninterested in my presence as I quietly sipped my drink at the bar. Having already told the bartender why I was there, he gestured for me to follow the crowd of men as they moved together through the building. Soon we entered the back room. I felt excited and nervous to be in this semi-public place of queer male pleasures that on any other day was off-limits to women; prior to this experience, I had always regarded "the back room" with curious fascination and perhaps a little envy that lesbian and bisexual women had no comparable outlet for their erotic

energies. As more people arrived, the two principle pedagogues and performers entered the scene and the instruction began.

One hour of sweet torture, all the while keeping his willing victim on the edge, on the verge of full, libidinal release. In a low-lit back room with dungeon-esque décor, 30 men and I looked on, asked coy questions, shared in safe, sane and consensual laughter that both revealed and concealed our pleasure in watching. I was clad in as much leather as my closet held, they in everything from nondescript jeans and t-shirts, to leather vests, leather boots, leather jackets, rubber jumpsuits, rubber shirts, rubber pants, and gas masks.

A couple of jean-clad, undershirt-wearing bears stood directly in front of me. As a short woman, the only woman, in that moment it seemed like they were purposely obstructing my line of sight, as if they didn't want me to see, to learn. Or perhaps it was just my paranoia, my nervousness at interrupting what would have otherwise been an all-male gathering. Not wanting to make myself more obvious than I already was, and not wanting to feel like the queer watching stag in the college dormitory, the straight man caught staring at the beefcake photo at MoSex, or even the 71-year old Jewish grandmother entering the Parisian antique shop with her erotica search blaring forth, I quietly moved my stool without saying a word and inconspicuously strained my neck upward to look between their wide, hairy, and supple shoulders.

Alternately moaning and grunting, Sam was saran-wrapped to a web of chains suspended from the ceiling and bolted to the floor. James, our teacher, applied a series of everyday objects that I'll never regard so nonchalantly again: corn cob holders, bag clips, frother, meat tenderiser, a new toilet brush, sponges of varying abrasive qualities, large Ziplock bags, tongs, chopsticks both steel and wooden, a new grill brush, and a cake spatula with a rubber head.

We learned where to apply these seemingly mundane instruments, with how much intensity, and with due caution. We learned that those objects that leave a mark, a residue on the flesh that met them, were the best.

When the workshop ended, I approached Sam and James to thank them for their arousingly instructive performance. We discussed my project, and I recounted some of the sites that had so sublimely dissatisfied me. After the momentary surprises and frequent frustrations of experiencing spaces of amazing pedagogical potential and too often encountering heterosexual, Caucasian, and relatively mainstream sex, I now found myself transfixed by plastic bags and dish sponges. I recalled the excitement and disappointment of the stag porn exhibit and my unsuccessful fight against those stubborn blinds at WEAM, meanwhile realising that I was now a cataloguer of kitchen utensils and bar mementos. But in that moment, something of the exquisite grew attached to the discovery of the erotic in the most quotidian of things, and as I watched Sam pack up his spatula, I thought not of bacon and eggs,

but of the satisfying marks this object might temporarily leave behind. Sam smiled and James, ever the matter-of-fact Dom, looked at me knowingly. "Yes," he said, "everything is pervertible."

Notes

1. For their support in this research, I wish to thank Jennifer DeVere Brody, E. Patrick Johnson, Lauren Berlant, Gregory Mitchell, The Museum of Sex (especially Jim O'Shea), The World Erotic Art Museum (especially Naomi Wilzig), and The Leather Archives & Museum (especially Rick Storer).
2. *L'Origine du Monde* was always partially and curiously concealed by any and all of its male possessors prior to its first public showing at the Brooklyn Art Museum for the *Courbet Reconsidered* exhibition in 1988 and its current home at the Musée d'Orsay since 1995. Jacques Lacan was the last private owner of *L'Origine du Monde*. After his death the French government partially settled his tax-bill by acquiring the painting for the Musée d'Orsay. According to personal email correspondence with the Client Service agent at the museum (2 Nov 2006), it is one of the best-selling postcards in the gift shop. For the account upon which I base my drag performance of Lacan's studio unveiling, see S Barzilai, 'A Brief History of *The Origin of the World*: Courbet and Lacan', in *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1999, pp. 8-18.
3. A Appadurai (ed.), 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986, pp. 3-63.
4. See B Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998; *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatianaui Odyssey*, C Fusco and P Heredia (dirs., performed by G Gómez-Peña and C Fusco, Authentic Documentary Productions, 1993; M Camille and A Rifkin (eds.), *Other Objects of Desire: Collectors and Collecting Queerly*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001.
5. For examples, see W Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987; JA Gertzman, *Bootleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999.
6. For example, consider Perverts Undermining State ScrutinY (PUSSY), a disbanded anti-censorship, pro-sex feminist group in England in the 1990s, or the play by H Hughes, *Preaching to the Perverted*, performed

by H Hughes at Northwestern University, 2001. For academic scholarship that plays with "pervert," see K Mercer, 'Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe', in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York & London, 1994, pp. 171-217, especially pp. 200-201.

7. D Bell, 'Perverse Dynamics, Sexual Citizenship and the Transformation of Intimacy', in D Bell and G Valentine (eds.), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, pp. 304-317, p. 312.
8. C Woods, 'Florida grandmother opens erotic-art museum', *The Seattle Times*, 15 October 2005, viewed on 5 November 2006, <http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002564010_eroticc17.html>.
9. N Wilzig, Personal Interview, 14 November 2006.
10. For examples, see J Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', in J Elsner and R Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1994, pp. 7-24; J Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, E Prenowitz (trans.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1995.
11. M Camille, 'Editor's Introduction', in M Camille and A Rifkin (eds.), *Other Objects of Desire: Collectors and Collecting Queerly*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 2001, pp. 1-6, p. 2.
12 Wilzig, op. cit.
13. Kendrick, op. cit., p. 31.
14. L Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1997, pp. 1-82.
15. Wilzig, op. cit.
16. M Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. I*, R Hurley (trans.), Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 11.
17. T Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', in D Boswell and J Evans (eds.), *Representing the Nation: A Reader - Histories, Heritage and Museums*, Routledge, New York & London, 1999, pp. 332-361, pp. 345-346.
18. See PH Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Routledge, New York, 2004; Mercer, op. cit; E Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1995.
19. G Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, Sage, London, 2007, p. 188.

20. Visitor Surveys and Guestbook, viewed 10 November 2005 to 19 November 2006, Property of the World Erotic Art Museum.
21. My gratitude to my colleague Theresa Smalec, also a PhD candidate in performance studies (at New York University) and a past volunteer at the Museum of Sex, for sharing this information with me.
22. See comments made by Senior Curator, Grady Turner, and MoSex owner, Daniel Gluck, versus Tom Dunne on the Board of Regents who claimed MoSex eventually and mysteriously withdrew their application from the Board: J D'Angelo, 'Sex in the City: Nation's First Sex Museum Opens in New York', *Fox News.com*, 27 September 2002, viewed on 20 August 2006, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,64189,00.html>; FM Winship 'Sex Museum has a rough first year', *United Press International*, 28 October 2003, viewed on 20 July 2006, <http://www.aegis.com/news/upi/2003/UP031008.html>.
23. For examples, see VM Patraka, 'Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at US Holocaust Museums', in E Diamond (ed.), *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, New York & London, 1996, pp. 89-106; S Lubar, 'Exhibiting Memories', in A Henderson and AL Kaeppler (eds.), *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1997, pp. 15-25.
24. G Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, Basic Books, New York, 1994; and JN Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Plume, New York, 1996.
25. Of course, other "stories," like those of (white) stag porn actresses or people of colour in and outside the frame of the stag porn, could inhabit the centre of the exhibit or this article. Since 'Stags, Smokers, and Blue Movies' covers the early twentieth century up until the 1970s, possible classed and raced mixing among men in the audience could also be a productive site to explore.
26. T Waugh, 'Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen', in L Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2004, pp. 127-141, p. 128.
27. Ibid., p. 132.
28. J Rose, 'Sexuality in the Field of Vision', in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Verso, London & New York, 1986, pp. 225-234, p. 231.
29. My gratitude to my colleague Gregory Mitchell for pointing out that Lynda Carter, who played Wonder Woman on television from 1976-1979, embodies an example of ethnic/racial/sexual suppression. Originally born Linda Jean Córdova Carter, she became Lynda Carter,

dropping her maternal surname and anglicising her first name in order to pass for white while playing Wonder Woman.

30. Consider JE Muñoz, 'Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts', *Women and Performance*, vol. 8 no. 2, 1996, pp. 5-16, p. 16; P Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, New York, 1993.
31. Bell, op. cit., pp. 312-313.
32. Melissa, Personal Interview, 30 August 2006. (All names of visitors and staff at MoSex are pseudonyms.)
33. Jane, Personal Interview, 1 September 2006.
34. Peter, Personal Interview, 1 September 2006. It should be noted that MoSex has since mounted an interactive exhibit called 'Kink: Geography of the Erotic Imagination.'
35. Tom, Personal Interview, 6 September 2006.
36. M Delahunt, 'Artlex's R-REG page', *ArtLex Online Art Dictionary*, 22 March 2007, viewed on 26 April 2007, <http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/R.html>.
37. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, op. cit., p. 51.

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Whore, Court, Church, and Europe's First Modern Obscene Text

Benjamin Jacob

Abstract
Intertwining sex and blasphemy, early pornography is situated at the centre of a complex web which binds Renaissance Classicism, a scientific urge to find material "truths," and political tensions which existed between Court and Church. This essay asks why this infamous genre emerged at this time and what purpose(s) it performed. It sketches how sexually graphic texts incorporated and depended upon the central tenets of the European Renaissance to provide a combination of instruction, revelation, and the most enduring and notorious form of social critique and moral commentary that Europe had ever seen. This paper considers how the themes of a notorious collection of Italian engravings and sonnets called *I Modi* (1524 and 1527) were influenced by political, artistic and religious currents of the time and how these themes paved the way for later pornographic and obscene texts. What emerges is an exploration of how the obscene brings onto the stage of public life that which an increasingly modern civilisation required to be stifled. It considers how these texts' depictions of bodies as "unveiled" represents an opening of the eyes of their readers to a scathing and satirical criticism of civilisation's mores and ruling institutions.

Key Words: Aretino, courtesan, erotica, Foucault, *I Modi*, obscenity, pornography, Raimondi, Renaissance, Romano.

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1. Introduction: Sex, Knowledge and Truth

"What is peculiar to modern [Western] societies," writes Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, "is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret."[1] In this way, he goes on, sex became "a revelation of truth … A great sexual sermon."[2] Foucault's argument is that nineteenth-century Europe developed a confessional attitude to sex and the human body which associated these subjects with knowledge and gave them a new kind of power. Foucault argues that the fascination which sex holds for Western societies - and its associations with knowledge and power - was the result of a nineteenth-century shift in the way society viewed this subject.

This paper aims to show how the trinity of sex, knowledge and truth, which Foucault ascribes to the nineteenth century, can already be located in a much earlier era. Drawing on Classical ideas, Renaissance Europe showed an increased interest in sexually graphic subjects which commonly combined the naked human form with themes of light, truth and knowledge. A product of these Classical and contemporary influences, Europe's first, most notorious, and influential obscene book was created: a collection of sixteen images from sixteenth-century Italy, called *I Modi*, a title which carries various connotations - "the ways," "the means," "the modes," "the fashions," "the manners," or, as it is usually translated, "the positions" or "the postures."[3]

The following pages examine how the themes and content of *I Modi*, and the notorious sonnets that later accompanied them, are a product of the fashions and values of its day - Neo-Platonism, Classicism, the Neo-Classical cult of the whore, Medieval Christian attitudes to sex, the hypocrisy of the Papal court, and new mass-printing methods - all filtered through the skills of three Renaissance talents: an artist, an engraver, and a writer. *I Modi* emerges as Europe's first obscene text not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of how it was received. In this sense, a recognisably modern way of thinking can be seen in how the ruling authorities reacted to *I Modi*; that is to say, they regarded it as dangerously powerful, capable of revealing uncomfortable truths and therefore necessitating swift prohibition. In this way, *I Modi* and the attitudes towards it formed the reputation, and even content, of the obscene literature of later centuries. This in turn grew into its own influential and inflammatory literary genre.

2. Lust.

To understand *I Modi* and the climate which created and received it requires consideration of earlier cultural influences. The inheritance of the Medieval stance towards sex is especially significant where Renaissance attitudes regarding obscenity are concerned. Central to this was the Church, the ultimate arbiter in designating acceptable practice. From the Church's standpoint the pleasures of the flesh belonged to the events of the Fall and were ultimately linked to damnation. Sex - specifically sex as pleasure - constituted "Lust," one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and sexual desire was deemed a depraved craving associated with evil and the devil.[4] This is, of course, a generalisation; nevertheless it serves to introduce various contradictions within the official attitude towards sex. On one level, the more the Church became concerned with sex, the more sex became its obsession. Instead of repressing it, sex was given significance. It was confessed, reviled in sermons, debated in the Bible, and - despite (or indeed because of) Church dogma - depicted in Medieval religious art. Portrayals of the Last Judgement or Hell's punishments for the Seven Deadly Sins (for example Taddeo di

Bartolo's work in the Church of La Collegiata in San Gimignano, dating from about 1396) are full of naked forms. These public displays of sexualised bodies are profoundly allegorical. Usually exhibited in the house of God, Medieval artists were at pains to show man's naked state as abject, to indicate humanity's humble position in relation to the elevated perfection of God. The naked bodies are often those of sinners, their bodies contorted into monstrous forms by their sins. With sagging breasts, engorged penises, or gaping vaginas (emphasised to indicate the source of their sin), there is little to distinguish these "fallen" people from the sexualised devils who punish them in the fires of eternal damnation.[5]

While it can reasonably be said that these images tend to be horrific, not realistic, and not intended to give pleasure - rather, to warn against that which they show - contemporary audience reaction to images and texts is difficult to gauge. What would a congregation have thought if confronted by these images during a sermon on the wickedness of lechery? Similar ambivalence surrounds other aspects of the Medieval Christian attitude to flesh. One such is the way that flesh, literally embodied in Christ, was central to Christianity.

