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Teresa de Lauretis

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# QUEER TEXTS, BAD HABITS, AND THE ISSUE OF A FUTURE

Teresa de Lauretis

*Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together.”

—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

My reflections on some themes of this special issue on queer bonds, sexuality and sociability, negativity and futurity, are indebted to the research and thinking involved in my recent book about the figuration of sexuality as drive in Freud and in literary and film texts.<sup>1</sup> One of those texts, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), has received much attention in feminist criticism and in the history of literary modernism but has been strangely disregarded in queer studies. My own psychoanalytic-literary reading of the novel did not specifically address its place in a possible archive of queer literary writing, a project that also exceeds the scope of this essay.<sup>2</sup> Were I to undertake such a project, however, I would begin by broaching the question, when can literary writing be called queer?

A recent characterization of Barnes as “a queer late modernist at the centre of the modernist movement” suggests that, to the literary historian, the qualifier *queer* refers to the person(a) of the author rather than to the author’s texts.<sup>3</sup> Interesting as it might be to speculate on the relation between the queerness of an authorial persona and the queerness of her or his writing—a relation by no means to be taken for granted—it is the latter that concerns me here.

### Queer Texts

For the purposes of this discussion, I may provisionally call queer a text of fiction—be it literary or audiovisual—that not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images, what Pier Paolo Pasolini, speaking of cinema, called “the language of reality.”<sup>4</sup>

The ability of language and images to refer to the phenomenal world is still operative in works of fiction, however compromised or even residual: of course we know that it’s only a story, it’s only a movie, but just the same . . . The unnegotiable demands of most readers, viewers, or listeners to identify and to *identify with*—to make sense of what’s happening, to know who’s who in the diegesis, to find some incitement to fantasy or some versions of oneself in the mirror of the text, be it only the ego’s sense of mastery over the object-text—are the normative requirements with which fiction is expected to comply. That Barnes’s novel was so unpopular in the United States in the 1930s, despite being hailed by T. S. Eliot and widely canonized, may be attributed partly to the shockingly sexual imagery of its ending, but the main reason why it is still widely unread today is that it is difficult to read. It is not that a plot is missing, for there is a narrative, but the text’s syntactical and rhetorical density, its unusual lexical choices, and the kaleidoscopic storytelling embedded in its elliptical narration frustrate both narrative and referential expectations.

Some time ago, though not in reference to Barnes, Tim Dean suggested that “difficult art” may be “queerer” than popular art forms in that it is “more resistant to [the] normalizing imperatives” of easily intelligible and consumable texts such as those of “lesbian- and gay-friendly popular culture.” Although I might agree with this, my reading of *Nightwood* as a queer text is not based purely on the “aesthetic challenges [it poses] to intelligibility.”<sup>5</sup> These challenges, undeniably, might qualify it as high art. They would not qualify it as queer, in my current view, if they did not prompt a reader to ask, as Emily Coleman did of Eliot, “Can you read and not see that something new has been said about the very heart of sex?”<sup>6</sup> Here, then, is a further and, to my mind, not sufficient but necessary specification: a queer text carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex.

The “new” at the heart of sex in *Nightwood* is that something more. And it is queer not simply because of all the far-from-normative sexual interactions between and within human bodies alluded to in the doctor’s monologues, or because the novel’s characters are homosexuals, transvestites, possibly transsexual, circus freaks, and even nonhuman animals. The heart of sex in *Nightwood*

is sexuality as enigma without solution and trauma without resolution — sexuality as an unmanageable excess of affect that can find textual expression only in a figural, oracular language, in hybrid images and elaborate conceits, or in the stream of allusions, parables, and prophecies with which the doctor attempts to fill the chasm between language and the real.

The novel's closing passage comes at the end of a very short chapter seemingly offered as narrative conclusion of the multiyear lesbian relationship that involves or preoccupies the five main characters. Nora loves Robin; Robin, who is married to Felix, leaves him for Nora, then leaves Nora for Jenny, and then returns to Nora in the last chapter; the doctor, Matthew, is both witness and oracle to their impossible relationship. Robin is most often presented from the others' viewpoints. What we know of her is through the effect she has on them: she is the empty center around which their lives and passions spin. When Nora at last meets up again with Robin by following her dog to an abandoned country chapel, she sees Robin on all fours inciting and inviting the dog, crawling after him and barking, the text says, "in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching."

The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went padding. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees.<sup>7</sup>

This enigmatic ending, shocking in its unequivocal simulation of a sexual act from frenzied crescendo to (failed) orgasmic release, has likely contributed to the ostracism *Nightwood* suffered in Barnes's native country. The novel refuses to explain the scene or to rationalize Robin's behavior. It merely describes in her the physical manifestations of an excess of affect that cannot be bound to its immediate object (the dog), as it cannot be bound to a suitable object (lover or child) throughout the novel. In Freud's metapsychology, psychic affect is the essence of the drive, and it is the function of the ego to maintain its quantity constant by binding affect to objects or to the ego itself (in narcissism). By denying psychological explanations for Robin's actions and leaving the reader with only the doctor's obscure pronouncements as a guide, the text inscribes in the narrative the figure of sexuality as an undomesticated, unsymbolizable force, not bound to objects and beyond the purview of the ego, a figure of sexuality as, precisely, drive.

