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**Queering the Real:
antisociality and the impossible nothing of queer**

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Abstract

This project charts a logic of queer antisociality along literary, cinematic, and theoretical works. Reading across a collection of textual case studies from Gertrude Stein, Herman Melville, and Samuel Beckett, as well as films from Derek Jarman and David Cronenberg, this thesis *thinks through* antisociality, employing it as a critical approach to reconcile moments of textual disorientation as queer encounter. The ambition of this thesis is not to designate certain works as queer texts, or to suggest a unifying queer thread across them; it is the very nature of queer as resistant to coherence and continuity that such a task could only ever fail. Rather, reading through antisociality offers a way to think queerness beyond a rubric of sexual difference as what frustrates or works against established forms of knowledge and trace modes of queer negation along inconsistent lines as aporetic junctures, opacity, and incoherence.

This approach is developed in conversation with Lee Edelman's *Bad Education* where he conceptualises queer aligned to the incomprehensibility of the Lacanian Real – as being outside of identity markers or systems of recognition. Queer as such does not locate an ontology or a sexuality, but rather resists determinate meaning and troubles categorisation; queer is that which disturbs coherence. To think queerness then, Edelman suggests, is to think beyond the structural limits of language. Following this invocation to think queerly beyond structures of knowledge, this project contemplates its application and details what it might look like to do so. Each chapter then illustrates forms of queer negation that resist the controls immanent in language, and articulates antisociality as a way of thinking, and indeed a way of reading, attuned to semiological abstractions and improper grammar as queer methods of resistance.

Since queer cannot be secured within language, this thesis works to reframe incoherence as queer encounter that changes shape across whatever given literary or visual landscapes. Antisociality then operates as a conceptual lens to locate queer not as content but as form: as structural idiosyncrasies that frustrate comprehension and unsettle conventional logic. Writing this thesis and working across different texts and mediums then allowed for a mapping of the different ways that queer is discursively constructed while simultaneously conceptualising modes of resistance that work against these constructions.

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Introduction: Antisociality as critical approach

It is the critics task, and there is hardly a more comical one, to coagulate an island of meaning upon a sea of negativity.¹

This project charts a logic of queer antisociality along literary, cinematic, and theoretical works to trace negation as a strategy of queer resistance and to map antisocial theorising across a set of conceptual terrains. Attending closely to the ‘antisocial’ qualifier, each chapter within this thesis considers different ways that queer is discursively constructed and conceptualises modes of resistance, or forms of queer negation, that work against these constructions. In reading across a collection of textual case studies from Gertrude Stein, Herman Melville, and Samuel Beckett, as well as films from Derek Jarman and David Cronenberg, this thesis *thinks through* antisociality, employing it as a critical approach to reconcile moments of textual disorientation as queer encounter.

This approach is developed in conversation with Lee Edelman’s *Bad Education* where he conceptualises queer aligned to the incomprehensibility of the Lacanian Real – as being outside of identity markers or systems of recognition. Queer as such does not locate an ontology or a sexuality, but rather resists determinate meaning and troubles categorisation; queer is that which disturbs coherence. To think queerness then, Edelman suggests, is to think beyond the structural

¹ Julia Kristeva, ‘How Does One Speak to Literature?’, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, pp. 91–123, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 2024) p. 110.

limits of language. This project then considers what it means to do so: to resist the controls immanent in language and indeed to think queerness beyond language. My ambition, then, is not to challenge existing antisocial conceptualisations of queer, but to contemplate their application. As such, I engage queer thought as an interpretive lens to think through textual opacities and reconcile moments of textual disorientation as queerly destabilising structures of knowledge.

Edelman's antisocial thesis suggests that, beyond its *improper* usage as an identity marker, queer operates in excess of a logic of sexual difference to designate what is strange or out of place. He suggests that

Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance. The negative associations of queerness speak to the subject's investment in the system of differences that called it into being in the first place and its intolerance of anything that puts its investment in the stability of those differences at risk.²

The usage of 'queer' to affirm an identity is then a misuse or a misnaming, what Edelman calls a *catathresis of nonbeing*. Reading queer through the Lacanian *Real*, the argument goes that symbolic organisation affirms being as what "is" and queer thus operates oppositionally to name what is *not*, or designates nonbeing outside of symbolic articulation: queer names the excess of symbolic logic that problematises fixed identity categories. Following Edelman's logic, queer cannot confirm an identity or function as a stable signifier because it registers as non-identity, as *not-heterosexual* or *not-firmly gendered*. Queer thus functions as a catathresis for what is unusual or out of place – registering indiscriminately as whatever is outside of, or chafes against, normalisation. Rather than a signifier for sexual difference, queer gestures at what cannot be

² Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022), p. xvi.

properly named or what resists signification: articulated by Edelman as the *Nothing* outside of symbolic articulation, or as what registers as unthinkable within discursive systems of recognition. Edelman then proposes that the project of queer resistance is to adopt this figural status and embrace the illegibility that queer so names.

I more thoroughly engage Edelman's thesis in conversation with queer antisociality in the pages that are to follow, as well as throughout the entirety of the thesis. Working with this initial premise for now, though, Edelman has rigorously theorised queer as the impossible nothing beyond discourse and articulated queer as that which disturbs order. There remains a gap in scholarship, however, between this theorising and its application as a critical model beyond Edelman's usage. Namely, there remains a gap between the invocation to think queerly beyond structures of knowledge, and examples of how one might do so. As such, each chapter of this thesis details different formulations of this antisocial logic and how it operates to frustrate epistemological, ontological, and discursive formations of queerness, as well as map the theoretical legibility of the antisocial. Beginning with literary works from Gertrude Stein, Herman Melville, and Samuel Beckett, these early chapters engage queer antisociality as a conceptual tool or hermeneutic rubric to locate queer as semiological abstractions and improper grammar. Following the antisocial premise that queer operates outside of semiological structures and frustrates linguistic efficacy, queer cannot be secured within language and rather manifests textually as incoherence or obscurity, as that which disrupts narrative coherence. In conversation with different fictional works, these chapters then develop a way of *reading queerly*, this is to say reading attuned to strange phrasing and unconventional syntax as instances of queer encounter. Rather than attempt to designate certain works as queer texts, this project proffers a

reconceptualisation of queer not as content but as form: as structural idiosyncrasies that frustrate comprehension and unsettle conventional logic.

Following this mapping of queer as textual obscurities across literary works, attention is then focused on films from the New Queer Cinema by Derek Jarman and David Cronenberg. Though two very different cinematic works, *Blue* and *Naked Lunch* visually articulate a logic of queer antisociality beyond a politics of identity, and rather enact queer negation through abstracted cinematic conventions or disrupted narrative coherence. As with the literary engagements that precede this shift to film, these chapters read across disparate visual works to suggest that negation formulates differently across textual environments; as with queerness itself, tactics of negation change shape and operate in accordance with different literary or visual landscapes.

As the epithet from Julia Kristeva suggests, it is a decidedly comical task to develop a project on the basis of negation; this is confirmed by moments of clumsy adherence to queer thought, moments of tenuous and frustrated application, and indeed moments of failure throughout this thesis. Nonetheless, it is necessary to continue expanding, disrupting, and challenging formations of queer and conceptualising modes of resistance: however conceptual or aesthetic, and however fraughtly navigated. This work is precisely an effort to do so.

Lacan's Three Registers

This thesis is a critical theory project as much as it is a literary or filmic one, perhaps more so. As such, each of the primary texts are placed in conversation with a different theoretical model to develop the logic of queer antisociality and map this logic across different conceptual terrains. To properly anticipate the structure of this thesis and signal the significance of the theoretical lenses engaged throughout, the work of Foucault, Blanchot, Kristeva, Derrida, and Deleuze and

Guattari will be discussed alongside my primary works as intertexts that shape and develop the scope of each chapter. From the outset, however, this project commences from the (French) poststructuralist tradition and signals a conceptual landscape that engages ‘truth’ and systems of knowledge as discursively determined and inherently unstable. In opposition to a structuralist sense of objective realities, *post*structuralism maps the construction of knowledges and social structures through language as an established system of signs that both produces meaning and confines its scope. The poststructuralist project to interrogate and deconstruct semiotic structures, namely that of the signifier and signified, characterises the theoretical application and ambitions of this thesis: to chart the discursive construction of queer and its attendant meanings as products of a politically, ideologically, and socially inscribed logic of sexual difference.

The poststructuralist lean of this thesis is influenced foremost by the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, in particular his three essential registers of human reality: the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. Though each chapter engages different theoretical positions to map antisociality across a set of critical approaches, the use of queer throughout this thesis is articulated in dialogue with Lacan’s three registers and conceptualised attuned to this theoretical framework. Following the title of this project, *Queering the Real*, the incoherences and semiotic rupture I trace as queer are aligned to the incomprehensibility of the Lacanian Real such that they are outside of symbolic or linguistic articulation. Given the significant influence of Lacan’s three registers, below is a brief summary detailing the interconnectedness of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, and how they operate to affirm reality premised on the structural exclusion of the Real.

In July 1953, Lacan gave a seminar outlining the premise and thematic basis for human reality titled ‘The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real’³ which was later developed in the Rome Report or ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’⁴ at the Paris Psychology Society conference two months later. Within both works, Lacan explains that the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real form a topology so that each register is contingent on the others, inextricably knotted in mutual dependence. The Symbolic register, also called the symbolic order, is foremost the register of language and speech, but it likewise governs laws, norms, practices, and culture. The Symbolic operates on a linguistic system of differences that organises reality according to the meaning or value of a term in relation to other terms. As Lacan suggests of the psychoanalytic process:

Whatever we constantly find and *re*find, which Freud referred to as its essential reality, is always a matter of symbols –symbols organised in language and which thus function on the basis of the link between the signifier and the signified, which is equivalent to the very structure of language.⁵

As such the signifier as the concept or meaning of a particular word or sign, *what a word symbolises*, is the foundation of the symbolic order. Language thus articulates and shapes reality through a network of symbols that not only name an object, but inform its value and relationship to other objects:

We find here a coming together or superimposing of symbols that is as complex as a poetic phrase whose tone, structure, puns, rhythms, and sound are all crucial. Everything occurs on several levels and partakes of the order and register of language.⁶

³ Jacques Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. Bruce Fink (Polity Press, 2013), p.1.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg (Norton & Company, 2006), p. 197.

⁵ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p.16.

⁶ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 17.

To be articulated as a subject is then to enter into the Symbolic order and be incorporated into its referential, complex structure where ‘the symbol constitutes human reality.’⁷ Indeed, even before birth a child is inscribed by signifiers that attend to personhood such as gender, race, or history. As Lacan remarks, ‘the form in which language expresses itself in and of itself defines subjectivity.’⁸ Sexual difference is explained by Lacan as the Symbolic’s most fundamental reality because ‘the mainspring of reproduction is to be found there.’⁹ Entry into the Symbolic thus begins with identification as a sexed subject not by virtue of its biological fact but through discourse: ‘it is through sexual reality that the signifier came into the world –that man learnt to think.’¹⁰

In regards to the Symbolic, it is important to understand that meaning, or how the signifier is interpreted in any given context, is not secure or consistent and thus constructions of reality, and of the self within this reality, are rife with miscommunications and misunderstandings: the symbolic value of a term does not translate across all beings and contexts. As Lacan suggests, these symbols are ‘always polyvalent, superimposed, overdetermined.’¹¹

Following the knowledge that there are gaps within the Symbolic as a signifying system, the Imaginary register functions to invest the subject and the social with an illusory coherence that enables a person to (mis)identify themselves and their reality as a stable, unified whole. This register operates on the level of consciousness and perception and speaks to how one orients themselves through the visual field: the Imaginary, suggests Lacan, is everything that is

⁷ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 44.

⁸ *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp .246-7.

⁹ *Four Fundamentals*, p. 150.

¹⁰ *Four Fundamentals*, p. 151.

¹¹ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 17.

artificially produced.¹² The most famous articulation of the Imaginary is the Lacanian mirror stage where, being met with their own reflection, a child identifies with the specular image of themselves as a whole, stable being. This identification, otherwise phrased as ego formation, affirms self-concept as a unified being by choosing to identify with the image of wholeness and rejecting the premise of a split subject. As Lacan remarks:

We must absolutely define the ego's imaginary function as the unity of the subject who is alienated from himself. The ego is something in which the subject cannot recognise himself at first except by alienating himself. He can thus only re-find himself by abolishing the ego's alter ego.¹³

Extending beyond the subject to their visual reality, the subject engages this same process of identification with images that affirm their self-concept: he symbolises images and imagines symbols.¹⁴ The Symbolic register then works to mediate this fantasy of coherence, to confirm it through language:

The goal is not, as people believe, to adapt to a more or less well-defined reality, but to get one's own reality –that is, one's own desire –recognised. As I have emphasised many times, the goal is to get it recognised by one's semblables –in other words, to symbolise it.¹⁵

Together, then, the Symbolic and the Imaginary registers comprise and organise ordinary reality through a process of identification and symbolisation so that 'the subject almost always forms a certain more or less successive unity.'¹⁶ Where the Symbolic has constituent gaps and impasses

¹² *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 52.

¹³ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 24.

¹⁴ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 36.

¹⁵ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 37.

¹⁶ *On the Names-of-the-Father*, p. 38.

of signification, the Imaginary is a necessary illusion because it constructs a screen to conceal these gaps (explained below as the Real) and secure the fiction of a stable, identifiable reality.

The Real, then, as the final constituent register in Lacan's framework of human reality, names what is neither symbolic or imaginary, but the unsymbolisable excess outside of identification and symbolisation: 'since the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we would be lead to define the real as the *impossible*.'¹⁷ Insofar as the Real is absolutely resistant to symbolisation and cannot be linguistically captured nor represented by the Imaginary, it is explicitly opposed to reality. It designates what can't otherwise be designated within the symbolic register: what cannot be named, articulated, or incorporated into meaning. It is as such fraudtly conceived, but no less prevalent than the other registers, and no less contingent: like the Real marks what is excluded from reality, reality is affirmed by the Real as its structuring negativity; as the persistent *nothing* that affirms the Symbolic's *something*.

The unsettling characteristic of the Real is that it is always proximate enough, just on the edge of reality, to spill over and unsettle the ostensible security of this reality. Such eruptions or spillage of the Real are articulated as *jouissance* where what has been repressed returns as painful enjoyment or a destabilising, transgressive kind of pleasure. This use of pleasure aptly gestures to associations between the Real and unmediated sexual desire: what has not been regulated by Symbolic law but rather exiled from reality. The Real as such 'finds itself, in the subject, to a very great degree the accomplice of the drive.'¹⁸ The drive, for Lacan, which is always sexual and excessive, are manifestations of desire as an essential, irreducible gap that exists from the

¹⁷ *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 167.

¹⁸ *Four Fundamentals*, p. 69.

moment one identifies with the specular image as a whole subject: the split that is constitutive of self-formation. As such desire is ‘a condition both absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued’.¹⁹ Like the unconscious as ‘lacuna, cut, rupture inscribed in a certain lack,’²⁰ desire and the unconscious gesture at something inarticulable below the Symbolic surface: to the necessary negation or lack that structures selfhood and the reality this selfhood invests as real. It is through eruptions of desire and moments that betray our conscious articulations of reality that we access or encounter the exilic register of the Real, and it is precisely here that queerness operates as the unsymbolisable excesses of a logic of sexual difference.

There is much deeper one can go into Lacanian psychoanalysis, and many more conceptual threads that one could follow. Though, as this is not a thesis on Lacanian theories of human reality, I have tried to portray the logic and principles that guide an understanding of queer antisociality throughout this project, particularly as they inform Edelman’s work, but also my own sense of symbolic organisation and queer negation.

Queer antisociality

Though this thesis has a decided emphasis on Edelman’s work, his sense of queer was not conceived in isolation and was rather generated in dialogue with the antisocial turn in queer studies. This turn marked a significant conceptual shift towards negativity as a productive site, and articulated queer as anti-establishment, anti-tradition, and indeed antisocial. In particular, queer negation operates against liberal inclusionism or rainbow politics that affirm

¹⁹ *Four Fundamentals*, p. 154.

²⁰ *Four Fundamentals*, p. 153.

homosexuality patterned on neoliberalist values of monogamy, reproduction, and the gender binary. Phrased otherwise, progressive politics insist on assimilation rather than liberation through rhetoric and policy that replicates heterosexual norms and values, what Lisa Duggan has termed *homonormativity*:

Homonormativity is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormativity assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.²¹

Negation then works against assimilation to affirm that queer experience cannot be mapped along heterosexual lines. As such, antisociality embraces and emphasises queer incongruity as a means to resist assimilation, framed often through political rhetoric as socialisation. The primary contributors to the antisocial turn characterise antisociality as an eclectic field of inquiry and locate Edelman within the antisocial queer tradition where his logic is formulated in conversation with, and often in opposition to, his contemporaries. As such, the following section details the arguments attending to queer antisociality that both pave the way for Edelman's theory of nonbeing and challenge its pessimistic charge.

To begin, the antisocial turn builds on a history of queer theorising that locates sexual difference as a site of repressive discourse and imbalanced power structures, such that sexuality and subjectivity are articulated through an asymmetrical logic of heterosexual/homosexual or normal and abnormal. Organisation as subjects into gendered or sexual categories then enforces difference; queer as sexual difference is produced by, and paradoxically produces, the heterosexual ideology that informs it. Following Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, recognition as a

²¹ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2003), p. 50.

sexual subject – not unrelated to the imperative to disclose the ‘truth’ of one’s sexuality by coming out of the closet – locates an individual within discourse, that is to say it locates them within an existing set of classifications and norms, so that identification as queer does not work against power but as means of its proliferation:

Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means first of all that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. Secondly, power prescribes an “order” for sex that operates at the same time as a form of intelligibility: sex is to be deciphered on the basis of its relation to the law.²²

Queer theory thus critically engages this premise and problematises systems of recognition by exposing the instability inherent in discursive formation and relational organisation. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks in her formative work *Epistemologies of the Closet*:

Categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions - heterosexual/homosexual, in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorised term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable.²³

Such that sexuality is a paradigm of mutually reliant, if not wholly unstable, terms, the antisocial queer thesis conceptualises modes of being, or *modes of being queer*, that trouble formulations of the social structured on this unstable binary. If the queer subject must accede to a position of alterity that is both subsumed by and excluded from culture, as Sedgwick suggests, then antisociality reconciles this dissonance by embracing the oppositional status that secures queers’ place within the social.

²² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (Penguin Books, 1990) p. 83.

²³Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemologies of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), p. 10.

The antisocial queer thesis is often credited as beginning with the work of Leo Bersani, particularly his 1996 *Homos* wherein he claims that ‘homo-ness instances a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known.’²⁴ This remark that queerness is antithetic to normative scripts of sociality is perhaps not revolutionary on its own, but it was Bersani’s invocation to embrace this incongruity that formulated ‘what might be called the antisocial thesis in contemporary queer theory’²⁵ Throughout *Homos*, Bersani suggests that efforts to resignify the queer body within a heterosexual framework only serve to reify straightness as the primary referent to which queerness is tied: ‘dialectical thinking and dialogue seek to effect reconciliations between opposed terms, but these reconciliations may require the transcendence or even the annihilation of the differential terms’²⁶:

More exactly, resignification cannot destroy; it merely presents to the dominant culture spectacles of politically impotent disrespect... It is, in any case, extremely doubtful that resignification, or redeployment, or hyperbolic miming, will ever overthrow anything. These mimetic activities are too closely imbricated in the norms they continue.²⁷

Claiming that ‘I can’t be oppressed if I can’t be found,’²⁸ Bersani then engages negation as a form of queer resistance, proposing that we might instead wish to ‘cultivate the *anticonnunitarian* impulses inherent in homo-ness’²⁹ and resign from a homophobic social order rather than make efforts to reform it. Gay sexuality, for Bersani, registered as an ascetic undoing of cultural scripts and as a site of momentary rupture wherein the sovereignty of the ‘self’ is

²⁴ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 7.

²⁵ Robert L. Caserio, and others., ‘The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory’ in *PMLA* 121.2, pp. 819-828 (2006) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357>, p.819.

²⁶Bersani, *Homos* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p.40.

²⁷*Homos*, p. 51.

²⁸ *Homos*, p.32.

²⁹ *Homos*, p.53.

shattered when given over to another. This is particularly true of the gay male encounter where, writing *Is the Rectum a Grave* at the height of the AIDS pandemic, Bersani proposes that sex between men

Advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of asceticism...If the rectum is a grave in which the masculine ideal is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.³⁰

Gay sex, reimagined in later queer theorising as the queer encounter, is thus conceptualised as a rupture or intrusion to modes of being, or modes of *being acceptable*, within the ‘sacrosanct general public.’³¹ As was written in the late Bersani’s obituary, the whole point of being a homosexual man was, to Bersani, ‘that you disrupted the experience of possession, ownership, fidelity, consistency, safety, and you allowed sexuality to be what it really is, which is disruptive, disorienting, shattering, limit-violating and boundary-breaking.’³²

In response to Bersani’s remark that ‘homo-ness instances a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known,’ a selection of queer theorists were gathered at a 2005 MLA roundtable to discuss this claim and the attendant question ‘should a homosexual be a good citizen?’ for a ‘stocktaking’ of the antisocial thesis in queer theory or ‘queer unbelonging.’ Participating scholars, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, Tim Dean and José Esteban Muñoz, locate the principles of queer antisociality, as well as the primary tensions; principles and tensions that remain true of this field twenty years later.

³⁰ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 29-30.

³¹ *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, p.6.

³² Clay Risen, ‘Leo Bersani, Literary Critic and Theorist on Gay Life, Dies at 90’ in *NYT Online* <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/books/leo-bersani-dead.html> Feb 27 2022, [accessed 28/02/2022]

As advocates of political negativity within this discussion, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam detail the antisocial turn in queer theory as a means of resistance or withdrawal from an inherently homophobic social order. For Halberstam, this resistance takes shape as ‘an angry, uncivil politics of negativity.’³³

It is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech, and desire is unloosed... These are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn... If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory, we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate.³⁴

This logic, which Halberstam expands in *The Art of Queer Failure*, rallies against the ‘toxic positivity’ of contemporary culture and antagonises cultural scripts that locate success in narrow, conventional terms: neoliberal, reproductive, capitalist. Queer antisociality via Halberstam proposes failure as an alternative pursuit; fail to assimilate to a prescriptive model of successful adulthood and rather maintain ‘some of the unruly and wondrous anarchy of childhood.’³⁵ They inscribe queer antisociality with the qualities of anarchy – *vive la queer resistance* – so that antisocial registers not simply as disengagement but active disruption and antagonism.

Where the sentiment that queerness is antithetic to a conventional politics structured on (hetero)sexual ideology remains true for Edelman, his approach broaches a strategy of negation as less a display of ardent counterculture that affirms queer as an oppositional identity, and more

³³ ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 821.

³⁴ ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 822.

³⁵ Jack Halberstam, *The Art of Queer Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.

interested in literalising the figural status of queer as illegible or unknowable through a refusal to proffer a positive identity:

The queer subject has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligability, and—instead of fighting this characterisation by dragging queerness into recognition—Edelman proposes that we embrace the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent.³⁶

Rather than suggest that queer mean *something* - that it be located within a rubric of identity politics – Edelman proposes that queer negation does not work outward from an established centre and engage an oppositional position (which, by contrast, would only serve to affirm this centre), but rather nominates what refuses an ontological paradigm: rather than affirm what queer *is* or what queer *means*, antisociality via Edelman negates social organisation through *disidentification*. As Edelman suggests, the antisocial queer project approaches ‘the humanities without any need to preserve the subject of humanism.’³⁷

Contra Halberstam and Edelman who represent, in different ways, antisociality as political negativity, José Esteban Muñoz and Tim Dean characterise the correlative position within the antisocial turn as a politics predicated on hope: queer as not-yet-there but invested ‘in utopia that is nothing like naive but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present.’³⁸ Muñoz’ stance, which he takes up more thoroughly in *Cruising Utopia*, proposes that this queer utopianism is always on the horizon:

I respond to the assertion that there is no future for the queer by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity. Queerness is always on the horizon. Indeed, for queerness to have any value whatsoever, it must be considered visible only on the horizon.³⁹

³⁶ ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 822.

³⁷ ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 822.

³⁸ ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 825.

³⁹ ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 825.

Distinct from the ‘failure of imagination in queer critique’ that Muñoz recognises as antirelational politics and the various romances of negativity, he proposes thinking queerness beyond the limitations of current conceptualisations, that is thinking queerness as collectivity imbued with possibility and utopian potential. Advocating a shared optimism, Tim Dean follows by lamenting ‘recent queer theoretical emphases on negativity, melancholia, and the death drive’⁴⁰ insofar as it confirms heterosexist beliefs in queers’ own solitary annihilation. Homosexuality, for Dean, is ‘profoundly connective’ where, beyond the normative coordinates of selfhood, lies an orgy of connection that no regime can regulate.’⁴¹ Rather than the pursuit of cultural nihilism, the antisocial turn registers, for Dean, ‘not the end of sociality but its inception.’⁴²

Developing on this antisocial landscape, Edelman departs from his contemporaries’ investment in utopian futures by proposing instead an politic of antifuturity. Antithetic to a logic of reproductive futurity, queer nominates what is outside of the social. Such is the premise of Edelman’s 2004 *No Future* where he posits that queer individuals are alienated by ideology that invests the figure of the child as the linchpin for a universal politics of reproductive futurism. The child, understood as innocent and needing protection, is upheld to represent social progression, survival, and continuity and thus queer, by virtue of its antithetic relation to heterosexuality and the reproductive couple, is positioned outside of this future-facing politics. Queer then figures, for Edelman, the inverse of futurity by way of the death drive:

As the constancy of a pressure both alien and internal to the logic of the Symbolic, as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, the death drive names what

⁴⁰‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 827.

⁴¹‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 827.

⁴² ‘The Antisocial Queer Thesis’, p. 827.

the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.⁴³

Aligned to my reading of Lacan earlier, the Symbolic governs the social order and articulates reality according to reproduction as its most fundamental structure. Though, within this symbolic reality, something remains necessarily excluded for the illusion of symbolic sovereignty to remain intact: a structural negation on which affirmation of reality depends. Queer thus fulfills this promise and marks what is outside of the symbolic law built on reproductive futurism: ‘queerness names the side of those *not fighting for the children*.’⁴⁴

As queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one,⁴⁵ Edelman’s invocation is to accede to this place, to embrace the structural negation that queer represents and accept ‘its figural status as resistant to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure.’⁴⁶ This claim clarifies that the very organisation of the social depends on this figural outsider and queer is thus inscribed, from the outset, as the place of the social order’s death drive. To embrace this figural status and take aim at its structuring foundation, then, is not an effort towards nihilistic annihilation, but ‘a radical challenge to the very value of the social itself’⁴⁷:

The efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself.⁴⁸

⁴³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004) p.9.

⁴⁴ *No Future*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *No Future*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *No Future*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ *No Future*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *No Future*, p. 18.

So it goes that the antisocial queer thesis is marked by this polemic assertion to embrace queer negativity: ‘to no longer disown but assume the figural identity as embodiments of the figuralisation, and hence the disfiguration, of identity itself.’⁴⁹

Following his claim that queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one from *No Future*,⁵⁰ Edelman’s *Bad Education* develops this premise and proposes that queer is not a positive identity or an ontological condition, but rather names what is outside of, or excluded from, being. Queer as such is ‘consigned to the void of nonbeing that enables being to be.’⁵¹ Unpacking this claim, Edelman suggests that articulation as a subject is predicated on the logic of exclusion inherent in Symbolic organisation. Ontological formation is then necessarily differential – to affirm being there must be the persistent threat of *nonbeing*. Nonbeing nominates what is outside of signification or, in other words, what cannot be located as an identity within language: what registers as unthinkable within discursive systems of recognition. Such that Symbolic organisation ‘*grounds being in being meaningful*, in conforming to the logic of thinkability that organises human community,’⁵² queer functions as a catachresis for what is external to meaning and being; it names the *nothing* that is the constituent excess of the Symbolic’s *something*:

Queer adverts us to what ontology leaves out, if only by figuring—within that ontology—what that ontology excludes. It confronts us with a representation of what the Symbolic *posits* as nothing, as external to being or sense.⁵³

⁴⁹ *No Future*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ *No Future*, p. 17.

⁵¹ *Bad Education*, p. xiv.

⁵² *Bad Education*, p. xiii.

⁵³ *Bad Education*, p. xvii.

Though queer does appear to register as an identity within a contemporary logic of progressive politics, Edelman explains that this term never wholly escapes its connection to the ‘incomprehensible and ontologically impossible’⁵⁴, that is queer always ‘signifies diacritically in relation to a norm’:⁵⁵

Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance. The negative associations of queerness speak to the subject’s investment in the system of differences that called it into being in the first place and its intolerance of anything that puts its investment in the stability of those differences at risk.⁵⁶

As with the invocation to embrace the death drive in his earlier work, Edelman maintains the imperative to embrace the negation that queer so names and, in doing so, disrupt the very framework on which identity is structured:

Negation, its queer undoing of our sense of “what is”, consists in affording us nothing more than this psychic and conceptual violence: the violence it does to the conceptualisation and mastery of reality and to the hope of breaking the bonds that enslave us to the nothing, the void, the pure division that the subject “is”.⁵⁷

Together these works inform queer antisociality as it is conceptualised and applied throughout this thesis: as the unsymbolisable excesses of a logic of sexual difference. The decision to align this project with the Lacanian Real and Edelman’s formulation of queer antisociality was determined by reading across queer theory, and antisocial queer theorising in particular, and returning always to queers’ entrapment within a discursive system: queer works to expose and

⁵⁴ *Bad Education*, p. xiv.

⁵⁵ *Bad Education*, p. xv.

⁵⁶ *Bad Education*, p. xvi.

⁵⁷ *Bad Education*, p. 161.

antagonise this system, but it remains fraudtly embedded in it, woven into the social fabric as one of its constituent threads. Lacan and Edelman, or Lacan *via* Edelman, offer a way to acknowledge the discursive construction of queer, but also to begin thinking queerness beyond or outside of structures of recognition. Edelman's articulations of queer aligned to the Real provide a conceptual basis on which to map incoherence as queerly disturbing symbolic and discursive efficacy.

The perspectives of Edelman and his contemporaries illustrate the interpretive scope and varied application of queer antisociality, not simply as a nihilistic gesture towards social annihilation, but as a rubric for reconciling the othered-status of queer within an ostensibly progressive political climate. Recognising the contributions of other scholars in the field, this thesis might appear at risk of overidentifying queer antisociality with Edelman, however, where Muñoz and Dean envisage positive queer futures, contemporary conceptualisations of queer remain locked into a logic of sexual difference, however aspirational the theorising otherwise. Edelman's polemic articulates antisociality as an immediate mode of intervention or a way of thinking queerness outside of discursive and political frameworks rather than trying to reform them. It is only through negating this determinate order that allows for thinking beyond it. This project is then not dismissive of the hopeful and imaginative possibilities of queer, but interested foremost in charting the cultural remapping that alternative queer futures depend on.

Where Edelman and his antisocial contemporaries have done the work of theorising queer negation and establishing a radical tradition within queer studies, this project is interested in the application of this theorising: in engaging absence as queer method and conceptualising forms of negation. In charting queer across instances of symbolic dissolution and textual disorientations as

well as a varied set of theoretical positions, this work *thinks through* antisociality, asking what it might look like to queerly resist the controls immanent in language and to articulate queer otherwise, as the unsymbolisable remainder. Acknowledging that this argument is a purely aesthetic one structured by fictional works, it is conducted in conversation with scholarship that likewise conceptualise tactics of queer negation, as well as their application to queer lived experience. As such, Eric A. Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence* translates queer exclusion to political action by framing non-identity or 'becoming ungovernable'⁵⁸ as a queer strategy of resistance. Stanley maps rising rates of violence towards queer individuals alongside contemporary progressive politics to document how 'inclusion, rather than a precondition of safety, most properly names the state's violent expansion.'⁵⁹ Such that the democratic myth of *safety for all* eclipses systematic oppression of trans and queer individuals, Stanley conceptualises recourse from enduring state violence as *ungovernance*; adopting a post-politic of unintelligibility and working 'the messy points of contact between the ends of language and the chaos of a desiring life experienced as the force of discipline.'⁶⁰

Following this, Nicholas de Villiers' *Opacity and the Closet* details the confessional imperative to 'come out of the closet' as a means to locate and codify queer individuals: it 'makes individuals into recognisable subjects by imposing a categorising and interpretive regime of truth.'⁶¹ De Villiers proposes opacity or discretion – the unwillingness to confess one's

⁵⁸ Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Duke University Press, 2021), p.114.

⁵⁹ Stanley, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Stanley, p. 3.

⁶¹ Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 3.

orientation – as a means to resist location as a particular subject and occupy undifferentiated ways of being that are not contingent on a heterosexual ideal:

Against a *scientia sexualis* that turns sexuality into an object of paranoiac knowledge, the suppression of the signified of homosexuality maintains a utopian potential and a tactical advantage (where suppression is not the same as repression or denial).⁶²

Where De Villiers remains in conversation with the closet as a proliferation of identity politics, this project attends to opacity or queer negation more broadly across linguistic, visual, or conceptual structures of recognition to traffick how the queer subject is articulated, and how they might negate articulation, through and beyond disclosures of the closet. So, while conducted in conversation with these works from De Villiers and Stanley, this thesis is tasked with a different operation: to follow a logic of queer antisociality along different conceptual threads and thoroughly engage the theoretical foundation that informs tactics of queer negation. Phrased otherwise, where this thesis develops a logic of antisociality and details how to begin thinking queerness as operating against systems of knowledge, De Villiers and Stanley illustrate how this logic could be deployed politically and personally – articulating negation not just as a way of thinking, but a way of being and practical forms of action.

Primary works and thesis structure

As my chosen texts vary in author, history, content, and form, I am not seeking to fix a definitive list of queer works or to suggest a unifying queer thread across them. It is the very nature of queer as resistant to coherence and continuity that such a task could only ever fail. Rather, I trace queer along inconsistent lines as aporetic junctures, opacity and incoherence to show how queer operates as moments of destabilising *jouissance* that interrupts Symbolic efficacy. Each

⁶² De Villiers, p. 18.

chapter then engages a logic of queer antisociality through different conceptual and theoretical frameworks to map queer along a varied collection of textual case studies. Such that queer operates so diffusely, my method of approach to this research involves close reading of my primary texts, that is reading with ‘close attention to literary texture and what is embodied there’⁶³ to recognise agrammaticalities or textual absurdities as deliberate efforts to frustrate linguistic efficacy and work against convention. This close reading means sustained engagement with a text, taking note of the ‘internal dynamics of a particular work’⁶⁴ and the messages contained therein such that each instance of queer negation is idiosyncratic and formulates differently across authors, mediums, and time periods.

These literary texts, or these case studies, are curious choices for a thesis on queer negation; namely because they are not, in any straightforward way, ‘queer texts’, nor do they confirm an agenda to articulate antisociality or problematise queer as an identity marker. This is precisely why they were chosen: to illustrate the ways that queer antisociality can operate beyond sexual politics or decidedly queer material, and to articulate antisociality as a way of thinking, and indeed a way of reading, attuned to the limitations of language. I then chose works that shared in the ambition to negate or frustrate linguistic structure: to pierce the illusion of symbolic sovereignty and exemplify instances of semiotic rupture as generative sites. As it happens, the modernist literary project to overturn traditional modes of representation involved efforts to consciously obstruct syntactic structures – such that conventional linguistic patterns generated conventional thought. This ambition to work against grammatical structure instances the kinds of textual incoherence and agrammaticality that allowed me to map queer thought as working

⁶³ Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois, *Close Reading: The Reader*, (Duke University Press, 2003), p. ix.

⁶⁴ Peter Howarth, ‘Close Reading as Performance’, *Modernism and Close Reading*, ed. by David James, pp.45-80, (Oxford, online edn: Oxford Academic, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198749967.003.0007>, p. 45.

against established forms of knowledge. The jump from early-to-mid twentieth century literature to the homo pmo (read: *homosexual postmodernism*) of the New Queer Cinema effects a similar logic on a visual register, such that it problematises linear narrative development or conventional cinematic technique. The logic informing the inclusion of films, and in particular *these* films, Derek Jarman's *Blue* and David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*, is then to illustrate that antisocial theorising formulates differently across texts and across mediums; as an imageless blue screen, or as a hectic hallucinatory landscape saturated with grotesque figures. These literary and visual works are seemingly disparate, but they each offer different articulations or textual manifestations of queer antisociality and speak to the nature of queer as a shifting landscape that operates diacritically to whatever given convention or textual form.

This mapping begins with a reading of Gertrude Stein's 1914 *Tender Buttons* to establish language as a closed system of signs and queer as resistant to linguistic taxonomies. Through syntactic oddities and asynchronous writing within *Tender Buttons*, Stein textualises queer as grammatical perversions that stifle linguistic production. Following Stein's ambition to invent new ways of seeing things⁶⁵, the argument goes that through subverting conventional linguistic structure, the interpretive scope of language widens and the domestic objects that Stein details are able to be newly, and indeed strangely, perceived. This *new way of seeing things* is an effort to foreclose the production of meaning in order to think beyond its prescriptive scope, to render language newly open to consideration. Out with the old, as it were, and in with the decentred linguistic freedom of the new.

⁶⁵ Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, 'Reconfiguring Identities in the Word and in the World: Naming Marginalised Subjects and Articulating Marginal Narratives in Early Canonical Works by Gertrude Stein', *South Central Review*, 31.2, pp. 9–27 (2014), *ProQuest*, <http://ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reconfiguring-identities-word-world-naming/docview/1544525439/se-2>. [accessed 25/10/2022]. p.18.

It is this sentiment that frames my reading of *Tender Buttons* as a queer poetics that occupies the threshold of language. Located somewhere between discursive efficacy and utter obscurity is queer just beyond the reach of articulation, appearing instead as a permeating strangeness so that the familiar objects throughout the text are tinged with a disorienting sense of *unfamiliarity*. As with queer as a designation for that which is strange or unusual (in excess of its function as a marker for nonnormative, nondescript sexual orientations), language can gesture at what is queer, but it cannot firmly locate it – except as a mobile rubric for what unsettles or chafes against convention. It is as such that *Tender Buttons* enables us to read attuned to syntactic obstructions and nonsensical phrasing as queerly disrupting linguistic efficacy, and gesturing at the spaces that language cannot reach, this is the spaces where meaning collapses.

Much of this thesis articulates queer as a structural negation, which is to say that queer marks the negativity on which positivity is structured in a relational model of language; like absence is necessary to confirm presence, or darkness to confirm light, queer is what structurally affirms the normative as its oppositional correlative. This sense of queer as structural negation is not invested in a binary logic of terms to secure its status as a catachresis for what is abnormal or other, but rather exposes how language operates to ensure queer remains in the dark. So long as the binary logic on which language is structured necessitates that terms are definitionally referential, queer will signify what is odd or what is outside of the normative. In her efforts to reshape language in a way that subverts this relational structure within *Tender Buttons*, however, Stein allows that we begin reading beyond this prescriptive logic; begin loosening our investment in language as a stable set of signs rather than a carefully curated production of meaning. The more we interrogate the constructedness of language, the more attuned we become

to its limited conceptual reach. Chapter one thus marks the beginning of this interrogation and establishes a basis for reading queerly; for locating moments that pierce at the illusion of linguistic sovereignty to see what exists on the other side.

Following this reading of *Tender Buttons* to establish a mode of inquiry and the conceptual basis of queer as definitionally imprecise and structurally antagonistic, I go on to read Herman Melville's *Bartleby* to consider subjecthood through the lens of queer antisociality. Having established that queer names what is Other within language, this premise is extended to queer subjectivities and the space they occupy within the social order. The queer subject, so it goes, is relationally bound to the heterosexual subject as its opposite and as such incorporation into language as a subject is marked by a logic of sexual difference. Following Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, even where particular orientations or subjectivities seem to have been incorporated into language and recognised as legitimate, they remain articulated in opposition to, and as affirmation of, a heterosexual standard: 'power prescribes an "order" for sex that operates at the same time as a form of intelligibility.'⁶⁶

My reading of *Bartleby* is then a dual project: it firstly establishes that queer does not signal a specific sexual orientation and rather frustrates intelligibility as a sexual subject. Following this, I apply a logic of queer antisociality that conceives of disidentification as a radical form of resistance. The argument goes that identification as a queer subject is not simply a process of naming but of classification and incorporation into the social order as 'Other.' To disengage

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (Penguin Books, 1990) p. 151.

language, then, is to resist recognition as a subject and the process of classification this recognition engenders.

Following this antisocial logic, I read *Bartleby's* persistent refrain 'I would prefer not to' as queerly frustrating identification as a subject: nothing can be known of his personage except this preference *not to*. He cannot be located in language or classified as a particular subject because he refuses any knowledge that would inform his classification as such. Even as his persistent use of 'I would prefer not to' articulates a preference, this is always a preference for *nothing* rather than *something*. The tension of the text arises as the impossible task of disengaging language. Insofar as the social self is discursively determined, so too are social realities: *Bartleby* does not only refuse identification, but his disengagement from language is likewise a refusal of that which language realises. What begins as a spoken gesture, *I would prefer not to*, translates to motionlessness, to solitude, and ultimately to death; to the unreality outside of language. This chapter then reconciles the antisocial impulse towards disidentification with the pervasive and inescapable function of language to construct reality and our position within it.