As John writes in the Gospels, "The word became flesh…." He continues, intertwining the themes - flesh/sex and truth - which Foucault places at the centre of his history of sexuality: "and we saw His glory … full of grace and truth."[6] The same mix of the divine and the base - that is, human, physical and sexual - exists in countless examples of Medieval iconography. There, variously depicted as a feminised body feeding the Church from the cross with the blood that spurts from his wounds, as the Christ child with an erect penis symbolic of his future resurrection, or nude with a loincloth, the folds of which emphasise the divine genitals as much as they serve to veil them, Medieval art habitually shows the infant or crucified Christ in sexual(ised) forms. As if such representations were not enough to question the whole veracity of the Church's condemnation of the flesh at that time, Europe's monastic libraries also contained more than devoutly spiritual works. Their collections included comprehensive assortments of ancient pornographic materials, such as the "lost" letters of Cicero and documents on the cult of Priapus.[7] Likewise, monks were among the most prolific creators of Medieval sexually graphic works. Lewd details, carefully incorporated into illuminated letters, or surreal drawings of copulation between men, men and women, and men and animals, can be found in the margins of illuminated manuscripts and in copies of the Bible which they transcribed. Although the meaning of these images remains debated, they convey a cartoonish, indulgent tone - a world away from the grotesque figures of church frescoes, the figures are often smiling or look rather surprised as they engage in coitus.

Significantly, of course, these illuminated texts were not for public display, and this division between what is acceptable in public versus private

proved a central issue where the politics of obscenity are concerned. In addition, this dual standard - some flesh was acceptable, some was not - indicates complex levels of acceptability and ambivalence within society, as true today as five hundred years ago. Thus, to see the Medieval era as a period of austere sexual repression does not necessarily reflect the values of the period's everyday life, and the same awareness of social complexities and ambivalence exists within the various influences that shaped reaction to sexual practice and its representation that occurred in the Italian Renaissance.

3. Gods and Concubines

On one side of the Italian Renaissance, fornication and adultery were crimes, and the Pope, church officials, and all good citizens obeyed the moral code set down by Church doctrine, which remained as central to regulating social practices, laws and the production and distribution of texts as it had during the Medieval era. Alongside this, however, ran a day to day existence where prostitution was legal and the Vatican, monasteries, and priories had a (not undeserved) reputation as hives of corruption and debauchery.[8] It is said, for example, that in 1501, Pope Alexander VI celebrated All Saints Eve by watching fifty naked courtesans crawling on all fours.[9]

In part as a method of establishing Italian cultural identity, an increased interest in Classical aesthetics entered this world of tensions. As the murals and artefacts recovered from Pompeii demonstrate, phallic imagery and realistic - as opposed to the Medieval Church's more allegorical - depictions of sexual pleasure appear to have been ubiquitous in Ancient Rome. Graphic sexual decorations on lamps, pottery, and cooking utensils, as well as in monument form in public baths and temples, illustrate that far from being scandalous in civic places, sexual imagery spanned Rome's public and private realms.[10] This is not to say that Ancient Rome was totally unrestricted in terms of the practice and portrayal of sex; its attitude was simply very different from the post-Classical Western view as shaped by Christian concepts of sin.

The Renaissance revival of Classicism and, with it, the rediscovery of naturalistic, sexually explicit art and literature in an era dominated by a different range of values, lies at the heart of the style, form, and content of art produced at the time. Classicism's paganism pushed man and the pleasures of the present (as opposed to the glory of the afterlife) to the centre of Renaissance art. Renaissance art shows an explosion of naturalistic depictions of pagan mythology, many of which illustrate erotic themes. Danae and the Golden Shower, and Venus and Mars - the erotic focus of both myths captured by Titian (c. 1485-1546), whose canvasses display Danae and Venus lying in suggestive abandon, with Danae's left hand hidden behind her thigh, suggesting masturbation - and Leda and the Swan became popular subjects. Although often transported to contemporary settings in order to

reinforce a link between the Classical glory of the Ancient world and contemporary Italy, the mythical content of these works was easily identifiable. Indeed their mythological references legitimated their erotic component. This, combined with the fact that they were works usually commissioned by the aristocracy and displayed in private, rendered their erotic content - no matter how explicit - socially acceptable.

Interestingly, however, it was not only Classical myths that received this increasingly sexual treatment. Renaissance artists applied their skills to Christian subjects and began to openly articulate Christianity's traditionally more subdued sensuality. Sebastiono del Piombo's version of *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha* (1520), for example, portrays a topless Agatha with two male torturers applying iron clamps to her nipples. Significantly also with respect to this artistic fashion, just as she had featured prominently in the art (and sometimes literature) of the Ancient world, the prostitute re-emerged as a favoured subject in Renaissance art.

The prostitute, particularly the higher-class courtesan, combined aspects of the religious, Classical, and contemporary. To an extent, courtesans were politically influential figures - etymologically *courtesan* derives from *courtier* and, as Ian Moulton notes, both professions served the rich and powerful - and they comprised a significant element of Renaissance Rome.[11] In a city of celibate church workers, concubinage was accepted. A sizeable number of Roman residents survived by selling sex.[12] Courtesans played on their status as, on the one hand, the Neo-Platonic ideal of "divine beauty on Earth" and, far more pragmatically, on the other hand, as luxury consumer goods. Taking their place among the major role models of the time, courtesans fashioned their hair in recognisable styles and wore veils which temptingly revealed their shoulders and breasts. Thus, these women evoked the Heterae of old, combining sensuality and the Neo-Classical cult of female beauty with the wealth and sensual possibilities of the present.[13]

Courtesan characteristics rapidly came to infuse Renaissance images of Classical subjects, such as Flora, Venus, and Aphrodite. Ever popular Christian iconography also found itself incorporated into this fashion. Provocative depictions of Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of prostitutes, merged the suggestive sensuality of Christianity and the Classical cult of the whore. Yet in stark contrast to Medieval renditions of the same theme, where Mary, draped head to foot in a red robe, stands with hands outstretched to the resurrected Jesus, Renaissance versions focus on a bare-breasted Mary, partially clad in a yellow/orange veil which, according to contemporary Renaissance fashion, identifies her as a courtesan.[14]

The point I wish to make by comparing these aspects of Medieval and Renaissance art is that Renaissance Classicism did not abandon Christian subjects and values. Rather, aspects of Christianity remained central to Renaissance attitudes to sexuality and its art's increasingly sensual imagery.

Indeed, it is to the Vatican itself that we must turn in order to locate the origin of Europe's first modern obscene text.

4. *I Modi*.

In 1523, Giulio Romano (c.1499-1546), a talented artist and one-time apprentice to Raphael, drew sixteen sexually graphic images onto the walls of the Vatican's *Sala di Constantino*. Whether these life-size images were commissioned by Pope Clement VII or, as another version has it, created in retaliation for a late payment by the Pope, what is clear is that afterwards Romano approached one of the most accomplished engravers of the day, Marcantonio Raimondi (c.1480-1534) and asked him to transform his drawings into engravings, which Raimondi duly did.[15] In 1524, the engravings appeared as prints published in booklet form.

Romano's original drawings have long since been destroyed and no complete original copy of the prints exists. A few fragments in the British Museum, one surviving woodcut copy dating from the 1520s, and a set of watercolour and ink copies made in the mid-nineteenth century by Count Jean-Frédéric-Maxmilien Waldeck (apparently from Raimondi originals) are all that enable us to piece together the appearance of the original engravings.

The most obvious thing about these images is that they are typically Renaissance in form and content. Classical influence manifests itself on various levels. It was well known, for example, that lists of sexual positions and their pictorial representation existed in the Ancient world. In sixteenth-century Italy, the name "Elephantis" - a female creator of at least one Classical sex manual (known today only by reputation) - was synonymous with the textual description of sexual positions, and Raimondi's contemporaries suggested that he took his idea from ancient Greek guides of that sort.[16]

In terms of form, the rendering of the figures and their composition are comparable to Raphael's: the bodies exhibit flowing curves, and the favoured Renaissance form of the circle (symbolic of wholeness and balance) dominates each composition. Alongside these aspects we find fashionable evocations of Classical myth. In image 14, Cupid pulls a cart on which two lovers engage in intercourse, and in some of the pictures (noticeably images 2, 7, 14 and 16) the men possess pointed ears and beards, which make them resemble the satyrs of antiquity. As Lynne Lawner has shown, further evidence of *I Modi*'s Classical roots can be seen in the way image 7 is lifted directly from the carvings of a second-century B.C. sarcophagus.[17] Moreover, again tapping into contemporary artistic fashions, from their hairstyles (braids worn wound about their heads) and settings (in all but one image the figures are surrounded by sumptuous curtains, carvings, and other furnishings) the female figures are recognisable as courtesans.

So why did these engravings receive such immediate notoriety and make the ruling authorities anxious to destroy them? After all, their style, with its Classical references, was fashionable and many Renaissance artists were producing canvases of a sexual nature, most of which, although attracting disapproval, have survived intact to this day.[18]

It is also true that before *I Modi* appeared, sexually graphic themes had an established tradition in literature and satirical humour. Bawdy works, like Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353), had been published much earlier and proved exceedingly popular. In the fifteenth century, the Italian Poggio Bracciolini had produced the *Facetiae*, a collection of dirty jokes (1450), many of which poked fun at figures of authority, especially the clergy. Originally in Latin, the *Facetiae* was read avidly throughout Europe.[19] Around the same time as *I Modi*'s appearance, members of Italy's esteemed "Academies" were writing satirical pornographic works, the most famous of which is Antonio Vignale's *La Cazzaria*, or *The Big Cock*.[20] Written in Tuscan in dialogue form, one of *La Cazzaria*'s allegorical stories provides a scathing commentary on the political situation of Siena. It tells of a power struggle between various factions, "The Big Prick," "Plebeian Asses," "Little Pricks," "Ugly Cunts," and "Pretty Cunts," who engage in power struggles, alliances and revolutions.[21] Despite drawing on extant themes, a number of factors set Romano and Raimondi's creation apart and contributed to its infamy.

I Modi's unique threat was that, printed in bulk, it was able to reach a more or less indiscriminate readership. In this way it was significantly different from *La Cazzaria*, the mythical-erotic canvasses of esteemed Renaissance artists, the marginalia of expensive Medieval manuscripts and Bibles, and the hand-copied works of Boccaccio or Poggio (Poggio's being, moreover, written in Latin, the language of the social elite), all of which had an acceptable, limited circulation among Italy's "learned" circles. The effects of *I Modi*'s potentially unregulated distribution were further compounded by the fact that, thanks to its illustrations - at this stage it was *only* a collection of illustrations - its message did not require literacy skills to interpret.

Secondly, the sexual positions which *I Modi* depicts are of an inflammatory nature. "Woman on top" was a particularly volatile topic and variations of it appear in four of the images (numbers 10, 14, 15 and 16). For various reasons, this position struck at the fundamental organisational levels of society: male-female, natural-unnatural, family and reproduction. In relation to the latter, the "woman on top" position countered the received medical opinion that women only conceived if they lay on their backs.[22] Marriage, the church reasoned, excused sex for the purpose of procreation; if a woman could not conceive "on top" then this position represented sex purely for the sake of pleasure, and sexual pleasure constituted the Deadly Sin of Lust. As such, "woman on top" was one of a number of sexual

positions banned from the marriage bed as "contrary to nature."[23] "Woman on top" also inverted the traditional, acceptable, social hierarchy of male and female. Ever since Greco-Roman times, the image of the woman riding the man - the *keles*, *equus* or "horse" - showed a socially disruptive activity. A popular variant existed in comic images of the courtesan Phyllis riding Aristotle, yet even this light-hearted version conveyed fearful themes, namely, the power of sexual desire to overcome intellect, and of the female to usurp male domination and turn the traditionally active, dominant man into the humiliated, passive partner.[24]

As if this content were not enough to ensure these images' notoriety, several illustrations exhibit ambiguity surrounding the orifice that the male is penetrating. This is especially true of images 7, 10, and 16, in which the arrangement of the figures suggests anal sex. Sodomy was treated as a serious transgression throughout Europe at the time. In Renaissance and late Medieval Italy it was the only sex crime referred to as a sin - rape, for example, was seen as a passionate lapse, not evil.[25] Sodomy, however, struck at God (as evinced by the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah) and at society, by threatening the same organisational levels attacked by the "woman on top." In practice, homosexual and heterosexual sodomy were widespread (the latter as a form of birth control); however, transcripts from trials in Venice indicate that, if found guilty, a sodomite could expect public mutilation, execution, and the burning of his remains.[26] Like the "woman on top" therefore, the suggestion of sodomy within several of *I Modi*'s images represents a particularly objectionable and conscious affront to Renaissance Rome's secular and religious moral code as well as its social structure.

Lastly, *I Modi* sets itself apart from other works because, although it gestures towards mythical content, there is nothing obviously satirical, comic, or suggestive about the prints (even if the sonnets, which later accompanied them, brought these themes to the fore). In contrast, *I Modi* shows bodies copulating for their own sake. These are naturalistic, arousing scenes of casual sex presented neither as a warning, nor as a joke at the expense of dim-witted husbands (as frequently occurs in the *Decameron* or Poggio's *Facetiae*). Unlike the monks' pornographic doodles, here sex acts are not squeezed into the margins, and unlike the satires of Italy's Academies these images are not directed at a specific, elite readership. Books had long been the medium for conveying knowledge, but as a book, *I Modi* does not place God, science, or philosophy at its centre. Instead, it unveils the pleasures of sex and the body as a *new* kind of knowledge and truth. Given their consciously disruptive content, when the Pope learned of the sixteen prints, the Church's action was swift and decisive. He ordered all copies destroyed. Romano fled - or, given his status, was allowed to quietly leave - to Mantua. The engraver Raimondi was less fortunate. Captured, he was thrown into the

Vatican prison. Two years later, with the aid of a popular writer, Pietro Aretino, and the negotiations of a future cardinal, Raimondi was released.

5. *Sonetti Lussuriosi*.