This final scene in the chapel and the references to animals of all sorts that punctuate the text, like the metaphors and similes that typically color the doctor's parables with biblical or surrealist overtones, have been read as alluding to an instinctive animality in Robin and suggestive of a pre-Freudian view of sexuality in which animal is opposed to human as instinct is to drive, body to mind, or the carnal to the spiritual. Even a reader as attentive to language as Kenneth Burke interprets the ending as "Robin's translation into identity with sheer beast."<sup>8</sup> I think that this is too conventional a reading. The actual, diegetic animals the narration presents in conjunction with Robin, for example, Nora's dog and the circus lioness that stops in front of Robin and Nora at their first meeting, have the status of characters—nonhuman characters in that they are living beings without language, but characters nonetheless in that they interact with Robin.

There is between Robin and them a sort of communication that is highly charged with affect, though not verbal or otherwise symbolically coded, a kind of exchange that takes place on the sensory register alone, without recognizable meaning, which is to say, outside representation. Consisting of inarticulate sounds, bodily movements, looks, or gestures expressive less of conscious emotions than of intensities of affect, the "exchange" between them is entirely outside the symbolic and imaginary registers, as if it were carried out through the primary process alone. Robin's interactions with the animals, which the text stubbornly refuses to anthropomorphize, figure what in the human responds to something before language or, as the text says, "something not yet in history" (44). The enigma that Robin is to Nora and Felix, as well as to the text overall, is the "odor of memory" she carries (the text says), "like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten and would give our life to recall" (118). That place is the mental site in which Freud locates the drive, a "psychical locality" between the somatic and the mental, the virtual area of demarcation (*Abgrenzung*) between body and soul—a space, that is, before language as we know it and thus not yet in history.

I have called queer the space in which Freud imagines the drive to operate, moving from the body to the mind and vice versa, because it is a space not just nonhomogeneous but more precisely heterotopic: it is the space of a transit, a displacement, a passage and transformation, not a referential but a figural space. For this reason a psychological reading of *Nightwood* falls short of appreciating what I think is the novel's more original achievement, namely, *the figural inscription of sexuality as drive*, a psychic excitation that the ego, in the case of Robin, is unable to bind to itself or to objects, and in Nora's case and the doctor's as well, that disrupts the emotional coherence and threatens the self-possession of the ego by the violence of its affective charge. It is in this violence, in this unmanage-

able quantity of affect and the shattering effects it has on the ego, that sexuality is figured in *Nightwood* as a psychic force that is *at once* sexual and death drive. Indeed the latter, according to Freud, is a thing beyond representation, something that pertains to the primary process alone and typically remains unconscious, “silent,” undetectable, except when directed outward in the form of aggression toward others.

Another text that inscribes sexuality as both sexual and death drive is David Cronenberg’s film *Crash* (1996), scripted from J. G. Ballard’s novel of the same name (1973). In the film, the “language of reality” is compromised by the flatness of its glossy surfaces, no depth of field, the metallic sound of electric guitars, staccato editing, and lingering shots of the protagonists’ empty looks. In representing this cold, distant, inhospitable space and the corresponding absence of psychic depth in the characters, the film links the compulsion to repeat to the eroticization of traffic accidents and the wounded or scarred bodies of people and cars. Crash after crash, sexual encounter after sexual encounter, the body is invaded by the sexual as a drive with no reachable aim or object choice, beyond gender and beyond desire.

The concern with sexuality and death is omnipresent in Cronenberg’s cinema since his 1960s shorts (the psychosexual experiments with orality in *Stereo* [1969] and *Crimes of the Future* [1970]) and his first feature *Shivers*, released in the United States as *They Came from Within* (1975), which earned him the title of originator of the “body horror” film genre by introducing the figure of the parasite bursting out of the human body that Ridley Scott later popularized in *Alien* (1979). If “horror films deal with such primal issues — particularly death and therefore also sexuality,” Cronenberg has said, it is because “death is the basis of all horror.”<sup>9</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s films, from *Videodrome* (1982) to *Crash* and *eXistenZ* (1999), as the topos of the scientific experiment gone awry gives way to the topos of individual metamorphosis, what instigates the transformation is the human’s attraction to the abnormal, the perverse, the abject, the nonhuman in its contingent phenomenal appearance as disease, violence, and death. Their relation to the sexual, barely veiled in the symptomatology and epidemic character of venereal disease in the early, experimental films, is later refigured in extreme forms of somatization as body horror, from the hyperbolic conversion hysteria of *The Brood* (1978), the sadomasochism hallucinated in *Videodrome*, narcissism in *Dead Ringers* (1988), and fetishism practically everywhere, to the marked emphasis of the later films on what Freud called the narcissistic neuroses: melancholia in *M. Butterfly* (1993), paranoia in *eXistenZ*, and schizophrenia in *Spider* (2002).

Sexuality is figured as infectious in the youthful transgressivity of *Shivers*, where disease, as one of his characters says, “is the love of two kinds of alien creatures for each other,” or in his own words, “indicates the presence of some other life form.”<sup>10</sup> In *Crash* this viral imaginary takes on a more somber hue. As the fatal car accidents of “immortal” movie stars (James Dean, Jane Mansfield) or beloved writers (Albert Camus, Nathanael West) are staged and relived in a spectacular, unredemptive Passion play, the film itself stages the encounter with the Real beyond the pleasure principle. Repetition drives each character toward his or her own crash, toward the place beyond pleasure, beyond mortality, where one becomes immortal. *Crash* visually literalizes Freud’s figure of the death drive: the crash is not merely the end of life but the *drive*, both drivenness and passage, toward another, virtual form of life.