As is the general structure of each chapter moving forward, I employ different theoretical lenses to help me tease out the logic informing the antisocial queer thesis, and to chart it along different conceptual frameworks. This chapter then places *Bartleby* in conversation with Giorgio Agamben's writing on personhood in *Potentialities* where he articulates *Bartleby* as dwelling in the 'abyss of potentiality.'⁶⁷ Read through Agamben, *Bartleby* figures 'pure, absolute potentiality'⁶⁸ because he exists between Being and non-Being; to resist articulation as a subject

⁶⁷ Giorgio Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency', *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Daniel Heller-Roazen (eds), pp. 243- 274. (Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 253-4.

⁶⁸ Agamben, p. 253.

is to neither affirm or negate one's personhood but to occupy the nothing that precedes affirmation *or* negation, to be suspended in the moment before actualisation. It is this space of nothing that informs queer strategies of negation: if articulation as a subject forecloses the potential to exist outside of signifying systems, then negation offers a means of resistance. Framed by Agamben, the unreality outside of language that Bartleby occupies does not gesture towards death but rather to the abyss of potentiality. Disidentification as such is read not as nihilistic resignation but gestures instead towards what exists beyond the determining force of language: gestures, that is, at the potential to curate ways of being that are not discursively determined.

Chapters one and two clearly mark the beginning of my thinking about queer in antisocial terms. This is where my logic is most frustrated, punctuated by moments that grapple with an argument, but do not always manage to articulate it. Though I wanted to ensure this thesis was a polished piece of work, I also wanted to retain a sense of its development as a work in progress where my grasp of queerness grew and my thinking markedly developed over the time spent working on this project. As such, the following chapter on Samuel Beckett's short pieces *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* is more precise in its application of queer antisociality and more firmly orients my reader towards queer as a destabilising force.

Developing on Agamben's sentiment that the space preceding language is the space of Nothing, Beckett articulates this space through an acerbic, precise syntax that reduces language to its most minimal signifying function. Through acute, functional description and a mathematical rendering of space, Beckett traces language as an expiring system of signs to reach a point at which language remains comprehensible but hollow – is functional, but not meaningful. This

symbolically sterile writing enacts a reversion to language before the sign as an effort to begin again, to imagine language anew as an empty slate that is not yet inscribed with meaning. In terms similar to Agamben's, this space of Nothing that Beckett realises is a generative site imbued with potential: to return again to that nothingness before the word and inscribe language anew.

Detailed through this skeletal prose, sibling texts *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* traffic a dying imagination across gradually reducing spaces and the expiring subjectivities that occupy them. As analogues for a dying imagination, the cylindrical spaces that are marked by precise diameter measurements and angles ABC and D, tighten to impossible, inhospitable sizes, and the language used to articulate them grows increasingly emaciated. The two occupants within these cylinders, Emma and Emmo, are initially detailed in sexuated, dissected terms, but eventuate to immobile, indiscriminate figures that chart a devolution of language not to its primal, carnal beginnings, but to a language preceding articulations of the gendered body. Beckett effects a minimal and malnourished writing isolated from the Symbolic register that might otherwise fatten it with meaning so that the piecemeal dissolution of space and subject across these works documents language as an expiring system of signs. It is from this place where language is emptied of signification, this place of nothing, that Beckett can foreclose inscribed meaning and write language anew. This writing of the negative follows the suggestion from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to 'use language in a way that takes from it its power of immediate or direct signification in order to equal it with what it wishes all the same to say.'⁶⁹

⁶⁹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 102-3.

Beckett's ambition to render language a blank slate is read aligned to the antisocial queer logic that affirms queer as an *asymbolic* term. Insofar as queer cannot be incorporated into meaning and rather designates what is odd or disturbing, it occupies this conceptual no-space, or space of Nothing; it is only in thinking beyond the structural limit of language, as Lee Edelman suggests, that we can begin thinking queerness.⁷⁰ This thinking invests negation – or nothingness – with potential insofar as it registers a point beyond the limit of language, a limit articulated as *nothing* because it is outside of a linguistic framework that could locate it as *something*. As such, this chapter reads Beckett's impoverished language as queerly negating linguistic and symbolic efficacy in pursuit of what exists beyond its limited conceptual scope. In framing negation as a generative site, I read Beckett's short works in conversation with Maurice Blanchot's writing on *le vide*, or the void, in *The Space of Literature*. Blanchot conceptualises the void not as ending or beginning, but as that which proceeds and forecloses ending and beginning, as 'seeing and naming from the starting point of *everything*, from the starting point of the *absence* of everything, that is, from nothing.'⁷¹ In articulating this nothing as 'that immense fund of impotence, the infinitely futile wherewithal to start over and over again,'⁷² reading through Blanchot frames Beckett's emptied, emaciated prose as securing, or suspended in, perpetual possibility: from this conceptual point zero, nothing remains certain and everything remains possible.

The following chapter marks a shift from literary works to film with Derek Jarman's 1993 feature film *Blue*. This work and the chapter on David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* that follows,

⁷⁰ Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022), p. xviii.

⁷¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 273.

⁷² Blanchot, p. 10.

are discussed as part of a cinematic movement from the early 1990s that problematised queer as a collective identity based on shared gendered and sexual experience, and instead represented queer as a complex nexus of antagonism, difference, and resistance. The New Queer Cinema, as B. Ruby Rich termed it, was borne in response to homophobic legislation and a governmental failure of care during the AIDS-epidemic, marking a shift from *queer as sexuality* to *queer as composite, angry, and beyond a politics of identity*; ‘outrage and opportunity merged into a historic artistic response to insufferable political repression.’⁷³

The films of the New Queer Cinema visually articulate queer in antisocial terms. In excess of a logic of sexual difference, queer is marked by a politic of defiance and provocation so that queer cannot be located as a coherent identity on screen, but rather as a fracturing of identity, what Bob Nowlan calls a ‘queer post-identity.’⁷⁴ While the content of these films works to complicate queer subjectivities, the New Queer Cinema also queers by means of style and form by subverting or abstracting cinematic convention. As such this movement renegotiates the terms of queerness and cinema alike aligned to an ethos of disruption and noncompliance.

Such cinematic disruption characterises Jarman’s final film where, rather than adhere to a definition of film as moving image, *Blue* is imageless except for a static, monochromatic blue screen in the colour International Klein Blue. The attendant narrative details Jarman’s living *and* dying with AIDS-related illness and serves as an ‘elegiac journey towards *immateriality*’⁷⁵ as

⁷³ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press, 2013) p. xvi.

⁷⁴ Bob Nowlan, ‘Queer Theory, Queer Cinema’, *Coming Out to the Mainstream: new queer cinema in the 21st century*, eds. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones, pp.2–20, (Cambridge Scholars, 2010), p.20.

⁷⁵ Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 511.

Jarman reconciles the immanence of his death through dream sequences, memories, and the progressive failings of his body.

This journey towards immateriality is inseparable from the process of dying through which it is framed; the *unbecoming* of the subject that Jarman confronts in narrating the imminence of his own death is mirrored in the abstraction of cinematic and aesthetic conventions. There is a shared abstraction across content and form that conceptualises death as the end of signification and materialises it on screen. This chapter then reads *Blue* as a visual articulation of the space of Nothing where, in the absence of orienting devices or signification, queer provides a framework for reading attuned to the immaterial; to ‘the static on screen that finally signifies nothing.’⁷⁶ The monochromatic blue screen is thus read not as a negative resignation into the abyss, but a generative site where Jarman exists unfixed to his failing body as allegory in the blue that is void of signification.

In conversation with Julia Kristeva’s *Giotto’s Joy*, the monochromatic blue screen is detailed as queer form: it works against narrativity and marks the unsymbolisable space of zero outside of precise articulation. Insofar as colour cannot be patterned on a linguistic schema, Kristeva suggests that it shatters the unity of meaning as presymbolic *jouissance*: ‘colour is not zero meaning: it is excess meaning through instinctual drive: that is, through death.’⁷⁷ Following Kristeva, *Blue* is placed in conversation with Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* to reconcile the abeyance of the screen that situates Jarman perpetually between, or indeed across, life and death.

⁷⁶Valerie Rohy, ‘The Cinema of the Impossible: Queer Theory and Narrative.’ *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*, ed. by Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol, Vol. 1 (2018) pp. 145–56, Edinburgh University Press, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2f4vh7k.16>. [Accessed 6 March 2023], p. 151.

⁷⁷Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 2024), p. 226.

In foreclosing the event of death through the temporal arrest of the screen, Jarman is articulated aligned to the lateral constituents of queer time as recurrent and eddying, unable to be mapped along a developmental progression of life and death, or life towards death. The sense of the uncanny and untimely that permeates *Blue* is theorised through Derrida as death's non-contemporaneity and incomprehensibility: a 'possible impossibility'⁷⁸ or 'a nothing that exceeds everything.'⁷⁹ *Blue* then abandons the signifying devices of image and time to occupy undifferentiated existence; to queerly negate convention in favour of '*the admirable austerity of the void.*'⁸⁰

As the penultimate chapter of this thesis, I read David Cronenberg's 1991 *Naked Lunch* as a radical display of the tenets of queer antisociality. Filtered through the hallucinatory imaginings of William Lee, queer erupts as a grotesquery of transgressive, unmediated sexual appetites and erotic energies. The film makes no effort to recuperate queer desires into a stable system of signs or to readily define it through a logic of reality and rather generously embraces queer as 'the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.'⁸¹

The narrative follows William Lee on a drug-induced trip to the hallucinatory landscape of Interzone. Though he adopts the illusion that he is going *undercover* as a homosexual, this hallucinatory break from reality permits Lee access to his repressed homosexual desires; it is the zone where nothing is true and *everything is permitted*. Occupied by abjectly-erotic creatures who 'specialise in sexual ambivalence', Interzone absurdly articulates queer desire beyond the

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press: 1993), p.72.

⁷⁹ Derrida, p .7.

⁸⁰ Derek Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion*, ed. by Keith Collins (Penguin Random House, 2018), p.198. (italics mine)

⁸¹ *No Future*, p.9.

dissolution of reality. Queer as such emerges on screen as an inexplicable, disorienting intrusion of the Real: we encounter the death drive as non-reproductive, self-destructive *jouissance*.

Though extreme in its portrayal, *Naked Lunch* is read with an antisocial bent towards the annihilation of rationality as departure from notions of stability or normalcy in a destabilising pursuit of pleasure.

Read through Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the fragmentary and transitory nature of the film – its oscillating between reality and paranoid fantasy – is the schizophrenic breakthrough of the schizo-subject: a world created - or visited - in the process of the self coming undone. In its embrace of queer in excess of reality and antithetic to social norms, *Naked Lunch* works to unravel the stability of such social organisation. So it goes that in the indeterminate, disorienting world of the film, designation as normal or abnormal collapses, as does reality and imagined possibility, so that we can not invest an existing logic to orient ourselves, but rather yield to the chaos and encounter queer only in our willingness to exterminate all rational thought.

Framed through Bill Lee's own homophobic logic, the film affirms queer as the monstrous and revels in all of its disturbing monikers: depravity, transgression, abjection. Its changing shape and composite forms ensure queer remains on the move, reformulating as the strange and stranger still, as impossible and endless permutations of desire. Rather than attempt to incorporate queer into the social order, however, the film amplifies its exclusion from this order, as that which disturbs and violates structures of meaning. Through the imaginative depictions of queer as distorted, abject forms, *Naked Lunch* employs the grotesque to 'destabilise what is

‘acceptable’ and ‘normal’ through an overdose, an excess, of the abnormal, the deviant, the abject.’⁸²

Before concluding my thoughts on this project, I take a moment to read T. Fleischmann’s personal essay, *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through*. Departing from the otherwise highly theoretical and generously abstract work of the thesis, this essay offers an experiential account of living outside of gender, of being ‘uninscribed by language.’⁸³ As such Fleischmann – or Clutch, as they refer to themselves throughout the essay – refuses to locate their gender or sexuality in language and rather revels in the uninscribed space of negation where identity is not fixed or coherent: the impossible self beyond discourse.

Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through then navigates identity as a shifting landscape and the trans body as one ‘that cannot be set, cannot be anchored in place.’⁸⁴ Following Clutch’s assertion that the transitioning body ages backwards, unable to be mapped along normative temporal logic, the narrative flows according to the spillages and detours of erotic time. It follows threads of desire that are multiple and multidirectional, and charts the milestones of queer self-formation as erotic encounters where the body erupts in excess of itself, reformulating anew. This essay offers an insight into living attuned to negation, phrased by Fleischmann as *insisting on absence*, where undifferentiated existence and the pursuit of desire are engaged as profound forms of resistance. The uninscribed, as Clutch remarks, ‘is a site of change’⁸⁵, an

⁸² Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (Routledge, 2013), p. 75.

⁸³ T. Fleischmann, *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through* (Coffee House Press, 2019), p. 64.

⁸⁴ Fleischmann, p.53.

⁸⁵ Fleischmann, p. 64.

unfixing that feels something like claiming power.⁸⁶ Framed through this narrative of embodiment is negation as a productive pursuit that allows for being that is not contingent on being-different.

These chapters are structured as such to approximate a developmental logic of queer antisociality within this thesis. Realising the contradiction apparent in this sentiment, where queer operates antithetical to coherence or progressive development, I have tried nonetheless to begin with language and build outward from there. In first articulating the asymmetry inherent in linguistic structure, the chapters that follow detail formations of this structural imbalance to show how an unyielding logic of sexual difference performs discursively, visually, or socially to codify identities and regulate reality. Attending these formations is my application of queer antisociality that likewise changes shape depending on the conceptual register it is working against. Each articulation of antisociality across these chapters is arranged to build on the one that preceded it, such that self-formation depends on social formation which depends on linguistic arrangement. So it goes that this structure is an effort to reconcile the varied conceptual threads of queer antisociality within what might resemble a coherent narrative structure.

As a final note to contextualise the ambitions of this project, at the time of writing this introduction, Donald Trump has just given his second inaugural speech confirming a legislated intolerance for queer and trans individuals. He made the following announcement:

This week, I will also end the government policy of trying to socially engineer race and gender into every aspect of public and private life. We will forge a society that is

⁸⁶ Fleischmann, p. 45.

colourblind and merit-based. As of today, it will henceforth be the official policy of the United States government that there are only two genders, male and female.⁸⁷

Though the political pendulum swings between progressive politics and the current horrors of the Trump administration, this executive order speaks to the persistent vulnerabilities of queer lives: to the fact that trans and queer personhood is contingent on contemporary rhetoric. It is therefore compulsory to continue formulating queer modes of resistance and generating thought that divests from structures of governance. This ambition is necessarily conceptual, practical, and political: an active collaboration that works across all forms of knowledge to imagine queer liberation. This work to articulate and apply antisociality as a conceptual rubric throughout this thesis is then an effort to think queerness outside of a punitive logic of sexual difference and to map antisociality as a strategy of resistance across different formulations of this logic. I do not suggest that this thesis will change the world, but it is recognition that the world needs changing. The following pages are an effort to do so: a small but hopeful contribution to this necessary work.

⁸⁷ 'Donald Trump's Second Inaugural Speech, Annotated', *The New York Times* (Jan 20 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/01/20/us/trump-inauguration-speech-annotated.html>, para.30.

Improper grammar: queering the textual body in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*

*I love this idea of using the flimsy tool we have (language) against
and around and into itself to move somehow past its limitations.¹*

Gertrude Stein's 1914 *Tender Buttons* presents a strange catalogue of items concerning 'Objects', 'Food', and 'Rooms'. The short poems—or portraits, as Stein refers to them—detail domestic space: the household objects one is likely to find, the events one is likely to do: eating, drinking, observing. Though recognisably domestic, the objects detailed throughout the text are stripped of their familiarity and assembled in an abstracted form. This chapter establishes a way of reading such form as queerly disorienting, or queerly resistant to taxonomies of language. The textual and temporal complexities of *Tender Buttons* articulate a tension that is central to, and sustained throughout, this thesis: that between language as an established system of signs and queer as resistant to such signs, queer as a symbolically disruptive force. It is with Sara Ahmed's suggestion from *Queer Phenomenology* in mind that I begin with the strangeness of the domestic in *Tender Buttons* to frame the disorienting nature of queer that this thesis charts and develops. In a way,

¹ Stacey Balkun, 'Some Notes on "Troubling the Line: Trans & Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics"', *The University of Arizona Poetry Center*, <https://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/some-notes-troubling-line-trans-genderqueer-poetry-poetics> [accessed 01/03/2023] (para 8)

writes Ahmed, ‘it might be a queer encounter with existential phenomenology that helps us rethink how disorientation might begin with the strangeness of familiar objects.’²

Following a mapping of queer along instances of strange and disorienting formulations of the domestic, I read the free-floating form and indeterminate meaning within *Tender Buttons* as a reshaping of the textual body aligned to queer, this is as a mobile way of being that operates outside of relational linguistic structures. In establishing how queer antagonises semiological structures, I extend this argument to structures of chronology to read the oscillatory movements and temporal arrest of Stein’s ‘continuous presence’ as queerly out of sync. This chapter does not designate a specific thing as queer and rather reads queer as that which thwarts designation. Queer as such appears throughout *Tender Buttons* as a persistent strangeness that works against structures of meaning. This strangeness is curated as odd pairings and paratactic musings - a ‘carriage cup in an ice-cream’³ - a collection of nonsensical descriptions that diverge in quick succession rendering ordinary household objects wholly *unordinary*. In reading attuned to the discursive gaps and inconsistencies of meaning throughout the text, this chapter posits a foundation for how to *read queerly*: queer not as a framework that adheres to a specific set of rules or defining characteristics, but recognising as queer the incomprehensible and inexact, and reading attuned to the absences that necessarily attend language.

Tender Buttons is placed as the first in a series of chapters in this thesis detailing examples or enactments of symbolic rupture as queer. This rupture is foremost semiotic precisely because reality and the structures of value therein are constructed by language. Queerness, as it is

² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006) p.162.

³ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Dover Publications, 1997), p. 38.

understood throughout this thesis, disrupts semiotic boundaries insofar as it can not be incorporated within them: queer is an *asymbolic* and mobile term that, as Lee Edelman suggests, can never be secured as a proper identity.⁴ Rather it is that which disturbs identity, queer is a catachresis for what can never be properly named:

Queerness as name may well reinforce the Symbolic order of naming, but it names what resists, as signifier, absorption into the Imaginary identity of the name.⁵

Insofar as queer resists recognition within a linguistic system of signs, it gestures at that which language cannot reach: the moments of incoherence and collapses of meaning that expose language as a limited conceptual tool. Queer as such appears in *Tender Buttons* as incomprehension, as that which stymies the production of meaning. Though queer disrupts language as a stable system of signs, however, words cannot be untethered from meaning, not entirely. Such is the scope and function of language according to structuralism. What occurs in *Tender Buttons*, then, is Stein's effort to reconcile the determined structure of language with her ambition to 'produce art in the tradition of the new.'⁶ She uses illogical phrasing and agrammatical syntax so that words and the images they conjure can be newly, and indeed strangely, perceived; Stein, like a watchful cook, 'ensures that language does not thicken, that it does not stick.'⁷ It is through this odd and incomprehensible writing that I establish language as a closed system of signs and queer as that which disturbs such a system.

⁴ Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022), p.xv.

⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004) p.27.

⁶ Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, 'Reconfiguring Identities in the Word and in the World: Naming Marginalised Subjects and Articulating Marginal Narratives in Early Canonical Works by Gertrude Stein', *South Central Review*. 31.2, (2014), 9–27, *ProQuest*, <http://ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reconfiguring-identities-word-world-naming/docview/1544525439/se-2>. [accessed 25/10/2022]. p.12.

⁷ Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 20.

When I discuss structuralism and the established pattern of language that Stein undermines throughout *Tender Buttons*, I am referring to the general architecture of semiotics according to Ferdinand de Saussure. In Saussure's theory of general linguistics, he posits that language functions according to a particular science of signs called semiology; 'semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.'⁸ The sign figures a relationship between the signifier as sound/image/word and the signified as the concept it conjures, or the symbol and its meaning. This generates a pattern of inter-related signs that form a chain of meaning: 'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.'⁹ Terms, then, do not exist in isolation and are instead determined in correlation to their counterpart. As Saussure remarks, the sign 'becomes a building block of oppositions'¹⁰:

Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences... A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas.'¹¹

These differences denote a hierarchy of positive and negative terms where the meaning of a term is developed in relation to what it is not, for example: man/woman, light/dark, good/bad, normal/abnormal. Our world is thus structured by and articulated through this linguistic system of difference. As Saussure claims, 'to be sure, the external world exists—but its reality remains quite nebulous until language articulates it.'¹² Within this structure of relation and delineation,

⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, 'Course in General Linguistics', *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* ed. Vincent B. Leitch, pp. 850–867, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) p. 851.

⁹ Saussure, p. 858.

¹⁰ Saussure p. 848.

¹¹ Saussure, p. 862.

¹² Saussure, p. 846.

heterosexuality functions as the centre from which other sexualities are defined oppositionally, and queer signifies the correlative abnormal to a standard of (hetero)normalcy. This rubric designates as queer that which is different or other, but it cannot locate the term with any specificity. Queer has no determined signified except as an *indeterminate* referent for that which is antithetic to the 'normal.' As a marker for something strange or unusual not necessarily pertaining to sexuality, queer operates in excess of a logic of sexual difference to name that which cannot properly be named. Queer as such does not simply refer to oppositional or alternative sexualities (though this is certainly encapsulated in its usage), but rather is a mobile and linguistically ungraspable concept - a *structurally antagonistic* concept. It is that, as Saussure remarks, which remains quite nebulous.

Tender Buttons offers a framework for beginning to think about queer in these terms: as a site that language can gesture at but can never fully reach. Through the odd assemblages of words and non-sequiturs within *Tender Buttons*, Stein refuses the logic and structure of linguistic architecture so that words might be newly interpreted, not stifled by typical linguistic construction but freed from its determinate structure; the opening of language to move in multiple, surprising directions that an established system of signs otherwise forecloses. As with this passage from 'Rooms', nonsensical descriptions foreclose comprehension:

A single speed, the reception of table linen, all the wonder of six little spoons, there is no exercise...No eye-glasses are rotten, no window is useless and yet if air will not come in there is a speech ready, there always is and there is no dimness, not a bit of it.¹³

Rather than form a coherent chain of meaning, Stein obstructs syntax so that the objects are disconnected, assembled as free-floating signs. This obstruction works to unsettle ordinary or

¹³ *Tender Buttons*, p. 45.

normative perception of the objects she details, and instead ensures that they are newly perceived. It is precisely this ambition to unsettle language as a fixed system of signs that informs and structures the pages of this thesis: in loosening the hold of language, we can begin to think beyond its limitations. It is beyond language as a limited system of knowledge that queerness dwells, in incomprehension and instability as an indeterminate, irreducible concept.

It is worth noting from the outset that language is not static and meaning shifts over time. Indeed, the shifting usage of queer to mark an oddity, a pejorative term, or as a reclaimed identity within LGBTQ communities, is a case in point of precisely this. Though, while semantic shifts have reoriented the usage and meaning of queer, the term remains curiously elusive, perpetually shifting alongside linguistic progression or degradation as that which remains unincorporated by language. The term cannot be recuperated within a system of signs (however ostensibly progressive this system might appear) because it remains trapped within a logic of difference, but also because queer names what is outside of sense so that, even when ‘sense’ changes shape, queer does too. This is the argument that Lee Edelman makes in *Bad Education*, characterising queer as something *strangely perceived*:

Primarily applied to something perceived as “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, queer can refer to anything that thwarts, contradicts, or departs from a norm. Even where its fluidity of reference, its resistance to taxonomic specificity, allows it to serve as a general rubric for nonnormative sexualities, queer so relentlessly challenges the boundaries of sexuality and normativity that no one can ever definitively succeed in escaping its connotative reach. Similarly, no one can fully secure it as a proper identity, either, insofar as it signifies diacritically in relation to a norm.¹⁴

Following Edelman, queer cannot be secured as a symbol or a signifier in its own right, except in relation to what is strange and *nonnormative*: a linguistic structure of difference invests queer as a

¹⁴ *Bad Education*, p. xv.

rubric for the ‘aberrant or atypical, to what chafes against normalisation’¹⁵ so that queer operates diacritically to what any given society conceives of as normal:

Queer adverts us to what ontology leaves out, if only by figuring—within that ontology—what that ontology excludes. It confronts us with a representation of what the Symbolic *posits* as nothing, as external to being or sense.¹⁶

Queer, in Edelman’s assessment, marks a limit point of comprehension precisely because we cannot articulate it *as something*. It designates *nothing* or the structural negation on which affirmation of a norm depends; like absence that works to affirm presence through contrast, queer marks the *nonsense* and *nonbeing* that necessarily attends to sense and being as their constitutive other. Conceptions of queer, then, only reach so far as linguistic structures will let them, as the negative correlative to whatever the social order recognises as positive. The structural limit of language on thought, as Edelman suggests, ‘is a limit that keeps us from thinking nothing, and so from thinking queerness.’¹⁷

Subsequent chapters expand Edelman’s thesis and more thoroughly engage queer and its relationship to the social order. However, my work that follows relies on first understanding how the relational structure of language positions queer as Other within the public imagination, but likewise how queer as a mobile, nebulous term antagonises language as a stable set of signs. Thinking nothing, or thinking queerness, as Edelman suggests, begins with a loosening of language: a picking at its foundational structure to reveal its cracks. It is in these cracks – the gaps,

¹⁵ *Bad Education*, 6.

¹⁶ *Bad Education*, p. xviii.

¹⁷ *Bad Education*, p. xviii.

inconsistencies, and lapses of meaning that attend to language – that queer appears as the *atypical* and *agrammatical*, as that which language can't quite hold firm. *Tender Buttons* revels in semiotic ruptures and moments of incoherence to expose these very gaps, to potentiate new routes for meaning and interpretation to develop outside of prescriptive linguistic regimes. Where the determinate structure of language works to affirm a hierarchy of terms, the playful configurations and nonsensical assemblages of words throughout *Tender Buttons* deny this determined logic and render language newly and unconventionally open to possibility. Stein ensures that the relational patterns on which language is constructed are obscured by confused pairings wherein 'no eye-glasses are rotten'¹⁸ and 'a shawl is a hat and a red balloon.'¹⁹ As such, the text meditates on language as an established system of signs and the extent to which this system can be manipulated and stretched to the limits of comprehension - and indeed beyond. This 'stretch', that is the malleability and plasticity of language, occurs to differing extents within the text, and the resultant phrasing occupies space between tenuous relation and utter obscurity. In her manipulations of language, Stein demarcates a limit between meaning and meaninglessness, a fading in and out of discursive efficacy.

The lack of punctuation, incomprehensible descriptions, and confused imagery throughout *Tender Buttons* possesses an incoherence that resembles Carla Freccero's assertion that

Queer can be a grammatical perversion, a misplaced pronoun, the wrong proper name; it is what is strange, odd, funny, not quite right, improper. Queer is what is and is not there, what disaggregates the coherence of the norm from the very beginning and is ignored in the force to make sense out of the unintelligibilities of grammar and syntax.²⁰

¹⁸ *Tender Buttons*, 45.

¹⁹ *Tender Buttons*, p. 16.

²⁰ Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Duke University Press, 2006), p.18.

For example, in this obscure vignette from ‘Objects’, Stein denies a logical pattern of development or grammatical structure in favour of fleeting, disconnected signs so that the associative link we might attempt to make between the objects she details, or the image that we might try to conjure, is obstructed by the rapid pace at which the subject changes. Stein gestures at meaning, indeed the words she uses make sense on their own, but the sentences in which they are placed insist that this meaning is always deferred or never resolved:

The change of colour is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable./Callous is something that hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men. Does this change. It shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume.²¹

Where words would usually be arranged in a pattern of interrelated signs that form a chain of meaning, Stein’s fragmented syntax interrupts this pattern so that no such meaning can be reached. As Marjorie Perloff suggests, ‘Gertrude Stein’s rejection of the traditional representational model is a rejection of *meaning* itself and *Tender Buttons* is intentionally non-referential.’²² The free-floating and indeterminate signifieds throughout *Tender Buttons* instead exemplify the polymorphous potential of language, as well as the ability of the signifier to develop in unexpected ways. Such that the production of meaning is carefully constructed through semiotic ordering, the absence of structure within the text enables new modes of thinking beyond strict convention and renders language newly accessible to interrogation. As Julie Godspeed Chadwick writes of Stein, ‘she is not inventing a new language or new objects but new ways of seeing them.’²³ This ‘new way of seeing things’ can be otherwise phrased as an effort to unsettle linguistic efficacy and the imbalanced constructions it upholds. This perhaps seems a leap, but the logic follows that

²¹ *Tender Buttons*, p.3.

²² Marjorie Perloff, ‘Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, XXXII:2, pp.137-154 (1996) <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1093/fmls/XXXII.2.137>, p. 137.

²³ Goodspeed-Chadwick, p.18.

language, such that it constructs and maintains meaning, need be newly configured (or disfigured, as it were) to begin thinking beyond its prescriptive scope. It is beyond the structural limits of language, as Edelman suggests, that we can begin to think queerness, and *Tender Buttons* offers a way of doing so. Aligned with this statement from Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, the following pages read *Tender Buttons* as a departure from linguistic convention, and from the constructions it upholds:

The essays are queer ones. Their angle of approach is directed, not at reconfirming the self evidence and “naturalness” of heterosexual identity and desire, but rather at rendering those culturally central, apparently monolithic constructions newly accessible to analysis and interrogation.²⁴

My reading of *Tender Buttons* as queerly destabilising linguistic efficacy is situated within a field of Stein scholarship that illustrates the interpretive potential of this text and solidifies the claim that ‘*Tender Buttons* has yet to be assimilated, in that, because of the obscurity of Stein’s language, it remains a challenge even for the greatest champions of artistic abstraction.’²⁵ In her piece ‘Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness’, Sara J. Ford²⁶ makes the argument that Stein’s work should not be pinned down according to a singular interpretation, and should instead be read attuned to the multitudes contained within; the feminist and queer subtext, the meanings encoded in metaphor, and *Tender Buttons* as a kind of literary cubism.

²⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1998) p.9.

²⁵ Jeremy Colangelo, ‘Tactics of Swelling: alterity and the room in ‘Tender Buttons’ in *Textual Practice*, 36.8, pp.1374–1392, (2022), [doi:/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900361](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900361) p. 1375.

²⁶ As well noted in Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) p.76.

My reading of the text upholds Ford's invocation to think laterally, to examine the work as multi-faceted, and as not neatly confined to a singular reading. I then want to consider three elements at play within *Tender Buttons*: firstly, how the text illuminates a tension between linguistic limits and Stein's ambition to create writing anew. This ambition is inexplicably tied to Stein's queerness insofar as her efforts to escape the rigidity of language –and language as a tool through which determinate selves are produced– is shared across person and text. Secondly, I look to *Tender Buttons* as a kind of queer poetics that orients our thinking attuned to the destabilising and disorienting nature of queerness. The third component of this textual nexus is temporality, specifically Stein's manipulation of time within *Tender Buttons* to create her 'continuous present'.

Ford's analysis of *Tender Buttons* likewise begins with the function of language to determine reality in accordance with a rigid and structured linguistic system:

Throughout the entire text of *Tender Buttons*, the words "arrangement," "order," and "system" recur regularly, emphasising language's rigid structure and its inability to create an unnecessarily rigid experience of the world. Language is neither "ordinary" nor "unordered"; it does not, because it is a structured system of arrangement, "resemble" the world of reality but, rather, determines it.²⁷

On the point of sexuality is where Ford and my own attentions diverge. She claims that 'any element of the writer's consciousness, including notions of sexuality, would be both created and discovered through the conscious wearing of language's structures.'²⁸ My own reading is more interested in the ways that Stein's language stifles this discovery; confines it to a determined set of terms and structures. How instead *Tender Buttons* articulates the incompatibility of language's

²⁷ Sara J. Ford, 'Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness', Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1099403>. [accessed 17 October 2022], p.56.

²⁸ Ford, p. 63,

structure with queerness as a shifting, indefinable, and evasive concept that occludes definitional precision, and certainly evades the logic of language's systematic orderings. As Ford suggests,

Stein suggests that the syntax of language creates a prison, a prison of formulated thought. Language necessarily defines things relationally, necessarily classifies, and therefore necessarily determines, and it was this fact that Stein set out to foreground and emphasise in *Tender Buttons*.²⁹

Tender Buttons illustrates the paradox, and indeed the hardship, that arises between language as both the system that affirms a linguistic center, and the tool with which to escape it. As Stein poses in *Tender Buttons*, the text is an invitation to ask 'what is the custom? The custom is in the centre.'³⁰ And to act as if 'there is no use in a centre.'³¹

Queer poetics

My reading of *Tender Buttons* is as a kind of queer poetics where the destabilising and disorienting nature of queer is built into the structure of these portraits: the form itself is queer. This is to say that linguistic efficacy is perpetually underscored by senselessness and incoherence to articulate (and emphasise) the sign not as static and singular, but unstable and fluid. *Tender Buttons* here figures a framework with which to map queerness as semiotic rupture; to map queerness as the negative or conceptual no-space where language does not obtain.

Insofar as writing negativity - or writing the no-thing outside of language's grasp - is an impossible task, this poetics is gestural; it necessarily uses language to signal the gaps and spaces where language cannot reach, or where its scope and efficacy fails; it articulates a strangeness and uncertainty, the something not-quite-right of queerness as an unrepresentable structural absence

²⁹ Ford, p. 56.

³⁰ *Tender Buttons*, p. 26.

³¹ *Tender Buttons*, p. 43.

underpinning language. What I propose here through Stein, then, is a preparatory hermeneutic through which to read as queer the gaps and incoherences in language where meaning collapses. As the thesis progresses these instances of incoherence change shape as each chapter attends to a different articulation of semiotic or Symbolic rupture. What remains true of each chapter, however, is that queerness shows itself primarily and consistently as a failing system of signs, and reading attuned to this failure is the foundation on which subsequent readings depend.

As writing that floats between meaning and meaninglessness, the portraits throughout *Tender Buttons* occupy what Julia Horncastle calls in relation to poetry a ‘threshold space.’ Horncastle frames this threshold space as queerly reorienting or queerly transformative because of its potential to radically change one’s perception:

Threshold space, one that I cast as a knowledge threshold in which one’s understanding of phenomena (such as selfhood or the arts of living queerly) are radically changed. This also ties into what I call queer self-transformativity.³²

This threshold space illuminates what is absent or outside of language. Not by attempting to incorporate this absence into language by naming it, but by orienting us towards what might exist beyond the edge of language. This is how I want to begin thinking about Stein’s work: as a poetics that occupies the threshold of language, and it is through thinking beyond what is written or what is known that orients us towards queerness. Beyond this cusp of the legible is queer as *illegible*, as that which can’t be incorporated into knowledge.

In describing Stein’s poetics within his 2022 piece ‘Stein and the Concern of Poetry’, Adam R. Rosenthal similarly draws attention to the way Stein uses or frames language to call attention to

³²Julia Horncastle, ‘Queer Orientation: Selfhood and poetics’ in *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23.6, pp. 903–920, (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903298714>, p. 904.

the absences that attend language, the way she gestures to an eerie presence of what remains unsaid or ungraspable:

Poetry, it is worth noting, remains strange...It remains strange, however, no longer as worldly vestige of divine source—as vatic vision or voice of nature—but as the strangeness of being itself, as only the most extreme proximity to language’s ungraspability allows us to experience....Poetry brings forth the strangeness of language by giving the name in its non-presence, by bringing to presence its non-presence.³³

This strangeness that Rosenthal registers in Stein’s work is inextricably tied to my sense of her work as queer: queer as that which unsettles and makes strange – as that which can’t quite be grasped or can’t quite be articulated. In *Tender Buttons* this is most evident through the way ordinary domestic objects are obscured so that their familiarity grows increasingly tenuous. As Horncastle goes on to say of poetry’s ability to surprise us:

A ‘surprising communication’ is the threshold moment that results precisely because the putatively familiar (heteronormative or normative) is viewed obliquely, oddly, differently (queerly), and this appears to be strange—it requires orienting.³⁴

Stein’s linguistic experimentalism throughout *Tender Buttons* refigures the home, a realm typically associated with femininity, and a site of unequal gender relations³⁵, as queerly strange. The household objects undergo a process of *decoding* and *recoding* according to Stein’s relationship to the domestic, according to her ability to reframe and remap domestic properties in

³³ Adam R. Rosenthal, ‘Stein and the Concern of Poetry’ in *Poetics and the Gift: Reading Poetry from Homer to Derrida*, pp. 121–26. *JSTOR*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022)
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2dd47mx.12>. [Accessed 23 Feb. 2023] p.122.

³⁴ Horncastle, p.906.

³⁵ Rachael M. Scicluna, ‘Beyond Kitchen Walls: Queering Domestic Place through Memory and Storytelling in *Queering the Interior*’, ed. Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p.82.

unconventional ways. Take, for example, this commentary on celery from the ‘Foods’ section of *Tender Buttons*:

Celery tastes tastes where in curled lashes and little bits and mostly in remnants. A green acre is selfish and so pure and so enlivened.³⁶

‘Curled lashes’ likely refers to the stringy, rogue parts of a stick of celery, and ‘mostly in remnants’ meaning the traces of celery within a dish and, of course, the colour a bright green. The quick shift to ‘A green acre’ changes the perspective from celery as singular and supplementary to abundant and enlivened. The subject remains the same, but the image conjured morphs at a rapid pace. This passage engenders a new perspective so that we are made to consider celery anew, as though for the first time. Though, more to the point, Stein’s writing unsettles our typical sense of celery –something so mundane and acceptable in its truth as a vegetable (and not a particularly exciting vegetable) – becomes tenuous. Experimentation with language for Stein, writes Hyunjung Kim, ‘was not only about subverting every word in its meaning, but about rerouting our ways of confronting the world with different relational modes.’³⁷ Though this rerouting is firmly situated in the domestic throughout *Tender Buttons*, the logic that informs it (that linguistic structures must be necessarily abandoned to enable thought beyond them) is exactly the sentiment of the queer project: to potentiate new ways of thinking that confront what is ordinary, or what is taken for granted as normal, and confuse it.

In refiguring domestic properties so that they are conveyed in new and interesting ways, *Tender Buttons* performs what Matt Cook and Andrew Gorman-Murray describe as the act of ‘queering

³⁶ *Tender Buttons*, p.34.

³⁷ Hyunjung Kim, ‘Loving was almost always listening’: Sensory collaboration and modes of relation in Gertrude Stein’s literary portraits’, *Literature Compass*, 18:6 (2021) 243-262 <https://doi/10.1111/lic3.12639>, p.257.

the home’, that is to take the familiar and look at what makes it strange.³⁸ It is not surprising that Stein takes aim at the domestic space to subvert its gendered associations, but beyond unhelpful associations between the domestic and the feminine, the home is the domain of the personal and private. As such the domestic throughout *Tender Buttons* is saturated with remnants of the self: the household objects are charged and coded with Stein’s lesbian desire. As Kathryn R. Kent remarks,

Stein creates an erotics of writing where her (at times) seemingly nonsensical combinations of words, her rhythmic sentences and paragraphs are, by metaphoric connection, also sexual/textual manipulations of the female body. Writing becomes an explicitly sexual act, a way of giving pleasure to the “her” of “tend her.”³⁹

As Kent suggests, the nonsensical descriptions throughout *Tender Buttons* are infused with a coded eroticism. At times discrete and difficult to locate, and at others rather obvious (‘The sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise?’), there is a libidinal energy that permeates the text. As with this remark from ‘Foods’, lesbian desire is couched in entendres that ensure its meaning is simultaneously visible and concealed:

Alas, alas the pull alas the bell alas the couch in china, alas the little put in leaf alas the wedding butter meat, alas the receptacle, alas the back shape of mussel, mussel and soda.⁴⁰

Kent suggests we might read ‘alas’ as ‘Alice’ - or ‘a lass’ or ‘all ass’⁴¹. Noting the use of both feminised and sexual terms ‘receptacle’ and ‘wedding butter meat’, this passage reads to me as a euphemism for oral sex – helped by the imagery of a mussel, both tongue and yonic-like in its appearance. The absurd phrasing ensures that we can only speculate at meaning and refuses a

³⁸ Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook, *Queering the Interior* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) p.3.

³⁹ Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 151

⁴⁰ *Tender Buttons*, p.34.