In late Renaissance Italy, Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) was an incredibly successful writer, famed for his satirical attacks on public figures and witty letters, which had the power to influence the ruling Italian dynasties. He was also a central figure in the development of *I Modi*, and to this day *I Modi* is commonly, if misleadingly, known as "Aretino's Postures." In a letter written two decades after the event, Aretino tells how,

> [a]fter I arranged for Pope Clement to release Raimondi … I desired to see those figures which had driven [some among the Papal court] to cry out that [their creators] should be crucified. As soon as I gazed at them I was filled with the same spirit that had moved Giulio Romano to draw them [and] … I tossed off the sonnets which are [now] to be seen below the original pictures. With all due respect to hypocrites, I dedicate these lustful pieces to you, heedless of fake prudishness and asinine prejudices that forbid the eyes to gaze at the things they most delight to see. What harm is there in seeing a man mounting a woman? Should beasts, then, be freer than we are?[27]

In 1527, beneath new renditions of Raimondi's engravings, a second edition of the sixteen postures was produced. This time one of Aretino's sonnets - collectively known as the *Sonetti lussuriosi*, or "Lascivious Sonnets" - accompanied each print (see figure 1 for an example). Each poem is composed as a *sonetto caudate*, or "tailed" sonnet, which departs from the usual fourteen-lined rhyming structure of *a b b a a b b a c d c d* by adding three additional lines, rhyming *d e e*.

As much as they depart from the traditional form, so these verses deviate from conventions of tone and content in Italian verse. Aretino's explicit writings represent a radical reversal of the established and acceptable Petrarchan mode, with its focus on the emotional and spiritual state of the poet-lover and the elevation of the unattainable loved one. The *Sonetti lussuriosi* are crude and bold, describing the physical, not the affective.

More descriptive than narrative, the sonnets are an interpretation and extension of the Romano-Raimondi images, for each refers to the position shown in the accompanying image. They give equal praise to male and female genitals (as well as vaginal and anal sex), and they often comment frankly on the relative pleasures that each method of intercourse and each position provides. Take, for example, the ninth image, which depicts a

woman on her back, a man astride her, penetrating her while he faces her feet. In the accompanying sonnet the woman's commentary runs: "You have your prick in my pussy and you see my ass, and I look at your rear and how it is formed."[28] As these lines demonstrate the poems ostensibly give voice to the protagonists of each picture.

Just as some of the images depict women in positions of sexual dominance, so the sonnets give prominence to female voice, sexual pleasure, and power. Eight of the sonnets begin with the woman's voice - of the others, seven begin with the man's. Sonnet 15 has a third-person voice, ostensibly that of the male poet directly addressing the reader. Similarly, within each dialogue (excepting sonnet 15 all the sonnets are dialogues, in vulgar Italian, between the performing man and woman), lines are quite equally divided between gendered actors. Moreover, following the precedent established by the Classical sex manuals of Elephantis, in several of the poems the woman instructs the man on how best to please her and the man complies with her wishes.[29] Consider Sonnet 10:

> She: "You'll pardon me, I want it in my ass."
> He: "Oh, lady, I don't want to commit this sin, because this is the food of prelates, who have always had the damnedest taste."
> She: "Go on, put it here."
> He: "I won't."
> She: "Yes, you will."
> He: "Why? Isn't it done anymore from the other side, that is, in the pussy?"
> She: "Yes, but it's far more agreeable to have a cock behind than in front."
> He: "I want to let myself be guided by your advice. My cock is yours, and if you like it so much, like a dick, he is yours to command."[30]

Here we see that, while anchored to the Romano-Raimondi pictorial representation, Aretino's compositions are also profoundly attuned to Classical erotic literary tradition as well as his contemporary cultural context. Conflicting attitudes emerge from this bridging of pagan Classicism and Catholic Renaissance. Aretino is aware of these tensions and plays with them in the same wry, humorous manner used by satirists of his own time. Thus, Aretino's blusterous letter to his friend Battista Zatti (quoted earlier) characterises the *Sonetti lussuriosi* as a defiant gesture against a hypocritical society where sexually graphic images were acceptable if displayed in private - including in the chambers of the Vatican - and if their erotic representation featured the cavorting gods and satyrs of antiquity. Sonnet 12 addresses this

practice by targeting named individuals from sixteenth-century Rome. “Mars, you Malatesta-like coward,” protests the female speaker, anxious to enact her role as a mythical goddess, “you shouldn’t push a woman under you like that. One shouldn’t fuck Venus with blind fury, but instead be measured and polite.” Exploding her fantasy and any excusable notion that *I Modi* and the *Sonetti* portray mythical scenes, the man replies, “I’m not Mars, I’m Ercole Rangone. And you beneath me, you’re Angela Greca not Venus.” In this way, Aretino emphasises that the images are ultra-modern, showing real courtesans and personages of the day: Malatesta was an inept military commander; Ercole Rangone a contemporary nobleman and public figure, and Angela Greca a well-known courtesan.[31]

As this example demonstrates, in the same vein as Poggio’s *Facetiae* and Vignale’s *La Cazzaria*, the principle foci of Aretino’s scathing humour are the aristocracy, church workers, and religious beliefs. Thus, where Romano’s images suggest sodomy, Aretino employs this social-sexual taboo as an instrument of political and religious satire. As seen above, one speaker from Sonnet 10 associates sodomy with the clergy and maligns it as “food for prelates.” Meanwhile in Sonnet 11 an ass - that is, representing sexual pleasure and probably sodomy rather than religious devotion - is described as leading “to Paradise.”[32]

Aretino sets the tone of what follows in the very first poem. It opens the collection with the male lover’s proclamation, “Let’s fuck, my love, let’s fuck, since all of us were born only to fuck. / You adore the cock and I the cunt; and the world would be nothing without this act.” It’s an inclusive statement - “all of us” - which, like the images, positions sex, not God, Church, art, civilisation, or love, as giving the world its principal meaning. The second stanza continues, “If it were proper to fuck after death, I’d say let’s fuck ourselves to death, then we could fuck Adam and Eve.”[33] Here, the satire begins, evoking the Christian afterlife as a place of lustful delight, reducing the revered Adam and Eve to human flesh and sexual desires. Just as Adam and Eve appear as basely human, so too do Aretino’s words transform the images into satirical portraits, which exhibit (sometimes named) courtiers, aristocrats, and prelates fulfilling base human desires with courtesans - indeed, even being dominated and instructed by these desirable women. Divested of the accoutrements of social status - robes, wealth, office - the flesh erases social distinctions. Thus, combining illustration and text in a way previously common to religious works, *I Modi* presents the physical truth of the body as a challenge to the shallow, abstract truths of Court and Church. In *I Modi* and the *Sonetti*, everyone is revealed as only human and all that truly matters is physical pleasure.

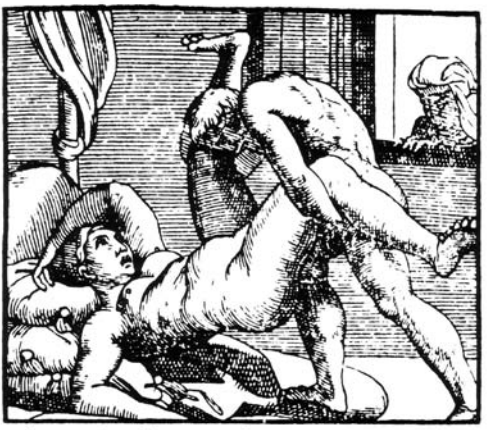
6. Obscenity Unveiled and Unveiling.

Revelation and sight are themes central to *I Modi*. The narrator of Sonnet 15 invites the reader to "Come *view* this you who like to fuck / Without being disturbed in that sweet enterprise." Likewise, the epilogue concludes, "You have *seen* all the remains of the horrible cocks in stupendous pussies if you have *seen* the joyous doing of these deeds to these lovely young girls."[34] Aretino's letter to Zatti (cited above) explains that *seeing* the Romano-Raimondi images inspired him to compose the verses, which he dedicates to those whose "prejudices forbid the *eyes* to *gaze* at the things they delight to *see*. What harm is there in *seeing* a man mount a woman?" (emphasis added). This recurrent allusion to the gaze indicates the significance accorded sight within the text.

Like so much else, this emphasis on sight reflects contemporary concerns. Sight permeated Renaissance discourse. In short, following aspects of Platonism, sight had an integral role in the process of apprehending physical truths and was central to Renaissance education and knowledge. On another level, this dwelling on sight links to early-modern thought, which regarded the eyes as sexual organs. Also, according to Renaissance Neo-Classicism, sight was the primary respondent to beauty. In *I Modi*, however, there is no Neo-Platonic movement towards a higher ideal; sight is firmly fixed on the flesh. Lovers gaze into each other's eyes or at the other's naked body, and the *Sonetti* reflect the same concerns: "This is certainly a beautiful cock, long and thick. If you really care about me let me *see* it" (Sonnet 4); "You *see* my ass, and I *look* at your rear and how it is formed" (Sonnet 9); "And if I weren't *looking* into your rump as into *a mirror* … if I weren't *looking* at you with such pleasure…' (Sonnet 14).[35]

Within this play of regarding and displaying, the above reference to mirroring relates to a theme which accompanies that of sight: voyeurism. Just as speaking and listening occur within the dialogues, and the narrator's reference to "you" encompasses the listener and viewer outside the text, so, within the images, figures reflect the voyeuristic *viewer* of the images and the *reader* of the sonnets. Sonnet and image 11 provides a specific example (see figure 1) which is replete with references to sight: the man calls the woman's ass "a mirror," which he gazes at, Narcissus-like, and which keeps his cock "upbeat." Meanwhile the woman claims that she orgasms just from *seeing* the man's "noble cock." Surrounded by these references to the arousing power of the visual and the low parts of the body as mirrors, there appears a detached observer. This figure of illicit viewing, an old woman, peers at the cavorting couple from a window. In this way, she reflects the reader as s/he too peers at the images and sonnets. Indignant, the old woman denounces the lovers as "indecent" and "depraved" but, arguably, her moralising veils a certain fascination; after all, despite her objections, she continues to gaze, as the reader does, at this scene. Why? On one level, it offers (as its protagonists

describe) the possibility of gratuitous sexual arousal; on another it reveals what decorum traditionally consigns to silence and shadows. It is this illicit revelation - a display of taboos - which attracts and fascinates. But what, exactly, do the images and terminology of *I Modi* reveal?



Apri le coſcie, accio ch'io ueggia bene
Il tuo bel culo, e ia tua potta in uiſo,
Culo da compire un pare un paradiſo,
Potta, ch'i cori ſtilla per le rene;
Mentre, ch'io ueggio, egli mi uiene
Capriccio di baſciarui a l'improuiſo,
E mi par eſser piu bel, che Narciſo
Nel ſpecchio, che'l mio cazzo allegro tiene;
Ah ribalda, ahi ribaldo, in terra, & in letto
Io ti ueggio puttana, e t'apparecchia
Ch'io ti rompa due coſtole del petto;
Io te n'incaco franciosata uecchia,
Che per queſto piacer plusquamperfetto
Entrarei in un pozzo ſenza ſecchia,
E non ſi troua pecchia
Ch'iotta d'i fior com'io, d'un nob l cazzo,
E no'i prouo ancho, e per mirarlo ſguazzo;

Figure 1. Image number 11 and the accompanying sonnet are taken from a woodcut copy ostensibly made from a Raimondi/Aretino original. Reprinted from Lynne Lawner, *I Modi: The Sixteen Pleasures, An Erotic Album of the Sixteenth Century: Marcantonio Raimondi, Giulio Romano, Pietro Aretino*, Peter Owen Publishers, London, 1988, p. 83, (with the kind permission of Peter Owen Publishers, London).[36]

They portrayed for the first time and in a widely available way, acts that had previously been hidden from public view: ostensibly moral, civilised aristocrats and prelates romping with whores.[37] It removed these public figures from their pedestals and revealed their "true" nature. On this level it showed what was socially forbidden. Yet *I Modi* and the *Sonetti* opened more than just the façade of Renaissance Italy: they displayed not just the clerics, prelates, and aristocrats' "true" nature but also the unadorned, uncivilised truth of man himself. For the male speaker in Sonnet 11, the woman's ass is a mirror in which he sees himself. "Come view this *you* who like to fuck" says one speaker; "*You* have seen … *you* have seen" intones the voice of the epigraph, which acts like a mirror itself, pointing out the reader's complicity in viewing these taboo scenes. In all these ways *I Modi* lives up to one of the Latinate roots of the word "obscene": *ob scaenus*, that which is "off the stage" of public life, not openly shown for the sake of public good. It *is* obscene because it brings into the limelight what was previously unseen on the public stage.[38] It did so not, like Medieval representations, to disapprove of man's sexual urges, but to rail against the hypocrisy and false premises behind which, it suggests, socially acceptable beliefs try to hide. Whereas in the New Testament, word became flesh, *I Modi* articulated a new, secular, gospel: it showed the usually hidden side of being human and "civilised." In a way, it turned flesh back into word.

7. Prohibition and Fascination

"What harm is there in watching a man mount a woman?" reasons Aretino. No matter how genuinely Classical such an attitude towards nudity and sex may have been, others, more powerful, considered such scenes and words far from innocuous. Since 1218, regulation of printed matter was the duty of a high ranking member of the papal bureaucracy, the *Maestro del sacro palazzo apostolico*. Directly appointed by the Pope and housed in the Vatican, the role of the incumbent of this venerable position was to examine all sermons and orations for doctrinal errors. In the sixteenth century, the responsibilities of this post were extended to hold jurisdiction over the printing and selling of all books and prints in Rome.[39] *I Modi* was printed without permission - indeed, it was probably printed in Venice, a free state outside direct Papal control. Yet, when the second (1527) edition of *I Modi* and its inflammatory sonnets came to be noticed, like its forerunner, almost all copies were destroyed by Papal decree. More forceful action against the authors was arguably prevented by the Sack of Rome, which occurred later the same year, effectively ending the Roman Renaissance - as well as, one could speculate, eradicating many remaining editions of the text.