It cannot but be clear to every spectator that *Crash* is about more than sex. Some have called it sick; I am calling it queer. Again, not just because of the “nonnormative” sex scenes between bodies able and disabled, the fetish objects, the kinkiness of the sex. What makes this text queer is its heterotopic vision of sexuality as drive and of the radical irrelevance of gender, sexual identity, or anatomy to sexuality as such. In Freud’s words, often cited and seldom heeded, “The object of the [drive] [*Das Objekt des Triebes*] is the thing in regard to which or through which the [drive] is able to achieve its aim. It is what is most variable about a [drive] and is not originally connected with it, but becomes assigned to it only in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible.”<sup>11</sup>

This leads to the next phrase in my title, by which I mean to highlight a disconnect between sexuality and gender, and the repressive function that a discursive emphasis on gender performs vis-à-vis sexuality, or what in sexuality is more than sex.

### **Bad Habits**

It seems to me that the terms currently employed in much of the Western world to designate a nonnormative sexual identity, LGBT (T for *transgender* or *transsexual*, whether specified as *F2M* and *M2F*, *transmen* and *transwomen*, or left ungendered in *trans*), have come to privilege gender over sexuality, or the social bond over the sexual proper, by which I mean sexuality in the Freudian sense, the work of the drives with their obstinate, often destructive character, and the difficulties this causes to both the self and the social. The current term *queer*, too, while still carrying something of its historical connotations of sexual abnormality, quickly covers them up by presenting itself as gender-inclusive, democratic,

multicultural, and multispecies, and thus effectively shifts the ground away from the nitty-gritty of sexuality—the polymorphous-perverse that Mario Mieli theorized in the visionary, radical 1970s.<sup>12</sup> If we are to reclaim *queer* in its contestatory sexual meaning, and as truly inclusive of the sexual, we need a conception of sexuality that goes beyond the nebulous equivocations of gender as well as the medical concerns with reproductive functionality. I suggest that we have such a conception in what Freud theorized as a sexuality of partial drives and saw most clearly in its uncluttered manifestations in childhood: a sexuality polymorphous, nonreproductive, pleasure-seeking, compulsive, and unruly.

It is a commonplace that infantile sexuality develops in two successive stages, the oral stage and the anal stage, which precede the development of the sexual organs and the kicking-in of certain hormones at puberty. The commonplace implies that only the latter really count as sexuality, that is to say, that sexuality is first and foremost genital. But this popular and medical view is contradicted by obvious considerations. The infantile manifestations of sexual pleasure, oral and anal, remain fully active in adult sexuality; moreover, these and other partial drives can actually be more powerful than genital activity, as they are, for example, in what psychoanalysis calls perversions and psychiatry now calls paraphilias: fetishism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, pedophilia, zoophilia, necrophilia, coprophilia, and urophilia, to name a few. Clearly, then, among the known sexual behaviors, there are several that hark back to infantile pleasures and produce sexual satisfaction even independently of genital activity.

The term *paraphilia* was adopted by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. John Money traces it back to the entrance of sexology into the criminal justice system in the late nineteenth century by way of forensic psychiatry. “Forensic psychiatry borrowed the nomenclature of the law in classifying sexual offenders as sexual deviants and sexual perverts. [It] also borrowed from the criminal code its official list of the perversions. Eventually, the terms perversion and deviance would give way to paraphilia.”<sup>13</sup> Now, *paraphilia* may sound more neutral, less “pathologizing” than perversion, but it still names sexual behaviors that are considered abnormal. The normal is not open to question in criminal law or forensic psychiatry: as is well known, Money himself initiated the clinical practice of treating infants born with genital organs that medicine considers indeterminate, through surgery or hormones to “normalize” their bodies as either male or female.<sup>14</sup>

Psychoanalysis, unlike psychiatry and psychology, is not about sexual normality. On the contrary, for Freud, sexuality is the most pervasive dimension of human life, ranging from perversion to neurosis to sublimation; it is compulsive,



noncontingent, and incurable. With psychoanalysis, queer theory could extend its range of concerns to all forms of sexual behavior, not to classify or criminalize them, not to “protect society” or shore up human sociality, but to understand its conditions of possibility. For, while we theorize queer sociability and attachment in local and global contexts, we cannot ignore the compulsive, perverse, ungovernable aspects of sexuality that confront us in the public sphere, in the family, in ourselves. The problem is, how can we think queer bonds together with the countersocial forces at work in them? How can we think together, say, gay marriages and barebacking, or serial murder and the search for spiritual community?

Freud’s theory of sexuality hypothesizes the presence of two contrary psychic forces or drives, coexisting and acting together in different combinations at different times in the individual’s psychic life. The life drives are psychic energy bound to objects—people, fantasies, ideals, the ego itself—and therefore attachment, social bond, creativity (not for nothing did he use the Platonic term *Eros*, specifying: “the *Eros* of the poets and philosophers”).<sup>15</sup> The death drive, on the other hand, is sheer negativity; it is unbound, unattached psychic energy that undermines the coherence of the ego and, consequently, the cohesion of the social. Freud, to be sure, was no optimist. His metapsychology does not offer so-called practical solutions—nor was it meant to. But precisely because it is speculative, nonsystematic, even contradictory, it remains open to the new. Take the issue of gender.