⁴¹ Kent, p.162.

definitive reading of sexual desire within the work. As a kind of erotic hermeneutic, or queer poetics, then, Stein articulates desire as indeterminate phrasing that cannot be secured as an erotic gesture, but likewise cannot be dismissed as sterile, either. The ambiguous and gestural quality of her writing queers the textual body to ensure it cannot be interpreted with any surety, but rather floats between meaning and meaninglessness. As Kent remarks, ‘in listing and obliquely describing or signifying on the domestic sphere, Stein is generating an alternative taxonomy of libidinal and cultural possibilities, a catalogue of pleasures and perversions.’⁴²

Not only is the text infused with this gestural, coded lesbian desire, but also with the imperative to hide this desire, to couch it within ambiguous phrasing. The material objects, then, in Stein’s treatment, signal what is to be found in the home, but also what is to be hidden and obscured; the potential for the signifier to say and not-say, to have multiple avenues of meaning. This is how I propose locating queer desire moving forward: not as a confirmed or obvious eroticism, but as unstable phrasing that speaks precisely through what is not said. This is to say phrasing that does not try to recuperate queerness within a linguistic structure, but unsettles this structure and allows for interpretive potential aligned with queer as manifold formulations and permutations of desire.

The queered (textual) body

By way of a relationship between the sexual and textual within *Tender Buttons*, we see that Stein cannot abandon language – lest she write in gibberish. She can, however, manipulate and obscure linguistic structure, reappropriate it so as to simultaneously work within an established system of signs and transgress its conventions. It is this same ambivalence that characterises the

⁴² Kent, p. 164.

(unofficial) marriage of Stein and Alice B. Toklas; she reworks the relational archetype of husband and wife, man and woman, according to her same-sex relationship. By way of example, detailed in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, is how Stein and Toklas replicate the seating custom of visiting husbands and wives to 27 Rue de Fleurus: ‘the geniuses came and talked to Gertrude Stein and the wives sat with me.’⁴³

Here in her life as in her work, Stein queerly reorients what is custom; she adheres to a structure of husbands (or geniuses, as it were) and their wives in such a way that simultaneously affirms this custom and challenges its boundaries; the scope of its meaning is changed. In similar fashion, Stein abstracts gendered norms, particularly by way of her ‘extraordinarily masculine,’⁴⁴ dress code — made up of a boxy suit and vest, a bow tie, and a bowler hat. In detailing the attire of Gertrude Stein in his book *So Famous and So Gay*, Jeff Soloman asks ‘is this drag?’ The response to which is firmly no: ‘Stein did not sport a costume but wore masculine clothes.’⁴⁵ The gendered body and gendered clothing as signifiers are productively unsettled by Stein’s dress code, by her *masculine feminine*. Stein’s body figures a palimpsest to be read not as a singular text, but as faceted, overlaid with contradictory signifiers; qualifiers that signal personhood and embodied experience as not neatly categorised by a singular identity marker. It is this same ambition to rework, or *queer*, what is custom that is textualised as abstraction and nonsensicalness throughout *Tender Buttons*.

My point is that the self in excess of relational models (here gendered, sexual) translates as semantic disorder within *Tender Buttons* as abstractions, ambiguity, distortion, multiplicity⁴⁶ - as a

⁴³ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 87.

⁴⁴ Jeff Soloman, *So Famous and So Gay: The Fabulous Potency of Truman Capote and Gertrude Stein* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 127.

⁴⁵ Soloman, p.128.

⁴⁶ Perloff, p.138.

loosened bond between the sign and its signified. The free-floating, unstructured form of *Tender Buttons* articulates the textual body as perpetually reformulating in surprising, unconventional ways. Through discursive spillages and excesses of meaning, this reconstituted language insists on reading attuned to difference, attuned to the imaginative scope beyond convention or linguistic structure. As Tram Nguyen writes, ‘with the orderly and grammatical ground of language destabilised, Stein is able to provoke difference into being.’⁴⁷ This difference that Stein provokes - this reading or perceiving otherwise that she engenders - is a queer reorienting, or *disorienting*, as it were. *Tender Buttons* is thus not just an object to be examined as queer, but a tool through which to think queerly.

Reading as I have done across Stein’s life and her textualisations, I mean my use of the term queer to both encapsulate and exceed its function as an identity framework: ‘Queerness is poetic as much as it is sexual.’⁴⁸ I mean queer not just as antithetic to what is normative, but as that which destabilises the structure on which the normative/antinormative dichotomy rests. Queer as an unstable, shifting collection of drives and erotic energies, both heuristic and aesthetic. Queer, then, operates differently to the determinate qualifier ‘lesbian’ often used to signal Stein’s long-standing partnership with Alice B. Toklas. The difference is best explained, I think, in relation to person and text. I detailed above the shared unconventionalities between Stein the person and her writing; as a subversion or reworking of established practice, and as the palimpsestic layering of signifiers that clash and contradict. But, more than this, queerness occurs in *Tender Buttons* in excess of coded lesbian desire, but in the unstable slippages where meaning fails; in the weak borders of

⁴⁷ Nguyen, Tram, POROSITIES: Aesthetic Correlations between Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett in *Samuel Beckett Today*, 25, pp. 45–57, (2013) *ProQuest*, <http://ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/porosities-aesthetic-correlations-between/docview/1505351217/se-2>. p.47.

⁴⁸ Stephen Guy-Bray, *Shakespeare and Queer Representation* (Routledge, 2020), p.14.

coherence and obscurity, or sense and senselessness. So, whereas Stein's masculine dress and same sex relationship might be read as queer and inform a reading of *Tender Buttons* as such, the text expands this rubric and offers a way of reading beyond the object-as-queer in favour of reading queerly. Not to locate queerness as a specific thing, but as instances that refuse designation or specificity.

There is a hardship or a doubleness to this insofar as to register Stein's work as queer relies on an established sense, or a theoretical base of locating queerness. A queer reading of a queer text. Though my work speaks to queer as the incomprehensible within *Tender Buttons*, there are specific textual transgressions that contribute to this sense, indeed ones that scholars and critics of Stein's work have identified as queer. I want to show, by way of example, the difference in reading queerness into the text, and in reading the text as queer. For example, Brendan C. Gillot in his writing on the non-comprehensible in Gertrude Stein, writes that

Decentralisation is certainly a key dynamic in Stein's book; there is a lot that is decentered here, from standard grammatical structures, to the normative rules of realist representation, to the 'authority' of the authorial voice itself.⁴⁹

Decentralisation and the omission of a stable linguistic centre certainly contribute to a decided sense of *Tender Buttons* as a queer text. This is particularly true of the exclusion of a masculine centre within *Tender Buttons*. It follows that if the linguistic structure posited by Saussure dictates a masculine/feminine binary in which masculinity functions as the positive hierarchised term, this masculine primary referent is inverted by the abundance of feminine-coded descriptors/descriptions throughout the text. The home, foods, décor, and the 'inside' detailed

⁴⁹ Brendan C. Gillott, 'Random Poetry?: Reading chance, randomness and the non-comprehensible in Gertrude Stein and John Cage' in *Textual Practice*, 34:11 (2020), 1865–1883, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1080/0950236X.2019.1655473>, p. 1871.

throughout occupy an ostensible position belonging to the feminine – homemaker, cook, domestic. (This is not to say that Stein subscribed to such logic that the realm of the domestic belongs exclusively to women - but it is to say that she consciously denied a logic of male dominance). For example, this short passage from ‘Rooms’ illustrates the conscious interplay of masculine/feminised terms such that the masculine terms are consistently underscored by, or couched in, the domestic or ‘feminine’ phrasing - really to the point of obscurity:

Something that is an erection is that which stands and feeds and silences a tin which is swelling. This makes no diversion that is to say what can please exaltation, that which is cooking.⁵⁰

An erection, more or less decidedly masculine, is underscored by the return to the domestic. The subject shifts to cooking, to what can please exaltation, rather than exaltation itself. Insofar as locating queerness within the text, this deferral - consistent as it is throughout *Tender Buttons* - back to a feminised referent could be, indeed has been, read in relation to Stein’s lesbianism. As Lillian Faderman suggests, Stein understood that depictions of lesbian relationships ‘was *inaccrochable* unless she could disguise it. She was determined to tell the truth, but willing to compromise enough to tell it slant.’⁵¹

Beyond reading this inverted hierarchy of masculine/feminine as lesbian-coded camouflage, we might look instead, or read attuned instead, to notions of a linguistic structure altogether. To the way words are incorporated into meaning - including my own sense above of feminised terms - to understand the text not as queer in content, but in form; form that works against convention

⁵⁰ *Tender Buttons*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (William Morrow, 1981) p. 405.

and is queerly disorienting. It is such form that calls attention to itself and gestures at its own limits that queerly orients the pages of *Tender Buttons*.

Writing on Stein in her 2020 critical text *No Modernism Without Lesbians*, Diana Souhami includes a remark from the composer Virgil Thomson regarding Stein: ‘the two things you never asked Gertrude, ever, were about her being a lesbian and what her writing meant.’⁵² Souhami continues to describe Stein’s typical response to these questions, were someone courageous enough to ask them. In the first instance, her response was a suitable ‘none of their business’, and to the latter a more pronounced ‘Twentieth-century literature *is* Gertrude Stein’⁵³, apparently said without irony. This is useful for framing Stein’s relationship to her homosexuality as well as her relationship to writing, and of course the relationship between these two things. If we read *Tender Buttons* conscious of Stein’s lesbianism as ‘none of our business’, there is less imperative to read this sexuality into the text - to decipher coded sexual allegory within her work. What her remark that ‘Twentieth-century literature *is* Gertrude Stein’ importantly implies, however, is her ambition to create writing anew. To disrupt and rework literature and this sense of disruption is, in my assessment, what qualifies *Tender Buttons*’ queerness. As Souhami goes on to say of Stein,

To be lesbian was to differ from the mainstream, slough off the directives of fathers and depart from nineteenth-century thinking, but in her lifestyle, apart from her and Alice both being women, she did not want to change the recognised values of harmonious married life. It was in art and literature that she departed from patriarchal ideas, dogmas and past conventions of style and content, left behind old ways of seeing and saying, forged new ways of expression and took credit as the mother and father of modernism.⁵⁴

⁵² Diana Souhami, *No Modernism Without Lesbians* (Head of Zeus Ltd, 2020) p. 295.

⁵³ Souhami, p. 295.

⁵⁴ Souhami, pp. 297–8.

It speaks to the fraught definitional imprecision of queer that it is often used to signal unconventional sexual attraction (and this has borne some compelling readings of Stein's oeuvre) but queer here is found in excess of sexual attraction, it is instead located in this ambition to forge new ways of expression - to gesture at the limits of representation and cast doubt over convention and 'old ways of seeing'. Phrased otherwise, Rosenthal describes this same ambition in relation to Stein's poetics in the following passage:

To understand what she herself had done in writing *Tender Buttons*, one must therefore first of all understand that the essential function of poetry, for Stein, writing in English in the twentieth century, could no longer merely be to *give* the names for things, nor even to give these things *new* names...poetry did not simply give any more, but engaged in the presentation of things as the things that they are –which is to say, the re-presentation of the thing in non-representative fashion, no longer through the name-signifier, but so many disruptive processes of material repetition or nominative abstraction.⁵⁵

This disruption is inextricably tied to the signifier as a limited (and limiting) apparatus. Through this nominative abstraction and non-representative fashion that occurs throughout *Tender Buttons*, Stein makes strange or tenuous the link between the thing being named and the image being conjured. By abstracting familiar objects, Stein interrupts the familiar associative link between sign and signifier and so the relationship between the two grows tenuous. Though, importantly, this relationship is not untenable. Instead there is an element of similitude, of difficult associative links that force the reader to expand their thinking - to consider different modes of relationality. It allows not that words are newly conceived, as Rosenthal suggests, but newly perceived. Though Rosenthal and Souhami don't articulate this as queer, it is my reading that this queerly undermines modes of signification that are referential, hierarchical, and heavily focused on the signified⁵⁶ and thus 'embraces the unintelligibility and nonsensicalness ascribed

⁵⁵ Rosenthal, p.123.

⁵⁶ Dekoven, p. xiii.

to the queer (or to the queer text) and pushes it to its limits.’⁵⁷ *Tender Buttons* undermines the power of language as a determining force, precisely through the use of language that is indeterminate. In refusing the singularity of the signifier, *Tender Buttons* adheres to the description of a queer text provided by Teresa De Lauretis:

A queer text carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex...Sexuality as an unmanageable excess of affect that can find textual expression only in a figural, oracular language.⁵⁸

Such that the limiting effect of language proscribes sexuality, this figural language evades such proscription as that which otherwise cannot be named. Not just same-sex attraction, but the elusive quality of queerness, that which ruptures a sense of coherence and disorients accordingly. It denotes a principle of opposition. Queer is the pervasive energy which encapsulates and exceeds sex, and makes strange the familiar. It perhaps seems a leap to say that the obscure description within *Tender Buttons* can be extended to personhood, but it is the broader ambition of this thesis to extend the polymorphous potential of language that *Tender Buttons* articulates to personhood and subjectivities. As Sara J Ford writes,

Language controls perception according to its own conventions—conventions which value certain elements of reality while ignoring and effectively erasing others. We are determined and situated as soon as we begin to access the world and to place ourselves in it through language. Selves in the world, according to this model, are linguistically determined.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Daniela Miranda, ‘The Queer Temporality of Gertrude Stein’s Continuous Present’ in *Gender Forum*, 54, (2015), n.p.

⁵⁸ Teresa De Lauretis, ‘Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future’ in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17:2-3, 2011, pp. 243–263, Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/437427, p. 244.

⁵⁹ Ford, p.45.

Language as a determining device, as Ford suggests, depends on a linguistic structure that is relational and hierarchical, and it is this very structure that *Tender Buttons* disrupts. In establishing a way of reading attuned to the gestural and abstract as queer, we begin thinking about language as a fixed system of signs, and queer as that which disturbs or unsettles this fixedness.

Queer temporality and Stein's continuous present

Linguistic structure depends on a pattern of successive development or progression where the signifier engages a chain of meaning. As Saussure notes of the signifier/signified relationship,

Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain. This feature becomes readily apparent when they are represented in writing and the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time.⁶⁰

In *Tender Buttons* this successive chain is interrupted by repetition and the pairing of signifiers that clash or contradict so that the production of meaning is consistently arrested or forestalled. As with the following passage, we erratically jump from one nonsensical image to another; there is no sense of development so much as there is a collection of disconnected moments:

Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger, please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel faces.⁶¹

This linguistic abstraction is then also a temporal one insofar as time, as it depends on sequence and on a sense of systematic development, is necessarily tied to language as the tool through which this sequential nature is enacted. As Lacan remarks, 'the question of the temporal constitution of human action is inseparable from that of the relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary.'⁶² In queerly disrupting linguistic progression, Stein's agrammaticality throughout

⁶⁰ Saussure, p. 855.

⁶¹ *Tender Buttons*, p.38.

⁶² Jacques Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. by Bruce Fink (Polity Press, 2013), p. 29-30.

Tender Buttons also queerly abstracts time so that it is not developmental or ordered, but fleeting, immediate, and forestalled.

Temporal abstraction is a key feature of queerness, and indeed a key feature of this thesis. Queer time, the argument goes, is markedly different from normative, structurally coherent time. As queer persons do not adhere to the cultural script of development measured in heterosexual milestones, queer time is markedly different from, or outside of, normative, linear, and structurally coherent time. It is non-teleological and inconsistent, forestalled and erratic. For the queer individual, there is no straightforward trajectory measured in heteronormative milestones: romance between a man and a woman, marriage, reproduction. Therefore queer registers a kind of discontinuity or arrested development. As Leah Lynch writes,

It is in the turn of the twentieth century in particular that same-sex desire, through sexological and Freudian reworking, becomes characterised by a queer ‘backwards’ relationship to the temporal: queer corporeality is deemed out of sync with the (normative) life narrative.⁶³

Queer defies the progressive logic of time and instead names what is untimely or what is *backwards*. But it is also the case that queerness disorients temporally because language as a stable conceptual rubric fails to account for queerness; queer is that which is elusive and unregulated and cannot be ordered according to a linguistic schematic. Indeed I have discussed queer as that which ruptures such a schematic. As such, ‘Stein’s agrammaticality acts as a direct attack on linear temporality since temporal structure is usually maintained through the linear sequence of grammar.’⁶⁴ Stein’s structural idiosyncrasies fracture this linear sequence. If the sequential pattern

⁶³ Leah Lynch, ‘Intemperate time: Queer(ing) temporality and narrative in *Nightwood* in *Women’s Studies Journal*, 33:½, pp. 84–102, (2019) <http://ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/intemperate-time-queer-ing-temporality-narrative/docview/2326846821/se-2> [accessed 22/11.2022] p.85.

⁶⁴ Miranda, n.p.

of meaning is obscured by ambiguity, nonsensicalness, or indeterminacy, then time is likewise muddled by queer as that which disrupts this pattern of meaning. The text enacts, through its agrammaticality and syntactic discontinuities, the antagonistic force that Edelman describes as

a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning... something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance.⁶⁵

The collection of brief, fleeting descriptions throughout the text decontextualizes the immediate moment from those occurring either previously or after and interrupts successive/referential ordering to the effect that it ‘disrupts modes of signification that are linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical, sensible, coherent, referential, and heavily focused on the signified.’⁶⁶ The abrupt departure from one thought to another - the syntactic discontinuities within the text—reads as an interruption so that each thought enacts a kind of detour, ensuring that the specific moment being detailed is cut off from, or a fragment of, the larger whole. The reader remains perpetually in the current moment, disconnected from the previous section and with no sense of what follows. Robert Bartlett Haas, editor of Stein’s previously uncollected writings, *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*, aligns Stein’s attention to the present with the exciting moment of the early twentieth century:

The vivid texture of *the present* became her “content”, and the *prolonged* or *continuous present* became her compositional device... The structure of her language was intended to correspond to the structure of the dynamic events she was describing. In this way she felt she could give expression to what she considered the character of her own epoch: “a space of time filled with moving.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Bad Education*, p. xvi.

⁶⁶ Marriane DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. xiii.

⁶⁷ Gertrude Stein, *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb: Volume 1 of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Robert Bartlett Haas (Black Sparrow Press, 1975), pp.vii - viii.

This fixation on the immediacy of the present is a technique Stein refers to as the ‘continuous present.’ It figures the kind of temporal arrest common to queer narratives; a whirling, folding, encircling, rather than a linear or successive ordering. Kate Haffey explains that

The ‘continuous present’ is formed by the mind telling what it knows in the present, without relying on past knowledge or memory. This includes the attempt to empty even words and sentences of their prior histories, to use them in ways that defamiliarize their former meanings and connotations.⁶⁸

And so it goes throughout *Tender Buttons* that the words circle in on themselves, oscillating between sense and senselessness. As with this moment from ‘Foods’:

A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no, a no since a no since, a no since, a no since.⁶⁹

The recurring refrain, ‘a no since when’ folds-in and overlaps, the words hang suspended without relief, blurring demarcations which might inform interpretation; as the words ‘a no since when’ repeat and redouble, each iteration seems less sensical than the last. This repetition, to borrow a phrase from Maurice Blanchot, ‘is not a repetition of the same.’⁷⁰ It divides and diverges, it seeks its own erasure; it is self-consuming and eludes the possibility of unity or totality. This is to say it exemplifies the slippery quality of language and the mobility of the signifier to develop in unexpected ways. Blanchot similarly ascribes the inexplicable quality I discuss in relation to queerness to the disaster. The disaster, for Blanchot, is the incomprehensible event that cannot be rationalised through language; it is exempt from, and insurmountable to, description. It is outside of language. As such, he notes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, that ‘it repeats, but not anything; it

⁶⁸ Kate Haffey, ‘Pure Child: The Temporality of Childishness in Sedgwick and Stein’ in *Literary Modernism, Queer Temporality: Eddies in Time*, pp.145-182, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p.159.

⁶⁹ *Tender Buttons*. p. 38

⁷⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press; 1980), p. x.

is the recurrence of no occurrence (it is outside phenomena, of experience).⁷¹ The rapture of the disaster according to Blanchot shares in my sense of queer as an impossible nothing precisely as one cannot describe nothing; it eludes and evades. Queer is not just the antithesis of straight, but the persistent negative force that threatens totality and cannot be articulated. It is that which promises not instability (the opposite of fixity) so much as disarray, confusion.⁷²

To return to Sedgwick, she remarks on the occurrence of queerness thus,

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The immaterial current that queer represents is antiseperatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange.⁷³

The remark that queer is *both relational and strange* rings true when reading *Tender Buttons*. An unsettling feature of this text (and indeed the most *troublant*) is the uncanny space it occupies between understanding and utter obscurity: the thickening sense of eeriness as words float from familiarity. The words, recognisable enough to the common reader, grow increasingly estranged from fixed meaning as they are repeated and repurposed: in this way they are both *relational and strange*. Take the opening line of *Tender Buttons*, for example:

A carafe, that is a blind glass

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt colour and arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.⁷⁴

Though the associative link between sign and signifier is tenuous here, it is importantly not untenable: the carafe functions as the primary referent in the image detailed above, though its

⁷¹ Blanchot, p. x–xi.

⁷² Blanchot, p.7.

⁷³ Sedgwick, p. viii.

⁷⁴ *Tender Buttons*, p.3.

relationship to a ‘blind glass’ or a ‘cousin’ is difficult to decode. In straining to figure the points of connection between the carafe and the description that follows, specifically a connection to a blind glass—likely meaning a glass that does not reflect the onlooker as a mirror might by virtue of being filled with a ‘hurt colour’ (red wine of some description, I would say), or as a cousin belonging to the glass-objects family—the reader of *Tender Buttons* is forced to pay close attention to the schematic-links, or linguistic patterns of language that do not come easily here, engendering consideration of our dependence or insistence on a limited sense of sign and signifier. The difference is indeed spreading with the divergence of language occurring within this work.

Repetition is a primary tool through which this instability is curated. In the ‘Foods’ section of the text, Stein insists

Please be the beef, please beef, pleasure is not wailing. Please beef, please be carved clear, please be a case of consideration.⁷⁵

The refrain ‘please beef’ repeats and redoubles, but this repetition serves to further alienate the phrase: each iteration is again less sensical or more obscure than the last. This repeated phrase forestalls development or a pattern of progression. It insists on the immediacy of this single moment, like a tape stuck on repeat. As Daniela Miranda writes on queer temporality and Stein’s continuous present, ‘for Stein, queerness is not in the horizon but in existing in the present.’⁷⁶

Stein’s work refuses to

align itself with any temporal or ontological hierarchy, preferring instead to engage in a cycle of questioning that continuously asks readers to revisit and revise their conceptions of being, becoming, the past, the present, and future. Stein’s philosophy on temporality, while reliant on the continuous present as a decentering tool, does not necessarily advocate

⁷⁵ *Tender Buttons*, p.24.

⁷⁶ Miranda, n.p.

for its supremacy, instead insisting on a form of dynamic existing that simply fattens the present, growing it both vertically and horizontally through the multiplicity of meanings generated by the beginning again and again of the composition.

In its ‘fattening of the present’ and generation of a ‘multiplicity of meanings’ *Tender Buttons* signals more broadly the slippery qualifications and demarcations of queer: it exists across and between things, it overflows as uncontainable excess. As with the experience of reading Stein, queerness pulls in two directions: it is both leaning *into* and *away from* language simultaneously. It gestures at linguistic convention only insofar as it illuminates the limits of this convention. This convention, that is the coded system of sign and signifier we rely on to encode objects and create meaning, collapses under the strain of Stein’s queer poetics as a continual process of de/re- scribing. The things throughout *Tender Buttons* –the rooms, the food, the objects – negate the symbolic order by way of their resistance to interpretation. By virtue of their obscurity, these spaces and things detailed by Stein are unmediated. If objects are ‘the material onto which we map our constructions’⁷⁷ as Kathryn Bond-Stockton asserts, then Stein illustrates the unlimited scope of these constructions: the potential for the sign to diverge and develop in unexpected ways. The map enlarges, broaching new territory on which to consider the multiplicity of these constructions.

Through its articulation of queer as an irreducible term that resists incorporation into linguistic structures, this chapter posits a way of reading queerly: not as an effort to locate the object of queer, but reading attuned to syntactic oddities and aporetic junctures as queerly disruptive. Rather than designate a specific or stable marker of queer, Stein’s incomprehensible writing orients us towards queer as an unstable conceptual rubric. This mapping of queer along grammatical perversions and disorienting phrasing across *Tender Buttons* establishes how queer is articulated

⁷⁷Kathryn Bond-Stockton, ‘God and Bodies: Poststructuralist Feminists Return to the Fold of Spiritual Materialism’ in *Boundary*, 2:19, (1992), pp. 113-149, <https://doi/10.2307/303536> p. 114.

and engaged throughout this thesis, as instances of incoherence and obscurity that unsettle semiotic or symbolic efficacy.

As an assemblage of non-successive, nonsensical descriptions, *Tender Buttons* foregrounds the kind of textual abstractions that this thesis charts. Though the subject of each chapter changes to examine a logic of queer antisociality through different theoretical lenses, these readings always return to the premise set out in this reading: that queer cannot be reconciled or incorporated within linguistic structures, except as that which disturbs such structures. This is because language as a determined system of signs can only ever misname queer, can only conceive of it as a catachresis for incongruity and obscurity. As such my efforts to interrogate queerness throughout this thesis necessarily begin with language. Following Lee Edelman's assertion that thinking queerness requires thinking beyond the structural limit of language, the agrammatical and asynchronous writing throughout *Tender Buttons* forecloses language as a determinate set of signs and allows that we begin thinking beyond its prescriptive scope, this is to say allows that we begin thinking queerness.

Following the premise that queer designates what is odd or Other, the following chapter extends this logic to subjectivities and reads the queer subject as similarly antagonising structures of recognition. The semiological structure of terms outlined by Saussure positions the heterosexual subject as the centre from which different orientations or subjectivities are articulated in reference to and as such queer remains locked into this relational structure as the nonnormative correlative to a standard of normative sexuality. I then read Herman Melville's *Bartleby* in conversation with Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to chart a logic of queer antisociality that, rather than be incorporated as Other within this system of difference, refuses this system entirely. Bartleby's refusal to locate himself in language through his persistent refrain 'I prefer not to' refuses his

intelligibility as a queer subject. Insofar as queer frustrates linguistic efficacy, the following reading embraces this frustration and revels in the obscurity that queer so names.

Enacting negation: non-identity as queer method in Herman Melville's *Bartleby*

If it is true, as the Irish Bishop Berkeley said, that to be is to be perceived (esse est percipi), is it possible to escape perception? How does one become imperceptible?¹

Herman Melville's 1853 *Bartleby the Scrivener* details the brief and elusive life of one curious law-copyist. Told from the perspective of the unnamed, unambitious lawyer,² the story accounts for the sudden appearance of Bartleby, as if from nowhere, onto the doorstep of his Wall Street legal office. As the narrative progresses, so too does Bartleby's commitment to the phrase 'I would prefer not to.' So it goes that Bartleby prefers not to do his scrivener tasks, prefers not to leave the office premises, and prefers, ultimately, not to do anything at all. By the close of the text, Bartleby's motionless, passive resistance culminates in his imprisonment and his death by starvation, his 'refusal to dine.' It is this piecemeal withdrawal that begins with Bartleby's negative preference and implicates every aspect of his life thereafter that I read as exemplary of queer negation. This negation, the argument goes, is foremost a refusal to be recognised as a subject and incorporated into the classifying regime of the Symbolic order, and occupying instead the unreality outside of language. In conversation with *Bartleby* and a queer logic of anti-

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Verso Books, 1998). p.23.

² Herman Melville, 'Bartleby', *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (Penguin Books, 1985) p.68.

recognition, this chapter aims to reconcile being as *being*-articulated with a queer desire for disidentification.

As I suggested from the outset, this thesis charts queer antisociality proposed foremost by Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman that figures queer as the unintelligible no-thing outside of language. Through reading *Tender Buttons* in the previous chapter I established how we might begin to read or locate queer as such through instances of semiotic rupture. These instances of rupture serve to pierce the illusion of language as a stable system of signs and in so doing call attention to its constructedness and hierarchical logic. But so too does this rupture gesture at the nebulous, unnameable thing outside of language: the spaces that language cannot reach. This chapter on *Bartleby* builds on this previous work to extend, and illustrate enactment of, this sense of queer as unlocatable or unintelligible through the titular character's obstinate resignation. In refusing to engage a discursive system or be located in language, Bartleby personifies the negativity –the *unknowability* – of queer that Lee Edelman thus describes:

The queer subject has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligibility, and—instead of fighting this characterisation by dragging queerness into recognition we embrace the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent.³

Bartleby's piecemeal dissolution throughout the text again suggests, as argued in relation to Stein, the impossibility of existing outside of, or of refusing, language as an established system of signs. Such is the ubiquity and function of language in determining both the world and the social-subject. Beyond this impossibility, however, *Bartleby* allows that we develop this logic of

³ Robert. L. Caserio and others, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory' in *PLMA* 121.2, pp. 819-828 (May, 2006) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357> p. 822.

queer as semiotic rupture to likewise consider acts of disidentification as queerly disruptive. If the determining force of language works to incorporate bodies into a signifying regime – a regime that is foremost a process of classification – then acts of disidentification interrupt this process. As such, *Bartleby* is placed in conversation with a set of theoretical works interested in disidentification as an act of queer resistance. Beginning with Foucault, this chapter establishes how subjecthood is articulated through speech acts, and discourse and sexuality are explained as deployments of power that work to classify and police bodies. Following this, works from queer theorists Nicholas de Villiers, Lee Edelman, and Eric A. Stanley theorise disidentification as a means to resist identification as a queer subject and the process of classification this engenders. Using *Bartleby* to exemplify disengagement from discourse and as occupying the *unreality* outside of this discourse, this chapter foremost serves to introduce the kinds of queer thought that frame my thinking throughout this thesis, and orient my reader towards non-identity or disidentification as a method of queer escape.

The logic of non-identity

To contextualise the above claim and preface my reading of *Bartleby* as an enactment of queer negation, I draw firstly on Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and the relationship between power, bodies, and sexuality detailed therein. Indeed, as Foucault suggests, 'deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures.'⁴ This deployment of power to regulate bodies importantly bridges the previous chapter and this one, and of course those that are to follow. In seeing first how language functions according to binary and hierarchical logic, and how queer as a nebulous, mobile term

⁴ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (Penguin Books, 1990) pp. 151-2.

interrupts such logic, we can begin to consider how this semiotic regime is outworked as discourse, and likewise how acts of disidentification refuse that one be located by this discourse.

Insofar as semiotic structure hinges on relational terms that correspond to one another, it engages a system of difference (or *différance*, as it were), a centre and an outside, such that meaning or the signified (that image or thought that is conjured by a particular word or sign) corroborate this relational structure of difference. This logic, how we interpret the world through language, informs discourse and filters through to every aspect of life: our belief systems, perceptions, political structures, laws. Language so constructs reality. The homosexual as signified of the abnormal sexual subject is constructed and regulated through this discursive deployment of power. As Foucault details:

Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means first of all that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. Secondly, power prescribes an “order” for sex that operates at the same time as a form of intelligibility: sex is to be deciphered on the basis of its relation to the law. And finally, power acts by laying down the rule: power’s hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule. The pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator; and its mode of action with regard to sex is of a juridico-discursive character.⁵

It is ‘under the authority of language’⁶ that sexuality and the sexual subject are ultimately determined, and it is this authority – that is the acceptance of, or assimilation into, linguistic efficacy – that queer disrupts by virtue of its unintelligibility. Such that sexuality is, as Foucault suggests, not the occurrence of desire, but the facilitation and classification of that desire, this

⁵ Foucault, p. 83.

⁶ Foucault, p. 20.

thesis articulates as queer unmediated, undifferentiated desire not so that it might be affirmed as, or incorporated into, an expanding rubric of sexuality, but as that which negates such a system of recognition. This system, according to Foucault, functions thusly:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.⁷

This assessment of sexuality according to Foucault articulates how language as a relational structure of signs informs the classification and discipline of the sexual subject. More to the point, it characterises the deployment of language through various institutional, legal, and discursive methods enacted upon the subject. To be sure, discourse changes over time and the rigidness with which bodies and sexualities are made to adhere to a standard of normativity has ostensibly loosened; there is a general shift towards inclusion. It is important to note however, as Foucault does, that ‘these discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise.’⁸ Though contemporary society might appear more generous or inclusive of an expanding sense of sexuality, then, and discourse less inclined towards the pathologising of nonnormative sexualities, sexuality remains a construction articulated around, and in opposition to, a heterosexual standard. In the social imaginary queerness signifies the negative correlative to normative sexual practice. Sexuality and the sexual subject cannot be extricated from its relationship to power that informs its otherness, and

⁷ Foucault, pp.105-6.

⁸ Foucault, p.32.

this power operates through an inescapable and extensive apparatus. It is as such that negation - phrased otherwise as non-identity or desubjectification - becomes a viable method of resistance.

Without the impulse to label Bartleby as a queer character, but rather as queerly frustrating his own subjection, we witness this kind of desubjectification occur throughout the text where his obstinate disengagement refuses that he be incorporated into language. It is as such that I read *Bartleby* as exemplary of negation and non-identity; as a figure that queerly disengages from the systems of value that render subjecthood and sexuality intelligible. We readers are offered nothing of this character beyond his resolve to disengage - his preference for *nothing* rather than *something*.⁹ As is reported of Bartleby, he ‘was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in this case, they are very small.’¹⁰ With no knowledge of his background, and no sense of his personage beyond his negative preference, Bartleby is a man without a referent and the more we readers are exposed to Bartleby’s idiosyncratic preference not to, the more profoundly unintelligible this character becomes. In ‘Doing Justice to Bartleby’, Jeffrey Weinstock remarks that

Bartleby’s repeated responses ‘I prefer not to’ and ‘I am not particular’ disrupt the rules of language that attempt to fix meaning, to pin signifier and signified, to differentiate clearly between sign and referent, original and copy.¹¹

I would prefer not to stops the chain of signifiers so as to arrest the production of meaning, rendering Bartleby ‘a text that can never be completely read, a text that always resists and

⁹ ‘Deleuze, Gilles, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, eds. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Verso, 1998), pp.68-90. p.71.

¹⁰ *Bartleby*, p.3.

¹¹ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, ‘Doing Justice to Bartleby’ in *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 17.1, pp. 23-42, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/222437985?accountid=17287&parentSessionId=kPD1qa9IHRGin8%2BCgaRDGVcXyb2VIU%2Fc5KgNBHeCyE4%3D> [accessed 04/04/2022] p. 27.

exceeds determinate meaning.’¹² It is as such that Bartleby carries an air of the uncanny with no details through which to validate or affirm his personage. His identity remains a curiosity that the narrator is ‘wholly unable to gratify.’¹³ One exception to Bartleby’s elusivity occurs as a rumour included at the close of the text that Bartleby once belonged to the Dead Letter Office as a subordinate clerk.¹⁴ The implication is that Bartleby himself is as a dead letter: a letter sent but never received, existing liminally between departure and arrival. Likewise registering a betweenness, that between life and death, his appearance is consistently detailed in terms associated with the latter: his pallidness¹⁵, ‘his cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*’¹⁶, his ‘long-continued motionlessness’¹⁷, and his ‘morbid moodiness.’¹⁸ It is as such that descriptions of Bartleby gesture to his abstract or spectral quality. Dead Letters, asks the narrator, does it not sound like dead men?¹⁹ Indeed it does, and my suggestion is that, as language is that which articulates reality, Bartleby’s disengagement with language registers him outside of this reality: as *unreal* or ghostly. Weinstock too frames Bartleby’s obscurity as ghostliness, noting language - or more precisely the construction of identity *through* language - as that which ‘constructs and endows with meaning’ the human subject:

Bartleby’s textualisation, that is, the identification of him with an unreadable letter, points to the ways in which all human subjects are “texts”, are socially constructed and endowed with meaning by virtue of their places within language and culture. His ghostliness indicates the ways in which this imposition of symbolic meaning from without results in the fading of the subject beneath the weight of the signifying chain of language.’²⁰

¹² Weinstock, pp. 25-6.

¹³ *Bartleby*, p. 99.

¹⁴ *Bartleby*, p. 99.

¹⁵ *Bartleby*, p. 66.

¹⁶ *Bartleby*, p. 76.

¹⁷ *Bartleby*, 78.

¹⁸ *Bartleby*, p. 79.

¹⁹ *Bartleby*, p. 99.

²⁰ Weinstock, p. 26.

Alternatively, in slight contrast with Weinstock, this might read as how refusal of Symbolic meaning from without results in the fading of the subject who cannot be reconciled apart from, or outside of, the signifying chain of language. Though this reading initially registers as grim, it is framed within queer antisociality as a means of liberation, or a method of escape. The argument goes that disengagement with the Symbolic field is a means to refuse the process of classification through which bodies are delineated and made intelligible. It is as such that Bartleby's preference *not to* is an emancipatory gesture: a queer embrace of negation. As seen with the construction of sexuality detailed by Foucault, the queer subject cannot be extricated from its relationship to power except, perhaps, to deny or negate this very subjecthood. Bartleby enacts this logic: with the refrain *I would prefer not to*, Bartleby precludes discursive determination by arresting the signifying process through which subjecthood is formulated.

Desubjectification, it is worth saying early into this thesis, is not conceptualised here as a suicide mission; it is a leaning away from presence towards absence²¹ in pursuit of the impossible nothing beyond the Symbolic order. This no-thing or negative space outside of the Symbolic order gestures at that which cannot be articulated or that which is beyond language. As Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant suggest,

Negativity is characterised as moments of rupture that interrupt the generative pattern of semiotics, the symbolic chain of meaning. It disrupts and disorganises. The desire of annihilation, then, is to permit the encounter with negativity to initiate transformations whose end is only the endless opening onto the necessity of new ones.²²

When I frame non-identity as a method of queer escape throughout this chapter, then, it is as a refusal to be incorporated into systems of recognition and of value, and to be determined by such

²¹ Marc Botha, *A Theory of Minimalism* (Bloomsbury, 2017) p. 1.

²² Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014) p.18.

systems. This thinking is apparent across gender abolitionists who, like Alyson Escalante, employ this same logic when writing on gender nihilism. They argue that to invest in identities that subvert gender serves only to reify a normative standard. This investment engages, however unwillingly, a relational model of gender centered always on the normative gendered body. And so it is with sexuality where the recourse to liberation thus becomes negation from that network of signs that inscribe bodies as normative or otherwise. As Escalante writes:

It is the normative grouping of bodies in the first place which we push back against. Neither contraction or expansion will save us. Our only path is that of destruction...The negation of all things, ourselves included, is the only means through which we will ever be able to gain anything.²³

Negation thus refuses the intelligibility on which subjection depends. Though, as explained through Foucault, there is no tangible point beyond that which has been articulated, and so, as Escalante writes, we must take a leap into the void.²⁴ This void as such is here called queer: queer as that unintelligible no-thing that cannot be articulated or incorporated fully into a system of signs. Lee Edelman suggests as much when, in his 2004 text *No Future*, he aligns queer with the death drive to frame its relationship to the Symbolic as that which figures ‘the negativity opposed to every form of social viability’:

As the constancy of a pressure both alien and internal to the logic of the Symbolic, as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, the death drive names what

²³ Alyson Escalante, ‘Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto’ (2017) https://libcom.org/files/Gender%20Nihilism%20An%20Anti-Manifesto_0.pdf <https://alyesque.medium.com/beyond-negativity-what-comes-after-gender-nihilism-bbd80a5fc05d> [accessed May 2022] pp.6,8.

²⁴ Escalante, p. 7.

the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.²⁵

It is through this lens of queer negativity that I read Bartleby's abnegation and consider subjectivity, selfhood and identity at the threshold of their undoing.

Bartleby's formula and enacting negation

Bartleby's intractable, elusive personhood – what I have framed as non-identity or as a site of negation – demonstrates how semiotic dissolution translates to a biopolitics of non-identity insofar as it registers Bartleby imperceptible. Articulated by Bartleby's passive resistance, then, is a resolve to disengage from not only linguistic exchange, but the social-self that is curated through such exchanges. Bartleby offers nothing of his history or origins. He is a man without references, a man with no past and indeed no future: nothing from which to glean a sense of his personage or with which to locate him in language: 'He had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world.'²⁶ When asked by the unnamed narrator 'will you tell me *anything* about yourself?' Bartleby of course replies, 'I would prefer not to.'²⁷ This repeated refrain, *I would prefer not to*, gestures always to absence, to *nothing* rather than *something*.²⁸

In 'Bartleby, or The Formula', Gilles Deleuze explains Bartleby's negative preference as an *agrammatical* formula. This formula forms a vacuum within language that stymies linguistic

²⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Duke University Press, 2004) p.9.

²⁶ *Bartleby*, p. 78.

²⁷ *Bartleby*, p. 80.