Despite this wholescale destruction of the text, the threat represented by *I Modi* did not quickly fade. The Counter-Reformation and increasing regulations surrounding Catholic practice and printed material saw the

creation, in 1559, of the Pauline Index - *Index auctorum et librorum prohibitum* - compiled under the direction of Pope Paul IV. The *Index* embodied the first concerted attempt, in what could be called a "modern" Europe, to comprehensively list books considered dangerous to the faithful and therefore requiring prohibition. All Aretino's works were listed there.[40]

With its prohibition, *I Modi*'s infamy was firmly established. In spite of this notoriety being based more on reputation than first-hand experience of the text, in England "Aretino's Postures" came to symbolise the degenerate influence and lustful temptation of the foreign. Italy was something of a place for cultural pilgrimage for England's young social elite, and in *Volpone*, Ben Jonson wryly mused on this fact when he wrote, "Dante is hard, and few can understand him. / But for a desperate wit, there's Aretine! Only, his pictures are a little obscene."[41]

In closing, it is worth noting that not only *I Modi* but the Church's reaction to it played a significant role in forming notions of modern obscenity. To designate material obscene depends as much on its reception as its content. So, struggling with the formation of a new European identity, the Vatican's fear-filled response recognised that obscenity was a powerful force; indeed, the Vatican's reaction *created* a genre of "obscene" literature. By forbidding it, the Vatican made this obscene text - and the others it banned - the equivalent of Eden's fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. After all, as Freud notes in *Totem and Taboo*, "[w]here there is a prohibition there must be an underlying desire."[42] Man desires what is denied him, and if he does not desire it, what reason is there in denying it to him? While its prohibition secured the notoriety of *I Modi*, it simultaneously secured its attraction and also that of the obscene texts which followed. Prohibiting it endowed this type of text with man's perennial association between taboos and places of secret knowledge. Furthermore, with its combination of voyeurism and the erotic gaze, satire, anti-clerical defamation, themes of education, and unveiling of uncomfortable truths, *I Modi* introduced the stock components of all later obscene material. The same ideas return at the core of later European, sexually graphic works, from the anonymous authors of erotic classics like *L'École des filles*, to the works of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille, many of which found themselves, like *I Modi*, listed in later editions of the Church's *Index* of forbidden books. Thus, it is due to the Renaissance, the printing press, Neo-Classicism, and Christianity that obscene literature's form, themes, *and* its illicit attraction were secured.

Notes

1. M Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, R Hurley (trans.), Penguin, London, 1978, p. 35.

2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. B Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, p. ix.
4. I Tang, *Pornography: The Secret History of Civilisation*, Channel 4 Books, London, 1999, pp. 45-46.
5. D Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, Ohio, 1989, pp. 126-128.
6. *John* I:14-17.
7. P Findlen, 'Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy', in L Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, Zone Books, New York, 1996, pp. 49-108, p. 79.
8. See G Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1985, pp. 77-82; and L. Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans: Portraits of the Renaissance*, Rizzoli International, New York, 1986, p. 88.
9. Tang, op. cit., p. 81.
10. In fact, to talk of public and private spheres in Ancient Rome may be an anachronism. As Isabel Tang notes, although Latin has a word "secret" for political purposes, there was no equivalent word for "private" to describe sexual behaviour or delineate between public and private spaces; ibid., p. 35.
11. IF Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England*, Studies in the History of Sexuality, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 134.
12. The contemporary commentator Domenico Gnoli estimated that in 1527, out of Rome's population of 55,035 people, 4,900 were prostitutes. See Lawner, *Courtesans*, op. cit., p. 5.
13. Ibid., pp. 4-5.
14. Ibid., pp. 69; and 178.
15. Talvacchia, op. cit., pp. 4-10.
16. Ibid., p. 53; and L Lawner, *I Modi: The Sixteen Pleasures: An Erotic Album of the Sixteenth Century: Giulio Romano, Marcantonio Raimondi, Pietro Aretino and Count Jean-Frédéric-Maxmilien de Waldeck*, Peter Owen Publishers, London, 1988, pp. 30-31. This paper is indebted to many aspects of Lawner's study.
17. Ibid., pp. 35-38.
18. The writer Mark Twain famously called Titian's *Venus of Urbino* "[t]he foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses." Cited in Tang, op. cit., p. 67.
19. Frantz, op. cit., pp. 10-24.

20. Ibid., pp. 36-42.
21. Findlen, op. cit., p. 87.
22. Talvacchia, op. cit., pp. 121-122.
23. Ibid., p. 115.
24. Ibid., p. 122.
25. Ruggiero, op. cit., p. 96.
26. Ibid., pp. 108-125.
27. Lawner, *I Modi*, op. cit., p. 14. Translations from this edition by Lawner.
28. Talvacchia, op. cit., p. 211. Translations from this edition by Talvacchia.
29. Moulton, op. cit., p. 124.
30. Talvacchia, op. cit., p. 213.
31. Lawner, *I Modi*, op. cit., pp. 80 and 84.
32. Talvacchia, op. cit., pp. 211 and 213.
33. Lawner, *I Modi*, op. cit., p. 62.
34. Talvacchia, op. cit., pp. 223 and 227, emphasis added.
35. Ibid, p. 205, p. 211, and p. 221, emphasis added.
36. See Lawner's translation (adapted) below; Lawner, *I Modi*, op. cit., p. 82:

    He: "Open your thighs so I can *look* straight
    At your beautiful ass and cunt before my face,
    Paradisiacal ass to be enjoyed,
    Cunt that melts hearts through the kidneys."
    Old Woman: "Ah, shameless pair! I *spy* you
    On that mattress pulled down to the floor.
    You whore, you'd better defend yourself.
    I'm going to break a rib or two!"
    She: "Shit on you, syphilis-ridden hag!
    In order to enjoy this superb pleasure
    I'd throw myself into a well.
    I'm greedier
    For a noble prick than bees are for flowers
    Even just *looking* at it tickles me." (Emphasis added.)

    In her translation Lawner uses the old Italian words for "ass" (*culo*), "cunt" (*potta*), and "prick" (*cazzo*). I have changed this aspect of her translation, using the equivalent English slang in order to convey more accurately the effect of the original language to readers of English.
37. Findlen, op. cit., pp. 59 and 77.
38. H Ellis, 'The Revaluation of Obscenity', in *More Essays on Love and Virtue*, Constable and Co., London, 1931, pp. 103-142, p. 104. Cf. P

Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p. xi. Note that most modern European languages take their word "obscene" ("obscène," "obszön," "obsceno," and "osceno") from the same Latinate origins.

39. Talvacchia, op.cit., p. 11.
40. Findlen, op. cit., pp.55-57.
41. B Jonson, *Three Comedies*, ed. M Jamieson, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 104.
42. S Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', in *The Origins of Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 13, J Strachey (trans.), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990, pp. 43-159, p. 127.

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Imagining Manhoods: Voyeurism and Masculine Anxieties in East African Asian Fiction

Godwin Siundu

Abstract
This essay aims to interrogate the various ways in which the dynamics of gender, sex and sexuality, singularly and cumulatively, impinge on wider discourses of racial identities and identifications within the trajectory of the post-colonial East African polity. Through a reading of two novels each by celebrated East African writers of Asian extraction, Yusuf Dawood's *Water Under the Bridge* and *Return to Paradise* and Moyez Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*, I argue that men's anxieties regarding their own sexuality are quite often manifested as concerns for the sexual patterns of their womenfolk. Subsequently, men's attempts at regulating the sexual liaisons of women in actual fact reveal the men's crisis of sexuality that cries out for avenues of affirmation.

Key Words: Asian, bodies, Yusuf Dawood, East African, identity, patriarchy, race, sex, sexuality, Moyez Vassanji.

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1. Introduction: Of Bodies and Identities

That the question of identities and their formational processes has dominated post-colonial studies globally is not in doubt. Indeed the idea that human beings have embarked on various journeys in search of their selves and identities in part explains the re-emergence and popularity of the travel genre in twentieth century literature. Equally prominent in twentieth century scholarship has been the concern with bodies and how they are viewed in the constitution of selves, their centrality in the creation of discourses of sameness and difference as part of a bigger host of related dialectics, as well as their metaphorical significance in understanding group interactional patterns and realities.

In this paper, which is related to issues of identities and bodies, I seek to read the way East African Asians have confronted the multi-pronged question of group and individual sexuality, especially the anxieties thus generated, and how these impinge on notions of ethnic identities.[1] These identities are comprehended within the prevailing dynamics of various forms of economic and political power, as well as notions of racial (im)purity that necessarily accompany many nationalistic enterprises. I intend to argue that men's anxieties regarding their bodies vis-à-vis those of Others intersect with

issues of cultural power, while sexual pleasure/repression interacts with threats of emasculation. This can be illustrated by drawing on the way in which Asian boys "supposedly concede the general smallness of their phallus in comparison with those of the Africans, but in the next breath revoke this concession by denying the Africans' phalluses' stretchability as an attribute of manhood."[2] A subsidiary argument can be formulated that Asian boys' acts of "throwing casual glances at each other's members" point to the crisis of bodies whose owners are trapped in a groove of superiority:[3] their bodies are largely visible by virtue of being a fairly wealthy minority, yet parts of their bodies remain invisible to themselves, thereby capturing tensions of sexuality that pit possible homoerotic desires against mere voyeuristic pleasures frowned upon by their largely homophobic communities. I focus on two novels each by two African-Asian writers: Moyez Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land* and Yusuf Dawood's *Water Under the Bridge* and *Return to Paradise*. All of these novels need be read within the trajectory of the minority discourses that inform the politics of nation-formation in the main East African countries of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.[4] Such discourses in many instances involve intersections between class, gender, and race against the backdrop of cultural conceptions of patriarchal and other structural influences on individual and communal interactions at the level of the immediate community and beyond.

The concern with the expression of masculinities essentially adds another layer to the concept of identities - not just the way in which gender is used to shape group identities, but also the way in which these identities thus shaped are premised on intra-groups' differential power relations. As I hope to demonstrate, some forms of masculinity are also expressions of sex-related anxieties that are in many instances identified by the gaze of those who share the same cultural and racial attributes and therefore belong, as opposed to those perceived as different who, subsequently, do not belong. I will show that the myths woven around perceived differences in phallic endowments are especially reassuring to the male members of different racial-cultural groups, who celebrate diverse attributes of the imagined commonalities of their phalluses in the knowledge that girls prefer them to those of the non-members. On a related plane, I also argue that the material and economic differences that provide one of the sites upon which masculinities are performed constitute linkages of interaction between members of various cultural and racial groups, further problematising the transcendental nature of identities. Indeed, the fact that people may belong to the same racial and cultural group but occupy different economic groups also works the other way round, since people may belong to different racial and cultural groups but share the same economic class. Whichever way one looks at such a situation, people appear to belong to different groups depending on the

moment and index of perception. Add gender differences to this, and the situation becomes yet more complex.

Indeed Joan Ostrove and Elizabeth Cole's reading of race and gender in psychology concludes that it is difficult to experience a racial identity that is genderless.[5] This conflation of different yet related experiences is termed as "intersectionality" by Kimberle Crenshaw, whose reading of class demonstrates how "failure to investigate intersectionality results in research that ignores intragroup differences."[6] The existence of intra-group disparities implies that apart from inter-group interactions that are often contentious, members of the "same" groups continue to experience intra-group inequities that inform their perception of identities at the individual or group level. This is why, as Ostrove and Cole note, overlooking these intra-group peculiarities truncates the story of the concerned groups, at the same time as it inadvertently implies support for essentialist theories of group relations that have been roundly critiqued for advocating the maintenance of the social and economic status quo. Awareness of all the dangers of essentialism becomes a central plank in attempts at forging identities for groups whose pasts and presents are marked by processes of inclusion and exclusion in circles that have differential access to various resources. In all these processes, gender as a category of analysis belies sexuality and sexual roles/codes of conduct, so that studies on gender are secondarily about sexuality and how it impinges on society members' interactions, competitions, and propensities in a complex of socio-economic, political, and cultural competitions.

Yet, recent studies in matters concerning gender, especially in Africa, have tended to place more emphasis on the study of the roles of women in a wide range of disciplines, with the unstated presumption that enough literature already exists on men. Indeed Frances Cleaver asserts that "[m]en appear to be missing from much gender and development policy." He goes on to concede that

> [w]hile a growing body of literature theorising men and masculinities exists, encompassing the fields of gender, men's studies, social studies and social policy, much of it focuses on the experience of men in northern industrialised countries. With some notable exceptions, the studies of men in the South are predominantly exotically ethnographic or historical accounts. There is a dearth of literature illuminating how concepts of gender relations that include a focus on men and masculinities might help us in understanding the lives and livelihoods of contemporary men and women in developing countries.[7]

Although Cleaver makes these observations within the context of gender and development, a closer look at recent literary studies reveals similar gaps in the literary analysis of gender relations. This can partly be explained by the fact that the entire corpus of postcolonial discourses concerns itself mainly with describing the whole idea of the Other, which includes hitherto marginal groups like women, while presuming that the Self has described itself adequately to be "known," and therefore has no need for further intellectual interrogation. Arguably, early (post)colonialist literature's portrayal of the formerly colonised spaces in feminine terms presented opportunities for the study of women and their experiences in these places at the expense of men, who had been rendered invisible by such portrayals. Yet, as Hema Chari suggests,

> if we accept the premise that colonialism is predominantly a male project between and of men, then this violative [colonial] penetration and control that operates as the predominant trope within which the colonial enterprise is executed is that of male rape.[8]

Hence, it becomes important to examine how men in the post-colonial set-up that is partly dealt with in the novels under study recoup their senses of masculine identities, which they had been robbed of by colonial structures that subjugated entire communities.

Elsewhere, I discuss the way in which Asians (and Europeans before them), generally viewed as immigrants to the region, conceive of Africa as a land of opportunities - usually described in feminine terms - awaiting exploitation.[9] Similarly, Africans' struggle to liberate their lands and achieve freedom often takes on gendered terms. Indeed, Sidney Lemelle and Robin Kelley observe that:

> [g]iven the close association between nationalism and masculinity, and the gendered iconography of Pan-Africanism - Black men coming to redeem the soil of a "Mother Country" "raped" by Europe - gender offers perhaps the freshest and most exciting possibilities of the study of diasporic political and cultural movements.[10]

It is with this in mind that I attempt a reading of the characters' anxieties regarding manhood, patriarchy, and masculinities, and the way an interplay of all these impact on the two authors' representations of the realities surrounding group relations in the novels under study. My analysis is largely guided by the fact that the reconstruction of group relations is gendered, especially in the novels of Moyez Vassanji. If colonial emasculation of males

was commonly presented through, among other means, images of the penetration of a feminine, exotic Africa, then the dynamics of nationalism and neo-colonialism in post-colonial East Africa can also be read in presentations of forms of masculinity. But in this context, masculinity refers to practices of simultaneous male domination of other males and females, rather than to singular patterns of control. Such a position signals due recognition to the dynamic of power that naturally underpins any violative sexual encounter, as hinted at in the meeting between the Asians and the East African region.

