ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

Reading Literature and Theory at the Intersections of Queer and Class

Class Notes and Queer-ies

EDITED BY
MARIA ALEXOPOULOS,
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SUSANNE HOCHREITER
AND TIJANA RISTIC KERN

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Reading Literature and Theory at the Intersections of Queer and Class focuses on the crossover of queer and class, examining a range of texts across languages and genres and spanning nearly a century.

This collection of chapters considers the intersection of queer and class in relation to literary aesthetics, a locus in which the interaction between sexuality and class is rendered with lucidity. Each chapter puts forward class and its manifestations as central to queer analysis of literary and cultural texts in historical and contemporary contexts. The readings adopt Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional paradigm by pointing to its activist as well as literary precedents and elaborations.

These chapters emerged from a long-standing collaboration among three Central European universities whose faculty and graduate students established a joint queer literature and theory research seminar. They are supplemented by a roundtable discussion in which the contributing authors and their colleagues discuss how the concepts of queer and class in theory and (academic) practice have informed their current and previous work.

Reading Literature and Theory at the Intersections of Queer and Class is intended for scholars in gender and queer studies.

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Anna Vida is an artist, teacher, and writer from Vienna, Austria, whose work engages with various sociopolitical themes, with a special focus on queer feminism.

Preface and Acknowledgments

This collection stems from a years-long collaboration among scholars from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the University of Vienna, and the University of Warsaw. Since 2017, members of this research group – *Queer Theory and Literary Studies* – have met for regular workshops. The book emerges from the discussions and papers presented at these events, which culminated in three workshops held in 2022 and 2023, where the authors discussed the intersections of queer and class, workshopped each contribution, and conducted a two-part roundtable discussion.

Contributors to the collection articulate multiple perspectives on the relationship between queer and class. Each chapter focuses on a reading of a literary text or set of texts, which represent a range of genres: fiction, life writing, essays, and manifestos. This diversity of genres and approaches to reading them – the differences between them and their partial overlaps – is reflected in the dialogue that unfolds in the final chapter, a roundtable panel with a focus on methodologies of queer and class-inflected analysis.

In many ways, the subject matter attended to by the book is circumscribed by the unique conditions of its emergence. The participants were determined by the already-established collaboration, one taking place in a Central European, predominantly white, academic context. The collection is certainly not comprehensive and does not attend to all of the multiple and dynamic identity categories that intersect with class in literary texts. Instead, the volume is intended as an exemplary exercise in queer reading, establishing class as a key analytical category. One that, we hope, will be helpful in making space for other vital perspectives.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Kathrin Tordasi, who was a long-standing member of the reading group and helped formulate our focus on queer and class for the volume. We would also like to thank all those colleagues who have been involved in the reading group, especially Melissa Jacques, who has contributed to the topic of "queer and class," and Anna Vida, who created the illustrations for this book.

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Research Group *Queer Theory and Literary Studies*

Artwork: Anna Vida, *Café Gagarin*, Vienna, November 29, 2023

Introduction

Maria Alexopoulos, Tomasz Basiuk, Susanne Hochreiter, and Tijana Ristic Kern

The current sense of precarity experienced by many around the world reflects complex and sometimes contradictory circumstances. These include the climate crisis, ongoing and emerging military conflicts, disparities in income and wealth – both within and among national/regional economies – the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of fascism and far-right politics, globalization, and sometimes perceived threats to and from globalization. Within these myriad crises, the intersection of queer and class has become a salient topic. Exploiting the legitimate anxieties these issues provoke, populist politicians and their supporters on the right often juxtapose the so-called gender ideology (which includes issues as diverse as reproductive rights, self-determination of gender, access to vital health care for transgender youth, marriage equality, and gender and queer theory itself), against the interests of the increasingly precarious working class.[1] This sets up a false class/queer conflict, which is used to bolster the agendas of conservative and far-right political actors and create a contemporary version of the culture wars of the 1990s and early 2000s. This sociopolitical and discursive context makes it more urgent than ever to examine the intersections of queer and class. Such an examination became more visible with the attention garnered by Didier Eribon's memoir *Returning to Reims* (2009), which explores this prominent queer historian and philosopher's working-class background and the shame it caused him. Eribon sought to obscure his class origins in the early stages of his career but later overcame his unease to address and theorize class-based inequalities, especially in education. This gesture exemplifies the possibility of class reflexivity as a generative site of academic research.

This volume combines research on class from cultural and literary studies with queer political and theoretical perspectives. As most contributions addressing issues of social class, including those within queer theory, come from the social sciences, a perspective that critically illuminates figurations and narratives of social distinction within literary and artistic work is often missing. An examination of literary and artistic engagements with this topic involves asking which images, figures, narrative patterns, linguistic, and aesthetic practices have emerged as part of European and North American

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discourses about class. More specifically, how do these aesthetic practices shape the discourse on social belonging, privilege, poverty, and life perspectives? Each of the six readings in this volume puts forward class, its manifestations, and its effects, as central to queer analysis of literary texts in historical and contemporary contexts. The roundtable discussion centers queer and class in academic institutions and practices, for example, through attention to elitism and precarity. As the title of the collection suggests, we wayfind through these complex contexts with the aid of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 as a corrective for the single axis of identity framework that delegitimized the experiences of those who face discrimination based on multiple identity categories, particularly black women ("Demarginalizing").

This book complements a burgeoning body of work within Queer Studies concerned with the connections between queer and class. Notable among these are Yvette Taylor's *Working-Class Queers: Time, Place and Politics* (2023) and Matt Brim's *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (2020). Each attends to different areas; Taylor examines British working-class queer politics, whereas Brim critiques the American neoliberal university. Alongside Brim's monograph, there are several noteworthy essay collections examining queer and class within the context of academia: Kenneth Oldfield and Richard Gregory III Johnson's *Resilience: Queer Professors from the Working Class* (2008), a collection of personal stories written by self-identified "poor queer" academics; Churnjeet Mahn, Matt Brim, and Yvette Taylor's *Queer Sharing in the Marketized University* (2022) and *Queer Precarities in and out of Higher Education* (2023). Other notable titles in the field include two editions of Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (2000 and 2018) and Lisa Henderson's *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* (2013). Hennessy's work takes a Marxist feminist approach to examine late capitalism's effects on sexual identity, while Henderson's monograph attends to the intersectionality of class and sexual identities, specifically through the lens of culture and representation in a U.S.-American context.

Feminist research has a long tradition of reflecting on class but less frequently with a focus on lesbian women, who, as discussed in the first chapter, generated a number of meaningful analyses of class. In her seminal essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" (1997), Cathy J. Cohen calls for queer theory's "return" to intersectional analysis and politics that conceptualizes queer positionalities in terms of their relation of power rather than solely in opposition to heterosexuality. She advocates for "a left framework of politics" specifically foregrounding the economic and material implications of domination and marginalization (443). Cohen emphasizes a specifically *queer* leftist politics, "one that designates sexuality and struggles against sexual normalisation as central to the politics of all marginal communities" (444). For her, queer theory and queer

politics' opposition to heteronormativity necessitates consideration of both race and class.

Linda Garber makes similar observations in *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (2001). She reads lesbian poet-activist-theorists whose work counters the narrative that lesbian feminism and queer theory exist in opposition to one another, specifically by bringing the issues of class and race into the discussion of gender and sexuality. Garber argues that lesbian feminist theory is inherently a social constructionist project that exhibits a "simultaneity of staunchly grounded identity politics and fluid positionality" (1). She also recognizes 1970s Black lesbian theorization and their "deessentialized identity politics" as based on an intersectional analysis of oppression (7). For Garber, it is the exclusion of Black lesbian working-class voices from lesbian feminist theory that creates the contentions between lesbian theory and queer theory, and she calls for a focus on "pivotal writings of working-class/lesbians of colour whose articulations of multiple, simultaneous identity positions and activist politics both belong to lesbian feminism and presage queer theory" (8). Following Garber, in this volume, we read literary texts as important sites for the production of a queer theory of class.

A queer theory of race *and* class is developed by Chicana lesbian/queer feminist writers throughout the 1980s, most prominently by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa outlines the revolutionary and resistant "new consciousness," "*la conciencia de la mestiza,*" which breaks down the binaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture. Similarly, in her essay "La Güera" in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Moraga explores her in-between identity of "la güera" (the fair-skinned Chicana), whose white-skin privilege disappears once she embraces her lesbianism, and who experiences queerness as a bridge to understanding race and class oppression. For Moraga, all forms of oppression take a material, economic form, as she writes that in the U.S. "lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor" (26).

Lori Fox's recent collection of non-academic essays, *This Has Always Been a War: The Radicalization of a Working Class Queer* (2022), remobilizes Anzaldúa's and Moraga's revolutionary affect and politics for a radical queer critique of capitalist patriarchy that sees heteronormativity interlinked with class as axis of systemic violence. Likewise, Yvette Taylor's *Working-Class Lesbian Life: Classed Outsiders* (2007) represents a continuation of the body of writing and politics articulated by writers such as Cohen and Garber. She argues that the intersection of class and sexuality has rarely been made visible. In her book, she explores this absence by centering the experiences of working-class lesbians. By engaging with this varied and intricate body of work on queer and class, we seek to incorporate various historical, theoretical, sociopolitical, and identitarian concerns into our readings of literary works.

(Re)conceptualizing Queer and Class

A reclaimed term, "queer" has variously signified strangeness, the abject, the homophobic, and most recently, the intellectual and political paradigm of "queer theory." Resistant to categorization, at both the level of institutional disciplinarity and individual/collective identity, queer theory has nevertheless gained a significant institutional foothold, usurping its predecessor Gay and Lesbian Studies. Heather Love writes: "While old school lesbian studies remained institutionally marginal, chronically underfunded throughout the 1970s and 1980s, queer theory, with its Foucauldian pedigree, its critique of identity politics, has had an easier go of it" (102). If queer theory can be understood as having an origin, it might be Teresa de Lauretis's coining of the phrase in 1991 as a title for a special issue of the journal *differences*. In this choice, de Lauretis emphasized her intention to signify a differentiation from Lesbian and Gay Studies, particularly the disciplines' presumed prioritizing of white, middle-class, masculinity. It is significant to our collection that intersectionality was embedded in the term queer theory from the time of its inauguration. De Lauretis described queer theory as attentive "to race and its attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, geographical, and socio-political location" (viii).

Queer theory has come to signify a number of identities and practices. Indeed, Annamarie Jagose's 2015 claim that "[i]t seems everyone knows – or no one much cares – what queer means these days" (26) might resonate even more today. Even the one definitional continuity – "queer" as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 62); "queer theory" as synonymous as a "critique of the normative" (Eng 193) – no longer holds. Indeed, in 2015, the very journal that inaugurated the discipline published a new special issue: *Queer Theory Without Antinormativity*. The issue recognized "[h]eteronormativity, homonormativity, family values, marriage, and monogamy" as the central "objects of sustained queer critique" and asked how the discipline might proceed without this "primary allegiance to antinormativity" ("Queer").

The concept "class" is not any less wrought than the hoary concept "queer." In socioeconomic terms, class has two primary modalities. On the one hand, Marxist political economy focuses on who controls the means of production. According to this logic, one is among either the "haves" or the "have-nots." As the latter possess only their own time, they must exchange it for wages, allowing business owners to pocket any profits. On the other hand, class implies belonging to a social stratum, as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu under the aegis of habitus and of distinction, which is to say that such belonging is a matter of recognition by others.[2] A sense of belonging to a particular social class may result in political self-consciousness of the kind which Marx hoped to see motivating the workers' revolution. It may also remain latent, failing to manifest as a political stance.

Such historical, political, and theoretical distinctions do not hold for more contemporary labor arrangements in any precise way. To illustrate, one of the chapters in the present volume offers a reading of a German novel from the 1930s about the *Angestellte* (salaried, or white-collar workers), a category complicating Marxist analysis. Similarly, the present-day neoliberal economy dictates that employees should save for their retirement by investing in means of production, for example, by buying stock, which technically makes them capitalists, albeit on a miniscule scale. The recently popularized term "precarity" not only reflects this new socioeconomic condition but also lacks specificity with respect to who qualifies as the new "precariat," which is so clearly different from the Marxist "proletariat," as it encompasses many who are self-employed. It may even be said to encompass the rich whose fortunes are insecure due to shifting global economies or due to their own misguided decisions. Moreover, precariousness sometimes describes the human condition as such, notably in work by Judith Butler, who uses this term more broadly, giving it a universalizing sense while simultaneously offering it as a rallying cry of those economically and otherwise oppressed. Precarity and other novel ways of addressing class distinctions illustrate the shifting socioeconomic grounds which undergird definitions of class.

Whereas gay and lesbian identity politics were accused of ignoring categories of oppression outside of gender and sexuality, queer theorizing made a point of overcoming such blind spots.[3] In the ongoing cognitive mapping of power dynamics, class is rarely, if ever, simply absent. For example, class structure and certain familial forms are intimately linked: the patriarchal family, defined by paternal authority and the obedience it commands, finds itself replicated on the level of society at large in the relationship between individuals with seemingly legitimate decision-making powers over others and those expected to submit. Intersectionality has served well as not only a turnkey approach to the different planes of dominance and dependency which readings such as ours strive to illuminate but also a name for a complex web of crisscrossing scholarly, political, and economic interests that continue to evolve. Accordingly, this volume does not set out to secure any stable or consistent definitions of queer or class, or the relationship between them. Rather, in each chapter, the different ways that queer and class might signify, be inhabited, be transformed, or transform, unfold in the literary texts that they examine.

The term "class" also has linguistic resonances that evoke education and formalized indoctrination into normative social roles. This is a particularly literary way of thinking about language. Our collection is interested in the theoretical possibilities we can hear in these resonances. Similarly, our subtitle makes a literary play on the homophonic quality of *queer* – oblique and off-center – and *query* – to inquire. This gesture is intended to acknowledge that the theory literature produces is frequently aesthetic, occurring at affective registers often overlooked in formal academic theory.

Although the collection focuses more broadly on the categories of queer and class, the individual chapters demonstrate this intersection to be inextricable from other dimensions of identity and social hierarchies, especially race, gender, citizenship, age, and ability. The authors pay close attention to the intricate ways that the intersections of queer and class are articulated in each specific text, making sure not to produce readings that are overdetermined by the collection's focus. Queer theory's anti-identitarian impulses are sometimes positioned as incompatible with intersectionality's focus on discrete identity categories. Because the framework of intersectionality relies upon locating precisely how, where, and what dimensions of social identities intersect, it has been argued that an intersectional analysis requires an investment in (relatively stable) identities and thus in identity politics. However, we understand both queer theory and intersectionality as enabling a critique of forms of identity politics that focus on "one" axis of exclusion or uphold the idea of "unitary" marginalized communities (Crenshaw, "Mapping"; Sullivan). Crenshaw recognizes that antiessentialist perspectives (such as queer theory) have been useful for intersectionality as a framework, as they help inquire how socially constructed social categories are given meaning and assigned value by the hierarchies of power. As Crenshaw writes, "a large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful – is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" ("Mapping" 1296–97). Intersectionality and postmodern frameworks are therefore not contradictory but complementary, facilitating dynamic social analyses of the power relations and hierarchies that produce social categories. Furthermore, together they enable a comprehensive deconstruction of the categories at the conceptual level that opens a space for political engagement.

Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Beatrice Michaelis, and Gabriele Dietze suggest the concept of "corrective methodologies" as a way to make productive this tension between queer theory and intersectionality (80). They write that queer theory and intersectionality are similar in their critique of categorization processes but have been long separated by what the authors call a "double blank": the absence of the category of sexuality in the application of intersectionality in gender studies, and a "continuous silence on intersectionality in a predominantly white genealogy of queer theory" (78). Their concept of corrective methodologies aims to create a productive destabilization of both critical paradigms: queering can counter the solidifying of binary identities in intersectional analysis caused by the use of abstract social categories as categories of analysis, and an intersectional approach can help flesh out different and conflicting positionalities in queer theorizing (see also Dietze, et al.). "Corrective methodology" describes the ways in which each analysis (or the texts that are the object of analysis) endeavors to both queer the category of class and recenter class in queer theory's analytical challenge to heteronormativity.

Reading Queer and Class

In this volume, works by U.S. American, British, German, and French authors have been selected by contributors on the basis of their interests and scholarly expertise. Our authors read activist writing by U.S. lesbian feminists, particularly by women of color, as well as personal essays by U.S. gay men. A chapter on Isabel Waidner, a German author living in the U.K., another on Annie Ernaux remembering her deceased mother in her life writing, and a reading of Michelle Tea's picaresque memoir, offer (queer) alternatives to linear, teleological narrative forms. A comparison between Hans Fallada's canonical 1930s novel and Kristine Bilkau's contemporary rendition of precariousness in the neoliberal age traces the development of social class categories and of sexual mores in Germany over the past century. Furthermore, a reading of dark academia considers the queer politics of a genre which romanticizes the pleasures and privileges of academic life. This eclectic selection of primary texts hopes to afford multiple perspectives on queer and class while acknowledging the impossibility of a comprehensive perspective.

In the first chapter, "'And They Would Scream *Revolution!*': Radical Lesbian Class Action in 1970s Feminist Manifestos and Michelle Tea's *Valencia*," Maria Alexopoulos, Krystyna Mazur, and Tijana Ristic Kern recover and celebrate powerful early precedents for contemporary queer debates about class: lesbian manifestos of the 1970s. Looking at the historical context for contemporary analyses of queer and class, the chapter reads Radicalesbians manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), Charlotte Bunch's "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972), and "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977). To show the persistence of the manifestos' complex and intersectional queer/class theorizing, and to center the contribution of radical lesbian politics, the authors read *Valencia* (2000), a contemporary text by prominent U.S. queer activist and author Michelle Tea. Tracing radical political thought, as well as the sentiment and the affect of the manifesto genre through a contemporary example that intertwines life writing, fiction, and criticism, this chapter emphasizes the creative power of literary writing to articulate complex theoretical positions and mobilize political agency.

In "'Contact – however brief – outside the prison of my class is what I still desire.' Interclass sexual contact in personal essays by Bruce Benderson and Samuel R. Delany," Tomasz Basiuk compares personal essays by Bruce Benderson and by Samuel R. Delany which focus on public sex in New York City to address male–male interclass contact. Benderson criticizes the moral rigidity of identity politics which, limited by its middle-class provenance, is unable to account for the precarious existence of members of the underclass. Delany calls on Jane Jacobs to argue that infrastructure and institutions facilitating contact – sexual contact included – are likely to improve everyone's enjoyment of urban living. While Delany dedicates his essay to Benderson,

his approach is more consistently materialist and less romanticizing than Benderson's.

In "Empowering Aesthetics: Queer Temporalities and Precarious Existence in Isabel Waidner's Novels," Eveline Kilian focuses on Isabel Waidner's novels, comparing them to a more canonical approach to queerness and social mobility. Waidner disrupts the linearity of biographical and narrative time, as well as the psychological coherence of her (sometimes fantastical) characters to illustrate the precarity of immigrant existence and to allegorize economic exploitation and its effects on individuals and communities, as well as to suggest ways in which the powerless may exercise agency. Kilian contends that Karen Barad's agential realism and Jasbir Puar's supplanting of intersectionality with assemblage illuminate Waidner's experimental aesthetics as related to her politics.

In "About Worlds and Words – Habitus and Precariousness in Annie Ernaux's *A Woman's Story*," Julia Lingl and Naomi Lobnig ask how literature can address the intersection of precarity, gender, and vulnerability, and thus be part of a practice of resistance. The authors offer a queer reading of Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* (1988) which they combine with a theoretical debate on precarity and vulnerability as articulated by Judith Butler. In the memoir of the life of her mother, a turn-of-the-century Normandy-born woman, laborer, then shopkeeper and wife, Ernaux negotiates the precariousness of her mother's living conditions and the class difference that grows out of her own social ascent. Her writing can be understood as a political act by means of which social inequalities are made visible, the prevailing social order is disturbed, and hierarchies and power relations are unsettled.

In "Happy Little People: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Hans Fallada's *Kleiner Mann – was nun?* and Kristine Bilkau's *Die Glücklichen*," Susanne Hochreiter examines Fallada's novel, a classic of German-language literature. Published in 1932, the book responds directly to the economically catastrophic situation of the time, with unemployment and misery for large segments of the population. The protagonist is a clerk – one of the many white-collar workers who emerged as a new social type at that time. The central question in this context is how the new social type is conceptualized in literature with regard to desire and sexuality. By contrast, Bilkau's novel is set in the present and addresses the crumbling of the new middle class. Hochreiter examines how these two stories, constructed in parallel, are told, how they reflect political and economic discourses, and how the concept of class functions in each. Thus, the so-called social question and the question of gender and sexuality are critically presented in their interconnectedness.

In "Queering Dark Academia," Anna Kurowicka examines the genre of dark academia, whose appeal, she argues, lies in its upper-class aesthetics coupled with an (often illusory) promise of queer belonging. The protagonists of dark academia find themselves awed by the material and intellectual

pleasures of an exclusive university education. These pleasures are interwoven with a centering of queer intimacies. The university provides an escape from the pressures of heteronormative life in a spatial and temporal sense: the university lies in a "nowhere land" and is an opportunity for a socially sanctioned break from the expectation to lead a productive and reproductive life. Kurowicka reads Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and Lee Mandelo's *Summer Sons* (2021), which illuminate the entanglements of upper class and queerness in dark academia, arguing that the intellectual and emotional pleasures offered by the academic institutions and queer communities turn out to be illusory.

The collection concludes with the collectively authored "Roundtable: Queer and Class in Theory and (Academic) Practice." The book contributors are joined by further working group members, which provides a wider scope for reflections not only on central issues of the collection but also on the question of doing queer theory work in the context of academic practice. The roundtable gives an insight into the way that queer theory research and work survive in increasingly neoliberal(izing) academic climates. This discussion is an example of how through collective praxis, connections, interrelations, and investment in small research networks, pockets of resistance can emerge to increased individualization and precariousness within the academic sector at large and the humanities in particular.

Notes

1 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (Penguin Books, 2024); Sonia Corrêa, "Gender Ideology: Tracking Its Origins and Meanings in Current Gender Politics." *LSE Blogs*, 11 Dec. 2017; Clare Hemmings, "'But I Thought We'd Already Won That Argument!': 'Anti-Gender' Mobilizations, Affect, and Temporality." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2022, pp. 594–615; Ivan Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest* (U of Pennsylvania P 2014); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2016).

2 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard UP, 1996; Orig. *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, 1979); Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Regnery Publishing, 1996; Orig. *Das Kapital*, 1867).

3 There were active attempts in various communities to be as inclusive as possible, and feminist and lesbian feminist groups addressed various dimensions of identity early on and reflected on them theoretically. Nevertheless, central lines of conflict still ran not only along the dimension of "race" in particular but also along the dimension of "class." One example of this is the historical devaluation of butch-femme cultures, which are often related to more working-class lesbians.

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1 "And They Would Scream *Revolution!*"

Radical Lesbian Class Action in 1970s Feminist Manifestos and Michelle Tea's *Valencia*

Maria Alexopoulos, Krystyna Mazur, and Tijana Ristic Kern

Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, lesbians began to articulate and contest their exclusion from the mainstream women's liberation and gay liberation movements.[1] In both contexts, although lesbians were active and heavily represented, their issues and interests were often marginalized or outright denied. Discouraged by the sexism of both leftist circles and the male-dominated gay liberation groups, as well as the disavowal of lesbians by members of the mainstream women's movement (who feared that a conflation of lesbianism and feminism would hurt their cause), lesbian feminists contended that lesbians should occupy a central position in feminist politics. Influential publications of the time, such as the Radicalesbians' manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), Charlotte Bunch's "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972), and "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1973), argued that lesbian women and political lesbianism are uniquely positioned to challenge patriarchal domination.

Many of these demands were voiced by women of color, who criticized the fragmentation of mainstream feminism along the lines of race, class, and sexuality. This has not always been recognized, and as Clare Hemmings points out, the progress narrative of Western feminism often positions feminists of color outside of or in opposition to lesbian feminists, erasing the participation and contributions of lesbian women of color (53). Within both feminism and queer theory then, lesbian feminism has often been characterized as racist and essentialist, as well as redundant, unfashionable, or "anachronistic" (Freeman 8). In foregrounding lesbian feminist contributions – particularly those of women of color – to feminist and queer politics, we recognize that Western feminism has been shown to prioritize the interest of white, cisgendered women, and attempt to intervene in the erasure of the interventions of lesbian women of color within the feminist movement.

In this chapter, we center radical lesbian activism and writing of the 1970s, which we view as antecedents to contemporary queer and feminist

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theorizations of class. We begin with a discussion of three manifestos which were at the center of lesbian feminist activism in the U.S. in the 1970s: "The Woman-Identified Woman," "Lesbians in Revolt," and "The Combahee River Collective Statement." Then, we turn to contemporary lesbian feminist literary writing, specifically *Valencia* (2000), by Michelle Tea, which we read for echoes not only of the manifestos' queer and class critique but also of their affective strategies. Through our reading, we argue that radical lesbian manifestos should be seen as important models for contemporary queer and feminist engagements with the questions of class. However, our reading strategies resist an overly simplified linear narrative of the "progress" and "development" of queer theory; instead, we follow Carolyn Dinshaw's concept of "queer historical touches" between past and present which "form communities across time" (178).

For lesbian feminists in the 1970s, "lesbian" and "homosexual" were often understood not as essentialist expressions of gender identity or sexual orientation but rather as categories constructed in response to patriarchal heterosexuality, "possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy" (Radicalesbians 40). Lesbian feminists contended that "[i]n a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear" (Radicalesbians 40). Anticipating Adrienne Rich's later theorizing of "lesbian existence" in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), many lesbian feminists did not articulate lesbian identity as determined exclusively by sexual desire but rather insisted on a practice of political lesbianism, on women withdrawing sexual energy from men and refocusing it on their own lives and on the larger women's movement. For lesbian feminists, then, women's liberation could only be achieved via a critique of heterosexuality as a fundamental mechanism of patriarchy, and a commitment to resisting male domination in both the public and private spheres.

Feminist writing of the 1970s represents a vast scope of different genres and positions addressing the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, and race. In our chapter, we focus on radical lesbian feminist writing, specifically political manifestos. These works insisted that abolishing structures of racism and classism was inextricable from the project of transforming heteropatriarchy. Breanne Fahs writes:

> The sort of feminism found in early manifestos featured a starkly different brand of feminism from the more likeable, friendly, and benign one we have come to know today in institutions like education, government, and corporate leadership. Second-wave feminist manifestos honoured a sweaty, frothing, high-stakes feminist anger that swept through the writing. Their words burn and simmer even today, giving them an unexpected freshness.
>
> (3)

The manifesto's bold and adamant style amplified the radical propositions of second-wave lesbian feminists, but these texts and voices were largely excluded from the more "mainstream" white middle-class feminist theorizing, and later from queer theory (Moraga 177; Katz 288).