²⁸ Deleuze, p.71.

progression and arrests language between preference and non-preference; a position that is devastating insofar as it ‘eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred’²⁹:

The usual formula would instead be *I had rather not*. But the strangeness of the formula goes beyond the word itself. Certainly it is grammatically correct, syntactically correct, but its abrupt termination, NOT TO, which leaves what it rejects undetermined, confers upon it the character of a radical, a kind of limit-function. Its repetition and its insistence render it all the more unusual, entirely so. Murmured in a soft, flat, and patient voice, it attains to the irremissible, by forming an inarticulate block, a single breath. In all these respects, it has the same force, the same role, as an *agrammatical* formula.³⁰

This inarticulate formula, suggests Deleuze, ‘ravages the whole of language’³¹ as this preference for *nothing* ‘excludes all alternatives.’³² This is to say that it forecloses the possibility of *something*, as though Bartleby ‘had said everything and exhausted language at the same time.’³³

As Deleuze further explains:

The attorney himself concocts a theory explaining how Bartleby’s formula ravages language as a whole. All language, he suggests, has references or assumptions. These are not exactly what language designates, but what permit it to designate. A word always presupposes other words that can replace it, complete it, or form alternatives with it: it is on this condition that language is distributed in such a way as to designate things, states of things and actions, according to a set of objective, explicit conventions.³⁴

To return more firmly to the logic of semiotics detailed in the previous chapter, language depends on a pattern of development; a progression from the sign to its signified. No such progression can develop from Bartleby’s obstinate refrain: by design the formula forecloses the potential for development because it does not signal an alternative preference, it does not designate anything beyond this preference not to. Thus the conditions under which language is

²⁹ Deleuze, p. 71.

³⁰ Deleuze, p. 68.

³¹ Deleuze, p. 68.

³² Deleuze, p.73.

³³ Deleuze, p.70.

³⁴ Deleuze, p. 73.

distributed –a process of designation and deferral – is obstructed by the formula that ‘disconnects words and things, words and action, but also speech acts and words—it severs language from all reference.’³⁵ Beginning with Bartleby’s preference not to copy, he (quite literally) arrests the (re)production of words:

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing...*I have given up copying.*³⁶

It is no coincidence that this gesture is couched in inaction: his dead-wall revery. Bartleby’s repeated refrain is not just a disengagement with language, but with that which language realises. What begins as a spoken gesture, *I would prefer not to*, translates to motionlessness, to solitude, and ultimately to death; to the unreality outside of language. A ‘dead-wall’ speaks to a wall with no openings, one that is closed-off from its exterior. Such is Bartleby’s motionless, passive resistance³⁷ that operates likewise to figure complete interiorty; to ensure his disconnectedness from that which is exterior to him so that he is, as the narrator remarks, ‘absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic.’³⁸

Following Deleuze’s work to establish how Bartleby’s formula ravages language and leaves nothing standing in its wake, Giorgio Agamben extends this reading in ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’ to consider Bartleby as a figure of pure potentiality:

As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality. The scrivener has become the writing tablet; he is now nothing other than his white sheet. It is not surprising, therefore,

³⁵ Deleuze, pp.73-4.

³⁶ *Bartleby*, pp. 82-3.

³⁷ *Bartleby*, p. 72.

³⁸ *Bartleby*, p. 83.

that he dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of ever leaving it.³⁹

This ‘abyss of potentiality’ that Bartleby dwells in is the moment before anything passes into actuality - it is the moment before *something* is realised/registered in language - and so it remains on the precipice of nothing and everything. *I would prefer not to*, suggests Agamben, ‘keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be.’⁴⁰ Such that the formula does not designate a preference beyond the preference *not to*, it occupies the realm of possibility that precedes negation *or* affirmation – rather it preserves the possibility to affirm or negate.

Bartleby himself is preserved in this possibility, on the threshold between Being and non-Being. The formula ensures that he remains an outsider insofar as no social role can be assigned to him; he does not refuse to act out of some rebellious impulse, nor does he articulate a position that would register as a principled stance. He simply prefers not to. It is these instances of negation - Bartleby’s anonymity, his silences, his negative preference - that ensure nothing can be known of him, that he is ‘too smooth for anyone to be able to hang any particularity on him’⁴¹ or assign him a role in the social order. As Deleuze writes,

If Bartleby had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role. But the formula stymies all speech acts, and at the same time, it makes Bartleby a pure outsider to whom no social position can be attributed.⁴²

³⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, pp. 243- 274 (Stanford University Press, 1999) pp. 253-4.

⁴⁰ Agamben, p. 267.

⁴¹ Deleuze, p. 74.

⁴² Deleuze, p. 73.

To return to my original proposition, then, the social-self that is actualised or articulated through language is likewise made imperceptible by Bartleby's formula as he cannot be located in language. He is, as Agamben suggests, between Being and non-Being, saddling the precipice of unreality and actualisation. In this emancipation from Being and non-Being alike, suggests Agamben, 'potentiality thus creates its own ontology.'⁴³ Phrased otherwise, Blanchot likewise suggests the figure of Bartleby is that which has fallen out of being, an 'abnegation understood as the abandonment of self, a relinquishment of identity.'⁴⁴ It is this sense of the imperceptible or non-identifiable as a site of pure potentiality that exemplifies the thought informing disidentification as a means of queer liberation. Bartleby instances the limit of signification, which is likewise the limit of subjectivity: if he cannot be read, it follows that he cannot be discursively determined. Negation as such is a radical form of resistance. To escape the determining force of language is to potentiate new ways of being (or non-being, as it were), or new ways of orienting oneself outside of language as a signifying system.

The paradox of language, as Bartleby's piecemeal dissolution throughout the narrative suggests, is that to exist is to be articulated; it is the logic of the Symbolic that to be named is to be incorporated into meaning, or into the social reality that naming so constructs. To negate this process of subjectification is to occupy the impossible unreality outside of language. To do so is, as Agamben similarly suggests, not a nihilistic leap into the void, but a gesture towards the potential selves that exist beyond the social subject:

What shows itself on the threshold between Being and non-Being, between sensible and intelligible, between word and thing, is not the colourless abyss of the Nothing but the luminous spiral of the possible.⁴⁵

⁴³ Agamben, p. 260.

⁴⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock, (University of Nebraska Press, 1986) p. 17.

⁴⁵ Agamben, p. 258.

This ‘luminous spiral of the possible’, then, speaks to what exists beyond the determining force of language; to how one might curate ways of being that are not discursively determined or outwardly imposed, but rather freed from the signifying regime that incorporates bodies into meaning, for better or for worse. Of course, the threshold of language marks the threshold of knowing or intelligibility, so to aspire beyond language is to venture, quite literally, into the unknown. The impossible no-thing beyond discourse.

This same thinking informs Nicholas de Villier’s *Opacity and the Closet* where he suggests that silences and the limit of articulation ‘allow for the possibility of non-meaning and nonknowledge as queer strategies.’⁴⁶ In the opening passage titled ‘Bartleby’s Queer Formula’, De Villiers likewise uses *Bartleby* to frame omissions of identity as queerly resistant to the categorising function of language, such that silences resist the imperative to declare or confess oneself through coming out of the closet:

The metaphor of “coming out of the closet” is indeed hegemonic –propounded not just as a manner of being truthful, but also as the quintessential gesture of acknowledging who one is. To “come out” is first and foremost to locate identity not just in a speech act but in a speech act by which one discloses a previously closeted “secret.”⁴⁷

This revelatory act or confessional metaphor of coming out of the closet, suggests de Villiers, functions as a form of power that ‘makes individuals into recognisable subjects by imposing a categorising and interpretive regime of truth.’⁴⁸ Recognition is a necessary feature of the

⁴⁶ Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 15.

⁴⁷ De Villiers, p.1.

⁴⁸ De Villiers, p. 3.

Symbolic or, more specifically, the Symbolic order and the position one occupies therein. To resist such a regime of truth, then, is to resist the codifying function of recognition where, like Bartleby who cannot even be assigned the social role of rebellious refusal⁴⁹, *unintelligibility* foreloses categorisation.

Though the trajectory of our arguments differ in important ways – de Villiers’ strategy of opacity remains in conversation with the closet, whereas my own work on language and identity here prefaces a broader deliberation on queer divestiture from the Symbolic through instances of negation, silences, and absences – we share in the ambition to frame silences and omissions of identity as queerly resistant to taxonomies of language. Contrary to the confessional of the closet (or the multiple confessional disclosures that attend to personhood and are by no means exclusive to the closet), opacity might allow instead for undifferentiated ways of being that are not contingent on a dominant heterosexual ideal, and for discretion in a society that demands disclosure. As de Villiers affirms:

Against a *scientia sexualis* that turns sexuality into an object of paranoiac knowledge, the suppression of the signified of homosexuality maintains a utopian potential and a tactical advantage (where suppression is not the same as repression or denial).⁵⁰

This sentiment of a ‘utopian potential and a tactical advantage’ speaks again, as did Agamben’s writing on *Bartleby*, to embracing the unknown or the unreality beyond language not as a nihilistic gesture, but as a form of escape from an otherwise inescapable discursive regime. Insofar as recognition is a necessary component of classification and incorporation of the queer individual into the Symbolic order, a strategy of opacity – or omission, discretion, silence –

⁴⁹ De Villiers, p. xi.

⁵⁰ De Villiers, p.18.

allows that one resist the imperative to profess (or confess, as it were) themselves and to consider, as David Halperin does in *Saint Foucault*, who this confession really serves:

If there is something self-affirming and indeed *liberating* about coming *out* of the closet, that is not because coming out enables one to emerge from a state of servitude to a state of untrammelled liberty. On the contrary: to come out is precisely to expose oneself to a different set of dangers and constraints, to make oneself into a convenient screen onto which straight people can project all the fantasies they routinely entertain about gay people, and to suffer one's every gesture, statement, expression, and opinion to be totally and irrevocably marked by the overwhelming social significance of one's openly acknowledged homosexual identity.⁵¹

The social significance of homosexuality that Halperin valiantly writes of in 1995 remains in the forefront of contemporary queer thought. It is as Foucault suggests that, though discourse changes shape over time, it remains operating in servitude to power, and queerness thus maintains its othered position in the social imaginary. As discourse has developed, however, so too has the desire to escape its grasp and occupy the negativity that queer structurally represents.

Non-identity as queer method

Two such contemporary texts, Lee Edelman's *Bad Education* (2022) and Eric A. Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence* (2021), theorise, in different ways, nonexistence or non-identity as strategies of queer escape. In conversation with these works, *Bartleby's* withdrawal from society reads as an enactment of the tactics of abnegation detailed by these theorists. In the first instance, Edelman's *Bad Education* details the premise on which queer in my assessment of *Bartleby* (and hereafter) hinges, where he extends the kind of semiotic dissolution described previously in relation to Stein to persons – or ontologies, ways of being – that threaten the structures of value placed on identities. Following, Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence* translates this exclusion of

⁵¹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 30.

non-normative persons to political action by way of abnegation or resignation. In dialogue, these frameworks marry what is a largely theoretical discussion with insights into an alarming contemporary political climate for queer individuals, and structure non-identity as an earnest (hopeful, necessary) response to this climate.

To begin, Edelman's *Bad Education* proposes that to sustain the framework of reality in any given community, there must be a correlative Other that threatens the dissolution of this framework. Phrased differently, conceptual or ontological formation necessarily excludes; to affirm being there must be the persistent threat of *nonbeing*:

Only this enabling subtraction of what, in itself, is subtracted from sense (even before there is a sense from which it could be subtracted), only this negation of a primal negativity, allows the ontology of the human through the language that differentiates culture from nature.⁵²

This argument relies on Lacanian psychoanalysis to conceptualise this primal negativity, particularly through what Lacan terms *ab-sens*. Ab-sens marks that which is excluded from meaning, or is in *nonrelation* to meaning. It is that which sits outside of language's grasp; the impossible nothing beyond the Symbolic. Sex, according to Lacan (and in line with Leo Bersani's notion of gay sex as a momentary rupture of reality), occupies this space - or *nonspace* - of ab-sens insofar as it 'pertains to the Real, to the beyond of signification where definition does not obtain.'⁵³

Because sex ab-sens is exorbitant to the logic of difference and meaning, however, it can have no name of its own. Only through catachresis can it indicate the state of

⁵² Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022) p. xiii.

⁵³ Edelman, p. xiv.

nondifferentiation made unthinkable by *sens-absexe*, which consigns it to the void of nonbeing that enables being to be.⁵⁴

Lacan names a shift from sex as negativity to sex as sexual difference: sex as *ab-sens* to *sens-absexe*. This shift denotes the effort to ‘make sex make sense’⁵⁵ in which case sexual difference is incorporated into meaning through this gesture that can only ever point to its non-meaning, its difference from meaning. Queer thus names that which is unnamable, that which can only be gestured at but never fully grasped. An important note, for Edelman, is that even if some sexual preferences or modes of being, like lesbian and gay, seem to have been successfully incorporated into values of structure and meaning, this is not what is implied by the marker of queer; queer is that which remains outside of recognition. What qualified as queer fifty years ago might be different to what qualifies as queer today so that queer is an unstable and shifting rubric that signals modes of being not yet conceivable by the current frameworks of recognition:

Queer can refer to anything that thwarts, contradicts, or departs from a norm. Even where its fluidity of reference, its resistance to taxonomic specificity, allows it to serve as a general rubric for nonnormative sexualities, queer so relentlessly challenges the boundaries of sexuality and normativity that no one can ever definitively succeed in escaping its connotative reach. Similarly, no one can fully secure it as a proper identity, either, insofar as it signifies diacritically in relation to a norm [...] The sex that *ab-sens* would designate, a priori absented from being, gives way to sex as the difference that governs the Symbolic as *sens-absexe*, Lacan’s term for the ontological order linking sexual difference to meaning. *Sens-absexe* permits signification precisely by absencing sex as *ab sens*. It creates, with that negative gesture, the world that swells into being through words.⁵⁶

Language as that which defines the parameters of our conceptual reach exposes its limit in this shift to *sens-absexe* where it insists that queer be something - that it be incorporated into values

⁵⁴ Edelman, p. xiv.

⁵⁵ Edelman, p. xv.

⁵⁶ Edelman, p. xiv.

of meaning - rather than the nothing or the negativity that *ab-sens* registered. This shift attempts to drag queerness into recognition:

Bad Education takes seriously the structural limit of language on thought, a limit that keeps us from thinking nothing, and so from thinking queerness—or, for that matter, Blackness, woman, trans*, incest, “sex,” or any of the catachreses of *ab-sens*—except as posited and positivised in those made to embody nothing.⁵⁷

This chapter has so far gestured at this thinking nothing, if not in gentler terms. Bartleby, as I’ve detailed, offers an approximation of this embodying nothing by way of his exclusion from the social order: because he is outside of language (or because his formula arrests language that would otherwise place him inside of it), he resembles the function of this structural limit of language that, outside of recognition, fails to incorporate the subject. I understand that Bartleby does not, in any obvious way, signal a sexual preference. He does, however, queerly exist as an ungraspable, unknowable entity - he is the embodiment of Nothing. He occupies the non-space of exclusion outside of our conceptual rubric, and it is in response to his uncanny existence that the structures of normalcy unravel. As de Villier writes, ‘the strangeness of the formula frustrates both grammatical and social normativity, including the social role of rebellious refusal.’⁵⁸

Bartleby is that which threatens and destabilises the social organisation that ‘*grounds being in being meaningful*, in conforming to the logic of thinkability that organises human community.’⁵⁹

This conforming to the logic of thinkability readily translates, at least at first glance, to a politics of inclusion that might work to incorporate or contain queer within its rubric – such is the sentiment of progressive identity politics. What Edelman suggests foremost, however, is the

⁵⁷ Edelman, p. xviii.

⁵⁸ De Villiers, p. xi.

⁵⁹ Edelman, p. xiii.

improbability of genuinely doing so: queer by nature, within Edelman's assessment, necessarily figures a structural negativity on which the Symbolic order, and which those affirmed within this order, depends; the exclusivity that inclusivity mandates. Of equal importance to his argument is the embrace of queer as such. Rather than an effort to be redeemed within the social order, Edelman suggests instead occupying non-identity or that limit of language framed as unthinkability. This is what a logic of non-identity or non-existence attempts to achieve.

In response to an ostensible politics of inclusion, Eric A. Stanley's 2021 *Atmospheres of Violence* details the expansion of LGBT rights (marriage equality, military recruitment of lesbians and gay men, the expansion of hate crimes legislation) and the simultaneous rise in violence against trans and queer individuals. Stanley's primary refrain is that the inclusion of LGBT peoples within systems of governance does not mitigate harm or create a more accepting society, but instead 'inclusion, rather than a precondition of safety, most properly names the state's violent expansion.'⁶⁰ This inclusion and recognition of LGBT identities is a mechanism of violence insofar as 'queer violence is written as an outlaw practice, a random event, and an unexpected tragedy.'⁶¹ Under the guise of inclusion and progressive politics, the narrative of recognition and acceptance of LGBT individuals overshadows narratives of ongoing violence:

Dominant culture's drive to dissolve the scope and intensity of this violence is expected. Yet mainstream LGBT politics also colludes in this disappearance in exchange for recognition, however partial and contingent. Through this privatization, meaning the continued trafficking in a belief that things might be any other way while leaving the social intact, the enormity of anti-trans/queer violence is vanished.

⁶⁰ Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Duke University Press, 2021), p.5.

⁶¹ Stanley, p. 6.

A part of the schematic of sustained state violence, Stanley suggests, is thinking violence as individual acts rather than epistemic force.⁶² What he means by ‘privitisation’, then, is as ‘a function through which the social and its trauma are whitewashed, heterosexualised, and made to appear gender-normative.’ A rhetoric of justice, inclusion, or safety *for all* under democracy positions anti-trans/queer violence as antithetic to democracy’s aims where, rather than acknowledge a culture of homophobic or racialised violence, attacks are conceptualised as an isolated anomaly – the workings of a rogue individual rather than systematic oppression. Formal equality under the law does not translate to *actual* equality, and it is this myth of democracy that sustains structures of violence, that informs ‘a matrix of fictive justice.’⁶³ As Stanley remarks, ‘for the law to read anti-trans/queer violence as a symptom of civil society, justice would demand the dismantling of its own administration.’⁶⁴

In light of the failure of democracy’s ostensible progress, Stanley proposes a post-politic, conceptualised as *ungovernance*, as a means to transcend enduring state violence. This tactic resolves to ‘release the fantasy of reforming these institutions, here the law and by extension the state, that have caused and continue to cause destruction, not simply in effect but in their aim.’⁶⁵ Ungovernance means abdicating from these systems of oppression: ‘becoming liberated, or getting ungovernable, might offer a way out, or at least through harm’s persistence.’⁶⁶

This becoming liberated, or getting ungovernable, as Stanley phrases it, brings us back to the thinking guiding this chapter: that resignation from presiding regimes, be them discursive,

⁶² Stanley, p. 7.

⁶³ Stanley, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Stanley, p. 7.

⁶⁵ Stanley, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Stanley, p.114.

political, or ontological/biometric, figures a form of queer escape. Ungovernability, writes Stanley, ‘becomes an abolitionist way of life. The charge of ungovernability, a behaviour recast as being, disturbs not just the social but the social’s coherence that designates some existence as beautiful disruption.’⁶⁷ In Stanley’s assessment, as in my own, this incoherence figures freedom of a queer making, it is existence as non-existence. More than this, it figures the *only* escape: if governing institutions cannot be redeemed, and if in fact this perceived redemption enables more violence, then resignation becomes the only viable method of escape:

I insist that the liberal state, or more precisely the para-colonial democratic state, can never be anything other than an engine of brutality. This assertion, rather than a descent into nihilistic inaction, opens up our histories and futures of practicing interdependence otherwise—a post-politics for the end of the world that might just save us from the present.⁶⁸

As Stanley concludes, ungovernability potentiates or marks the radical generativity of a something (a something understood as nothing through the lens of our current discursive and political regimes) beyond sovereignty’s simulacrum.⁶⁹ If the limit of our conceptual reach has been met, then that which insists on *something* else, on an unknown alternative, marks the pursuit of being otherwise. It is in this sense that disengagement - the preference not to - figures an escape. As Stanley remarks,

While this book has dwelled for perhaps too long in the space of death, I end with the ungovernable, not because such practices negate violence but because we, those who go on, must hold this incommensurability. If abolition’s generativity names a presence of a world as much as it labours to the end the one we cannot survive, then ungovernability not only refutes the state; it also figures the ease of living now.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Stanley, p. 118.

⁶⁸ Stanley, pp. 16-17.

⁶⁹ Stanley, p. 116.

⁷⁰ Stanley, p. 123.

In keeping with Stanley's sense of resignation as liberation, and as the pursuit of a something beyond the current political regime as codified by rigid structures of meaning, *Bartleby* once more fits the bill as a site of potentiality resigned from such structures of meaning. As Agamben writes of this indignant scrivener:

As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality. *The scrivener has become the writing sheet [the tabula rasa]; he is nothing other than his white sheet.* It is not surprising, therefore, that he dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of leaving it.⁷¹

In Agamben's assessment, Bartleby is a figure *outside of being*, and it is precisely his refusal to engage that positions him so. Bartleby enacts the model of disengagement characterised above as queer escape; his is a willful occupancy of the impossible non-space where meaning does not obtain. As Nancy Ruthenburg explains,

Without reason or passion, Bartleby announces an ontology that surpasses Hamlet's question concerning Being and non-Being and which, as pure potential –as something that can be or not be –is neither true nor false. He embodies absolute contingency, the refusal of necessity, the refusal to decide whether to be or not to be⁷²

An important distinction should be stated here: that between the structural exclusion and harm faced by *real* people detailed by Stanley, and that of Melville's fiction. The purpose of bringing these two narratives together, however, is to exemplify resignation from the Symbolic order. In his relinquishment of identity,⁷³ Bartleby is ungovernable because he cannot be incorporated into or contained by the framework of meaning that depends on exclusion to sustain its illusion.

⁷¹ Agamben, p. 253–4.

⁷² Nancy Ruthenburg, 'The Silhouette of a Content: *Bartleby* and American Literary Specificity' in *Melville and Aesthetics*, ed. by Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn, pp. 137-156 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. 140.

⁷³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 17.

Bartleby is thus an insight, however fictional, into non-existence that disturbs not just the social but the social's coherence.

To translate once more Bartleby's disengagement to this form of queer escape, and to do so with an air of optimism, Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* frames passive resistance, like the kind we find in Bartleby's preference not to, as registering a refusal. In this way Bartleby's preference is for *something* rather than *nothing*: for the something outside of language that is registered within language as nothing – it is that which exceeds the limit of language that would name it so:

Refusal is said to be the first degree of passivity. But if refusal is deliberate and voluntary, if it expresses a decision—though this be a negative one—it does not yet allow separation from the power of consciousness, and comes no closer to passivity than this act of refusal on the part of the self. And yet refusal does tend toward the absolute, independent of any determination whatsoever.⁷⁴

For Blanchot, passivity exceeds being, 'it is being when being has been worn down past the nub.'⁷⁵ Integral to passivity is a demand, a hope for something – otherwise characterised by the refusal to accept, or to be incorporated into, reality as structured by language:

This is what is strange: passivity is never passive enough. It is in this respect that one can speak of an infinite passivity: perhaps only passivity evades all formulations—yet it seems that there is in passivity something like a demand that would require it to fall always short of itself. *There is in passivity not passivity, but its demand, a movement of the past toward the unsurpassable.*⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Blanchot, p. 17.

⁷⁵ Blanchot, p.17.

⁷⁶ Blanchot, p.16.

This movement toward the unsurpassable captures precisely the demand inherent in queer negation through a passivity that evades all formulations – like Deleuze writes of Bartleby’s formula as ‘*a negativism beyond all negation.*’⁷⁷ It evades all formulations and is beyond all negativism because it is outside of the linguistic structure that names these. This is the pursuit of thinking nothing that Edelman details, or the non-meaning and non-knowledge that de Villiers describes. I would prefer not to, writes Blanchot, ‘belongs to the infiniteness of patience; no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity. We have fallen outside of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go.’⁷⁸

Queering death

Bartleby’s fall outside of being is ultimately confirmed by his death. Recounted in this brief passage is not the finite gesture of death, but a return to Bartleby’s liminality between Being and non-Being; a reminder of how he ‘confounds the opposition between life and death’⁷⁹ Terms of death followed Bartleby through life - his ‘persistent haunting of the building’,⁸⁰ his ‘cadaverous’ reply⁸¹ – and in death life persists as he ‘lives without dining’:

I went up close to him; stooped over, and saw that his eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping...The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. ‘His dinner is ready. Won’t he dine today, either? Or does he live without dining?’ ‘Lives without dining,’ said I, and closed the eyes.
Eh! He’s asleep, ain’t he?
‘With kings and counselors’, murmured I.⁸²

⁷⁷ Deleuze, p. 71.

⁷⁸ Blanchot, p. 17.

⁷⁹ Weinstock, pp. 25-6.

⁸⁰ *Bartleby*, p. 93.

⁸¹ *Bartleby*, p.81.

⁸² *Bartleby*, p. 98.

As with the passage likening Bartleby to a dead letter that follows this to close the narrative, Bartleby remains, in death as in life, somewhere between departure and arrival: he withdraws from the very system that could recognise him as having departed or arrived. Death in the literal more firmly situates him as such - that signified of the end of the sign - but it is conceptually this same non-space he has Symbolically occupied throughout the narrative.

This is to say that death is a way to conceive of the non-space outside of language's grasp, as a profoundly unintelligible negativism that precludes a dialectic of positive/negative because death does not operate according to this framework; it is the nebulous no-thing that is outside of Symbolic logic as non-knowledge or non-space. *The vast Nothing*. If queer thought has led us so far to thinking nothing, death is the closest approximation we might have for doing so. Symbolic death, we might imagine, is this inconceivable/inarticulate nothing where the subject has fallen out of being - or exists in the abyss of potential between Being and non-Being. Queering death is a project I undertake more thoroughly in chapter 4 on Derek Jarman's *Blue*, but for now, in the instance of *Bartleby*, death figures the ultimate passivity or the ultimate abnegation.

To return to Foucault once more, in the final section of *Volume 1*, he details death as the moment one finally escapes power's limit:

Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion; death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most "private".⁸³

Death as such, or non-existence as death of the social subject, is the only liberation from discourse as the impossible nothing beyond discourse. It is the queerly marked non-space that

⁸³ Foucault, p.138.

language cannot reach, and cannot incorporate into its system of signs. Indeed, to return to this quote from Edelman, the pursuit of the unintelligible, structural negativity that death names is key to the project of queer antisociality that embraces the death drive as what queer, in the social imaginary, represents:

The drive – more exactly, the death drive – holds a privileged place in this book. As the constancy of a pressure both alien and internal to the logic of the Symbolic, as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.⁸⁴

Death in this sense, like language, marks a threshold between knowledge and non-knowledge. It at once signals the end of the social subject or the margin of subjectivity, but it likewise gestures to an outside beyond our conceptual reach: not a leap into the void, but rather into the abyss of potentiality. So it goes that both the appeal and the horror of embracing negation is that there is no way to know what exists beyond this threshold: it is the limit point of language and therefore the limit point of knowledge. The argument returns always, however, to a preference for *nothing* rather than *something*: for the abyss over incorporation into a homophobic social order.

Rather than dragging queerness into recognition, disidentification embraces the negativity that queerness structurally represents. To be identified or recognised as a subject is to be discursively determined and incorporated into semiotic structures of value. For the queer individual, this structure – however ostensibly progressive – can only ever reconcile queer identity in reference to a heterosexual standard. In the social order, the queer individual is the signified Other, the abnormal correlative to a standard of heterosexuality. To be a legible subject is to be incorporated into such a system of recognition. So it goes that subjection necessitates

⁸⁴*No Future*, p.3.

articulation; it is the logic of the Symbolic that to be named is to be incorporated into meaning, or into the social reality that naming so constructs.

This is the logic that informs a desire towards annihilation of the social-self, or non-existence as a method of queer escape. Indeed, if this inescapable system of signs can only ever register the queer subject as Other, then negation of this very subjecthood becomes the only viable recourse to liberation. This unbecoming or undoing of the subject reads as overtly pessimistic or disenchanted – which it is – but an important component of this logic is that language sets the limits of our conceptual reach and so to resist linguistic efficacy – to refuse incorporation into its structures of value – is to pursue the impossible self beyond discourse. It is not simply a nihilistic leap into the void, but rather a leap into the abyss of potentiality that Agamben details as outside of Being and Non-Being: outside of a framework of signs that necessitates such a binary. If Being insists on being meaningful (that is recognised within a system of meaning, for better or worse) then disidentification attends to queer as non-meaning and non-knowledge as that inarticulable surplus beyond the threshold of knowledge: a non-space that precedes recognition or actualisation as a subject.

To disengage language, however, is to disengage that which language realises: the social reality that language so constructs. To negate one's subjecthood is to occupy the unreality outside of language. It is as such that death (that negative non-space beyond the threshold of knowledge or articulation) occupies this same conceptual space as negation. Importantly, negation as queer method pursues death of the social-self - not literal death, in case this is unclear - but that unreality beyond the threshold of comprehension and the limit of power's reach. This non-space or conceptual absence is the subject of the next chapter on Samuel Beckett's *All Strange Away*

and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. The symbolically sterile worlds within these texts materialise negation as sites of absence that precede language and precede the subject. Like Agamben's space of Nothing, the Beckettian subject occupies a conceptual point zero, that is 'a space where all the external elements are reduced or eliminated, generating a complete lack of referentiality.'⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Alberto Tondello, 'Italo Calvino and Samuel Beckett: Regenerative Creation in the Fiction of the 1960s.' in *The Modern Language Review*, 111.1 (2016), pp. 17–37, <https://doi.org/10.5699/modlangrevi.111.1.0017>, p.35.

Something comes of nothing: writing the negative across Samuel Beckett's *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*

To decompose is to live too.

–Beckett, *Molloy*

The ambiguities of language and interpretive hardships explored within previous chapters recur in Samuel Beckett's 1960s short texts *All Strange Away* (1963-4) and *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965). These works imagine the death of imagination as gradually reducing spaces and expiring subjectivities told through the narration of an unidentified observer – an observer, the reader can assume, who is articulating their own failing, recalcitrant imagination. The contortion of bodies to adhere to the decreasing generosity of space in which they are contained is 'said as seen' through an excruciating prose that locates, at one moment, a body folded one way and in the next moment gone, 'never was.'¹ The beats in which the space of imagination is renewed again, reiterated as some smaller-still cylinder, are marked by a cold consuming dark and then a hot white flash that 'bleaches all, lights all.'² These punctuations of dark and light, all consuming as they are, precede an incremental shift or a disappearance so that the scope of the dying imagination tightens as do the delimited walls it is contained in. Piece by piece, the diameters shorten so that the cylinder becomes a cube – 'perfect cube now', the sexuated body of Emma

¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski, pp. 169–181 (Grove Press, 1995), p.173.

² 'All Strange Away', p. 178.

we encounter in *All Strange Away* shifts from kneeling to lying - 'have always lain so, never knelt'³, and her counterpart, Emmo, fades into oblivion - 'no Emmo, no need, never was.'⁴ Consciousness as a dying imagination (and bare, expiring bodies as its analogue) perpetually reformulates anew, each time forgetting its own past and each time registering less and less 'so little by little all strange away.'⁵

In writing these two short works, Beckett abandons ornament so that the writing is purely functional, reduced to an acerbic, precise syntax that says only what is seen, nothing more and nothing less. The effect is a minimal and malnourished writing isolated from the Symbolic register that might otherwise fatten it with meaning. Beckett instead relies on a mathematical rendering of space:

Diameter three feet, three feet from ground to summit of vault. Two diameters at right angles AB CD divide the white ground and the semicircle ACB BDA.

This mathematical writing effaces language as linguistic sign and inscribes it instead with numerical value. This is writing *as absolute function*. As Alain Badiou writes, it is 'language where its epistemic edifice is undone and the bare being of language is exposed.'⁶ He carries on to say of Beckett's minimalist writing that,

It is not in the destruction of language (which would amount to the annihilation of humanity and the imperative to speak that defines it) but in its subtraction and supplementation that 'the things (or the Nothingness) behind it' can see the light.⁷

³ 'All Strange Away', p.173.

⁴ 'All Strange Away', p. 173.

⁵ 'All Strange Away', p.178.

⁶ Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, eds. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Clinamen Press, 2003)p. xix.

⁷ Badiou, p. xxix.

This ‘Nothingness’ that is exposed through Beckett’s subtracted prose is precisely the interest of this chapter, as is the process of annihilation that language must undergo in pursuit of such nothingness. It is attuned to queer thought as a divestiture from Symbolic orderings, and as the incoherence that marks the limit of knowledge, that I read Beckett’s confined, recalcitrant spaces, as well as the dying imagination that constructs them, as generative sites. These symbolically sterile worlds are not interested in the redemption of language, but in a reversion to language before the sign; a gradual reduction towards a primordial language that Byron Heffer has termed Beckett’s ‘queer atavism.’⁸ As with previous chapters within this thesis, the sentiment that language is imbued with meaning, and the equal sentiment that this language must be refigured to escape the imposition of such meaning, continues to characterise and inform the logic of this chapter, though the nature of linguistic abstraction here changes shape. We find again in Beckett an idiosyncratic temporal register, and a language reduced to its bare descriptive function. Unlike previous works charted in this thesis, however, Beckett materialises the spaces of this impoverished language, and the expiring subjectivities that occupy them so that the reducing scope of language effects a conceptual no-space, or space of nothing, as a hollowed, sterile environment emptied of signification.

Following Gertrude Stein’s efforts to liberate language from a determined structure of signs by confusing and subverting the referential relationship between signifier and signified in *Tender Buttons*, Beckett likewise attempts an escape from signification, though rather than confuse the sign, he gradually eliminates it through language that is increasingly minimal. As a small note on a point that I will return to and discuss in full later, where a referent *might* be located, say in the

⁸ Byron Heffer, ‘Beckett’s Queer Atavism’ in *Journal of Irish Studies*, 14.2 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2019-9182>, p.80.

explicit dissection of the sexuated female body in *All Strange Away* as ‘cunt, breasts hanging, trunk bowed’⁹, this is quickly negated: ‘Physique, too soon, perhaps never, vague bowed body bonewhite when light at full, nothing clear but ashen glare as imagined.’¹⁰ Language in these works does not devolve so as to reach its primal, carnal beginnings, but to surpass, or to regress further, to a language preceding articulations of the gendered body. The dying imagination, then, is a dual expiration of language and of the subject; both being gradually emptied of signification.

Developing on chapter 2 that looks at the relationship between subjectivity (or *formation as a subject*) and language, or rather the inability to separate subjecthood from language, in Beckett we find this same relationship developed through the simultaneous estrangement of language and body. As Marc Botha suggests, ‘Beckett, at his most acute, writes about thinking about the intense struggle between thought and the absence of thought as analogues for being and non-being.’¹¹ A decreasing investment in sexualised or gendered markers leads to the neutral suggestion of a body: ‘long black hair and lashes gone and puckered breast no details to add to these for the moment save normal neck with hint of cords and jugular and black bottomless eye.’¹² Or to its disappearance: ‘no Emmo, no need, never was.’¹³ So, while the ambition to empty language of its symbolic value remains true across these first three chapters, in Beckett’s short prose we are witness to a failing - or expiring - system of signs. We see language and logic dissipate, and the world this language constructs and the bodies that inhabit it dissipates too.

⁹ ‘All Strange Away’, p.171.

¹⁰ ‘All Strange Away’, pp. 171-2.

¹¹ Marc Botha, *A Theory on Minimalism* (Bloomsbury, 2017), p.101.

¹² ‘All Strange Away’, p. 176.

¹³ ‘All Strange Away’, p. 137.

These barren Beckettian worlds, claustrophobic and impoverished as they are (outside of the monotonous repetition of precise measurements), articulate a subject, indeed an entire isolated universe, void of the Symbolic. Beckett's spare prose and temporal arrest explore language as a closed system of signs that performs queerly to negate or escape this system by emptying language of its signifying function. This claim characterises the previous chapters of this thesis, however, in Beckett we encounter not just a resistance to naming in favour of ontological imprecision or opposition to the taxonomy inherent in language. Rather, we find isolated worlds bereft of signification and the pre-ontological subject of the unconscious as occupants of this void. These voids are read here as exemplary of negativity and absence as generative sites. This is to say, in agreement with Johnathon Boulter's framing of Beckett's short fictions, that these are sites in which Beckett

works from a point zero at which a certain idea of literature and the human subject is negated, not to move towards a final end, but to work for a gradual restoration of man's potential and ability to imagine.¹⁴

Beckett masterfully crafts impoverished environments within *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* not as a bleak gesture towards nihilism, but to empty language of its history and begin again from 'the primordial void, a space where all the external elements are reduced or eliminated, generating a complete lack of referentiality.'¹⁵ In contrast to a nihilistic end point, these spaces figure a conceptual point zero from which to build language afresh so that the estrangement of language within these works as spare, emaciated prose invest negation – or *nothingness* – with potential. They signal both an ending and a beginning as the limit of language

¹⁴ Alberto Tondello, 'Italo Calvino and Samuel Beckett: Regenerative Creation in the Fiction of the 1960s', *The Modern Language Review*, 111: 1 (2016), pp. 17–37, <https://doi.org/10.5699/modlangrevi.111.1.0017>. p.17.

¹⁵ Tondello, p.35.

and the imaginative potential beyond language. The rapturous logic of queer as *asymbolic* culminates in these odd, symbolically sterile little worlds. In Beckett's writing the tension that arises between the nothing and everything that incoherence marks is particularly acute: 'In Samuel Beckett's work, the difficult meeting of generative negation and destructive negation discovers a different intensity.'¹⁶ Though this destructive negation often eclipses a reading of these works as generative sites, this chapter resists such a reading and instead approaches these works, as Jonathan Boulter does, with a firm interest in queer potentialities, by asking 'How does this ruined world act as refuge, and how might these refuges lend solace, specifically to queer-aligned identities?'¹⁷

To answer this question, I rely on Blanchot's sense of absence in *The Space of Literature* where he suggests that, when everything disappears, disappearance appears. In essence, my claim is that these recalcitrant spaces – the temporal, linguistic, and spatial reduction of Beckett's closed-space fictions– articulate the *no-thing* marked by queerness. The Other implied as the outside of the Symbolic (that excluded by virtue of its inability to be incorporated into meaning) can be articulated only in the absence of that which otherwise names. What I mean to say, and what will be expanded on and clarified throughout this chapter, is that the negation I am describing in, or through, Beckett's short prose does not simply register as a dichotomy of presence/absence, but a moment wherein the absence that precedes all presence is articulated not so that it is incorporated into meaning, but rather that it precedes meaning; language without the signification that always attends language. The self beyond signification central to a queer divestiture from language is presented in Beckett as the self *before* signification. Death as queer refusal, then, would too

¹⁶ Botha, p.100.

¹⁷ Boulter, p. 97.

easily give into the allure, or the trap, of language's binary structure. What we find instead in Beckett, and this point is important to my interpretation of these texts as queer, is a refusal to slip into the paradigm of presence/absence, but instead to write negation's persistence - or the occurrence of the negative - through absence *as* presence. This is an affirmation of the negative as that which has not been, or cannot be, incorporated into meaning.

All Strange Away (1963-4) and Imagination Dead Imagine (1965)

These sibling texts, as Beckett scholar S. E. Gontarski notes, mark

a dramatic turn, away from stories featuring the compulsion to (and solace in) motion, towards stories of stillness or some barely perceptible movement, at times just the breathing of a body or the trembling of a hand.¹⁸

Published first in French and later translated into English by Beckett himself, these narratives also mark a dwindling faith in the efficacy of linguistic representation. The French language provided Beckett with a way of writing that was not stylistic, which was a feature of writing in English he found difficult to avoid. Perhaps, Beckett suggests, 'only the French language can give you what you want.'¹⁹ As Gontarski continues on to say of Beckett's change to French:

Beckett set out to expunge ornament, to write less, to remove all but the essentials from his art, to distil his narratives and so develop his own astringent, desiccated, monochromatic minimalism, miniaturisation...As Beckett's fiction developed ...towards the voiceless bodies of *All Strange Away* and its evolutionary descendant *Imagination Dead Imagine*, he continued his ontological exploration of being as becoming in narrative and finally of being as narrative, producing in the body of the text the text as body.²⁰

¹⁸ S. E. Gontarski, *Beckett Matters: Essays on Beckett's Late Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 62.

¹⁹ Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (Harper Collins, 1996) p.360

²⁰ Gontarski, p.45.

This exploration of ‘being as becoming in narrative’ is what we find in these closed-space fictions. Though, the beings we encounter, as with the narrative they are produced through, are lacking any grounding subjectivity; perhaps more appropriately phrased as *unbecoming* in narrative. The texts detail a mutual expiration across language and body, and indeed language *as* body. That is to say that we witness, in these strange small works, the simultaneous emptying of language and the subject alike from signification, and thus from being (being as being-articulated-as-a-subject). Phrased otherwise, Beckett makes clear the role of language in constructing - or *deconstructing*, as it were – the subject as he traces its *unbecoming* towards oblivion. In line with Marc Botha’s thinking about Beckett’s works, his writing names the *least* possible through language, or the conceptual minimum that can be reached:

Naming the point at which every given reality comes into or departs from existence, marking the passage between undifferentiated *being* and differentiated *existence* by revealing the least that is possible and the least that is necessary in a given reality.²¹

As spaces decreasing towards the *least* possible, both *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* detail precise claustrophobic spaces, demarcated mathematically by lines A B C and D, and precise diameter measurements - ‘five foot square, six high²² - though these dimensions morph throughout the texts, giving the sense of a shrinking and increasingly claustrophobic environment. Both ‘sparse, purgatorial landscapes’,²³ *Imagination Dead Imagine* is understood as a continuation of *All Strange Away*. Gontarski again offers connection between the two:

In *All Strange Away*, the narrator is imagining or re-imagining images of a former lover, Emma. In *Imagination Dead Imagine*, the lineaments, the details, the specifics have blurred or vanished, references to a world outside the enclosure disappear. What remains

²¹ Botha, p.9.