2. The Quest for Masculine Certainty

Much of the Asian writing in East Africa is situated within the trajectory of immigrant and other related literature, confronting in varied degrees the conditions of exile, alienation, subalternity, and corresponding desires to come to terms with these predicaments and create homes wherever one finds oneself. Subsequently, the journey motif is a dominant stylistic strategy, which involves projecting explorative Asians, especially mercantile males, who then create families and communities around where their business ventures are situated. For varied reasons, these males are preoccupied with preserving the purity of their "racial community" by controlling sexual liaisons that involve their female members and repressing the presence of members with African ancestry among them (many of whom are products of Asian male and African female conjugation). Hence, the supposed purity of the Asian communities in East Africa, as imagined in the fiction of Moyez Vassanji especially, depends more on the extent to which women live out the wishes of their male counterparts regarding the abhorrence of any sexual liaisons with African men. The latent fear of sexual "contamination" of the Asian nation dominates the mind of the Asian male, who finds it necessary to control the body of the Asian female. Policing the woman's body has in many ways been used to "preserve" the "purity" and "integrity" of communities with the potential for inter-cultural/racial mixing. Where these women "defy" such forms of socio-cultural confinement - often encoded in norms of "proper" marriage or liaisons - they are seen as having transcended "racial/cultural spaces,"[11] or subverting what Anne McClintock has so powerfully identified as "the cult of domesticity."[12] In such communities, putting the women's bodies beyond the sexual reach of men from Other communities not only locates them within definite social spaces, but also ensures the continued propagation of ideas of moral/racial superiority of entire groups in environments that portend threats of contamination. The implied Other that completes the dialectic is, of course, tagged with notions of inferiority, impurity, and so on.

Yet, the patriarchal tendency in such communities to "protect" the woman from the Other's contamination also belies deep seated anxieties

about the men's own imagination of what the Other's "manhood" is like. This is why, in many novels by Vassanji and some by Dawood, the Asian male is an anxious male, watching with suspicion the African male's interactions with the Asian female, all with the express aim of ascertaining that whatever sexual activities the Asian females engage in are exclusively with Asian males, though not necessarily vice versa. As a matter of course, cultural idioms of (im)purity inscribed by and on the African/Asian phallus in large measure signal the political dialectics of post-colonial discourses of autochthony and immigrancy, impure and pure, African and Asian respectively, that have dominated the East African multicultural polity from the late pre-colonial to post-colonial times. On the one hand, these discourses capture the immigrants' attempts to root themselves in a place without losing their cultural identities while resisting possibilities of sexual-cultural hybridisation, and, on the other, attempts by the autochthons to savour the exoticism promised by the phenotypically different Asian woman. That some women buy into these concerns of resistance and desire is one way in which these same concerns are sustained.[13]

3. Reading Manhood in Moyez Vassanji's Novels

In Vassanji's novels, different forms of manhood and masculinity are constructed around what one would call traditional patriarchy, where most important societal norms and values are dictated by powerful men who decide what other men and women can and cannot do. Presenting masculinity and manhood in terms of achievement leads to situations of dominance by strong and influential men, who exercise their power by having their way, sometimes cruelly so. For instance, in *The Gunny Sack*, Musa Shivji, a Sergeant in the National Service, is a former classmate of the main character, known only as Salim. When they meet at the training camp after school, Musa does not hesitate to remind Salim of their relative change in status: "You know, Juma, out here we are not equals. See these stripes - I am a sergeant. Soon I'll have scissors here - a major. You're a recruit. You are in my power."[14] As it emerges in the novel, Musa was not good at class work in school, a handicap that made him a laughing stock among his peers. From a school failure to a hawker, Musa celebrates his achievement as a lowly civil servant by exercising the power and authority that come with it over the young recruits in the National Service: "I am the master of my world here! For the first time in my life, people look up to me. I am a leader, I command them, I can make them laugh and I can make them cry."[15] Unstated in Musa's pronouncement is the point that his ability to make other people laugh or cry makes him more manly than them.

On a more common plane, there is an essential concern with anxieties of virility and manhood that is projected onto the sizes of the

phalluses, with the Africans supposedly being more endowed in this regard. This concern is condensed in parenthesis in *The Gunny Sack*:

> (After National Service all the Asian boys agreed upon at least one observation.
>
> "These blacks, bana, they have such long ones, dangling there like anything -"
>
> "Yes, like a donkey's or something -"
>
> "And we sitting there with our shrivelled little peanuts of cocks -"
>
> "Aré [sic], even the cold water wouldn't make a difference on their sizes!"
>
> "That's the point, yar! That's precisely the point. These long dangling things don't have stretchability. Young's modulus zero. They are already at their maximum lengths. While these peanuts, these little jugus grow and grow like there's no end. They grow into fighting bananas and still they want to grow!"
>
> "Girls prefer them, yes?"
>
> Such our insecurities. And later, an observation from Sona in college: "Indian boys studiously avoiding each other in the showers, but (I swear!) all the while throwing casual glances at each other's members as if to ask: Hindu or Muslim, Muslim or Hindu?").[16]

From the foregoing lengthy excerpt, the anxieties about masculinity also lay bare the intersection of sexuality with group differences, gender, and religious concerns. By assuring themselves that girls prefer their "little peanuts of cocks," the Asian boys individually seek to redeem their sexual potency and masculinity as a way of overcoming the sense of emasculation they feel in the presence of their African age mates. Collectively, the homosocial bonding among the Asian boys allows them to fraternise in perpetuation of cultural jingoism that plays a significant role in sustaining masculine privilege within the discourses of nationalism. The glances towards the Other's phallus and the attendant mythifications are part of the processes through which, as Benita De Robillard asserts, in a somewhat different context, "gender and heterosexuality are performed and imagined particularly through the operations of fantasy and desire."[17] Such masculine anxieties and their animation present a perpetuation of the heteronormative order of sexuality, which is subscribed to by the larger community from which the boys come.[18] Heteronormativity and the very idea of it are part of the structures of patriarchy around which societal conceptions of morality and sexuality are encoded. The masculine anxieties hinted at by such

conversations arise out of the reciprocal influences and conflations of myth, ideology, fantasy, and desire in the Althusserian and Lacanian understanding of the interpellative dynamics of obedience and other psychosocial processes that are sanctioned by cultures of discipline and conformity to communal expectations.

Furthermore, Asian boys "throwing casual glances at each other's members" points to a crisis of sexuality that suggests possible homoerotic attractions in an environment that nonetheless emphasises heteronormativity within the same Asian community. Musa Shivji is one of the characters whose maturation from a boy into a man is necessitated by a castration anxiety, occasioned by what are viewed by some as effeminate attributes. His own admission to Salim that "I was big but a coward [….] People would pat my arse,"[19] and the humiliating treatment that he undergoes at the hands of a National Service Policeman - "I won't tell you what else I had to do …" - all emphasise his emasculation, which he seeks to redeem by use of physical and sometimes violent power.[20] He views power as a manly attribute: "when I saw the National Service and TPDF marching … the power in their arms, their legs … I decided to join, *to become a man*."[21] This was after his African helper in hawking became angry with him because of his too gentle behaviour: "Weh Musa, you fag! Hanisi. What are you?"[22]

The issue of power as a form of masculinity is also tied to the issue of one's ability to provide for dependants, where success in material terms bequeaths corresponding power to the patriarchs, hence the respect earned by Haji Lalani in *No New Land* and Nurmohamed Pipa in *The Book of Secrets*.[23] This is the kind of respect that Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack* gets initially, before he misappropriates community funds to pursue his run-away half-caste son Huseni. In *The Gunny Sack*, material success as a marker of masculine achievement reaches legendary proportions in Amarsi Makan, whose rise from a village loafer and stowaway to a business magnate renders him very inspirational to other Asian young men, infusing them not just with the desire to improve their well-being, but also to leave the subcontinent altogether. This becomes such a trend that successive generations of members of the community define their success or failures in life as per the benchmarks set by Makan and other patriarchs.

In *No New Land*, Nurdin suffers a lot of humiliation due to the fact that his father Haji before him was able to provide for his family adequately in harsh circumstances, something that he himself is not even capable of in more prosperous times. Considering that the ability to provide is celebrated as a marker of success in his community's tradition, Nurdin's own inability to supply material comforts - similar to or more than those his father gave his family before him - causes the younger man a lot of anguish. In addition, the fact that Haji never thought much of Nurdin puts the latter in a position where he views himself as someone incapable of any "manly" achievement in

a community whose tradition valorises patriarchy, even in cases where the same is enforced through violent means. The relationship between Nurdin and his father, quite apart from the obvious generational discrepancy that impacts on their general outlook, captures the possible ways in which masculine socialisation fails to attain its hidden objectives. For Nurdin, growing up in a household whose head emphasises strict moral guidelines and high achievements only sets him up for later frustration, owing to his failure to attain remarkable levels of satisfaction in his life.

As Nurdin's case illustrates, material poverty and vulnerability to patriarchal violence are related in their emasculating effects on the victims. One of Nurdin's childhood memories is of Haji beating up Nurdin's brother to within an inch of his life for making a pass at a girl neighbour. The beating, which, on a *prima facie* basis, is about instilling high moral values in the young man, is actually used to camouflage the high expectations that Haji has of his sons, and it paralyses Nurdin's emotional and romantic growth. The perceived affront committed by his son is made worse for Haji by the fact that it is committed with a girl of supposedly lower social status and therefore incapable of adding value to his son's or family's social standing. This position needs to be understood within the wider picture of the caste system that most South Asian communities are known for. The idea that social structures can be constructed and upheld through regulated sexual liaisons is not new to Haji, who subscribes to this view, albeit inadvertently, by virtue of showing strong attachments to physical and cultural India.[24] His thinking could be that by failing to show his young sons "the right way," he will be failing in his responsibilities as the man in the home, an idea that simultaneously captures the extent to which his own "manhood" hinges on the expected "good manhood" of his sons. Haji's extraordinarily violent reaction to his elder son's love letter instils terror in the younger Nurdin's heart, so much so that he becomes almost powerless in dealing with women without viewing such acts as subversive of his father's teachings.

Later on, Haji's portrait in Nurdin's house becomes a constant reminder of the latter's failure to provide for his family and therefore live up to his late father's expectations. In a way, Haji's portrait emasculates Nurdin, since it undermines the sense of manhood that would be assured if he were fully capable of supplying his family's wants and needs. Nurdin, then, is locked in a battle to reclaim his masculinity by attempting to do those things that his father would never have approved of, such as contemplating sex with a woman other than his wife, eating pork, tasting liquor, and visiting peep-shows. It is particularly significant that Nurdin fantasises the possibility of sleeping with the very same woman who, as a girl, had landed his brother in problems back in Dar-Es-Salaam. All these examples can be read as Nurdin's awareness of his inadequacy as a man, an inadequacy brought about by his sense of entrapment between memories of his autocratic father and the

presence of an overbearing wife. It does not help Nurdin that his wife not only refuses any further sexual liaisons with him - which would be one way for Nurdin to exercise his manhood over her - but also lives the very values and beliefs of his late father, thereby denying Nurdin the chance to forget his earlier predicament and move on with life as a man who charts his own way. If as a young man Nurdin had his emotional and romantic growth stunted by his father, as an adult he realises that his father's values remain embodied in his own wife, rendering him perpetually emasculated. As if to buttress her own influence in the home, Zera, Nurdin's wife, is very enthusiastic in inviting Missionary to come to Toronto. It is important that Missionary, who arrives in Toronto as a substitute father figure, wears Haji's fez with all its symbolic authority. Missionary, an age mate and friend to Nurdin's late father, together with the latter's portrait on the wall become shadows that immortalise Haji Lalani, making it very difficult for Nurdin to outgrow his own anxieties.

In Vassanji's writing, it is not just Nurdin who suffers this predicament of emasculation. Although his father died when he was young, any memories that Salim in *The Gunny Sack* has of him are interlaced with strife that arises from Salim's perceived role in the death of his father. Salim seems to be fated to become entangled one way or another with his father Juma's death and the subsequent rituals meant to honour his memory. First, Salim's superstitious mother perceives the boy as having a hand in the death of his father by causing an accident, in which four litres of milk are spilt. Later on when the family buys apples from South Africa with which it intends to honour the spirit of the dead man, Salim eats all of them, much to his mother's annoyance. The act of eating the apples, described as "steal[ing] from the dead, whose death you're partly responsible for,"[25] can be seen first as a way in which the narrator competes for visibility with his father and, secondly, as a physical manifestation of Salim's psychological turmoil in the form of a contest between memory and amnesia. Like Nurdin in *No New Land*, Salim in *The Gunny Sack* undergoes a similar experience whereby his late father exerts a huge influence over his actions. Besides, Salim's father's portrait occupies a central space in the home long after his death and is complemented by a miniature ship, SS Nairobi, that Juma had been given as a souvenir. It comes as no surprise that the continued growth of Salim coincides with the continued degeneration of his late father's portrait in the living room, as well as with the declining power of the miniature ship to awe the narrator.

4. The Outsider Within: Yusuf Dawood and Material Masculinity

In Dawood's novels, manhood and masculinity are similarly constructed around material achievement and the way those who succeed in attaining material success influence other people below them. Old man Desai

and his three sons in *Water Under the Bridge* particularly stand out as characters that commit their lives to attaining material success.[26] Old man Desai, for instance, exercises influence over his three sons, who defer to his authority because of the successful business empire that he started. Because of this, the old man can continue to influence the decisions that his sons make about the business, even after he has retired from the active running of the shops and factory. In the Asian society presented in *Water Under the Bridge*, the manhood created around material success and business acumen sustains the patriarchal set-up that relegates a majority of the womenfolk to domestic spaces, therefore rendering them dependent on their male kin for their material needs. This is why, although the three elder sons of Desai are married, none of them seems keen on introducing his spouse to his business activities. For example, Kanti, the eldest son, has managed to keep his wife ignorant of the extent of his business's performance:

> in the true Indian tradition, the Desai boys never told their wives about the booming business they conducted, the enormous profits they made and the amount of cash they had stacked away. The fact that the wives got whatever they asked for, within reason, was enough.[27]

This is a way in which the politics of power and knowledge have influenced and continue to influence the relationship between gender and culture, further complicating the dynamics of sexuality. Jaffer, like the Desais, is another Kenyan Asian whose substantial business investments deal in fish processing. Although he emigrates to Canada soon after his wife's death, he does so in order to attain more wealth.