To make our claim for the presence and persistence of a lesbian feminist politics of sexuality and class, we identify and follow three threads central to their articulation: prefigurative politics, anti-respectability politics, and a critique of heterosexuality as an exploitative economic relation. By prefigurative, we mean a political orientation and practice in which "[a]ctivists model or prefigure the future society at a micro-level that they hope to realize at a societal level, thereby instantiating radical institutional transformation in and through practice" (Reinecke 1300). By anti-respectability politics, we mean the ways radical lesbian feminist communities embraced and advocated for living outside of heteropatriarchal capitalism's structures and its attendant economic and social determinants of success. Finally, by a critique of heterosexuality as an exploitative economic relation, we refer to an understanding of heterosexuality as grounded in economic exploitation, and to the theorization of "women" as a separate economic class (Bunch 9). The fight against heteronormativity thus becomes a class fight whose central strategy is, as Bunch writes in "Lesbians in Revolt," rejecting participation in the "nuclear family as the basic unit of production and consumption in capitalist society," and its gendered labor division and relations of domination and dependence (9).

Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970)

Radicalesbians formed in New York in 1970, first calling themselves "The Lavender Menace." Their original name referenced a remark made by U.S. American second-wave feminist Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In 1969, Friedan, then-president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), warned members that lesbians – who she referred to as the "lavender menace" – were a threat to the progress of the women's rights movement. As a response, Radicalesbians manifesto – "The Woman-Identified Woman" – was written to be distributed at the opening session of the *Second Congress to Unite Women*, on May 1, 1970. Members of the group distributed copies of the manifesto to the audience, and in a dramatic intervention, shut off the lights while 17 women formed a line in front of the stage wearing t-shirts printed with the words "LAVENDER MENACE." They invited the women of the conference to discuss lesbian issues and the two-hour session extended into numerous debates and workshops on the topic. They demanded that feminists acknowledge heterosexuality and homosexuality as constructed by patriarchal culture, and the importance of lesbians to the women's liberation movement. At the final assembly, a series of pro-lesbian resolutions was adopted by the Congress (Rapp).

"The Woman-Identified Woman" opens with a flamboyant and theatrical definition of "lesbian": "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion" (Radicalesbians 39). The work claims that to be a lesbian is to be in painful conflict with the world; the lesbian finds it impossible to "accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society – the female role" (39). The lesbian desires to not only set herself free but also share "the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women" (40).

Radicalesbians theorize heterosexuality as an oppressive institution, which along with homosexuality and lesbianism are socially constructed categories within a society characterized by sexism and male supremacy. Within this system, they claim, "the essence of being a 'woman' is to get fucked by men" and the denigrating connotations of the label "lesbian" function to discipline women who desire equality (41). Radicalesbians anticipate Victoria Hesford's theorization of the feminist-as-lesbian (2005) in their claim that accusing all those active in the Women's Liberation Movement of lesbianism is a strategy meant to discredit feminism and feminists, and to cause division among women. For Radicalesbians, life within male-identified society is psychically damaging, producing intense self-alienation and "a reservoir of self-hate" (43). They recognize that it is not only women but also men, who are harmed by heteropatriarchy, describing men as "emotionally crippled" by gender roles, "alienated from their own bodies and emotions" (40). The radical lesbian vision for achieving liberation is prefigurative and proposes creating new consciousness through women forging communities with one another, separate from men. Here, liberation via separatism is a psychic as well as material project. Women must "withdraw emotional and sexual energies from men and work out various alternatives for those energies in their own lives" (42). Only then, they claim, can transformation be achieved; through "the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other" (44).

Radicalesbians explicitly refer to heterosexuality as a "caste" system which gives women "second-class status" (42). Heterosexuality, they claim, maintains women's economic dependence on men and "binds us in one-one relationships with our oppressors" (43). This figuration of heterosexuality as an exploitative economic system is taken up and expanded upon in the manifestos of both the Furies and The Combahee River Collective.

Charlotte Bunch for the Furies Collective, "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972)

Founded in 1971 in Washington, DC, the Furies Collective was a separatist lesbian commune invested in activism and theory. Although short-lived, the Furies had a significant impact on feminist activism of the 1970s and on feminist theorizing of sexuality as a social construct and heterosexuality as

a political institution. The Furies shared communal living space, organized consciousness-raising groups, and established community-based educational and practical training for women. They also published a newspaper, *The Furies* (1972–1973), which disseminated their proposition of lesbianism as a political choice and lesbian separatism as an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist practice (Valk 221). The politics of *The Furies* reflect those of Radicalesbians (these two groups also had several members in common), critiquing the homophobic attitudes in the 1960s- and 1970s-women's movement, the sexism of the leftist movement, and the reformist masculinist agendas of the male gay movement. The collective went beyond embracing lesbianism as a private matter of sexuality, positioning lesbianism as a challenge to the patriarchal, white-supremacist, capitalist social order. As Charlotte Bunch, one of the founding members, writes on behalf of the collective in the manifesto "Lesbians in Revolt" published in the first issue of *The Furies*: "Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organized, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system" (8–9).

While they were not the first lesbian feminist group founded in the U.S., the Furies stood out in their practice of collective living and implementing feminist politics within their commune as a way of developing strategies for future activism, and as a source of theorizing from lived practice. The collective's focus on bringing together theory and practice embodies the radical feminist slogan of the period, "the personal is political" and prefigures the feminist social and political system that lesbian feminists were striving toward (Valk 223). The Furies' prefigurative politics were expressed not only through their own model of communal living and sharing of resources but also in their work to motivate women to reject heterosexual patriarchal structures and join the lesbian separatist movement. They also developed experientially and theoretically supported transformative politics and agenda for a feminist social order. In their theorizing, they decidedly rejected reformist politics and advocacy for equality and tolerance, because these "encourage . . . individual solutions, apolitical attitudes" and keep women from "political revolt and out of power" (Bunch 8). Lesbianism is theorized not only as a "sexual preference" but also as a subversive "choice," which is "political because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance. Since the Lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system" (9). The very act of identifying and living openly as a lesbian becomes a political act, one that threatens the hegemonic heteronormativity.

The Furies were conscious of the heterogeneity in the lesbian feminist movements and the women's movement and emphasized that lesbian identity does not constitute a radical feminist position without an awareness of the intersections of oppression and privilege and without an investment in politics beyond the individual. In their theoretical work, the Furies attended

to the intersections of gender and sexuality with race and class, and their politics specifically foregrounded anti-racist and anti-capitalist strategies. "Lesbians in Revolt" states that "sexism is the root of all oppression" by the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and that compulsory heterosexuality is the main tool of oppression and exploitation; however, racial and class oppression, though "secondary," are seen as inseparable in the analysis of patriarchal power relations. Intersectional analysis of heteronormativity is thus centered as crucial for the success of the politics of the radical lesbian movement, which, according to the Furies, must "face class and race as *real* differences in women's behavior and political needs" (emphasis ours, 9).

The 12 founding members of the collective came from different class backgrounds but were all white women; thus, class takes a more prominent place in the writing of the Furies than race. Their focus on heterosexuality as intrinsically economically exploitative, and the view of "women" as an economic class constituted in the relations of domination, anticipates Monique Wittig's undoubtedly queer "material lesbianism" which theorizes sex as a "political category" that submits women to a "heterosexual economy," and argues that the sexual difference and the "opposition of men and women" should be analyzed "in terms of class conflict" (xiii). The Furies' queer class critique also pays attention to material, embodied existence, for example, by foregrounding the role of the nuclear family and heterosexuality in producing and enforcing a gendered division of labor and by insisting that, by refusing the unpaid labor of reproduction and childcare, lesbians constitute an inherent threat to capitalism (9). The fight against heteronormativity thus becomes a class fight, and "Lesbians in Revolt" argues that lesbians reject the exploitative economics of heterosexuality by denouncing the partial privilege that comes from familial structures, such as safety, financial security, and social status, and accepting economic precarity as a political position instead. As Bunch writes, these radical lesbian feminist practices work toward expanding the Marxist critique of capitalism to account for gender and sexuality, by actively foregrounding women's and lesbians' roles in the fight for workers' rights (9).

The Furies further developed their class politics in the collection *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays from the Furies*, published in 1974. The critique of class in the collection is based on the experiences of the collective itself, and on the belief that "understanding class behavior among women is a useful, and perhaps essential, way to begin to understand class as a political mechanism for maintaining not only capitalism but also patriarchy and white supremacy. More simply, class, sexism and racism" (Bunch and Myron 7). The Furies identify middle-class respectability as a hegemonic tool of oppression. They argue that sex/gender are socially produced through class hierarchies, and that feminists need to denounce their class privilege and fight class division (Bunch and Myron 10–11). Their focus is on class relations *within* the feminist movement and in the essay "The Last Straw,"

Rita Mae Brown argues that white middle-class lesbians, though they lose most of their economic privileges, can still act as class oppressors by perpetuating middle-class values. Brown calls for abolishing middle-class attitudes that oppress working-class women, such as seeing institutionalized education as a marker of class belonging and mobility, using education to diminish working-class women, and practicing "downward mobility" as a political strategy. The Furies' critique of the middle class as embodying and perpetuating oppression based on class, sex, and race, alongside their dismissal of reformist politics, constitutes a radical rejection of politics of respectability and assimilation. Their anti-respectability politics are, however, nuanced, and highly critical of the "de-classing" practices of middle-class activists widely spread within social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As Coletta Reid and Charlotte Bunch write in "Revolution Begins at Home," addressing the class privilege of middle-class women is crucial to ending the "male supremacist system"; however, this is not achieved by practicing "voluntary poverty," but rather by sharing the resources, skills, and privileges obtained through class affiliations while actively rejecting middle-class attitudes and values (80–81). Reid and Bunch emphasize that fighting class oppression is the responsibility of middle-class feminists and they lay out an extensive list of suggestions for fighting middle-class privilege. In this way, the collection represents not only the collective's theoretical reflections on the intersections of sex, race, and class oppression but a guide to a radical lesbian feminist ideology and political practice.

The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977)

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) (1974–1980) was a Boston-based, black, lesbian, feminist, socialist grassroots organization. Their manifesto begins by tracing the diverse heritage of the group and thus foregrounding the intersectionality that defined their politics. The CRC was formed as the most recent alternative to various manifestations of political organizing over time: their immediate precursor, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), had been created as a reaction to 1970s white feminist organizations, which in turn had redefined, in feminist terms, the ideology of the U.S. Left, shown to be as patriarchal as it was radical in its class and economic politics (265). The NBFO had ties to the black liberation movement, which also influenced the strategies of both second-wave feminism and LGBTQ+ movements (265). This leftist, feminist, black heritage was redefined by the CRC in specifically nonheteronormative terms.

In 1977, the "Combahee River Collective Statement" introduced the term "interlocking oppression": "The most general statement of our politics at the present time," they say,

> would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the

> development of *integrated analysis and practice* based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.
>
> (our italics, 264)

This was an important precedent for the theory of intersectionality developed by the legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Today, intersectionality is one of the key frameworks demonstrating the necessity of moving beyond single-issue perspectives.

The specific issues women of color faced at the time – for example, "sterilization and sexual assault or . . . low-wage labor and workplace rights" – were not foregrounded in the feminist struggles of the 1970s (Taylor 5). Unlike white middle-class women from the suburbs, struggling with the "problem that has no name" and desirous of having professional lives, the majority of black women had to work to support themselves, often providing services to the middle-class, depressed subjects of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.

At the time of the writing of the manifesto, the CRC had been meeting for three years, "involved in the process of defining and clarifying [their] politics, while at the same time doing political work within [their] own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements" (CRC 264). Particularly important among those, says Barbara Smith in conversation with Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor, were socialist feminists who, unlike other feminist groups, "thought that addressing race and class were important" (Smith 50). With a double focus on "analysis and practice," the CRC project grew directly out of, and fed back into, their political activism. Their strategy, as defined in the Statement, emphasizes their prefigurative methodology:

> We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group. . . . We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice.
>
> (273)

The writers of the Statement redefine what may appear to be discrete, personal experiences in collective and political terms. They argue: "There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black Feminism, that is, the *political* realization that comes from the *seemingly* personal experiences of individual Black women's lives" (265–66). The original impulse for the creation of the CRC was anti-racist and anti-sexist. With black women "at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy," however, the Collective recognized the need to address economic oppression under capitalism (266). It is this complex political positionality that defines their class politics:

> We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We need to articulate the real class situation

> of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives.
>
> (268)

The CRC Statement's queer feminist politics of class recognizes the need for solidarity with men of color, both out of recognition of their shared oppression and in order not to weaken the movements for black rights. The statement posits whiteness as a form of oppression that impacts all people of color, and that is inextricable from class privilege. However, the CRC perspective on anti-respectability politics deviates somewhat from the previous two manifestos. For black women in the U.S., anti-respectability politics were readable as a sign of privilege. In an economy constructed through race-based exploitation – first as chattel slavery, then as indentured servitude and segregation, and later, via the prison industrial complex – to be black meant to suffer "social death," to be consigned to the space of negativity, and to be denied humanity (Wilderson III 16–17, 40–41). Because so little value is given to the bodies, emotions, lives, experiences, and perspectives of black women, it may be more radical to claim *respect* (agency, voice, space, the inviolability of one's body, and the legitimacy of one's point of view) than to engage in politics of anti-respectability.

Michelle Tea, *Valencia* (2000)

Thirty years later, at the turn of the millennium, in the afterglow of capitalism's "end of history" victory, we see in Michelle Tea's autobiographical novel *Valencia* a recapitulation of feminist-lesbian queerness and class-consciousness. *Valencia* relates Tea's adventures in the 1990s queer community in San Francisco's Mission District. Told from a diaristic first-person perspective, the novel takes us through the gritty, radical, and exciting world of dyke drama, bar-hopping, dancing, mushroom trips, sex work, radical safe sex in latex gloves, quick make-outs and, above all, love affair and heartbreak. While the "ironic, detached, even jaundiced" (Felski 109) tone of the novel's narrator stands in opposition to both the Pollyanna neoliberalism of the 1990s LGBT movement and the radical utopianism of 1970s lesbian feminism, the novel is also an obvious heir to lesbian feminism's radical postulates about the intersectionality of sexuality and class, if not race.

Valencia is a picaresque, a novelistic genre which originated in Spain in the sixteenth century. A tale of adventures, the picaresque typically features a lower-class, wandering hero. An uprooted newcomer to San Francisco, Michelle shares the fate of other Picaros, who are often without a home and drift somewhat aimlessly from one social milieu to another, from one employer (or "master") to the next. Her precarious economic position, with irregular gigs as her only source of income, reflects the precarity which defines the lives

of other Picaros, who also rely on their (often criminal) craftiness to get by. Difficult to pin down, ever-moving, wearing masks, the Picaro's status as outsider facilitates for Tea a privileged vantage point from which to observe the social reality of her age. And she is an uncommonly good observer: restrained neither by the social norms of propriety nor by the current ideological frames, the Picara is free to enjoy a distanced, critical position.

The picaresque allows Tea to write an unsentimental, realist text with a narrator who is a social outsider and who occupies a radical, anti-assimilationist position. The genre's affinity with satire and the instability of the protagonist persona make it particularly suitable to the post-second-wave, post-AIDS-activism queer landscape of the 1990s. While the chivalric romance tended to be didactic *and* politically conservative – supporting the existing social hierarchies and norms, and reproducing the values of the ruling class – the picaresque constituted a reaction to both the reigning literary genres and the dominant ideology. The reaction against the chivalric romance materializes in the lesbian picaresque as a reaction to not only gay and lesbian romance but also realist coming out narratives (Felski 114), and the heroic accounts of the early lesbian and gay movement (so often told from the unreflective white, cis, middle-class perspective).

A class critique is embedded in the performance of the picaresque genre. The picaresque tales are first-person narratives (often autobiographical) which tend to adopt episodic structure and follow accidental turns of plot. Indeed, in terms of its structure, *Valencia* works with parataxis rather than linearity and logic of cause and effect. Neither the book's chapters nor the protagonist's narrative advances in a linear way. The fate of the novel's narrator, Michelle, seems to be determined by chance (as when her detour to Arizona is decided by the flip of a coin) (20). Decisions seem to play little role in the unfolding of events: "[M]aybe I should leave for good," she muses at some point, "I never meant to stay in San Francisco" (23). The precarity of life in late capitalism is therefore inscribed in *Valencia*'s structure.

Like all picaresque characters, Michelle is a social other, identifying with "hideaways and outcasts," "outlaws," and "fugitives" (23, 100, 103). She has left her family behind in Boston and consistently fails to be "a productive member of the society"; her "entire history of employment" is "full of horribly precarious arrangements" (43). "I wasn't cut out for it, employment," she admits (43). At some point, like the proto-picara of the English language, Moll Flanders, she finds employment as a sex worker. Other than that, she takes up temporary jobs or engages in scams. Like the Furies and Radicalesbians before her, Michelle embraces anti-respectability politics and rejects the futuristic logics of reproduction and material investment. The implicit critique of the normative ideologies of late capitalism takes the form of a resolute refusal to participate in their logics, to speak their language (of accomplishment, acquisition, and upward mobility). In *Valencia*, this refusal is in fact a necessary component of queerness.

Michelle feels she belongs to an "in-between place," "always on [her] way, never arriving" (24). This undetermined, elusive status places her between various life options and between clashing discourses, a situation which often results in humor; in this rather carnivalesque world, she becomes a variety of Michelles, depending on where and with whom her successive adventures land her. The novel's protagonist can be read as an embodiment of the Butlerian critique of identity categories – a condition taken up with gusto by the directors of the book's film adaptation (*Valencia: the Movie/s*, 2013), where each of the novel's chapters, adapted by a different director, also has a different person perform as Michelle. The film's character of "Michelle" unfolds in ways that allow for a truly intersectional representation of the queer community – across gender, race, and time.

Michelle's own time is governed by her crushes, yet unlike heteronormative, monogamous love stories, instead of the clear, single, well-defined line of development, with a period of wooing, followed by the phase of obstacles, crises, and inevitable climax, in *Valencia* the love objects and consequently the narrative lines are multiple and, in fact, each of the stories is realized according to a different dynamic. In that sense, a queer love story is a perfect fit for the picaresque, as the proper heterosexual romance obviously precludes the heroine's multiple adventures. Arguably, classic fictional genres grant multiple adventures only to male heroes, or, at best to girl children and "loose" women. Michelle inhabits what has come to be defined as "queer time," governed by its own (il)logic. In Jack Halberstam's words:

> For people who either stay outside of reproductive logics or refuse the futuristic logics of investment, insurance, and retirement and for those who live outside of the workforce or in vexed relations to money, work, and family, other temporal schemes exist, and other temporal schemes guide the life narrative.
>
> (53)

Michelle, neither interested in reproduction nor making plans for the future, lives for the passion of the day; instead of focused on progress and driven by aspirations for success, her life trajectory is, rather, paratactic.

An ad hoc zine party organized by Michelle in the office of an anarchist labor union illustrates well this temporal logic and gives a relatively direct comment on the class politics of Tea's novel. Michelle, who was fired from her employment with the labor union, is still in possession of the keys to the office and often sneaks in to use the office equipment. From the window she has a view of "her" San Francisco: the strip club, the peep show, the check-cashing place, sex workers, drunken brawls. One night she begins inviting others in:

> [T]he kids I invited would stand on the street six stories down, the lively corner of 7th and Market, and they would scream *Revolution!* and I would take the elevator downstairs and let them scurry in. . . . [E]veryone who

> came would have to write something and it would get printed on the computer and I would stick it all together with a gummy yellow glue stick and crank it out on the xerox machine.
>
> (44)

"Crank it out," the term left over from the times of mimeograph, suggests a continuity of the revolutionary spirit of the trade unions. However, that spirit seems to have left the anarchist labor union itself, together with its "grand martyr" Joe Hill, whose ashes are kept in the office, the union now no more than "a historical society of irritating gray-haired bureaucrats" (62).

The short-lived zine collective works by breaking into the system, stealing its resources, and creating spontaneous political art, with neither a prior program nor leader to determine the shape of their activity. It does not provide a blueprint for potential future activism; the zine parties may continue to happen but in an unplanned, spontaneous, unreproducible manner. A group accidentally brought together around one common task, without a past or a future, the zine party is the form of activity that supplants activism spurred by the AIDS epidemic, as well as old-school leftist organizing. The zine's contents include an "anti-capitalist tirade" against one of the girls' grandfather; "a bitch about the O.J. Simpson thing"; "a love manifesto"; a tongue xerox; a story about stealing from one's job; and a story about waiting in line for food stamps. While common threads may be discerned in this list of disjointed topics, as with the lesbian feminist manifestos, it is not necessarily coherence, nor quality that constitutes its politics, but the very energy generated by the common task and produced by the form. Like the manifesto, which, as Fahs points out, was "ephemeral, hurled off balconies and out of speeding automobiles," so is the zine "perhaps never meant for careful study or careful curation" (6). Thus, the manifesto and the zine share an affective valence. An unlikely coupling in many ways, Michelle Tea's *Valencia* and the 1970s feminist manifestos thus "touch," queerly, forming a community "across time" (Dinshaw 178).

Writing from the post-*Valencia* (post-queer-1990s) perspective, Matilda Bernstein Sycamore is openly nostalgic for the lost queer community of the Mission District. Acknowledging that the community around Valencia Street was pushed out by the forces of gentrification, she points out that the LGBT community was itself partly responsible for the loss of radically queer San Francisco, which today, argues Bernstein Sycamore,

> [m]ore than any other US city, is the place where a privileged gay (and lesbian) elite has actually succeeded at its goal of becoming part of the power structure. Unfortunately (but not surprisingly), members of the gaysbian elite use their newfound influence to oppress less privileged queers in order to secure their status. . . . This pattern occurs nationwide, But San Francisco is the place where the violence of this assimilation is most palpable.
>
> (par. 1)

Be it gay bar owners calling "for the arrest of homeless people (many of them queer youth)," "a gay-owned real estate company advis[ing] its clients how best to evict long-term tenants, many of them seniors, people with HIV/AIDS and disabled people," or "wealthy Castro residents . . . [fighting] against a queer youth shelter, because . . . it would get in the way of 'property values'," the affluent gay faction of San Francisco residents is shown to drive a wedge within queer community (par. 5–6). For Bernstein Sycamore, queerness is also a class-consciousness, which makes her critical of the neoliberal economy and aware of the need for an alliance with other threatened communities.

Conclusion

Michelle Tea's *Valencia* is but one example of lesbian feminist prose that takes up the class-conscious heritage of the feminist second-wave manifestos. Seminal works such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Eileen Myles's *Chelsea Girls* (1994), but also the collection of spoken-word queer performance transcripts, *Sister Spit: Writing, Rants & Reminiscence from the Road* (edited by Tea in 2012), and Tea's own *Against Memoir: Complaints, Confessions and Criticism* (2018), often autobiographically inflected, all represent an intergenerational engagement with the history and politics of class, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. These authors consciously claim the radical lesbian feminist heritage of the "previous generations" and write themselves into the interstices of the period's queer and feminist thinking. In doing so, they defy the linear progress narrative of feminist and queer theorizing and establish a space of radical queer/class politics that is enabled by multiple and multiplying queer touches. In *Against Memoir*, Tea considers the central position of class struggle in the radical queer politics of the Sister Spit collective, of which she was a founding member:

> You know how earlier eras of feminism sort of forgot that there were poor women? Or, the lavender menace of queer women butting in with their own experiences, messing up the hetero sisters' stab at media acceptance? I think that the people who made up Sister Spit, the all-girl performance tour that tore up the United States at the end of the last century, were the living, breathing, writing responses to those particular overlooked patches of feminist experience. We were the lavender menace and the broke-ass menace, we were the never-been-to-college menace and the drunken menace, we were the shove-your-dogma menace and the my-poetry-can-beat-up-your-theory menace.
>
> (271)

With this "we," Tea invokes a contemporary queer feminist collective that haunts and is haunted by earlier eras of feminism – one that destabilizes generational thinking. Eileen Myles, over twenty years Tea's senior, articulates

this poignantly in "My Intergeneration," when she writes about joining the younger Sister Spit artists: "I can't believe I've found my generation at last" (par. 10). In the work of writers such as Tea, Myles, Feinberg, and activist collectives such as Sister Spit, we read echoes of the early lesbian feminist manifestos. In dialogue across generations, these works insist on the centrality of anti-normativity and anti-respectability to queer artistic creativity, foreground and acknowledge both the failures and the life-saving importance of feminism, and remind us why class-invested feminist politics need to be (re) centered in queer politics.

Note

1 This chapter focuses on lesbian feminist and queer feminist work produced within the Anglo-American, particularly the U.S.-American context. However, these political and theoretical impulses emerged alongside and in dialogue with feminist theorizing and activism in multiple national contexts (e.g., French material feminism).

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2 "Contact – However Brief – Outside the Prison of My Class Is What I Still Desire."[1] Interclass Sexual Contact in Personal Essays by Bruce Benderson and Samuel R. Delany

Tomasz Basiuk

Class is sometimes portrayed as a category analogous to gender, race, and sexuality, but it does not sit easily within that grouping. One reason is the obstinate materiality of class. While thinking about identities as social constructs may not erase their material bases, race can be muddled by genetic expression and uncertain lineage, and non-binary gender identification may obfuscate this category's relationship with corporeal materiality. Class, however, is capable of being expressed in numeric, monetary terms that are strikingly objective. Another way in which class stands out is the highly nuanced way it is signaled. While there is certainly more than one way to be gendered or racialized, people may be exceptionally sensitized to "reading" the class expression of others and mindful about how they perform their own class positionality (Bourdieu). Finally, unlike race and gender, and more recently, sexuality and disability, class is not a protected category, and class difference is not admissible grounds for anti-discriminatory regulation.[2]

Kadji Amin has argued that queer theory is premised on what Robyn Wiegman calls object lessons, that is, historical examples which prompt and illustrate its argument; he notes, however, that authors typically avoid the lessons which trouble the field's egalitarian and overwhelmingly progressive impetus. By contrast, Amin frames his remarks as embracing negativity in a manner analogous to Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007). He focuses on the sanitization, in queer thought, of Jean Genet's legacy, that is, a discursive elision of forms of same-sex contact premised on inequality, including in criminal contexts: an elision which hagiographically enshrined Genet as a queer rebel. Amin ponders also how modern homosexuality may have emerged from pederasty, noting that such troubling provenance, while acknowledged by Michel Foucault, remains unpalatable.[3] Interclass sexual

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contact – the topic of the present chapter – is another negative object lesson, given its anti-egalitarian premise.