Recently, Jean Laplanche, one of Freud’s closest and most original readers, has introduced the question of gender in psychoanalysis in the context of his own theory of primal seduction.<sup>16</sup> Succinctly stated, Laplanche maintains that sexuality is not innate or present in the body at birth but comes from the adult other(s) and is an effect of seduction. It is implanted in the newborn infant—a being without language (as the etymology of the word *infant* implies) and initially without an ego—by the necessary actions of maternal care, feeding, cleaning, holding, and so on, through the enigmatic messages they transmit, enigmatic not only because the baby is not able to translate them but also because they are imbued with the (un)conscious sexual fantasies of the adult(s), parent(s), or caretaker(s). Untranslatable, these enigmatic signifiers are subjected to primal repression and constitute the first nucleus of the child’s unconscious, the primal unconscious. Partial translations occur as the child grows and the ego is formed and develops, but they, too, leave untranslated residues that live on in the individual’s mental apparatus as the unremembered memory of bodily excitations and pleasures. Such unconscious memory traces act, in Laplanche’s words, “like a splinter in the skin,” or we might say, like a virus installed in a computer.<sup>17</sup> They remain live, though undetected, and are reactivated in adult sexuality, at times in forms that we find shameful or

unacceptable. From this come the conflicts, whether moral or neurotic, that we all experience in sexual life.

Unlike sexuality, gender is a message sent and received at the conscious or preconscious level. Although it, too, comes from the other, is *assigned* by parents and medical practitioners, often before birth, gender is not implanted in the physical body but assumed by the ego during its formation; it is not, like sexuality, the somatic implant of a psychophysical excitation particularly insistent in the so-called erogenous zones. Undoubtedly, parental fantasies conscious and unconscious play a part—I think a large part—in the child’s gender identifications or disidentifications, and hence the multiple articulations of gender identity in adulthood, when sexual object choice intervenes in line or in conflict with gender identifications. One’s sense of one’s gender may be unclear, confused, contradictory, conflicted, but it is so in a conscious or preconscious way; gender pertains to the ego, not to the unconscious.

Typically, socially and legally, gender is assigned on the basis of sexual anatomy, or rather, of the adults’ perception of it, which in turn is based on the visibility of the external genital organ. When it is unclear whether the infant body has a penis or an elongated clitoris, or when a discrepancy later appears between external and internal genital organs, then parental and medical authorities decide which gender to assign and how, or whether, to modify the body accordingly. This was spectacularly demonstrated in the recent sports scandal involving the Olympic gold medal and eight-hundred-meter title won by South African athlete Caster Semenya.<sup>18</sup> Paradoxically, it is the existence of physical intersexuality “in nature” that conclusively proves gender to be a social and normative construction, and thus also provides its most convincing deconstruction.

The category of gender, like that of sex (as Monique Wittig remarked long ago), falls under the binary, digital logic of the phallus—either with or without, male or female, one or zero, a logic that, in its rigid binarism and genital bias, erases or disavows the polymorphous and, above all, *unconscious* dimensions of infantile sexuality brought to light by Freud.<sup>19</sup> Laplanche suggests that the displacement of the question of sexual identity onto that of gender identity in current discourses may be a mark of repression (*refoulement*), the repression of infantile sexuality and its replacement by gender as a category more acceptable to the adult’s self-understanding. “I think,” he writes, “that even in our time, infantile sexuality is what is most repugnant to the adult’s vision. Still today what is most difficult [for adults] to accept are, as one says, ‘bad habits.’”<sup>20</sup> (Think of Pedro Almodóvar’s film *La mala educación* and its clever pun on, precisely, bad habits learned in school.)

In referring the notion of gender back to Robert Stoller's *Sex and Gender* (1968), Laplanche seems to ignore or disregard the practices of gender de(con)struction of the past four decades; he dismisses the arguments of "feminist sociologists" from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler to Wittig for opposing gender to sex as culture to nature, or sociology to biology, in a dualism that is not disrupted by the claim that the former denaturalizes the latter. In this uncharacteristically reductive reading and in the denomination "sociologists," one detects the traditional *parti pris* against feminism shared by most psychoanalysts, starting with Freud himself. Feminists, Laplanche asserts, dismiss psychoanalysis as complicit with the ideology that subordinates gender to sex and disregard what Freud had to say about sexuality.<sup>21</sup> Apart from overgeneralizing, however, he is not altogether wrong. With few exceptions, feminist discussions of gender have been guided by the original, anthropological concept of the sex-gender system made famous by Gayle Rubin's "Traffic in Women" and have tended to avoid the issue of sexuality except as reproductive or genital sexuality. Lacanian feminists, on the other hand, have mostly avoided the issue of gender as a matter of principle, for in Lacanian psychoanalysis it is indeed a nonissue.

The value of Laplanche's discussion for queer theory is its taking on both gender and sexuality, and articulating their relations in a triadic interplay of gender, sex (anatomical-physiological), and the sexual proper; by "the sexual proper" I mean sexuality in the Freudian sense of polymorphous-perverse, based on repression, fantasy, and the unconscious.<sup>22</sup> He agrees with Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey that gender identity is formed earlier than sexual identity but does not agree with their conclusion that gender organizes sexuality.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, Laplanche contends, while gender is assigned and acquired very early on, its meaning becomes clear to the child only with the apperception of sex, that is to say, of anatomical sexual difference, and hence with the coming into play of the castration complex. Despite the questions and doubts that have been raised about the universality of the castration complex, he observes, the binary logic predominant in Western culture also appears to reign at the level of the individual, if the memories linked to the castration complex that surface in analysis are to be believed.<sup>24</sup> But are they?

Here Laplanche adds something that, coming from a psychoanalytic theorist, seems to me quite exceptional and worth noting. "What sex and its secular arm, one could say, the castration complex, tend to repress is infantile sexuality. To repress it is precisely to create it in repressing it."<sup>25</sup> To paraphrase: not only the social institution of sex-gender but also the psychoanalytic concept of the castration complex, *which justifies it and enforces it* (as "its secular arm"),

have the effect of repressing or containing “le sexual,” the sexuality that was the crucial discovery of Freud—the perverse, polymorphous sexuality that is oral, anal, paragenital, nonreproductive, upstream of sex *and* gender differences, and ultimately uncontainable by them, uncontainable because repressed, outside the ego’s purview, yet capable of being reactivated.

The castration complex, like the Oedipus complex or the murder of the father, Laplanche argues, are preformed narrative schemata, mytho-symbolic codes transmitted and variously modified by culture, that help “the small human subject to deal with, that is to say, to bind and symbolize, or again translate, the enigmatic, traumatizing messages coming from the adult other” (212); they help the child find a place in the family, the community, the *socius*; they help us historicize ourselves. But nothing, Laplanche quips, is less sexual than the myth of Oedipus or Sophocles’ tragedy. These collective and more or less contingent, that is, culture-specific narrative structures get inscribed in the psychic apparatus not, as commonly assumed, on the side of the repressed but on the side of the repressing (“non pas du côté du refoulé, mais du refoulant”) (212), not on the side of the sexual but on the side of what represses it, giving rise to neurosis, or in the best of cases, on the side of what restrains the sexual, contains it, organizes it, and ultimately desexualizes it in the name of attachment, the social bond, the law of alliance, procreation, the future.

In other words, those infamous psychoanalytic notions, castration and the Oedipus complex, are not the enemies but the allies of gender; they are instrumental in constructing it, affirming it—and reaffirming it as necessary. What troubles gender identity are the bad habits, the repressed, unconscious dimensions of the sexual. Let me put it this way: the trouble with gender is the kink in sex—the perverse, the infantile, the shameful, the disgusting, the “sick,” the destructive and self-destructive aspects of sexuality that personal identity seldom avows and the political discourse on gender must elide or deny altogether. For the issue of gender, as the claims for legal recognition of new or changing gender identities demonstrate, is one that requires social acceptance and validation.

The discourse on gender has been political from its inception, whether covertly conservative in the “scientifically neutral” studies of Money and Stoller, or explicitly contestatory in the 1960s and 1970s feminist critique of gender as an oppressive social structure. That critical understanding of gender, attained in the context of an oppositional and initially radical political movement, was the basis of all the gender-deconstructive practices and discourses that followed in its wake. Today, LGBTIQ notwithstanding, we are confronted with the fact that the political issue of gender/sexual identities, especially those stigmatized

as paraphilias or identity disorders, runs aground on the sexual, on sexuality in the Freudian sense.

The malaise of civilization, as he saw it, consists in its foundational paradox: the institutions of civil society, the family, and secular education no less than religion are meant to curb or contain the sexual and organize it toward the social bond and the common good. The incest taboo is to yield kinship and sociality, the Oedipus complex to bind attachment to physical and social reproduction, the castration complex to produce gender and ensure a smooth articulation of reproductive labor. The paradox is that the curbing, what Freud called repression (and which showed how the ego carries out psychic repression more efficiently than the state does political repression), also produces sexuality as something more than sex, as symptom, compulsion, aggression.

The impasse, the negativity inherent in this view of human society, is at odds with the politics of gender or indeed with any politics, if by politics we mean action aimed at achieving a social goal, whether that is the common good or the good of some. This being at odds of sexuality and politics is at the core of what I have called the equivocations of gender, the confusion of gender and sexuality. I think that it also subtends the arguments for an antisocial politics of queer theory. Political contestation, opposition, or antagonism is anything but antisocial; it is constitutive of a democratic society. What is antisocial is sexuality, the pleasure principle, and most of all the death drive.

“The antisocial thesis in queer theory,” so named and encapsulated in a panel held at the 2005 MLA convention, was first associated with Leo Bersani’s *Homos* (1995), as nearly all the panelists concurred, but the 2005 panel discussion identified it—and possibly overidentified it, as Robert Caserio suggests—with Lee Edelman’s book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).<sup>26</sup> This is not surprising, even disregarding the latter’s more recent publication date, in that Bersani’s view of sexuality in *Homos* was closer to Freud’s than in subsequent works concerned with theorizing affirmative forms of queer sociability and impersonal intimacy. Thus it is the negativity of “Bersani’s definition of sex as anticomunitarian, self-shattering, and anti-identitarian” in *Homos*, as one panelist remarks, that returns in Edelman’s *No Future* as “perhaps the most powerful and controversial recent contribution to antisocial queer theory.”<sup>27</sup>

### The Issue of a Future

I first read parts of *No Future* when I was writing my own book on the death drive and did not have the time or the energy to think about it, though I knew someday

I would. All I could manage then was a paragraph on the uncanny coincidence of our respective critical projects, quite unrelated and unaware of one another: we both read visual, literary, and cultural texts with psychoanalytic theory and a focus on figurality. Our books converged on the linked tropes of queerness and the future, while diverging in their respective readings of the death drive, Edelman's with Lacan, mine with Freud and Laplanche. Edelman, I wrote, "urges queers to embrace a figural identification with the death drive as *jouissance*, a figure for the undoing of identity and the heteronormative order of meaning. My reading of Freud's drive offers no program, no ethical position, no polemic, only queer figures of passing in the uninhabited space between mind and matter."<sup>28</sup>

Now, after some reflection, I see that the divergence I sensed in our respective critical works consisted in the intimation of a political project in Edelman's book (I called it a manifesto), a political intent that was both affirmed and denied. The future negated in *No Future* seemed to me both metaphorical and empirical. I was and am not interested in the empirical future, which will happen anyway, even to those of us who would vote for no future, if we could. The future that concerns me is precisely the future one would vote for, that is to say, the idea, the trope of the future, or, to paraphrase Freud, the illusion of a future. The issue of a future, therefore, would not concern me were it not for the political stakes it has raised in queer theory and in the queer community since the publication of Edelman's book.

On one side, there are the proponents of queer utopianism who see in queerness the potential for a better collective future: "For queerness to have any value whatsoever, it must be considered visible only on the horizon," states José Esteban Muñoz in his response to *No Future*, a preview of his forthcoming book *Cruising Utopia*.<sup>29</sup> Others, instead, focus on positive affects and want "to *think* about feeling good" in the present, as Michael Snediker puts it in *Queer Optimism*. Dustin Friedman, reviewing the book, finds that its "critique of queer theory's tendency to obsess over negative forms of affect is salutary," whereas he is less convinced by Heather Love's *Feeling Backward*, which, "despite its stated attachment to non-redemptive emotional states, ultimately has optimistic aspiration."<sup>30</sup>

On the other side are those who think *No Future* is not political enough. Judith Halberstam, for one, finds its vision narrow when it comes to "material political concerns" and argues for "a more explicitly political framing of the anti-social project," one that would articulate the ways of "an explicitly political negativity" as does, in one of her examples, the "deeply antisocial politics" of Valerie Solanas.<sup>31</sup> The phrase "political negativity," which Edelman picks up in responding to Halberstam, appears to be the term of equivocation. While aligning himself

with her as “advocates of political negativity,” Edelman is troubled by Halberstam’s affirmation of “an angry, uncivil ‘politics of negativity’ — a politics in which what troubles me isn’t its negativity but its affirmation.” *No Future*, he says to clarify the distinction, “approaches negativity as society’s constitutive antagonism, which sustains itself only on the promise of resolution in futurity.”<sup>32</sup>

Negativity, then, is not an attribute of politics or one kind of politics among others but an inherent character or structural aspect of society, which the book identifies with the death drive: “In a political field whose limit and horizon is reproductive futurism, queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance, by figuring sexuality’s implication in the senseless pulsions of that drive.”<sup>33</sup> Queerness names the negativity of the drive, the antisocial that is in sexuality, “*the death drive that always informs the Symbolic order*” as it inheres in each individual subject. The link between the negativity of the drive in the Symbolic and in the subject, in the social order and in the social subject, is made by linguistic parallelism in the words I italicize in the following passage, two pages earlier:

Queerness, therefore, is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of *embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order. One name for this unnameable remainder, as Lacan describes it, is jouissance. . . . jouissance evokes *the death drive that always insists as the void in and of the subject*, beyond its fantasy of self-realization, beyond the pleasure principle. (second emphasis added)<sup>34</sup>

This, it seems to me, is a restatement in Lacanian terms (*jouissance*, the Symbolic, the Real) of what I described earlier as the paradox in Freud’s view of society, the impasse of civilization, the blockage to progress that civilization itself produces in repressing the sexual. Excluded by the social bond, the sexual remains within the social as an unmasterable, uncontainable excess, a force of conflict, disaggregation, unbinding. This is, in Freud’s conception, the negativity of the death drive.<sup>35</sup> This is why *No Future*, as I read it, links queer theory and the death drive, pushing the conceptual boundaries of queer thinking beyond the comfort zone of the pleasure principle.

When Edelman urges queers to embrace a figural identification with the death drive, and throughout the book, the tone of his impassioned critique of society can be heard as a call to action, but the words negate or undercut its possibility: “By assuming the ‘truth’ of our queer capacity to *figure* the undoing of the Symbolic, and of the Symbolic subject as well, we might undertake *the impossible*

*project* of imagining an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification . . . which can only return us, by way of the Child, to the politics of reproduction” (emphasis added).<sup>36</sup> The dissonance between tone and words, a tell-tale token of the two contrary impulses toward affirmation and negation, the political and the theoretical, is again present in his concluding statement for the published MLA debate: “The aim of queer negativity [is] to face up to political antagonism with the negativity of critical thought.”<sup>37</sup>

I may be particularly attuned to the dissonance for having felt the two contrary impulses in my own work. When I first used the expression *queer theory* as the theme of a working conference I organized at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990, I thought of it as the term of a project at once critical and political, aimed at resisting the cultural and sexual homogenization in academic “gay and lesbian studies,” then taken to be a single, unified field of study. The project was a call to lesbians and gay men to confront our respective sexual histories and deconstruct our own constructed silences around sexuality and its interrelations with gender and race, and from there “to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual.”<sup>38</sup>

To my mind, the emphasis on nonnormative sexuality and the focus on the theoretical work of new discourse production joined in the words *queer theory* went hand in hand with a political project in which “critical dialogue [would] provide a better understanding of the specificity and partiality of our respective histories, as well as the stakes of some common struggles.”<sup>39</sup> The dialogue I had hoped for did not take place, although some specific—and controversial—works on gay and lesbian sexualities were published in that decade.<sup>40</sup> While mine was definitely not a utopian project, I did see political and theoretical practices as mutually enabling. In light of later developments in queer theory and, most recently, the reception of Edelman’s book, I am no longer confident in their compatibility.