The Desai family, especially the sons, in *Water Under the Bridge* are actually a replica of the Masood Khan family in another Dawood novel, *Return to Paradise*, who are shown as committed to extending their business beyond Uganda, their country of birth. Like all the other materially successful men in Dawood's novels, Masood Khan uses his position to change the course of things. When still in Uganda, he uses his immense wealth to shape the direction his children's careers take by inducting them into business and using his vast experience to make sure they make only those decisions that would not adversely affect the performance of the family enterprises. When the family, among many other Asian families, is expelled from Uganda, Masood still exercises control over his family, owing to the Asian cultural structures that revere patriarchy and achievement.[28] Suffice it to say that in both Vassanji's and Dawood's novels, the characters are acutely aware of those influences that arise from cultural heritage and societal structures and the way these affect their relationships with members of the same and different groups. In all these relationships, it is possible to argue that

materialism offers another dimension to the phallocentric conceptions of manhood, by sidestepping the latter through the processes of compensation.

Specifically, Asian men influence to a large extent the way in which their families, and therefore entire communities, hold themselves together and negotiate their places within the region in the perpetual contests of individual and communal power. In a sense, the entire East African Asian communities look up to their menfolk to provide guidance with regard to matters of group interactions. What is less obvious is that in spite of such prestige, the men also suffer their own anxieties, which more often than not remain subsumed under their perceived dominance over women and other disempowered members of their communities. This means that the anxiety to build forms of masculinity that revolve around material success is bought into by Asian men so that, in keeping their women at home, they may be deemed to conform to traditional Asian constructs of the role of men. At the same time, the women who remain on the domestic front conform to the traditional role of women, so that the men who come back in the evenings find welcoming homes. As summarised by Chari, departures from this arrangement may result in "the anxiety of alienation from home, nation, and ethnic community in which estrangement is portrayed as the fundamental condition of the postcolonial, diasporic, globalised ethnic male identity."[29]

5. Conclusion: The Anxiety of Voyeurism

Voyeurism, then, is at once an expression of desire for some people, and a manifestation of masculine anxieties for others. The desire is ambivalent to the extent that one hardly distinguishes between a human being's heterosexual attraction to another, or the desire for what is considered the exotic and unknowable Other. Related to these desires are anxieties that are manifested in individuals who subscribe to various discourses of supposed racial superiority/inferiority, but who are also attracted to the woman's body that is the bearer of the perceived superiority/inferiority. All these, in my view, constitute part of the drama of group relations as played out in Vassanji and Dawood's fiction analysed here. Obviously, the two writers only try to capture in their works realities taking place on a larger scale in the post-colonial normative order.

Notes

1. Parts of this paper derive from my doctoral research; see G Siundu, *Multiple Consciousness and the Reconstruction of Home in the Novels of Yusuf Dawood and Moyez Vassanji*, PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2005, especially pp. 65-73.
2. Ibid., pp. 67-68.

3. M Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1989, p. 210.
4. As it is, a number of scholars have written widely on the so-called Asian question in East Africa. See, for instance, R Warah, *Triple Heritage: A Journey to Self Discovery*, Rasna Warah, Nairobi, 1998; P Simatei, *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa*, Bayreuth University Press, Bayreuth, 2001; D Ojwang, *Writing Migrancy and Ethnicity: The Politics of Identity in East African Indian Literature*, PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2004.
5. J Ostrove and E Cole, 'Privileging Class: Toward a Critical Psychology of Social Class in the Context of Education', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 59, no.4, 2003, pp. 677-692, p. 687.
6. KW Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', in MA Fineman and R Mykitiuk (eds.), *The Public Nature of Private Violence: Women and the Discovery of Abuse*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp. 93-118; cited in Ostrove and Cole, ibid., p. 681.
7. F Cleaver (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Masculinities Matter: Men, Gender and Development*, Zed Books, London, 2002, pp. 1-7, pp. 1-2.
8. H Chari, 'Colonial Fantasies and Postcolonial Identities: Elaboration of Postcolonial Masculinity and Homoerotic Desire', in JC Hawley (ed.), *Postcolonial, queer: theoretical intersections*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001, pp. 277-304, p. 279.
9. Siundu, op. cit., pp. 117-170.
10. SJ Lemelle and RDG Kelley (eds.), 'Introduction: Pan-Africanism Revisited', *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, Verso, London & New York, 1994, pp. 1-16, pp. 5-6.
11. G Siundu, 'Transcending racial/cultural spaces: the power of the woman in Yusuf Dawood's *The Price of Living* and *Water Under the Bridge*', *African Identities*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2004, pp. 203-214.
12. A McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Colonial Contest*, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 34.
13. This concern is also seen in Vassanji's collection of short stories *Uhuru Street*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1991. See especially the sketches 'Áli' and 'Breaking Loose', pp. 12-19 and 79-90 respectively. I share in Dan Ojwang's argument that although women do not necessarily benefit from the patriarchal structures that necessitate policing the women's bodies, they all the same come out as strong defenders of the same notions of "racial purity" that forbid African male-Asian female sexual liaisons. See, e.g., D Ojwang, especially the conclusion in *The Construction of East African Indian Identities in M. G. Vassanji's* The

Gunny Sack *and* Uhuru Street, M.A. Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1997.

14. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, op cit., p. 214.
15. Ibid., p. 215.
16. Ibid., pp. 209-210.
17. B De Robillard, 'Heterosexual Selfhood in the Contemporary South African Bridal Magazine', unpublished paper at the time of citation, 2006, p. 5.
18. I am inclined to agree with Chrys Ingraham's theorisation of heteronormativity as a system in which "heterosexuality becomes institutionalized and is held up as the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations, bisexuality is less valued and homosexuality is least valued." See C Ingram, *Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality*, Routledge, New York & London, 2005, p. 2. Also helpful is Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's understanding of heteronormativity as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent - that is, organized as sexuality - but also privileged." See L Berlant and M Warner, 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547-566, p. 565.
19. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, op. cit., p. 215.
20. Ibid., p. 217.
21. Ibid., p. 216, emphasis added. One of Henry Ole Kulet's novels, entitled *To Become a Man*, is themed around the changes in the processes of growing up and initiation among the Maasai young men, who are faced with the dilemma of pursuing modern education or remaining loyal to the ways of their ancestors, which will necessarily keep them away from school and all that formal education promises. I draw a parallel between this and Musa Shivji in *The Gunny Sack*, who decides "to become a man" by quitting school to join the police force, although there is a strong suggestion in the novel that he lacks the aptitude to pursue higher education anyway. See Henry Ole Kulet, *To Become a Man*, Longman, Nairobi, 1972.
22. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, op. cit., p. 213.
23. M Vassanji, *No New Land*, McLelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1991; M Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets*, Picador, London, 1996.
24. It is beyond the ambit of this paper to interrogate the possibilities of the caste system as part of the cultural baggage forming part of the identification markers of Asians in the Diaspora; all the same, a helpful source in this regard is Rehana Ebr.-Valley's *Kala Pani: Caste and*

Colour in South Africa, Kwela Books and South Africa Online, Cape Town, 2001.

25. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack*, op. cit., p. 131.
26. YK Dawood, *Water Under the Bridge*, Longman, Nairobi, 1991.
27. Ibid., p. 115.
28. YK Dawood, *Return to Paradise*, Peak, Nairobi, 2000.
29. Ibid., p. 284, emphasis added.

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One

Luisa Orza

Abstract
This paper uses erotic fiction to explore the themes of erotic servitude, power and pleasure. It is the story of a woman entering into a Master-slave relationship for the first time and discovering a side of her sexuality that is daunting, exciting, and frighteningly powerful to her. The story traces the journey of the slave's self-discovery and challenges Western cultural taboos and norms around pleasure, fidelity, trust, identity, and control. The tension of the writing is maintained in the questions of where the power lies in the relationship between Master and slave. Deliberately ambiguous and sometimes mocking, the story juxtaposes the slave's submission with her ultimate sense of growth, self-definition, self-determination, and right to pleasure, which emerge as the story develops.

Key Words: BDSM (bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; sadism and masochism), erotic servitude, master, obedience, pleasure, punishment, slave, submission, trust.

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Learning the Slave Arts

My body is not my body. It is just the packaging for One's most precious possession: his slave. I did not know that a slave lay dormant inside me, until my One Master came to wake her. And as One took possession of me, so I gradually began to inhabit her, until she and I were one.

One was a good master. He did not teach me but helped me to learn the slave arts, presenting me one by one with the four essential elements: availability, humility, obedience, and surrender. These areas cannot be learnt chronologically one after the other, but must happen and evolve concurrently. There is much intertwining of disciplines in slavehood, and it is often impossible to move forward in one discipline without having reached a certain standard in another. One allowed me to find my own limits, before pushing me onto the next stage with a series of tests and requirements that he knew I would be able to achieve, albeit with difficulty. It took me a long time to trust that the limits he set for me were, in fact, my own. Of course, I was motivated to achieve them by the punishments I knew I would receive if I did not. And I was sometimes motivated to rebel against his requirements by the same punishments. That I should come to fear and desire the same things is not difficult to explain. I feared causing displeasure in my Master, and I

desired anything that pleased him. That his pleasure and his displeasure might bring about the same outcome was irrelevant.

My lessons began before I knew they had begun. One wanted me and I him, and he would take me whenever and wherever he wanted to. If I objected to the location, a small punishment would be inflicted. For example, travelling on a commuter-packed train, One once put his hand up my shirt and began to fondle my breast. I tried to withdraw, not wanting to be seen by other passengers. One pinched my nipple hard, staring at me with flinty eyes. I read the choice he presented me with: I could either draw more attention to myself by pulling away and crying out in pain, or I could yield to his pleasure. I yielded. His hand grew soft again, and tender, so that I longed for it to continue its journey. As soon as he became aware of my longing, he withdrew the hand, leaving me wanting and prepared for a greater degree of exposure.

I quickly learnt that One required my body to be available to him at all times. This meant that it also needed to be accessible. It was no good to be wearing swathes of clothing that One could not easily discard or enter in a moment of wanting to possess me. I learnt that tops should be openable, bottoms liftable, unwrappable, at least rippable. I might choose to wear jeans or less easily removable items of clothing. However, I wore them on the understanding that, should he happen to want me - or any part of me - however briefly, while I wore such items, and his access be impeded, I would bear the consequences. In this event, some or all of the following might take place:

First, I should immediately offer my mouth for penetration if other orifices were inaccessible due to clothing. Second, I should accept that the offending articles of clothing might be torn off or roughly removed and possibly ruined in the process, including in public places. And third, I might be tied to the bed or another piece of furniture, where my clothes would be cut from my body, and where I would remain, naked, until such a time as One saw fit to graciously untie me.

A further matter of accessibility pertained to my readiness to be penetrated by One at all times. It was therefore my responsibility to ensure that I was almost constantly aroused and responsive to his urges. This was made easier by One’s other requirements regarding accessibility, as I found that the clothes and other conditions I will go on to describe often caused me to become aroused without any word or gesture from One. In addition, as I became more skilled in slavecraft, the notion of being able to please my Master was enough to ensure that my body responded appropriately and with speed to the slightest perception on my part that he might be ready to take me.

The requirement that I should be constantly available also meant that I needed to be in One’s physical presence at all times. If One should

want me when we were not in the same physical space, it was understood that a punishment may be incurred. My One Master was kind on occasions when the absence had been perpetrated by himself. Normally, this would simply result in my being teased a little - tied to a table top, for example, and left there for some time, that I might experience some of the abandonment which he had previously suffered. However, should the absence have been effected by *my* decision to be elsewhere, be it for work, social or any other reasons, then the punishment would certainly involve use of the cane, and might be repeated at intervals over a period of time corresponding to my absence. In the event of my absence being caused by my Master, if, for example, he sent me out to run an errand, and then found that he wanted to access my body before I came back, the consequences would be less severe: a mouth-fucking, perhaps, with my arms tied above my head, or use of nipple clamps for a short time while he took possession of me.

Humility and Obedience

The disciplines of humility and obedience were harder to learn. Before I became One's slave, I was proud and arrogant. It took time for me to become proud of being his slave, and thereby to embrace humility, casting off my former haughtiness. Yet, when this happened, I stood straighter, held my head higher, and knew myself to be more beautiful and desired than I had ever been before. I would often resist One's demands despite wanting to please him. I would frequently look him in the eye without permission. I rarely remembered to call him Master or to thank him for the gifts he bestowed on me - for each spank from his hand, stroke of his whip or cane was given with love, and I ought to have been more grateful. Each time he placed the clamps on my nipples, or commanded me to drink his piss, he allowed me the opportunity to prove myself worthy of him, to surrender to his will and to enter a state of bliss, yet my obedience was often accompanied by a scowl.

The first time he whipped me, I even cried, but One was forgiving. After commanding me to arouse myself, he tied me to a post in the centre of the room, hands cuffed around the rough wood, feet tied a little more loosely, breasts splayed to sit poking out on either side of the post. He stepped back and watched me for a long time before he moved. Approaching me, he picked up his red riding crop, and walked around me several times. Finally he stopped. He stroked my breasts with the flap of the crop, letting the leather rest on my nipples, flicking them gently until they grew hard. He ran the leather over my arse cheeks, between them, and gently stroked me until I began to ache, and the leather flap glistened. He spanked me, interchanging hard slaps with gentle caresses, until I didn't know what to expect next. "I'm going to whip you now," he whispered, "one on the sole of each foot, two on each arse cheek. But because you've been so good, you can choose the order

in which I administer the strokes." My arse was burning hot and stinging from the spanking. I raised my right foot.