The two U.S. authors discussed in the present chapter contribute to thinking negatively about queerness by virtue of their interest in (definitionally unequal) cross-class sexual contact; their very acknowledgment of economic stratification as intertwined with sexual behavior and desire is likely to produce unease. Moreover, these authors express skepticism about the usefulness – especially where class is concerned – of a liberationist discourse premised on discursively conceived identities and, by extension, on these identity categories' subsequent intersectional elaboration. While their arguments differ, both speak out against urban gentrification as limiting interclass contact.

Bruce Benderson is a second-generation American of Russian Jewish descent who was raised comfortably middle class in New Jersey and who lives in New York, where he used to spend time among sex workers and drug users in Times Square. He is more widely published in France than in the U.S. with the exception of his prolific work as a translator of French literature. In his essays, collected in *Sex and Isolation* (2007), a volume which includes the earlier *Toward the New Degeneracy* (1997), in a novel titled *The User* (1995) reflecting his Times Square experience, and in a memoir *The Romanian. Story of an Obsession* (2006), Benderson examines his erotic fascination with men from the lower classes, exulting especially in their street smarts, which he portrays in stark contrast to middle-class dullness. (In *The Romanian*, he draws a parallel between the magnetic pull which the underworld exerts on him and the attraction which his down-and-out father had for his wife, Bruce's professionally and socially successful mother, thus suggesting that fascination with the underclass is not uniquely a feature of same-sex desire.) "Contact – however brief – outside the prison of my class is what I still desire," he avows, hoping for a personal and creative reinvigoration (*Toward* 60). Benderson's negativity with respect to queer thought consists not only in acknowledging his cross-class attraction but also in harboring the problematic notion that economic deprivation can yield existential benefits. He also condemns the liberal preference for a politics premised on identity, and hence on coming out, as serving the interests of the middle class while ignoring the living circumstances of the lower classes. Through the prism of his personal experience of interclass contact, Benderson seeks to present those circumstances more faithfully than identity politics has done.

Samuel R. Delany, a middle-class African American and native New Yorker, is a prolific author of science fiction known also for his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988) about his bohemian life on the Lower East Side and for his personal essays, in particular, the collection *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), dedicated to Benderson. Unlike Benderson, who speculates about how the lower and the middle classes differ, Delany focuses on the ways that urban and institutions may facilitate interclass contact, sexual and otherwise, making everyone's life more enjoyable. Delany does not

romanticize the lower classes as a source of invigorating energies. His negativity is thus distinct from Benderson's: rather than revel in the lives of those down-and-out or denounce gay identity politics as a middle-class endeavor, Delany ignores the discourse of identities by focusing on the materiality of urban infrastructure and institutions.

The following discussion is based almost exclusively on a narrow selection of both authors' work. While this is primarily due to limitations of space, Benderson's *Toward the New Degeneracy* and Delany's "Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" (included in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*) are especially clear expressions of these writers' ideas on interclass contact. Both authors bring up race, albeit in ways merely tangential to their argument about class.

Bruce Benderson

Benderson's thesis in *Toward the New Degeneracy* is that, through interclass contact, the creative artist may tap into vital energies which stem from the precarious socioeconomic condition of the underclass. These energies are stirred up by the harsh circumstances which compel members of the lower classes to rely on their wits. Benderson sees their constant hassling and impromptu jockeying as boosting their ingeniousness, as well as their libido. By contrast, middle-class lives are more predictable and even dull due to the security of economic privilege.

Benderson credits his concept of the underclass to two sources which he creatively misreads: Max Nordau's writings on degeneration (*Entartung*) in the early 1890s and Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro." Nordau, a Hungarian Jew who spent most of his life in Paris and was known as an ardent Zionist, criticized modern art, for example, *pointilisme* and Zolaesque naturalism, as symptomatic of the hectic nervousness pervading the age and epitomized by urban life. Without seconding Nordau's condemnation of some artists as degenerates, Benderson echoes the observation that modernist aesthetics was characterized by an interest in what mainstream society deemed unwholesome and a sense that old hierarchies were in a state of upheaval; in effect, writers and artists most personally affected by this cultural condition – including those who themselves were down-and-out – were the ones to portray it most convincingly.[4]

Benderson draws a similar conclusion from "The White Negro," a meandering meditation on the hipster as an existentialist in which Mailer portrayed contemporary society as adversarial to the self-aware individual. Where Nordau had been concerned with the nerve-wrecking consequences of modern upheaval, Mailer worried about normative ossification preventing individuals from achieving their full potential. In seeking remedy for such moral stultification, he turned to the African American – in the parlance of the Fifties, the "Negro" – whose experience of unequal access made him adept at making-do

with whatever limited means were at his disposal: deprived of the smothering protections that come with privilege, the African American was forced into an existentialist position by his circumstances and was therefore a suitable role model for the hipster.

In describing the model hipster, Mailer also invoked the figure of a psychopath, that is, someone overlooking moral norms to focus on their own needs in a manner typical of those at the highest and the lowest social rungs but not those in the middle. Mailer lists "many politicians, professional soldiers, newspaper columnists, entertainers, artists, jazz musicians, call-girls, promiscuous homosexuals and half the executives of Hollywood, television, and advertising" (Mailer, section III). The psychopath is like the Negro in that (s)he does not fall back on inherited privilege or received strategies but relies on cunning. So, too, the (implicitly male) hipster, who sees that the system is crooked and, rather than follow rules observed by squares, breaks away for the sake of his personal freedom, thereby giving his vivacity a boost: "The emphasis is on energy because the psychopath and the hipster are nothing without it since they do not have the protection of a position or a class to rely on when they have overextended themselves," notes Mailer (section IV). Notably, Benderson glosses over Mailer's point that psychopathy determines success also at the upper echelons of society. The omission leads him to exalt the troublesome energies of the lower class as though they were somehow proper to it.

Where Mailer posits race as epitomizing the absence of privilege, Benderson substitutes the underclass. "The White Negro enjoyed a special link to urban ghetto culture, which kept him marginal but vital," he remarks, explaining that underclass positionality produces the energy which Mailer ascribed to the hipster – the kind of energy which Benderson, too, finds existentially and culturally, as well as erotically, invigorating (*Toward* 32). To reiterate, Benderson's determinedly class-based view is that someone who is permanently down-and-out is compelled to live at odds with norms usually adopted by those who are economically secure, for example, as far as property rights are concerned. Such an individual is also likely to harbor a sense of temporality suitable to their situation because, living hand to mouth, they may have no opportunity to plan out their life in stages, such as by saving for retirement.

Disparate stations in life suggest that avowing one's sexual identity is more advisable for members of the middle class than for others. However, the living circumstances of the underclass, decisive for grasping its cultural condition, are frequently ignored. Benderson asserts that "(l)ack of class consciousness is America's glaring, unspoken sin," suggesting that middle-class positionality has become transparent to the point where it seems to typify all other positionalities, including sexual identity (*Toward* 51). It is only by turning to lower-class experience that we can see class difference at all.

Benderson testifies to his own disenchantment with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, in which he had participated, precisely because of its patent insouciance about class difference:

> Why, then, this feeling of irrelevancy as the years of the 1970s rolled by? Perhaps it was a foreshadowing of the limitations of identity politics. It would become apparent – a decade later – that a politics concerned with who you are is a politics of a particular class and that all it can offer to assimilated minorities – be they black, female, or gay – is a holding cell that serves to define them as a particular subculture of that class.
>
> As the 70s progressed, identity politics would not only become the only politics of the Left, but it would be shaped by minorities within the educated classes, whose need for assimilation would recast subversive elements of society – homosexuals, ghetto inhabitants, or alcoholics – as normal people who participated at least mentally in wholesome middle class life and were in need of protection and help.
>
> (*Toward* 35)[5]

However, underclass realities will not be accommodated by neatly delineated identity positions. With reference to bisexuality and circumstantial homosexuality in men from the underclass, Benderson contends that identity categories suitable for the Anglo-Saxon middle class belie the experience of others: were a man who regularly and openly has sex with women but who also, occasionally and in secret, has sex with men, forced to adopt an identity label announcing this preference, he would likely forego this libidinal investment; coming out as bisexual or gay would disrupt his sexual pattern and effectively erase it. "There are sexual impulses which are too fragmented to base an entire sociological identity upon. To brand them simply as 'closeted' is intolerant and presumptuous," Benderson holds (*Toward* 49).

Affirming an unmalleable sexual identity may well be a prerogative of those with economic advantage to protect them; their advantage may even be reinforced by maintaining a stable sexual persona. By contrast, those who live day to day and hand to mouth may have neither time nor resources to assert an identity with the usual discursive and gestural rites. Declaring an identity may work in their disfavor, for example, when they resort to paid sexual work or when their sexuality becomes a bargaining chip in some way. Benderson describes an ostensibly straight male underclass acquaintance who has been jailed and whom Benderson is trying to help. He realizes that the man's homoerotic teasing – for example, when he calls from the prison – is his way of repaying Benderson for his efforts to get him out: a kind of transaction. Benderson marvels at the man's ability to know exactly how to play this game, which suggests that his ostensible straightness is not exclusive. The anecdote illustrates how easily identity positions are cast aside when they no longer serve one's purpose, suggesting that their rigidity is easily overstated.

> In the Anglo-Saxon world . . . the surface claims an exact match with what goes on underneath. But not so in the culture of poverty, where the bravado of appearances is one thing and the off-the-record experiences and feelings

> are another. A man's got to have an image but he must not become a slave to it.
>
> (*Toward* 48)[6]

The above assertion may startle for the reason named by Amin: it invokes a negative object lesson for queer thought, which has neglected to problematize coming out (avowal) as a strategy geared to the interests of a particular class. Meanwhile, Benderson acknowledges that the playing field of sexual contact is unequal and that the smoke-and-mirror strategies of erotic cunning subvert the rhetorical hegemony of avowal and question its implied transparency. And yet progressive academics have censored libidinal expression and reductively misrepresented or elided the variety of sexual experience in a manner particularly offensive to the poor:

> The devaluation of some of the more sociologically authentic, sensual, deranged, and aesthetic literary texts we have began with the aim of liberation from imposed norms and ended up by boilerplating the burgeoning id, which is by definition obscene and aggressive, but which is the fount of energy for the creative artist. When it comes to discussing outsider culture, academics have invented distanced cynical terms like "performance" or "transgression." Giving voice to the reality of poverty in all its lustiness, energy, and degradation has become taboo, and it is actually considered a slight to a poor person's integrity to tell the reality of his cultural experiences.
>
> (*Toward* 51)

Benderson reinforces his analysis with personal testimony to point out how liberating it feels, to him, to maintain sexual contacts beyond the framing of middle-class positionality and of avowed sexual identities. "(T)here is a certain depth of need or disorganization at which a person will stick it in anybody or let anyone at all stick it in," Benderson notes without a hint of moralizing (*Toward* 52). On the contrary, as one equipped by birthright with the moral standards of the bourgeoisie, among which avowing the identity slot one occupies is requisite, he finds the taxonomic chaos more typical of the underclass, and specifically of the urban ghetto, attractive and inspiring. "In this world, I profit from the excitement of dangerous underclass energies, from which my first-generation immigrant parents, struggling for security, spent a lifetime protecting me. I come home contaminated with inspiration, then sleep it off until the afternoon" (*Toward* 55).

Samuel R. Delany

Delany, too, combines personal testimony with argument in "Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" to insist on the value of interclass contact, sexual contact included. Without ascribing any special qualities to members

of any one class, he argues that urban spaces and institutions can facilitate cross-class contact, a view which aligns with that expressed by some historians of urban sexuality.[7] Delany's essay, originally delivered as a Kessler lecture at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York in 1997, forms one-half of his *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* alongside "Times Square Blue," a personal essay first conceived in 1996 (xiii) in which Delany describes his years of frequenting gay porn movie theaters in 42nd Street and Times Square in New York City, meeting tricks and lovers, and cultivating friendships, while also seeing the neighborhood succumb to widespread addiction to crack and, subsequently, to gentrification – something which Benderson, too, bemoans: "What used to be sordid is being replaced by pseudo" (*Toward* 56).

While the disappearance of inexpensive (and disreputable) commercial infrastructure catering to the sexual needs of men having sex with men is the focus in Delany's "Times Square Blue," the same Manhattan neighborhood, replete with porn theaters and similar establishments, figures prominently in "Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red," an essay drawing on Jane Jacobs' concept of contact and her discussion of how the arrangement of urban space can facilitate contact or prevent it. Jacobs has famously discussed the sidewalk of a commercial thoroughfare to argue that mixed use of city space – especially the combination of residential buildings and small businesses serving individual customers – promotes contact, making city space safer because of regular human traffic, as well as more pleasantly inhabitable than would be a fragmentation of that space into areas with a single purpose, such as city blocks of only residential housing, or only office buildings, or only shops. Restaurants located in a mixed neighborhood are more likely to stay open for business at different times of day and night, perhaps serving lunch to office employees and dinner to residents, which can make them profitable while also making the area more congenial to those living and working there. Delany, too, thinks of urban infrastructure as determining the ease of contact. For example, in a city park with easy access to restrooms people living in the neighborhood will likely be less apprehensive about speaking to strangers because they would be unconcerned about being asked, by someone they have just met, to use their bathroom (*Times Square Red* 126–27).

Delany's argument hinges on a distinction between contact and networking. A conference, an example of networking, brings together people with common interests, and it greatly facilitates the exchange of information and ideas but not so access to limited resources. Conference participants often compete with one another, for example, academics may find themselves competing for jobs or research funds, while writers at their conferences may compete for publishers' attention. By contrast, contact occurs between random strangers, perhaps when queuing at a cash register, strolling, or riding together in a subway car. Unlike networking, contact happens spontaneously and without a particular expectation, and that is why it is more likely to result in a valuable resource being given up by someone who has no use for it. Delany

describes buying a functioning vacuum cleaner sold cheaply by a man in the street and, on another occasion, giving away an extra copy of a book to a stranger working on a dissertation.

Delany contends that interclass contact used to be more common, for example, landlords met with tenants when collecting rent. This regular contact made it easier for them to reach consensus about which repairs were more urgent than others, or to decide that a tenant would replace a leaking faucet in the apartment and deduct the cost from next month's rent. But as the class divide between landlords and tenants grew, the custom has all but vanished. Delany does not contend that interclass contact eliminates class difference but that it can render interaction between individuals from different classes less adversarial, making everyone's life more pleasant.

Delany's main interest lies with infrastructure and institutions enabling interclass sexual contact between men. Delany has previously noted that certain types of cruising grounds have impacted the rise of gay visibility by rendering men seeking sex with other men conspicuous to each other, making them aware that they were part of a larger demographic. While public toilets limit users' mutual visibility with physical partitions, some other cruising spots do the opposite: Delany describes a gay bathhouse in which men were having sex in plain view of other such men and recalls a police raid on a cruising area in Chelsea, which caused a surprisingly large crowd of men to emerge from under various covers they had been using for their sexual activities as they ran from the officers, an experience that produced in Delany a sense of belonging to a group bigger than normally met the eye (*The Motion* 291–92).

In the two essays comprising *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Delany is particularly interested in opportunities for interclass contact afforded by such institutions as porn theaters, which he patronized over the years. The crucial benefit from these encounters to Delany has been the pleasure of contact, both sexual and not. While this assertion of pleasure is a matter of personal testimony, it also brings to mind the classic sociological discussion of sociability offered by Georg Simmel, who argued that sociability begets new forms of sociality by serving as a laboratory of sorts: a space in which new personae and new forms of interaction may be tried out without a need to fully commit to them; one of Simmel's examples is coquetry (258–59). Delany's contact is similar to Simmel's sociability because both can be pleasant and because they are non-committal to begin with but carry potential consequentiality.

While Delany's motivation for his pursuits obviously encompasses sexual desire and while his preferred venues' modus operandi is that they provide a safe space for anonymous sex, they turn out, in his account, to promote also other forms of contact, including contact across class barriers. Some friends and lovers whom Delany meets while cruising are houseless, and some of them he helps with simple gestures, such as buying a man a sandwich. To eliminate opportunities for such contact and thus to frustrate desire by

eliminating porn theaters in the process of urban gentrification represents a loss that would limit his enjoyment of the city and banish opportunities for cross-class interaction. Delany argues this point in a fictionalized exchange:

> A conservative commentator might ask, "Well, why are these beneficial nonsexual (i.e., safe) encounters threatened by the severe restriction of sexual (i.e., unsafe) encounters, especially if, as you say, the sexual ones are in the minority?"
>
> My answer:
>
> Desire is just as inseparable from the public contact situation as [. . . it is present] in the fundamental structure of the networking situation. Desire and knowledge (body and mind) are *not* in a fundamental opposition; rather, they are intricately imbricated and mutually constitutive aspects of political and social life. Situations of desire (as Freud noted in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of Childhood* [1910]) are the first objects and impellers of intellectual inquiry.
>
> (168, emphasis in the original)

Delany's conceptual linkage between sexual desire and other forms of interest (cognitive interest included) indirectly points at what may be lost – besides pleasure, which he insists carries intrinsic value – when opportunities for erotic contact are eliminated.

Comparison and Conclusions

The passage illustrates the different tenor of Delany's discussion compared to Benderson's, even though both describe cruising for sex and meeting down-and-out individuals in the same general location and at approximately the same time. Benderson is preoccupied with his own positionality as someone who comes from relative privilege vis-à-vis an underclass whose members fascinate him because of how different their lives are from his own. He describes himself as "part voyeur, part exploiter, part chronicler, and part victim," where "chronicler" refers to his work on *User* and where "voyeur" marks him as an outsider to a scene in which he de facto participates (*Toward* 44). "Exploiter" and "victim" name social roles that are at least partly negotiable and perhaps reversible but which Benderson renders oppositional. This terminological ensemble calls to mind slumming, a practice echoed also in Mailer's "The White Negro." Similarly, Benderson's aforementioned epithets: "obscene and aggressive [id]" (51), "contaminated with inspiration" (55), and "sordid" (56) suggest he perversely revels in transgression (while dismissing this coinage as cynical, 51), even if we allow the possibility that, with these epithets, he is mockingly ventriloquizing some nameless moralizer.

By contrast, when Delany ventriloquizes a hypothetical conservative commentator to mockingly gloss "nonsexual" as "safe" and "sexual" as "unsafe,"

rather than a whiff of transgressive exhilaration we are presented with terms borrowed from Jacobs' discussion of urban space. Delany, who has been seeking out sexual partners in Times Square from a young age, does not find the area intrinsically unsafe or the people he meets there exotic. Neither does he ascribe special qualities to individuals based on their class. He enjoys interclass sexual contact without eroticizing it as a particular goal; as stated elsewhere, his self-declared preference is for nail-biters, a category which cuts diagonally across social strata ("Coming/Out" 8–9).

Delany seems skeptical about identity categories more generally, race and sexuality included. He does acknowledge that a struggle for same-sex rights requires presenting as a group ("Coming/Out" 19, 21) and he offers a particularly lucid explication of how discursive categories, as stipulated by social constructionists, determine the possibility of group-based identification (*Times Square Red* 187–92). And yet, despite being a gay man and an African American, he regards coming out as merely an element of political strategy and fails to give race much prominence. While alluding to Benderson, for example, Delany omits any mention of Mailer's essay. A likely reason for this hiatus is that he does not consider debating identities, that is, discursive constructs as opposed to material infrastructure, to be a practical way to address people's needs. Of course, that is not to say that homophobia and racism leave him indifferent.[8]

Rather than solemnize class as an identity on a par with discursively constructed groups, Delany and Benderson point to its material determinants, in however different ways. Where Benderson focuses on how precarious circumstances make the underclass markedly distinct from the middle class (and more fully alive, in his assessment), Delany zeroes in on how interclass contact can make cities more enjoyable and on how such contact is facilitated or obstructed by urban infrastructure and institutions. Where Delany sees interclass sexual contact as potentially benefiting the parties involved in various ways, both material and intangible, Benderson defines the benefits accruing to the privileged party as existential, in the form of a momentary escape from a rigidly defined social identity, and those accruing to the unprivileged party as economic, in the form of otherwise unavailable money or goods. Seeking to vicariously live the life of the lower classes without abandoning his middle-class social capital or his ability to earn a living as a professional, Benderson hopes to be energized by contact with members of the underclass, as if by osmosis. Meanwhile, Delany speculates about material ways in which some barriers dividing social classes can be made permeable, enabling spontaneous interclass contact, both sexual and otherwise, with the goal of making everyone's life more pleasant. Disinterested sociability, which may encompass a sexual relationship, is provoked by casual contact, which in turn depends on urban space – much as it does for Jacobs.

Both Benderson and Delany work in the vein of negativity, as defined and as advocated by Amin. Several meanings of negativity are embedded in their

work. There is Benderson's dip into the underworld and into what he calls the culture of poverty, whose unexpected virtues he extols, hoping to tap into its energies by means of interclass contact, including sexual contact. His affective and erotic investment in the underclass reverses the hierarchy of class by perversely claiming that those economically privileged are less completely alive, while it also implicitly reaffirms class difference as a crucial source of existential energies being exchanged. Another kind of negativity is articulated in Benderson's key pronouncement that the underclass does not abide by identity categories, specifically sexual ones, which have been invented by middle-class activists and which reflect their class-based values and goals, but disregard underclass interests and experience.

This latter negativity resonates as well in Delany's implicit distrust of group identity other than as a limited political tool. However, rather than lambasting identity politics, Delany indirectly subverts it by focusing instead on urban infrastructure as enabling or obstructing contact in Jacobs' sense and thereby impacting the likelihood of interactions across class divides. Without suggesting that class difference may be eliminated, Delany argues that making class barriers more permeable is desirable. In effect, Benderson and Delany speak out, in however different ways, against gentrification as erecting such barriers and limiting opportunities for cross-class contact, sexual contact included.

A profound layer of negativity in their work stems from the sense that class stratification is not to be overturned. At no point is class imagined as a mere social construct: something to be eliminated with the adoption of enlightened discursive principles. Defined as a social hierarchy which brings about material effects, class difference is never portrayed as disposable. Instead, economic and social inequality produces the need for a critique of sexual identity categories that may be class-based rather than universally applicable and, even more urgently, for finding ways in which interclass contact can ease the burden of inequality. The persistence of class difference thus produces the practice of interclass sexual contact and, in Benderson's account, it gives rise to specifically cross-class desire. Interclass sexual contact and desire are premised on (presumably intransigent) economic and social inequality and, simultaneously, are themselves ways to alleviate some of the hardship which inequality causes.

Notes

1 Benderson, *Toward the New Degeneracy* 60.
2 While class is sometimes invoked in the context of intersectionality as though it were one of the categories contributing to the kind of compounded discrimination analyzed, alongside gender and race, in Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal 1989 essay, her analysis of court rulings did not include class, which is not a proscribed grounds of workplace discrimination in the

U.S. (Crenshaw). Neither does Matt Brim list this essay among his sources for *Poor Queer Studies* (Brim).

3 Amin notes that the historical rootedness of modern-day homosexuality in past pederastic practices has been erased, as have been other practices characterized by inequality, such as prostitution and the wolf–punk relationship prevalent among the working class (Amin 40–41).

4 In turning to Nordau (and implicitly to Oscar Lewis, as shown later), Benderson anticipates queer theory's interest in so-called deviance studies, recently postulated by Heather Love in *Underdogs* (2021): describing Erving Goffman's concept of stigma management as a universal strategy, Love contends that deviance studies is a key source for queer theory. An analogous argument could be made for Eve Sedgwick's much earlier work on Silvan Tomkins and her own elaboration of the affect shame (Sedgwick and Frank; Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity"; Sedgwick, "Shame"). Both Sedgwick and Love seem to answer Amin's call to embrace queer negativity.

5 Christopher Chitty similarly notes that already at the time of the French Revolution, "the bourgeoisie had begun to fashion the Enlightenment epistemology of sex into a weapon of struggle against both the popular classes and the nobility" (108–9).

6 Benderson's term "culture of poverty" is uncredited, but the coinage comes from Oscar Lewis' *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. Where Lewis bemoans cultural formations which perpetuate poverty, Benderson extols them for the vivacity they allegedly bring.

7 Christopher Chitty notes that already in the early modern period, "(u)rban male homosexuality was a culture of cross-class and intraclass sexual contact" (134) while George Chauncey offers pertinent examples from the Gilded Age and the interwar years in *Gay New York* (Chauncey).

8 In *The Motion of Light in Water*, where race is occasionally addressed, an anecdote about a racist employer who failed to recognize Delany as Black (mistaking his skin color for a heavy tan) illustrates how race is a matter of perception and a cultural construct (*The Motion* 519).

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3 Empowering Aesthetics

Queer Temporalities and Precarious Existence in Isabel Waidner's Novels

Eveline Kilian

Introduction

Literary examinations of the intersections of class and homosexuality have more recently been both mobilized and shaped by Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (2009), an autobiographical account cum sociological analysis of the author's own life, which was in turn partly inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* and Annie Ernaux' writings on class shame. Eribon, one of the most renowned French sociologists, chronologically traces the various stages of his development: his childhood in a poor working-class district in Reims, his escape from the homophobia of this environment, his passing through a number of educational institutions, his professional career as a journalist and, finally, as an academic. The book proffers an incisive criticism of an education system that effectively bars most working-class individuals from climbing the social ladder (see Rieger-Ladich and Grabau). Eribon nevertheless avails himself of the progress-driven pattern of the social mobility narrative for his own self-stylization as an exceptional case who miraculously managed to work his way up, while, paradoxically, at the same time proclaiming that he could not but fail at every turn. Apart from the various excursions into social analysis, the life narrative itself follows a conventional linear structure and is supported by an investment in fairly fixed, discrete, and opposing class concepts. For Eribon, upward mobility entails rejecting the working class completely and fully embracing the middle class, seamlessly passing as one of its members. In a more critical vein, we can also say that *Returning to Reims* is still clearly attached to hegemonic ideas of social structuring and forms of identity construction.

In contrast to Eribon's model, I will examine a very different and unmistakably queer literary engagement with questions of social mobility and injustice in the work of German-British author Isabel Waidner. Their queer experimental fiction poses a much more radical challenge to the parameters and values of the heteronormative world and exposes social inequalities in a fundamental and often original way. Their socially disadvantaged, non-binary queer protagonists defy clear definition and are instead shown in constantly

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shifting entanglements and relations. I will focus on Waidner's novels *Corey Fah Does Social Mobility*, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* and *Sterling Karat Gold*, and examine their literary interventions and epistemological contributions to the constitution of the contemporary self in three sections. The first concentrates on the use of queer temporalities to decenter and interrupt the narrative pattern of linear progression and, in doing so, create spaces for reflection in an extended present to probe alternative forms of (queer) existence and relationality. This also shifts the perspective on social mobility from practicing it to critically interrogating its political framing. The second part is dedicated to Waidner's concept of the queer subject. Their novels portray complex and intricate forms of intersectionality, agency, and disenfranchisement that no longer respond to binary structures and clear categorizations. Rather, the notion of assemblage harnessed to new materialist and posthumanist thought will prove more adequate to capture these manifold interlacing attachments. And finally, the third section uses this particular lens to approach some prominent features of Waidner's writing as a type of aesthetic relationality.