I still see *No Future* as a manifesto written to impact the twenty-first century as some of its predecessors did the twentieth century, a manifesto that, with the passion and risk-taking intelligence of the best examples of the genre, proposes queerness as the figure for an ethical position against “reproductive futurism” and especially, not by chance, against the “democratic literality that marks the futurism of the left.”<sup>41</sup> One problem with its address, and thus with its reception, is that literality, or referentiality, is a mainstay of political discourse, where rhetoric is primarily instrumental, as in Mark Antony’s speech on Caesar’s coffin. Self-reflexive irony, however, is incompatible with the business of politics, as are all rhetorical figures that fissure the solidity of meaning. “The ironic language”



of the writer, the poet, the philosopher, those who “deal in language,” as Paul de Man remarked of Charles Baudelaire, “splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity.”<sup>42</sup>

The difficulty here is one of hearing two discursive registers at once, the ironic and the literal, the figural and the referential, the literary or speculative register of theory and the empirically or fact-based register of politics. The best illustration of this problem of reading is Edelman’s figure of the Child as the Imaginary that secures the future. When the figure is read referentially, through the political (and he baits us to do so, punning on the Child as “the one true access to social security”), that Child, despite the capital letter that marks its figural being, becomes literally the empirical, living child next door, the child who has a claim on our love, the child human society is there to protect, the sickly or hungry child for whom charitable donations are solicited, or perhaps the polymorphous-perverse, queer child of Freud’s *Three Essays*; it becomes the child we have and/or were.<sup>43</sup>

In his political mode, Edelman hopes that, while no one can ever be “outside the Symbolic . . . we can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures—*within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality—for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbors within” (22). But to pitch the death drive, however abstractly articulated (for that is what it is: a conceptual figure of Freudian or Lacanian theory), against that mental image of a child is unbearable because it threatens nothing less than “the immortality of the ego, which is so hard pressed by reality,” as Freud well knew.<sup>44</sup> We could stand the (in)famous image of Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” because it bespoke the shattering of the ego in masochistic pleasure—which he would later rearticulate in less-threatening terms as the “ascetic spirituality” of the barebacker or the self-divestiture of “pure love.”<sup>45</sup> What few, if any, of us can bear is the thought of a drive to the virtual place from which no traveler returns.

In these times, when civil rights and the pursuit of happiness are deemed to inhere in the socially reproductive couple—and not, as I would auspicate, in the individual—Edelman’s *No Future* may remain unreadable like the hybrid word he coins to figure “the ethical task” for queers (109), *sinthomosexual*: a word, a book, a task without a future. One can always count on poetic justice. But let us go back for a moment to the antisocial thesis debate and an important question incidentally raised by Halberstam. Speaking of *Homos*, Halberstam wonders whether

“one can identify a political trajectory in a radically nonteleological project.”<sup>46</sup> The question is just as relevant to *No Future* and to queer theory in general.

To the extent that it is theory, a conceptual, critical, or speculative vision of the place of sexuality in the social, queer theory does not map out a program of political action. Which is not to say that a nonteleological queer politics cannot exist, but that a kind of translation is needed from one to the other, from the figural to the referential, from words to things. The value of Solanas’s SCUM manifesto was not in the action of shooting Andy Warhol but in the statement itself, in its charge of negativity and the critical space it opened up, regardless of its failed political translation.<sup>47</sup> SCUM, too, like Edelman’s queerness, is a figure of negativity, whether or not we remember what the acronym stands for. Figures travel through time and language, and reappear metamorphosed at times as utopias that “permit fables and discourse,” at times as heterotopias that “dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.”<sup>48</sup>

Foucault’s distinction between utopias and heterotopias informs my thinking about gender and sexuality and politics and theory in this essay because it is not a binary opposition like utopia/dystopia. As we know from science fiction, both of the latter “permit fables and discourse . . . run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*”; their opposition takes place within the *fabula*, on the imaginary axis of good and bad, within the moral norm. It is not there that I locate the distinction between gender and sexuality or between politics and theory, but precisely on the axis of language, as Foucault does, taking his cue from Jorge Luis Borges. Gender and politics run with the referential grain of language; they “name this *and* that” and make “words and things . . . ‘hold together,’” while sexuality and theory, like heterotopias, “secretly undermine language” in working with its figural dimension: they “stop words in their tracks” and make them mean something else or displace them onto another scene.<sup>49</sup>

Heterotopias are disturbing. The point is, as Foucault concludes in the preface to his book about words and things, to make the ground once more stir under our feet.

## Notes

1. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). In particular, the "Queer Texts" section of the present essay condenses and at times excerpts verbatim, for the sake of clarity and brevity, chapters 4 and 5 of *Freud's Drive*.
2. See "The Odor of Memory: On Reading Djuna Barnes with Freud," in de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive*, 114–50.
3. Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 258.
4. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Written Language of Reality" (1966), reprinted in *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 197.
5. Tim Dean, "Perversion, Sublimation, and Aesthetics: A Response to Elizabeth Grosz," *umbr(a)* (2001): 162, 163.
6. Cited in Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, ed. Cheryl J. Plumb (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), xxi.
7. Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 170.
8. Kenneth Burke, "Version, Con-, Per-, and In-: Thoughts on Djuna Barnes's Novel *Nightwood*," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946), 253.
9. *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, ed. Chris Rodley (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 57, 58.
10. David Cronenberg, *Interviews with Serge Grünberg* (London: Plexus, 2006), 167.
11. Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 14: 122. I replaced the word "instinct" with "drive" in the quotation.
12. Mario Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, ed. by Paola Mieli and Gianni Rossi Barilli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002), translated as *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Gay Men's, 1980).
13. John Money, *The Lovemap Guidebook: A Definitive Statement* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 55. I thank Timothy N. Koths, a doctoral candidate in history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for sharing this source.
14. See, for example, Beatriz Preciado, "Technologiquement votre," *Actes du colloque Épistémologies du genre: regards d'hier, points de vue d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, June 23–24, 2005).
15. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 18: 50.

16. Laplanche is the scientific director and general editor of the new French translation of Freud's *Oeuvres complètes* (1988–). He first sketched out his theory of sexuality as psychic trauma in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), and reelaborated it as a theory of primal seduction in *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989) and *Essays on Otherness*, selected and introduced by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999).
17. Jean Laplanche, "Masochism and the General Theory of Seduction," in *Essays on Otherness*, 209.
18. See Ariel Levy, "Either/Or: Sports, Sex, and the Case of Caster Semenya," *New Yorker*, November 30, 2009. I owe this reference to Gloria Careaga Pérez, co-secretary general of International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.
19. Monique Wittig, "The Category of Sex," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 1–8.
20. "Je crois que, même de nos jours, la sexualité infantile proprement dite est ce qui répugne le plus à la vision de l'adulte. Encore aujourd'hui, le plus difficilement accepté, ce sont les 'mauvaises habitudes', comme on dit" (Jean Laplanche, "Le genre, le sexe, le sexual," in *Sexual: La sexualité élargie au sens freudien: 2000–2006* [Paris: PUF, 2007], 157). All citations from this text are my translation.
21. Laplanche, "Le genre, le sexe, le sexual," 161.
22. To convey the specific meaning of sexuality in Freud, Laplanche coins the French neologism "sexual," which replicates the German word, to distinguish it from the common French word "sexuel." I have tried to render his "le sexual" with the phrase "the sexual proper."
23. Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey, "Psychoanalytic Theories of Gender Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 11, no. 2 (1983), cited by Laplanche, "Le genre, le sexe, le sexual," 166.
24. Laplanche, "Le genre, le sexe, le sexual," 173.
25. "Ce que le sexe et son bras séculier, pourrait-on-dire, le complexe de castration, tendent à refouler, c'est le sexuel infantile. Le refouler, c'est-à-dire précisément le créer en le refoulant" (Laplanche, "Le genre, le sexe, le sexual," 173).
26. "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory" was the title of a panel organized by Robert Caserio for the MLA Division on Gay Studies in Language and Literature at the 2005 MLA convention in Washington, DC. The respective positions of Caserio and panelists Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean were subsequently published, with the same title and under the rubric "Forum: Conference Debates," in *PMLA* 121 (2006): 819–28.
27. Judith Halberstam, "The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 823.
28. De Lauretis, *Freud's Drive*, 87.

29. José Esteban Muñoz, "Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 825.
30. Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3; Dustin Friedman, review of Michael Snediker's *Queer Optimism* and Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, *Textual Practice* 24 (2010): 179.
31. Halberstam, "Politics of Negativity," 824.
32. Lee Edelman, "Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 821–22.
33. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 27.
34. Edelman, *No Future*, 25.
35. As Caserio points out, "*No Future* rewrites Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*" ("Anti-social Thesis," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 820). Ironically, Edelman himself may miss the Freudian basis of his own Lacanian thinking when he relies on blatant misreadings of Freud such as the following: "The drives always seek a form of satisfaction that, from a Freudian or traditional moralistic standpoint, is considered perverse" (Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 211; cited in *No Future*, 114).
36. Edelman, *No Future*, 27.
37. Edelman, "Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory," 822.
38. Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory. Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): iv. This special issue gathered contributions to the conference by Tomás Almaguer, Sue-Ellen Case, Julia Creet, Samuel R. Delany, Elizabeth A. Grosz, Earl Jackson Jr., Ekua Omosupe, and Jennifer Terry.
39. De Lauretis, "Queer Theory," xi.
40. Notably Leo Bersani's *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and my *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
41. Edelman, *No Future*, 28.
42. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 213, 214.
43. Edelman, *No Future*, 75.
44. "At the most touchy point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, which is so hard pressed by reality, security is achieved by taking refuge in the child. Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again" ("On Narcissism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols. [London: Hogarth, 1953–74], 14: 91). Cf. Edelman's pun about the Child as "the one true access to social security" (*No Future*, 75): "Few can bring up a child without

constantly bringing it up,” where the *it* does not refer to the child but to the bringing up, the upbringing of the child, that is, the fact of being parents.

45. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 212; Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 55, 75.
46. Halberstam, “Politics of Negativity,” 823.
47. Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Olympia, 1968).
48. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973), xviii.
49. Foucault, *Order of Things*, xviii.