One moved with deliberate, agonising slowness. He circled me, touching my mouth, nipples, cunt, making them keen towards him. He knelt in front of my arse, caressing the burning cheeks and kissing them. The lingering stinging from his palms was replaced in an instant by a sensation so exhilaratingly light and fine that I would have offered myself for a thousand more spanks. He took my foot in his hand. Kneeling, he lifted it to his mouth and kissed the sole, reverently. He pushed his tongue in between each of the toes, making me cry out. My belly felt swollen and gluttonous with longing.

Finally my One Master stood, and without further warning brought the crop down on the ball of my foot with a *thwack*, and I felt a pain like nothing I'd ever experienced shoot through me. I bit back the tears, tipping my head back to prevent them from falling. I tried immediately to put my foot down so that I could raise the other one to his service. I found that I could not stand. There was silence between us, and eventually he came round the post to see my face, and the tears leapt from my eyes with a will of their own. I looked at the ground. I did not dare meet his eyes.

"Precious angel," said One, kissing the tears away. "My beautiful slave," he whispered. He held me for a long time before administering the second stroke. With each stroke of the crop, I felt an indignation and shock that left me stranded and afraid, and in between the strokes, my Master comforted and healed me with such skill and tenderness that I invited the next, only to be offended again at the pain. After the final stroke, he released my hands and feet, and took me upstairs to bed, where he praised me. I was his obedient girl. He would look after me and fuck me for ever. He stroked and kissed the bruises left by the crop, and slowly spread me out on the bed, entered me, and fucked me till I came, as if it were my pleasure and not his that counted.

I made many mistakes. Once I cleaned the house, wearing an old pair of jeans, a tee-shirt, my hair tied back in a rough pony tail. One came home sooner than I expected. I wasn't ready for him. "What's this?" he wanted to know, pulling at the jeans, pulling them down to my knees. He dragged me, stumbling, out into the hall, where the front door stood open. In his urgency to possess me, he had not closed it. He took the tee-shirt in both his hands at the neck and ripped it open. It gaped, flapping open to expose one of my breasts. His hands moved to my pants. With both hands he ripped them open too, and discarded them in disgust. "God," he cried, "how many layers are there to get through?"

"I'm sorry, I was cleaning, I -"

"I'm sorry *what*?" He demanded, pinching and twisting my nipple.

"Master! I'm sorry Master-" I was gasping with pain, humiliation.

"How should I punish you?" He asked.

I laughed nervously. “I don’t know, Master,” I said. “Maybe a spank or two?”

“Insolent slave,” he whispered. “Kneel.”

He let me suck him, holding my hands up above my head in one of his, while he pulled my hair loose with the other. Then he pulled me away, bent me over the stairs in front of the open door, and said, “you get two hundred for your disobedience. Don’t forget to count.”

The next time I did the cleaning, I wore nothing but a silk camisole, ardently hoping that One would come home and find me, want me while I was so engaged. I was bitterly disappointed when he didn’t, and so ready for him, that I went up to the bedroom to relieve my aching. I was afraid that the act would anger him, so I got out the clamps and placed them on myself, a quick intake of breath at each nipple. I concentrated on the pain and overcame it. I was close to orgasm when One came into the room. He observed the clamps approvingly. “Good girl,” he said, and leaned over me, licking the tip of each nipple in turn. The pain doubled but I basked in his praise. He leant closer to my face and whispered softly, “who gave you permission to masturbate?” In a single movement, he bound my hands to the bedstead with a tie he always kept there. He hooked the clamp chain between my teeth, pulling my nipples almost out from their roots, and unzipped himself into me. “What am I going to do with you?” he asked quietly, then kissed my mouth, pushing the chain deeper into it, intensifying the pain on my nipples. I came hard, begging him to take the clamps off. He released me, and ordered me to dress, flinging the camisole and a wrap-around skirt at me. I asked where we were going. One gave me his flinty stare and I looked at the floor. “That’s better,” he said.

He took me to a piercing parlour. He told me that as I had used the nipple clamps without his permission, he was going to give me a permanent reminder of my offence. In a back room he pulled a box from his pocket and took out two identical silver rings. The camisole was arranged to reveal my breasts, my nipples were held momentarily in a different kind of clamp, and needles shot through them, inserting One’s rings. In shock rather than pain I sat in disbelief and stared at him, while One, apparently unaware of my indignation, viewed his creation. Then he pushed me back on the couch, thumbed a drop of blood off my left breast, and held each nipple in his mouth, gently licking and sucking the offence away. He put his hand up my skirt, and I felt him find my cunt, surprised that it still yielded to him so independently. “Oh my beautiful, beautiful slave,” he moaned as he fucked me.

Surrendering to the Path

By now, I was permanently accessible, humble, obedient. I wrote my slave diary daily, listing my imperfections, my mistakes, and jotting

down the punishments they deserved. Each Wednesday I read from the book, so that One might punish me, according to my suggestions, and often more harshly. I logged each one, and endured them without complaint. The physical aspects of my slavehood were well rehearsed by this time, and I welcomed the feel of the cane on my arse, the soft leather of the flogger on my breasts and sides. Yet there were still barriers to my complete surrender, and most of these resided within my rebellious, possessive mind: lack of trust, emotional dependence, jealousy, and other forms of weakness. And I often floundered. I questioned One's authority; I tried to negotiate; complained that things weren't fair. Occasionally I made a bare-faced refusal to carry out One's requirements.

One did not engage in these bargainings. I saw him grow weary and I tried extra hard to please him, with things I knew I could manage. I would frown over how to dress to please him most, approach him with the gifts of easily accomplished chores. Of course, One didn't care for these things! He didn't need to know how or how willingly I did his bidding, only that I did it - and with the least fuss and visibility possible. My pains in demonstrating how hard I was trying only drove him further away. If I lapsed, he no longer always bothered to punish me. And instead of realising that this *was* my punishment, and bettering myself for my Master, my foolish will led me to transgress further, to dangle each misbehaviour in front of him, as I had done with my feeble offerings, in the hope that if the offerings didn't please him, then the transgressions might at least annoy him enough to find me worthy of punishment. His marks, which I had once found so ugly - the speckled bruising left by the paddle, the angry stripes of the cane - were disappearing from my flesh, and I longed for them. These were the stigmata of my slavery. Without them, now, I was nothing.

At the next Wednesday meeting, I went to One with my diary overflowing with small rebellions but as I opened it to recite the list, One held up a hand. "Don't," he said. "I'm not interested." My heart started to beat faster and I was very afraid at what One would say next. He bade me sit next to him on the couch, something he rarely did, and for a long time he didn't say anything. He appeared to be examining the ceiling, the corners of the room. Finally he spoke. "I want to know," he said slowly as if choosing his words carefully, "whether you are really interested in developing as my slave."

I did not know what to say or do. I did not understand what One was asking me. I felt only a great anxiety, confusion and fear, and in the midst of these emotions, I slid to the floor and knelt before my Master. I dared not raise my eyes to his face. "Master, do you no longer want me?" I asked his shoes. One lifted my face that I might look into his eyes and said, "I want you very much, angel." Yet his face was full of sadness. "But I am not convinced of your commitment to this path." I opened my mouth to protest, but One

held up a hand. “I have no desire to ask you to perform for me; to make you pretend to be something you’re not.” I felt the shame of a dancing poodle.

“Do you want to give me your mind, your soul, your very essence?” One asked.

“I do, Master,” I answered, lowering my eyes again. One drew my face back up, holding my chin in his hand.

“How would you feel if I sent you to another Master or Mistress for a period of training so that you can learn in other ways than mine? They will be harder on you than I am,” he warned, scrutinising me.

“As long as you are still my Master, I will serve you however you choose to test me, Master,” I answered, though my voice threatened to belie my fear.

“And if I desire to train another slave alongside you?” I hesitated and blinked several times before answering. “As long as I know that you are still my Master…”

“And if I offer you to others to be used by them in both body and mind?”

“I trust you, Master, to know what you are doing with your possession.”

“With my most precious possession,” he corrected me.

“With your most precious…” I choked, and could not go on.

“Lift up your hair,” One ordered. I obeyed, and One opened the shirt I was wearing so that he could see my recently pierced nipple. One took a silver collar from a box, and fitted it round my neck. It was hinged, with rings at the hinge and clasp, through which a lead could be attached, or a rope could be threaded. One then placed two silver cuffs on my wrists, each with another ring on it, attached at the clasp. “From now on I want you to wear these at all times,” he said. “For the sake of decorum, you will detach the rings, if they are likely to cause embarrassment to others in our company.” They were beautiful items, and I gazed at the bracelets admiringly. I looked at One, my heart light with happiness. “Thank you, Master,” I said.

“And you may no longer look at me or speak to me without permission,” he said. I lowered my eyes again immediately, but I could not hide my smile. One passed a heavy silken rope through the two cuff-rings, so that my hands were loosely tied behind my back. He then steered me backwards to the post in the centre of the room. He looped another rope through the back collar ring, and threaded this rope through my tied hands, and up over a hook above my head. “You will remain here for the night,” he said. “Be careful not to fall asleep.” And with that, he left the room.

I stood there, alone and in the dark. If I fell asleep, I risked being garrotted by the collar. Within minutes of One’s leaving, my arms began to ache, my head began to feel heavy, and un-scratchable itches sprung up all over my body. I shifted my feet in an attempt to reposition myself more

comfortably. For a few minutes I dwelt on the conversation with One, and my happiness at his keeping me, giving me a second chance, overcame my immediate discomfort.

I went over our conversation in my mind again and again, now feeling a frisson of excitement at my redoubled commitment to being One's slave, now trepidation, fear and overwhelming anxiety at what might be expected of me. Closing my eyes I felt the bliss of submission. I recalled the path that had led me to this point, thrilling at the memory of punishments endured, tests overcome and rewards received. But I balked at the task ahead of me, could not see the way, felt doomed to failure - to my dismissal, and to One's disappointed realisation that I was not good enough for him after all. The gulf between what I was now - and what was I exactly? - and what One expected me to be, seemed too vast to bridge. The other side was a foreign country. I could never know its secrets.

The night was getting cold, and I, wearing a thin blouse and skirt began to feel real discomfort. Anger suddenly flared up and replaced my self-doubt. Why *should* I learn the secrets of that alien place? Why *should* I follow this fear-shrouded path that seemed to have no end but more and harder hurdles for me to fail at? When would I ever be good enough? Why couldn't One accept me the way I was, as I did him, instead of making increasingly numerous and harsh demands on me? When did I ever make demands on him? What was he doing for me, while I shivered and ached, tied to a humiliating post? Injustice and indignation coursed through my veins, as I dwelt on the sacrifices I had already made, and contemplated those I would be asked to make in future. Wasn't I just being bullied, and fooling myself into a belief that this was some sort of higher love? A ludicrous romantic notion of love that stripped away the barriers of skin and flesh - quite literally! - revealing the ugly core of my being, yet promised to love that too? I laughed, suddenly, bitterly. Didn't I see? This wasn't *real* - it was just a game. At any moment, I could say, "that's enough: I don't want to play any more," and the game would be over. Didn't I see: it didn't *matter*! If I wanted to be "*released*," all I had to do was call One's name. I could do it right now. I would, in fact, do it right now. One would be down in a second to untie me, and that would be that. It was ridiculous, this life of pretending to be a slave. Of course I wasn't a slave!

So why didn't I? Why didn't I call him, tell him what I thought of his game, tell him that I didn't want that any more? Why instead did I stand there, shivering with cold, anguishing over my future, weeping with despair? I could not put the answer into words. But while I silently vowed to end this, I knew that I wasn't going to.

As the night wore on, my thoughts ceased to be thoughts. I counted to keep myself awake. When the pain in one part of my body threatened to overwhelm me, I concentrated hard on a lesser discomfort elsewhere, until

the first was forgotten. When I felt that all I could do was cry out loud, I turned and smothered my voice with my shoulder to prevent One from being wakened. When I lost count, I went back to one.

When One came to free me, I almost didn't understand what he was doing there. "It's not day yet," I said, incoherently. "You said I had to stay the whole night. You can't take me down. I haven't been here long enough. You will say I've failed. You will say I don't really want to be your slave, but I do. Let me stay, so I can prove it." I tried ineffectually to duck away from his liberating hands.

"Shh," he said. "That will do."

Submission

One told me to write down the rules of my slavehood. He then went through them, ensuring that I understood them properly, designing testing lessons, that I would learn the true meaning of what I had written. Every week I was to revise the list, and with each revision a new chain or shackle was added. Bracelets and anklets, to each of which a lead, chain, or bind could be attached, and often One would use them, either in punishment, play, or simply as part of my training. At each sign of rebellion, the rules were re-written and made more stringent, and another chain was added: a belly chain; thumb-rings that could be padlocked together; ankle and foot jewellery that could similarly be used to immobilise me. He had my belly button pierced, and used the ring as a hook for a clitoris clamp that caused exquisite pain when I walked. The rules, he said, were there to guide me. I should learn how to use them. I didn't always understand him.

Broadly speaking, the rules fell into three categories: easy, harder and near impossible ones. The easy rules set out how I should worship my Master's body and how One might use my body. That I should honour my Master's cock; that my own arse, mouth or cunt should be always ready to receive him; the reverence with which I should treat the cum and piss he offered to nourish me; that I should constantly endeavour to learn and improve the skills through which I might pleasure him.

Then came harder ones: rules about my demeanour, about my Master's expectations of me and his trust in me that I wasn't sure I could always live up to. I was to answer without hesitation whenever One spoke to me, be we alone or in company; and I should be clear, succinct and specific in my speech. I should walk, sit or move with grace and poise; One wanted others to see and admire me, when I walked into a room, performed at work, or simply went about my daily business. I was to spend hours on perfecting my posture and movements. And One didn't want a passive, empty vessel for his slave; he had chosen me on the basis of my intellect, humour, wit and sensitivity - I should use these gifts at all times, to add to his pleasure, and to that of those around him.

The hardest rules of all were those that required me to perform acts I'd wish to perform on my Master on others; have others use my body the way my Master might, and worst of all, those in which I not only accepted that my master would desire and use other slaves, but indeed assisted him in doing so - I knew these rules would have to come, but to begin with I was too afraid to add them to the list.