Queering Social Mobility and Temporal Disorder

The title of Isabel Waidner's latest novel, *Corey Fah Does Social Mobility* (2023), already signals a shared concern with Eribon's text. It is set in the year 2024, and its first-person narrator, 40-year-old Corey Fah, is a hard-up writer from a lower-class background living with their partner Drew Szumski in a one-bed flat on a 1960s housing estate in the eastern part of a capital city that is very reminiscent of London. There is, however, no straightforward narrative of the protagonist's life, no information on their geographical and cultural background and no timeline which would connect the past and the present in a linear fashion. The opening chapter of *Corey Fah* and its reflection that successful social mobility depends on the appropriate habitus is one vital feature that coincides with Eribon's class criticism. Corey Fah has just been announced winner of the "Award for the Fictionalisation of Social Evils" (2), which consists of a trophy accompanied by a substantial, and much-needed, sum of money, because "I had bills to pay, a partner I owed. Neither of us had notable savings, nor familial backing" (20). Collecting the trophy, which Corey calls "the physical representation of the cultural capital I'd just acquired" (2), proves surprisingly difficult, not to say practically impossible, however, presumably because Corey is completely unversed in the intricacies of the "prize culture etiquette, its unwritten rules and regulations" (3): "I'd not won an award before, and neither had anybody I knew" (3). The volatility of success is visualized in the trophy itself, a neon beige Unidentified Flying Object, which refuses to be captured and carried away.

This event triggers an extensive crisis scenario with a number of ramifications that quite literally engulf Corey's whole world. This entails a rupture

with time and the developmental agenda suggested by social mobility. The maybe three months' story time becomes an extended present that does not organically evolve from the past and that does not show any recognizable avenue into the future. Instead, it is punctured by a proliferation of times and alternative worlds and selves that invade and constantly transform the here and now and that are used to lay bare social inequalities as well as the run-down state of contemporary (British) society.

Repeated attempts to take hold of the elusive trophy fail, not least because of the unexpected appearance of a strange reincarnation of the lead character from the 1942 Disney film *Bambi*, who keeps distracting Corey's attention from the task at hand. This popular children's classic is one of the intermedial sources that have been "put to work" in the novel (147). Waidner presents an update on the sanitized earlier version of the story by transferring Bambi into a different social class and into a reality ostensibly structured by intersectional entanglements that shape his character and his chances in life. They thus not only adapt this cultural icon to their literary world but effectively rewrite Bambi's past universe to highlight what the reference source leaves out. The new Bambi, a deer with four additional spider's legs and multiple sets of eyes, is inspired by Nicole Eisenmann's drawing "Bambi Gregor" (1993). Waidner calls him Bambi Pavok, *pavouk* being Czech for spider, and his name is an indication of the Central European presence in London, and Britain in general, just as is Corey's partner Drew, a "descendant of first-generation immigrants," who works as a translator and interpreter and specializes "in several Central European languages including Polish and Czech" (19). Ethnic diversity is a feature of all of Waidner's novels and often draws attention to the common link between social background, migration, social exclusion, and economic precarity.

Bambi Pavok is the cross-species offspring of a deer and "a spider the size of a twelve-pointer stag" (4) called the False Widower, and had to struggle with a highly dysfunctional family situation: the False Widower was an absent father by choice (unlike Bambi's father, who was the Prince of the Forest and therefore away on State business), neglecting "his bastard child" (26), so that Bambi Pavok grew up in a "single-parent family hideout" (4) with a mother unable to cope. She is described as having lived "a protracted death – by prescription painkillers, long-term unemployment and ever-increasing financial arrears," until her life was brutally ended "by a fatal gunshot wound" (25) administered by "a person with a legalized gun" (3). Bambi Pavok and his mother are both victims of poverty and patriarchy, and these structural failures affect Bambi Pavok's life from the very start: "he's been corrupted all along. He's been othered from the beginning. . . . He was caught up in the socio-economic systems designed to disadvantage and kill-by-stealth the racially othered, the sick and disabled, the working classes, the lower castes" (24). In this statement, the impossibility of social and economic success (social mobility) is linked to a number of possibly interlinking factors and does not give

any priority to the class concept, which is rendered rather unspecific through the use of the plural ("working classes") and its juxtaposition with "the lower castes." What all these designated subjects have in common, however, is their deviation from some norm that motivates their being othered.

Similarly, Waidner's 2019 novel, *Sterling Karat Gold*, set in a neighborhood in Camden, is composed of a mix of characters marginalized on account of their queer gender performance, race, economic precarity, and/or lack of legal recognition (in terms of citizenship). These attributes congeal into the figure of "the Other" and turn them into targets of right-wing thugs and police violence. Consequently, whenever Waidner uses the term working class, we should understand this as a strategic label that gestures toward a former idea of the working class as a rallying point of political action while referencing a shifting group of variously disadvantaged subjects. What unites those subjects is their precarity, which exposes their vulnerability as human beings, and I read this as an expression of Waidner's queer and decidedly intersectional perspective that rejects the divisiveness of clear-cut categorizations and instead paves the way for the recognition of a common ground connecting different marginalized groups. This responds to the current discussions around precarity and precarious life, which have resurged in queer studies with Judith Butler's notion of precariousness as a deeply relational, "shared condition of human life" (*Frames of War* 13; see also *Precarious Life* 128–42) that translates into different degrees of vulnerability and precarity, which are sustained by ongoing processes of precaritization (Butler in Puar, "Precarity Talk" 169).

The novel gradually reveals Bambi Pavok to be one of Corey Fah's past selves, their "undomesticated part" (Waidner, *Corey Fah* 34), whom they have all but shed and buried after escaping from the abusive situation in their native forest and immigrating to the capital but who reappears to confront them when Corey is faced with the possibility of social recognition. Bambi Pavok's appearance in 2024 is made possible by what the text calls červí díra, another Czech term meaning "a space-and-time-defying passageway, a transdimensional wormhole" (11), which allows various characters, human and animal, to travel back and forth between the present and some point in the past. This process is uncontrollably accelerated when, in the last chapter, the playing field of a former stadium caves in and "a giant červí díra open[s], like hell-mouth" (122), and unleashes a proliferation and duplication of alternative worlds and selves in different time loops, into which each of the characters is projected consecutively. Each time loop lasts for about 10 minutes, and then there is another change, resulting in a complete collapse of the timeline (141). This is a realm of queer time which effectively blocks and negates the forward-moving social mobility narrative that had briefly appeared on the horizon, instead opening a space to dismantle the terms and conditions of the promises attached to it. The book raises the crucial question of complicity with a system that produces growing social inequality and precarity, social division even in the poorer communities and destruction of lives. One example of such

a collusion is the opening of a fast-food restaurant called "Frikadellen, Best in Forest," praised by Bambi Pavok's father, the False Widower, which sells "locally sourced" venison meat burgers (94). This leads to "a drastic decimation of the local deer population," "killings and kidnappings" (30), and a subsequent "culture of bullying" (31) of the deer by other inhabitants of the forest, for instance, the rabbits. In one of the time-loop scenes, Corey finds themself implicated in this expanding business, competing against the False Widower for customers. This theme culminates in their recurring nightmare about working in a meat processing plant where the workers willingly comply in butchering each other for meat supply:

> the convergence of human resources and meat supply seemed a false economy to me, not to say uncollegial and really fucking painful. I tried in vain to communicate the perceived inefficiency of the set-up we were complicit in to my co-workers.
>
> (71)

The ethical challenge continues for Corey when Drew suggests that the only way to stop the nightmarish series of time loops may be for Corey to go back to the past and rectify a former failure. This is followed by two important time loops. In the first one, Corey can no longer avoid facing the fact that Bambi Pavok actually is their younger self; and in the second one, they do change the course of action by arranging for their award trophy to be delivered to another character, Malachi Hölderlin, at some point in the future. Malachi is a disaffected and mentally unstable young woman living in "Florida Rot, the swampy part of town" (11), who has spent a lot of her time in her windowless bathroom, mourning the loss of her pet rabbit Fumper (a reincarnation of Disney's Thumper). She has apparently produced "thousands of pages of . . . unusual writing" (144), but the novel is not very clear about the direction this activity is going to take, so that the outcome of Corey's intervention remains uncertain. Their gesture signifies nothing more (but also nothing less) than giving this disadvantaged individual a chance and a spark of hope. As far as Corey is concerned, this act also marks their attempt to refuse to make compromises and be co-opted by the current cultural agenda, thus preserving their independent critical voice as a writer.

This type of self-critical interrogation about one's own implication in an exploitative system is practically absent from more traditional social mobility texts, which are more concerned with an individual's progress, their successful integration into society and, ultimately, prosperity. In contrast, Waidner's texts exude a much more fundamental critique of the devastating results of a political system relentlessly driven by neoliberalism and the accumulation of capital, which fosters short-term profits, long-term financial instability, and rising levels of precarity as well as a deadening of ethical considerations, which only get in the way of keeping up in the rat race. The perversity of

this situation becomes apparent when an underfunded TV station tries to create a reality TV show titled *Corey Fah Does Social Mobility*, capitalizing on Corey's failure to escape their life at the bottom of the social scale (78).

In Waidner's novels, the concept of upward social mobility and the promise of deserved social advancement for those who prove themselves worthy of it have been relegated to the past. As one chapter heading in *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* reads: "If you still think it's a meritocracy go back to start" (67). There is not even a remote vision of a better life. Waidner's characters live in a bleak and slightly dystopian world, often in areas of urban decay scattered with council estates that have fallen into neglect and disrepair. *Corey Fah* opens at a place aptly called Koszmar Circus (Polish for nightmare), "an ornamental mount at the centre of a social housing estate in the east of the international capital," surrounded by "thirteen-storey-high concrete apartment blocks" (3). Corey and their partner Drew live on another housing estate with appealingly laid out terraces of flats, but the former supermarket and community spaces have been "overtaken by knotweed which the council had given up contending with" (7). The aforementioned TV station has moved their production unit from "the derelict . . . tv studio in Gheto Attentat" to "the site of what once had been the capital's largest stadium. Now only ruins remained" (75). *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* is set in Ryde on the Isle of Wight. The two protagonists, the narrator and their friend Shae, two queers in their mid-thirties, work in an unspeakably run-down hotel, on minimum wage, and without the faintest prospect of ever bettering their situation. Intertextual evocations allow us to read the decrepit state of the island as a metonym for the state of the country as a whole. In Julian Barnes' 1998 satirical novel *England, England*, the Isle of Wight is turned into a huge theme park representing quintessential Englishness, from the royal family to cricket to the class system to Shakespeare and thatched cottages and the like. It becomes so successful that mainland England steadily declines into insignificance. Waidner's novel can be seen as a sequel to Barnes' satirical take, as it pulls down the fake front of Britain and exposes the final stage of the country's ruin. Unsurprisingly, some critics have called this book a "state-of-the-nation" novel (Cook).

The only information we receive on Corey Fah's backstory is through the various snapshots of Bambi Pavok, who quite literally attaches himself to Corey. The clearest connection emerges in a single memory, which also encapsulates a separation: "when first I arrived in the capital in '99, I hung upside-down under the roof of a bike shelter outside the international bus station for several days, unwilling to move" (137). Quick assimilation makes them lose one additional leg after the other and turn into a two-armed and two-legged human. What the text gives us is a skeletal notion of Corey's movements that include the elements of escape, change of location, and some form of adaptation. But the focus of the book is not on the details of this trajectory and how it has shaped the protagonist. Instead, their chance

encounter with and attachment to Bambi Pavok raises the ethical question of what adaptation, and possibly social mobility, mean and which human, social, and political responsibilities they entail.

As we can glean from Corey's close relationship with Drew and their fear of losing them as well as from their final gesture toward Malachi Hölderlin, Waidner's subjects are relational rather than self-sufficient and isolated. Relationality in Waidner's novels entails a protective sticking together against external, potentially destructive forces, which becomes increasingly vital in the face of accelerating social divisions and exclusions. In *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, the two queer protagonists realize that they have even become outsiders in their own changing subculture. Gay Pride is, for example, infiltrated by right-wing sympathizers who want immigrants out, which prompts the narrator to ask: "How many times can you divide a minority culture" (85). In *Sterling Karat Gold*, which intertextually connects to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and opens with the protagonist being pursued by the forces of the law for no apparent reason and without any explanation, the protagonist and their friends form a queer community providing help and solidarity against these overpowering enemies. Queer kinship is not only an indispensable means of survival but also a rallying space for subversive resistance.

Queer Subjects and Queer Agency

The autodiegetic narrator of *Returning to Reims* is an autonomous and detached autobiographical subject. His retrospective self-construction relies on developmental stages organized along a linear timeline and, despite all contestations to the contrary, fulfills the hegemonic narrative of social mobility. In contrast, Waidner's texts present much more frayed and unpredictable characters as well as a more deconstructive engagement with social structures, following their belief that "queer politics . . . must be transformative of society at large" rather than assimilative ("Class" 12).

As we have already seen, one major component in this endeavor consists in redirecting forward-moving time toward an extended present that provides opportunities for reflection and ad hoc experimentation, even though the daily struggles of life preclude long-term goals or any sustained vision of the future. Integration of the subject into the hegemonic social order is neither offered nor desired. Instead, the precarious subject will remain at odds with the social world in which it finds itself and which marginalizes or even tries to destroy it. The sporadic and unsystematic resurgence of past scenarios and alternative worlds in *Corey Fah* indicates that there are further temporal planes that may unfold their significance in the present. In that sense, Corey Fah's recognition and acceptance of Bambi Pavok as a former self signals a way of "touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact" that can act as a catalyst for their ensuing actions (Carolyn Dinshaw in Dinshaw et al. 178).

Waidner's concept of the subject is informed by post-structuralist theories as well as posthumanism and the new materialism emanating from feminist

science studies, especially Karen Barad's notion of agential realism (see Waidner, *Experimental Fiction* 13, 108). Their subjects are embodied, situated, and relational as well as dynamic and open to rearticulations. Indeed, as Barad would phrase it, they only come into being through their intra-actions; they "emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (*Meeting the Universe* ix).[1] This addresses a more fundamental form of relationality than the predominantly social relationality of queer community building discussed earlier. Barad describes this process as an "iterative materialization" of bodies understood as "a dynamic play of in/determinacy" ("TransMaterialities" 401) that never congeals into one form. This is part of her "posthumanist performative approach" (*Meeting the Universe* 135), which latches on to Judith Butler's concept of performativity as "a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, . . . a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (*Undoing Gender* 1). Barad does away with Butler's "anthropocentric remainders" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe* 135), however, and widens the spectrum of the forces involved in the materialization of bodies beyond the exclusively human (32–35). And it is in these entangled processes of mutual constitution that agency resides, which is not an "attribute of subjects or objects" but a "'doing' or 'being' in its intra-activity" (178). This is an interesting take on the notion of agency, because it implies that agency is always present and attaches itself to every action and therefore always raises "questions of responsibility and accountability" (37). Nevertheless, we also need to draw attention to the varying degrees of agency available to differently situated subjects, which result in power imbalances that have a crucial impact on the outcome of their intra-active engagements. Corey Fah reflects on this when they are called upon "to get something right" in one of the time loops and becomes "aware of the limitations of my personal agency" (Waidner, *Corey Fah* 135).

Barad's approach translates into Waidner's aesthetic practice of "sharing agency (the capacity to influence the narrative) across assemblages of human and nonhuman, fictional and real, material and semiotic 'actors'" (Waidner, *Experimental Fiction* 3). These "performative agential assemblages" (88) acknowledge the fuzzy boundaries of human subjects, since the concept of assemblage, as Jasbir Puar notes, "is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency." They produce queer subjects that remain unreceptive to clearly circumscribed categories and elude "the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time" ("Queer Times" 128).

This unclassifiability of Waidner's precarious subjects makes them unreadable to a certain degree, which can have a number of different implications. For one thing, it can turn into a form of cultural unintelligibility that allows the State to refuse citizenship and legal recognition to an applicant, as in the case of the narrator of *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, who is an EU national applying for permanent residence in Britain in vain: "I have worked in the UK for twenty years – UNDER THE TAX THRESHOLD. For twenty years, I have consistently earned less than the annual tax allowance . . .

which renders me illegible in terms of immigration law" (102f.). Second, it can act as a kind of camouflage for characters who have to remain obscure, unidentifiable, shape-shifting, and unrecognizable in order to be shielded from the reach and control of the law that can be arbitrary and dangerous to marginalized individuals. Consequently, they are not introduced by their real names, and their characterization remains sketchy and generic and gives away just enough to situate them loosely as precarious subjects. The first sentence of *Sterling Karat Gold*, for example, reads: "I'm Sterling. Lost my father to AIDS, my mother to alcoholism. Lost my country to conservatism, my language to PTSD. Got this England, though. Got this body, this sterling heart" (9). And third, illegibility means that these marginalized subjects cannot be pinned down, that they are unfathomable and unpredictable, and therefore potentially subversive and perhaps even dangerous. And this is where their epistemological and political relevance lies as well as their "potential for radical literary innovation" (Waidner, *Experimental Fiction* 49).

Aesthetic Relationality

The posthuman angle of the performative assemblages described earlier is a fertile ground for the writer's imagination to work on. The interlacing of human and nonhuman materialities not only breaks down the boundaries between the two but also releases additional agential energy. We can see this in the description of Shae, one of the two protagonists in *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*: They are "wearing an army green t-shirt with black polar bears on it, what does it mean. Black oversize joggers, white Reebok classic trainers" (9). These fashion items are linked to their personal coordinates: "They are second-generation economic migrants (Shae), ecological refugees (the polar bears) and African elopers I mean antelopes (the reeboks) from North West London" (10). All these elements become what Waidner calls "marginal actors" (*Experimental Fiction* 17) and fuse into a hybrid (animal-human, cross-cultural) being, forming "a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe* 35) and opening up new and unexpected agential constellations: "The polar bears are novelists (infantry soldiers), the reeboks are poets (intelligence operatives)" (Waidner, *Diamond Stuff* 11). A little later, Shae is wearing a sweater featuring "a lypard (a leopard)" (14). This can be read as a reference to William Blake's poem "The Tyger" (1794), actually mentioned in the final chapter of the novel (101), which features a ferocious and dangerous animal, at once awe-inspiring and powerful. Shae's affinity to a brand of art that is radical, like Blake's, and close to political activism is paradigmatic for Waidner's precarious subjects, for whom art is a means of resistance and survival in a hostile world and under the grimmest circumstances. It allows them to produce counter-realities, expand their horizons and scope of action, and envisage alternative worlds that provide not only temporary respite but also possibilities for critical intervention. This squares

with Waidner's Barad-inspired notion of "[a]gential realist fiction [, which] mobilises what probably exists, elsewhere, for someone else, or what might exist in the future" (Waidner, *Experimental Fiction* 132). In Waidner's texts, it is the literary imagination that becomes a motor for producing and proliferating such assemblages.

As much as art is a necessary and important political tool, the protagonists have no grand illusions about its actual outreach and impact; their creative interventions may bring small or temporary comforts or triumphs but will most probably not effect much change. In the Kafkaesque *Sterling Karat Gold*, the characters have the feeling that no matter what they do, they will always be scapegoated and lose out. Nonetheless, their queer art collective and anarchic performance theater is a creative outlet for their rage and a platform to stage their own situation in plays, which they call Cataclysmic Foibles, because they address "a state of precarity in which any foible, character flaw, or momentary slip up can and will have cataclysmic personal consequences" (64f.). Such activities mark their persistence in the face of adversity, their will to carry on regardless, and, ultimately, their love of life. As the narrator of *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* proclaims: "Whatever will happen, we will adapt. . . . Life is fear, rage, joy and laughter. It's political urgency, transgression and it is never boring" (103).

Another outstanding feature of Waidner's novels is their frequent use of intertextual or intermedial sources, both canonical and non-canonical, which are part of the performative assemblages the author constructs by entangling past and present texts as well as high and low art. Waidner's engagement with these sources is transformative rather than affirmative (see Waidner, "Class, Queers" 12–14; Clarke 11–13), resulting in reciprocal rereadings and reconfigurations, whose effects are epistemological, affective, and political. In the case of Disney's *Bambi*, for example, Waidner subjects the original to an ideological critique that exposes the rigorous boundaries and exclusionary practices of the animated film. In other cases, Waidner's choice of reference material marks their sympathy or affinity with authors or movements that challenge cultural and aesthetic norms, with "an earlier avant-garde commitment to radical innovation and towards different futures" (Waidner, *Experimental Fiction* 70). They form part of Waidner's "personal, queer avantgarde archive" (83) and include works by literary and political visionaries like William Blake or postmodern avant-garde writers like B.S. Johnson or Brigid Brophy, whose novel *In Transit* plays an important role for the construction of nonconforming genders in Waidner's earlier novella *Gaudy Bauble* (see *Experimental Fiction* 106–33). Another kindred soul that is evoked in *Corey Fah* is the iconoclastic gay working-class playwright Joe Orton, who is also subjected to time travel and alternative lives. He actually appears in the present of the novel as host of a TV show, having escaped his violent death at the hands of his lover in 1967 by disappearing into a wormhole. Granting him another lease of life in their novel, in which he is said also to have received

the Award for the Fictionalisation of Social Evils in the 1960s, demonstrates Waidner's literary agenda to mobilize "existing but marginal knowledges" (*Experimental Fiction* 83), not least produced by writers from the lower-class and other marginal positions. Orton's presence in the novel clearly commemorates the anarchic and anti-establishment playwright as part of an alternative literary tradition, but Waidner's engagement with him is also "disidentificatory" (Waidner, "Class, Queers" 13) in that they expose his self-importance and vacuous pretentions. As host of a daily TV show titled *St Orton Gets to the Bottom of It*, he usually appears in boxing shorts, treats his guests with considerable rudeness, and consistently fails to get to the bottom of anything, let alone the "irregularities in the spatio-temporal continuum" (Waidner, *Corey Fah* 10) that he aims to investigate. Beyond paying respect to innovative predecessors like Orton, Waidner's agenda aims at widening and diversifying avant-garde writing, making it more inclusive, multi-vocal, and intersectional (see "Liberating the Canon").

Concluding Remarks

The subversive energy of Waidner's queer experimental writing largely resides in its obstruction of linear time and narrative coherence, its presentation of characters as dynamic assemblages rather than stable or clearly categorizable identities, and a method of writing that produces entangled relationalities of human and posthuman elements and keeps boundaries and meanings in constant flux. It stands to reason that seemingly clearly definable concepts like "working-class" are hardly compatible with this literary universe. Indeed, what we can infer from Waidner's novels is that a queer inflection of "class" dissolves any notion of it as a clear-cut category, as it merges with other components, continuously forming and reforming the subject. This reflects an issue that, on a theoretical level, Jasbir Puar raises with respect to intersectionality and its tendency to reify categories of social differentiation. To counter this problem, she demands that intersectionality "must be supplemented – if not complicated and reconceptualized – by a notion of assemblage" ("Becoming-Intersectional" 50). My strategy to avoid this pitfall in my discussion of Waidner's novels has been to describe her characters as precarious subjects and queer subjects, terms that are more elastic and inclusive.

Waidner's narrative anarchy and blending of the real and the surreal not only serve to expose social evils in an unconventional way but also demonstrate how little of an established script there actually is for precarious subjects to deal with the kinds of issues and dilemmas confronting them in their daily struggle. Waidner's books do not offer a bright queer utopia but rather a down-to-earth rendering of "a less than depressing future in the face of no hope" (Waidner, "Class, Queers" 15), which features the imagination as an important locus of resilience and resistance that can create pockets of livability and foster alternative visions of life beyond existing social conditions.

In their introduction to a collection of contemporary experimental writing, Waidner critically notes that "[h]istorically, sociopolitical marginalisation and avant-garde aesthetics have not come together in UK literature, . . . divorcing outsider experience and formal innovation" (Waidner, "Liberating the Canon" 7). Their own novels succeed in amalgamating experimental fiction, precarious subjects and incisive social criticism, and brilliantly demonstrate that contemporary writing about "class" issues can (and perhaps should) transcend the realist mode that seems to stick to most "working-class" literature.

Note

1 Barad employs the neologism "intra-action" instead of "interaction" to stress that "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (*Meeting the Universe* 33).

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4 About Worlds and Words – Habitus and Precariousness in Annie Ernaux's *A Woman's Story*

Julia Lingl and Naomi Lobnig

The fragility of a life becomes particularly noticeable when such a life seems precarious. It may be precisely these precarious moments that not only can interrupt our lives at any time but may even constitute this life in the first place. As Judith Butler points out in *The Force of Nonviolence*: "We can always fall apart, and that is why we struggle to stay together" (203). Annie Ernaux also emphasizes vulnerability and precariousness in *A Woman's Story* (original *Une Femme* 1987), for example, in a letter written by her mother as her dementia progresses: "Dear Paulette, I am still lost in my world of darkness" (75). It seems as if alliance, resistance and strength are needed to survive in a "world of darkness."

In *A Woman's Story*, intersecting aspects of gender and class as well as heteronormative power dynamics within the family are particularly accentuated. Through engaging with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's method of "queer reading" (*Novel Gazing*), we want to take up these themes in Ernaux's text and address the question: is a potential for resistance opened up by art, in particular, literature that focuses on questions of gender, class, precariousness, and vulnerability? Taking Ernaux's text further, how can the binding nature of a social structure and concern for others be used to outline a responsible way of dealing with one another that counteracts these power dynamics?

In a "plural-queer" perspective, as postulated by Gudrun Perko, "queer" is used "as a (political-strategic) umbrella term for all people . . . who do not conform to the prevailing social norm" (3; our translation). The categories "gender," "sexual/romantic orientation," and "forms of relationship" are thus expanded to include further categories of difference, such as class/social origin, race, and dis_ability. "Queer" addresses the manifold possibilities of living and being, offering alternatives and a sense of (collective) belongingness while at the same time troubling clear categorizations and identity markers (Perko 3; our translation). "From a social perspective, the queer critique of coercive identification articulates the claim of an expanded participation in the social wealth of possible modes of existence" (Adamczack 218; our translation).

Following Sedgwick, we understand queer reading as a method that uses the methodology and basic theoretical assumptions of, for example, discourse

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analysis, deconstruction, or psychoanalysis, to examine texts with regard to their heteronormative signs, thereby enabling binary gender concepts to be deconstructed and resistance and contradiction to be recognized (Babka and Hochreiter 12). In *Touching Feeling* (2003), Sedgwick also argues in favor of readings that are less "paranoid" and more "reparative" – the focus should not be on what meaning lies behind the text but on what can be read on the surface of the text. Butler describes queer reading practices as practices that are about uncovering naturalized "orders" and "hierarchies" and revealing their power relations (*What World Is This?* 73–74). We follow both Sedgwick's and Butler's understanding of queer reading and attempt a theoretically and literarily interwoven reading of *A Woman's Story*.

In *I Remain in Darkness* (original *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* 1997), Ernaux acknowledges that her text *A Woman's Story* contains contradictions and does not portray a coherent life in the diary-like notes that she wrote while her mother was suffering from dementia. In the same way, there is no definitive answer to the question of genre: "Naturally, this isn't a biography, neither is it a novel, maybe a cross between literature, sociology, and history" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 89–90). It is this multitude of literary genres, this style of working across and expanding genre boundaries, that leads us to speak of a text rather than a genre.

In recent years, many writers have explored their own positionality and the question of social origin and social class;[1] the prominent perspectives being those of upwardly mobile individuals (Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, Annie Ernaux), who look at their own origins and the class affiliation of their parents with a certain distance. But even in this field, there is ambiguity: the (supposedly clear) boundaries between different classes get blurred, especially in cases where a change of class takes place. Temporality plays a special role in these narratives, which are mostly based on memories: the past and present overlap, making it increasingly difficult to differentiate between class positions; the inertia of habitus is evident in the preservation of former class-specific characteristics. In Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, we can speak of the *hysteresis effect*, a disruption or dissonance of the relationship between habitus, in the sense of embodied habits and the field structures (*Distinction* 142). According to Bourdieu, a field is a system of social positions (e.g., in a profession) that is internally structured by power relations (e.g., the power differential between individual actors in the profession) in the sense of embodied habits.

In Ernaux's texts, many parallels to Bourdieu's studies can be drawn along the observations of everyday life. Since *A Woman's Story*[2] raises questions about gender, social class, precarious living conditions, and also *writing about* class, we focus in the following pages on the possibility of using literary writing to counteract the marginalization and "invisibilization" of gender-specific class differences; this also includes circumstances such as aging, illness, dying, and mourning, which elude a neoliberal logic of exploitation and have a different temporality or break with temporal linearity. Ernaux creates

counter-hegemonic narratives, and her writing can be understood as resistant, insofar as she draws attention to the vulnerability of individuals and groups resulting from belonging to a (precarious) social class, thus raising ethical questions about the importance of caring and responsible interaction with one another.

A Woman's Story

A Woman's Story is made up of kaleidoscopic fragments of a first-person narrator's memories of her mother's life. In a sober style, seemingly objective, the short, concise sentences capture existential events. The starting point of the text is the traumatic event of her mother's death, which disrupts the order of the first-person narrator's life. Subtle characteristics of her mother's habitus are described through the narrator's memories and perceptions. Photographs, everyday observations, and events often form the starting point and the basis of her reminiscences. The relationship of closeness and distance between mother and daughter changes – due to the geographical location, the place of residence, and the professional distance between the daughter, who works as a teacher, and the mother, who works as a shopkeeper – over the span of the two lives. The narrator describes her mother as a woman with ambition, who is talented and could have taken a different educational path from her family, but the family's fear that she would then leave the village prevailed. The Northern French connotation of the word "ambitious" is pointed out: "In Norman French, 'ambition' refers to the trauma of separation; a dog, for instance, can die of ambition" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 14). This meaning of ambition, which refers to traumatic experiences of separation, becomes particularly legible in the text through the class distance and alienation (as a form of separation) that mother and daughter experience a generation later due to the daughter's educational advancement.

The boundaries between theory and literature have become increasingly blurred, particularly in gender and queer theory and in works that address class. The lived experience of vulnerability can also be taken as an opportunity for theoretical engagement. As bell hooks writes: "I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me" (1). Through Ernaux' literary text, we might be able to think about questions of class and gender in a way that might be understood as theoretical, one that opens up questions and does not give us clear answers at all.

Habitus and Gender in *A Woman's Story*

Gender roles are characterized by social circumstances, relationships, and the family – the specific social situation must be considered in detail (Krais 14; Bourdieu, *Distinction*). For Bourdieu, it is central that the existing order and

the power relations of this order are effortlessly maintained and constantly reproduced, and thus appear to be "natural" (Dölling 172). Gender is a dimension of habitus (Dölling 172). Andreas Reckwitz emphasizes: "there is little sense in speaking of the social position of *the* woman or *the* man without referring to classes" (59). In the same way, Silvia Federici points out the link between the devaluation of women and the expropriation of labor:

> if "femininity" has been constituted in capitalist society as a work-function masking the production of the work-force under the cover of a biological destiny, then "women's history" is "class history," and the question that has to be asked is whether the sexual division of labour that has produced that particular concept has been transcended.
>
> (14)

In *A Woman's Story*, this seemingly "natural" order can be observed in the following passages: early on, the mother becomes aware of her gendered role as a girl who is allowed to play like the boys but at the same time knows about the shame of her own sexuality and her need for protection:

> leading the full outdoor life of a little country girl, displaying the same knowledge as the boys: sawing wood, shaking the fruit off apple trees, and killing hens by plunging a pair of scissors down their throat. There was, however, one difference: she made sure no one touched her "place."
>
> (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 17)

What is described in the English translation of the book as "her place," meaning "vulva," actually assigns her a different place and marks her as different from the boys. Heteronormativity becomes particularly apparent when gender boundaries are (about to be) crossed.

School, or rather the entire educational path, appears exclusively as a "phase," a means to an end, that of being able to earn a living later on (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 18). The prospect of wage labor in the factory demands that female workers be docile. Every transgression of boundaries brings with it serious consequences: "inevitable poverty, the threat of alcoholism, and everything else that happened to a factory girl who had slipped into bad habits" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 22). Marriage for women is considered "a matter of life or death" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 23) – alcoholics and dying babies are mentioned in the same sentence as unmarried mothers to evoke the horror of the pre-war years in the valley in which the mother grows up (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 27–28). Here, again, heteronormativity, alongside classism, manifests itself in its material, physical, and symbolic power, limiting the gendered and socially situated subject while evoking the horrors of other, non-normative ways of living and being.

The apparent "naturalness" and "immutability" of the gendered position in social space obscures the moment of its own genesis and ongoing

reproduction: the *female* habitus is thus fed by certain collective and individual "patterns of interpretation and social practices" (Thieme 91–92; our translation), which are inscribed in the body. The habitus must always be understood as changing and was also described by Bourdieu as a "history of the body and of things that have become things" (*The Logic of Practice* 52), which indicates the relative stability of the habitus. These processes of inscription and internalization – referred to by Bourdieu as "incorporation" or "embodiment" (*Distinction* 190, 468) – identify the habitus as a primarily "*socially constructed* habitus" (Thieme 91–92; translation and emphasis ours).

The extent to which Ernaux's body becomes visible as a central carrier, as the "foundation of the habitus" (Klein 295; our translation), can be seen in the way she dresses, moves, speaks, and interacts with others, all of which are physical experiences that are socially characterized:

> How could she know that her short skirts (she took them up herself), her urchin cut, the 'bold' expression in her eyes, and especially the fact that she worked with men, meant that she would never be seen as a "decent young girl."
>
> (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 22)

Feelings and emotions that appear as physical evidence of a social biography and tell of belonging to a particular social milieu also occur against a specific social background: "When I think of my mother's violent temper, outbursts of affection, and reproachful attitude, I try not to see them as facets of her personality but to relate them to her own story and social background" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 39).

Overcoming class boundaries is described as the desire to be "some*body*" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 21; emphasis ours) – a person, a *body* of meaning and value. "She was aware that she belonged to the lower class and she resented it, refusing to be judged according to her social status alone" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 21). In contrast, the mother follows the learning of "rules of good behavior" and "social conventions," which serve as an important means of distinguishing herself from her own milieu of origin – but always accompanied by the fear "of doing the wrong thing" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 44). This "newly" acquired, actively learnt habitus, which feeds on economic as well as cultural capital, includes, among other things, paying attention to "correct" pronunciation (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 29) – here too she is in constant fear of making a mistake (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 43) – aware of acquiring the appropriate knowledge and "good" taste (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 75), "that she attributed to cultivated people" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 45).

The habitus is brought to the fore, or rather brought out of its naturalized invisibility, when the mother's efforts to rise up are described. From an early age, she was proud not to come from the country, as many of her family did (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 13). The class-consciousness she developed from

childhood can be traced back to the family's precarious living situation. As a worker in a factory, she set herself apart from the "country girls who stayed behind with the cows," it "made her feel civilized compared to the barbarians . . . and free compared to the slaves" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 20). Later, it was her "one and only dream: to become a shop girl" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 20), "trying to escape the dull certainties of her fate" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 22). "She was proud to be a factory girl but too proud to stay one all her life, dreaming of the only ambition which lay within her reach: running a grocery business" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 27). Over the years, the small family enjoyed a "higher standard of living" – now in contrast to the "other working-class people around them" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 35).

On the one hand, the impossibility of completely discarding or leaving behind one's own origins becomes apparent: "The feeling that she wasn't worthy of them [her husband's family], a feeling which in her eyes also applied to me" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 57). On the other hand, the family has class privileges that are fueled by career advancement opportunities, economic security, and newly acquired social and cultural capital. This multiple affiliation – or lack of affiliation – emphasizes the position of the mother as a border crosser, an intermediate, somehow queer, position, that leads to the earlier mentioned hysteresis effect (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 109, 142). This position allows or demands the awareness of circumstances that are self-evident to others, "because they are forced to keep watch on themselves and consciously correct the 'first movements' of a habitus that generates inappropriate or misplaced behaviours" (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* 163). (Class) shame and fear, the traces of the "old" habitus, are the mother's constant companions, as is the desire to have it better one day, to live a "good life."

Precariousness, Shared Vulnerability, and Responsibility

When we speak of the concept of precarity, Butler claims we are basically assuming a "shared condition of human life" that exists from the beginning of life ("Precariousness and Grievability"), a condition that all human beings share. This "shared condition" is linked to corporeality (Pistrol 241); physicality or having a body as a form of "primary vulnerability" "implies a fundamental and unrestricted susceptibility to being affected by others" (Pistrol 239). In this general common vulnerability, some lives are nevertheless more vulnerable/at risk of precarity due to certain characteristics – their social and ethnic origin, their gender identity and sexual orientation, etc.

The lives of both women in *A Woman's Story* show the unequal distribution of precariousness, mutual dependence, and shared vulnerability, and allow the physicality of both characters to come to the fore. The vulnerability of both characters in their relationship dynamic is at the center of the narrative. This becomes apparent, for example, in the way the first-person narrator deals with her mother's illness and her life after her death:

> I shall never hear the sound of her voice again. It was her voice, together with her words, her hands, and her way of moving and laughing, which

> linked the woman I am to the child I once was. The last bond between me and the world I come from has been severed.
>
> (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 90)

The narrator's own vulnerability becomes particularly visible when she begins to talk about her own childhood, her growing up, and her dependence on her mother.

Precarity implies that we always already live in a tangled structure of relationships, "that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, "Precariousness and Grievability") and that each "we" "does not, and cannot, recognize itself, that it is riven from the start, interrupted by alterity" (Butler, "Precariousness and Grievability"). In this mutual dependency, in this vulnerability, we can locate – with Butler – a fundamental moment of responsibility. For it is precisely in situations of particular vulnerability – such as the death of the mother in Ernaux's text – that we are called upon to act responsibly:

> we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation that we did not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it establishes our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it creates the conditions under which we assume responsibility.
>
> (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 101)

Butler argues that it is precisely the way in which we react to injury that can offer us an opportunity "to elaborate an ethical perspective and even *become* human" (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 101; emphasis ours). Butler refers here to Theodor W. Adorno; in this definition of ethics, a specific understanding of "*becoming* human" is assumed, which seems to be relevant for an ethics of responsibility, because it moves away from a narcissistically oriented, neoliberal logic:

> One of the problems with insisting on self-preservation as the basis of ethics is that it becomes a pure ethics of the self, if not a form of moral narcissism. If one persists in vacillating between claiming a right against such violations and resisting this claim, one becomes "human."
>
> (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 103)

To be human, therefore, is to be in a dilemma and at the same time difficult to define. Butler captures this in the following words: "If the human is anything, it seems to be a double movement, one in which we assert moral norms and at the same time question the authority with which we make that assertion" (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 103).

It is precisely in situations of vulnerability, which Ernaux focuses on in her texts, that this ethical dimension comes to the fore, as the question arises as to how we can treat each other responsibly in particularly vulnerable situations such as illness or old age. What do we do when someone close to us

dies? How do we deal with our own and other people's precarious life situations? These questions are not only relevant to our personal decisions but also embedded in political and social circumstances. Our own vulnerability thus always relates to other (externalized) persons, to situational circumstances, institutions, and structures with which there is an "interdependence" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 45). If, at the same time, a common vulnerability connects all living beings and a "primary vulnerability" (Pistrol 239) refers to physicality, gender appears as a dimension of unequally distributed vulnerability, as is shown, for example, in the gender-specific habitus of the two women in *A Woman's Story*.

How does Ernaux's text address this dimension of unequally distributed vulnerability? Through a seemingly sober, distanced approach, it makes it possible to address the contradictory, ambivalent foundations of feelings and thus vulnerability, while at the same time emphasizing the personal, structural, and political dimensions of vulnerability. After all, it is not just the story of two women that is told here but that of countless lives. In order to distance itself from the purely personal view of this situation and not just emphasize the assessment of one character and thus a subjective judgment, the narrative voice distances itself in the form of sober descriptions that appear as objective as possible. In our opinion, this is precisely the particular strength of Ernaux's texts for dealing with precariousness: that the seemingly objective, structural dimension of vulnerability as well as the highly personal perception of this situation are told and made visible at the same time.

We can go one step further with Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay's theory of precarity and vulnerability (*Vulnerability in Resistance*). For it is not only that the dimension of unequally distributed precarity that is difficult to perceive becomes visible, this situation can also hold the potential for resistance. Vulnerability holds the potential for change insofar as collective resistance can be achieved through alliances and interventions in joint actions. What happens when we understand vulnerability as a condition for the possibility of resistance? "What follows when we conceive of resistance as drawing from vulnerability as a resource of vulnerability, or as part of the very meaning or action of resistance itself?" (Butler, *Vulnerability in Resistance* 1).

If we understand vulnerability as potential resistance, then it also has a fundamental ethical dimension, which Butler points out when she writes that her aim is not to rehabilitate humanism but rather to "struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity" (Puar 170). According to Butler, responsibility can only be developed in the encounter with the other and the recognition of vulnerability. Butler refers in particular to Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of alterity, which is essentially aimed at responsibility. This responsibility toward the other in a world that seems so unequal is what Ernaux's text emphasizes when talking about particularly precarious lives, and literature possibly opens up a space here that allows reflection on ethical questions about the worlds we live in.

About Worlds and Words

"My mother died" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 1); Ernaux places these final words at the beginning of the narrative. The simultaneity of the finality of the content (the death of a loved one) and the textual beginning (the first sentence in *A Woman's Story*) anticipate that there will be no narrative linearity and coherence in the further course of the story. The statement "She will never be alive anywhere in the world again" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 10) reads like a seemingly seamless, logical consequence. It is a sober, simple realization, the impact of which remains unimaginable and inexplicable for the narrator: "I couldn't come to terms with the fact that the other people behaved normally" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 10). Dying, as a deeply individual and at the same time social event: how can it be that the other people, in view of her mother's death, behave "normally," the first-person narrator asks herself. Being part of a socially organized world also means that dying is part of (past and future) *normality*; it is part of all our vulnerable existence. But how do we deal with the loss of a person – both spatially ("anywhere") and temporally ("never again")? How to mourn the death of a person, both individually and collectively, as it also appears in the quotes above ("I couldn't come to terms," whereas "other people behave normally")?

Losing one's place in the world, but also being lost in it or being denied a sense of belonging, is a motif that is frequently used in the narrative, especially in relation to the mother's Alzheimer's disease. People suffering from dementia suffer a "social death" long before they are "biologically dead" (Taylor 2008): "And here her story stops for there was no longer a place for her in society. She was slowly turning insane" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 74). The onset of the incurable disease marks the end of her existence as a "valuable" member of society in the capitalist sense: "insane," sick, old, incapable of working and reproducing, socialized as *female*,[3] that is, as a person marginalized by multiple forms of domination, she is entitled to neither space – "there was no longer a place" – nor time or a testimony – "here her story stops."

"She slowly slipped into a world without seasons, warm, gentle, and sweet-smelling, where there was no notion of time, just the inevitable routine of eating and going to bed" (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 81). Writing about her mother suffering from Alzheimer's, what kind of world is it that seems so fundamentally different from her own world? Even if we all seem to inhabit a common world, Butler states: "The common has not yet been achieved. Perhaps it is more apt to say that there are many and overlapping worlds" (*What World is This?* 2). Is it a world in which we live? Or are they worlds? And if so: what kind of worlds are these?

> So even though we tend to speak of the world as a singular horizon or expect that the word *world* will set the horizon to experience itself, we also

> talk about *worlds* in the plural to highlight discontinuity, barriers, and inequalities, and we feel it is imperative to do so to describe the world as it is.
> (Butler, *What World is This?* 6)

Death and Illness – including Alzheimer's, for example, but also the illnesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, which Butler takes as the starting point for her reflections in *What World is This?* – confront us with questions like the following: How are diseased and dead bodies dealt with? What resources and support services are available to the most marginalized and vulnerable among us? Which bodies are granted self-determination and protection – and which are excluded?

The question of a common, habitable world for all is inextricably linked to the question of a liveable and (in past and future terms) grievable life, of a *good life* for all (Butler, *What World is This?* 32). The possibility to be mourned, as a prerequisite for equality, is based on "a body that matters" (Butler, *What World is This?* 102). This decidedly ethical claim is reflected in Ernaux, in *a story that matters*, as it were. With a story ("a story that matters") about the life of a person socialized as *female*, a sick person from a socially disadvantaged milieu, Ernaux creates a temporal and spatial testimony. Ernaux repeatedly and explicitly incorporates the process of writing, writing down and recording into the narrative. In Donna J. Haraway's words: "It matters what worlds make worlds, what worlds make stories" (53). Telling/writing is remembering, and remembering is political: the remembered "ordinary" life of a woman, the story of a woman, becomes a collectively told narrative that, in its visualization of injustice and inequality, always begs the question: What common world do we want to live in? How should this world be organized?

Conclusion

Ernaux's narrative can be read as an insistence on the *resistant* body, an insistence through which the stories of precarious, vulnerable/endangered, and marginalized bodies are preserved and not consigned to oblivion. Through the very personal, subjective story of mother and daughter, the story of many similarly invisible and untold lives is brought to the fore – the "collective biography," as it is often called (Charpentier; Engelmeier; Paterno). In Ernaux's case, her writing grows out of direct experience; it consciously breaks with "writing well and beautiful sentences," with linearity and coherence:

> In the bringing to light of the social unspeakable, of those internalised power relations linked to class and/or race, and gender too, felt only by the people who directly experience their impact, the possibility of individual but also collective emancipation emerges. To decipher the real world by stripping it of the visions and values that language, all language, carries within it is to upend its established order, upset its hierarchies.
> (Ernaux, *Nobel Prize Lecture*)

"In the bringing to light of the social unspeakable" is precisely where the potential of a *queer reading*, such as the one presented in this chapter, can lie. With Butler, we have shown that every resistant, subversive reading has also an affirmative moment; "a way of hoping for 'we' that does not yet exist. We are not fully distinct from each other (nor fully the same) for we are already implicated in each other's lives prior to any contract or consent" (Butler, *What World is This?* 80). In speaking of this fundamental interconnectedness of life, of the underlying vulnerability in all our lives, and of the precariousness that makes our world(s) unequally structured and liveable, Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* is an endeavor to resist these inequalities.

Notes

1 We also want to make our positionality as *white* academics born in Central Europe visible and – despite individual biographical experiences – not leave the resulting privileges unnamed. Questions of situated knowledge are discussed in this volume in the roundtable discussion.
2 On the problematic nature of the term "woman," which only refers to one possible legible gender identity, Annemarie Jagose aptly states the following: "The term 'women' does not signify a natural unity but instead a regulatory fiction, whose deployment inadvertently reproduces those normative relations between sex, gender and desire that naturalise heterosexuality" (83–84). Lola Olufemi formulates in *Feminism Interrupted*: "'Woman' is a strategic coalition, an umbrella under which we gather in order to make political demands. It might be mobilised in service of those who, given another option, would identify themselves in other ways. In a liberated future, it might not exist at all" (65).
3 In relation to Alzheimer's, gender plays a central role: the majority of sufferers are women and at the same time women are also those who perform the majority of (un)paid care work, as shown in the *World Alzheimer Report* 2022.

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5 Happy Little People

Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Hans Fallada's *Kleiner Mann – was nun*? and Kristine Bilkau's *Die Glücklichen*

Susanne Hochreiter

Introduction

The 1920s were anything but "golden years." After the end of World War I, however, there was a brief phase of social liberalization and economic recovery in German-speaking countries, especially in Germany and Austria, which went down in history as the "Roaring Twenties." Various emancipatory movements of the time – from the labor movement to the women's movement to the homosexual movement – demanded equal political and legal rights. During these years, gender and sexual norms were significantly challenged. By the 1920s, multiple new discourses had emerged: since the nineteenth century, medicine and the so-called sexual sciences had been trying to tame "perversions" via elaborate systems of classification; gender and sexuality were vividly depicted and thematized in many literary texts, criminology worked to distil discrete criminal types and articulate so-called degenerative phenomena; the new sociology discussed the increasingly complex structures of classes and milieus, and numerous philosophical and political writings dealt with nationality conflicts and anti-Semitism.

Political and economic developments following World War II are characterized by neoliberal ideas. Since the 1980s, in particular, this has manifested itself in a changed social structure in German-speaking countries, and the so-called middle class, which still dominated in the 1960s and 1970s, is increasingly under pressure. Kristine Bilkau's 2015 novel *Die Glücklichen* reflects the social decline of a young couple against this backdrop, with clear references to Hans Fallada's 1932 book *Kleiner Mann – was nun?* Because of this literary "kinship," I draw a comparison of the respective contemporary discourses on sexuality and class. The political and economic situations addressed in the two novels are different and yet have similarities. In both cases, financial bottlenecks and the threat of social decline, seem to reinforce traditional relationship patterns and sexualities. Likewise, existential emergency leads to a focus on the nuclear family. However, the protagonists' hope for security and stability is only partially fulfilled by recourse to this constellation.

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Sign of the Times

Both the women's movement and the homosexual movement found new scope for action in the 1920s in the Weimar Republic. Numerous clubs, pubs, and magazines for lesbian women and gay men, including contributions about "transvestitism" or transgender persons, emerged. Berlin in particular attracted people with entertainment and comparatively tolerant living conditions. In 1908, women were generally allowed to study in Prussia. In 1913, around eight percent of all students were female. In 1919, women achieved the right to vote and stand for election. Even though dominant gender concepts continued to exist, the blurring of traditional gendered roles and behaviors created the emancipatory and queer potential of the 1920s (McCormik 4). While homosexuality continued to be pathologized through the propositions of sexologists, these often had the aim of decriminalization. In this context, the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld was a formative enlightener who went one step further with his Scientific-Humanitarian Committee. He took up Karl Ulrichs' theory of the "third sex" to show homosexuality as an innate sexual variant (Hirschfeld 395). At the same time, during this period, more people in Germany were employed, including a third of women, who achieved greater financial independence. Siegfried Kracauer's well-known book *Die Angestellten* (*The Salaried Masses*) was published in 1929 and was the inspiration for Fallada's novel (Manthey 88). Kracauer's study was the first model of social research in German-speaking countries, presenting systematized observations on the lives of white-collar workers.

The global economic crisis put an abrupt end to liberal tendencies, and the New York stock market crash of 1929 led to mass unemployment in Germany. In 1933, the National Socialist German Workers' Party seized power in Germany. For the homosexual subculture, this meant threat and persecution, including the deportation and murder of homosexual people. The dazzling subculture of the major cities in the Weimar Republic was destroyed in one fell swoop.

Literature of the Weimar Republic

German-language literature from the mid-1920s and early 1930s is very diverse in its forms, styles, and themes. In addition to classics by authors such as Thomas Mann, Gerhart Hauptmann, and the highly influential poet Stefan George, it is above all the novels of the New Objectivity that reflect the preoccupations of the times. They address big city life, unemployment, the situation of ordinary employees, and what was both sought out and ostracized as "decadence" at the time: drugs, sexual "perversions," and prostitution. Authors such as Irmgard Keun and Vicki Baum take a critical look at gender relations from the perspective of female protagonists. They write about ruthless consumer culture, unemployment, and prostitution.

In addition, texts with homosexual protagonists began to appear, despite the fact that male homosexuality was prosecuted in the Weimar Republic. Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1911) articulates a homosexual desire in a barely concealed manner. Likewise, his son Klaus Mann tells a story of gay desire in his debut *Der fromme Tanz* (1926, The Pious Dance). Maximiliane Ackers, Anna Elisabet Weirauch, and Christa Winsloe were famous for their lesbian novels and plays.

Employees

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new group of white-collar workers emerged: the *Angestellten* (loosely translated as "employees" or "clerks"). The *Angestelltenkultur*, the white-collar culture, in German-speaking countries differs from that in other European industrialized countries. It is characterized by the higher level of prestige enjoyed by employees, although the actual working conditions are sometimes hardly better than that of workers (Schmidt 36). The *employés salariés* or *cadres* (middle and upper employees) in France or the "white-collar workers" or "clerks" in England received less attention as a differentiated social group.

At the upper end of this occupational structure are those carrying out research, management, and administrative work – closer to the bourgeoisie than the proletariat (Hirschle 58). At the lower end are those employed in the sale of goods and in consumer-related and personal service occupations. In between are those occupational groups who perform clerical and simple administrative tasks. This produced a multitude of different occupational situations whose representatives only perceived each other as equals to a limited extent (Hirschle 58). Acceleration and increased efficiency in production (particularly through the introduction of the assembly line) are key elements of the changes in the world of work at the beginning of the twentieth century. The principles of Fordism spread rapidly and manifested themselves in the lifestyle of people, who were not only expected to work faster but also in demand as consumers. This is associated with a lifestyle that also includes "leisure time" and the "weekend" due to the regulation of working hours. Fashion trends combine with new body ideals, and competition in a very tight labor market displaces solidary class-consciousness. An "Americanization" of culture brought visible changes, especially with regard to the concept of femininity. Young women, in particular, were expressing their sexuality in a more self-determined way.

Gender Models and Desire

The strengthening of the homosexual movement and the increased visibility of queer people, especially in the metropolitan areas, allowed sexual and gender diversity to be lived much more openly than was possible for a long time before and after. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people

organized themselves, socially and politically: in 1920, the "German Friendship League" was founded in Berlin. Increased openness and permissiveness can be observed with regard to sexual morals. In literary terms, the new white-collar culture has only a limited connection with the emancipatory homosexual movement that was active at the same time. Although there were of course many queer people among the white-collar workers, there are few homosexual protagonists in the literary depictions of the white-collar milieu. Conversely, the protagonists of queer novels tend to be artists, aristocrats, or members of the upper-middle classes.

Overall, it can be said that where class issues or social injustices are discussed, there is little room for an emancipatory view of homosexuality. Conversely, novels that deal with the love and desire of lesbian women and gay men hardly reflect contemporary class issues. This tendency is not universal, though. There are several examples of literary texts that address both homosexuality and social class, mainly published in magazines. Examples among lesbian authors include stories by Charlotte Lang, Selli Engler, or Herta Laser.[1] The thematic link seems to be even more frequent in stories by gay men. In gay magazines (*Freundschaftsblatt*, *Die Freundschaft*, etc.), the subject of class is not unusual. There are also stories about racial differences but mostly as an eroticization of the "other." Writers like Bruno Balz, Eugen Ernst, or Friedrich Radszuweit address the connection between unemployment and prostitution or crime. The plot in these stories often follows the pattern of rich gay citizen from an academic milieu meets poor, young worker. Overall, a separation between the different literary markets can be observed. The homosexual magazines were designed for a broader reading public and for entertainment.

Sales considerations on the part of publishers play an important role. Rowohlt, a major German publishing house which published Fallada's novel, pressured the author to rewrite or delete passages involving Nazis and passages that were too explicit when it came to sexuality or the protection of minors. Rowohlt was in a very precarious financial situation and Fallada's successful novel effectively enabled the company to be restructured. Although there was no active state censorship in a strict sense, many editors and publishers did not want to take risks (Petersen 149).

Two examples of successful queer novels are the books by Klaus Mann and Anna Elisabeth Weirauch. Both focus on queer desire and relationships but hardly reflect on class issues. In Mann's novel *Der fromme Tanz*, homosexual desire is portrayed openly, set in bohemian scenery. The characters' financial hardship becomes clear, but the reasons for this lie more in family conflicts than in social class. Mann describes characters who are coded as queer and correspond to what Hirschfeld understands as members of the "third sex." They are recognizable types of the time: the masculine-looking lesbian woman, the exalted craftswoman, and the effeminate dancer. The protagonist in Weirauch's trilogy of novels *Der Skorpion (The Scorpion)* (1919, 1921, 1931)

is a daughter from a middle-class family who falls in love with an older woman. All three parts found an enthusiastic (lesbian) audience (Schoppmann 11).

Little Man, What Now?

The title of Hans Fallada's novel refers to the colloquial "little man," a member of the milieu of people who are moderately educated and have little income or influence. The protagonist of Fallada's novel is Johannes Pinneberg, who marries his partner Emma Mörschel, known as Lämmchen ("little lamb"), when she becomes pregnant. The book tells the story of the couple's social decline against the backdrop of the economic crisis and Pinneberg's job loss. Emma and Johannes have to move in with his mother in Berlin who gets him a job at a department store. Later they move into a tiny illegal apartment, which they must leave when he loses his new job. Jobs are scarce, and the employee Pinneberg comes to the realization that he is one of the many who cannot cope with the enormous pressure of this new economic system. The couple ends up living with their child in a garden shed outside Berlin.

Marriage and Escapades

The conflict-ridden relationship between workers and employees becomes visible when Pinneberg introduces himself to Lämmchen's parents. When her father, a member of the socialist party, accuses Pinneberg of wanting to be something better, we learn that he is not wrong; Pinneberg does wish that he had something better: "After the hasty, loveless lunches of his bachelor days, he longs for a white, cleanly laid table, a meal with decent, pure ingredients, a nicely dressed housewife" (25^{2}). Here, the petit bourgeois ideal is clearly outlined and includes traditional gender roles and the concept of marriage. Pinneberg is not entirely without reflection about his changing ideals. He and Lämmchen have sex when they first meet on a beach. There is no talk of marriage. Later it is said:

> So now he has the usual childhood behind him, with all the disillusionment and veil falls and at least a dozen girlfriends, not counting the escapades. And then he met Lämmchen.
>
> (Fallada, *Little Man* 252)

> And if Murkel [the baby] hadn't come forward, then it wouldn't have come to that decision [marriage proposal], and gently and gradually Lämmchen would have been followed by an Eva or Trude.
>
> (Fallada, *Kleiner Mann* 298; my translation)

The now almost 23-year-old Pinneberg looks back on a varied and permissive sex life. Even though he loves Lämmchen, for him marriage is first a

convention and now more an act of responsibility toward his wife and the child she is expecting. Likewise, Lämmchen does not expect him to marry her and is in many ways portrayed as an independent, intelligent young woman who lives her sexuality in a self-determined way.

The "veil falls" in the above quote may refer to affairs with married women; it may be that other things such as gender identity were also unveiled during these encounters. The fall of the veil also signifies a loss of illusions (Fallada, *Kleiner Mann* 290), of relationships, love, and morality. In addition to the various sexual encounters and love affairs, there were also "escapades." What these entailed remains open, therefore, potentially including a whole spectrum of sexual encounters. Pinneberg's implied gonorrhea is a reminder of these experiences, which are only revealed through the narrative perspective and free indirect speech; it is suggested that Pinneberg himself is putting a veil over the past. He does not mention those things which do not fit in with his self-stylization as a husband and father. Once again, it should be emphasized that in Berlin, a metropolis of 3.6 million people, where a third of the population is under 20 years old, all kinds of opportunities flourish: prostitution is extremely widespread, both female and male. The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig comments in his memoirs *Die Welt von Gestern* (*The World of Yesterday*): "Make-up boys with fake waists promenaded along Kurfürstendamm, and not just professionals; every high school student wanted to earn something, and in the darkened bars, state secretaries and high-ranking financiers could be seen tenderly courting drunken sailors without shame" (Zweig 313). Berlin was hugely popular in the 1920s because of its "sexual peculiarities," as even conventional travel guides pointed out. Tourists from all over the world flocked to Berlin precisely because of its gay bars and transvestite balls and for all the other pleasures that were comparatively cheap for foreign guests to enjoy (Beachy 294–95).

Nudist Culture and Queer Scene

Joachim Heilbutt is the head salesman in the Berlin department store Mandel. He is Pinneberg's "crush," a gentleman and the best salesman (186). When Lämmchen is in the hospital giving birth, Pinneberg is worried and restless. He wants to talk to someone and decides to visit Heilbutt. Surprisingly, Heilbutt turns out to be a passionate supporter of nudism and persuades Pinneberg to come along to a "cultural evening" at the bathing establishment. There, through Pinneberg, the novel negotiates the heteronormative petit bourgeois order of the time: what do naked bodies mean, where does desire come from, and how is it regulated? Having previously imagined that he would not be able to control himself in the face of naked bodies, Pinneberg is now disgusted by the naked body of a woman (*Kleiner Mann* 292–93). The text suggests that the blunt nakedness irritates Pinneberg. The usually sexualized body of a woman is now perceived differently. Instead of a woman objectified and

thus safely contained, Pinneberg sees a woman who is a vulnerable but also powerful individual.

A conversation with the elderly Mrs. Nothnagel also transforms the promises of the nude bathing establishment. As a sales representative for lingerie, she considers joining the *Verein für Freikörperkultur* (Association for Nudist Culture) because this could be useful "for business." The fact that she, as a Jew, is also constantly subjected to anti-Semitic insults causes Pinneberg to flee. He realizes that Mrs. Nothnagel's plight is not unlike that of Lämmchen and himself: "We are also such poor little defenseless grey animals when things throw us off course. If only I don't become unemployed!" (Fallada, *Kleiner Mann* 301; my translation). For Pinneberg, the question of lifestyle is moral but above all economic. The bathing establishment with its various (sexual) promises becomes irrelevant to him. The golden twenties are, it seems, over for him; the prospects for "small" employees like him are narrowing. Pinneberg's fear of losing his job grows in view of the increasing numbers of unemployed, the impoverishment, and the hunger that many suffer. Between September 1929 and the beginning of 1933, the number of unemployed in Germany rose from about one million to over six million. Real income fell by a third, and poverty and crime increased sharply. Mass impoverishment characterized the everyday life of broad sections of the population during the economic crisis (see Reitmayer).

Looking at the way Fallada develops this type of employee in relation to gender and sexual desire, we see a difference from another important novel of the time. Fallada does not create an intellectual moralist, as Erich Kästner does with the protagonist in his novel *Fabian*. Pinneberg is, as they say, a simple man whose wishes and desires are caught between bourgeois and proletarian standards. He sees his desire for material security and a stable order under constant threat. The standard of what is necessary for life is constantly being lowered. Modesty is the proverbial adornment, especially for those who have nothing.

One Night in Berlin

The idea that Pinneberg's earlier experiences also included queer encounters is supported not only by his sexual openness (see *Kleiner Mann* 287) but also by the presence of a queer (sub)culture. In his book *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht* (1904, Berlin's Third Sex), Magnus Hirschfeld creates a sexual topography of the city similar to a travel guide. Beate Binder's findings about this guide are relevant to our context: on the one hand, Hirschfeld's booklet reflects a textual tradition that leads the bourgeois milieu into the dark and remote areas of a large city, where the abject is situated. In Hirschfeld's case, it is not the workers' houses, slums, and factories that are presented; instead, he takes the visitors to working-class restaurants where gay, lesbian, and trans people meet after work. The social codes in his writing have a specific aim in

mind: Hirschfeld "was interested in shifting the classification and evaluation schemes immanent to the perception of sexual phenomena in the city" (Binder 93). In his descriptions, he followed "dominant bourgeois ideas," what he called the "natural sense of shame and morality," in order to gain empathy for those he describes as the "third sex" (Binder 93). In this work, Hirschfeld creates a "picture of deviant normality," telling of various places in the city, pubs, hotels, boarding houses, and bathing establishments where so-called Urnings[3] meet (Binder 93). However, it is not only places but also various codes, signs, and gestures that characterize this changing sexual topography. Hirschfeld describes the metropolis as a socially differentiated landscape of consumption and pleasure, over which the grid of a homosexually coded spatial order is laid (Hirschfeld 47). Hirschfeld does not frame homosexuality as a social issue, as it exists in all social classes and is not caused by social situations (Binder 100). At the same time, the homosexualities of the different classes are coded as such, for example, when Hirschfeld reports on a visit to a suburban pub where a birthday is celebrated with potato salad and sausages, and "the landlord's son plays the hits of the day on the piano" (Hirschfeld 53). Here, too, it is the subtle forms of distinction Pierre Bourdieu analyses in *Distinction* that take effect. What is more, homosexuality is closely interwoven with the dimension of social class in the various discursive conceptions, both literary and non-literary. Hirschfeld's guidebook makes this clear: his depiction is aimed at a bourgeois audience – just as literature primarily addresses bourgeois readers.

Pinneberg wanders through Berlin, from square to square where he hopes to steal the most beautiful flowers for Lämmchen, who has just given birth to their child. On his way, he crosses popular and lively queer locations, and yet since he does not enter any of the numerous bars and dance halls, his nocturnal roaming of the city becomes an ironic reference to the queer scene in Berlin at that time:

> and one after the other he appears at Großer Stern, at Lützowplatz, at Nollendorfplatz, at Viktoria-Luise-Platz, at Prager Platz. . . . He continues his walk, he shows up at Nikolsburger Platz and goes on to Hindenburgpark. And again he is at Fehrbelliner Platz, at Olivaer Platz and at Savignyplatz.
> (Fallada, *Little Man* 262–63)

Viktoria-Luise-Platz was a short walking distance to the most famous queer nightclub of the time, the "Eldorado," and the area around Nollendorfplatz between Kurfürstendamm and Bülowstraße had a particularly lively queer scene. This is what Berlin was known and sought after for, as Christopher Isherwood shows in his autobiographical novels.[4]

Comparable to Hirschfeld's strategy of complicity with bourgeois heteronormativity, Fallada's conception of Johannes Pinneberg can be read as a "well-behaved" employee who does not succumb to queer temptations. If the

aim is to gain empathy for the social declassification of the declining employees, then this seems incompatible with queer sexual "escapades." Instead, Pinneberg and Lämmchen are represented as somewhat naive during their excursion to Berlin's nightclubs and ballrooms, as they remain oblivious to the more scandalous side of these establishments.

End in the Garden Shed

The novel concludes not only as was predicted from the beginning but also as could be historically expected. Pinneberg loses his job. The family can no longer maintain their accommodation, and they move into a garden shed on the outskirts of town. Pinneberg looks after the child and Lämmchen sews for a modest living. Pinneberg is visibly poor and is even chased away from a store window by a policeman. It is Lämmchen who supports and lifts him up, who continues to counter this experience of humiliation and devaluation with love and confidence. The novel ends with an embrace that comes from the greatest existential despair and lifts the two of them into the sky, as it were – into the same starry sky under which they met (Fallada, *Kleiner Mann* 482).

Homosexuality is not part of a literary white-collar culture, and the figure of Johannes Pinneberg can only naïvely navigate the (sexual) opportunities of Berlin. It is above all his financial situation that shapes his hopes and his fears. He is guided by the pursuit of bourgeois prosperity and bourgeois values, but at the same time, he knows that he is at best an aspirant. The economic crisis destroys his dreams and shrinks the family's prospects. The prospects are equally modest for Lämmchen, who initially gives up her job for the marriage but ends up supporting the family.

Pinneberg is not representative of hegemonic masculinity, neither physically nor in his attitudes. Overall, he is rather gentle and naive, oriented toward traditional values but open-minded and willing to question convictions. Fallada created this figure of an employee – who is supposed to appear sympathetic – as reliable and loyal. Pinneberg resists the erotic temptations of Berlin as well as the political temptations of the time since he does not turn to the National Socialists. The ideal employee is portrayed as strictly monogamous and heterosexual. While politics and economy fail completely, the heteronormative nuclear family is idealized as a tiny island of salvation.

Kristine Bilkau: *Die Glücklichen*

Today, an increasing commodification of social activity can be observed on the one hand, and the withdrawal of political measures and the dwindling influence of intermediary organizations that tamed capitalism in the post-war period of prosperity on the other (Hirschle 59). If the central figure of the post-industrial service society is the employee, this trend has intensified with economic globalization.

Kristine Bilkau's novel *Die Glücklichen* (The Happy Ones) was published in 2015. It is about the threat of social decline due to the two protagonists, Isabell and Georg, losing their jobs in quick succession: Georg, a journalist, because an international media group is closing the editorial office of his newspaper, and Isabell, a musician, because her hands are shaking so badly that she can no longer play. They have a young son, Matti. Their ideas about life, family, love, happiness, and the future erode with the loss of their jobs and the realization that the bourgeois model of life, even for the educated class, has little future in times of neoliberal precarity.

According to the model Andreas Reckwitz advocates in his book *Das Ende der Illusionen* (*The End of Illusions*), Isabell and Georg belong to the new middle class, the class of the highly qualified (Reckwitz 90). Even if they have not graduated from university, higher education is a prerequisite for both jobs. They both possess above-average cultural and economic capital. They perform intangible work with high emotional identification potential, which demands ever higher performance (Reckwitz 90–91). This becomes particularly clear in Isabell's work as a cellist in an orchestra: the trembling of her hands, which leads to her being unable to perform daily in the orchestra pit, is a symptom of this demand and of its constant pressure. Her job loss becomes particularly existential, because it is related to what she perceives as her non-functioning body.

With this constellation, Bilkau thematizes a gender paradigm that corresponds to what Reckwitz describes as characteristic of the new middle class: here, the overcoming of traditional gender roles is experienced – also by the men – as a liberation: the cosmopolitan men of this class are generally oriented toward cooperative values (Reckwitz 112). The character Georg shows this orientation very clearly. Even if some attachment to a more traditional model – an echo of the bourgeois family and some of its core values and functions – can be observed in the couple's relationship, Georg's longing for life in the country is linked to a fantasy of himself as a caring family man who is able to do traditional men's work.

Sexuality and desire are also an expression of existential pressure. Sex in the couple's relationship is rare and often complicated. Desire is transformed in a peculiar way: Georg secretly researches farms and dreams of his own house in the country, while Isabell buys expensive clothes and specialty food despite the lack of money. She repeatedly withdraws completely into herself and appears to be overwhelmed and depressed. An encounter with a former girlfriend awakens the memory of the desire Isabell felt for her. Yet the shame about her professional and financial situation prevents her from getting close to her friend again; instead, Isabell feels like a failure and tries to hide her plight. The title "The Happy Ones" is an indirect reference to the novel by Fallada. The first chapter of Fallada's book is titled "Die Sorglosen" ("The Carefree"). Bilkau's novel reads like a reflection of the same basic constellation – heterosexual nuclear family, job loss, and social declassification – and its central

motifs: conflicts with the parents' generation and the questioning of dominant ideas about love, family, and happiness. In both cases, the protagonists hope for a positive future: professionally and as a family. In both cases, social decline means the loss of such prospects for the future, and it changes not only the overall structure of the relationship but also each individual's respective gendered self-image as a woman and as a man. In connection with this, dominant life plans are also called into question.

Fallada's book stands at the beginning of a strongly capitalist economic and social development, and Bilkau's novel does not mark an end but a critical interim. In *Die Glücklichen*, the precarization of the educated middle class is a relatively new development: education is no longer a guarantee of a job or opportunities for advancement. The flexibilization and pluralization of lifestyles and family forms appear as an additional threat: the nuclear family tries to gain security in a restorative movement.

Fallada's characters are sexually more open and more curious, as well as also more self-confident. For Bilkau's protagonists, sexuality has become difficult; social shame seems to kill every erotic impulse. The central metaphor in the book is a small box embedded in the wall of Isabell's former nursery in her early twentieth-century apartment, a box that cannot be opened. All efforts to unlock the secret of this safe fail. The safe can be understood as a metaphor for inaccessible desire and unfulfilled (erotic) wishes. Embedded in the wall of Isabell's room, it suggests that it is primarily about her (lesbian) desire. At the same time, it is an old wall safe in an old house that connects the present of the narrative with the past. Here, we see another possible link with Fallada's novel, which is set in the Weimar Republic.

In *Die Glücklichen*, the strong bond of trust between Lämmchen and Pinneberg is absent. Isabell and Georg keep secrets from each other and struggle to decide whose life model will prevail: Isabell's path of refusing to surrender luxuries, or Georg's path of self-sufficiency in the countryside. In the end, like in Fallada's novel, there is a scene outdoors, a moment in nature. It is a temporary reconciliation and an image of the future – but it is essentially an image that Isabell projects from a possible future into her present. She imagines being an old woman and looking back: "She will see her young self next to Georg and the child, there on the blanket under the tree, and recognize the perfection of the moment" (Bilkau 300; my translation). Similar to Fallada, the tone at the end suggests optimism, but Bilkau's last sentence throws a shadow of doubt: "Today, at least, she can feel it that way" (Bilkau 301; my translation).

Conclusion

Fallada's and Bilkau's novels show a close interweaving of the issues of economy and class with concepts of gender and desire. Both texts show how fragile these constructions are and that social decline is experienced in both texts

as crisis-ridden and threatening, leading the protagonists to insist on the heteronormative nuclear family. In this way, both novels illustrate the effectiveness of normativity. Faced with the threat of social decline, the protagonists seek security in traditional relationships. In Fallada, this perspective is not chosen without reflection, but it is romanticized. In the case of Bilkau's protagonists, the ruptures in their relationship are clear. Their social plight imposes on them a closeness from which they can hardly escape.

Comparing the two novels, published 85 years apart, it is notable that Fallada's characters are less isolated; despite the great misery and existential hardship that they encounter, they seek and receive help from others. In Bilkau's novel, the couple resent one another and the felt necessity to conceal financial restrictions has an isolating effect. Bilkau's protagonists' shame is greater than that of Fallada's, who are accustomed to simple circumstances and who live at a time when many people of their class are experiencing social hardship.

Notes

1 I owe this information to Janin Afken and Liesa Hellmann – both researchers at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.
2 For the analysis, I used the latest unabridged German edition. The quotations are mostly from the English translation published by Penguin. Those quotations from the German edition that are not part of the Penguin English edition are my translation and cited as such.
3 The term was introduced in the nineteenth century by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs as a term for male homosexuals. Hirschfeld took up the term and integrated the idea of the "urnic human" into his theories on the "third sex."
4 Isherwood, Christopher. *Goodbye to Berlin*. Hogarth Press, 1939. This novel and *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) were published together and became known as Isherwood's "Berlin Stories."

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6 Queering Dark Academia

Anna Kurowicka

Most new research at the intersection of queerness and class argues against the displacement of working- and lower-class queerness in favor of privileging its middle-class version (Taylor, Brim, Raffo). This chapter, in turn, focuses on the romanticized (re)creation of upper-class queerness which, I argue, can be found in the genre of dark academia. The appeal of dark academia, a literary genre and an aesthetic trend centered around the university and featuring criminal or Gothic undertones, lies in its fascination with markers of class and racial privilege combined with the affective draw of queer intimacy it offers. My chapter explores the interweaving strands of upper-class and queer affinity in two dark academia novels: a classic of the genre, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992; *Secret*) and one of the recent critical reimaginings of these themes, Lee Mandelo's *Summer Sons* (2021; *Summer*). Dark academia provides an opportunity to critically engage with queer attraction to economic, social, and cultural privilege inherent in romanticizing the university as a unique site of intellectual freedom and queer formation. In particular, an idealized university seems to be a perfect setting to create a queer utopia outside the restrictions of normative temporality. These utopian projects, however, fail when they turn out to depend on upholding strict class hierarchies.

Dark academia's popularity is based on the depiction of university life as a place where one can find protection from the pressures of capitalist and heteronormative life. The luxury of devoting time to knowledge and sharing intellectual excitement with an elite group of like-minded people is something sorely missing from the realities of most jobs under contemporary capitalism. University becomes a utopia for those who reject the pursuit of money and the mind-numbing work it often requires, along with the normative, linear timeline of life that requires heterosexual coupling and starting a nuclear family. Yet as both *Secret* and *Summer* suggest, such romantic dreams of escape ultimately turn out to be futile. In Tartt's novel, the queer friendship falls apart under internal and external pressures and the group members end up alone and miserable, struggling to make it in the world outside academia. Meanwhile, in Mandelo's novel, academia turns out to be corrupt and threatening, so the queer utopia is found in a relationship with the white working-class object of desire.

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Though queerness is neither class nor race specific, long-standing cultural tropes associate queerness, most pronouncedly of the male gay variety, with white upper class. The figures of rich gay men posing as cultural tastemakers, patrons of the arts, and talented artists abound in popular culture (Halperin). In a historical study of the construction of gay male identities in pre-World War II New York, George Chauncey argues that some middle-class gay men, intent on distancing themselves from their working-class counterparts, created "a persona of highly mannered-and ambiguous-sophistication" coupled with "a reverence of the elegance and wit attributed to the English gentry" (106). This strategy separated them from the working-class sexual cultures and served as partial protection against "ridicule for gender nonconformity" by enabling them to treat such ridicule as proof of lower-class lack of sophistication (Chauncey 107). Consequently, similar gender-nonconforming behaviors took on entirely different meanings depending on class, with upper-class mannerisms offering a shield against social sanctions and an explanation for unorthodox behavior.

Putting on upper-class affectations can also be understood in terms of expressing affinity with famous queers in history. Gayness has often been associated with the tradition of artistic and literary genius in figures such as Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, or Michelangelo (Chauncey 284–85). A marginalized group of people may look for its antecedents among the privileged to claim a respectable lineage. These queer affinities do not necessarily map onto actual demographics or common life experiences; Donna Allegra explains that her first experience of recognizing herself in culture was reading Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, whose protagonist, a British noblewoman, resonated with Allegra across racial and class difference (205). The sense of belonging to the upper echelons of society, if only vicariously, is strengthened by the affinity with "beautiful, rare, expensive objects" which, for a certain section of gay male culture in particular, stand in for both exclusive taste and class-based privilege (Halperin 228); thus, gay men become "aristocrats of taste" (Sontag 290).

The feeling that sexual nonnormativity can only be fully realized in a middle- or upper-class context is expressed in what Allan Bérubé refers to as "class escape stories" (45). Bérubé, along with his French counterparts such as Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis, describes the rejection of working-class families and embrace of upward mobility through education. Despite feeling out of place both in their family of origin due to their gender expression and sexuality, and in the upper echelons of society due to their (often hidden) class background, these authors associate access to university education and high culture not only with a change in their social position but also with the ability to embrace a certain class-specific version of a gay lifestyle. University education, together with a chance to join artistic and literary circles, provides access to a queer community and support network, as well as new language to make sense of one's sexual identity. A similar entanglement of queer affinities

and economic privilege with access to higher education is echoed in dark academia literature.

Admittedly, some of the tropes discussed earlier have a homophobic undercurrent as they cast queer people of the upper classes as a shadowy group likely to seduce and manipulate people on the lower social rungs for their own benefit. The historical class-based inequality of criminal consequences for same-sex sexual behavior, which resulted in the lower-class partners taking the brunt of police violence, may transform into the monstrous image of the upper-class partner as all-powerful. The privileged queers can then be depicted as agents of foreign influence, international elites ensnaring the down-to-earth working-class people. Metaphorically, they reflect such supernatural figures as vampires, typically coded as queer in popular culture in part through their affluence, cultural cachet, and non-reproductive yet eternal life. These negative connotations of queerness and class privilege are also the focal point of the dark academia books analyzed in this chapter, in which queerness situated in the elitist university is marked with moral decay and criminality.

Dark Academia

Dark academia has been variously defined as a genre, a marketing category, an aesthetic especially prevalent on social media, or even "a vibe" (Stowell and Therieau). Its rise in popularity has been associated with the crisis of neoliberal university in the U.S. under President Trump (Nguyen 64), but it became a truly noticeable phenomenon on social media a few years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Murray 347). Critics claim that "dark academia captures and facilitates cultural engagement in times of social isolation and closed college campuses," as young people used TikTok and Instagram to live through an imagined college experience to which they had no access (Adriaansen). The genre's affinity with Gothic tropes and its recent overlap with fantasy suggest that a fantastic setting enables the authors to take on class and race privilege at the universities more directly than was possible in the realist novels.

In the guise of atmospheric photos, harking back to the idealized vision of university inspired specifically by the affluent old Oxbridge or American Ivy League, dark academia social media went back to the "ur-text" of the genre, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Murray 353). Tartt's 1992 debut owes its longevity to its status as a highly innovative mix of low- and high-brow genres; it is a literary novel and an engaging "whydunnit" (Murray 354). *Secret* is a story of Richard, a Californian hiding his lowly origins in the liberal arts college in Vermont he got into on a scholarship. He quickly becomes fascinated with the academic atmosphere of the university and the elite, close-knit group of students who study classical Greek and hide important secrets. From the first page of the novel, the reader knows that a member of the group will

be killed by the others; the pleasure of the story lies in finding out how this happened and falling in love with this enticing group along with Richard.

The Vermont setting, a certain sense of out-of-timeness enhanced by a distinct lack of modern technology, the focuses on one of the most traditional university subjects (Greek), and the retro style favored by the students all make *Secret* a perfect example of a dark academia aesthetics. Particularly in its social media version, dark academia relies more on a general mood, evoked by old-fashioned libraries, books, tweed jackets, and falling leaves, than on any particular objects or details; the result is "the deliberate de-historization and eclectic aestheticization of the past," which creates a distance between the fantasy of dark academia and any reality of university education (Adriaansen).

As a literary genre, dark academia not only shares certain characteristics with the campus novel (such as the setting) but also draws heavily on crime (there is typically a central mystery to solve) as well as Gothic. The Gothic elements of dark academia include not only the presence of typical horror tropes, such as the curse, the trap, and the monster, but also a founding fault: much like Southern Gothic relies on the undercurrent of dark history of slavery, dark academia tells the story of hierarchy, privilege, and exclusion hiding behind the veneer of a democratic endeavor (Truffin 164–65). The queer sensibility of Gothic, meanwhile, is reflected in dark academia's reliance on such tropes as sexual transgression and social taboo. The school experience "transforms students into sociopaths, machines, or zombies" by making them complicit in criminal activity and – indirectly – in retrenching the hierarchies of inequality university is built on (Truffin 165). Indeed, *Secret* opens with a reveal of murder committed by the students on one of their own. Truffin also argues that Richard's melancholy nature and the impression of surreality that plagues him may suggest inspirations in Gothic (167, 169). I would add to this list the prominence of incest (Kokkola and Valovirta 128), mental troubles, and the mystical undercurrent that can be identified in the group's first murder, committed while performing an ancient Greek ritual (Palmer 144–49).

Gothic tropes take center stage in the second novel featured in this chapter: Lee Mandelo's *Summer Sons* (2021). Mandelo's book is part of the effort to diversify and critique dark academia for its pervasive whiteness and idealization of privilege. In contrast to the cold Vermont setting in *Secret*, *Summer Sons*, as the title suggests, is set in scorching Nashville (as such, it can also be read as Southern Gothic). The outsider protagonist in this case is Andrew, who comes to the Vanderbilt University graduate program following in the footsteps of his best friend and love interest, Eddie. Eddie dies mysteriously after embarking on research about Southern myths in relation to his own family history, which involves the curse of eternal life. In his efforts to discover the circumstances of Eddie's death, Andrew finds himself involved in elite university circles as well as a rough working-class group of street racing enthusiasts. While *Secret* is a relatively straightforward crime novel focused on psychological analysis of the characters, *Summer* veers sharply into the territory of supernatural horror.

Privilege in Dark Academia

Dark academia is firmly rooted in nostalgic longing for the economic and cultural privilege embodied by the fantasy of an exclusive institution of higher learning. Here, university is depicted as a space of personal freedom, academic satisfaction, and queer fulfillment, a romanticized image that covers up the class inequalities and economic precarity foundational to the American system of higher education (Ngyuen 56). If "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" was the "fatal fault" of Richard in *Secret*, it is also an affect at the heart of dark academia (Tartt 5). The Ivy League-like institutions, whose aesthetic appeal is due in large part to their elitism (Murray 352), are mythologized as places out-of-time that bring the distinct beauty of the romantic past to the dreary realities of contemporary education. This elitism is based on class exclusions due to the simple fact that universities in the U.S. are not free (and the Ivy League ones are extremely costly); the privilege necessary to attend such an institution is reproduced through a system of legacy admissions and private donations from wealthy alumni. At the same time, the class hierarchy is reflected in racial division as elite institutions remain predominantly white.[1]

The romanticization of the elite university in *Secret* is achieved mainly through employing the perspective of Richard, a newcomer enchanted with his surroundings. He is impressed by the way the imposing college architecture contrasts with the low quality, banal aesthetics of his working-class life in a small California town. Even before he gets to Vermont, the college brochure captures his imagination:

> For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak academic light . . . a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence.
>
> (Tartt 10)

He is particularly impressed by the insulary group of students of Greek he soon joins, described as possessing "a cruel, mannered charm which was not modern in the least but had a strange cold breath of the ancient world" (Tartt 32). Richard "[envies] them and [finds] them attractive" in large part because they seem to belong to a different, more romantic, and elevated time (Tartt 32).

University's out-of-timeness occupies a central position in dark academia because it removes the institution from the mundane realities of contemporary market-based education and highlights the academic "mission," as well as the privilege of leading a leisurely life devoted to the pursuit of pure knowledge, "the fantasy of uninterrupted personal time and deep scholarly concentration in an elite campus" (Horgan). The area of academic interest best suited for such an imagined organization of life is the humanities, so it is no accident that this is what the protagonists of dark academia books focus on. *Secret* is

the most striking example of this preference as the main characters devote all of their study time to classical Greek, to the point where they have trouble graduating from university when their eccentric teacher leaves. This focus on the white, Eurocentric vision of what constitutes research worth doing, is merely one of the clues that Tartt seems unwilling to engage critically with issues of race and class (Murray 357).

The protagonists of *Secret* focus on pursuing their intellectual ambition to the complete exclusion of any moral concerns. When they kill a farmer during a drug-addled ritual inspired by Dionysian rites, they feel no remorse, pointing out that the victim "was not *Voltaire*" (Tartt 220, original emphasis). The farmer's life has no significance due to his low-class status, which is extrapolated onto his (presumed) lack of literary talent. The students consider themselves to be above the justice system because their intellectual (and implied economic) superiority places them above regular people. In fact, they are largely correct since it is not until they kill one of their own class, Bunny, that police become involved. The class status they enjoy is based on cultural signifiers rather than financial ones because they all suffer from insufficient funds, so that hiding their economic anxiety and mooching off one another becomes a prominent theme of the novel. Most of the characters enjoy the upper-class privilege, but this does not always translate into having money at hand.

This willingness to commit acts of violence is also indicative of the appeal the dark academic environment has for its protagonists, and indirectly for the readers as well. As Nguyen notes, the characters are willing to do most anything to cling to the privileged position they enjoy (60–61). The group in *Secret* fights for what they see as their due first by covering up the farmer's death and eventually by murdering their friend. A similar attitude, taken to the extreme, is represented by the professors in *Summer*, who turn out to be the villains of the novel, killing Eddie to steal his eternal life. Thus, Mandelo directly engages with the theme of white academic elites willing to break all moral rules to safeguard their position. *Summer Sons* constitutes part of the recent trend to diversify dark academia by including marginalized perspectives and critique the genre's reliance on economic and racial privilege.

The dark academia aesthetic on social media is "Eurocentric and white-washed" (Jewett 2021) with sparse representation of people of color due in part to an overwhelming focus on white canonical sources, such as *The Secret History* itself, or the movie *Dead Poets Society* (Adriaansen). The same charge can be levied against dark academia books, which "fetishize a nostalgic British culture that never really existed," overlooking "sexual harassment and abuse, class disparities, homophobia, and systemic racism" (Gentry). Nevertheless, these issues are critically reexamined in such recent bestselling examples of (fantasy) dark academia as *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* by R.F. Kuang (2022), *Ninth House* by Leigh Bardugo (2019), or *The Atlas Six* by Olivia Blake (2020).

The protagonist of *Summer*, Andrew, is also an outsider to the academic community. In contrast to Richard, however, he has just inherited a fortune from his best friend, Eddie, whose apparent death by suicide he intends to investigate. Andrew thus enjoys the security provided by money; he does not need to work nor worry about tuition or any other costs associated with moving to Tennessee. He is immune to the charms of the university life because his purpose is purely private. He wants to follow in Eddie's footsteps in order to find out how he died and is willing to pretend to be interested in his friend's research on local folklore to achieve his goal, but in truth he lacks intellectual ambition that typically motivates a dark academia protagonist.

The university occupies a less central position than readers normally expect of dark academia because Andrew is torn between the two different communities that Eddie had belonged to: the grad school on the one hand, and a group of working-class street racers on the other. Consequently, class tensions are crucial to *Summer*, as Andrew navigates his own class prejudice when he first suspects the street racers, including their leader Sam, of being responsible for Eddie's violent death. The group is depicted as lower working class: Sam is a mechanic by day, by night, he deals drugs and organizes wild parties featuring weed, beer, and casual violence. While the student group in *Secret* also enjoyed illegal substances and consumed liters of alcohol (in fact, they committed their first murder under the influence), their consumption is described as upper class, with wine, spirits, and cocaine taking center stage. At first glance, Sam's group seems to be the obvious source of Eddie's trouble due to their criminality, dangerous hobbies, and violence. Yet Mandelo upends readers' expectations when they become Andrew's allies in solving the mystery, and later constitute the queer community he ends up joining.

Meanwhile, the perpetrators of Eddie's murder are actually hiding in the ivory towers of academia. It is Eddie's supervisor, Professor Troth, and her dying husband who killed Eddie to gain access to his family's life-prolonging curse. The academics enjoy all the institutional and financial advantages. They live in an old plantation house, which is compared to "a welcoming necropolis" (Mandelo 275), suffused with the foreboding ambiance of the region's racist past:

> The ancestral home creaked at the seams with the weight of contained histories, a constant pressure that ached in his nail-beds and molars . . .. [Andrew] bet with enough dedicated attention he'd unearth their ghosts as well; no old families around these parts came without some monstrous history.
>
> (Mandelo 273)

The house Andrew inherits from Eddie is also steeped in this "monstrous history," as Eddie's fortune derives from slave trade. The social life of the university faculty takes place in such locations, where the bloody past is covered

up by luxurious design and family heirlooms. This disguise of respectability, coupled with the appearance of physical fragility, initially deceive Andrew and direct his suspicion to Sam's group instead.

The old, white academics drain the life from their students literally and metaphorically, reflecting the queer figure of a vampire who feasts on the life force of others to live forever. Just like she kills Eddie to use his powers, Professor Troth also commits academic fraud at the expense of one of the few students of color, West. She sabotages his ability to graduate and plagiarizes his research to boost her career. In this secondary storyline, Mandelo yet again reveals the dark undercurrents of racism, lack of accountability, and hierarchy that undergird dark academia, yet remain hidden in more conventional examples of the genre. Both *Secret* and *Summer* suggest that the university's undeniable appeal is ultimately founded on murderous ambition and the exclusion of the class and racial others.

The Queer Appeal of Dark Academia

The privilege essential to dark academia's appeal is not, however, the only source of pleasure for protagonists and readers who enter this world. Dark academia is also suffused with the promise of queer intimacy and belonging, stemming both from the genre's use of explicit queer themes and tropes and from its investment in questioning normative narratives of life and temporality. Queer affinities form not only in-text but also between the reader and the book's characters: "Dark academic desire is queer mirroring – I want to be fucking Cassandra and Henry and Rebecca and Lavinia and Marjorie and Daniel and Graham and Peter, and to be them" (Raphel). Raphel's personal declaration resonates with my own sense that queer dark academia holds a unique power over its readers, drawing them into what seems like a queer utopia, yet ultimately disappoints as the cracks of racial and class exclusions are revealed.

Upon entering a university, the separation from the necessities and rhythms of the outside world creates the perfect circumstances for quick and intense immersion in a close-knit group of friends. The imposing surroundings, insular focus on the pursuit of pure knowledge, and the elitism of higher education institutions contribute to the impression of belonging to an exclusive club, one whose boundaries are then closely guarded from any outside interference. The intense friendship of the students in *Secret*, formed around deep fascination, shared secrets, and dreams of a utopian future together, can be read through the lens of queer erotics (Kurowicka). The group's queer sensibility is revealed on two levels: in the queer relationships within the group and in their attempts to reject the normative life track that requires growing up, forming monogamous sexual relationships, and participating in middle-class economy.

The very title *The Secret History* suggests that layers of obfuscation and lies structure the novel. The novel follows an investigation into a murder the

characters committed together, but their personal relationships are also shot through with hidden agendas and desires. The most forbidden of those is the incestuous affair between the twins, Camilla and Charles, a secret that is left unsaid for the most part even among the friends, and only gradually revealed to Richard. This sibling relationship constitutes a reflection of the problematic relationship between all members of the group: too close for comfort and slipping the bounds of normativity, its intensity marks the protagonists as outlaws, in addition to their actual criminal acts and lack of any morality (Truffin 173). While the relationship is depicted as abusive during the events of the novel, it appears to have been consensual originally (Palmer 149), suggesting that the criminal secrets are to blame for the toxicity within the group and between the couple, rather than an inherent sinfulness of the relationship.

The protagonists of *Summer* also share an incestuous bond of sorts. When Eddie was adopted by Andrew's parents, the two became, at least legally, siblings. Their relationship, though never acknowledged or consummated as such, was decidedly erotic and romantic in nature, as evidenced by the flashbacks to Eddie's possessive behavior and Andrew's confused yet clearly sexual recollections. Andrew is thus haunted by the ghost of his friend, the curse he was unwittingly gifted by Eddie, and queer desire that remained unspoken as long as Eddie lived, only to reemerge once Andrew gets involved with Sam and his street racing crew.

Homoerotic desire takes center stage in both *Secret* and *Summer*, though in different class contexts. Classical Greek history and culture, which the friends in Tartt's novel are invested in, to the exclusion of other academic interests, resonates with specifically male homoerotic themes and aesthetics coupled with the marginalization of women. The protagonists of Tartt's novel not only are intensely bonded together as an insular group but also form multiple coupled relationships at various points of the novel. Francis, the group's one gay (if closeted) character, has brief sexual encounters with Richard and Charles, which they hide from each other, much like the incestuous relationship between Charles and Camilla is hidden. Francis's ultimate fate suggests the impossibility of reconciling queer desires with a high-class position. When Richard visits him some years after the novel's denouement, Francis is hospitalized after a suicide attempt and engaged to a woman, having been threatened by his family with the withdrawal of financial support unless he follows the heteronormative life path. This ending reflects the trope of a tragic ending for gay characters, though in fact all of the main characters become "tragic queers" once their group dissolves among recriminations, mental breakdowns, and substance abuse. Once the group's leader, Henry, kills himself in an attempt to save the others, their bond cannot be sustained and they end up drifting apart, alone and miserable.

Andrew in *Summer* starts out in complete denial as to the erotic nature of his past relationship with Eddie. As he gets to know Sam's crew, he becomes fascinated with the violent, working-class masculinity they represent. The

attributes of white working-class masculinity romanticized by Andrew include fast cars, roughhousing, drugs, and alcohol. Even though the group of young white men seems to be a threat to any racial or sexual others, in the end Andrew finds a sense of queer belonging among them, including a developing romantic and sexual relationship with Sam. In both novels, interclass sexual contact holds a queer erotic charge: in *Secret* the white elites hold the queer appeal for the newcomer, while in *Summer* it is white working-class masculinity that is fetishized.

Whether upper or working class, the queer sensibility is mostly limited to the male homoerotic and homosocial relationships, with women marginalized or objectified. Del, a friend of Andrew and Eddie, had served as an excuse for the two of them not to acknowledge their feelings for one another. Andrew realizes he and Eddie treated Del as "a stand in for something else" when they used her presence in their bed and life to conceal their true desires (Mandelo 297). Del's function is that of a catalyst of gay male revelation, a tool rather than a subject. Just as Del ultimately turns out to be incidental to the relationship between Andrew and Eddie, so is any female presence in the crew Andrew starts to run with; it is the homosocial tension among the men that Andrew finds appealing.

In *Secret*, Camilla, the only woman in the group, becomes a victim of misogyny dressed up in allusions to classical Greek tradition, which provides a powerful justification for anti-woman bias. Most of the other group members seem to be interested in her, but her role is ultimately reduced to that of a pawn. Sedgwick's concept of the triangle of homosocial desire, in which the woman becomes the conduit for an intense relationship between men, takes the form of a more complex polygon in *Secret* (Sedgwick). The men play their own games, pretending to fight over Camilla, when the true stakes are located elsewhere: in the lost queer utopia of anti-normative life, they planned to create. This marginal position of the few women characters is especially striking considering the fact that the genre holds a significant appeal for female readers.[2] Much like fanfiction, with its popularity of slash, or male same-sex relationships and erotics, dark academia may be seen as a site for women to explore their fantasies of queer masculinities and gay male eroticism.

In dark academia, the university provides an escape from the pressures of heteronormative life in spatial and temporal sense: it lies in a "nowhere land" and is an opportunity for a socially sanctioned break from the expectation to lead a productive and reproductive life. This fantasy of remaining free of social and economic obligation, coupled with the possibility of retaining the sense of intense queer friendship, is expressed in Richard's fantasy:

> The idea of living there, of not having to go back ever again to asphalt and shopping malls and modular furniture; of living there with Charles and Camilla and Henry and Francis and maybe even Bunny; of no one marrying or going home or getting a job in a town a thousand miles away or

> doing any of the traitorous things friends do after college; of everything remaining exactly as it was, that instant.
>
> (Tartt 113)

This dream is based on the economic privilege they all enjoy, especially in the form of access to Francis's house. The house serves as haven from the threat posed by a banal life, filled with nuclear families and boring, unfulfilling jobs. The friends' dismissal of an ordinary lifestyle, as well as their misogyny, is revealed by their mocking of Bunny's relationship with Marion, a traditionally feminine student of elementary education. Meanwhile, Richard and others want to embrace "queer time" (Halberstam) in which they will forever remain just the way they are, locked in the magical closeness they share. This fantasy carries an intense emotional investment for the characters and readers alike, so when it ultimately falls apart, the readers mourn this queer utopia along with the characters, lost and lonely without each other. Another form of queer temporality is presented by Mandelo, as Andrew and Eddie share a curse that links them even beyond death. When Andrew decides to get rid of the curse and Eddie's ghost, he gives up the unproductive and dangerous queerly erotic haunting in order to embrace the new relationship with Sam, which offers a clean slate and fulfillment of both his sexual and emotional needs. It is significant, however, that this must happen outside the academia: the villainous university professors have been vanquished, and Andrew's ultimate freedom and class affinity are revealed when he goes back to racing Sam in the last scene.

Conclusion

As I argue in this chapter, the appeal of dark academia is rooted in its two interwoven elements: the fantasy of access to an elite institution and the queer sensibility at the core of these novels. Dark academia tells the stories of intense queer relationships set in the isolated luxury of ivory towers, where the rhythms of heteronormative life may be, if not abandoned, then at least delayed. The queer appeal of dark academia ultimately disappoints as far as offering a utopian alternative lifestyle goes because racial and economic privileges continue to prevail. The queer intimacy at university is at best fleeting and at worst a cover for exploitation, cruelty, and self-absorption. Andrew is only successful in forming a queer alternative to both the splendid isolation of academia and heteronormativity of the world outside by embarking on a relationship with the representative of working-class honesty, Sam. Even as the ending of *Summer* seems hopeful, this hope for a better future is built on fetishization of white working-class masculinity and the concealed economic privilege that Andrew ultimately enjoys.

Yet the problematic politics of dark academia do not prevent the genre from generating incredibly strong emotional investment on the part of its

readers. The power of escaping into this fantasy world should not be dismissed, particularly when it applies to minority readers since, as Darieck Scott points out in reference to speculative fiction, "the dismissal of escapism . . . ought to always raise the question of what exactly readers or audiences desire to escape from, and why that escape is needed" (661). The pleasure of escaping into the fantasy of a queer-friendly space allowing one the freedom to pursue knowledge without economic pressures should not be approached uncritically, yet it needs to be taken seriously as fulfillment of the emotional needs of readers who feel tired of and cheated by the contemporary discourses of capitalist (re)productivity.

Notes

1 See Ashkenas, Park, and Pearce. For more recent statistics on American higher-ed institutions in general, see Ellsworth, Harding, Law, and Pinder.
2 However, other recent dark academia novels often feature a female protagonist (e.g., Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House*) or a gender-balanced cast of characters (Olivia Blake's *The Atlas Six*).

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7 Roundtable

Queer and Class in Theory and (Academic) Practice

Tamara Radak (convener), Maria Alexopoulos, Tomasz Basiuk, Susanne Hochreiter, Ludmiła Janion, Eveline Kilian, Karolina Krasuska, Anna Kurowicka, Julia Lingl, Krystyna Mazur, and Tijana Ristic Kern

This roundtable emerged through two in-person workshops in Warsaw and Vienna (2023), as well as written correspondence. It elaborates on questions, theories, and topics explored in the individual chapters of this volume and provides further reflections on the relationship among the concepts of queer, class, and precarity both on a conceptual level and with regard to academic practice. The collective nature of this text is itself meant to performatively embody our understanding of academia as a collaborative praxis: its web of connections, interrelations, and cross-references is emblematic of our joint work as a research network in its various shapes and forms, highlighting the importance – indeed, the necessity – of such networks in times of increased individualization and precariousness within the academic sector at large and the humanities in particular.

Tamara Radak:
How did your previous work in queer studies inform your current research and the theoretical ideas for this collection on queer and class?

Tijana Ristic Kern:
The relation of queer and class came up in my work somewhat unexpectedly when I was working on my master's thesis and writing about the concept and uses of violence in Jeanette Winterson's texts from the late 1980s and early 1990s. The thesis investigated how literary writing engaged with the "feminist contentions" of this period, specifically between "radical feminism" and post-structuralist feminism and queer theory. These contentions revolved around issues of the materiality of gendered existence and embodiment in the context of queer theorization of gender and sex construction (e.g., in Judith

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Artwork: Anna Vida, *Entanglement*, University of Vienna, November 30, 2023

Butler's work on gender performativity), and the issue of violence was one of the central points of the theoretical debates. It was actually the question of class and the notion of sex difference as class difference as theorized by Monique Wittig in *Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992) that helped me think about "queer" in relation to embodiment. What does queering do to a subject of violence – and by that, I mean different "kinds" of violence: symbolic violence, material violence, state violence, physical violence, and the violence of gendering? How can we consider the material and economic implications of symbolic violence, such as discursive violence? Wittig's "material lesbianism" frames the constitution of gender opposition "in terms of class conflict" and approaches sex difference as produced in exploitative economic relations, and within this framework, she considers heterosexuality as a political relation of domination that establishes divisions at the material and economic level (2). Her critique of heteronormative theoretical and cultural discourses that perform "material oppression" and violence on individuals and her analysis of their implications in terms of material realities of economic, classed existence (25) enables a queer analysis that does not ignore embodied existence. In that way, class as a concept helps me to think in terms of lived, material experience when thinking about queer, and I see it as a way to negotiate the ongoing discussion about the question of embodiment in queer theory. Thinking of how gender, sexuality, race, and class shape subjectivity in terms of the implications of their interactions for material existence and embodiment is central to the interrelations I see between class and queer theory. Because the way I think of these questions is still very much influenced by Wittig's literary and theoretical writing, as well as by material lesbianism and radical lesbian feminist theorizing and activism, I was very glad to return to this topic in the present publication, and especially to work on it in collaboration with Krystyna and Maria.

Tomasz Basiuk:

A decade ago, as I was working on my monograph on gay men's life writing in the U.S., I wrote a long chapter on Edmund White, whose work also engages with class – in fact, he has even been called a chronicler of class in America (Bynum). And then, as I was reading critical responses to White's first gay novel, *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), I came across a chapter by Robert McRuer, who unfavorably compares it to Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name* (1982). McRuer contends that White fails to address class or race, as opposed to Lorde. Part of my chapter on White was a response to this criticism, which I did not think entirely justified. That was the first time I wrote about class in a disciplined way.

In the same monograph, I also looked at Samuel R. Delany, one of the two authors I discuss in my chapter in our volume. Delany's focus on interclass contact, including sexual contact, seemed unlike anything I had come across before. It was different, for example, from how class difference substitutes for

sexual difference in some discussions of Oscar Wilde. Delany's approach is non-identitarian in that he looks at urban space and infrastructure, and at both formal and informal social institutions in New York City, reflecting on how they facilitate or prevent interclass contact. His approach seems pertinent to what we have been addressing in the context of queer studies because he does not foreground identity, offering instead a material analysis of some conditions for cross-class contact. For Delany, class is not primarily a matter of identity or "habitus" (Bourdieu, *Outline* 86), as it is for White, and this offers interesting avenues for thinking about queer and class, in my view.

Julia Lingl:
I first started thinking about class in a seminar held by Jens Kastner at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna concerned with arts and the theory of society, when I was reading Gramsci and Bourdieu for the first time as a student. I was very excited when I started reading Bourdieu because I was feeling insecure all the time in the university setting. When we were discussing class and habitus in this course, I started recognizing and understanding what was going on with me and that helped me to find security in the university context. One concept that I particularly related to in this regard is Bourdieu's "hysteresis effect" (Bourdieu, *Distinction*), which suggests that if you change the field you have been growing up in and the habitus you have been learning to adopt, the kinds of practices you do, then your habitus lags behind and that is why you feel insecure. This corresponded to my experience at the time.

Karolina Krasuska:
Two decades ago, I was writing my PhD on transnational modernism and questions of gender, sexuality, and nation were central aspects of it. The question I started asking myself at that point was, in a nutshell, how can all these people, including expat Americans – people like Nancy Cunard, or Bryher – afford to be jetting around or spending ample time on ships; where did their funds come from? I remember reading Else Lasker-Schüler's letters, in which she writes about her daily struggle with earning money, and realizing that these letters concerned the question of how the author was going to put food on her table the next day. And then there was the question: How does my reading of these letters influence my reading of Lasker-Schüler's performance of masculinity? How does it influence my readings of her Jewishness? Then I started wondering more broadly to what extent the economic is a factor in these authors' lives as well as their literary work. It made me aware that class is not a foregrounded aspect of transnational modernism, yet it nevertheless had a significant impact on the authors' work.

Anna Kurowicka:
Like Karolina, I do not think I had employed class analysis in much of my previous work. The first time I engaged with the topic directly was in my article on the erotics of intense friendships in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and

Tana French's *The Likeness*, where I argued that economic and racial privilege were the necessary conditions for attempting to form alternatives to normative lifestyles. This insight has provoked further interest in how queer upper-class aesthetics are coded in dark academia, a topic I explore in my chapter in this collection.

Susanne Hochreiter:
I have been working in queer and gender studies for a long time and one thing that became particularly obvious to me when working on the paper for the present collection in a way it had not been before is that concepts of homosexuality are always a class issue. We cannot think of homosexuality or queer identities as being beyond class. All characters, figures, and types that we see in history, may it be in literature or in medical discourses, are shaped by certain concepts of class. In my impression, this aspect has often been sidelined, which is why I believe it is particularly important to shine a spotlight on it now.

Krystyna Mazur:
I remember encountering commentary on issues pertaining to class when I first read Lisa Duggan's influential 2002 article on "new homonormativity" and, around the same time, pursued an interest in the 1990s queer community in San Francisco. Duggan argues that the more "assimilative" tendency within the LGBTQ+ community not only undermines the more radical claims of queerness but also negatively impacts those who are either unwilling or unable to assimilate – among them, queers who are not part of the middle class. The "ability" to climb the social ladder is, obviously, contingent on the raced, ethnic, gendered, able-bodied contexts one inhabits. By creating a new, well-assimilated middle and upper-middle class, the (mostly white, mostly cis) gays and lesbians create a new outside, a new nonheteronormative social other toward whom homophobia is redirected. Duggan's claims resonate with the political stance of, say, Michelle Tea or Matilda Bernstein Sycamore, who write about the radical queer community that flourished in 1990s San Francisco. For both of those writers, the struggle to maintain the San Francisco community includes other inhabitants of the Mission District, who are not part of the queer community, but for whom it has been an affordable place to live and who now face evictions.

At the time, I probably understood this radical strain to be the result and logical consequence of queer politics that began with the Stonewall Riots and grew with AIDS activism. With time, however, when my interest in queer feminist film took me back to its beginnings in the work of Barbara Hammer and Su Friedrich, I (re)discovered the work of the lesbian feminists from the 1970s, for whom – particularly for lesbians of color – intersectionality was the necessary condition of political consciousness and political activism. I always knew that about the radical claims of second-wave feminism, but it took me

a long time to realize that it is actually such an important precedent for queer politics. Maria, Tijana, and I talk about these interconnections in our chapter.

Eveline Kilian:
In my previous work, class came up as an important factor in the formation and expression of queer desire in Maureen Duffy's *The Microcosm* (1966) and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). They give visibility to working-class butch and femme identities, and especially in Feinberg's text, the protagonist's political activism combines their fight for transgender and workers' rights and envisions a kind of common solidarity. And in a book chapter I wrote on Christopher Isherwood's life writing, class played a particular role in his literary avatar's sexual preference for young working-class men, which helped him to repudiate his British middle-class habitus and values. He fetishizes the lower class as less inhibited and more directly in touch with their sexual drive, a stereotype that has had a lasting impact on British gay literature (for example, E.M. Forster or Alan Hollinghurst).

I became again intrigued by class more recently when reading Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (2009), which also received some critical attention in our group discussions. Although I have many misgivings about this text, it has also proved singularly inspiring for me. Since it is a social mobility narrative, it inevitably sets class boundaries in motion. Eribon is still very much invested in fairly fixed class concepts, however, and mostly concerned about never quite being able to "pass" as middle class. I am less interested in his self-stylization as an, actually very successful, "failure," but would like to think more about exploring the possibilities and creative interventions opening up in these transgressive movements and spaces, for which Chantal Jaquet coined the term *transclass*. Moreover, it seems to me that taking a queer perspective to class, "queering class," as it were, might help to undo an apparently clearly compartmentalized class structure and render its internal and external boundaries more permeable. In my view, this is a precondition for a more comprehensive intersectional analysis that will necessarily turn "class" into a more dynamic reference point with different impacts in different contexts.

Maria Alexopoulos:
I started researching the relationship between lesbian feminism and queer theory and politics – the topic of the chapter Tijana and Krystyna and I are writing together – during my PhD. I was examining lesbian literary texts from the 1970s onward, and as I was reading I found that in these narratives, class almost always figured prominently. In fact, class was often at the center of how writers and fictional characters anchored their identities, experiences, and analyses. Across genres, in these texts, class is inextricable from other major themes such as sexuality, race, trauma, violence, intimacy, and friendship. Sometimes class appeared in these texts in ways that surprised me. For example, in her 2014 novel *Adult Onset*, Ann-Marie MacDonald thematizes

the unexpected affects produced by the upward mobility suddenly available to (some) gays and lesbians. Her protagonist, a lesbian writer who finds herself living in the affluent suburbs of Toronto, with a wife and small child, experiences intense disorientation and alienation, both from herself and from former experiences of queer community. I was fascinated by this unpredictable relationship between class and affect, and how it complicates our understandings of both queer and class politics.

Tamara Radak:
Where do you see the potential where these two critical lenses mutually enrich each other or where they possibly impinge on each other?

Tomasz Basiuk:
When talking about queer as well as about intersectionality, we keep returning to the question of identity. A question that imposes itself on me is, what happens to identities when we talk about class? To what extent can we talk about class-based identity and to what extent are we talking about something other than identity? On the one hand, of course, class *is* a matter of identity. Take Bourdieu's "habitus," for example: people may recognize each other as belonging to a particular class by the ways that they, perhaps inadvertently, mark their status in everyday life. Similarly, class consciousness is of great importance to Marx because belonging to a certain class carries a revolutionary potential only if people are aware of their class positionality, so they can rebel against the powers that be. So, there is obviously a way in which class is related to identity, but then again, class is also something else. It has to do with economic structures and various interdependencies. This economic side can be quite nuanced, and it will likely vary with socioeconomic context. Two individuals may be grouped together in one context but perhaps not in another context, which has to do with geopolitics and with our national economies. You could belong to one class at home but to another when you are spending a year abroad, for example. I think that this complicated relationship with identity makes considering class somewhat similar to queer theory, and it promises that an encounter between queer and class should be interesting.

Maria Alexopoulos:
Picking up on Tomek's remark about the relationship between identity and class, it does seem that theoretical and political discussions about gender and sexuality very often return to the tension between essentialism and social constructivism. Not only as an ontological question but also as a question of political utility. Spivak's (sometimes misunderstood) notion of strategic essentialism is a helpful way to think about this. She proposes that shared, temporarily stabilized "essential" traits are the grounds upon which we can fight for different kinds of rights or be in relation to community. Discourses about class circle around different axes, and class is certainly not often viewed as a biological or essential identity. Rather, as Tomek pointed out, it is

associated, for example, with a particular habitus. It is also unstable, vulnerable to change, which can produce different affects. For example, one might experience anxiety about the downward movement of one's class identity and position, or be (cruelly?) optimistic about upward movement.

Krystyna Mazur:
Perhaps the question for queer studies in connection with the concept of class is the question about the "invisible norm" we all take for granted without being aware of it (very much as whiteness or cisness are often taken for granted) and what that norm marginalizes or what its constitutive exclusions are. In *Poor Queer Studies*, Matt Brim does make this argument about academia. He says, in a nutshell, that the theories we are engaging with come, for the large part, out of Duke University. He calls those "rich queer studies," pointing to the inequality in terms of resource distribution between "renowned" universities (such as Duke) and others. Brim contextualizes this discussion with reference to U.S. academia. Where would we place, then, Eastern European queer studies? Don't we often feel like "second-class citizens" in international queer academic contexts? I think these are questions that are worth asking, and the case of the U.S. is particularly interesting, because there used to be the illusion that it's a classless society.

Susanne Hochreiter:
I find it noteworthy that unlike other identity categories we have been thinking about, class is something that you can "climb out of" – or at least there used to be this narrative in the post-war "economic miracle" from the 1950s to the 1970s, and it is still a very present pattern of thinking in the neoliberal presence where everybody is supposed to be the architect of their own fortune. But there is a certain sense of potentiality inherent in this idea – you might be born one thing and then you might ascend into a different class identity. This would not be possible with race or gender – you don't have a similar kind of potentiality or promise in this sense because there is not the same idea of a linear trajectory there. I think there is a point to Andreas Reckwitz's argument that not only different gender orders but also different sexual orders emerge depending on class. It seems to me that these questions are closely intertwined and that we cannot easily separate them.

It also seems to me that we tend to forget that class was *always* also part of feminist debates (as Krystyna, Maria, and Tijana's chapter notes), but it had perhaps not been as visible in recent decades because class almost seemed to become invisibilized at a certain point in time in Western culture. Around 1900 and in the first half of the twentieth century, one's self-understanding of being a member of a certain class was developed much more clearly than today. People had a stronger sense of being working class, or being employees, or of being bourgeois. And yet class is becoming more central in debates nowadays, which is interesting to me, because it had almost been forgotten and then it re-emerged. That is why I think we have to distinguish between the

concept of class historically and how we experience it now. What exactly does it mean nowadays to say that somebody identifies as working class, vis-à-vis somebody being working class at a different time in history? Both as a society and also as researchers, we often seem to communicate as if it were clear what class means, when in fact, it is so contingent on specific historical, national, and personal contexts.

Karolina Krasuska:
Back in the early 2000s, we had similar debates in the "Gender as a Category of Knowledge" Research Training Group at Humboldt University in the context of queer and intersectionality, discussing how to navigate between these different concepts. I remember an article by Gudrun Axeli-Knapp about intersectionality, which argues that class is endemic to the German context and leftist theory-building in ways that "race" is not. Perhaps the invisibility of class that Susanne mentioned may be related to its interconnection with feminism, race, and queer within intersectional frameworks?

Julia Lingl:
The connection between class and other identity categories seems also to be central to Bourdieu's understanding of class, as he speaks of class on the basis of various characteristics (economic, cultural, social capital) and uses the concept of habitus to describe patterns of thought and perception that are typical of a class. Our way of perceiving the world, of thinking, our interests, ways of speaking, preferences, etc. are shaped by our social background. If we assume that gender, race, and class are intertwined in this way, this complicates the idea of "upward mobility" in the context of class. This also links back to Bourdieu's notion that there is no such thing as linearity or simplicity in declaring what class you belong to, because if you are defining your class according to the field or kind of work that you do, other categories that also influence your class such as your gender, your age, your religion, the kind of education you received, the education of your parents – which are all complex factors in themselves – become invisible. Criticizing the alleged simplicity or linearity of class affiliation is essential for understanding how those structures work.

Ludmiła Janion:
Absolutely – and it's additionally important to note, I believe, that there is a distinction between post-Communist, post-state socialist class and Western understandings of class. In the post-socialist context, 1989 is an artificial but nevertheless important turning point in terms of the new production of class. The pro-market reforms of the late 1980s and the shock doctrine of the early 1990s led to impoverishment and massive layoffs, and, gradually, the middle class and new virtues, such as individualism, competitiveness, efficiency, and self-improvement, were expected to appear. The post-1989 transition project was to change at least some working-class people into the Western-modeled middle class. I study these ideologies of transition; specifically, I focus on

gay and trans identities in Poland. How were they produced at the turn of the 1990s as implicitly classed? For example, drag was imagined as middle-class, Western, and thus progressive, but everyday gender nonconformity was condemned as a sign of class failure; it was deemed Eastern or Soviet.

Eveline Kilian:

I would like to take up the various conceptual arguments that have been made for a more differentiated and complex notion of class and add a further perspective that specifically addresses the subject's own, potentially creative, management of class assignments. For this, we need to think of class as a generator of intricate and shifting identifications as well as dis-identifications that imply reorienting oneself or reneging on previous conscious or unconscious identifications. We need to consider class both with respect to social recognition and the way others read my class position, but also in terms of personal affiliation, of how I perform "class" and how I negotiate my "class" affiliations both affectively and intellectually. Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, for example, presents a subject that deliberately breaks with his working-class background in order to be able to embrace his homosexuality. This dis-identification complicates the whole tapestry of future identifications and dis-identifications. In fact, it could produce a very interesting epistemological position by situating the subject within reach of but never quite coinciding with a specific class. It allows a critical distance to both the working class and the middle class. And it is a way of reading class that takes its cue from the destabilizing and decentering dynamic associated with queer.

In the academic context, which is my professional "home," this state of limbo, this position of calculated distance, can be very useful. I suppose everyone here would agree that academia is defined by middle-class habitus and standards. This also implies that it polices behavior through expecting and privileging a middle-class habitus: If you don't behave in a certain way, you will not be part of certain coteries (but maybe of other, more interesting ones!); if you "misbehave," you will not be respected by your colleagues, etc. What the view from a certain distance also reveals, however, is that this habitus sometimes also functions as an instrument of power used by the institution to keep the voicing of criticism on a polite and practically inaudible and therefore also rather ineffective level. So inadvertently or purposefully "misbehaving" need not be seen as a class stigma but can become an effective means of intervention. I like this idea, because, without wanting to downplay the struggles and obstacles confronting working-class individuals in middle-class institutions, it stresses the position of these subjects as potentially resourceful agents rather than disadvantaged victims.

Tamara Radak:

One concept that comes up repeatedly within the collection apart from class is precarity and precariousness. How do you see the relationship between the two concepts and how did it inform your research for the present volume?

Eveline Kilian:
I want to probe the potential of terms like precarity and precariousness to address questions of social inequality, not least because they have been linked to queer perspectives (e.g., Deuber-Mankowsky and Hanke; Puar). Another reason is that I have profound reservations about concepts of class for several reasons. For one thing, we have seen in the German context that after reunification in 1989, East German ideas about class became obsolete and were subsumed under the Western European class concepts. This not only produced problems of classification but also showed how geographically limited and, in fact, hegemonic the class concepts are that we work with. And as scholars of queer studies, we may want to be a little more cautious of such hegemonies. Second, in the context of migration, subjects may have a very different class status in their country of origin than the one they are relegated to in the country of immigration. So how do we conceptualize these differences? On the whole, I think that "class" is not flexible enough to accommodate the complicated life trajectories we encounter, and it is actually not very receptive to intersectional transmutations. A good example to demonstrate this is British writer Bernardine Evaristo's recently published memoir *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021), where she explains the difficulties to determine her class affiliation on account of the intricacies of her family history: her father, a Nigerian immigrant, who came to Britain in the late 1940s, was predominantly determined by his race, which was deemed lower than the white working class, while her mother, coming from a white working-class background and moving toward the middle class through becoming a schoolteacher, was quickly declassed on account of her marriage to a black man. When Evaristo, a writer and academic, describes herself as working class, I read this designation first and foremost as a political and strategic move rather than an accurate placement in a recognizable class structure. Similarly, Isabel Waidner, who is the main focus of my chapter in this volume, uses the term working class as a denominator for somebody who is socially disadvantaged.

Tijana Ristic Kern:
The way that I conceptualize the relation between class and precarity or precariousness is not thinking in terms of "either/or," but seeing that they need to work in conjunction. I understand that precarity or precariousness can be seen as an ontological state of being – where we are all in a way precarious, in the sense that we are human beings and that we are subject to precariousness; whereas class as a concept and class constellations are actual materializations of specific cultural, historical relations of power and hierarchies within this precariousness, of these precarious states within specific power relations. The concept of class can help us to discuss specific existing constellations of power in specific contexts and bring these considerations back to materiality. With this "combined" approach, we can acknowledge that we, in this room, might all be precarious, but there are still different material, classed positionings, and power relations in play.

Tomasz Basiuk:
The term "precarity" not only addresses something like division into classes defined by economic exploitation but also addresses a dynamic related to risk and to risk management – for example, the concept of "risk society." We are seeing a lot of social mobility, not just upward but also downward. I think the word precarity addresses this aspect, which is an advantage of this term. But there is also a disadvantage in that the term does not point to inequality because precarity applies to just about everyone. Of course, people have different stakes: some are struggling just to make ends meet, while others take huge risks on big transactions. The word precarity encompasses both of these scenarios. And so, in a way, it erases class difference, which I think is a potential downside.

This ambiguity makes the word a fairly precise name for what is happening to the middle class, in my view: a class which is disappearing with economic polarization. It's not so much a matter of class categories disappearing but of a diminution of the space in the middle, along with the fading certainty that you will just continue to reside in that space if you are middle class. That, I think, is what many of us grew up with: the expectation that if you have a job and if you are making a decent living, you'll be okay. You don't have to be a millionaire, but you're not going to be destitute, either. But now this middle place is becoming much less certain, which is very troubling for political reasons, obviously, and for all kinds of practical reasons.

Eveline Kilian:
I'm not quite sure whether I would actually want to do away with the concept of class. I completely get the point Tijana and Krystyna have made earlier about its political function and about its "reality effect." But I do have a strong investment in examining it critically, historicizing it, and asking what it enables us to understand and where it becomes an epistemological impediment and for which cases we may require terminological adjustments. I find it much easier to refer to the working class when I look back to the past, my own past, for example. But in the present, the situation becomes a lot more blurred and messy. It is perhaps not by accident that Eribon's retrospective memoir sometimes reads like an exercise in conservation, an attempt to archive the existence of an apparently homogeneous working class that is on the verge of disappearing. In a similar vein, other writers have also complemented their own life narratives with separate biographies of their parents (e.g., Didier Eribon himself, Annie Ernaux, or Édouard Louis).[1] This resonates with Andreas Reckwitz's analysis of changing social structures and his observation that the decades of economic prosperity in West Germany after World War II saw the development of a growing middle class which largely absorbed the traditional working class. After the 1970s, he claims, the dynamics of a post-industrial and globalized world have eroded this structure again and introduced new vertical stratifications in this now larger middle class through upward or downward movements. No matter what we think of his model, what becomes clear is that

class concepts must be able to accommodate historical changes. So, for me, the question remains: What exactly does the term working class refer to today?

Susanne Hochreiter:
It seems to me that nowadays, class is only used as an expression for those who are less privileged because there is such a normalizing of non-class that makes this category invisible from the dominant bourgeois position. What seems to be happening at the moment is a kind of "re-classification," a reusing of the term, sometimes by those who feel precarious or precarized. This may be a bit of a provocative claim, but in my understanding, "precariat" is a term that mostly refers to people who are not underclass (in Marx's sense). I think precarity is a term that also refers to the idea that Tomek just mentioned with downward mobility. We see a situation that Reckwitz discusses, in terms of a new class society – a new bourgeois class, a new middle class that is much less stable than it used to be. Although the new middle class is increasingly affected by precarity, it also consists of very well-educated people, often with academic degrees, who tend to be liberal in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationship concepts. There is a big difference between people whom we would call working class today – as Eveline noted – and those whom Marx would call working class.

"Precarity," as Butler uses the term in my understanding, avoids some of the issues that the concept of "class" has because of the blurriness of its referents. They note that precarity "has itself become a regime, a hegemonic mode of being governed, and governing ourselves. The all-pervasive sense of insecurity appears as an element in the formation of the subject" (vii). On this level, the term applies to everybody. But then, we obviously have to differentiate in terms of other levels and experiences and practices. And in this sense, the term transcends class structures, because even the life of somebody with a bourgeois background may be precarious because they are queer. This cutting across categories makes the term particularly useful, in my view.

Karolina Krasuska:
Precarity has also been relevant to my work, from a different angle with regard to class and queer. Narratives of progress and of success are quite often linked to economic progress or economic success. And just like many terms and norms are being transvalued by queer theory, one of these things is the narrative of failure that has been prominent in queer theorizing. Halberstam's "queer art of failure" is based on the idea of questioning linear narrative of success – it could be familial success, going back to the link between heteronormative family and economy and the idea of how failure is also represented in queer narratives. One of the texts I worked with recently was *Broad City*, a TV show about queer Jewish women, who economically fail and who do not want to embrace the middle-class habitus. This kind of link – not on a representational level, but on the paradigm level – in terms of ways of thinking about one or/and the other is a place of very interesting intersections. And

I think it's also important to think about how the post-2008 economic crisis strengthened this theorizing.

Ludmiła Janion:
There is also new precarity – instability and uncertainty – in personal life. In *The End of Love*, Eva Illouz explains how relationships under neoliberalism become more precarious because of technologies such as dating apps but also the rising role of consumer culture. We have gained freedom to have casual sex, to love and un-love as we wish, but the consequence is that love has become more elusive. There are also material consequences because single life is more expensive and romance – especially for women – was in the past a legitimate way of class advancement, but it requires a stable contract to work that way. So, precarity is not only about economy or employment but also about personal life. Here, queer theory provides tools to analyze these changes – for example, Berlant's classic insights into how intimacy is political and institutionalized. Maybe current ideologies of romance set people up for failure – just as the precarized labor market does.

Tamara Radak:
The "precarized labor market" inevitably seems to lead to questions of academic practice. How do you see the foregrounding of quantification and metrics in contemporary academia – a sense, perhaps, of "overproductive futurism" – vis-à-vis doing what one believes to be meaningful work within a specific field, such as queer studies? To what extent is it necessary to participate in certain forms of habitus to be able to do the work that we want to do and how do we straddle this contradiction creatively?

Ludmiła Janion:
The question is particularly pertinent today, because to be a successful queer studies scholar, you have to be productive: publish well, have a neoliberal nice resume, practically work overtime. The norms in academia are extremely inflated, and there is no place for "queer failure" here. You need to be extremely successful to receive funding for a huge project, so that you employ younger scholars who are promising to be very productive. I don't see any alternatives per se, but I do think it's important to acknowledge this tension.

Tomasz Basiuk:
On the upside, at least the current system functions according to fairly transparent rules: if you get cited more, if you publish in certain venues, you are more likely to land a job. We have not moved from an ideal situation to one that is bad but rather from a pretty bad situation, in which cronism played an important part, to one that is not ideal.

Anna Kurowicka:
I see similar frustrations with the current university system and its focus on (over)productivity reflected in the dark academia novels I analyze in my

chapter. Their appeal lies to a large extent in creating a romantic vision of the university as a space out of time, safe from the economic forces, where students and professors alike can devote themselves to studying and deep theoretical exploration. Not only does this have little to do with the precarious conditions of work and studying in contemporary academia, but arguably it is a fantasy even when it comes to the university in the past, where the institution only granted such privilege to the select few.

Tijana Ristic Kern:
It's also pertinent to ask, when we talk about academia and doing queer work in academia, what do we talk about exactly? Do we talk about ourselves as academics and employees of the liberal university, our economic existence and class positioning, our identities, allegiances and loyalties, our projects that are funded or not, how we are paid (or not), the hours we work, how much we are exploited, or something else? My sense is that we discuss primarily *our* position in the neoliberal university and how this affects *our work* in terms of research production, and that we rarely discuss teaching. Thinking of what we can do in terms of resisting or rather redefining the narratives of productivity, investing in teaching offers itself as an important avenue of queer work, and that's where I see a potential escape from the "vicious circle" of (over) productivity in academic contexts. By that, I don't only mean teaching queer theory and queering your syllabi and your teaching methods to the extent that you can "get away with it" but also that the decision to invest more energy and time in teaching can itself be a move that resists and pushes back against the relentless demand for productivity focused on research and publishing.

Eveline Kilian:
Maybe it's not either the one or the other. I personally don't think there is anything wrong with productivity. It's over-productivity, overregulation of productivity, subjecting everything to the principle of productivity that is the problem. And we should not forget that, at least as far as German universities are concerned, standards of productivity are often set and enforced by our own peers. This is a good example of Foucault's principle of governmentality. We are often enough willing accomplices in that game. At the same time, the university is still a place that allows for thinking, reading, critical discussions, and engagement. And we need to cultivate these possibilities more consciously, both in our teaching and in our own work. Looking at current developments in higher education across Europe and the ongoing erosion of the humanities, it may require a more concerted effort to preserve these spaces of creative reflection and pockets of resistance. In a small (or maybe not such a small) way, I think we have achieved this with our regular group meetings over several years and across several countries. And it is worth pointing out that these workshops have not only been important in terms of personal and intellectual bonding and exchange, but they have also led to a successful funding application for a queer studies research project and to this collection – two outcomes that actually both testify to an impressive degree of productivity.

Tijana Ristic Kern:
You're right, the question is perhaps not one of "doing away" with the idea of productivity in all forms, but of challenging the idea of what constitutes productivity, and of doing away with the narrative of productivity that is measured in success, monetary value, and class privilege – or, in the academic context, by the number of publications in "appropriate" publication outlets, the number of prestigious grants received, by prestigious jobs at prestigious institutions. If that is the measure, then how do we measure up? And how do we want to measure up?

Karolina Krasuska:
It's crucial to examine economy in a broader sense as structuring both our research and the literary field and to think about the literary market, audiences, and the ways in which capital influences the texts that are produced, both the texts we read and where we publish our own work. And to also reflect on the not only symbolic but also material, financial capital that queer theory brings us as scholars. This is especially interesting with most of us being part of the grant that Eveline mentioned, which was funded after several attempts. So, I think there is also a larger question about production that is pertinent here – both of knowledge and of the kind of financing (or capital) that much of our work is immersed in.

Susanne Hochreiter:
I believe this point is very important because one of the things that we do at universities is discussing literature and for me, the question is: from what perspective are we teaching and what dominant kind of narratives can we see in literary texts? Literature is often considered a very bourgeois thing in general and, as Karolina mentioned earlier, it's essential to think about who is writing, who is represented, what or who is visible or invisible or invisibilized. It's important to be aware of the kinds of stories that are told or not told, published or not published, because these decisions might affect us in the way we think of others and of ourselves.

Julia Lingl:
I agree, it's vital to think about the aesthetics of literary texts, as well as the economic materialities of their authors. What kind of language or style is this story written in and how many people are represented? But also, how many people does a literary text reach? How "accessible" is it? In Ernaux's works, which Naomi and I are focusing on in this volume, sentences are sometimes very short and the texts are rather easy to read. Some critiques of her texts are, indeed, that they are *too* easy to read, that they are too "simple." So, I'm wondering what our taste in literature tells us about our own position in this field. Again, we can think of Bourdieu – the texts that we come into contact with, also in a professional capacity as literary scholars or educators, say a lot about our class. And even if the question of habitus depends on idiosyncratic aspects of our lives and this complex negotiation about what constitutes our habitus

within the field we are working in, I'm wondering, who are these literary texts addressing? Who are they meant for? And how does our own position as educators, but also our personal positionality enter into these questions when we are teaching these texts? We should keep returning to these questions in our daily academic practice, accepting that answers may change and always remain provisional to some degree.

Note

1 Didier Eribon, *Vie, vieillesse, et mort d'une femme du people* (2023); Annie Ernaux, *La Place* (1983; *A Man's Place*) and *Une Femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story*); Édouard Louis, *Qui a tué mon père* (2018; *Who Killed My Father*) and *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme* (2021; *A Woman's Battles and Transformations*).

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