²² ‘All Strange Away’, p.169.

²³ Ronan McDonald, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.18.

are hermetic images without external reference, images in and of themselves. There is movement, if ever so slight, but where movement is perceptible there is life, a life force, vitality, even at its merest minimum.²⁴

Following Gontarski's assertion that *Imagination Dead Imagine* is a continuance of *All Strange Away*, they traffick the same expiring imagination that devolves across the two texts. This expiration begins with moments of overt sexualisation at the beginning of *All Strange Away*: 'Imagine him kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking, and buggering all this stuff, no sound.' This sexually explicit moment that imagines figures Emma and Emmo through a perverse, primal language soon changes to detail subjects whose only movement is to contort their bodies to fit a gradually diminishing space, and eventually, in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, subjects that are bereft of movement, the body reduced to 'absolute stillness' save the blink of an eye:

They might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible.²⁵

As the narrative progresses to *Imagination Dead Imagine*, the only marker of life left for Beckett's diminished subject is this inhuman gaze and the suggestion of breathing: 'hold a mirror to their lips, it mists.'²⁶ This is imagination at the threshold of expiration, reduced to the minimal suggestion of life so, as Beckett writes, there is 'no life or dying here'²⁷; there is only the imagination suspended in the stale recurrence of existence – suspended in the nothingness that is neither life nor the foreclosure of death. As detailed in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, this

²⁴ Gontarski, p. 46.

²⁵ 'Imagination Dead Imagine', p.184.

²⁶ 'Imagination Dead Imagine', p. 184.

²⁷ 'All Strange Away', p. 172.

suspension is certain; the imagination does not expire into oblivion, but returns always to this suspended space:

But whatever its uncertainties the return sooner or later to a temporary calm seems assured, for the moment, in the black dark or the great whiteness, with attendant temperature, would still proof against enduring tumult.²⁸

This perpetual return is punctuated or renewed, as Beckett suggests, by intervals of cold dark and hot white: flashes of an all-consuming ‘great whiteness’ followed by darkness:

Emptiness, silence, heat, whiteness, wait, the light goes down, all grows dark together, ground, wall, vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the greys, the light goes out, all vanishes.²⁹

These intense flashes occur indiscriminately and register some infinitesimal shift towards oblivion – a reduction in spatial measurements or movement –so that they read as some failed synapse, or some acute rendering of the imagination as smaller than before. Like Stein’s ‘continuous present’ that cuts off the present moment from its past or a future, the moment of encounter following the ‘great whiteness’ is described anew so that the moment that preceded it evaporates or is dissolved, so that it ‘never was’. These cylindrical voids are then *atemporal* as much as they are *asymbolic*: neither time nor referent are available to serve as a structuring or orienting device. As Badiou writes, ‘in Beckett’s work we encounter an absolutely formal reduction of ‘thinking humanity’ to its indestructible functions, to its atemporal determinants.’³⁰

Beckett’s effort to reduce language to its least ornamental, most functional - his ‘wish to purge language of itself³¹- is in effect a kind of asemic writing. I say *kind of* because, though the words

²⁸ ‘Imagination Dead Imagine’, pp.183-4.

²⁹ ‘Imagination Dead Imagine’, p.182.

³⁰ Badiou, p.xxii.

³¹ Badiou, p.xxix.

remain legible on the page, they are reduced to a bare minimum of semantic content: reduced to a sterile and skeletal writing, a sort of basic speech that Roland Barthes would term ‘neutral’:

Writing is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of a language are abolished in favour of a neutral and inert state of form...If the writing is really neutral, and if language, instead of being a cumbersome and recalcitrant act, reaches the state of pure equation, which is no more tangible than an algebra when it confronts the innermost part of man, then Literature is vanquished, the problematics of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration, the writer become irretrievably honest.³²

This writing as pure equation annihilates not just the symbolic value of a word, but that which is articulated or constructed through these words: the limit of language is likewise the limit of the imagination. *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* traces this limit to reach a point at which both language and imagination are hollow, but not incomprehensible. Functional, but not meaningful. Following Barthes’ logic from *Writing Degree Zero*, the aim of this writing ‘is to go beyond Literature by entrusting one’s fate to a sort of basic speech, equally far from living languages and from literary language proper.’³³ This aim, as I understand it across Beckett’s works, is to perform a kind of *un*languageing – to empty language of its inscription – not for nihilistic abandon, but to revoke language of its ‘efficacious power’³⁴ so that it might be imagined anew. The final lines of *Imagination Dead Imagine* gesture to the unknown beyond this linguistic reset:

No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing.³⁵

³² Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Jonathan Cape (Beacon Press Books, 1968), pp.77-8.

³³ Barthes, p. 77.

³⁴ Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett’s Prose Works After the Nobel Prize* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p.66.

³⁵ ‘Imagination Dead Imagine’, p. 185.

Though faint, the final suggestion that the imagination *might* persist after it has been emptied of all meaning is exemplary of the queer thought informing my reading of Beckett. It is an affirmation of the negative that invests nothingness – a conceptual point zero that empties language of all meaning – with potential. To return to Badiou’s claim, ‘Beckett is a writer of hope, but a hope based on nothing.’³⁶ It is this precise hope based on nothing that characterises my own reading of Beckett through the antisocial logic of queer as a generative site of negation.

This reading of Beckett’s work builds on previous scholarship that has likewise considered his writing through a queer lens, or as queer texts, particularly reading the dysgenic bodies or sterile spaces of Beckett’s making as a queer refusal against (re)productive life. One such reading is Byron Heffer’s 2019 piece, ‘Beckett’s Queer Atavism’ where Heffer claims Beckett is a ‘writer of the queer counter-pastoral’³⁷ and frames his works as anti-vitalist modernism, focusing especially on his ‘fascination with atavism, regression, and decadence’ as well as his ‘queer refusal of generative life.’³⁸ As such, Heffer aligns Beckett with queer theorists Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, and Jonathan Goldberg and their decided hostility towards reproductive futurism.

In keeping with the imperatives of the antisocial queer thesis, Heffer resists reading Beckett’s counter-vitalism as affirmative of ethico-political scripts that reinscribe degenerate bodies with value: ‘Beckett’s violation of productive life is also a violation of the emancipatory urge to recuperate anti-normative life as part of an ethical resistance to biopower.’³⁹ Rather, Heffer reads Beckett’s dysgenic bodies (bodies, bodies of works) as a refusal to redeem the monstrous body,

³⁶ Badiou, p. xxx.

³⁷ Byron Heffer, ‘Beckett’s Queer Atavism’ in *Journal of Irish Studies*, Special Issue, 14:2 (2019), pp.78-91. <https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/DEF.HEFFER-1.pdf> [accessed 01/06/22], p.79.

³⁸ Heffer, p.79.

³⁹ Heffer, pp. 78-91.

opting instead for a *sacreligious* negation of the imperatives of humanism and heterosexuality: ‘My aim in this essay is to read Beckett’s fascination with the perverse—with Sade, sodomy, child-murderers, flagellation, and so on—as a violation of the mandate to find the source of value in life.’⁴⁰ The negativity espoused by Beckett’s atavism - the turn toward regression by way of the Beckettian primordial void - deviates from contemporary queer inhumanisms (wherein non-vital bodies are redeemed by an affirming of the monstrous) and instead Beckett’s rejection of “life” and ‘refusal to identify with the vital pulse of life as the final guarantee of meaning and value links with his counter-vitalist aesthetic.’ After all, Heffer suggests, ‘the invective against life that punctuates his texts joins with his depictions of ailing and exhausted bodies in mutually reinforcing negation of the vitalist ethos.’⁴¹

Within the two short texts I am looking at, this violation obviously presents quite differently to Heffer’s reading of Beckett’s more explosive and grotesque bodies (like those found in the anus and excrement-laden pages of *How It Is* and *Molloy*, for example). While Heffer and I share in reading retrogression as queer refusal of reproductive imperatives across Beckett, these readings differ in important ways. Most significantly, the aims of my project – within this chapter and more largely across the thesis – is not to locate specific bodies as queer, but to detail queer as that which works against language: to articulate queer as that which resists signification and to detail moments of semiotic dissolution as queer encounter. In conversation with Heffer, this reading locates a queer pulse across Beckett’s later works as ‘negation of the vitalist ethos’, but, rather than reading particular bodies as queer, I am interested in the stark, sterile bodies of Emma and Emmo as negating the function of the signifier not to proffer a queer body, but to frustrate

⁴⁰ Heffer, p.79.

⁴¹ Heffer, p. 80.

the modes of signification that articulate a body as queer or otherwise. This is the reason for choosing these two small texts that are not, perhaps, as overtly queer as those enlisted by Heffer: whereas he reads queer as content within Beckett's works, I am interested in how queer might work as form: as a gradual negation of linguistic efficacy.

The Beckettian subject as a non-vital body is likewise explored in Jonathan Boulter's 2018 monograph *Posthuman Space in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose* where he writes on *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Boulter's particular emphasis is on subjecthood within these 'closed space fictions':

How are we to understand the relation between the perceiving, remembering subject, the subject who appears only as the claustrophobic remainder of a past self, and his location within massively reduced and confined spaces, spaces that appear as testimony, perhaps witness, to a seismic shift in the reality of the world, as such?⁴²

Ultimately, it is Boulter's claim that the nameless subjects within *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* figure interiority, claiming the Beckettian posthuman to be a 'spectral subject, neither here nor there, neither absent or present, material or non-material, is defined, if this is indeed a term that is useful here, by its resistance to knowledge.'⁴³ This subject –or, the subject's imagination - Boulter suggests, is not concerned 'with the ephemera of memory, of affect, or of emotion'⁴⁴, and is therefore 'always already lacking any grounding subjectivity or person; that what we are presented with here in *All Strange Away* is a radically displaced voice, a radically ungrounded voice, a subjectivity without any subject, to return to Blanchot.'⁴⁵ This

⁴² Jonathan Boulter, 'Spaces of Ruin: *All Strange Away, Imagination Dead Imagine, The Lost Ones, Ping, Lessness*', *Posthuman Space In Samuel Beckett's Short Prose* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp.96-128, p.97.

⁴³ Boulter, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Boulter, p. 108.

⁴⁵ Boulter, p. 101.

reading prefaces my own to follow in which I likewise consider the spaces of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* through a Blanchottian framework; as a ‘post-catastrophic space.’⁴⁶

Though the focus of this chapter is on the two short works, S.E. Gontarski’s 2017 collection *Beckett Matters: Essays on Beckett’s Late Modernism* usefully situates these two shorter works within a larger ‘preoccupation with cylinders and enclosed spaces’⁴⁷, and characterises this preoccupation as Beckett having ‘done something innovative not only with his own fiction but with fiction in general –a reduction of narrative time to points of space, which, like all points, occupy, paradoxically, no space and so are a no thing, a nothing.’⁴⁸

Some early critics, Gontarski suggests,

Had confused Beckett’s pursuit of a ‘literature of the unword’ (a phrase he used in a 1937 letter to acquaintance Axel Kaun) with the cessation of creation –an active ‘unwording of the world’, as critic Carla Locatelli (1990) phrases it–with a passive silence, a retreat into quiescence. In the ‘closed space’ tales, however, Beckett seems to take some consolation and even pleasure in ‘unwording the world’, even as the enterprise was doomed to failure given the imagination’s persistence even in the face of the death of imagination.⁴⁹

Though phrased differently to my own position on these reduced spaces signalling a point from which to exceed language’s semiotic boundaries, Gontarski shares the sentiment that these spaces are generative by way of imaginative potential: ‘the desire to worsen language and its images generates an expansion of imaginative possibility in the attempt to shape experience.’⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Boulter, p.97.

⁴⁷ Gontarski, p. 63.

⁴⁸ Gontarski, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Gontarski, p. 67

⁵⁰ Gontarski, p. 73.

Gontarski also notes the role of the ‘devouring eye, ‘the eye of prey’ as it is called at the end of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, that witnesses and devours, consumes.’⁵¹

Writing more recently on this in *Beckett's Intermedial Ecosystems*, Anna McMullan frames these shorter works as commentary on surveillance, as though a ‘pseudo-anthropological gaze turned on human specimens, in some cases the last of their species, and the conditions of their enclosed habitats.’⁵² :

The constant preoccupation with eyes and inspection, combined with the dislocation of a stable point of observation in many of these closed space prose texts, echoes such regulatory techniques of inspection alongside an increasing sense of both narrator and viewer being subjected to the generative mechanisms of the textual world.⁵³

Her argument suggests an ambivalence in Beckett that at once deconstructs the apparatus of surveillance through writing that maintains this surveillance as an inescapable, ever-present feature:

While these prose texts vividly evoke the spatial confinement of their human inhabitants, the continual textual deconstruction of what has been posited also prevents the establishment of any stable world to be inhabited or imagined ‘whole’ by the reader. Rather, the works continually operate against, while framing, the persistent objectifying mechanisms or ‘syntaxes’ of their construction and perception.⁵⁴

This ambivalence characterises much of the following pages where Beckett’s closed-space fictions straddle presence and absence; the eternal return of nothing. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write of this sense of surveillance in Beckett’s work, too, in terms close to my own where the ‘unhappily sophisticated sense of all the external and internal forces that determine our

⁵¹ Gontarski, p. 64.

⁵² Anna McMullan, *Beckett's Intermedial Ecosystems: Closed Space Environments across the Stage, Prose, and Media Works* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) p.23.

⁵³ McMullan, p. 23.

⁵⁴ McMullan, p. 34.

misapprehension of others and of objects' are used 'in order to imagine starting again, in order to reconstitute the human as a monadic consciousness'.⁵⁵

Le vide

Maurice Blanchot's 1982 *The Space of Literature* articulates absence, or *space*, in precisely the terms I have chosen to understand Beckett's closed-space fictions. This is to say that imagined in the white rotunda of Beckett's making is 'that immense fund of impotence, the infinitely futile wherewithal to start over and over again'. As Blanchot writes:

Literature's space shelters nothing within it: it is also called *le vide*, "the void." ...Almost always, it is the origin which is anterior to any beginning, the image or echo of beginning—that immense fund of impotence, the infinitely futile wherewithal to start over and over again. Literature's space, in other words—the void which literature introduces in place of the place it takes—is analogous to the "other time" in the time measured by achievements: sterile, inert time, the time of distress. But the very freshness of every dawn is safeguarded in this distress and nowhere else, which is why literature demands that we return there.⁵⁶

The space of literature, according to Blanchot's thinking, is akin to queerness as it is understood within this thesis. The logic follows that if the void or 'literature's space' is analogous to the 'other time' - the sterile, inert time - and is 'anterior to any beginning', then its function is as the negation of presence. It is the absence or space that confirms presence: it is the antithetic force that sustains presence as presence's oppositional value. It is as such that queerness sustains the Symbolic by virtue of the necessary non-existence that existence depends on. Queerness is that indefinite persisting force of the Real through which the Imaginary and the Symbolic are oriented in opposition.

⁵⁵ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment* (Harvard University Press, 1993) p. 27.

⁵⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p.10.

In relation to the final refrain from the Blanchot passage above, *Imagination Dead Imagine* shares in the sentiment that ‘the very freshness of every dawn is safeguarded in this distress and nowhere else.’ The short text similarly reads:

But whatever uncertainties the return sooner or later to a temporary calm seems assured, for the moment, in the black dark or the great whiteness, with attendant temperature, world still proof against enduring tumult. Rediscovered miraculously after what absence in perfect voids it is no longer quite the same, from this point of view, but there is no other.⁵⁷

For Blanchot and Beckett both, the assuredness of the void offers existence even in non-existence. The persistence of the void survives because it must; its endurance is ‘safeguarded in this distress and nowhere else.’ A constant refrain throughout this thesis is the idea that to reduce oneself to nothingness - or to occupy the *no*-thing marked by queerness - is to occupy both ending and beginning. This is precisely the site that the void occupies - not ending or beginning, but that which proceeds and forecloses ending and beginning. It is, as Blanchot writes, ‘seeing and naming from the starting point of *everything*, from the starting point of the *absence* of everything, that is, from nothing.’⁵⁸

This notion of persistence is explored further in Blanchot’s writing on ‘The Murmur’s Inexhaustibility’. The murmur, suggests Blanchot, functions as pure language, that is language not yet abstracted by the signifier or language not yet incorporated into meaning, but language of an ‘extreme poverty’⁵⁹:

⁵⁷ ‘Imagination dead Imagine’, p. 184.

⁵⁸ Blanchot, p. 273.

⁵⁹ Blanchot, p. 182.

[the murmur] is still more than that which has been promised to him: not only the whole of language, but language as origin, the pure springing of the origin, where speaking precedes not one or another utterance but its possibility—where speaking always precedes itself.⁶⁰

We encounter this murmur in *All Strange Away* through Emmo's 'talking to himself in the last person, murmuring, no sound'⁶¹ The murmur is the only instance of verbalisation across Beckett's two short texts, occurring again in *Imagination Dead Imagine*:

Only murmur ah, no more, in this silence, and at the same instant for the eye of prey the infinitesimal shudder instantaneously suppressed. Leave them there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what are they doing.⁶²

The murmur, in Blanchot's conception, is language dispossessed from speech. If these cylindrical spaces are to be understood as the absence that precedes presence, then it follows that this murmur is the language that precedes speech, or precedes the naming function of language. Found, then, in these sterile, pre-linguistic spaces, is a perverse Garden of Eden as the moment before the determining advent of language. We find in this negation a reversion to that non-start before the start marked by language. Figured here, however, is not the origins of a human lineage, but an atavistic perversion of the origin story.

The two bodies that are named in *All Strange Away* as Emmo and Emma, are the figures of this regressive origin story, particularly in the beginnings of the text as the narrating observer explicitly imagines Emma's sexuated body and sexual acts:

⁶⁰ Blanchot, p. 181.

⁶¹ 'All Strange Away', p. 169.

⁶² *Imagination dead Imagine*, p. 185.

Breasts alone, then thighs and cunt alone, then arse and hole alone, all lovely beyond words... Fancy her being all kissed, licked, sucked, fucked and so on by all that, no sound, hands on knees to hold herself together.⁶³

The body of Emma is dissected, shown in pieces - arse *alone*, breasts *alone* – showing, to borrow a term from Baudrillard, the ‘lost unity of the subject.’⁶⁴ Her image grows more tenuous and more lifeless as the text progresses into *Imagination Dead Imagine*; as the imagination (sometimes described as the memory⁶⁵) of the narrator fails him. What begins as the imagination of sexual acts dissipates so that this explicit ideation is never foreclosed and, to the contrary, Emma’s body is described in decreasingly sexed terms until the only marker of her personhood is her blinking eye. Emma’s sex is only ever described as a ‘speck of dirt’, negating the prospect of a productive coupling. The two bodies never intersect, nor do their gazes meet. Instead they are assembled with their backs to one another so that they coexist in the vault, but never acknowledge or perceive one another. As Arka Chattopadhyay writes,

There is something rotten in the state of coupledness, and we can see the Beckettian pseudo-couple as an expression of sexual non-relation... The static position [of the bodies] disables the possibility of an encounter. The predetermined space and the fixed positions ensure that there is no relation between the two sexed bodies. They have their respective zones, strictly delimited, as if to prohibit a sexual act.⁶⁶

Eventuating to sexless, immobile figures, the occupants of these scarce, purgatorial spaces offer an origin – that is the possibility of existence without foundation⁶⁷ – but one wholly antithetic to the generation story, rather this is a story of *degeneration*; a ‘queer refusal of generative life.’⁶⁸

⁶³ ‘All Strange Away’, p. 172-3.

⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 111.

⁶⁵ Boulter, p.96.

⁶⁶ Arka Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real* (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 161, 168.

⁶⁷ Locatelli, p.66.

⁶⁸ Heffer, p.79.

Reading across Chattopadhyay and Heffer, this refusal is queer insofar as it negates (re)productive life in favour of the non-vital subject. I agree with the basic sentiment, but rather than locating queer as non-sexual bodies, I am more interested in these bodies as an analogue for the decreasing legibility of linguistic production throughout these works. As language reduces, so do the possibilities of life informed by this language. In working backwards towards a language before the sign, Beckett dissolves that which language constructs, including the gendered body and heterosexual union (that is incidentally detailed elsewhere in this thesis as the fundamental binary logic or conceptual basis on which language is structured). Queerness, such that I interpret it is across these two short works, is that which negates or acts against linguistic production so that the desexed bodies of Emma and Emmo, much like the sterile cylindrical spaces they are entrapped in, are products of Beckett's effort to reduce language to its minimal semantic content.

Much like Beckett's writing across these short texts is at the limit of the textual, his subjects are articulated at the limit of the human. Beckett's reduction of language to its bare function is a double project that sees the human (or the subject) implicated in this thinking nothing. These works are not interested in the redemptive potential of man, but in their regression towards a preconscious, preverbal state; a regression towards subjects that are 'inanimate save for a blinking eye.' This expiring subjectivity – or this backwards mapping – of the imagined subject reverts beyond (or *before*) a dialectical relationship or an oppositional binary between man and woman and instead we find the two bodies laid parallel, indiscriminate and immobile. Beckett reduces the human to the *least* possible in order to, as Heffer remarks, think seriously about humanity by interrogating its qualifications and essential functions:

If you wish to conduct a serious enquiry into ‘thinking humanity’, it is first of all necessary to suspend everything that is either inessential or doubtful; it is necessary to reduce humanity to its indestructible functions.⁶⁹

These regressive, bare figures literally embody nothing: they are the human stripped of the qualifiers of humanity. Here Heffer locates the body as the site of inquiry, and I do too in many instances throughout this chapter, but where he is looking at the least possible qualification of the human, my own work is interested in the least possible function of language; which, of course, has large implications for the human. Heffer and I are then aligned in reading Beckett’s sterile, bare bodies as negating, in one way or another, the cultural scripts that inform productive (read: viable) bodies. As far as my own logic goes, ontological formation at its most primary function is premised on the designation of bodies as male or female and the attendant gendered inscriptions of these terms. In negating language across these short works, Beckett is then negating the human as it is constructed through this language. Following the ambition of this thesis to think queerness beyond the limitations of language, Beckett articulates a piecemeal withdrawal from the governing law of the Symbolic to detail bodies and spaces as the non-articulable (occurring in Beckett as the nonverbal, prelingual, and immobile) – surplus outside of the Symbolic.

In simpler terms, James Brophy’s writing on Beckett in ‘As if the sex matters’ offers a reading of the isolated, solitary Beckettian figure as queerly exiled from the social world and ‘normalised discursive realms.’⁷⁰ Brophy’s argument is centred around love as a ‘private and socially deprived state’ in Beckett’s *Endgame* and as such is not given much attention in this chapter on

⁶⁹ Badiou, p.44.

⁷⁰ James Brophy, ‘As if the sex matters’: Beckett, Barthes and *Endgame* in *Love, Beckett Beyond the Normal*, ed. by Sean Kennedy, pp.90-104 (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 90.

Beckett's two shorter works. However, there is a sentiment from Brophy that articulates a way of reading *as queer* the exiled figure within Beckett's work:

Without romanticising queer suffering, contemporary queer theory might look to Beckett and Barthes who, I suggest, achieve insight about love by use of a not-specifically *gay*, but definitionally queer, exilic isolation.⁷¹

This 'definitionally queer' speaks to a level of deconstruction or 'carefully-constructed extreme solitude' that the 'homosexual/heterosexual binary is reduced to essentially nothing.'⁷² At the outset of *All Strange Away*, there is the imagined sexual scenario that is easily understood as a heterosexual fantasy (though perhaps confused by the unknown gender of the narrator).

However, as the texts progress –or as the bodies *regress* - there are fewer and fewer markers of sexuality or gender: in their gradual unintelligibility, these figures become immune to interpretation and the text gradually annihilates any qualifiers that might locate them within the Symbolic order. This is the same reduction of binaries to essentially nothing that Brophy articulates as queer. As Beckett writes, 'Imagine what needed, no more, any given moment, needed no more, gone, never was.'⁷³ In this piecemeal dissolution of Symbolic efficacy across these short fictions we locate the logic of a queer antisociality: to embrace negativity not to uphold the social order that invests queer subjects as Other, but to embrace negation to the extent that it annihilates an order that could designate a subject as queer or otherwise.

Symbolic articulation and the scopic field

⁷¹ Brophy, p. 94.

⁷² Brophy, p. 90.

⁷³ 'All Strange Away', p.170.

In addition to the works from Heffer and Brophy above that read the non-generative figures of Beckett's works as queerly antithetic to a future-facing politics, I suggest that Beckett's acute rendering of the scopic field or the *gaze* of the unspecified narrator within these works is a vital component in his queerly-oriented depiction of being/non-being. My suggestion is that, through the gaze as its structuring form, the dying imagination negates the visual field as a space of identity formation and operates instead as pure unconscious. I have detailed above the piecemeal dissolution of Symbolic efficacy within these works: the production of a sterile and bare functional language *sans* signification. The scopic field as such is void of the assurance of the Symbolic to structure and symbolise it - to facilitate the illusion of wholeness or a unified subject - and thus the Real invades this field as the unmediated unconscious.

Through the specular register, or more properly through the gaze, the subject is always already split; the Real is always already intruding. The gaze, as I will explain it through Lacan, is the means by which the unconscious is manifested in the visual field. Usually, the gaze would occur as a stain that marks the visual field as a gesture to what is lacking or what is unseen by the conscious subject. This stain is reconciled, however, through one's false identification with the image of a complete subject (usually through a mirror). In Beckett we find the inverse; the gaze is not mitigated by self-concept, but is all-consuming. It is not only part of the visual field but its constitutive form. It is in this way that the Beckettian void is a space of the Real, and why the subjects we find therein are lacking any grounding subjectivity.

On the point that the subject is always already split, there is a gap between what the subject registers and interprets as reality through their line of vision and the recognition that, as seen through the gaze, the subject is always already part of a reality constituted by another's look. Does the subject then belong to the reality he identifies with in the image of his wholeness, or is

he an object of the other's gaze? This split is explained in Lacan's seminar from February 1964 titled 'The Eye and the Gaze', where he suggests that we must 'distinguish between the function of the eye and that of gaze.'⁷⁴ The eye, or seeing, speaks to the function of the eye-as-organ that interprets as objective reality what is seen. The gaze, however, precedes recognition through sight. The gaze is what overflows from the immediate line of vision, and what accounts for the image as partial:

In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze.⁷⁵

The gaze is, as Lacan suggests, 'the underside of consciousness.'⁷⁶ This underside suggests the structuring role of the gaze, like that of the Real, that underpins and shapes what the consciousness perceives as reality. This slippage or impasse that Lacan characterises as the gaze are the excesses of vision beyond perception, and the rupture or split of the moment that the seeing *subject* becomes a seen *object*. Lacan then asks, 'if the gaze is that underside of consciousness, how shall we try to imagine it?'⁷⁷

Is it not this effort to imagine the gaze that we find in the failing consciousness of Beckett's dying imagination? To begin, the cylindrical spaces of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* share the curved shape of the eye, while the geometrical interpretations of space and the unstable refractions of light suggest these works are occurring within a visual register; one where

⁷⁴Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Penguin Books, 1986), p, 74.

⁷⁵ Lacan, p. 73.

⁷⁶ Lacan, p. 83.

⁷⁷ Lacan, p. 83.

vision is renewed or adjusted by the close of a blink as ‘darkness’ followed by the opening of the eye as ‘great whiteness’. Agreeing that these spheres are indeed analogous to the interior of the eye, the imagining subject is then detailing their own fragmentary specular image: one that passes through desire in the instance of recounting Emma’s sexed body, and reformulates in partial and fragmented pieces. In addition to being fragmentary, this specular image is consistently displaced by the refrain ‘he’s not here, no sound, fancy dead’, or ‘she’s not here, or, Fancy dead’.

If the conscious mind works to recuperate a unified subject through identification with the image, the gaze of the dying imagination as *unconscious* perpetually evades such identification. The perceived image as expiring, dissected, and at times invisible bodies resists recognition of a subject with which to identify so that the dying imagination vacillates indiscriminately between varied states of non-being. As Lacan writes, ‘what truly belongs to the order of the unconscious, is that it is neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealised.’⁷⁸

This unrealised figure of the unconscious is, as Lacan describes it, *pre-ontological* –namely that it does not lend itself to ontology.⁷⁹ Belonging to the Real, the unconscious cannot be figured within an ontological rubric of being and non-being, this is to say that it cannot be realised within language as either being or non-being: it is outside of the Symbolic register that could locate it as such. It is this non-representable, unrealised figure that aligns the Beckettian non-vital body with the queer figure as it is conceptualised within the antisocial queer thesis:

The burden that queerness is phobically produced precisely to represent, is that of the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void (replete, paradoxically with *jouissance*) always already lodged within, though barred

⁷⁸ Lacan, p.31.

⁷⁹ Lacan, p.29.

from, symbolisation: the gap or wound of the Real that inhabits the Symbolic's very core.⁸⁰

This model of queerness, insofar as it cannot be conceptualised within the Symbolic unless as some persistent negative force on which normative sexuality is structured in opposition, is the figural identity (or the *disfiguration* of identity⁸¹, as Edelman suggests) of the death drive that 'always insists as the void in and of the subject, beyond its fantasy of self-realisation.'⁸² As Lee Edelman writes:

Queerness is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order...a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law.⁸³

The gradual dissolution of signification within these short works articulates this 'violent passage beyond the bounds of identity.' The bodies at once named and gendered, Emma and Emmo, edge not towards death (they importantly persist against death), but towards incoherence, that is towards Symbolic annihilation. As language as an increasingly acerbic prose is emptied of its signifying function, so too are the bodies that signification inscribes emptied. As Marc Botha writes:

Atopia is pervasive in Beckett's work. It emerges in the closed spaces in which his characters habitually find themselves trapped; *a space of dying*, not only empty but always emptying, in which they narrate their unlikely persistence in a state of interminable decline.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Lee Edelman *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), p. 22.

⁸¹ *No Future*, 24.

⁸² *No Future*, 25.

⁸³ *No Future*, p.25.

⁸⁴ Botha, 104.

The barely human, immobile and indiscriminate bodies that we encounter at the end of *Imagination Dead Imagination* are the bodies on the other side of this violent passage: they are neither being or non-being, but the undifferentiated unconscious suspended in the nothingness that is neither life nor the foreclosure of death.

Lacan's sense of this suspended unconscious as *pre-ontological* ties into my reading of these works as materialising a primordial void, or a perverse origin story, one where the instruction to go forth and multiply is foreclosed by the inert impotence and non-relation of Beckett's barely human bodies. In keeping with this thread, the gaze of these closed-space fictions perverts the logic of a Genesis, of an all-saying creator bearing witness to his creation. Instead we find 'the closed economy of the backward gaze'⁸⁵ where 'Beckett doesn't just reject the future; he exposes his creatures to an inhuman past which negates the image of life as a flourishing continuum.'⁸⁶

This inhuman past is most apparent in the final passage of *Imagination*, where we find the fragmentary specular image finally made whole, laid bare and essentially inanimate save an inhumane gaze returned to the observer:

Sweat and mirror notwithstanding, they might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible. Piercing pale blue the effect is striking, in the beginning. Never the two gazes together except once, when the beginning of one overlapped the end of the other, for about ten seconds.⁸⁷

The gazes of the entrapped bodies never meet to allow recognition of one another (or, importantly, never allow recognition of oneself *through* the other), but a gaze is met nonetheless:

⁸⁵ *No Future*, p.54.

⁸⁶ Heffer, p. 81.

⁸⁷ 'Imagination Dead Imagine', p.184.

that between the narrating observer and his seen objects. This returned gaze cast back onto the observing subject alienates the dying imagination from a position of observation, so they too are trapped in another's gaze, likewise fragmented and split. One might read this final exchanged glance as the suggestion that there is no stable frame of reference, nor is there a stable basis or point of conception from which language operates. Such that reality is articulated through the illusion of wholeness, this illusion is pierced in the moment that the observer is implicated in the gaze of the subject – their authority is undone, such that there is only the option to begin again.

Something comes of nothing

As with Blanchot's sense of the void, discussed earlier as the appearance of absence precisely in the absence of presence, this perverse Genesis, or this closed economy of the backwards gaze, likewise registers 'a moment of appearance and disappearance, an event of creation and destruction.'⁸⁸ The event of destruction as the annihilation of temporal, linguistic, and ontological markers of the Symbolic across the two texts simultaneously registers as the end of coherence and as a radix from which things newly acquire coherence: a beginning again from, or *as*, nothing. It is in line with Marc Botha's writing on minimalism that I read the symbolic sterility of the Beckettian closed space, then, as foreclosing a return to a conscious reality, while gesturing at the possibility of the impossible non-existence beyond this reality. As Botha suggests of the minimum:

Minimum names the absolute: it is the *least possible*, but also the *least necessary*. It is both an ending and a beginning, the terminus of patient processes of simplification, reduction, exposition, intensification and clarification, but also a site of sudden,

⁸⁸ Botha, p.1.

transfigurative events and explosions of novelty. Minimum establishes a limit beyond which things lose coherence, disappearing into nothingness, returning to undifferentiated multiplicity. But minimum also marks a radix from which things acquire coherence, subtracting form out of nothingness, proceeding from pure multiplicity.⁸⁹

The atopia of the dying imagination is precisely this dissolution of coherence. It is the limit of language at the threshold of its oblivion. Secured in this disappearance into nothingness, however, is non-space, or the impossible space of Nothing beyond articulation. Phrased otherwise, this space of Nothing is, to borrow a phrase from Agamben, the ‘abyss of potentiality.’⁹⁰ It is the moment before things acquire coherence or pass into actuality, where things remain in abeyance on the threshold of unreality and actualisation. It is the non-space as pure potential not yet inscribed by the Symbolic. As Boulter writes,

Beckett is clear that this conjuring, this attempt to call a being into being, functions at the limit of imaginative possibility: the narrative imagination is dead: *imagination dead*; and yet it continues: *imagine*.⁹¹

It is this thinking nothing, or this impossible continuation, beyond language (or beyond reality as constructed by language) that aligns with the queer thought guiding this thesis. As mentioned earlier in regards to Edelman, queer as the figural identity of the death drive occupies this very same non-space (call it incoherence, the unconscious, the Real) that we encounter through Beckett. It is not only the space beyond articulation, or that language cannot reach, but the destructive force that destabilises the order which would name it as such:

Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual

⁸⁹ Botha, p.1.

⁹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, pp. 243-274 (Stanford University Press, 1999) pp. 253-4.

⁹¹ Boulter, p.99.

or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance.⁹²

The logic follows that it is in the annihilation of such a system of recognition that the queer figure arises as multiplicity, as undifferentiated existence that evades recognition within the social order. To return to Botha:

Minimum constitutes an ontological threshold: on one side, being is expressed in terms of existence – the multiple configurations of real entities; on the other side, minimum gives way to pure being – multiplicity without configuration.⁹³

Queerly thinking this incomprehensible nothing beyond signification arises precisely at the limit of signification - at the other side of the violent passage through identity. This is what we encounter through Beckett's strange sterile worlds: destruction and creation, ending and beginning. The final remark from *Imagination Dead Imagine* hints at the possibility of this impossible beginning again, beginning, that is, as non-existence of the imagination after its death:

Leave them there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, *and if not what are they doing.*⁹⁴

And if not –if the end of signification does not mark the end, then what are they doing? It is this sense of the faint potential that things might exist otherwise - that life might impossibly carry on beyond the current discursive regime – that one might find affirmation in these thoroughly grim works. Indeed, Badiou broaches Beckett with a bent towards the affirmative with the claim 'Beckett edges towards a faith in possibility.'⁹⁵ He continues:

⁹² Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2024), p. xvi.

⁹³ Botha, p.9.

⁹⁴ 'Imagination dead Imagine', p. 185 (italics my own).

⁹⁵ Badiou, p.136.

Beckett is a writer of hope, but a hope based on nothing. ‘Nothing’, because the event or encounter with the other does not operate as a principle or foundation that could serve to plot the outline of a ‘hope-giving’ series of texts. ‘Nothing’, because the ultimate resource from which generic humanity draws its cognitive and practical capacity for novelty, as well as its courage to confront the torture of the cogito and the indifference of the dim, is the *void*, and the way its pure inconsistency can burst through the partitions of apparent order, to reveal the most radical, the most generic, equality.⁹⁶

It is this sentiment from Badiou that characterises Beckett’s inclusion within this thesis. This hope based on nothing is precisely the queer logic that embraces negativity insofar as it destabilises the frameworks of coherence and allows for the possibility of change: a hope based on nothing. As Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant suggest,

The desire of annihilation, then, is to permit the encounter with negativity to initiate transformations whose end is only the endless opening onto the necessity of new ones.⁹⁷

As queer within the Symbolic order cannot be recuperated as an identity - except as non-identity - the annihilation of this order allows that queer appear as the social order’s death drive, as ‘the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.’⁹⁸ Beckett articulates the encounter with negativity through the piecemeal dissolution of Symbolic efficacy and this encounter with queer as negativity, or queer as the nonbeing associated with the Real, thus permits, as Badiou suggests, a ‘burst through the partitions of apparent order, to reveal the most radical, the most generic, equality.’⁹⁹ The void as such is a generative site. It is the other side of coherence where the body appears as incoherence and nondifferentiation. Of course, this incoherence marks the limit point of knowledge – the unknowability of the queer figure beyond the structures of recognition that is captured in the

⁹⁶ Badiou, p. XXX.

⁹⁷ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman., *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014), p.18.

⁹⁸ *No Future*, p.9.

⁹⁹ Badiou, p. xxx.

refrain *and if not what are they doing?* – but in annihilating these structures of meaning, we can begin thinking nothingness, that is thinking queer.

The following chapter on Derek Jarman's *Blue* likewise details the *unbecoming* of the subject through the abstraction of cinematic and aesthetic conventions on screen; the reduction of cinematic elements to a monochromatic, static blue screen. It is through the screen emptied of signification that Jarman materialises '*the admirable austerity of the void*'¹⁰⁰ and queerly orients us towards negation or that conceptual no-space outside of symbolic structures. In detailing Jarman's experience of being an HIV-positive gay man under the Thatcher government, the film speaks to the harm that the imposition of identity markers can cause, but it also speaks to a shift from *gay as sexuality* to *queer as composite, angry, beyond a politics of identity*. Unlike 'gay', 'queer' for Jarman announced that 'homosexuality was difficult, different and far from anodyne; sometimes gay, but at other times sad and furious.'¹⁰¹ This chapter as such reconciles queer as theoretical intervention with queer as lived experience, and indeed how such experiences have informed queer not as an identity marker, but as defiance, resistance, and as antithetical to systems of subjugation that aim to codify identities.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion*, ed. by Keith Collins (Penguin Random House, 2018) p.198 (italics mine).

¹⁰¹ Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 464.

The admirable austerity of the void: symbolic dissolution in Derek Jarman's

Blue

*In absence he grasped a presence, a strength still persisting,
as if in nothingness there were a strange power of affirmation.*

–Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

Derek Jarman's *Blue* is the final addition to his cinematic oeuvre and undoubtedly his most experimental film. This feature film offers 79 minutes of static blue screen in the colour of Yves Klein's *International Klein Blue*. The screen is void of images outside of this unchanging blue, and is overlaid with narration detailing dream sequences, memories, and Jarman's meditations on life as he reconciles himself to gradual blindness from the AIDS-related retinal virus he developed, Cytomegalovirus (CMT), and the imminence of his death in light of his HIV-positive status. These are poetic and somber meditations filtered through musings on the colour blue as transcendence or as a portal to the infinite¹, as an 'elegiac journey towards immateriality.'² It is the abeyant blue screen as an articulation of, or as a journey towards, immateriality that informs my reading of *Blue* as instancing the kinds of symbolic rupture that this thesis charts; these are moments when the illusory law of the Symbolic is suspended and the orienting devices of time, signification, and the subject are displaced by, or subsumed into, the blue.

¹ Chris Townsend, *Art and Death* (I. B. Tauris and Company, 2008), p.100.

² Peake, p. 511.

This journey towards immateriality is inseparable from the process of dying through which it is framed; the *unbecoming* of the subject that Jarman confronts in narrating the imminence of his own death is mirrored in the abstraction of cinematic and aesthetic conventions on screen; the reduction down to pure elements of cinema. This is to say that there is a shared abstraction across content and form that conceptualises the void through death as the end of signification and materialises it on screen. Without images through which to locate meaning, the blue screen is emptied of signification – what Jarman phrases as ‘*the admirable austerity of the void*’³ – though, rather than register the end of meaning, this void figures meaning’s excess as the unnameable surplus beyond the Symbolic. When I speak of blue as excess here, I do so aligned with Julia Kristeva’s sense of colour as a shattering of meaning:

The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm for language, involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences. These, however, are articulated within an area beyond meaning that holds meaning’s surplus. Colour is not zero meaning: it is excess meaning through instinctual drive: that is, through death. By destroying unique normative meaning, death adds its negative force to that meaning in order to have the subject come through.⁴

It is this sense of excess meaning that characterises my reading of *Blue*, and indeed of queer divestiture from a schematics of meaning throughout this thesis. Departure from, or refusal of, the Symbolic does not register as nihilism in Kristeva’s assessment or my own. It more properly registers ‘normative meaning’ not as law, but as the limiting logic that queer exceeds, ruptures, and resists. The form of *Blue* as colour that shatters meaning properly reflects the content in

³ *Smiling in Slow Motion*, p.198. (italics mine)

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 2024), p. 226.

which Jarman's refusal of signification on screen does the very same. It is in destroying this logic, as Kristeva suggests, that our thinking is oriented towards the non-logic that queerness marks beyond the normative discursive regime.

It is the refrain of this project that queer orients us towards negation or that conceptual no-space outside of symbolic structures. The work of locating queer beyond structures of recognition and beyond articulation is not solely a literary phenomenon, and similarly frustrates cinematic practice. Despite efforts to locate queer within structures of recognition, whether through literary or cinematic examples, it remains *asymbolic* across these mediums and as such has no signified; it instead figures the structural negativity that exists outside of (or underlies) the Symbolic as an unnameable, structurally antagonistic force. As Lee Edelman conceives of queerness:

Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance.⁵

As such my readings previous to this chapter have not been an effort to locate or read queerness into a text, but rather recognising and reading *as queer* moments of illegibility or disorientation where signification lapses. This approach is true of this chapter, too, however the relationship between *Blue* and queerness is twofold: the blue screen serves as a site of negativity where, in the absence of orienting devices or signification, queer provides a framework for reading attuned to immateriality; to 'the static on screen that finally signifies nothing.'⁶ So too does queer offer a

⁵ Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022) p. xvi.

⁶ Valerie Rohy, 'The Cinema of the Impossible: Queer Theory and Narrative' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*, ed. by Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol, Vol. 1 (2018) pp. 145–56, Edinburgh University Press, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2f4vh7k.16>. [Accessed 6 March 2023]p. 151.

framework for reading Jarman's abstracted subjectivity as multiplicity spanning living and dying, which is to say subjecthood that is difficult to perceive, let alone map. In the instance of *Blue*, however, the creative decisions made by Jarman are directly informed by, and inseparable from, his lived experience of queerness and the political context of the AIDS-epidemic under the Thatcher government. The cinematic void of *Blue*, for example, captures the invisible quality of Jarman's HIV-diagnosis and refuses to designate or reinforce the emaciated gay man as referent of this disease. As Tony Peake remarks of *Blue*:

He would have a meditation not only on the void, but on his disease. He had long wanted to make on celluloid the sort of statement about AIDS he had been making with paint. Two things had defeated him: the impossibility of visualising an unseen virus and the difficulty of avoiding sentimentality, almost inevitable in any realistic or semi-realistic treatment of the subject.⁷

This chapter as such reconciles queer as theoretical intervention with queer as lived experience, and indeed how such experiences have informed queer not as identity marker, but as defiance, resistance, and as antithetical to systems of subjugation that aim to codify identities. Jarman's experience of being an HIV-positive gay man under the Thatcher government speaks to the harm that the imposition of identification can cause, but it also speaks to a shift from *gay as sexuality* to *queer as composite, angry, beyond a politics of identity*. Unlike 'gay', 'queer' for Jarman announced that 'homosexuality was difficult, different and far from anodyne; sometimes gay, but at other times sad and furious.'⁸

This usage of queer as a concept to articulate more than an identity fixed to sexuality characterises the works of the New Queer Cinema of the early 1990s. This cinematic movement,

⁷ Peake, p. 511.

⁸ Peake, p. 464.

of which Jarman was a part, was borne of a shifting sense of queer as political and antagonistic where ‘outrage and opportunity merged into a historic artistic response to insufferable political repression.’⁹ As Bob Nowlan writes of the ‘queer’ of New Queer Cinema:

Contemporary use of queer was, in fact, from the beginning, most often conceived both as an invocation and as a problematization of the notion of collective identity rooted in sexual and gender commonality. “Queer” was, in other words, used to both denote and to refuse to denote identity...Queer use of queer did not represent the assertion of a new political identity but rather the organisation for political action around a “fracturing of identity.”¹⁰

As this chapter navigates queer as a theoretical tool alongside queer as lived experience, it is interested, too, in how antisocial queer imaginings reconcile or account for death as an abstraction - ego death, for example - and death as a literal occurrence. I try to reconcile this abstraction as it is balanced with the occurrence of Jarman’s death in February 1994. There has been much attention leading up to this chapter on annihilation of the self as a feature of queer antisociality: a pursuit of ego death through queer acts of disidentification, risque sexual practice as rapturous *jouissance*, or an embrace of the death drive. And here the blue screen is likewise read as an abstraction of death where ego-death occurs through the lack of signification on screen, and where I read the moment of encounter with the film as a perpetual return to the moment where death is imminent but never fully foreclosed. I conduct such readings in conversation with Jarman’s passing, and ask how this sense of temporal disorder and fragmented subjectivity that so attends to queer lives might attend also to queer *afterlives*.

Into the blue

⁹ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press, 2013) p. xvi.

¹⁰ Bob Nowlan, ‘Queer Theory, Queer Cinema’, *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st century*, eds. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones, pp.2–20, (Cambridge Scholars, 2010) pp. 4-5.

The colour of *Blue*, International Klein Blue, is a deep ultramarine created by ‘the great master of blue—the French painter Yves Klein.’¹¹ Klein considered this blue to be the purest colour, with an extra-dimensional quality that transcended the viewer beyond the materiality of the painting, and into ‘the void, the space that existed outside of the living reality emptied out of all matter.’¹² For Klein, the profound hue of International Klein Blue engendered a new aesthetic consciousness – ‘a potentially infinite visual expansion’¹³ – that extends to the immaterial, spiritual or sublime. It is this sense of blue as transcendence towards the sublime that is shared across Jarman’s own meditations on colour where he remarks that ‘blue is the universal love in which man bathes – it is the terrestrial paradise.’¹⁴

Beginning in 1992, Jarman’s writing efforts concentrated on colour, offering deep considerations on hues, representative qualities, and usage which were compiled for the collection *Chroma*, published shortly before his death. His meditations on blue within this collection, titled ‘Into the Blue’, are paired with writings from Jarman’s diary in June of 1992 to inform the script of *Blue*. Across these writings, Jarman places the colour blue in conversation with blindness and the gradual dissolution of his sight. Though mostly unable to see through his deteriorating retinas, he inverts the logic of failing vision as a limitation, framing this loss of sight as a renewed insight, one intimately tied to blue as being beyond or liberating one from the suffocation of the image.

¹¹ Derek Jarman, *Chroma* (Vintage, 2000), p.104.

¹² Eli Anapur, ‘All You Need to Know About the International Klein Blue’, Widewalls (2016) [All You Need to Know About the International Klein Blue | Widewalls](#) [accessed 15/07/2024], para 4.

¹³ *MoMA Highlights: 375 Works from The Museum of Modern Art, New York* (The Museum of Modern Art, 2019)

¹⁴ *Chroma*, p.108.

Blue, as Jarman writes of the colour in *Chroma*, is ‘an open door to soul, an infinite possibility, becoming tangible’¹⁵:

The image is a prison of the soul, your heredity, your education, your vices and aspirations, your qualities, your psychological world... To be an astronaut of the void, leave the comfortable house that imprisons you with reassurance. Remember, to be going and to have are not eternal – fight the fear that engenders the beginning, the middle and the end. For blue there are no boundaries or solutions.¹⁶

Jarman reconciles death through this logic of blue as immaterial and boundless, as communicating the metaphysical that is freed from image and freed from form: I have walked beyond the sky, writes Jarman, the ‘fathomless blue of bliss.’¹⁷ It is this logic of blue as the immaterial that informs *Blue* as space through which Jarman orients us towards his death. Without any images to detract from the depth of the blue screen, it becomes a boundless, timeless void.

I will come to detailing the particularities of the colour blue and its relationship to the Symbolic in the following section, which is framed by Julia Kristeva’s chromatic analysis from her 1972 essay ‘Giotto’s Joy’ but, for now, I am interested in the temporal abstractions and the fragmented sense of time within *Blue* as a component of immateriality, and the void as a space for thinking temporality attuned to those lateral constituents of queer time as circular, lapsing, fragmented. As with the works considered in previous chapters, temporal signifiers or time as a structuring device come loose within *Blue* through fragmented narration that looks forward to a death that has both long passed and never arrived such that the narrative is not situated in time, but rather in

¹⁵ *Chroma*, p. 112.

¹⁶ *Chroma*, p.115.

¹⁷ *Chroma*, p.115.

the timeless space of the blue. Film as moving image that might register a sequence of events or the spectacle of death is denied in favour of the motionless, imageless screen: ‘with its monochromatic screen, *Blue* unites film and painting by annihilating time except as ‘writing’ - the diary entries and commentary read by Jarman and his collaborators.’¹⁸ In the absence of such images, the spoken narrative functions as the primary orienting device in *Blue*, told through the multiple voices of Nigel Terry, Tilda Swinton, John Quentin, and Jarman himself. The narrative as such recounts a fragmentary, non-progressive temporal passage as it floats indiscriminately between dream sequences, memories, and Jarman’s death that, at the moment of encounter with the film, simultaneously has and has not occurred. This non-linear, unstructured narration enacts queer temporality aligned with Laura Doan’s sense of queer time as

Open to the plurality of the present, all permutations of queer temporalities investigate the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life.¹⁹

These recursive eddies and loops are the piecing together of moments: sombre articulations that detail death’s imminence are layered upon recollections and memories, the incidentals of life by way of a passing cyclist and a flower in bloom, and tributes to Jarman’s friends lost to HIV - ‘David, Howard, Graeme, Terry, Paul’. The narration does not offer a sense of coherence or lineated development, and rather past and present, dream and reality, collapse and culminate in *Blue*. In this delineated abstraction of time, the moments of narration regarding the imminence of Jarman’s own death – those which detail the tenderness of his failing flesh – look forward to a

¹⁸ Townsend, p.15.

¹⁹ Laura Doan, ‘Queer history / Queer memory: The Case of Alan Turing’ in *GLQ*, 23.1 (2017), pp. 131-136, *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/645206. p. 125.

death that has already long passed, a death that is poignantly framed through the acts of living which it haunts. 'All that concerns either life or death', narrates Jarman, 'is all transacting and at work within me.'²⁰ As Jarman writes of death in his journal, 'Once you are dead, time telescopes'²¹, and so it does here in the blue: the dead and the dying, this is to say the dead and the living, are in conversation, simultaneously present and absent in this strange meeting place - this intersection of life and death - of the blue screen. One experiences the film attuned to this uncanny intersection of life and death; attuned to Jarman's presence that persists through the enduring blue screen, but a presence unwhole and disembodied so that he is at once there and not there. Jarman's ghostly presence enacts Jacques Derrida's sense of the spectre where 'a spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronises, it recalls us to anarchy.'²²

The temporal anarchy of *Blue*, and indeed of Jarman's specter, is compounded by the perpetuity of the filmic medium: each encounter with the film finds the Jarman of 1993, dying but powerfully alive in his narration of a death not-yet-come. *Blue* as this temporally diffuse site recalls the past, but the immediacy of the screen situates it always in the present. The linear imaginings of time as a developmental passage of past/present/future, or 'beginning, the middle, and the end' as Jarman suggests in the passage quoted earlier, are here disrupted as past and present collapse in on themselves. The film, and indeed Jarman, cannot be comfortably relegated to the past as, in the moment of encounter with the film, he remains in the perpetual presence of the blue screen where he is both everywhere and nowhere so that time and its teleological structure is further obscured or tempered by the timelessness of the abeyant screen. Jarman

²⁰ Derek Jarman, *Blue* (Zeitgeist Films, 1993)

²¹ Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testimony* (Random House, 2017) p. 81.

²² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Routledge, 2006), p.6.

remains and does not remain; he dies and too he lives forever here in the blue. The absence of images within *Blue* work to compound this inability to locate the film in a particular setting and likewise ensure we cannot locate Jarman within a particular moment of his life or a particular subjecthood. Jarman exists beyond or untethered to his corporeal self precisely because the lack of images refuse a stable referent or signifier - most significantly, the film refuses a fixed image of Jarman as the emaciated spectacle of the AIDS victim.

As Jarman writes of blue in *Chroma*, 'BLUE IS BLUE', registering the purity of International Klein Blue not as fixed sign (blue is melancholy, blue is calm, etc.), but as colour freed from signification. The static on the screen finally signifies nothing.²³ The monochromatic blue screen is then not a negative resignation into the abyss, but a generative site and a moment of potentiality where Jarman is able to exist not as a fixed subject, but as allegory in the blue void of signification. As the film's narration suggests, the blue is 'infinite possibility becoming tangible'. Writing on *The Cinema of Stasis*, Justin Remes asks: 'what is one to make of these cinematic voids? Is it sadistic for filmmakers to embrace absence, deprivation, nothingness? Does the void imply a kind of nihilism?'²⁴ The answer to which is firmly no: as with *Blue*, this absence on screen functions not as a gesture toward nihilism, but potentiates new modes of orienting oneself outside of dominant subjectivities or temporalities. It ruptures modes of signification and in doing so becomes a form of queer escape: a momentary liberation from dominant cultural scripts. Remes continues on to assert that 'a film like *Blue* does not use the monochromatic screen to merely posit nihilism and emptiness. Rather, Jarman's blue screen is a site of multiplicity, limitlessness, eternity.'²⁵

²³ Rohy, p. 151.

²⁴ Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (Columbia University Press, 2015) p.129.

²⁵ Remes, p.129.

Colour and the symbolic

The temporal abstractions of *Blue* are amplified, or enabled, by the blue screen not simply through the lack of images, but through monochrome colour as an abstract form that likewise evades signification. As Tony Peake remarks,

Jarman does something far more shattering, and liberating, than simply negate the image. The abstract film is marked by the yoking of filmic temporality to the forms of abstract painting; it allows a yearned-for dynamism to overcome the stasis of painting. By making that abstract form a monochrome, the purest form of modernist abstraction, Jarman utterly destroys the temporality of film itself, not simply the screened filmic-photographic image, because it is a form that defeats time.²⁶

This sense of monochrome as the purest form of abstraction is the refrain of Julia Kristeva 1972 essay ‘Giotto’s Joy’ which she opens with the assertion that ‘painting is its own reality.’²⁷ Kristeva’s suggestion is that colour, and in particular the colour blue, is outside of signification as presymbolic *jouissance*. It resists incorporation into a shared or communal sense of reality and rather figures its own reality independent of the Symbolic register: ‘Colour emerges as the device by which painting gets away from identification of objects and therefore from realism’²⁸ This sentiment from Kristeva echoes Yves Klein’s refrain on International Klein Blue as ‘the void, the space that existed outside of the living reality emptied out of all matter.’²⁹ This shared belief in colour as existing outside of the signifying logic of the Symbolic is informed by the plurality and inconsistency of meaning that colour registers. Colour as such is incorporated into meaning as signified of the context in which it is produced, but at the same time shatters or exceeds this

²⁶ Townsend, pp.101-2.

²⁷ Kristeva, p.210.

²⁸ Kristeva, p. 231.

²⁹ Eli Anapur, ‘All You Need to Know About the International Klein Blue’, *Widewalls* (2016) [All You Need to Know About the International Klein Blue | Widewalls](#) [accessed 15/07/2024], para 4.

meaning by resisting its uniformity. This shattering is *jouissance* as surplus or excess meaning (beyond meaning, against meaning) that pierces the illusion of unity so that colour, as Kristeva suggests, is a space that gives rise to its own transgression; ‘it achieves the momentary dialectic of law – the laying down of one meaning so that it might at once be pulverised, multiplied into plural meanings. *Colour is the shattering of unity.*’³⁰

In articulating blue as being outside of the symbolic order, Kristeva maps her chromatic theory along semiotic lines by establishing parallels between writing and painting, or naming and painting as that which is ‘both without a name and more than a name.’³¹ This mapping aligns cultural codes or historical moments with *narrative* (that is the overarching ideological and social systems informing a painting) and the image as its *signified* within this narrative (that is the image as upholding or affirming the normative logic of whatever given context), but there is no correlative term for the role of colour in pictorial “language.”³² Of course, colour registers different meanings in different contexts, but it is a ‘hopelessly *separate* referent’³³ because how the subject perceives colour creates its own separate reality. An example of this more firmly related to *Blue* comes again from Tony Peake where he suggests that:

Art may adopt structures that, in their eschewing of the permitted forms of the culture industry (and I’m thinking immediately of Jarman’s *Blue* in contrast to the meretricious drivel offered by the narrative film industry), render it unrecognisable because they no longer share common conceptual and linguistic paradigms.’³⁴

³⁰ Kristeva, p. 226.

³¹ Kristeva, p. 214.

³² Kristeva, p. 212.

³³ Kristeva, p. 214.

³⁴ Townsend, p. 19.

It is this same translatory inability or inconsistency that registers colour nebulous or resistant to unity. Colour as such cannot be aligned to a speech act, but rather functions in addition to speech as ‘something that is more-than-speech, a meaning to which space and colour have been added.’³⁵ Kristeva explains that

Although semiological approaches consider painting as a language, they do not allow an equivalent for color within the elements of language identified by linguistics. Does it belong among phonemes, morphemes, phrases, or lexemes? If it ever was fruitful, the language/painting analogy, when faced with the problem of color, becomes untenable.³⁶

In locating colour in the structures of language, Kristeva frames it as ‘the translation of instinctual drives into coloured surface.’³⁷ Instinctual drives, as discussed throughout this thesis (namely the death drive), disrupt semiological orderings because they, like colour, cannot be incorporated within them; they cannot be patterned on an existing linguistic schema –except as antithetic to such schematics. They are erratic, non-linear eruptions, lapses in meaning, and the unsymbolisable excesses that ruptures coherence. It is as these instinctual drives that colour, and in particular the colour blue, figures presymbolic *jouissance* as unable to be incorporated into meaning.

This chromatic analysis focuses foremost on the colour Padua Blue, which is the blue that dominates Giotto’s frescoes at the Arena Chapel in Padua. With a sameness of reverence that Klein and Jarman detail International Klein Blue, Kristeva suggests of Padua blue that ‘such a blue takes hold of the viewer at the extreme limit of visual perception.’³⁸ This is because the shattering of unity that colour engenders is compounded by the way the eye perceives blue.

³⁵ Kristeva, p. 210.

³⁶ Kristeva, p. 221.

³⁷ Kristeva, p. 215.

³⁸ Kristeva, p. 230.

Krsiteva writes that, given the way the eye interprets colour as wavelengths (through the rods of the retina's periphery), blue is the first colour to appear, while the central element of the eye (the fovea) fixes the object's image and identifies its form so that 'the perception of blue entails not identifying the object; that blue is, precisely, on this side of or beyond the object's fixed form; that is the zone where phenomenal identity vanishes.'³⁹ What's more is that the central element of the eye that fixes the object's image and identifies its form (the fovea) is the last part of the eye to develop in humans. As such, colour perception precedes identification –including one's own image:

Thus all colours, but blue in particular, would have a non-centred or decentering effect, lessening both object identification and phenomenal fixation. They thereby return the subject to the archaic moment of its dialectic, that is, before the fixed, specular "I".⁴⁰

The space of blue enables or initiates a return to the self preceding identification; a self that has not yet been incorporated into a fixed system of recognition as a subject. It is this return of the subject to the archaic moment before the fixed, specular "I" that occurs in *Blue* as Jarman's disembodied specter haunts the screen unfixated to a particular form or image. The shattering of meaning as *jouissance* that I mentioned earlier here occurs as a shattering of unitary personhood. *Jouissance* is negativity that registers as excess because it interrupts the organisation of, or identification as, a complete subject; that is, it gestures at what is lost in the process of subjectification (or incorporation into the Symbolic): the unstructured, indeterminate, multiple selves that exceed the subject or mark the point of its limit. As with Chris Townsend's assertion of *Blue*:

³⁹ Kristeva, pp. 230-1.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, p. 231.

This is the point, or, rather, the surface inhabited by the artist's avatars of colour and voice, the tympanum that is *Blue*, a trembling, uncertain and finally unnameable boundary between vision and voice, before and after, here and there, life and death.⁴¹

Freed from form, the blue screen then allows for a version of Jarman - or versions, as it were - that are inconsistent and multiple, that span living and dying, but that also resist identification as the AIDS-victim over the filmmaker, the painter, the gardener, the storyteller, or the activist. In the blue, Jarman is all of these iterations and none of them; an unfixed subject both everywhere and nowhere as undifferentiated plurality. As Tony Peake remarks,

Jarman had transmuted the pandemonium of images that had been his boon and bane into a vibrant void in which, miraculously, he was more fully present than in almost any of his other films.⁴²

This fullness of presence speaks to Jarman in excess within *Blue*; untethered to a particular subjecthood he is multiple and overflowing, occurring as sensation and sound, the artist as magnus.⁴³ Jarman is absorbed into the blue to be reconstituted as plurality. The blue screen engenders a process of dissolution and reformulation that Kristeva thus describes:

The chromatic experience constitutes a menace to the "self", but also, and to the contrary, it cradles the self's attempted reconstitution. Such an experience follows in the wake of the specular-imaginary self's formation-dissolution.⁴⁴

While the narration details Jarman's failing flesh, Jarman occurs in *Blue* in contradistinction to his dying body as immaterial and endless. Justin Remes suggests as much when he writes of *Blue*

⁴¹ Townsend, pp. 89-90.

⁴² Peake, p.515.

⁴³ Townsend, p.100.

⁴⁴ Kristeva, p. 225.

that ‘while *Blue*’s voice-over is poignantly evoking the deterioration of Jarman’s body, another kind of deterioration takes place: what I have earlier called the degradation of signification.’⁴⁵

Phrased otherwise, this degradation of signification is the admirable austerity of the void that Jarman speaks of in his journal, *Smiling in Slow Motion*. He details the decision to forgo images in favour of the unchanging blue screen because images ‘hinder the imagination and beg a narrative and suffocate with arbitrary charm, the admirable austerity of the void.’⁴⁶ Insofar as signification inscribes the sign with meaning, the capacity or potential to imagine otherwise outside of this inscription is stifled by the imposition of meaning. It is an escape from such imposition that *Blue* as void, to borrow Jarman’s phrasing, enables. As Jarman wrote in a proposal for *Blue* from 1987: ‘The monochrome is an alchemy, effective liberation from personality. It articulates silence. It is a fragment of an immense work without limit. The blue of the landscape of liberty.’⁴⁷

In alignment with Kristeva’s sense of colour as pre-symbolic *jouissance*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari offer a reading of colour, particularly blue monochrome, as zones of indiscernibility that ‘reveal the forces lurking in the area of plain, uniform colour.’⁴⁸ These forces are again akin to Kristeva’s sense of instinctual drives insofar as they are outside of, or antithetic to, a logic of reason. Rather than drives, plains of colour are conceptualised in Deleuze and Guattari as imperceptible forces of nature, or forces ‘freed from any house or flesh’⁴⁹:

⁴⁵ Remes, p.123.

⁴⁶ *Smiling in Slow Motion*, p.198.

⁴⁷ Peake, p. 515.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Columbia University Press, 1994) p.182.

⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, p.181.

The area of plain, uniform colour vibrates, clenches or cracks open because it is the bearer of glimpsed forces. And this, first of all, is what makes painting abstract: summoning forces, populating the area of plain, uniform colour with the forces it bears, making the invisible forces visible in themselves, drawing up figures with a geometrical appearance but that are no more than forces—the forces of gravity, heaviness, rotation, the vortex, explosion, expansion, germination, and time. Is this not the definition of the percept itself—to make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become?⁵⁰

This assessment of monochrome articulates the experience of, or immersion in, colour that one has when watching *Blue*. The way that the eye interacts with blue makes the ostensibly static image deepen the longer one stares at it, and the viewer grows suspect of movements on the screen that cannot be accounted for. These ‘figures that are no more than the forces of heaviness, expansion, germination,’ occur as imperceptible movements within the blue that gesture to some ungraspable force, or to some occurrence, beyond oneself. The colour then engages a process of continuing, deepening abstraction throughout the 79 minute duration of the film so that the viewer is drawn into, or made a part of, the painting’s own reality; the screen subsumes Jarman, and it likewise subsumes its viewer. The film then orients the viewer towards the imperceptible so that they must forgo the logic of reality and embrace instead the disorienting and destabilising nature of pure colour:

Blue in particular takes on the infinite and turns the percept into a “cosmic sensibility” or into that which is most conceptual or propositional in nature – colour in the absence of man, *man who has passed into colour*.⁵¹

It is through this sense of blue as freed from signification shared across Kristeva, Deleuze, and Guattari that *Blue* enacts queerness as the *unreality* outside of semiotic structures of meaning. Insofar as blue monochrome works against narrativity and resists incorporation into the

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, p.182.

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, p.181.

Symbolic, it is that nebulous no-thing or the unsymbolisable space of zero outside of precise articulation that queer occupies—phrased otherwise as *jouissance*, imperceptible cosmic forces, or intrusive drives. As Jarman remarks in *Chroma*, ‘colour seems to have a Queer bent!’⁵² Like death as the end of signification, colour inhabits the same refuge from the determining forces of the symbolic that queerness as an unsymbolisable, shifting conceptual rubric does. Like colour, queer achieves the momentary dialectic of the law as the correlative to normative sexuality, but as quickly as queer is defined it evades this definition. It changes shape, affect, and meaning with each encounter. Queerness, like colour, shatters unity. It is no surprise, then, that this is the form Jarman chose to narrativise his queer life. He opted for a form as resistant to unity and to interpretation as he was. He opted for a form that rejected the imposition of signification in favour of the ‘infinite possibility’⁵³ of the blue.

AIDS, Thatcher, and the new queer cinema

The narrative schematic of cinema is likewise disorganised by the lack of referentiality in *Blue*. In similarly recognising the abstraction of cinematic form as queer divestiture from the symbolic in *The Cinema of the Impossible*, Valerie Rohy articulates the collapse of cinematic convention as a queer ligature to the Real.⁵⁴ The cinematic spectacle writ large fails to account for, or tries to obscure, queer as an impasse within a signifying system, that is queer as meaningless, or *outside of meaning*, and instead proffers a reading of queer as meaningful, or as *meaning something*. That is cinema often attempts to symbolise or represent queer according to a schematics of meaning that must invest sexuality in an identity:

⁵² *Chroma*, p.58.

⁵³ *Chroma*, 112.

⁵⁴ Rohy, 153.

The relation between queerness and cinematic narrative is adversarial, but not for the reason commonly supposed—not, that is, due to the association of gay men with spectacle in the guise of camp or the musical. Instead, narrative and spectacle, though distinctly different elements of cinema, are both pressed to disguise, if incompletely, the vacancy of meaning in sexuality itself.⁵⁵

This relationship between queer and cinema is one that the project of the New Queer Cinema of the early 1990s tries to reconcile. In the wake of the AIDS-epidemic and homophobic governmental initiatives, the New Queer Cinema framed queer as not just non-normative sexualities, but as a complex nexus of antagonism, difference, resistance. The following section details the context from which the New Queer Cinema arose, and Jarman's place within a canon of queer cinematic works that oriented representations of queer aligned to a politics of anti-assimilation, antisociality, and, as Jarman suggests, fury:

[Jarman] particularly liked the idea of being queer rather than gay. This recycling of an old insult properly encompassed, or so he thought, the complexity of his sexual and political life. Unlike 'gay', 'queer' announced that homosexuality was difficult, different and far from anodyne; sometimes gay, but at other times sad and furious.⁵⁶

This fury no doubt informs Jarman's unwillingness to oblige images of the emaciated gay man - the figure of the 'gay plague' - on screen in *Blue* in response to the position gay men occupied in the heterosexual imaginary during the AIDS-epidemic of the 1980s. Laura Mulvey writes of the image on screen as that which 'constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity.'⁵⁷ Jarman thus refuses this identification or misrecognition. Tim Lawrence suggests as much when he writes:

⁵⁵ Rohy, p.153.

⁵⁶ Peake, p.464.

⁵⁷ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989), p.18.

Jarman's reason for wanting to develop this idea is self-apparent: given the negative depiction of gay men in relation to AIDS and death, he needed to demonstrate that AIDS art is an artificial representation, not an objective truth.⁵⁸

The AIDS-epidemic provides important historical context for anyone writing on *Blue* insofar as homosexuality, and indeed gay men, were villainised as the sole arbiters of the AIDS virus. As Anne Balsomo writes on the depiction of AIDS in biomedical discourse:

Persons with AIDS are discursively constructed as victimised, pitiful, valiant, contagious, marked by god's wrath, marginalised. In a similar way the identity of the AIDS virus manifests itself at the centre of a fierce signification battle.⁵⁹

Anxieties towards homosexuality were compounded in light of the epidemic as homophobia was framed as an effort to protect sexuality-abiding citizens from undesirables and their plague. The tragedy and scope of this rhetoric is evident in Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, introduced into UK law under the conservative Thatcher Government. Homophobia was legislated under the guise of protection, specifically the protection of children, by this clause that specified prohibition of the promotion of homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material. The legislation reads:⁶⁰

A Local Authority shall not:

(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;

(b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.⁶¹

⁵⁸Tim Lawrence, 'AIDS, the Problem of Representation, and Plurality in Derek Jarman's Blue' in *Social Text*, 52/53, (1997), pp. 241–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466743>. [Accessed 27 Apr. 2022], p.252.

⁵⁹ Anne Balsamo, 'Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism', *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* eds. Fiona Hovenden, Linda Janes, Gill Kirkup, and Kathryn Woodward pp. 148 – 159 (Routledge, 2000) p.155.

⁶⁰ [The origins of Section 28 – The National Archives](#)

⁶¹ [Local Government Act 1988 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

In effect, this meant that teachers were prohibited from talking about or educating on homosexuality in schools (and most certainly *promoting*; a generous euphemism meaning anything other than punitive takes on homosexuality). This decision legislated a culture of intolerance and a perception of queer identity as corruptive and dangerous in the public imaginary. As such, in 1987, prefacing the passing of this bill into law, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made an address at the Conservative Party annual conference that reinforced the rhetoric surrounding this act as an effort to protect children:

Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay. All of those children are being cheated of a sound start in life. Yes, cheated.⁶²

Astoundingly and tragically, this legislation remained in law until 2003. It figures a backdrop then not only to the failing government in light of the AIDS-epidemic that sought to compound anxieties about dangerous queers and ‘gay plague’ - as AIDS was often referred to in public documents - but so too it set the scene for a queer movement built on distancing itself from, or rejecting, the identities that non-normative desire occupied in the heterosexual imagination. This historical moment generated resistance and a queer counter-narrative in opposition to the grim identities that queer individuals had been assigned. The emergence of queer as a diffuse and antagonistic term in the early 1990s then served to reorient queer identities away from this imposed status of the *dangerous homosexual* and towards a liberated subjecthood - one that sought to establish queer meaning (and indeed the meaning of queer) on its own terms.

⁶² Margaret Thatcher, ‘Speech to Conservative Party Conference’, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation* (1987) [Speech to Conservative Party Conference | Margaret Thatcher Foundation](#) p.7.

In light of a government that actively silenced queer voices and the discussion of same-sex practices, Jarman's decision to discuss his experience with AIDS-related illness, and to resituate the names of those lost to AIDS into the public sphere - indeed on broadcast television - is a profound gesture of counter-resistance. As Thomas Dunn writes on preserving queer afterlives:

In the face of such destructive regimes of active silencing, revision, misrepresentation, and willed forgetting, some queers have made efforts to ensure that they create for themselves a public legacy that matches their queer identities.⁶³

This public legacy, in the case of *Blue*, and indeed throughout Jarman's films, is one that resituates queer identities that have been omitted from the historical record. Those films previous to *Blue* - *The Tempest*, *Wittingstein*, *Jubilee*, *Edward II*, and *Carravagio*, for example – include queer narratives or characters so they are central to Jarman's retelling of the past (or re-writing of canonised works by way of Shakespeare or Marlowe). Queer voices or histories within these works are amplified, joyous, and unmistakably present. As Jim Ellis writes of Jarman's Renaissance films,

Jarman's version of history and art is a decidedly activist one: he repeatedly stated that he made his films for himself and his community, and his engagement with historical subjects is often an attempt to wrest them away from the official guardians of the past, in order to secure a happier future.⁶⁴

Ellis likewise details how Jarman applies the temporally-disruptive quality of queer to his films through the inclusion of historically anachronistic imagery. He creates temporally diffuse spaces in which past and present intersect and overlap:

⁶³ Thomas R. Dunn, 'Preserving a Queer (After) Life.' *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past*, pp. 129–69. (University of South Carolina Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6wgfz.10>. p.131.

⁶⁴ Jim Ellis, 'Queer Period: Derek Jarman's Renaissance', pp. 288-315, *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hansen (Duke University Press, 1999), *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=3008035>. p.289.

Jarman doesn't do period, at least not in the conventional manner. His films of the Renaissance are clearly for the present, and insistently reference the present, whether it is Elizabeth Welch singing "Stormy Weather" to a crew of hunky sailors in *The Tempest* (1979). The OutRage activists in *Edward II* (1991), or the typewriters and motorcycles in *Caravaggio*. Jarman distinguishes his approach to history from that of the heritage film by placing it in a tradition that includes Caravaggio's approach to historical subjects.⁶⁵

This tradition of Jarman's making is starkly at odds with the imageless void of *Blue*. Whereas earlier works can be characterised by excess and a rich, vibrant colour palette, this final film is reduced to a single softened blue. This, as suggested, speaks to Jarman's refusal to offer as signifier the bearer of AIDS, it 'signals a refusal to hold still, to essentialise, submit to definition.'⁶⁶ It also works to evade or shed the carapace of the political subjectivity of the queer activist. So too does the monochromatic screen speak to the fraught task of narrativising one's own life; choosing to locate in an image a lifetime worth of experiences, and accounting for the multiple versions of oneself across time and indeed beyond time, as Jarman details awaiting the arrival of his own death. As Justin Remes notes, 'Jarman's final film *Blue*, for the first time in his career combines film and autobiography. This combination presents as a cinematic problem how a depiction of the life-span becomes narrativized –with disparities, asymmetries and significances imposed.'⁶⁷

Existing scholarship on *Blue* is likewise interested in how Jarman negotiates this complex task of narrating himself at the juncture of life and death, where the backwards glance to a life lived and the forward glance to its end intersect, and remain intersected in perpetuity, to be never fully

⁶⁵ Ellis, p.289.

⁶⁶ Steve Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea* (University of Texas Press, 2004), p.47.

⁶⁷ Tracy Biga, 'The Principle of Non-narration in the Films of Derek Jarman', *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman* ed. by Chris Lippard, pp.12-30 (Ficks Books, 1996), p. 25.

foreclosed, in the blue. It deals with the hardship of reconciling, as Maia Kotrostis suggests, the non-teleological, and certainly non-separate occurrences of life and death:

The polarity of life and death and the associations of life with narrative, progression, continuity, and future, and death with annihilation and narrative impossibility, fly in the face of what we know about the ways that death and life are necessarily co-implicated.’⁶⁸

In large part this foreclosure of either life *or* death is refused by the absence of images in the film, allowing Jarman to exist abstractly as here and not here, occupying presence and absence both. As Derrida describes the untimely occurrence of the ghost in *Spectres of Marx*:

The disjointed in the very presence of the present, this sort of non-contemporaneity of the present time with itself (this radical untimeliness or this anachrony on the basis of which we are trying here to *think the ghost*).⁶⁹

This arrested present of the blue screen - its lingering in this transitory passage⁷⁰ - then affords Jarman a kind of undifferentiated existence, one untied to a particular version of Jarman as he was or is, but rather as he never was and *could* always be; a self aligned to the scope of the endless potential of the blue. The blue then becomes a ‘landscape of liberty’, as Kate Higginson describes it, and this liberty ‘serves as an instructive model of one of the film’s forms of mourning: a consolatory turn towards the immaterial and redemptive.’⁷¹

⁶⁸ Maia Kotrosits, ‘Queer Persistence: On Death, History, and Longing for Endings’ in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, eds. Britnall, Kent, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore, pp.133 - 144. (Fordham University Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1xhr6tw>, p.139.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Routledge, 2006), p.29.

⁷⁰ Derrida, p.30.

⁷¹ Kate Higginson, ‘Derek Jarman’s “Ghostly Eye”: Prophetic Bliss and Sacrificial Blindness in *Blue*’ in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 41:1 (2008) pp.77-94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90011646> [accessed 15/05/2022], p.79.

Writing on queer persistence, Kostrostis details the concomitant occurrence of life and death, or *living and dying*, that we see outworked in *Blue* in specifically queer terms, using Sedgwick's 'continuing moment' in application to queer *afterlives*:

But if queer is a 'continuing moment', its continuity is (at least by Sedgwick's account) one that transverses death in important ways without wholly undoing it. It is a moment of grief that extends before loss. It is a moment of haunted survival: life goes on after it should have ended; goes on haunted by terrible possibilities that never occurred, almost did, or still might; goes on despite itself and in the face of other losses; or simply just *goes on*.⁷²

This extension of grief before loss, this preemptive postscript of Jarman's narration throughout *Blue*, captures the circular temporality of queer lives; captures living, and indeed dying, attuned to those lateral constituents of queer time that collapse and oscillate, that account for the messy intersection of life after life's end, its continuing moment; that which is rendered possible here in 'the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible.'⁷³

The themes covered in previous chapters - that of queer temporality, a rejection of binary logic and imposed identity markers, and a politic of non-compliance and non-assimilation to heteronormative standards - are key features of the 'HomoPomo' (homosexual postmodernism) of the New Queer Cinema. Indeed, New Queer Cinema, as the movement was termed by B. Ruby Rich in 1992, is a collection of films from the early 1990s characterised by independent filmmakers, low production value, and queerness as their primary thematic interest. When detailing what made New Queer Cinema possible, B. Ruby Rich suggests that

⁷² Kostrosits, p. 138.

⁷³ *Spectres of Marx*, p.6.

Four elements converged to result in the NQC: the arrival of AIDS, Reagan, camcorders, and cheap rent. Plus the emergence of “queer” as a concept and a community. Outrage and opportunity merged into a historic artistic response to insufferable political repression: that simple, yes, and that complex.⁷⁴

New Queer Cinema negotiates queer as an emergent term that registers a subjecthood freed of rigid identity markers through a filmic repertoire that is diffuse, political and inventive. This is to say that these films renegotiated the terms of queerness and cinema alike. As such, this filmic movement is treated here as historical intertexts in conversation with canonical writings on queer in its contemporary usage, as well as those writings formative to the antisocial queer thesis: Leo Bersani’s 1987 ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, Judith Butler’s 1990 *Gender Trouble*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1993 *Tendencies*. The New Queer Cinema and these texts alike share in the project, as queer cinema scholars JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones argue, of

Challenging the mainstream to look beyond traditional identification of character, director, and audience. 21st century political, cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical changes in gender perceptions and definitions have opened the way for queer cinema to move beyond binary challenges to promote a new wave of openness and inclusion.⁷⁵

The early nineties then proved a critical time in the development of a queer counter-culture, curated in response to, and in fraught conversation with, the AIDS-epidemic. As B. Ruby Rich writes,

The tragedy and trauma of AIDS have led to a new kind of film and video practice, one that takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake. This time, it’s art for our sake, and it’s powerful: no one can stay dry-eyed through its witty elegy.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke University Press, 2013) p. xvi.

⁷⁵ JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones, *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st century* (Cambridge Scholars, 2010), p.xiii.

⁷⁶ Rich, p.20.

This critical developmental moment in queer cinema included the release of *Blue*. The ambitions of these early works - those filmic and written efforts to represent queer selfhood aligned to a politics of anti-assimilation, as well as being responsive to the tragic failure of care in the AIDS-epidemic, intersect in Jarman's feature film. As Jarman details in the film, 'all of my friends are dead or dying.' While the film's narration serves to position Jarman's AIDS-narrative into the public sphere and insists on a cinema that amplifies queer voices and victims of AIDS, so too does the film's construction and style serve as a radical reinvention of the terms of cinema as moving image. As Bob Newlan writes of *Blue*, the film

queers by means of form, style, and content...Queer cinema emphasises defiance, refusal, and demand versus the normative that queer cinema represents as in turn responsible for queer repression—and oppression.⁷⁷

The use of the blue screen enacts the ambitions of the New Queer Cinema insofar as it refuses to oblige a particular image of the AIDS-victim, as detailed above, but likewise because Jarman transfers the experience - the discomfort, the sadness, the intricacies of AIDS - onto the viewer so that the viewer is implicated by the visceral response that the film generates. As Roger Hallas suggests, without any explicit visual figuration of the witness's body on the screen, the audience are made distinctly aware of their own body and its visceral response to the narration within

Blue:

The body of the witness that has disappeared from the screen returns through the corporeal experience of the spectator...This process of what I call 'corporeal implication' allows the film's spectator to become a witness to AIDS through a simultaneously visceral and imaginative encounter with Jarman's subjectivity.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Newlan, p.18.

⁷⁸ Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Duke University Press, 2009) p. 219.

Blue resituates queer narratives into the public sphere in such a way that queer experience is perceived – and indeed felt, as Hallas suggests, on Jarman’s own terms. In refusing to perpetuate the damning imagery of the AIDS-victim, Jarman offers a counter-narrative, one where queer lives persist, here in the blue; they persist as loved ones, as friends, and as a vital and enduring moment of queer counter-culture.

Death, dying, and queer persistence

I have discussed the temporal arrest of the blue screen, the idea that Jarman remains and does not remain, perpetually situated between, or indeed across, life and death where the narration of *Blue* awaits death, its arrival *distinctively* impending;⁷⁹ it details death’s coming through the degeneration of the body, accompanied by the sombre sound of bells as they toll for Jarman. ‘All that concerns either life or death’, narrates Jarman, ‘is all transacting and at work within me.’⁸⁰ It is this sense of death as uncanny and untimely that characterises the latter half of this chapter. As such, I employ Jacques Derrida’s *Aporias* and *Spectres of Marx* as hauntological frameworks through which to comprehend death, only through its incomprehensibility. Derrida too is interested in the untimeliness of death and the particular hardship of articulating its occurrence - or its non-occurrence as we’ll soon come to understand it. Death, in Derrida’s terms, is ‘a nothing that exceeds everything.’⁸¹

⁷⁹ Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 1993) p.67.

⁸⁰ Derek Jarman, *Blue* (Zeitgeist Films, 1993)

⁸¹ *Specters of Marx*, p.7.

Foundational to his later writings on death in *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida's *Aporias* establishes his sense of death's non-contemporaneity, its untimely and elusive quality, as the 'possible impossibility'⁸²; this is to say death as an aporia. An aporia, so Derrida suggests, is

the impossible, the impossibility, as what cannot pass [*passer*] or come to pass [*se passer*]: it is not even the *non-pas*, the non-step, but rather the deprivation of the *pas*.⁸³

Death cannot come to pass, in this logic set out in *Aporias*, precisely because it is outside of, or beyond, the temporal and linguistic scope used to register a trajectory of life and death, a before and after. The dichotomy structure of *différance* collapses in the case of death because language cannot account (or cannot hold or persist) beyond death; death is the threshold that language cannot cross. It is outside of signification and as such it is 'excluded from the system of possibilities':⁸⁴

Fundamentally, one knows perhaps neither the meaning nor the referent of this word. It is well known that if there is one word that remains absolutely unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word "death."⁸⁵

This paradox of death as the possible impossible, in Derrida's imagining, speaks to the certainty of death as always coming, but as never having arrived. We can only ever anticipate its arrival, only ever entertain the possibility of the impossibility that death registers. As Derrida writes, death, in this way, is *possibility par excellence*.⁸⁶

This is precisely the terms in which I read *Blue*; as a paradox that awaits a death which never arrives. Jarman exists in this aporetic juncture of the possible impossible. We know, as above,

⁸² *Aporias*, p.72.

⁸³ *Aporias*, p.23.

⁸⁴ *Aporias*, p.46.

⁸⁵ *Aporias*, p. 22.

⁸⁶ *Aporias*, pp.62-3

that Jarman did indeed die in February of 1994 but, in the eternal presence of the blue screen, his death is never foreclosed. He returns with every encounter with the film, to this perpetual non-presence. The present of the film is one in which Jarman is always awaiting death. Much like Derrida's sense of death as beyond comprehension, the film's narration suggests, 'blue transcends the solemn geography of human limits.' Developing on death's incomprehensibility in *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida reconciles the impossibility of death, that is death as being outside of language's reach, with our imperative to incorporate death into language by way of the specter or the ghost:

This non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. Here is – or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, "this thing," but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us, comes to deny semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy.⁸⁷

Even so, this framing of the ghost as 'something, between something', serves to resituate death or the dead into the linguistic realm, this is to say the realm of knowledge or the living. It is to incorporate absence into presence. As Derrida suggests, this resituating must occur for the specter to return - not to their original body, but to a body that is *more abstract than ever*:

The spectrogenic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical *incorporation*. Once ideas or thoughts are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghost by giving them a body. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in another artifactual body, a prosthetic body, a ghost of spirit, one might say a ghost of the ghost...For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *Spectres of Marx*, p.5.

⁸⁸ *Spectres of Marx*, p.157.

In *Blue* the blue screen becomes this prosthetic body. The material body is replaced, or displaced, by the blue body of the screen where Jarman is visually absent but his affective presence resonates and his voice lingers. This corporeal abstraction enables the specter to return, again and again; to return as the visibility of the invisible on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see:

The specter, as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible.⁸⁹ And visibility, by its essence, is not seen, which is why it remains...beyond the phenomenon, or beyond being. The specter is also, among other things, what one thinks one sees, and which one projects—on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see. Not even the screen sometimes, and a screen always has, at bottom, in the bottom or background that is, a structure of disappearing apparition.⁹⁰

The disembodied voices throughout *Blue* enact this spectral quality, these ‘thoughts detached from their substratum’ so that they are incarnated into the artifactual body of the screen. The assertion that the specter is also *what one thinks one sees*, recalls what I referred to earlier as Jarman’s transference onto the viewer; the viewer is implicated here, or forced to conjure the specter as they project or imagine for themselves, onto the blue screen. Though the screen remains static and the blue an unchanging shade, as one watches and immerses themselves into the blue, there is a sense, however vague, of shadows or movement - of discrepancies that don’t actually occur. Such is the sense of the specter, of Jarman, as there and not there, as uncannily present as an apparition. Through the blue screen we encounter this visibility of the invisible that insists, as Derrida does, that ‘they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.’⁹¹

⁸⁹ *Spectres of Marx*, p.101.

⁹⁰ *Spectres of Marx*, p.101.

⁹¹ *Spectres of Marx*, p.221.

As an aporetic juncture, *Blue* articulates death as the limit of the Symbolic – a conceptual point zero –not as terminate ending, but as the space where structures of meaning come loose. In this unraveling of the subject from signification within *Blue*, Jarman is renewed as the specter, existing indiscriminately in the nothing or nowhere that death marks. This logic of death and the specter that Derrida details is this same space of incoherence that queerness marks, and that *Blue* as the boundless void outside of signification enacts. That is death as the limit of logic and comprehension maps so seamlessly onto the blue screen void of signification because they occupy the same conceptual no-space beyond meaning. As Chris Townsend writes in *Art and Death*, artworks communicating death, of which he includes Jarman’s *Blue*, offer something more than death’s finitude, but a way for thinking about the ‘radical absence’⁹² at the heart of language and culture:

Culture here comes out of death, and if culture is a form of evasion, its trace is nonetheless an address to death –if not literally, and therefore ‘falsely’, then through its indirection, its very impossibility. Our making of signs, representation, rests upon an originating absence...Death offers us the possibility of something more than the phobic iteration of its signs, displacements that might ward off or somehow placate the event. This ‘something more’ is found both in the work of artists dealing with the imminence of their own death and in our responses to the deaths of others.⁹³

Death, like queerness, marks the unsymbolisable excess that attends to language, and articulations of death as such orient us towards thinking beyond the illusory law of the Symbolic; Death as the limit point of signification is the starting point *beyond* signification, and this thinking otherwise –thinking beyond, outside of, or against the Symbolic – is this ‘something more’ that Townsend locates in *Blue* as ‘the possibility of language that might come afterwards:’⁹⁴

⁹² Townsend, p.2.

⁹³ Townsend, p.2.

⁹⁴ Townsend, p. 90.

Dying, he knew that language could not grasp death, but also knew that its failure to name experience adequately nonetheless left open through allegory, always, the possibility of language that might come afterwards.⁹⁵

This language, deeply tied to Jarman's politics that were angrily at odds with dominant discourses,⁹⁶ is one that shatters a subjective center, that destabilises these dominant discourses so that one day they might not hold. In imagining a future of queer community (a community that is latent, one that is yet to come⁹⁷) Jarman's death is invoked as the foundational moment of a necessary incoherence here; death as a separation of sign from object, text from author, is a beginning of 'meaning' that necessarily undermines itself.⁹⁸ In breaking the relation between Jarman's failing, diseased body and death as the spectacle or signification of his subjectivity as such, *Blue* posits a resistance to, or remove from, the discursive construction of the AIDS-victim, the homosexual, the abject queer so that 'the most marginal – or marginalised – communities may read the possibility of resistance to that order.'⁹⁹ Language's totalising or inscriptive function is annihilated within *Blue* so that the film is 'simultaneously an allegory of the artist's death and an anticipation of a possible future for others.'¹⁰⁰

It is through such a sentiment that we can find in this reading - this sense of *Blue* as perpetual presence- a counternarrative to the impermanence of queer lives. They persist not singularly or passively as a memory, but as informants of the present and messengers of possible futures. As Jarman recalls, he 'hears the voices of the dead - David, Howard, Graeme, Terry', and we are

⁹⁵ Townsend, p. 90.

⁹⁶ Townsend, p. 89.

⁹⁷ Townsend, p.90.

⁹⁸ Townsend, p.2.

⁹⁹ David Gardney, 'Perverse Law: Jarman as Gay Criminal', *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman*, ed. by Chris Lippard, pp. 31-64 (Ficks Books, 1996), p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Townsend, p.15-16.

made to hear them too, over and over as their names are repeated. Those friends of Jarman's having suffered from AIDS are resituated into the present, and indeed into a future that they were once denied. Unseen but nonetheless still pressingly there, they exist in the perpetual presence of the blue screen - between, to return to Derrida, what leaves and what arrives.

Where previous chapters have charted challenges to symbolic sovereignty through the momentary rupture of different symbolic devices - through semiological lapses and grammatical incoherences in Stein, unmediated subjectivity and a logic of anti-recognition in Melville, and symbolically sterile environments in Beckett - in the dimensionless void of Jarman's *Blue* we encounter total Symbolic annihilation. The semiological, temporal and spatial abstractions I have mapped across previous chapters here culminate in *Blue* as the admirable austerity of the void. As a site that shatters the unity of meaning, *Blue* materialises, through the promise of the *immaterial* no less, the no-space of queerness, of death, and of colour that is freed from signification. The abstraction of aesthetic and cinematic convention resists that *Blue* be beholden to the narrative structures of cinema, and likewise the temporal asynchronicity of the spoken narrative refuses that the logic of the film be patterned on, or ordered according to, a sense of linear (or even non-linear) progression. Temporal markers of past, present, and future collapse and intersect indiscriminately so that moments are at once present time and memory, or so that the foreclosure of death is perpetually forestalled. The most significant feat of abstraction within the film is the separation of sign from object or, more properly, the separation of Jarman from his ailing body that might fix him as a sign. He exists within the monochrome blue screen as an allegory freed from signification. To escape the imposition of subjectification is queer triumph.

To return to the point that I outlined in the introduction, then, *Blue* enacts, through content and form, queer as an unsymbolisable, structurally antagonistic force:

It is the refrain of this project that queer orients us towards negation or that conceptual no-space outside of symbolic structures. Queer as such has no signified and cannot be located within structures of recognition; it instead figures the structural negativity that exists outside of or underlies the Symbolic as an unnameable, antagonistic force.

The new aesthetic consciousness that International Klein Blue registered for Yves Klein becomes in *Blue* a new queer consciousness. This queer consciousness is the renewed articulation of being that, rather than being as being-a-subject, is mapped instead onto forms and nature of existence as plurality, erratic eruptions of *jouissance*, invisibilities, sensations. The disorientation one feels when they encounter the monochromatic blue screen is then more properly described as reorientation; a reorienting of ‘being’ attuned to queer as the ‘shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences’. As Jarman writes, blue is ‘the invisible becoming visible’ and so it is that the ungraspable, unknowable space of queer beyond the symbolic is here glimpsed and momentarily held through the immeasurable existence of colour, an infinite possibility, becoming tangible’¹⁰¹

Following this reading of *Blue* as the immaterial void freed from signification, the next chapter looks again to film to figure queerness not as symbolic void, but as the eruption of unmediated desire. My reading of David Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* looks to queer as a transgressive and destabilising force outside of the social order. As such, I map a logic of queer antisociality onto desire as an orienting force within the film, and the Interzone as the culmination of this desire in an erotically-charged, unstable and ungoverned site of queer negativity. This reading returns to

¹⁰¹ *Chroma*, 112.

Lee Edelman's sense of queer as 'the negativity opposed to every form of social viability'¹⁰²
where *everything is permitted*.

¹⁰² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2014), p.9.

Gorging on desire: the radical antisociality of Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*

Nothing is true; Everything is permitted.

As the penultimate chapter of this thesis, the following pages detail antisocial queer imaginings in the extreme. They detail, this is to say, queer as transgressive, inhuman, and indeed destructive; as a set of unmediated erotic drives aligned to Lee Edelman's assertion of queer as 'the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.'¹ As such, I read David Cronenberg's 1991 film, *Naked Lunch*, as radically exemplifying queer antisociality through William Lee's hallucinatory collapse into Interzone: a drug-induced break with reality wherein queer manifests as grotesque creatures by way of anthropomorphised typewriters with talking-anuses, semen-secreting Mugwumps, and attractive-gay-men-come-shapeshifting-centipedes. These creatures, so the film suggests, 'specialise in sexual ambivalence' and so it goes that Interzone, as a hallucinatory break from reality, permits access to Lee's repressed desires; it is the zone where nothing is true and *everything is permitted*.

As an auteur filmmaker, Cronenberg's ambition is 'to show the unshowable, to speak the unspeakable'² and, in *Naked Lunch*, he depicts queer in precisely these terms: as outside of systems of knowledge and as an uncanny force that negates and exceeds structures of sexual

¹ *No Future*, p.9.

² Chris Rodley, 'Naked Lunch: So Deep in My Heart that You're Really a part of Me' in *The Criterion Collection*, 2013, [Naked Lunch: So Deep in My Heart That You're Really a Part of Me | Current | The Criterion Collection](#), Para 7.

difference. Queer as such emerges on screen as an inexplicable, disorienting intrusion of the Real. *Naked Lunch* makes no effort to recuperate Lee's repressed queer desires into a stable system of signs or to readily define queer through a logic of sexual difference. Instead, the film materialises the erotically-charged, unstable and ungoverned site of queer negativity as a place realised only in the process of the self coming undone. The film realises queer in terms set out by Theresa De Laurentis in *Queer Texts, Bad Habits* as 'the space of a transit, a displacement, a passage and transformation, not a referential but a figural space.'³

My interest in this chapter is not simply the discovery of same-sex desire through a break with reality, but the shape this desire takes: its perverse, transgressive, and absurd quality. Queer erupts in irreducible forms as abjectly erotic figures, distorted realities, and aberrant sexual appetites. In alignment with the logic of queer antisociality, and in stylistic Cronenberg excess, the film indulges the horror that queerness figures in the public imagination and embraces the negativity that queer structurally represents. As Edelman writes,

The queer subject has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligability, and—instead of fighting this characterisation by dragging queerness into recognition we embrace the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent.⁴

The erotic threads throughout *Naked Lunch* lead always to the strange and stranger still so that queer desire is never fully foreclosed but reformulates in multidirectional and absurd ways. Call it the *antisocial aesthetic*. The queer we encounter in *Interzone* is desire as a destabilising pursuit of pleasure. It is the death drive as non-reproductive, self-destructive *jouissance*. So it goes

³ Teresa de Laurentis, *Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future* in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17:2-3 (2011), pp.243-263, Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/437427. p. 246

⁴ Robert. L. Caserio and others, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory', *PLMA* 121.2, pp. 819-828 (May, 2006) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357> p. 822.

throughout *Naked Lunch* that ‘desire remains on the move exploring new zones and routes’⁵ through transgressions (and not just by way of Mugwumps and anthropomorphised typewriters - those highly sexualised creatures of Interzone), but by way of ‘an entropic world of nomadic flights and constant breaks, both formal and thematic.’⁶ As such, I employ Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of schizoanalysis as outlined in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as a framework through which to read the fragmentary and transitory nature of the film - its oscillating between reality and paranoid fantasy - and the imaginings of a queer erotics untethered to reality. Interzone as such is understood here as what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a new land:

The connections are always partial and nonpersonal, the conjunctions nomadic and polyvocal, the disjunctions included, where homosexuality and heterosexuality cannot be distinguished any longer: the world of transverse communications, where the finally conquered nonhuman sex mingles with the flowers, a new earth where desire functions according to its molecular elements and flows. Such a voyage does not necessarily imply great movements in extension; it becomes immobile, in a room and on a body without organs—an intensive voyage that undoes all the lands for the benefit of the one it is creating.⁷

This ‘new land’ is the ungoverned territory of Interzone, and Bill Lee’s rupture from reality is the ‘intensive voyage that undoes all the lands for the benefit of the one it is creating.’ This intermedial zone is the no-thing or *nonspace* of queer accessed through the annihilation of the social-self.

Naked Lunch(es)

⁵ Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199993161.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199993161.001.0001), p. 26.

⁶ Davis, p. 5.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.319.

Cronenberg's 1991 *Naked Lunch* is not a direct translation of William S. Burrough's 1959 novel of the same name, but rather a pseudo-biographical narrative about Burrough's experience writing *Naked Lunch*:

The film offers something quite different - namely a narrative of the writing of *Naked Lunch*...In outline, what emerges is a story about Bill Burroughs's agonised journey through drug addiction, wife-killing, homosexuality, and exile, to the profession of a writer.⁸

Cronenberg's adaptation then uses *Naked Lunch* as its framing narrative and draws on other Burroughs texts, namely *Junky* (1953), *Queer* (1985), and *Exterminator!* (1973) so that the story is infused with his *real* experiences: drug-addiction, homosexuality, and the accidental killing of his wife Joan Vollmer during a drunken game of William Tell - an event that Burrough's recounts in the preface to *Queer* as formative to his becoming a writer:

I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would have never have become a writer but for Joan's death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing.⁹

Unlike the novel, this event shapes the film's narrative and functions as the antecedent to Lee's exilic drug-induced (insecticide-induced, as it were) trip to Interzone. What follows is a series of hallucinatory episodes where Lee sets out to write a report on Interzone (the writing of *Naked Lunch* the novel) undercover as a homosexual: 'the best all round cover an agent ever had.' The film details Burroughs at the precipice of both becoming a writer and coming to terms with his homosexuality, and the Interzone is the hallucinatory state in which these discoveries are permitted. Though the film offers a more coherent, continuous narrative than the book, temporal

⁸ William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, (University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 279.

⁹ William S. Burroughs, *Queer* (Macmillan Publishers, 1986), p.17.

markers are difficult to grasp and are perpetually skewed by lapses between reality and the hallucinatory landscape of Interzone:

The film implies temporal stases, dilations, overlaps, and aporia, amidst which its sequences float as disorganised sheets rather than tracing a clear succession.¹⁰

Through such temporal stases and disorganization - the indiscriminate jumping between reality and paranoid fantasy - the film's chronology is organised according to the non-linear, erratic time of the addict - it replicates 'junk time', as Burroughs calls it:

A junky runs on junk time. When his junk is cut off, the clock runs down and stops. All he can do is hang on and wait for non-junk time to start. A sick junkie has no escape from external time, no place to go. He can only wait.¹¹

Junk time is inseparable from what I have discussed throughout this thesis as queer time. Indeed, addiction and queerness are intimately bound throughout the film. As with junk time, queer time does not adhere to a linear pattern of progression; it is outside of, or inconsistent with, normative time as a sequential series of events. Through the collapse of 'real time' or disengagement with reality, Bill Lee (which is also the pseudonym Burroughs wrote under) moves according to the erratic disorientations of desire without a sense of how his hallucinatory landscape maps onto time. Following the narrative across a series of increasingly weird, erotically-charged encounters, this temporal dislocation produces, as Elizabeth Freeman writes of queer time, 'new origins of desire.'¹²

I chose to focus this chapter on Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* precisely because of this fusion of fiction and reality by way of details from Burrough's life, other books, letters, and prefaces.¹³ Of

¹⁰ Davis, p.7.

¹¹ William S. Burroughs, *Junky* (Penguin Books, 2009), p.87.

¹² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010) p. 16.

¹³Nicholas Zurbrugg. 'Will Hollywood Never Learn?: David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*' in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. ed. by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, pp. 98–112, (London: Routledge,1999), p. 105.

course there's inevitable levels of abstraction in the transmission from writer to novel, and again from novel to film, but so too there is the trace of Burrough's earnest (this is to say *real*) effort to disengage with reality, informed by multiple points of his writing, and this disengagement is intimately tied to his queer desire. This queer desire, unhinged as it is across novel and film, is not stable or determinate, but constantly reformulates according to multiple, libidinally-charged threads; the sexualised creatures of Interzone change shape, they grow bigger and stranger, polymorphous and perverse. The tools we use to account for sexuality - be them linguistic or symbolic - grow increasingly tenuous and futile so that queer desire occurs not only as outside of regulatory frameworks, but as the unsettling force which unravels and destabilises these frameworks. Writing on *Contemporary Queer Cinema*, Nick Davis says of *Naked Lunch* that

The film refuses to fix any desiring formation, homosexual, heterosexual, or otherwise, as an innate characteristic of anybody. *Naked Lunch* views Bill Lee's ostensible homosexuality not as a premise one must reinvest with stable contours (which the book itself refuses) but as a contingent assemblage, shattered like Burroughsian prose into remixable parts, with varying effects and intensities...In this respect, Cronenberg's film sustains that politics of difference that queer theory privileges above a politics of identity, whether the latter term connotes individual subjectivity or else connotes sameness as a value we enforce upon desires, their consistent enactments over time, and the erotic or political relations into which they draw us.¹⁴

This refusal to fix any desiring formation as an innate characteristic or codified sexuality articulates queer as 'what can only be called an antisocial, negative, and antirelational theory of sexuality.'¹⁵ As with previous chapters, I follow the threads of queer desire as that which is 'disruptive, disorienting, shattering, limit-violating and boundary-breaking.'¹⁶ Likewise with previous works studied throughout this thesis, queer emerges here as a temporally and

¹⁴ Davis, p.3.

¹⁵ Robert L. Caserio and others, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory' *PLMA*, 121:2, pp. 819-828, (2006) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357> p. 822.

¹⁶ Clay Risen, 'Leo Bersani, Literary Critic and Theorist on Gay Life, Dies at 90', *NYT Online* <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/books/leo-bersani-dead.html> (2022) [accessed February 2022]

structurally dislocated void accessed only through annihilation of the socialised-self. Where previous chapters have interrogated pursuits of self-annihilation, *Naked Lunch* offers an absurd insight to queer desire beyond the dissolution of reality. It offers a depiction of the unruly contours of queer desire aligned to Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's description of queer as

Psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity. It denotes, that is, the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty.¹⁷

Much like the original text, Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* proved contentious as a transgressive, erotically-charged, and queerly-oriented film that both disturbed and confused audiences:

Conflicting interpretations and judgements of Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* eerily repeat the the polarised reception and contradictory interpretations of the novel, as if – even in its absence – the unsettling power and undecidability of *Naked Lunch* break through the film's normalising strategies.¹⁸

In specifically queer contexts, like that of the New Queer Cinema - a 'movement that discounted Cronenberg entirely'¹⁹ - the film was criticised as having diluted the overt homosexuality of Bill Lee's character so that his sexual orientation is obscured by doubt and denial throughout the film - evidence that the film is closer to a Burrough's biography than it is to *Naked Lunch* the original. So it goes that Bill Lee's same sex desire is more fraudtly, tentatively negotiated throughout the film, rather than explicitly (and violently) engaged with. Nick Davis' work on *Contemporary Queer Cinema* argues most convincingly in defense of Cronenberg's adaptation

¹⁷ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014), p. viii.

¹⁸ Jennie Skerl, 'The Book, the Movie, the Legend: *Naked Lunch* at 50', *Naked Lunch @ 50: anniversary essays*, ed. by Oliver Harris and Ian MacFayden, pp. 167-176 (Southern Illinois University, 2009), p. 173.

¹⁹ Davis, p.1.

as a depiction of queer desire attuned to its messy, unruly contours. Despite Cronenberg's oft-invoked heterosexuality, writes Davis,

His films *Dead Ringers* and *Naked Lunch* help us conceptualise queer desire as distinct from gay or lesbian orientations... David Cronenberg constitutes an unnerving yet uniquely rewarding test case for theorising queer cinema.²⁰

In Davis' assessment, as in my own, this adaptation takes the same-sex desire inherent to Burrough's text and reshapes it according to a queer aesthetic. This is not to say that this desire is displaced within the film, but rather that it is reconstituted as a less stable, less prescriptive reading of sexuality:

Cronenberg's film sustains that politics of difference that queer theory privileges above a politics of identity, whether the latter term connotes individual subjectivity or else connotes sameness as a value we enforce upon desires, their consistent enactments over time, and the erotic or political relations into which they draw us.²¹

This interpretation is truer to queer as a destabilising force than a marker of sexual preference or identity, and it is this sense of queer that Cronenberg does so well to capture and articulate. A queer text, writes Theresa de Lauretis, 'carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex.'²² Contemporary readings of Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* suggest that these same criticisms that excluded the film from the New Queer Cinema in the early 1990's are now what qualifies the film as queer. This speaks to contemporary efforts to recover queer not as a confirmed identity marker, and not as a measure of same-sex attraction, but as 'optimism's self-resistance: the queerness that is less an identity than an ongoing effort of divestiture, a practice of

²⁰ Davis, p.1.

²¹ Davis, p.3

²² De Lauretis, p.244.

undoing.’²³ Queer then encapsulates and exceeds Burrough’s sexual desire. As Davis goes on to say, ‘I view Cronenberg’s cross-textual elisions of “gay” characters and scenes, however grating at times, as important elements in how he queers the erotics of his films.’²⁴

In keeping with this sense of the film’s queer erotics as encapsulating and exceeding sexual desire, William Beard’s comprehensive dossier of Cronenberg’s work, *The Artist as Monster*, offers a reading of homosexual desire in *Naked Lunch* in conversation with Burrough’s original work. This reading reconciles the ‘unfilmable’ book with Cronenberg’s successful attempt to bring it to the screen ‘in the nature of a poetic reduction of quasi-history into a delirious and dreamlike allegory.’²⁵ Instead of adaptation in the traditional sense (or really in any sense) Beard reads *Naked Lunch* as ‘an interpretation of the book’s underlying impetus, and of Burrough’s psychological problems arising from drug use, homosexuality, the act of writing, and the death of his wife’²⁶:

Indeed, it is most often quite impossible to say or even guess what is really going on in the film: everything has been reduced to the disordered mental landscape of a drug user with very peculiar idiosyncracies.²⁷

What *is* going on in the film, at least at a conceptual level, Beard suggests, is William Lee’s denial and misrecognition of his own sexual impulses so that what he cannot confront or permit at the level of consciousness - his repressed homoerotic desires - erupt as drug-induced hallucinations. What the film insists on, more than Burrough’s work ever did, writes Beard, ‘is the falseness and inadequacy of this masquerade of control.’²⁸ The dissolution of control, the

²³ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, p.19.

²⁴ Davis, p.7.

²⁵ William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, (University of Toronto Press, 2006), p.279.

²⁶ Beard, p. 279.

²⁷ Beard, p. 280.

²⁸ Beard, p. 306.

fraught unraveling of Lee's rational self to libidinal drives, is the film's structuring narrative: the undoing of the self through an encounter with desire.

The shape of Lee's desire, its manifestation as creatures of Interzone, is particularly absurd. Their inhuman, alien-type-forms register them as some transgressive, externalised Other that are intruding on Lee, rather than a part of the unruly terrain of his own psyche. As Beard describes these creatures:

Flesh-typewriters, a penis-headed-typewriter whose dripping semes you milk into your drinking cup, an Arabic typewriter whose incomprehensible filthy writing causes it to metamorphose into an insectoid-crustacean sex blob – these are certainly a colourful realisation of the otherness of the liberated transgressive imagination.²⁹

In their various, strange forms, these creatures figure or materialise the polymorphously perverse: the many disturbing iterations of desire that can manifest from the subconscious. The polymorphous perverse, as conceptualised in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, are the unfiltered, unsocialised libidinal drives that originate in childhood. Because children are not yet socialised towards a specific kind of attraction (heterosexual, monogamous), their sexual energies are not focused on a specific object, and are instead impulsive and multiple: 'the multifariously perverse sexual disposition of childhood,' as it were.³⁰ In Freud's assessment, these desires manifest as perversions in the adult whom, for reasons of mental illness or pathology (or in this case radically drug-altered consciousness), 'the mental dams against sexual excesses - shame, disgust and morality'³¹ - do not hold. Freud writes of the neurotic that 'between the pressure of the instinct and his antagonism to sexuality, illness offers him a way of

²⁹ Beard, p. 308.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other works*, ed by James Strachey (Penguin Books, 1977), p.164.

³¹ Freud, p.79.

escape.³² Though there are more interesting ways to discuss the film's queer erotics, Freudian conceptions of sexuality should be acknowledged as both a framing device and an intertext; As a patient of psychoanalysis from 1936–39, William S. Burroughs engaged with Freudian conceptions of sexuality, particularly with the notion that neuroses are unconscious desire manifesting itself. As Burroughs writes of his experience as a patient of psychoanalysis:

I decided to undergo psychoanalysis and continued with it for three years. Analysis removed inhibitions and anxiety so that I could live the way I wanted to live. Much of my progress in analysis was accomplished in spite of my analyst who did not like my "orientation," as he called it. He finally abandoned analytic objectivity and put me down as an "out-and-out con." I was more pleased with the results than he was.³³

Given Burrough's immediate proximity to psychoanalytic theory, it stands to reason that he reconciles his homosexual desire through his drug addiction, paranoia, and anxiety: that is his deepening entrenchment in the Interzone as a worsening unstable mental landscape. Following my suggestion that there are *more interesting* ways to read the relationship between this dissolving conscious efficacy and unmediated queer desire, the following sections investigate departure from notions of stability or normality as queerly oriented towards incoherence. This is to say that I invest Lee's withdrawal from structures of coherence – i.e. consciousness, rationality, heterosexuality – with an antisocial bent towards the annihilation of rationality. Queerness as a threat to the normative is here read as productively rupturing the systems of recognition that locate sexuality as normative or otherwise. As such, schizoanalysis allows for a reading of the film's hallucinatory landscape as the unruly contours of desire that move in multidirectional, unregulated patterns of flight. Following this, I offer a reading of the grotesque within *Naked Lunch* as productively distorting and destabilising 'the gap between imagined

³² Freud, p.79.

³³ *Junky*, p.xxvi.

possibility and reality.’³⁴ Through the imaginative depictions of queer as distorted, abject forms, *Naked Lunch* employs the grotesque to ‘destabilise what is ‘acceptable’ and ‘normal’ through an overdose, an excess, of the abnormal, the deviant, the abject.’³⁵ It is attuned to this instability that I read Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* not as an effort to recuperate desire into the realms of rationality, but to allow its flight into absurd assemblages: to follow the threads of queer desire to their most unruly and destructive ends.

Schizoanalysis and Interzone

In Bill Lee’s hallucinogenic break with reality, i.e. Interzone, we encounter queer desire as it is conceptualised within the antisocial queer thesis: desire that does not cohere to structures of meaning, but transgresses and annihilates such structures. The film’s opening directive to ‘exterminate all rational thought’ is the necessary condition required to encounter queer as rapturous *jouissance*; queer not as unconventional desire, but as beyond, between, or outside of that framework of thought that registers desire as conventional or otherwise. Queer as that which shatters the frameworks of coherence. This same sense of desire as a set of unstable, undifferentiated libidinal currents characterises Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of schizoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* where they suggest that desire operates nomadically and polymorphically towards regions where ‘homosexuality and heterosexuality cannot be distinguished any longer.’³⁶ The schizoanalytic model provides a framework through which to read the fragmentary and transitory nature of the film - the slippage between reality and paranoid fantasy - as unmediated and unidirectional libidinal currents. Read through a Deleuze

³⁴ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (Routledge, 2013), p.17.

³⁵ *Grotesque*, p. 75.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.319.

and Guattarian framework of schizoanalysis, William Lee's tourist-class trip to the Interzone is the schizophrenic breakthrough of the schizo-subject. Following the threads of desire engages an unstable and perpetual process of dissolution and reformulation towards 'realms of unknown, untapped desires that have no necessary end'.³⁷

It is worth noting from the outset that Deleuze and Guattari make a point of differentiating schizophrenia (as clinical diagnosis) and schizoanalysis as a theoretical framework:

We have distinguished the schizophrenic process ("the breakthrough") from the accidents and relapses that hinder or interrupt it ("the breakdown")...The schizo himself is not the revolutionary, but the schizophrenic *process*.³⁸

Without romanticising schizophrenia as illness, this framework maps desire according to its erratic, multidirectional patterns - patterns that escape being codified because they are in a state of inconsistent and perpetual flux. Before I properly engage schizoanalysis in conversation with *Naked Lunch*, below begins a brief description of the theory, followed by its application to the text.

Schizoanalysis is inseparable from what Deleuze and Guattari call 'desiring machines' and a 'body without organs.' A body without organs functions like a blank slate: it is inert and sterile, unproductive and dysfunctional - on its own, that is. The body without organs is a site of pure potential; a body not yet inscribed with particular functions imposed on it by organs. 'Organs' are understood, by Deleuze and Guattari, as 'desiring machines' or 'partial objects.' Though these terms are used consistently throughout *Anti-Oedipus*, their exact meaning can't be explained except in phenomenological terms, that is how these partial objects interact - with each other as

³⁷ Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the shaping of Modernism* (Chicago University Press, 1998), p.7.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993) pp. 278/408.

with the body without organs. The bodies of schizophrenics, drug addicts, and hypochondriacs are examples they give of bodies without organs. This body, by virtue of its unproductiveness prior to the imposition of organs, is co-opted by various mechanisms (or desiring machines) that give it an identity; the body without organs is an unmarked medium that takes on an identity once organs have implanted in/on the body:

The schizoanalytic argument is simple: desire is a machine, a synthesis of machines, a machinic arrangement–desiring-machines. The order of desire is the order of *production*; all production is at once desiring-production and social production. We therefore reproach psychoanalysis for having stifled this order of production, for having shunted it into *representation*.³⁹

Unlike psychoanalytic models that insist on coding individuals and pluralising narratives, schizoanalysis proposes instead a framework which accounts for being - or *becoming* - as a mobile and uncodified state of perpetual transformation. Where psychoanalysis tries to resolve breaks in reality, schizoanalysis sees these psychotic ruptures as *breakthroughs* – as potential insights into new possible modes of existence.

To demonstrate this process, Deleuze and Guattari offer an analysis of capitalism where, in their assessment, the body without organs is capital and the desiring machines (organs) are capitalists. The capitalist sees capital as a site on which to impose itself – its wants, its desires – and transform capital according to these ambitions. What this means is that the organs inscribe the body-without-organs with meaning, for better or worse. And, as much as capital exists in the way we understand it today, the important point is that this is but one way. Through the schizophrenic process, there are infinite possibilities. The imposition of organs onto the body-without-organs serves to recode the body and this process of flux - this *decoding* and *recoding* - produces the schizo-subject (an

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 296.

undoubtedly problematic term). The schizo-figure is fleeting and sporadic and continuously abandons its identity. The product of which is an uncoded subject: a subject that does not adhere or subscribe to an overarching conceptual rubric, this is to say a subject that can't be totalised. This subject engages in an endless process of becoming. This process of perpetual re/degeneration necessitates death (or *unbecoming*): the simultaneous death of previous selves and rebirth of new ones:

Destro, destroy. The task of schizoanalysis goes by way of destruction—a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage. Destroy oedipus, the illusion of the ego, the puppet of the superego, guilt, the law, castration.⁴⁰

This becoming and unbecoming (rather than the fixed 'being') is mapped along the nomadic excesses of desire. This desire has no specified sexual object nor does it have an end goal. It has only the proliferation of more desire in a continual process of de/reterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari offer a long but helpful description of this:

Everywhere a microscopic transsexuality, resulting in the woman containing as many men as the man, and the man as many women, all capable of entering—men with women, women with men—into relations of production of desire that overturn the statistical order of the sexes. Making love is not just becoming as one, or even two, but becoming as a hundred thousand. *Desiring-machines or the non-human sex: not one or even two sexes, but n sexes.* Schizoanalysis is the variable analysis of the *n* sexes in a subject, beyond the anthropomorphic representation that society imposes on this subject, and with which it represents its own sexuality. The schizoanalytic slogan of the desiring-revolution will be first of all: to each its own sexes.⁴¹

Sexuality, or the sexual instinct, under a schizoanalytic framework is undifferentiated desire. It is not aligned to homo or heterosexual markers, nor does gender play any role in determining this

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, p.311.

⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, p. 286.

desire. It is instead the disorganised shifting of one indiscriminate libidinal investment to another *ad infinitum*.

Thinking about *Naked Lunch* in schizoanalytic terms, the Interzone is the body-without-organs: a blank, sterile slate that has been inscribed with Bill Lee's unconscious, unregulated desire. The imposition of such desire (foremost Lee's latent homosexuality) generates a new reality according to desire as the unconscious id: as hedonistic, inhuman, transgressive. Insofar as the unconscious is liberated from the mediating function of the conscious or rational mind, Interzone as the unregulated terrain of Lee's subconscious is mapped along a series of worsening transgressions. Enemy agent Tom Frost does well to characterise this when, in conversation with Lee about his efforts to murder his wife, he suggests: "on the level of conscious intention, it's insane, monstrous... This is all happening telepathically. *Nonconsciously*." The unconscious realm of the Interzone indulges those monstrous libidinal energies that otherwise, on the level of conscious intent, would be inadmissible. As Lee remarks of his homosexual desire:

A curse has been in our family for generations. The Lee's have always been perverts. I shall never forget the unspeakable horror that froze the lymph in my glands when the painful words seared my reeling brain: *I was a homosexual*.

While Lee's rational self is repulsed by his desire, his involvement in Interzone (read: the dissolution of his rational self to excessive drug use) is inexplicably framed in pursuit of this desire. In conversation with a typewriter that has transformed into a 'giant beetle with a speaking dorsal anus'⁴², homosexuality is established as central to Lee's mission in the Interzone:

Homosexuality is the best all-around cover an agent ever had... We appreciate that you might find the thought of engaging in, uh, homosexual acts morally and, uh, possibly even physically repulsive and, uh, we are encouraged that you are able to overcome these personal, uh, barriers to better serve the cause to which we are all so devoted.

⁴² Beard, 280.

And so it goes that a central part of Lee's directive is to overcome the barrier of his own homophobia; to exterminate that part of his consciousness that rationalises his same sex desire as abnormal. The shape of this desire throughout the film - those inhuman specialists of sexual ambivalence - enact the changing, unstable pattern of flight of the schizo-subject. Each erotic encounter is more transgressive than the last, and each creature more inexplicable so that this perpetually shifting morphology crosses thresholds only to encounter new ones. As Beard writes,

The Mugwump, in fact, is worse than the beetle, and represents an escalation of the homosexual impulse, a franker and more open acceptance and enjoyment of it – and also (closely related) a more addicting and controlling drug (Mugwump jism).⁴³

The perpetually escalating forms and renewed sexual appetites throughout the film are the flights of the schizo-subject into, and indeed through, new planes and territories. By way of example, during the beginnings of a sexual encounter with Joan Frost (the spectre of his dead wife, Joan Lee), the scene is interrupted by the protrusion of an erect, phallic tentacle that takes the form of a male torso and buttocks (the 'sex blob') that leaps on top of them and aggressively humps Lee - as though a literalisation of his homosexual desire intruding on efforts at heterosexuality. In a final, shocking erotic transgression, Lee finds Yves Cloquet has transformed into a centipede (a human-sized centipede that retains the face of Yves Cloquet, nonetheless) that is simultaneously fucking and killing Kiki; his centipede limbs wrapped around and piercing through Kiki's body. Bill understands that "it was meant to be me in that birdcage with Cloquet", as though to give in fully to his desire would be to succumb to his own terrifying demise. To embrace fully the transgressive liberated unconscious would mean the end of the conscious, and consciously-mediated, subject.

⁴³ Beard, 322.

To yield to the unconscious is to forego the very subjecthood that consciousness designates. This logic returns to the earlier claim from Deleuze and Guattari that, in its rupture from reality, schizoanalysis destroys the illusion of the ego and the puppet of the superego.⁴⁴ These aspects of the psyche responsible for morality and tempering sexual appetites work to mitigate desire, to organise sexual practice within a Symbolic rubric, and to organise the subject accordingly: heterosexual/homosexual, normal/perverse. It is this organising principle that is undone by the intrusion of unconscious, uncodified desire. Though a surface reading might locate in *Naked Lunch* an alarming depiction of the transgressive potential of unregulated sexual desire, this, I think, would be missing the point. The tension arises between Lee's internalised homophobia and his same sex desire: between libidinal drives and the persistence of a consciousness that sees these drives as repulsive. The corrupted sexual landscape of Interzone, therefore, arises as Lee's own devastated interiority, the fraught incompatibility of his rationalising and desiring selves. The Interzone thus marks the beginning of the undoing of the subject: the disengagement from reality that initiates multiple breaks for there are, as Deleuze and Guattari write,

Several layers, several planes of resistance that come from within or are imposed from without. Schizophrenia as a process, deterritorialisation as a process, is inseparable from the stases that interrupt it, or aggravate it, or make it turn in circles, and reterritorialise it into neurosis, perversion, and psychosis.⁴⁵

A vital point of schizoanalysis, then, is that the schizo-subject is 'endlessly fertile, ceaselessly shifting, devoid of all stable content, an invitation to musing rather than a fixed object of

⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, p.311.

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 318.

inquiry.⁴⁶ This initial rupture with reality by way of the Interzone begins an endless process of dissolution and reformulation as desire renews in countless iterations and assemblages. The Interzone figures just one articulation of this desire – one threshold to be crossed. As such, the ending of the film follows Lee down a bumpy barren road away from Interzone. On being stopped by security he is asked for proof of profession before he can proceed to Annexia. This moment registers not as a return to ‘reality’, but that this unreality, this hallucinatory unconscious, will continue to change shape, will reformulate anew as different iterations of a liberated unconscious.

Schizoanalysis offers another way of thinking about or charting the logic of queer antisociality that informs this thesis. Much like unmediated desire belongs to the unconscious and has destabilising effects on reality within a schizoanalytic rubric, queer is likewise conceptualised throughout this project as a destabilising, rapturous force. The conscious self that rests on the organisation of identity as a gendered, sexual subject comes undone through queerness as *jouissance*: as ‘a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law.’⁴⁷ The impossibility of thinking queerness within a logic of sexual difference, what Lee Edelman phrases as *thinking Nothing*,⁴⁸ can only ever misname queerness in an effort to drag it into recognition: queer as gay, strange, nonnormative. Queer, however, can not be located within a schematics of sexuality as the non-normative correlative to a heterosexual standard, and rather it

⁴⁶ Edmund White, ‘Today the artist is a saint who writes his own life’ in *London Review of Books*, 17:5, ed. by Adam Mars-Jones (1995), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v17/n05/edmund-white/today-the-artist-is-a-saint-who-writes-his-own-life> [accessed 04/04/2022], para. 18.

⁴⁷ *No Future*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University press, 2024), p. xviii.

is that which negates such a schematics. Queer belongs to the conceptual no-space or no-thing of the Real, 'to the beyond of signification where definition does not obtain.'⁴⁹ Queer is that which cannot be symbolised or incorporated into structures of meaning, indeed that which threatens the efficacy of such structures.

It is as such that a logic of queer antisociality engages ruptures with reality as productively piercing the Symbolic order and its illusory stability. Likewise with schizoanalysis that sees the undoing of the subject and conscious reality as liberating desire from structures of thought that would qualify it as perverse, queer antisociality embraces negation as a withdrawal from systems of recognition for the same reason. Negation as such figures a 'resistance to or undoing of the stabilising frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience'.⁵⁰ Insofar as a break from reality registers a break from coherence and consciousness, that is from knowledge, what exists beyond this rupture is the incomprehensibility and incoherence of the Real: the nomadic flow of erotic energies into multiple assemblages of desire. It is only in forfeiting a logic of sexual difference, or foreclosing the compulsion to locate queer within systems of recognition, that we can begin thinking queerness outside of the limitations of an incompatible conceptual rubric – can begin, as Edelman suggests, thinking nothing. Like the break from reality of the schizo-subject, this rupture initiates a liberation of desire from notions of difference, and allows for the transitivity of the desiring subject in pursuit of these desires.

Queer grotesquerie

⁴⁹ *Bad Education*, xiv.

⁵⁰ *Sex or the Unbearable*, p.xii.

As polymorphous manifestations of Lee's queer desire, the erotically-charged, sexually ambivalent creatures of Interzone articulate this desire in accordance with his internalised homophobia, as monstrous and aberrant:

Giant speaking beetle-crabs that later meld with typewriters to become fleshy insectoid machines; seven-foot silver-white reptilian 'Mugwumps' with multiple head-penises; a huge monstrous centipede with the face of a man..⁵¹

Given Lee's profession as an exterminator, it tracks that his repressed homoerotic desires take shape as insectoid creatures – as that which he finds intolerable, and that which he is committed to exterminating. In tension with his repulsion, however, the bug powder to which he is so addicted is described in the film as giving 'a very literary high, a Kafka high—one that makes you feel like a bug.' The insect as such is a site of repulsion and pleasure: that which Lee detests and simultaneously cannot resist. The insectoid, monstrous creatures that Lee encounters throughout the film are projections of this ambivalence; his mixed feelings of desire and repulsion manifest as the abjectly erotic conspirators of his deepening demise into Interzone. As externalised, monstrous forces, Lee is able –albeit incoherently and unaware of his doing so – to create some illusory distance between himself, his actions, and his desires; it was the giant-typewriter-beetle-with-talking-anus that instructed him to kill his wife, and it is under the instruction of these creatures that Lee goes 'undercover' as a homosexual. As Adam Hart suggests,

Cronenberg dramatises a character's repression of his queerness, and the monstrous manifestations that result from that repression. Here, Cronenberg demonstrates how Lee's denial of his sexuality leads to both monstrous behaviour (the shooting of his wife) and literal monsters, feeding him the instructions he cannot admit he wishes to receive.⁵²

⁵¹ Beard, p.280.

⁵² Adam Charles Hart, 'I, Mugwump: projection, abjection, and Cronenbergian Monstrosity in Naked Lunch' in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 15.2 (2017), pp.162–171, doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1303233, p.166.

It is as such that these slimy, erogenous creatures of Interzone are the spillage or excesses of Lee's desire: that which ruptures the veil of repression and erupts as inexplicable entities that are 'beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.'⁵³ As part of himself that Lee cannot reconcile, that is to say part of his own devastated psyche, Interzone and its monstrous inhabitants figure Julia Kristeva's sense of abjection as that which has been excluded from identity, that which threatens its borders and challenges its sovereignty: that which 'draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.'⁵⁴ The object cannot be distanced or separated from the self as an object, nor can it be assimilated as part of the subject. Instead it 'emanates from a curiously ambiguous place that overturns the very differentiation between inside and outside.'⁵⁵ As Kristeva writes of abjection, it is 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.⁵⁶

To come into confrontation with one's repressed desires –with what has been expelled as 'other' – is to unsettle the coherency of identity: the self/other distinction dissolves and the rules that govern or structure the self come loose. This is to say that the ego is momentarily split by the intrusion of the repressed so that the composite parts of the psyche that the ego would otherwise mediate, the id and the superego, encounter one another in abjection:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated... Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself⁵⁷

⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), p.1.

⁵⁴ Kristeva, 2.

⁵⁵ Konstanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller, *The Object of Desire: The Aestheticisation of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (Brill, 2007), p.21.

⁵⁶ Kristeva, 4.

⁵⁷ Kristeva, p.1.

Abjection as such is a destabilising intrusion of the Real: the eruption of what has necessarily been excluded from being, but likewise that which attends to being as its structuring negativity. It is a threatening force insofar as it exposes the composite nature and instability of the self; ‘the individual must reject the abject in order to be able to define and defend the boundaries of identities.’⁵⁸ The abject, like queer – or, in the case of *Naked Lunch*, the abject *as* queer – points to meaninglessness and annihilation. Both belonging to ‘non-sense or the impossible real’⁵⁹, they name the unsymbolisable excesses of the Symbolic, an unknowable otherness. Insofar as the impossible real unravels the subject, it *places one beside himself*, it occurs at the borders of existence.

It is at the border of existence, in his hallucinatory, drug-addled state, that Lee encounters abjection in the terms Kristeva sets out:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness ... now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognise as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards.⁶⁰

The abject functions as Lee’s safeguard because to acknowledge the truth of his desire would mean annihilation. In abjection, on this liminal border of existence, the psyche is not forced to reconcile dissonance or to confront the impasse between desire and repulsion that would annihilate the subject. Rather, abjection yields to this dissolve, not so that “I” disappears, ‘but

⁵⁸ Konstanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller, p.9.

⁵⁹ Kristeva, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, p. 2.

finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence.’⁶¹ So it goes that Lee’s exilic, hallucinatory landscape allows both involvement with, and ostensible distance from, his queer desires – allows that he be simultaneously fascinated and repulsed. In keeping with Kristeva’s description of abjection, the *unreality* of Interzone and Lee’s ‘assignment’ as an undercover homosexual preserves an illusory distance where

The “unconscious” contents remain here *excluded* but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established –one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration.⁶²

This strange exclusion allows, as Kristeva suggests, Lee to ask himself *Where* am I? Rather than *Who* or *What* am I?⁶³

It is through its depiction of queer as abject that the film realises queer in antisocial terms, that is as a destabilising, incongruent force. Remembering that this depiction is framed or informed by Bill Lee’s own homophobic self-hatred, the film embraces that which queer signifies within a homophobic system of differences: the abject, the deviant, the transgressive. The ambition of the film is not to recuperate queer into systems of recognition, nor is it to triumph over the repressed through a restoration of reality. Rather, the film is interested in the dissolution of this reality – of coherence and consciousness – in pursuit of the unconscious ‘place where meaning collapses.’⁶⁴ Interzone, the ‘exotic home of homosexuality and drug-use’⁶⁵, articulates the encounter with queer as a de/re territorializing event; a reconfiguration of the psyche and its organising principles beyond, to borrow again from Kristeva, ‘the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the

⁶¹ Kristeva, p. 9.

⁶² Kristeva, p. 7.

⁶³ Kristeva, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Kristeva, p.2.

⁶⁵ Beard, p. 315.

thinkable.⁶⁶ The film exaggerates this inexplicable and transgressive quality of queer by literalising the alien Other of queer as such, as fluidly disjointed forms where unique sites of desire can be explored.⁶⁷

The grotesqueries of *Naked Lunch*, as orifice and semen-laden as they are, work to locate sexual unease and queer desire as a site of horror. The excessive otherness of these sexually ambivalent creatures, their imaginative distortions of form and violent sexual scenarios, exemplify a claim made in Laura Westernguard's writing on queer horror where she suggests that these terms are 'a tautology –queer and horror collapse into each other in the public imagination.'⁶⁸ Queer and horror, as Westernguard's claim suggests, designate what has been banished from being and relegated to otherness, what is not only abnormal but threatens to intrude upon and violate the boundaries of normalcy. As Barbara Creed writes of horror in film,

The concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.⁶⁹

This encounter between the symbolic and that which threatens its stability then speaks as readily to queerness as it does to the monstrous, indeed they are one in the same. Both gesture at something uncanny and strange beyond the threshold of knowledge, that which disturbs structures of meaning: 'inhumanity, like queer, is a catachresis for what can never be properly

⁶⁶ Kristeva, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, p. 116.

⁶⁸ Laura Westernguard, 'Queer Horror', *The Cambridge Companion to American Horror*, eds. Stephen Shapiro and Mark Storey, pp. 120-138. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 121.

⁶⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), p.10-11.

named.⁷⁰ It is precisely this sameness that Cronenberg captures in *Naked Lunch*. He firmly locates queer *in* and *as* the inhuman creatures of Interzone not to affirm a homophobic logic, but to give form to negation; to articulate in appropriate likeness the nebulous, shifting shape of queer and its resistance to recognition. Most importantly, the grotesque creatures throughout *Naked Lunch* figure queer as a ‘transgression of order, form and stability.’⁷¹ They unsettle subjectivity and problematise what is ‘normal’ by weakening the borders of reality and imaginative possibility. As Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund remark,

The queer grotesque includes a representation of otherness and difference that forces the viewer to experience the juxtapositions of attraction and repulsion, desire and disgust. This opens up the potential for forms of desire that challenge normativity through an aesthetics of grotesque queerness that forces us to see beyond the boundaries of what is inside ‘the normal.’⁷²

So it goes within *Naked Lunch* that the queer grotesque works to reorient notions of normalcy through excesses of aberrance and *abnormality*; the film obscures and surpasses a semblance of the ‘normal’ to expose its limits and violate its boundaries. Cronenberg amplifies abjection as a site of indeterminacy, as *the space where meaning collapses*, so that nothing is secure: fascination cannot be extricated from repulsion, the liquidity of hallucination and reality disorients and distorts logic, and the unthinkable permutations of desire ‘open up an indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images, and figures.’⁷³ Queer occurs as exorbitant to the logic of difference and meaning. Our ambivalence to the grotesque, its strange allure and concomitant repulsion, disgust and intrigue, unsettles desire as a stable territory and rather remaps this desire across multiple and mobile ways of being. The film depicts, with a healthy

⁷⁰ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, p.87.

⁷¹ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, 19.

⁷² Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, p.116.

⁷³ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, p.3.

dose of revelry and absurdity, queer as a destabilising, erotically-charged force that works to foreclose normalcy in pursuit of desire as endless avenues and assemblages, as a radical challenge to order and reason.

I suggested from the outset that *Naked Lunch* offered an articulation of queer antisociality in the extreme, as an excessive depiction of queer as ‘the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.’⁷⁴ Queer throughout the film is not depicted as a positive identity or a stable ontology, but as a disorienting intrusion of the Real – as inexplicable, abjectly-erotic creatures and unravelling subjectivities; Interzone as the irreducible site of queer negativity is a place realised only in the process of the self coming undone. Where previous chapters have read semiotic instabilities and dissolutions of symbolic efficacy attuned to queer as outside of the logic of difference and meaning, the uncanny, transgressive quality of queer here culminates in abject distortions of reality and form. Aligned to the project of queer antisociality as an embrace of queer as a catachresis for the abnormal, nonsensical, and threatening figure of the Other, *Naked Lunch* gives shape to this unthinkable and ontologically impossible figure. In annihilating structures of meaning that delineate the normal from the abnormal, the film forces a departure from rationality and sense as useful conceptual tools. Instead, we are made to revel in abjection as unstable and uncomfortable formulations of desire.

The film then makes no efforts to recuperate or invest queer within a logic of sexual difference or rational thought, and rather the shifting morphology of queer throughout *Naked Lunch* insists on its resistance to knowledge. Its changing shape and composite forms ensure queer remains on

⁷⁴ *No Future*, p.9.

the move, reformulating as the strange and stranger still, as impossible and endless permutations of desire. Framed through Bill Lee's own homophobic logic, the film affirms queer as the monstrous, as the horror that it signifies in the public imagination, and revels in all of its disturbing monikers: depravity, transgression, abjection. Rather than attempt to incorporate queer into the social order, the film amplifies its exclusion from this order, as that which disturbs and violates structures of meaning. Queer here retains, as Edelman suggests, 'the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance.'⁷⁵ In its embrace of queer in excess of meaning and antithetic to social values, *Naked Lunch* works to unravel the stability of such social organisation, to violate the very structures of value on which incorporation into the social order depends. In the indeterminate, disorienting world of the film, designation as normal or abnormal collapses, as does reality and imagined possibility, so that we can not invest an existing logic to orient ourselves, but rather yield to the chaos and encounter queer only in our willingness to exterminate all rational thought.

Following this final chapter is a brief coda that situates what is otherwise an overwhelmingly theoretical project in an experiential account of living outside of gender, of wanting to be 'uninscribed by language.'⁷⁶ I read T. Fleischmann's personal essay *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through* aligned to queer as a perpetually reformulating thing, a continuous process of becoming that is antithetic, and indeed resistant, to discursive or cultural scripts of development. Queer, such as Fleischmann describes it, moves according to the many threads of desire, the

⁷⁵ *Bad Education*, xvi.

⁷⁶ T Fleischmann, *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through: An Essay* (Coffee House Press, 2019) p.64.

*libidinal undercurrents to it all,*⁷⁷ however fleeting, eddying, and excessive these desires might be. Fleischmann articulates, through their own life and in their own terms, an insistence on absence as a powerful act of queer resistance: a body absent, writes Fleischmann, ‘is a body that cannot be set, cannot be anchored in place and subjected to the process by which we racialise, gender, assess through our senses.’⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Fleischmann, p. 38

⁷⁸ Fleischmann, p.53.

Coda: *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through*

Before summarising my project in the conclusion that follows, this section takes a moment to deviate from the fictional texts that have structured this thesis so far by reading a personal essay from T. Fleischmann – or Clutch, as they refer to themselves. *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through* follows Clutch’s transience; between cities, cross-continent infatuations, lovers, and identities. Time is unfixed from a lineated logic of development throughout this narrative where the transitioning body ages backwards and the text jumps indiscriminately between time zones and floats between the present moment and the past, gliding between the two, or existing in them both. This work beautifully mixes memoir and criticism, and offers meditative correspondence with the artwork of late conceptual artist Félix González-Torres:

Clutch jumps topics non-linearly, from erotic memoir to art criticism about Félix González-Torres to sketches of melting ice. The experience of reading this book becomes one of constantly moving between and alongside ruptured and simultaneous time zones. This movement, as the title reminds us, brings the experience of reading back to the body’s embodiment in time.¹

In distinction to the otherwise highly theoretical and generously abstract work of the thesis, This final section offers an experiential account of living outside of gender – of curating, for oneself, an identity outside of prescribed identity markers. While I wanted for this thesis to follow the logic of queer antisociality and to articulate its key themes through fictional works and different theoretical lenses, I want too to include the reality of living otherwise; to acknowledge the legitimate ambition to escape from a linguistic system that punitively marks one as Other, in both

¹ Noa Micaela Fields, “Time is a Thing the Body Moves Through: A Review” in *Sixty Inches From Center* (2019), <https://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org/time-is-the-thing-a-body-moves-through-a-review/> [accessed 16 February 2024], para.5.

its hardship and its ‘deadly serious joy.’² This is to say that I wanted to explore disidentification through the lens of lived experience.

Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through revels in absences and elisions that extend across the textual and sexual. The ‘many little absent moments’³ within the pages of Fleischmann’s work contribute to a broader meditation within this thesis on living attuned to absence; in wanting to be ‘uninscribed by language.’⁴ Fleischmann too writes of their desire as a persistent force driving their movements across the text so that the narrative then moves according to ‘the many-handed hunger of transsexuality’⁵ and time occurs as inconsistent and fleeting, moving across time-zones and backwards, following instead the ‘libidinal undercurrents to it all.’⁶ Clutch says of the experience writing *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through* that they were writing ‘to see where the excess of my desire would go.’⁷ And so it goes that this excess orients the pages of the essay toward the spillage and detours of erotic time; ‘a further splitting open of time, in the way erotic time is composed of infinite moments.’⁸

This desire defies the successive, lineated logic of time. The threads of desire - those infinite moments of erotic time that this essay charts - are multiple, and indeed multidirectional; ‘to chart these romances would be to name constellations / among stars that will not stay still.’⁹ Desire as

² T. Fleischmann, *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through: An Essay* (Coffee House Press, 2019), p. 118.

³ Fleischmann, p. 10.

⁴ Fleischmann, p. 64.

⁵ Fleischmann, p.46.

⁶ Fleischmann, p. 38

⁷ Fleischmann, p.13.

⁸ Fleischmann, p. 18.

⁹ Fleischmann, p. 8.

a propelling current across this narrative, one that folds and oscillates, stops and starts, textualises the temporally idiosyncratic experience of queer lives:

I distrust linearity, but bodies can seem like one of the only linear things—age, getting bigger and then smaller, death. Another reason to appreciate the transitioning body, which ages backward, every person seeming to become younger, with or without hormones. It's a good reminder that the body was never linear in the first place.¹⁰

As Fleischmann suggests, the body as a marker of one's relationship to time comes loose in the case of the transitioning body, and so it is with queerness that time moves differently; queer time moves backwards or counterclockwise. As Halberstam suggests, the queer body

is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity.¹¹

The lineated logic of time is suffused with signification and expectation, it is the measuring stick through which development is traced - whether the developmental stages of childhood or adolescence, the pressured tick of a biological clock, or the standard (read: heterosexual) timeline of coupling-marriage-reproduction. As Halberstam suggests in the quote above, where time is tied to identity formation and the production of a normative subject, Queer time is (dis)oriented towards lateness, incoherence, interruption – and erotic time, as Fleischmann depicts it throughout their essay, allows that this incoherence be lead by the force of desire; that time be constructed as a collection of intimacies and transgressions - those moments of erotic

¹⁰ Fleischmann, p. 59.

¹¹ Carolyn Dinshaw and others, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GDQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13.2-3 (2007), pp. 177-195, doi:10.1215/10642684-2006-030. p.182.

encounter where we reconcile the body in excess of itself. These are the milestones of queer self-formation.

Desire flows in excess of temporal markers of past and present as we read across Clutch's different lovers throughout *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through*. Simon, a past lover and an enduring part of Clutch's experience, to whom large parts of this essay are committed, reads as immediate and as informing as their current partner, Jackson. Two lines of desire, across two decades, intersecting indiscriminately. Reading attuned to desire or erotic time as temporally inconsistent allows that we follow the traces of its multiple threads, however erratic, inconclusive, or enduring, rather than trying to resolve them or articulate them as temporally coherent. As the author of *Queer Velocities*, Jennifer Eun-Jung Row writes, 'within the concept of direction is a concept of straightness.'¹² Queer temporalities instead

Trace the grappling with and reappropriations of temporality that gives rise to desires, attachments, and intimacies that complicate not only the norm and the margin but also the very idea of "sexual identity", by destabilising the biopolitical and affective terrain on which something like an identity comes to be established.¹³

The unsocialised nature of desire means that it does not adhere to, or is not incorporated into, those linguistic, symbolic, or temporal frameworks that structure identity or sexuality. It remains an erotically-charged, free-floating force. Desire, by its very nature, remains transient and transcendent: desire begets desire so that each encounter is generative, each encounter enacts a newness or redirection and, insomuch as our desire changes, we are changed, too. As Patricia

¹² Jennifer Eun-Jung Row, *Queer Velocities: Time, Sex, and Biopower on the Early Modern Stage* (Northwestern University Press, 2022), p.6.

¹³ Eun-Jung Row, p.8.

MacCormack writes, ‘becomings are borne of undifferentiated desire, to open oneself through a materialist, discursive, corporeal metamorphosis.’¹⁴

In speaking of their own corporeal metamorphosis, there is a moment in the essay where Fleischmann details trying to reconcile their own body and gender with those on television screens, and their encounter with the mid-90’s show *Emmanuelle in Space*; a ‘soft-core series where aliens come to observe Earth.’¹⁵ The shapeshifting ‘magnificent slut’ of the show’s title, we learn, is one ‘of the most sensual and beautiful of all Earthlings, who fucks all over the world.’¹⁶ It is in relation to, or encounter with, Clutch’s own desires - their desire to likewise shapeshift, to navigate sexually one’s place in the world - that *Emmanuelle* renders something newly possible:

My young self knew that none of the men and women on television was me, even as I formed a fractured identification with them—an identification that allowed me to voice a part of myself while negating something more. But still, in the middle of that negation, I saw *Emmanuelle*. Her body was multiple, exiled from the explicit and made brilliant in the imaginative, both cock and pussy and neither in my mind. And there, in the illogic of orgasm, my body became multiple too.¹⁷

Found through desire, then, is the potential for metamorphosis, and living attuned to desire is to revel in the unscripted space of negation where identity is not fixed or coherent, but malleable to the multiple directions, the perpetual newness, of this desire. Indeed, in a review for *The Brooklyn Rail*, Corinne Manning writes in response to *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*

¹⁴ Patricia MacCormack, ‘Queer Posthumanism: Cyborgs, Animals, Monsters, Perverts’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. by Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke, 1st edn (Routledge, 2009), pp. 111-126, doi:10.4324/9781315613482. p. 124.

¹⁵ Fleischmann, p. 41.

¹⁶ Fleischmann, p. 41.

¹⁷ Fleischmann, p. 45.

that ‘this is where we have the most potential to defy authority: through our desire.’¹⁸ This is because desire is antithetic to taxonomies of identities or sexuality, and so to liberate desire - to indulge those libidinal undercurrents –is a dangerous thing precisely because it is these unsocialised drives that threaten to destabilise frameworks of ‘acceptable’ sexuality –be them heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive, *normal*. To live, and certainly to love, according to desire is a shifting provocation and a radical form of resistance:

The police state wants me dead to make sure their children don’t end up like me, so I guess every time I fuck and I’m happy and I do what I want I would like to call that an anti-state action. The people I love alive–yes, we weaken the state.¹⁹

As Fleischmann suggests, deeply tied to this radical resistance is joy: ‘We take our joy very seriously, our deadly serious joy.’²⁰ In a world where queer desire is locked into a punitive and imbalanced logic of sexual difference, this joy really is deadly serious but so too it is the most profound form of resistance; to know that the odds are against you, and to live joyously anyway. To live queerly is to live aligned to difference, but it is also to create something out of negation.

As much as *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through* is a memoir, a narrative of embodiment, and a poetic consideration of the art of Félix González-Torres, this long essay is also a meditation on the body’s relationship to language. Clutch writes of their disengagement from language’s structuring regime – their resistance to ‘the larger controls immanent in language and perception’²¹ –with the same trappings and tensions of language’s grasp that have been explored

¹⁸ Corinne Manning, ‘Never Ours to Give: *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*’, *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019 <<https://brooklynrail.org/2019/06/books/Never-Ours-to-Give-Time-Is-the-Thing-a-Body-Moves-Through>> [accessed 19 February 2024].

¹⁹ Fleischmann, p. 138.

²⁰ Fleischmann, p.118.

²¹ Fleischmann, p. 53.

throughout this thesis. This is to say that they write with the knowledge that one cannot entirely exempt themselves from language; even if you are to refuse it yourself, it is still imposed and weaponised to register one's status or identity, however difficult this status is to locate. As Fleischmann suggests,

I am of course still written into this whole structure, I can't escape the language, but that won't stop me from refusing it anyway, and believing that a blank paper might transport me somewhere else.²²

This 'refusing it anyway' speaks to the acts of negation and disidentification throughout the essay; the desire to be uninscribed by language.²³ This is particularly true of Fleischmann's refusal to label their gender or their sexuality:

It's taken a lot of resistance, that I want to leave my gender and my sex life uninscribed—that it took me years to consider the fact that I did not have to name my gender or sexuality at all, so that now I must always tell people that I am not something. I insist on this absence more, even, than I used to insist on my identities, that I was a bisexual boy, or genderqueer, or a queer, which was actually just unpleasant for me in lots of ways, come to realise.²⁴

To refuse language and its inscription - to *insist on absence* - is a powerful act of queer resistance, indeed one that has filled the pages of this thesis. Insofar as bodies are discursively constructed, to divest from this structuring regime is to mobilise the slippage between identity categories and to revel in the gaps inherent in language. A body absent, writes Fleischmann, 'is a body that cannot be set, cannot be anchored in place and subjected to the process by which we racialise, gender, assess through our senses.'²⁵ To insist on absence is to occupy negation as the *nothing* on which language's *something* depends. It is to choose incoherence and the inexplicit,

²² Fleischmann, p.65.

²³ Fleischmann, p. 64.

²⁴ Fleischmann, p. 64.

²⁵ Fleischmann, p. 53.

and from this space of nothing - this undetermined, unnamed absence - comes the power of possibility; the possibility to imagine the body otherwise, to be a 'person that managed to unhinge itself from its frame'²⁶ :

I do know what it means to be unfixed from narrative, an unfixing that feels something like claiming power. I feel grateful for it, really. It meant that I traveled through space as a hotel burned.²⁷

By having reached this coda, you will know that my understanding of queerness insists on withdrawal from semiotic structures based on difference. This is precisely how Fleischmann is able to curate their selfhood according to their own desire — through disengaging with language. If the inscribing function of language asks that we are *something*, disidentification is to embrace negation. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman describe such negation in their work *Sex, or the Unbearable* as

Moments of rupture that interrupt the generative pattern of semiotics, the symbolic chain of meaning. It disrupts and disorganises. The desire of annihilation is to permit the encounter with negativity to initiate transformations whose end is only the endless opening onto the necessity of new ones²⁸

This framing of negation as initiating transformation follows the logic that through resisting the inscribing function of language - that linguistic imposition that assigns or qualifies or categorises bodies from without - that one is able to imagine, for themselves, something new. Possibility (newness, imagination!) becomes a reality only in negating that which already exists.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

²⁶Fleischmann, p.53.

²⁷ Fleischmann, 45.

²⁸ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014), p. 18.

Moments throughout *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through* come from an unfinished meditation on the artwork of conceptual artist Félix González-Torres. His minimalist installations use everyday materials - candy, hanging lightbulbs, paper, and wall clocks - and are displayed according to the preference of any given curator. This means that in purchasing the artwork, the curator is given precise instructions regarding the materials –a specific flavour of candy or the precise weight of the candy pile – but they are at liberty to arrange these materials however they like. This freedom ensures that the work maintains an essence of change, that it is constantly reshaped:

Although González-Torres died in 1996, people continue performing his works, extending and replicating them. / People spread the candy, its ideal weight, / and hang the strings of lightbulbs, their ideal height, /and print the stacks of paper. / While the instructions are clear, they are not exhaustive—/ what shape the candy takes, and where the curtain hangs, all of this is mutable, a choice. / It means that the pieces keep changing. / It means that the candy I know so well, tucked up in a corner, could be any shape, / spread like a heart on the ground, or scattered down a stairway. / What will these pieces look like in twenty years, fifty, more? / What will they look like, as new imaginations take hold?²⁹

González-Torres artwork is always “Untitled” followed by a title in parentheses and the year of creation: “Untitled” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) 1991. As with Flieschmann’s own untitled body, the non-specific, inexact quality of these artworks resist the imposition of meaning and instead these titles ‘simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning.’³⁰ As Flieschman writes, ‘But anyway, who wants a title? So claustrophobic, when I’d rather just float away in the parenthetical, or jump right in.’³¹ González-Torres’s body of work gestures to the personal - his own homosexuality in “Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*) 1987-1990, for example, or the loss of his partner Ross to AIDS in “Untitled” (*Ross*) 1991, but this personal aspect of the work - González-

²⁹ Fleischmann, p.125.

³⁰ Jan Avgikos, ‘This is my body: Felix Gonzalez-Torres’, Artforum, n.d. <https://www.artforum.com/features/this-is-my-body-felix-gonzalez-torres-204385/> [accessed 11 March 2024].

³¹ Fleischmann, p. 41.

Torres's relationship to the art as artist - is muted, parenthetical, uncertain. He creates this work in such a way that its scope remains unfixed: it is reshaped according to the context in which it is produced and reproduced. He allows the viewer to take a piece of candy or a piece of paper and make with it their own meaning and their own experience. The material lends itself to ongoing change; the candy melts and is dispersed, the sheets of paper from "*Untitled*" (*Passport*) 1991 are given with the suggestion to inscribe it with 'the most painful, the most banal, as well as the most sublime.'³² As Fleischmann writes:

When González-Torres speaks of infecting power, he speaks of power spreading./An individual viewing his art can be transformed, having been implicated and involved in it,/taking home a sheet of paper, tasting sugar, feeling./A person in the world who has been affected by the pain of/another is an agent of change./A person in the world who has been affected by the joy of/another is an agent of change./A person in the world is an agent of change./A person in the world, impossible as it may seem,/that's what I am, that's how I'll live.³³

During these moments written in conversation with González-Torres, the form of the writing changes shape, shifting to a poetic meditation where the line-breaks register a pace and rhythm distinct from the prose that precedes it:

His work moves between fact and imagination, the object and | the memory, to open a new space: | from me, to something that exists beyond that limit. | Like I was only a boundary before, and now I can move again – | pushing through a crowd until I come out the other side, and | the air opens up and I breathe.³⁴

This poetic form registers an emotive and embodied engagement with González-Torres' work where we read attuned to the breaths we take, conscious of slowing and stopping in line with the rhythms of the page. These moments aren't interpretive so much as they are meditative, where Fleischmann explores how these artworks can both resist meaning and remain meaningful, how

³² Fleischmann, p. 63.

³³ Fleischmann, p. 55.

³⁴ Fleischman, p. 8.

in light of material restrictions, they are perpetually changing shape. González-Torres's body of artwork then becomes an intertext in conversation with Fleischmann's own body; both bodies are "Untitled", both are open to transformation, and both resist a singular or fixed reading. 'The uninscribed, like González-Torres says, is a site of change.'³⁵

Queer

As a final note, where queer is used throughout this thesis to register an ineffable quality outside of the categorizing structure of language, Fleischmann speaks to queer as already co-opted, as fatally incorporated into meaning so that, rather than being outside of identity markers, it reifies the very identities and structures it promises to escape. Indeed, they suggest the 'utopic is a *post-queer moment*'³⁶:

Queerness, when I first encountered the idea, aspired to a life away from identity categories, eroticising what lies outside them, but today it seems the word often points to a reification of identity, to new rules.³⁷

I understand Fleischmann's skepticism, and agree that queer is often used to register an identity, though the specifics of this identity remain hard to locate. In any case, as antithetical to normalcy and indeed heterosexuality, queer perhaps engages the relational model or structure of language that it aims to resist. Like Fleischmann writes of their own desire to be outside of language, queer is 'of course still written into this whole structure.'³⁸ But so too queer changes shape, it cannot be discussed with any precision or exactness precisely because it is a moving goalpost; it is, as Lee Edelman suggests, 'whatever a dominant culture conceptualises as a threat to ontology,

³⁵ Fleischmann, p. 64.

³⁶ Fleischmann, p. 59.

³⁷ Fleischmann, p. 64.

³⁸ Fleischmann, p. 65.

and thus it's highly variable. What's conceptualised as queer will vary, even within queer communities.'³⁹

It is with this sense of queer that I have written this thesis, hopeful that queer remains elusive and untraceable; that a shadow of queer remains unfixed and defiant so that it cannot be incorporated into meaning, not fully. I also employ queer as a conceptual rubric and not an identity marker, one that inevitably has limitations and tensions - not least of all those detailed by Fleischmann. Indeed I think it worth saying that the desire to depart from the term queer and to question its efficacy as a term freed from language's structuring regime is precisely the ambition, or the greatest success, of queer thought. If it is the case that we have begun to outgrow queer, that the scope of being is too large and too shifting for a single term to ensure it's expanse, then it is in no small part due to the work of queer - to the aspirational departure from fixed identities - that this has become so. I think there's also a tension to be noted between queer and *queer antisociality*, and in choosing the latter as my primary focus throughout this project, my emphasis is not on queer as a qualifying term, but on the freedom from qualifiers that queer once promised: queer as beyond borders and antithetic to normalcy. Even when, in the case of mainstream gay culture or *homonormativity*, queer has come to tragically replicate that which it resisted; a sadness that genderqueer writer Matilda Bernstein Sycamore phrases as 'the dream of queer and its failure.'⁴⁰

³⁹ "Queering Nothing", Lee Edleman, *Queer Lit*, Lena Mattheis, 5 July 2022, podcast, Spotify <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0xhsPhi6xod1FJuSP9Imzf?si=lh3BxqoiTMax5xSST_E-jQ> [accessed 5 July 2022].

⁴⁰ Women & Children First Bookstore, *The Freezer Door: Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore with T Fleischmann*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 December 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq5RJ59AXmU>> [accessed 19 January 2024].

Though Flieschmann is disillusioned with the term queer, their personal essay speaks so thoroughly to the acts of disidentification and resistance that have characterised queer antisociality throughout this thesis. They articulate, through lived experience, the desire to be uninscribed by language insofar as this uninscription means liberation - conceptually, if not always literally - from language's structuring regime. They detail how negation functions as a place from which the body can be imagined otherwise, where a person can be unhinged from its frame. So too does Fleischmann speak to the orienting force of desire; a force temporally incoherent and disorganised that accounts for redirection - indeed for multiple directions. It accounts for movement backwards and sideways; those moments of erotic encounter as formative self discovery. For Fleischmann, the desire to escape language's punitive structure is not an abstract notion. The acts of disidentification and living attuned to absence and negation that have characterised this thesis are here made real in all of their deadly serious joy.

Conclusion

Queer remains as nebulous a term in this conclusion as it did from the outset of this project, with all of its attendant ambiguity and incomprehensibility remaining intact. What I hope has become clearer throughout the pages of this thesis, however, is how we might begin thinking against established forms of knowledge as a mode of queer negation. Rather than attempt to recuperate queerness as a specific way of being, the ambition of this work was to employ antisociality as an approach to conceptualise queer attuned to disruption and inform efforts to disinvest from structures of knowledge rather than work within them. The point of this thesis was then not to explain queerness with any certainty, but rather to lean into uncertainty and allow for the messy, incongruent nature of queer to guide my thinking. In this way, this project was a successful venture. Thinking through antisociality allowed me to conceive of queerness in multiple and mobile ways that changed shape and developed with each textual encounter.

Working across different texts and mediums then allowed for a mapping of the different ways that queer is discursively constructed while simultaneously conceptualising modes of resistance that work against these constructions. Beginning as I did with Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, this first chapter detailed language as a closed system of signs and established the ambition to disrupt this system (rather than work within it) that would be formulated across subsequent chapters. I began with linguistic structures knowing that conceptual, political, or ideological formations of queer are premised on, or informed by, the imbalanced logic of sexual difference that articulates queerness in relation to a heterosexual standard. This is why queer negation is mapped along efforts to negate linguistic formula or empty language of signification, in the case

of Melville's *Bartleby* and Beckett's two short works *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*, respectively; because whilst language remains intact, conceptualisations of queer remain entrapped by its binary logic. My hope in reading across these two works was to articulate not just modes of negation, but also to articulate, through a logic of antisociality and poststructuralist theorising, why this negation is necessary and how it applies to queer experience. Extending this approach to visual works from Derek Jarman and David Cronenberg then allowed me to illustrate how, much like conceptualisations of queer change shape, so too do forms of negation. Both Jarman and Cronenberg explicitly formulate queerness against convention, but these formulations could not be more visually disparate: an unchanging blue screen in the case of Jarman's *Blue* and an excess of grotesquerie and imagery in Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*.

Working across a range of texts likewise accounted for the diffuse nature of queer as a shifting rubric for what frustrates conventional logic or modes of knowledge production; queer not as a confirmed *something*, but as the constituent negation, or *nothing*, that is outside of, and indeed works against, knowledge – phrased otherwise by Edelman as being ‘consigned to the void of nonbeing that enables being to be.’¹ Reading through antisociality then allowed for formulations of queer resistance that do not depend on a rubric of sexual difference or defer to a heterosexual logic, but rather actively negate this logic.

I made mention at the beginning of this project to the alarming state of trans and queer rights under the Trump administration. To return to this point, there is an acute relevance or necessity for projects such as this, or thinking such as this, that generate or engage conversation about

¹ Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022), xiv.

queer resistance. Even where this resistance is conceptual – as it is within this project – a shift in perception or thinking against dominant rhetoric is a vital part of imagining queer liberation. In addition to this point, following my reading of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* in chapter 2, it is difficult to extricate queerness from a position of alterity such that queer as sexual difference is produced by, and paradoxically produces, the heterosexual ideology that informs it. It is then aligned to a contemporary impulse to dislocate queer from heterosexual ideologies, like the efforts by Stanley and De Villiers that conceptualise queer resistance as non-identity or opacity, that this thesis has sought to show how we might work against language, rather than within it, to figure queer outside of this logic of difference. As such, my contribution to these contemporary efforts is to formulate antisociality as a conceptual lens and illustrate across a set of textual case studies how to locate queer not as a fixed entity, but as a method of approach and a way of thinking. This thesis as such offers a way to acknowledge the discursive construction of queer, but also to begin thinking queerness beyond or outside of the structures that formulate it so.

Admitting to a limitation, or rather a glaring omission within the thesis, I clung tightly to primary works that I know share an interest in reformulating language or negating modes of signification and this has produced an overwhelmingly white, cis canon within this project. In part this was informed by a desire to read queerness beyond decidedly queer content, but it also reflects a trepidation about approaching racial or trans narratives aligned to queer negation in a way that did not eclipse or frustrate their intended reading. On this note, I remain unsure that it is my place to conduct such readings, but I hope that these efforts to think queerly might expand beyond the pages of this project and inform further attempts to employ queer antisociality as a critical approach to interrogate linguistic structures. I similarly hope that students, scholars, or readers who engage with this work find it a useful premise to help orient their thinking attuned to

queer not as a fixed identity or sexual orientation, but as that which disrupts systems of knowledge.

This was an invigorating and personal project. To think against established forms of knowledge or dominant rhetoric across the writing of this project felt like moments of triumph and quiet rebellion. It felt like maybe in thinking queer otherwise, it could eventually be otherwise. All of this thesis is then to say: one hopes. I hope this thesis will then inform future efforts to read queerly and think beyond the parameters of language, not just in my own work but for other scholars interested in antisocial possibilities and how this critical approach could be extended to other disciplines.

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