Now, One tested me with a different kind of punishment: if I failed him in my duties, instead of spanking me, he would leave the house, and be gone for up to three days. If I doubted him, he might leave me to count - for the whole day if necessary - or he might deny me food, or use of the bathroom, or sleep, until he deemed that I had come to my senses. The punishments sound cruel, but they taught me a valuable lesson: that it wasn't my place to decide whether One was right or wrong. All I had to do was accept his word. And when I did, when I stopped struggling, the ropes and chains ceased to cut into my flesh, and they became easier to carry. My frown was smoothed away, and my voice laughed easily again.

Adding to the rules, week by week, sometimes I'd choose an "easy" rule to add, such as not masturbating without my Master's permission, or not being allowed to touch or speak to One without his permission; variations, specifications, in short, of rules that I already knew. When I did this, my Master would make me add another five. But if I chose a new rule that my master knew would cost me to learn and enact, such as assuming responsibility for entertainments and diversions to help my Master relax during his leisure time, and making any logistical arrangements that these might entail, he would be satisfied with the addition of only one rule; he would reward me for my courage and assist me in endeavouring to learn and enjoy the rule. For One didn't want to see my face screwed up with pain and concentration as I carried out his desires. He wanted to see me laughing in joy and delight in the act of pleasing him, however that might be. Pleasing One ought to be the air that I breathed, not some heavy burden of care. I had only just begun to understand this, but still the duty felt like a weight at times.

Sometimes I'd choose a rule that I thought would be easy, but One knew better. On one occasion, I suggested the rule "I am in complete submission to my Master." Believing myself to be in complete submission already, I didn't think this rule posed any new difficulties. One looked at me sceptically. I knew - not from his expression, but from my own prickling guilt - that I had chosen too easy a rule and that One would punish me for this. But to my surprise, he just nodded. "Very well," he said. "Let's see."

That week he pushed me harder than he ever had to date. Each test was manageable in itself, but taken together the tasks were endless. My usual tasks already involved being constantly available to One, ensuring that his every physical and emotional need was met (for both of which I would need

to predict his needs, not wait to be told what he needed and when), and carrying out my everyday household duties, dressing appropriately and ensuring that my body was maintained in the condition he liked to see it - completely depilated, perfectly clean, soft and lightly made up and perfumed. One added to these duties every chore imaginable - many of which he would make me repeat several times, despite not having found anything to complain about in my original fulfilment of the task. And each day, come bedtime, he instructed me to carry out some final assignment, the purpose of which was often completely obscure - if indeed, it had a point at all. One night I was to copy out a whole section of the dictionary; the next I was to count every lentil in a 1-Kilo bag; the following I was to write a 25-page essay on the UK fiscal system, and so on. If I so much as asked *myself* why I was being made to do these things, One's face darkened, and I knew better than to give voice to the query. I barely slept. By the end of the week, my eyes were red with exhaustion, my mouth dry from myriad recitals and countings, and my body aching from physical labour.

"Well?" said One, in the manner of his customary prompt for me to add another rule. I lowered my head in humility. "I am in complete submission to my Master," I said.

"Good girl," he said. "You are learning." He took a brand new, stiff leather tawse from the drawer. "Now bend over," he said. I did so willingly. "Do you submit?" he asked.

"Yes Master." Under the rigidity of the leather, I fell onto my knees, gasping at the force of the blow.

"Do you submit?" One asked again.

"Yes, Master," I replied, bracing myself on the floor with my arse raised towards him. This time the leather tongue licked the back of my thighs with an excruciating sting, and I cried out, instinctively reaching behind with both hands to sooth and protect the area. One flicked my fingers away with the tawse. "Do you submit?" he asked again, allowing me no recovery time.

"Yes, Master," I replied through gritted teeth, feeling my face flush with anger and my eyes fight back the customary tears which I tried so hard to control. The third blow, landing in exactly the same place as the second, caused me to cry out, and without pausing to interrogate the rigour of my submission further, One rained a tattoo of hard, unyielding slaps onto the same area of skin, while I announced my anguish in a voice I didn't know I had; One had never made me scream before. Untied and free to move, I fought an inward battle to remain braced on the floor where I knelt, while my body urged me to flee. Sobs of pain, humiliation, exhaustion and failure wracked me, and with each smack of leather against my skin the inhuman howl of desperation that escaped my lips frightened me almost more than the prospect of more pain to come. I had never asked my Master to stop a punishment before. I did so now, begging and beseeching with each bite of

the strap. Finally, the ordeal ended and I lay, limp and spent on the floor, shaking with sobs. One pushed my legs apart and knelt between them, lifting my body into a kneeling position once more, as if he intended to fuck me. He leant forward over my back, one hand round my belly, fingers hooked between my legs, the other holding up the front end, his arm resting between my breasts while his hand held my shoulder up. “Do you submit?” he whispered, his voice barely more than a breath on my ear.

It was the first and only time I could remember wanting One not to fuck me. “Yes, Master,” I muttered, through a mouth that was swollen with crying.

“That will do,” he said, gently, and released me.

The following Wednesday, after a second week of seemingly infinite tasks, I brought the tawse with me to our meeting. “I am in complete submission to my Master,” I said, without waiting for the prompt. I laid the tawse on One’s lap, and assumed the position.

On the sixth week of “I am in complete submission…” One laid the tawse that I had proffered to one side. At the sight of my crestfallen expression, he smiled and said, “Yes, finally I believe you really are.” I raised my eyes to meet his. He stroked the side of my face, my neck, breasts, belly; his hand lingered over the velvet soft skin around my cunt, and the great tracts of dictionary I could repeat off by heart, the windows cleaned a dozen times over, the number of grains of rice in a jar, all made sense. “I expect you have a new rule for me to hear,” he said. With a quaking heart, but no outward hesitation, I moved into the area of rules I was most afraid of: acceptance and submission to my Master’s desire to have me used by others for their pleasure, that One might take additional pride in me; and not only submission to, but active participation in One’s enjoyment of other slaves.

This learning was hard. Sometimes my Master would send me to another Master for a period of a few days, or even a week. The first time this happened, I felt betrayed, rejected, and hopeless. I knelt before the Other Master angrily with gritted teeth; I carried out his commands sullenly, and I felt guilty for any intimacy that occurred or developed between us. But worse still was the rage of jealousy I would feel towards the slave whom my Master would take home with him in my stead. All the time I spent with the Other, my mind would be filled with the fiery imaginings of what One was doing to the other slave. My jealousy, like a crazed horse kicking and biting at the door of its stable, was poised to be unleashed on my happiness and safety. I wanted, above all, to hide it from One, but whenever I was returned to him, after a sojourn away, my Master saw it, and was affronted by its persistence. Yet try as I might, I could not find the answer to the problem.

One took me to serve a Mistress of his acquaintance. Her slave and I passed in the exchange, and I felt the suffocating blow of the jealous beast kicking at the walls of my chest. One and the Mistress exchanged a look. The

other slave, a well-presented young woman, remained poised and demure, and went to One apparently eager to please him, and not regretting for a moment her absence from her Mistress's side.

This Mistress was the hardest of all those I had had to serve, and she had arranged a demanding training schedule that tested my physical endurance, intellectual agility, and psychological robustness. In between working for her, pleasing her with my body, amusing her with my wit, and being disciplined for my innumerable mistakes, there was barely any time for dwelling on what was happening in my Master's house. But at night, or in rare periods of rest, I would again be tortured with anxiety. One night my temporary Mistress came to me, clearly annoyed that my restlessness was keeping her awake. But she showed me a rare kindness.

"You may ask me one question," she said.

"Madam, how do I put a stop to this jealousy that makes me suffer intolerably and interferes with my Master's happiness and pleasure?" I answered promptly.

"You have a list of rules don't you?" she asked in response to my question. I nodded. "Learn them," she said. "Not just off by heart, though you will do that too, starting from tomorrow. But internally. Understand them. Use them. You have them for a reason." Without understanding her, I thanked her, barely concealing my disappointment.

The next evening she commanded me to recite the rules. I could only remember a fraction of them, and for each of those I had forgotten, I received a stroke of the cane. At the end, the Mistress allowed me to ask her one question. I didn't have one ready, and stalled, trying to think what would be the most valuable thing to ask. For my lack of preparedness, I earned myself ten extra strokes of the cane, and my Mistress's displeasure. That night I rehearsed the rules into the night, and prepared my question. The same procedure was repeated the following evening, and the one after that. I never managed to remember more than half the rules, but my questions became more thoughtful, and I sensed a growing approval in my temporary Mistress as she became more generous in her answers. Night after night I anticipated my punishment almost with pleasure, knowing that it would be followed by my question, and long into the night I dwelt on her remarks. Then I returned to the rules, and repeated them to myself, muttering them over and over until I fell asleep with them on my lips, and dreamt of crowds of slaves chorusing them while their Masters and Mistresses stood by, waiting for them to falter. I held them in every available space in my mind, finding deposit boxes for each and every one.

It was after several weeks of this routine, that I finally recited all the rules without fault. I was so surprised and disarmed by the freedom from punishment that followed this success, that the question I had been poised to ask suddenly changed itself into the words "Am I ready?" I had not expected

to ask this, and I felt a vertiginous dread as the Mistress answered with an uncustomary smile, and words I did not feel at all ready to hear: “I believe you are.”

My temporary Mistress took me to a part of the house I had not been in before. It comprised a small dark room, one wall of which was covered by a curtain. The walls, floor and ceiling had hooks, which my temporary Mistress chained me to, and I was quite unable to move. On drawing back the curtain, she revealed a glass window, looking onto a banqueting hall. I gathered that I was invisible to the banqueters, but had a clear view over their proceedings from a slightly raised position at the side.

One entered the room with my temporary Mistress’s slave. He sat among the other guests, while she served dinner. The sight of her accepting food and commands from my Master; watching him tease and make love to her, undid me. I watched in horror, felt rather than saw my Master’s hands on her; watched her being offered, delightedly to other guests, and my Master’s confidence in her ability to please them; knew her pride and pleasure at pleasing him; and felt my horse stamping around in its stable, gathering fear, tossing and snorting and kicking in fury. I stood in front of it, and it pawed the ground, head high, eyes mean and narrow, ears flat against its head. Without thinking, I began rehearsing the rules, aloud, speaking them to the horse in an attempt to calm it down. I stepped slowly towards it, but it reared up, legs flailing wildly above my head, and I desperately wanted to protect myself from that rain of hooves but my arms were tied, and I couldn’t move them. I gripped the chains that held me, and continued to recite the rules, pitching each one at it, in defiance of its strength and anger. The horse continued to crash around its stable, threatened to fall against me and crush me, but I had no other defence than the rules. I had to trust them. I delivered each one, urging the horse to hear and understand them, to learn finally that One’s bond to me was stronger and more powerful than any other combination of his actions, and that I, knowing this, had access to boundless pleasure. And as I finally realised this myself, the door of the stable swung open, and the horse flew out, its main and tail leaping like ribbons in the wind until, a graceful silhouette, it stopped to graze quietly at the top of a hill.

I opened my eyes. One stood in front of me, and released each of the chains. They fell to the floor in a heap around me. I felt suddenly weightless. I dug my toes into the pile of chains to remain steady, and felt One’s arms holding me tightly, keeping me down.

My body is not my body. It is just a piece of packaging for One’s most precious possession: his slave. Open it, and she will flow out: supple, willing, conscious, and free.

Notes on Contributors

Erzsébet Barát is an Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Linguistics at the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Szeged, and a Visiting Professor at the Gender Studies Department, Central European University, Budapest. Her research interests and publications focus on the ideological investment of meaning production, mostly in relation to language use and sexual and gender identity.

Tahseen Béa (Basheer) is currently a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University, New York. Her scholarly interests include issues of female sexuality and spirituality, the construction of female subjectivity, and female desire in a feminist context.

Benjamin Jacob graduated with a PhD from the University of York, UK, in 2005. His thesis examined the development of obscene literature in Western culture from 1750 to 2000, and he continues to research this area of study as an Independent Scholar based in Ukraine.

Marie-Luise (Mel) Kohlke is a Lecturer in English Literature at Swansea University, Wales, and the General and Founding Editor of *Neo-Victorian Studies*. Her research into the neo-Victorian novel and trauma literature focuses on the intersection of the historical imagination and cultural discourses on gender, sexuality, and violence.

Kateřina Lišková is an Assistant Professor at the Gender Studies Programme, in the Sociology Department at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Masaryk University, in the Czech Republic, with a research focus on gender and sexuality. She recently received her PhD for her dissertation entitled *Feminist Anti-Pornography Discourse: A Sociological Analysis*.

Luisa Orza, is a Writer and Researcher in sexual and reproductive rights, with a special interest in power relations, gender, and the dynamics of negotiated dominance and submission. She holds an MA in Gender and Development from Sussex University, UK.

Shalmalee Palekar is a Lecturer in the School of English, Media and Performing Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. She is currently researching representations of women's sexualities in post-1970s Indian fiction and cinema ("Bollywood", Regional and "Parallel").

Jan Peterson Roddy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois. She is a media artist with on-going projects exploring Ozark land, people and culture.

Ilana Shiloh is the author of *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere* (Peter Lang 2002), and her book *Metaphors of Paradox in Detective Fiction and Film* is forthcoming from Peter Lang. She has published a range of articles on contemporary fiction, film, and theatre and is the Head of the English Language Unit in the College of Management Academic Division, Rishon Lezion, Israel.

Godwin Siundu holds a PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and is a Lecturer in the Department of Language and Literature Education at the Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya. He is currently undertaking two research projects, one on the sociology of gender in Kenya, with a focus on how gender dynamics impinge on education and empowerment; and the other as part of a team of Pan-African scholars on popular objects as agents and mediators in the process of cultural negotiation in and out of Africa.

Jennifer Tyburczy is a Performance Artist and PhD candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, USA. Her academic work examines the intersection of museums, sex, and performance, and her artistic projects include resurrections of vintage genres, like vaudeville and burlesque, as well as adaptations of diverse literatures to performance.

Marek M. Wojtaszek is currently completing his PhD study in the American Studies and Mass Media Department at the University of Lodz, Poland. His research accounts for his critical engagement with feminist poststructuralist philosophies, gender and visual studies, and Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy.